

PART

1

INTRODUCTION: MAIN
THEMES

In Part 1, we explain the overall plan of the book, describe the main themes you will see in each chapter, and suggest why these topics are important for the study of American government and politics. We introduce the central dramatic thread that ties the book together: the struggle for democracy. We make the point that American political life has always involved a struggle among individuals, groups, classes, and institutions over the meaning, extent, and practice of democracy. Finally, in this part, we suggest that although democracy has made great progress over the course of U.S. history, it remains only imperfectly realized and is threatened by new problems that only vigilant and active citizens can solve.

Democracy and American Politics

LEARNING OBJECTIVES

After reading this chapter, you should be able to:

- 1.1 Explain the meaning of democracy and its use as a standard to evaluate American government and politics
- 1.2 Outline a systematic framework for thinking about how government and politics work

ROBERT MOSES AND THE STRUGGLE FOR AFRICAN AMERICAN VOTING RIGHTS

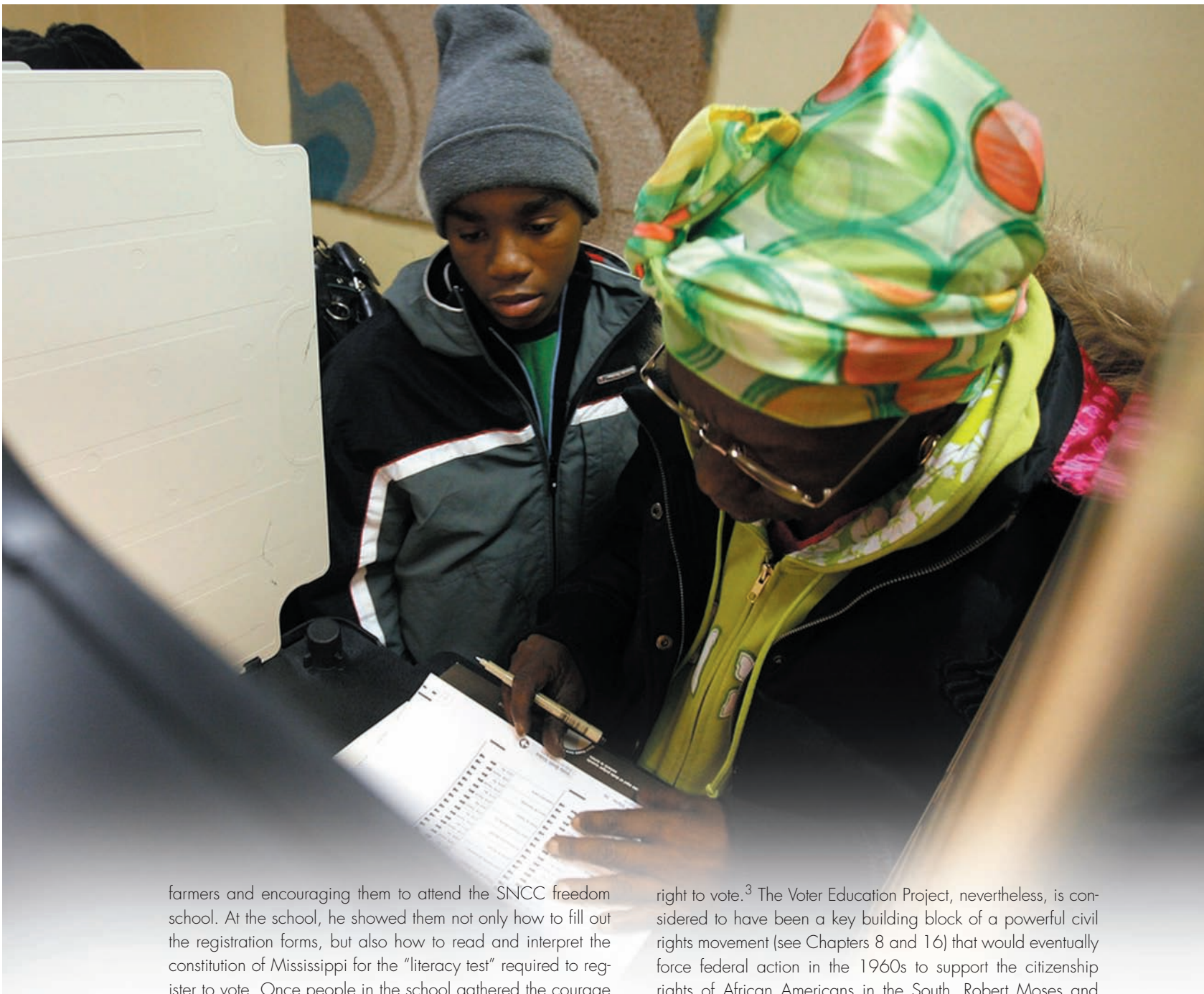
The right to vote in elections is fundamental to democracy. But many Americans won the right to vote only after long struggles. It took more than 30 years from the adoption of the Constitution, for instance, for most states to allow people without property to vote. Women gained the right to vote in all U.S. elections only in 1920, and young people ages 18 to 20 did so only beginning in 1971. African Americans in the South were not able to vote in any numbers until after 1965, despite the existence of the Fifteenth Amendment—which says that the vote cannot be denied to American citizens on the basis of race, color, or previous condition of servitude—adopted in 1870.

In Mississippi in the early 1960s, only 5 percent of African Americans were registered to vote, and none held elective office, although they accounted for 43 percent of the population. In Walthall County, Mississippi, not a single black was registered, although roughly 3,000 were eligible to vote.¹ What kept them away from the polls was a combination of exclusionary voting registration rules, economic pressures, and violent intimidation directed against those brave enough to defy the prevailing political and social order. In Ruleville, Mississippi, civil rights

activist Fannie Lou Hamer was forced out of the house she was renting on a large plantation; fired from her job; and arrested, jailed, and beaten by police after she tried to register to vote.²

The Student Non-Violent Coordinating Committee (widely known by its initials, SNCC) launched its Voter Education Project in 1961 with the aim of ending black political isolation and powerlessness in the Deep South. Composed primarily of African American college students, SNCC worked to increase black voter registration, to challenge exclusionary rules like the poll tax and the literacy test, and to enter African American candidates in local elections. Its first step was to create “freedom schools” in some of the most segregated counties in Mississippi, Alabama, and Georgia to teach black citizens about their rights under the law. Needless to say, SNCC volunteers tended to attract the malevolent attentions of police, local officials, and vigilantes.

The first of the freedom schools was founded in McComb, Mississippi, by a remarkable young man named Robert Parris Moses. Despite repeated threats to his life and more than a few physical attacks, Moses traveled the back roads of Amite and Walthall counties, meeting with small groups of black



farmers and encouraging them to attend the SNCC freedom school. At the school, he showed them not only how to fill out the registration forms, but also how to read and interpret the constitution of Mississippi for the “literacy test” required to register to vote. Once people in the school gathered the courage to journey to the county seat to try to register, Moses accompanied them to lend support and encouragement.

Moses paid a price. Over a period of a few months in 1963, he was arrested several times for purported traffic violations; attacked on the main street of Liberty, Mississippi, by the county sheriff’s cousin and beaten with the butt end of a knife; assaulted by a mob behind the McComb County courthouse; hit by police while standing in line at the voting registrar’s office with one of his students, and dragged to the stationhouse; and jailed for not paying fines connected with his participation in civil rights demonstrations.

