

CHAPTER OVERVIEW

INTRODUCTION

Politics and government matter—that is the single most important message of this book. Despite the fact that government substantially affects each of our lives, youth today are especially apathetic about politics and government. Whether because they feel they can't make a difference, the political system is corrupt, or they just don't care, young Americans are clearly apathetic about public affairs. And while political apathy isn't restricted to young people, a tremendous gap has opened up between the young (defined as under age 25) and the elderly (defined as over 65) on measures of political interest, knowledge, and participation. The goal of *Government in America* is to assist students in becoming well-informed citizens by providing information and developing critical analytical skills.

GOVERNMENT AND POLITICS

This chapter introduces the fundamental concepts of government, politics, and public policy, and defines the ways in which the three are interrelated. **Government** consists of *those institutions that make authoritative public policies for society* as a whole. Regardless of how their leaders assume office, all governments have certain functions in common: they maintain national defense, provide public goods, use police powers to maintain order, furnish public services, socialize the young into the political culture, and collect taxes to pay for the services they provide. Part of what government does is provide public goods—services that can be shared by everyone and cannot be denied to anyone.

Throughout *Government in America*, two fundamental questions about governing serve as themes: *How should we govern?* and *What should government do?* The chapters that follow acquaint students with the history of American democracy and ask important questions about the current state of democracy in the United States. One goal of the authors of *Government in America* is to familiarize students with the different ways to approach and answer these questions.

Politics determines whom we select as our governmental leaders and what policies they pursue. Political scientists still use the classic definition of politics offered by Harold D. Lasswell: “*Who gets what, when, and how.*” The media usually focus on the *who* of politics. *What* refers to the substance of politics and government—benefits, such as medical care for the elderly, and burdens, such as new taxes. *How* people participate in politics is important, too. People *engage in politics* for a variety of reasons, and all of their activities in politics are collectively called **political participation**. Voting is only one form of participation.

THE POLICYMAKING SYSTEM

A **policymaking system** is a set of institutions and activities that link together government, politics, and public policy. In a democratic society, parties, elections, interest groups, and the media are key **linkage institutions** between the preferences of citizens and the government's policy agenda. When people confront government officials

with problems they expect them to solve, they are trying to influence the government's **policy agenda**. A government's policy agenda changes frequently: if public officials want to get elected, they must pay attention to the problems that concern the voters.

People, of course, do not always agree on what government should do. Indeed, one group's concerns and interests are often at odds with those of another group. A political issue is the result of people disagreeing about a problem or about the public policy needed to fix it.

Three **policymaking institutions**—Congress, the presidency, and the courts—stand at the *core* of the political system. They make policies concerning some of the issues on the policy agenda. Translating people's desires into public policy is crucial to the workings of democracy. **Public policy** is a choice that government makes in response to some issue on its agenda. Public policy includes all of the decisions *and nondecisions* of government: policymakers can establish a policy by doing *something* or by doing *nothing*, as can be seen in the government's original response of "inaction" to the AIDS crisis.

Policy impacts are the effects that policy has on people and on society's problems. The analysis of policy impacts carries the policymaking system *back to its point of origin* (often called *feedback*). Even when government decides NOT to do anything, this decision has an impact on people.

DEMOCRACY

Resounding demands for democracy have recently been heard in many corners of the world. In his famous Gettysburg Address, Abraham Lincoln referred to democracy as "*government of the people, by the people, and for the people.*" Although Lincoln's definition imparts great emotional impact, such a definition is subject to many different interpretations. For example, what do we mean by "*people*"? No democracy permits government by literally every person in society. Throughout this textbook, the authors define **democracy** as *a means of selecting policymakers and of organizing government so that policy represents and responds to the public's preferences.*

Traditional democratic theory rests upon several principles that specify how a democratic government makes its decisions. Democratic theorist Robert Dahl lists five criteria that are essential for "an ideal democratic process": equality in voting, effective participation, enlightened understanding, citizen control of the agenda, and inclusion, which means that government must include (and extend rights to) all those subject to its laws.