Despite the efforts of Moses and other SNCC volunteers, African American registration barely increased in Mississippi in the early 1960s. Black Americans there and in other states of the deep South would have to await the passage of the 1965 Voting Rights Act, which provided powerful federal government protections for all American citizens wishing to exercise their

right to vote.³ The Voter Education Project, nevertheless, is considered to have been a key building block of a powerful civil rights movement (see Chapters 8 and 16) that would eventually force federal action in the 1960s to support the citizenship rights of African Americans in the South. Robert Moses and many other African Americans were willing to risk all they had, including their lives, to gain full and equal citizenship in the United States. They surely would have been gratified and perhaps surprised by the election of African American Barack Obama in 2008 as the nation’s 44th president.

The struggle for democracy is happening in many countries today, where people fight against all odds for the right to govern themselves and control their own destinies. Americans are participants in this drama, not only because American political ideas and institutions have often provided inspiration for democratic movements in other countries but also because the struggle for democracy continues in our own society. Although honored and celebrated, democracy remains an unfinished project in the United States. The continuing struggle to expand and perfect democracy is a major feature of American history and a defining characteristic of our politics today. It is a central theme of this book.

Democracy

1.1 Explain the meaning of democracy and its use as a standard to evaluate American government and politics

Why should there not be a patient confidence in the ultimate justice of the people? Is there any better, or equal, hope in the world?

—ABRAHAM LINCOLN, FIRST INAUGURAL ADDRESS

With the exception of anarchists who believe that people can live in harmony without any form of authority, it is generally recognized that when people live together in groups and communities, an entity of some sort is needed to provide law and order; to protect against external aggressors; and to provide essential public goods such as roads, waste disposal, education, and clean water. If government is both necessary and inevitable, certain questions become unavoidable: Who is to govern? How are those who govern to be encouraged to serve the best interests of society? How can governments be induced to make policies and laws that citizens consider legitimate and worth obeying? In short, what is the best form of government? For most Americans the answer is clear: democracy.

Democracy's central idea is that ordinary people want to rule themselves and are capable of doing so. This idea has proved enormously popular, not only with Americans, but with people all over the world.⁴ To be sure, some people would give top priority to other things besides self-government as a requirement for the good society, including such things as safety and security or the need to have religious law and values determine what government does. Nevertheless, the appealing notion that ordinary people can and should rule themselves has spread to all corners of the globe, and the number of people living in democratic societies has increased significantly over the past two decades.⁵

It is no wonder that a form of government based on the notion that people are capable of ruling themselves enjoys widespread popularity, especially compared with government by the few (e.g., the Communist Party rule in China and Cuba) or by a single person (e.g., the dictatorship of Kim Jung-il in North Korea). But there are many other reasons people have found it appealing. Some political thinkers think that democracy is the form of government that best protects human rights because it is the only one based on a recognition of the intrinsic worth and equality of human beings. Others believe that democracy is the form of government most likely to produce rational policies because it can count on the pooled knowledge and expertise of a society's entire population: a political version, if you will, of the wisdom of the crowds.⁶ Still others claim that democracies are more stable and long-lasting because their leaders, elected by and answerable to voters, enjoy a strong sense of legitimacy among citizens. Many others suggest that democracy is the form of government most conducive to economic growth and material well-being, a claim that is strongly supported by research findings. (Though the historic economic expansionism in China may change thinking on this.) Others, finally, believe that democracy is the form of government under which human beings, because they are free, are best able to develop their natural capacities and talents.⁷ There are many compelling reasons, then, why democracy has been preferred by so many people.

Americans have supported the idea of self-government and have helped make the nation more democratic over the course of our history.⁸ Nevertheless, democracy remains an aspiration rather than a finished product. Our goal in this book is to help you think carefully about the quality and progress of democracy in the United States. We want to help you reach your own independent judgments about the

degree to which politics and government in the United States make our country more or less democratic. We want to help you draw your own conclusions about which political practices and institutions in the United States encourage and sustain popular self-rule and which ones discourage and undermine it. To do this, we must be clear about the meaning of democracy.



Can societies function without some kind of government? What do you imagine would happen if the United States government were rendered powerless?

Democratic Origins

Many of our ideas about democracy originated with the ancient Greeks. The Greek roots of the word *democracy* are *demos*, meaning “the people,” and *kratein*, meaning “to rule.” Philosophers and rulers were not friendly to the idea that the *many* can and should rule themselves. Most believed that governing was a difficult art, requiring the greatest sophistication, intelligence, character, and training—certainly not the province of ordinary people. Aristotle expressed this view in his classic work *Politics*, where he observed that democracy “is a government in the hands of men of low birth, no property, and vulgar employments.”

Instead, they preferred rule by a select *few* (such as an aristocracy, in which a hereditary nobility rules, or a clerical establishment as in Iran today, where religious leaders rule) or by an enlightened *one*, somewhat akin to the philosopher king described by Plato in his *Republic*, or a hereditary monarch as in England in the time of Elizabeth I. **Democracy**, then, is “rule by the people” or, to put it as the Greeks did, self-government by the many, as opposed to **oligarchy** (rule by the *few*) or **monarchy** (rule by the *one*). The idea that ordinary people might rule themselves represents an important departure from most historical beliefs.⁹ In practice, throughout human history, most governments have been quite undemocratic.

Inherent in the idea of self-rule by ordinary people is an understanding that government must serve *all* its people and that ultimately none but the people themselves can be relied on to know, and hence to act in accordance with, their own values and interests.¹⁰

Interestingly, democracy in the sense described here is more a set of utopian ideas than a description of real societies. Athens of the fifth-century BCE is usually cited as the purest form of democracy that ever existed. There, all public policies were decided upon in periodic assemblies of Athenian citizens, though women, slaves, and immigrants were excluded from participation.¹¹ Nevertheless, the existence of a society in Athens where “a substantial number of free, adult males were entitled as citizens to participate freely in government”¹² proved to be a powerful example of what was possible for those who believed that rule by the people was the best form of government. A handful of other cases of popular rule kept the democratic idea alive across the centuries. Beginning in the fifth century BCE, for example, India enjoyed long periods marked by spirited and broadly inclusive public debate and discourse on public issues. In the Roman Republic, male citizens elected the consuls, the chief magistrates of the powerful city-state. Also, during the Middle Ages in Europe, some cities were governed directly by the people (at least by men who owned property) rather than by nobles, church, or crown. During the Renaissance, periods of popular control of government (again, limited to male property holders) occurred in the city-states of Venice, Florence, and Milan.

democracy

A system of government in which the people rule; rule by the many.

oligarchy

Rule by the few, where a minority group holds power over a majority, as in an aristocracy or a clerical establishment.

monarchy

Rule by the one, where power rests in the hands of a king or queen.

Direct Versus Representative Democracy

To the ancient Greeks, democracy meant rule by the common people exercised *directly* in open assemblies. They believed that democracy implied face-to-face deliberation and decision making about the public business. **Direct democracy** requires, however, that all citizens be able to meet together regularly to debate and decide the issues of the day. Such a thing was possible in fifth-century BCE Athens,

which was small enough to allow all male citizens to gather in one place. In Athens, moreover, male citizens had time to meet and to deliberate because women provided household labor and slaves accounted for most production.

? What logistical and practical issues make direct democracy difficult, if not impossible, in a large society? Given the opportunity, do you think you would be able—or willing—to participate directly in governing your town, state, or nation?

direct democracy

A form of political decision making in which the public business is decided by all citizens meeting in small assemblies.

representative democracy

Indirect democracy, in which the people rule through elected representatives.

Because direct, participatory democracy is possible only in small communities where citizens with abundant leisure time can meet on a face-to-face basis, it is an unworkable arrangement for a large and widely dispersed society such as the United States.¹³ Democracy in large societies must take the representative form, since millions of citizens cannot meet in open assembly. By **representative democracy** we mean a system in which the people select others, called *representatives*, to act on their behalf.

Although representative (or indirect) democracy seems to be the only form of democracy possible in large-scale societies, some political commentators argue that the participatory aspects of direct democracy are



RULE BY THE FEW President Mahmoud Ahmadinejad is the president of Iran—though his election in 2009 is widely regarded as fraudulent—and quite visible in defending the country's nuclear program and attacking the West, but real power in the country is exercised by an unelected clergy and the Revolutionary Guard. Here, the president receives a certificate of appreciation from Supreme Leader Ayatollah Ali Khamenei. Is a system that is responsive to the many in theory but run in reality by the few likely to retain its legitimacy over the long term? How might the people of Iran move their system to one where the majority rules rather than the few?

worth preserving as an ideal and that certain domains of everyday life—workplaces and schools, for instance—could be enriched by more direct democratic practices.¹⁴ It is worth pointing out, moreover, that direct democracy can and does flourish in some local communities today. In many New England towns, for example, citizens make decisions directly at town meetings. At the state level, the initiative process allows voters in many states to bypass the legislature to make policies or amend state constitutions. Some observers believe that the Internet is empowering people to become more directly engaged and influential in the political process and that this process will accelerate in the future.¹⁵ Increasingly, the Internet enables people to more easily gather information, deliberate with other citizens about important issues, organize political meetings and demonstrations, and directly communicate their interests and demands to political leaders at all levels of government.

Benchmarks of Representative Democracy

In large societies such as our own, then, democracy means rule by the people, exercised indirectly through representatives elected by the people. Still, this definition is not sufficiently precise to use as a standard by which to evaluate the American political system. It does not tell us what features indirect representative systems must have to ensure that those who govern do so on behalf of and in the interest of the people. You will see that this involves more than the existence of elections.¹⁶ To help further clarify the definition of democracy, we add three additional benchmarks drawn from both the scholarly literature and popular understandings about democracy. These benchmarks are *popular sovereignty*, *political equality*, and *political liberty*. A society in which all three flourish, we argue, is a healthy representative democracy. A society in which any of the three is absent or impaired falls short of the representative democratic ideal. Let us see what each of them means.



RULE BY THE MANY In small towns throughout New England, local policies and budgets are decided upon at regular town meetings, in which the entire town population is invited to participate. What are some advantages to such a system? What might be the drawbacks? What other kinds of forums might there be where direct democracy is possible?

popular sovereignty

The basic principle of democracy that the people are the ultimate source of government authority and of the policies that government leaders make.

Popular Sovereignty **Popular sovereignty** means that people are the ultimate source of government authority and that what the government does is determined by what the people want. If ultimate authority resides not in the hands of the *many* but in the hands of the *few* (as in an aristocratic order), or of the *one* (whether a benevolent sovereign or a ruthless dictator), democracy does not exist. Nor does it exist if government consistently fails to follow the preferences and serve the interests of the people.

How can we recognize popular sovereignty when we see it? The following six conditions are especially important.

Government Policies Reflect the Wishes of the People The most obvious sign of popular sovereignty is the existence of a close correspondence between what government does and what the people want it to do. It is hard to imagine a situation in which the people rule but government officials continuously make policies contrary to the expressed wishes of the majority of the people; sovereign people would most likely react by removing such officials from power.

But does the democratic ideal require that government officials always do exactly what the people want, right away, responding to every whim and passing fancy of the public? This question has troubled many democratic theorists, and most have answered that democracy is best served when representatives and other public officials respond to the people after the people have had the opportunity to deliberate among themselves about the issues.¹⁷ We might, then, want to speak of democracy as a system in which government policies conform to what the people want over some period of time.

Government Leaders Are Selected in Competitive Elections The existence of a close match between what the people want and what government does, however, does not necessarily prove that the people are sovereign. In a dictatorship, for example, the will of the people can be consciously shaped to correspond to the wishes of the leadership. For the direction of influence to flow from the people to the leadership, some mechanism must exist for forcing leaders to be responsive to the people's wishes and to be responsible to them for their actions. The best mechanism ever invented to achieve these goals is the contested election in which both existing and aspiring government leaders must periodically face the people for judgment. (See the "Mapping American Politics" feature on competition in U.S. presidential elections.)

Elections Are Free and Fair If elections are to be useful as a way to keep government leaders responsive and responsible, they must be conducted in a fashion that is free and fair. By free, we mean that there is no coercion of voters or election officials and that virtually all citizens are able to run for office and vote in elections. By fair, we mean, among other things, that election rules do not favor some over others and that ballots are accurately counted.

People Participate in the Political Process Although government leaders may be elected in a balloting process that is free and fair, such a process is useful in conveying the will of the people and keeping leaders responsive and responsible only if the people participate. If elections and other forms of political participation only attract a minority of the eligible population, they cannot serve as a way to understand what the broad public wants or as an instrument forcing leaders to pay attention to it. Widespread participation in politics—including voting in elections, contacting public officials, working with others to bring matters to public attention, joining associations that work to shape government actions, and more—is necessary to ensure not only that responsive representatives will be chosen, but that

they will also have continuous incentives to pay attention to the people. Because widespread participation is so central to popular sovereignty, we can say that the less political participation there is in a society, the weaker the democracy.

High-Quality Information Is Available If people are to form authentic and rational attitudes about public policies and political leaders, they must have access to accurate political information, insightful interpretations, and vigorous debate. These are the responsibility of government officials, opposition parties, opinion leaders, and the news media. If false or biased information is provided, if policies are not challenged and debated, or if misleading interpretations of the political world (or none at all) are offered, the people cannot form opinions in accordance with their values and interests, and popular sovereignty cannot be said to exist.

The Majority Rules How can the opinions and preferences of many individual citizens be combined into a single binding decision? Because unanimity is unlikely—so the insistence that new policies should require unanimous agreement for them to be adopted would simply enshrine the status quo—reaching a decision requires a decision rule of some sort. If the actions of government are to respond to all citizens, each citizen being counted equally, the only decision rule that makes sense is **majority rule**, which means that the government adopts the policy that the *most* people want.¹⁸ The only alternative to majority rule is minority rule, which would unacceptably elevate the preferences and the interests of the *few* over the *many*.

Political Equality The second benchmark of representative democracy is **political equality**, the idea that each person, being of equal intrinsic value as other human beings, carries the same weight in voting and other political decision making.¹⁹ Imagine, if you will, a society in which one person could cast 100 votes in an election, another person 50 votes, and still another 25 votes, while many unlucky folks had only 1 vote each—or none at all. Democracy is a way of making decisions in which each person has one, and only one, voice.