Democracies must also practice **majority rule** and preserve **minority rights**. The relationship between the few leaders and the many followers is one of **representation**. *The closer the correspondence between representatives and their electoral majority, the closer the approximation to democracy.*

Theories of American democracy are essentially theories about who has power and influence. This chapter focuses on three contemporary theories of American democracy. **Pluralist theory** contends that many centers of influence compete for power and control over public policy, with no one group or set of groups dominating. Pluralists view bargaining and compromise as essential ingredients to democracy. In sharp contrast to

pluralist theory, **elite and class theory** contends that society is divided along class lines and that an upper-class elite rules. Wealth is seen as the basis of power, and a few powerful Americans are the policymakers. Some scholars believe elitism is on the rise in the United States, especially due to the administrations of Ronald Reagan and George W. Bush. **Hyperpluralism** is “pluralism gone sour.” Hyperpluralists contend that the existence of too many influential groups actually makes it impossible for government to act. When politicians try to placate every group, the result is confusing, contradictory, and muddled policy (or no policy at all). Both hyperpluralist theory and elite and class theory suggest that the public interest is rarely translated into public policy.

Regardless of which theory is most convincing, there are a number of continuing challenges to democracy: increased technical expertise, limited participation in government, escalating campaign costs, and diverse political interests. Traditional democratic theory holds that ordinary citizens have the good sense to reach political judgments and that government has the capacity to act upon those judgments. However, it has become increasingly difficult to make knowledgeable decisions as human knowledge has expanded. There is evidence that Americans actually know very little about policy decisions or about who their leaders are. Today, the elite are likely to be those who command knowledge—the experts.

Many observers also worry about the close connection between money and politics. Candidates have become increasingly dependent on Political Action Committees (PACs) to fund their campaigns. Critics charge that PACs have undue influence on members of Congress when it comes to the issues that the PACs care about.

The rapid rate of change in politics over the last three decades makes it more difficult for government to respond to demands. Some feel that this can lead to inefficient government that cannot adequately address challenges.

The large number and diversity of interest groups coupled with the decentralized nature of government makes it easy to prevent policy formulation and implementation, a condition known as **policy gridlock**.

Five elements of American **political culture** support, shape, and define its democracy. These components are quite important to the immigrant nation of the United States—which has fewer unifying nationalistic characteristics and a shorter historical memory that is the case of most other countries.

The first element is **liberty**—one of Jefferson’s inalienable rights. Americans are supportive of civil liberties and personal freedom. The second is **egalitarianism**, which is more of an evolutionary process than an absolute. Americans tend to support equality of opportunity, and the struggle for equality continues. American social equality has promoted increasing political equality. The third is **individualism**, which developed in part from the desires of immigrants to escape government oppression and from the existence of a western frontier with little government. The fourth is **laissez-faire** economics. The American government taxes and regulates less than most countries at its equivalent level of development. The fifth is **populism**—the “of the people” in Lincoln’s famous description of democracy. The common, ordinary citizens are idealized in American politics, and both liberals and conservatives claim to be their protectors.

Scholars debate whether there is a “cultural war” afoot in America. Some argue that different interpretations of our core political culture have polarized Americans into opposing camps. Others argue that American citizens are fundamentally centrist and tolerant.

Throughout *Government in America* students will be asked to evaluate American democracy.

- Are people knowledgeable about matters of public policy?
- Do they apply what knowledge they have to their voting choices?
- Are American elections designed to facilitate public participation?
- Does the interest group system allow for all points of view to be heard, or do significant biases give advantages to particular groups?
- Do political parties provide voters with clear choices, or do they intentionally obscure their stands on issues in order to get as many votes as possible?
- If there are choices, do the media help citizens understand them?
- Is the Congress representative of American society, and is it capable of reacting to changing times?
- Does the president look after the general welfare of the public, or has the office become too focused on the interests of the elite?

THE SCOPE OF GOVERNMENT IN AMERICA

One goal of *Government in America* is to familiarize the student with different ways to approach and answer the crucial questions that the authors raise. In particular, the text focuses on one of the most important questions facing modern American democracy: *Is the scope of government too broad, too narrow, or just about right?*

Our governments (national, state, and local) spend about 29 percent of the **gross domestic product**. Our national government spends about \$3.1 trillion annually, employs over 2.2 million people, and owns one-third of the land in the United States. National defense takes about one-sixth of the federal budget. Social Security consumes more than one-fifth of the budget. Medicare requires a little over one-tenth of the budget. The federal government helps fund highway and airport construction, police departments, school districts, and other state and local functions. The American government has been more willing to spend than tax, creating a national debt of over \$9 trillion.