Most people know this intuitively. Our sense of what is proper is offended, for instance, when some class of people is denied the right to vote in a society that boasts the outer trappings of democracy. The denial of citizenship rights to African Americans in the South before the passage of the 1965 Voting Rights Act is such an example. We count it as a victory for democracy when previously excluded groups win the right to vote.

Political equality also involves what the Fourteenth Amendment to the Constitution calls “equal protection,” meaning that everyone in a democracy is treated the same by government. Government programs, for example, cannot favor one group over another or deny benefits or protections to identifiable groups in the population, such as racial and religious minorities. Nor should people be treated better or worse than others by law enforcement agencies and the courts. Taken together, political equality and equal treatment are sometimes called **civil rights**, a subject we will address in more detail in Chapter 17.

But does political equality require that people be equal in ways that go beyond voice in decision making and treatment by government? In particular, does democracy require that inequalities in the distribution of income and wealth not be too extreme? While many do not think this to be the case, thinkers as diverse as Aristotle, Rousseau, and Jefferson



WAITING TO VOTE IN SUDAN Although it remains unclear whether the 2010 elections in Sudan were free and fair, voters nevertheless lined up around the country to cast their ballots. These voters are waiting their turn in the town of Yambio. What other conditions need to be in place, in addition to ballot casting, to ensure that political leaders act as representatives of the people?

majority rule

The form of political decision making in which policies are decided on the basis of what a majority of the people want.

political equality

The principle that says that each person carries equal weight in the conduct of the public business.

civil rights

Guarantees by government of equal citizenship to all social groups.

MAPPING AMERICAN POLITICS

All the States Are Purple

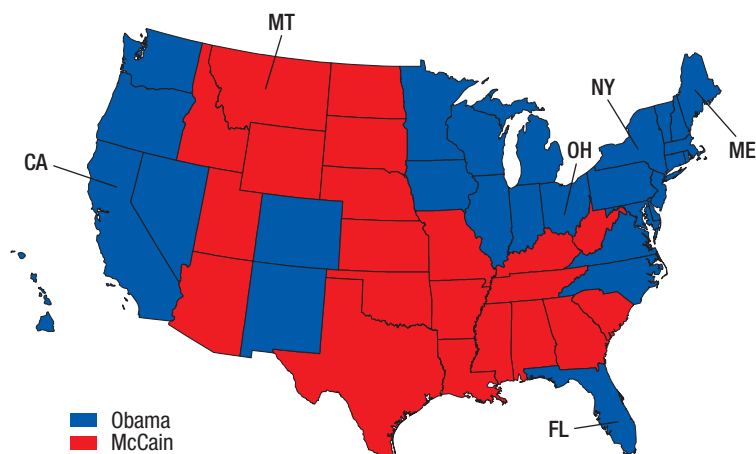
Introduction Voting in elections in which people can choose among competing candidates and political parties is one of the hallmarks of democratic political systems. As we suggest in this chapter, democracy requires other things, such as political equality, civil liberties, and a free press, but competitive elections are essential. For the most part, at all levels of government in the United States, the most important public offices are filled by election, including that of the president. Both the map and the cartogram show the results from the 2008 presidential election won by Democrat Barack Obama over Republican John McCain, focusing on turnout and competition between the candidates.

Different Maps; Different Stories: The standard geographic map of the United States on this page shows states won by John McCain (in red) and Barack Obama (in blue). Election maps like this are widely distributed in newspapers, magazines, and television. However, they are misleading in a very fundamental way because they emphasize geographical space over people and overplay the partisan divisions in the country. They take no account of the relative populations of the states and exaggerate the political importance of large, under-populated spaces. This map suggests a

country that is mostly red, or Republican, yet we know that the Democrat candidate won a relatively decisive victory. So, is there a better way to visualize who voted and for whom in 2008?

The map on the next page is called a cartogram. We will be using cartograms throughout this book to learn more about American politics. A cartogram is a way to visually present information that is organized on a geographical basis, with

each unit (in this case, state) sized in proportion to the data being reported (in this case, number of voters). So rather than thinking of the cartogram as a “map,” think of it as a figure displaying some aspect of American politics in a geographical fashion. Sometimes a cartogram shows geographical units in relation to one another in direct proportion to some simple measure, such as population size. Sometimes a cartogram shows



Standard U.S. Map, Blue for Obama States, Red for McCain States

thought so, believing that great inequalities in economic circumstances are almost always translated into political inequality.²⁰ Political scientist Robert Dahl describes the problem in the following way:

If citizens are unequal in economic resources, so are they likely to be unequal in political resources; and political equality will be impossible to achieve. In the extreme case, a minority of rich will possess so much greater political resources than other citizens that they will control the state, dominate the majority of citizens, and empty the democratic process of all content.²¹

In later chapters, we will see that income and wealth are distributed in a highly unequal way in the United States and that this inequality is sometimes translated into great inequalities among people and groups in the political arena. In such circumstances, the norm of political equality is in danger of being violated.

geographical units drawn to reflect some measure on a per-capita basis (such as the distribution of homeland security defense dollars to states divided by population size). Sometimes a cartogram shows geographical units expanded or diminished from their "normal" geographical scale using mathematical transformations that enable the viewer to easily compare units (such as states and countries) while preserving the rough outlines of the normal shapes of these units. In each "Mapping American Politics" feature in this book, we will specify clearly what sort of cartogram we are using.

The cartogram here uses a simple and direct proportion; each state is sized according to the number of votes cast in the 2008 presidential election. By adjusting the

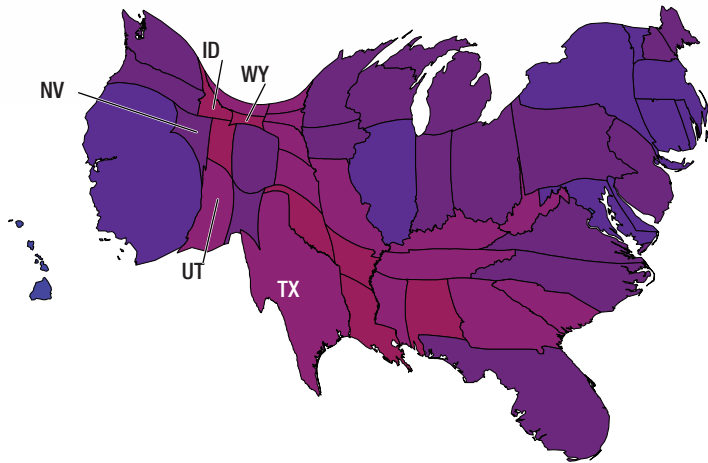
size of the states to reflect the number of citizens who voted for president in 2008, this cartogram shows clearly that California, Florida, New York, Texas, and Ohio have lots of voters and Idaho, Wyoming, Montana, Nebraska, and Maine have relatively few.

Color is often used to convey additional information in cartograms, as we do here. The proportions of blue (for Democratic voters) and red (for Republican voters) in each state reflect the proportions of Democratic and Republican voters in that state. The result is a map with various shades of purple, because all states contain a mix of Democratic and Republican voters. The closer a state comes to the blue end of the spectrum, the more Democratic voters it has relative

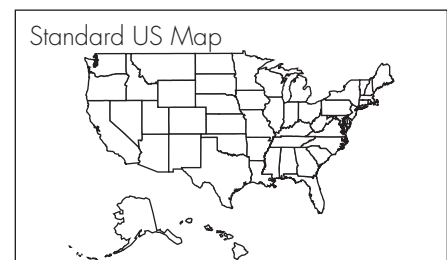
to Republicans; the closer a state comes to the red end of the spectrum, the more Republicans it has relative to Democrats. There are no pure red or blue states, no pure Republican or Democratic states. Even states that are deep purple (more blue), such as California, have many Republican voters, while states that are more red, such as Utah and Wyoming, have many Democratic voters.

What Do You Think? How does the cartogram convey more information than the conventional map about competition in the 2008 election and where the most voters are located? Do you see anything interesting in either the map or the cartogram that we have not mentioned here? How about your own state? What, if anything, about its portrayal in the cartogram surprises you?

Source: <http://clerk.house.gov/members/electionInfo/2008/Table.htm>. Details about methods for producing such cartograms can be found in the pioneering publication by Michael T. Gastner and Mark E. J. Newman, "Diffusion-Based Method for Producing Density-Equalizing Maps," *Proceedings of the National Academy of Sciences* 101 (May 18, 2004), pp. 7499–7504.



Size of States Adjusted to Reflect Voter Turnout; Each State is a Mix of Red and Blue Reflecting the Percentage of Obama and McCain Voters.



Political Liberty A third benchmark of democracy in indirect, representative systems is **political liberty**. Political liberty refers to basic freedoms essential to the formation and expression of majority opinion and its translation into public policies. These essential liberties include the freedoms of speech, of conscience and religion, of the press, and of assembly and association, embodied in the First Amendment to the U.S. Constitution. Philosopher John Locke thought that individual rights and liberty were so fundamental to the good society that their preservation was the central responsibility of any legitimate government and that their protection is the very reason people agreed to enter into a **social contract** to form government in the first place.



In what ways do you think technology might affect American democracy in the future? Could a society that governs itself through electronic participation meet all three criteria for democracy: equality, sovereignty, and liberty?



WOMEN DEMAND THE RIGHT TO VOTE

Although political equality is a cornerstone of American democracy, the nation's understanding of who is entitled to equal status has changed over the years. The right to vote was granted to all men regardless of race in 1870, although stringent registration rules made it very difficult for nonwhites to exercise that right. It wasn't until 1920 that the Nineteenth Amendment extended the right to vote to women; in 1971, a constitutional amendment lowered the voting age from 21 to 18. Here, suffragettes demonstrate for the right to vote in front of Woodrow Wilson's White House. Why has voting been such a contentious issue in America's history?

Without these First Amendment freedoms, as well as those freedoms involving protections against arbitrary arrest and imprisonment, the other fundamental principles of democracy could not exist. Popular sovereignty cannot be guaranteed if people are prevented from participating in politics or if opposition to the government is crushed by the authorities. Popular sovereignty cannot prevail if the voice of the people is silenced and if citizens are not free to argue and debate, based on their own ideas, values, and personal beliefs, and form and express their political opinions.²² Political equality is violated if some people can speak out but others cannot.

For most people today, democracy and liberty are inseparable. The concept of *self-government* implies not only the right to vote and to run for public office, but also the right to speak one's mind; to petition the government; and to join with others in political parties, interest groups, or social movements.

Over the years, a number of political philosophers and practitioners have viewed liberty as *threatened* by democracy rather than as essential to it. We will have more to say about this subject in the next section as we consider several possible objections to democracy. But it is our position that self-government and political liberty are inseparable, in the sense that the former is impossible without the latter.²³ It follows that a majority cannot deprive an individual or a minority group of its political liberty without violating democracy itself.

political liberty

The principle that citizens in a democracy are protected from government interference in the exercise of a range of basic freedoms, such as the freedoms of speech, association, and conscience.

social contract

The idea that government is the result of an agreement among people to form one, and that people have the right to create an entirely new government if the terms of the contract have been violated by the existing one.

liberal democracy

Representative democracy characterized by popular sovereignty, liberty, and political equality.

Objections to Liberal Democracy

What we have been describing—a system of representative government characterized by popular sovereignty, political equality, and liberty—commonly is called **liberal democracy**. Not everyone is convinced that liberal democracy is the best form of government. Following are the main criticisms that have been leveled against liberal democracy as we have defined it.

“Majority Tyranny” Threatens Liberty James Madison and the other Founders of the American republic feared that majority rule was bound to undermine freedom and threaten the rights of the individual. They created a constitutional system (as you will see in Chapter 2) that was designed to protect certain liberties against the unwelcome intrusions of the majority. The fears of the Founders were not without basis. What they called the “popular passions” have sometimes stifled the freedoms of groups and individuals who have dared to be different. In the 1950s, for example, many people in the movie industry, publishing, and education lost their jobs because of the anti-communist hysteria whipped up by Senator Joseph McCarthy and others.²⁴ For a time after the 9/11 attacks on the United States, Muslims in the United States became targets of popular hostility (see Chapter 15).

majority tyranny

Suppression of the rights and liberties of a minority by the majority.

Although there have been instances during our history of **majority tyranny**, in which the majority violated the citizenship rights of a minority—the chapter-opening story is a good example—there is no evidence that the *many* consistently threaten liberty more than the *few* or the *one*. To put it another way, the majority does not seem to be a special or unique threat to liberty. Violations of freedom seem as likely to come from powerful individuals and groups or from government officials responding to vocal and narrow interests as from the majority of the people.

Liberty is essential to self-government, and threats to liberty, whatever their origin, must be guarded against by all who value democracy. But we must firmly reject the view that majority rule inevitably or uniquely threatens liberty. Majority rule is unthinkable, in fact, without the existence of basic political liberties.²⁵

The People Are Irrational and Incompetent Political scientists have spent decades studying the attitudes and behaviors of citizens in the United States, and some of the findings are not encouraging. For the most part, the evidence shows that individual Americans do not care a great deal about politics and are rather poorly informed, unstable in their views, and not much interested in participating in the political process.²⁶ These findings have led some observers to assert that citizens are



FEAR CAN UNDERMINE DEMOCRACY Political hysteria has periodically blemished the record of American democracy. Fear of domestic communism, and anarchism, captured in this editorial cartoon, was particularly potent in the twentieth century and led to the suppression of political groups by federal and state authorities acting, in their view, in the name of a majority of Americans. Why was such hysteria able to take hold in the United States? How likely is it that political hysteria will emerge today in the United States given the current economic troubles?

ill-equipped for the responsibility of self-governance and that public opinion (the will of the majority) should not be the ultimate determinant of what government does.

This is a serious charge and bears a great deal of attention, something we shall do in various places in this book. In Chapter 5, for example, we will see that much of the evidence about individual opinions often has been misinterpreted and that the American public is more informed, sophisticated, and stable in its views than it is generally given credit for.

Majoritarian Democracy Threatens Minorities We have suggested that when rendering a decision in a democracy, the majority must prevail. In most cases, the minority on the losing side of an issue need not worry unduly about its well-being because many of its members are likely to be on the winning side in future decisions about other matters. Thus, people on the losing side of an issue such as welfare reform may be part of the majority and winning side on an issue such as how much to spend on education. What prevents majority tyranny over a minority in most policy decisions in a democracy is that the composition of the majority and the minority is always shifting, depending on the issue.

However, what happens in cases that involve race, ethnicity, religion, or sexual orientation, for example, where minority status is fixed? Does the majority pose a threat to such minorities? Many people worry about that possibility.²⁷ The worry is that unbridled majority rule leaves no room for the claims of minorities. This worry has some historical foundations, because majorities have trampled on minority rights with alarming frequency. Majorities long held, for instance, that Native Americans and African Americans were inferior to whites and undeserving of full citizenship. Irish, eastern European, Asian, and Latin American immigrants to our shores, among others, have been subjected to periods of intolerance on the part of

the majority, as have Catholics and Jews. Gays and lesbians have been discriminated against in housing and jobs and have sometimes been violently victimized.

? How might majority rule override liberty or equality in defining a democracy? Must all be present if a democracy is to flourish?

As Robert Dahl points out, however, there is no evidence to support the belief that the rights of minorities are better protected under alternative forms of political government, whether rule by the *few* (note the persecution of the Christian minority in China by the Communist ruling party) or by the *one* (note the persecution of Shia Muslims under the rule of Saddam Hussein in Iraq), and that given the other benefits of majority rule democracy, it is to be preferred.²⁸

In any case, democracy, as we have defined it, requires the protection of crucial minority rights. Recall that majority rule is only one of the defining conditions of popular sovereignty and that popular sovereignty is only one of the three basic benchmarks of democracy, the others being political equality and political liberty. The position of minorities is protected in a fully developed liberal democracy, in our view, by the requirements of equal citizenship (the right to vote, to hold public office, to be protected against violence, and to enjoy the equal protection of the law) and access to the full range of civil liberties (speech, press, conscience, and association). To the extent that a majority violates the citizenship rights and liberties of minorities, society falls short of the democratic ideal.

Democracy as an Evaluative Standard: How Democratic Are We?

After this discussion, it should be easy to see how and why the democratic ideal can be used as a measuring rod with which to evaluate American politics. (See the “By

the Numbers” feature for ways of evaluating how the United States is doing compared with other countries.) We have learned that the fundamental attributes of a liberal representative democracy are popular sovereignty, political equality, and political liberty. Each suggests a set of questions that will be raised throughout this book to encourage critical thinking about American political life.

- *Questions about popular sovereignty.* Does government do what citizens want it to do? Do citizens participate in politics? Can citizens be involved when they choose to be, and are political leaders responsive? Do political linkage institutions, such as political parties, elections, interest groups, and social movements, effectively transmit what citizens want to political leaders? What is the quality of the public deliberation on the major public policy issues of the day? Do the news media and political leaders provide accurate and complete information?
- *Questions about political equality.* Do some individuals and groups have persistent and substantial advantages over other individuals and groups in the political process? Or is the political game open to all equally? Do government decisions and policies benefit some individuals and groups more than others?
- *Questions about political liberty.* Are citizens’ rights and liberties universally available, protected, and used? Are people free to vote? Can they speak openly and form groups freely to petition their government? Do public authorities, private groups, or the majority threaten liberty or the rights of minorities?

These questions will help us assess where we are and where we are going as a democracy. They will help us go past superficial evaluations based on the existence or nonexistence of this institution or that institution—for example, an elected legislature—and allow us to raise questions about the quality of democracy in the United States and its prospects.²⁹ Popular sovereignty, political equality, and political liberty are benchmarks to help us in this evaluation. None are attainable, of course, in perfect form. They are, rather, ideals to which our nation can aspire and standards against which we can measure everyday reality.

A Framework for Understanding How American Politics Works

1.2 Outline a systematic framework for thinking about how government and politics work

In addition to helping you answer questions about the quality of democracy in the United States, our goal in this textbook is to help you understand how American government and politics work. To help you do so, we describe in this section a simple way to organize information and to think about how our political system works.

Organizing the Main Factors of Political Life

If we are to understand why things happen in government and politics—for example, the passage of the 1965 Voting Rights Act that Robert Moses and his SNCC colleagues did so much to bring about—we must begin with what biologists call *taxonomy*: placing things in their proper categories. We believe that each and every actor, institution, and process that influences what our politics are like and what our national government does can be placed into four main categories: structure, political linkage, government, and government action.

BY THE NUMBERS

Is the United States the most democratic country in the world?

While this may surprise you, the answer is no, at least according to the leading measures used by scholars and journalists when addressing this question. We have suggested in this chapter that, while Americans admire democratic political arrangements, and while we have struggled for most of our history to make our society more democratic, democracy remains an unfinished project.

Why It Matters: People here and many people abroad may admire democracy but they also want other things for their societies. It may be the case, for example, that societies where very strong religious beliefs prevail may want government to ensure that religious practices are observed under the direction of religious authorities. Countries like Iran and Saudi Arabia come to mind, although one can observe democratic stirrings even there. Or, there may be societies where economic expansion and rapidly rising living standards are foremost in mind, with democracy taking a back seat. China comes to mind here. Even in the United States, some people might want other values maximized in society, perhaps security from terrorism even at the cost of personal liberties. For the most part, however, Americans say they like living in a democratic society and want it to remain vital. So, it matters for most Americans how we stack up to others and whether we are becoming more or less democratic.

Measuring Democracy: By far the most widely used measure of democracy is the one calculated by a nonprofit organization called Freedom House. It annually calculates a “freedom” score for every country in the world, then uses these scores to assign each of them to one of three categories: free, partly free, or not free.

The raw “freedom” score for determining into which category a country goes is actually made up of two separate sets of measures, one that focuses on political rights, the other on civil liberties. Each is scored by panels of regional experts and scholars. For political rights, they evaluate each country on such things as the degree to which free, fair, and competitive elections exist and whether all adults can vote on a nondiscriminatory basis. With respect to civil liberties, countries are rated on, among many other things, the extent to which the rule of law and an independent judiciary, free speech, press, and association, and protection of property rights exist. (For a full list of items used in the two measures, go to the Freedom House website at www.freedomhouse.org). Scores for political rights can go as high as 40; for civil liberties, the top score is 60. The United States scores very high on this measure at 93 (2008), but it is exceeded by Norway and Sweden (100), Canada (99), Australia and Denmark (98), Ireland (97), Germany and Spain (96), and France (94), and surpasses Italy (92) and Japan (88). The United States’ total score is big enough, however, to comfortably fit within Freedom House’s “free” category. The map shows which countries in the world Freedom House deems free, partly free, and not free.

The Economist magazine has created a measure it claims does a better job evaluating the quality of democracy, going beyond political rights and civil liberties (measured by Freedom House) to include evaluations of the transparency and efficiency of each nation’s government, the degree to which people actually participate in a wide range of political activities, and the degree to which a nation’s political culture values tolerance and active debate on the issues. Like Freedom House, *The Economist* uses

panels of experts to score each country, but it places them on a 10-point scale with 10 representing perfect democracy and 0 representing no democracy at all.

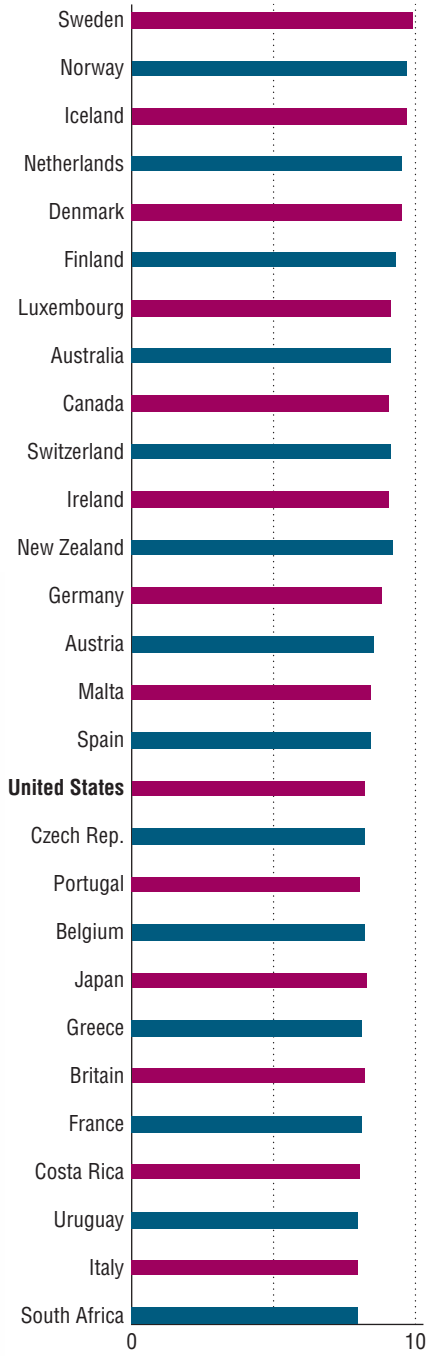
The United States scored 8.22 in 2008 on *The Economist* democracy scale, high enough to fit comfortably within the magazine’s “full democracy” category (of which there were only 30 in the world in 2008), but with a rank of only 18th in the world. The top democratic nation on the scale was Sweden at a near perfect 9.88. Iceland, the Netherlands, Norway, Denmark, Finland, Australia, Canada, Switzerland, Ireland, and New Zealand all scored at 9.0 and above. The United States was ahead of such countries as Japan, Britain, and France in the “full democracy” grouping. The least democratic country in the world on *The Economist* measure was North Korea at 0.86.

Criticisms of the Democracy Measures:

Although the Freedom House freedom measure is widely used by journalists and scholars, many criticize it for focusing only on competitive elections and civil liberties. One reason the editors of *The Economist* came up with an alternative measure was that they and others wanted a measure that does justice to the many processes, institutions, and behaviors that allow for popular self-government, including a tolerant and participative culture and an open and transparent government. Both measures might be faulted, of course, for depending on expert panels rather than clearly observable and easily measured political system attributes in their scoring systems.

What to Watch For: An expert panel is only as good as the experts who are on it. So try to pay attention to who is on the panel. Both Freedom House and

- **Structure.** Structural factors are enduring features of American life that play key roles in determining what issues become important in politics and government, how political power is distributed in the population, and what attitudes and beliefs guide the behavior of citizens and public officials. This category includes the economy and society, the constitutional rules, the



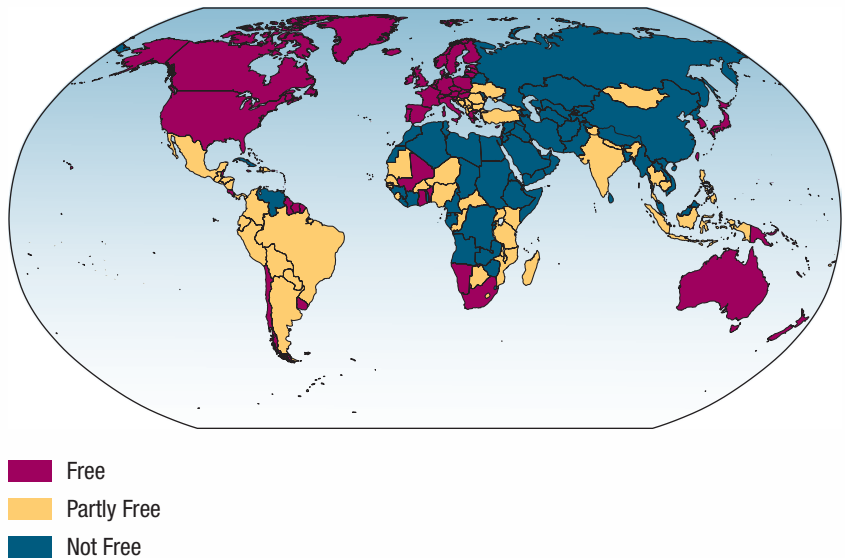
Source: Economist Intelligence Unit.

The Economist post the names and some information about their experts. Check that the experts have either academic



credentials or extensive field experience in the countries and regions they are asked to rate. Equally as important, check to see that the experts are not drawn from a single part of the world, say western Europe or the United States, but come from a broad range of countries and cultures so that as much bias as possible is taken out of a process that is inherently subjective.

What Do You Think? Does it matter to you how highly the United States is ranked on measures of democracy? Why or why not? What are some other values—perhaps security, economic growth, or the extent of religious freedom—that you find important as the basis for judging the quality of a society? If you care deeply about the quality of democracy in the United States but don't believe that the two democracy scores described here tell the full story, what other attributes of a political system would you try to measure? What would your democracy score look like?



Source: Freedom House. Map of Freedom 2007 from Freedom House Publications. Copyright © 2007. Reprinted by permission.

political culture, and the international system: the most fundamental and enduring factors that influence government and politics. They form the foundation upon which all else is built. They are the most enduring parts of the American system, the slowest to change.³⁰

- *Political linkage.* Political linkage factors are all of those political actors, institutions, and processes that transmit the wants and demands of people and groups in our society to government officials and that together help shape what government officials do and what policies they adopt. These include public opinion, political parties, interest groups, the news media, and elections. While not a formal part of government, they directly influence what sorts of people are chosen to be government officials and what these officials do once they are in office.
- *Government.* Government factors include all public officials and institutions that have formal, legal responsibilities for making public policy for the United States. These include Congress, the president and the executive branch, the federal bureaucracy, and the federal courts, including the Supreme Court.
- *Government action.* This is about what government does. This category includes the wide range of actions carried out by government: making laws, issuing rules and regulations, waging war and providing national defense, settling civil disputes, providing order, and more.

This textbook is organized around these four categories. The chapters in Part 2 focus on structural factors. The chapters in Part 3 are about political linkage processes and institutions. The chapters in Part 4 attend to government institutions and leaders. Finally, the chapters in Part 5 examine what government does.

Connecting the Main Factors of Political Life

To understand how government and politics work in the United States, we must appreciate the fact that the structural, political linkage, and governmental categories interact with one another in a particular kind of way to determine what actions government takes (see Figure 1.1). One way to see this is to look at these categories in action, using the passage of the 1965 Voting Rights Act as an example. The main point of the exercise is to show how connecting and considering together the main factors of political life—structure, political linkage, and government—can help explain why government takes certain actions.

To understand passage of the landmark legislation, we might begin with *government*, focusing our attention on Congress and its members; President Lyndon Johnson (who was the most vigorous proponent of the voting rights legislation) and his advisers; and the Supreme Court, which was becoming increasingly supportive of civil rights claims in the mid-1960s.

Knowing these things, however, would not tell us all that we needed to know. To understand why Congress, the president, and the Court behaved as they did in 1965, we would want to pay attention to the pressures brought to bear on them by *political linkage* actors and institutions: public opinion (increasingly supportive of civil rights), the growing electoral power of African Americans in the states outside the South, and most important, the moral power of the civil rights movement inspired by people like Robert Moses and Martin Luther King.

Even knowing these things, however, would not tell us all that we needed to know about why the 1965 Voting Rights Act happened. Our inquiry would have to go deeper to include *structural* factors: economic, cultural, and social change; constitutional rules; and the international position of the United States. For example, economic changes in the nation over the course of many decades triggered a “great migration” of African Americans from the rural South to the urban North. Over the long run, this population shift to states with large blocks of Electoral College votes, critical to the election of presidents, increased the political power of African Americans. Cultural change increased the number of Americans bothered by the second-class citizenship of African Americans, even as combat service in World War II and the Korean War led many

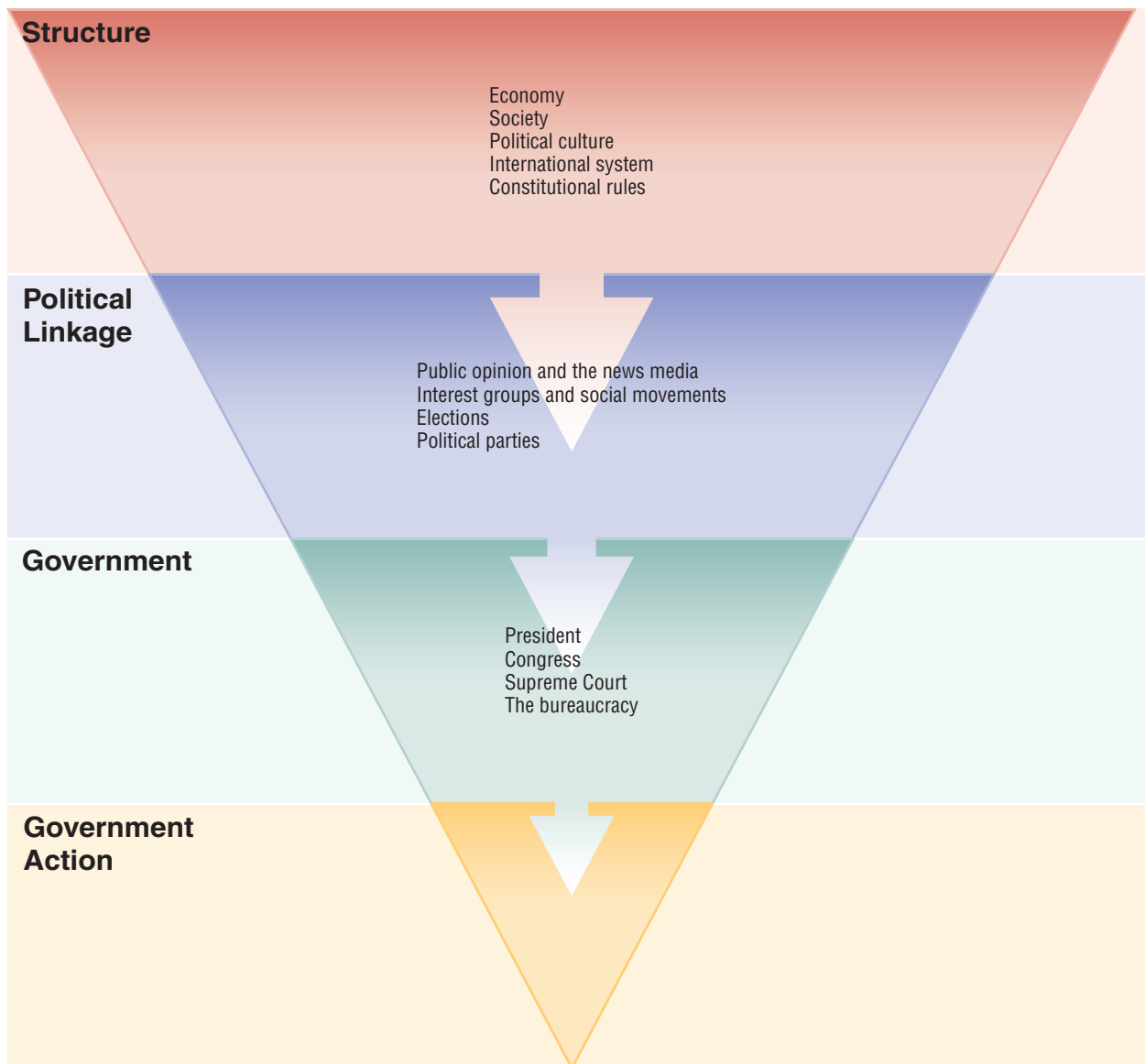


FIGURE 1.1 The Analytical Framework

Various actors, institutions, and processes interact to influence what government does in the United States. Structural factors such as the economy, the political culture, the international system, and constitutional rules play a strong role in political events. They may influence the government directly, or, as is more often the case, through political linkages such as elections, parties, and interest groups. In a democratic society, the policies created by the government should reflect these influences.

black Americans to insist on full citizenship rights. Finally, the Cold War struggle of the United States against the Soviet Union played an important role. Many American leaders, recognizing the contradiction between asking for the support of people of color in Third World countries in the struggle against communism while treating African Americans in the United States as second-class citizens, sought an end to the system of official segregation in the South (known as **Jim Crow**).⁵¹

We see, then, that a full explanation of why the 1965 Voting Rights Act happened (government action) requires that we take into account

Jim Crow

Popular term for the system of legally sanctioned racial segregation that existed in the American South until the middle of the twentieth century.

INTRODUCING THEMSELVES Here, two young children meet on the first day of integration at a Fort Myers, Florida, elementary school in 1954 after the Supreme Court ruled that racially segregated schools were unconstitutional. The elementary school was on a military base under the jurisdiction of the Defense Department, which implemented the new policy relatively quickly. Local school districts in Florida and elsewhere moved more slowly and reluctantly. Why might this have been the case?



how governmental, political linkage, and structural factors interact with one another to bring about significant change in American politics.

Understanding American Politics Holistically

This way of looking at things—that what government does can only be understood by considering structural, political linkage, and governmental factors—will be used throughout this book and will help bring order to the information presented. We will suggest throughout that action by public officials is the product not simply of their personal desires (although these are important), but also of the influences and pressures brought to bear by other governmental institutions and by individuals, groups, and classes at work in the political linkage sphere. Political linkage institutions and processes, in turn, can often be understood only when we see how they are shaped by the larger structural context, including such things as the national and global economies and the political culture. This way of understanding how American government and politics work is illustrated in the “Using the Framework” feature on the next page. This feature appears in each chapter to explore why particular government actions happen.

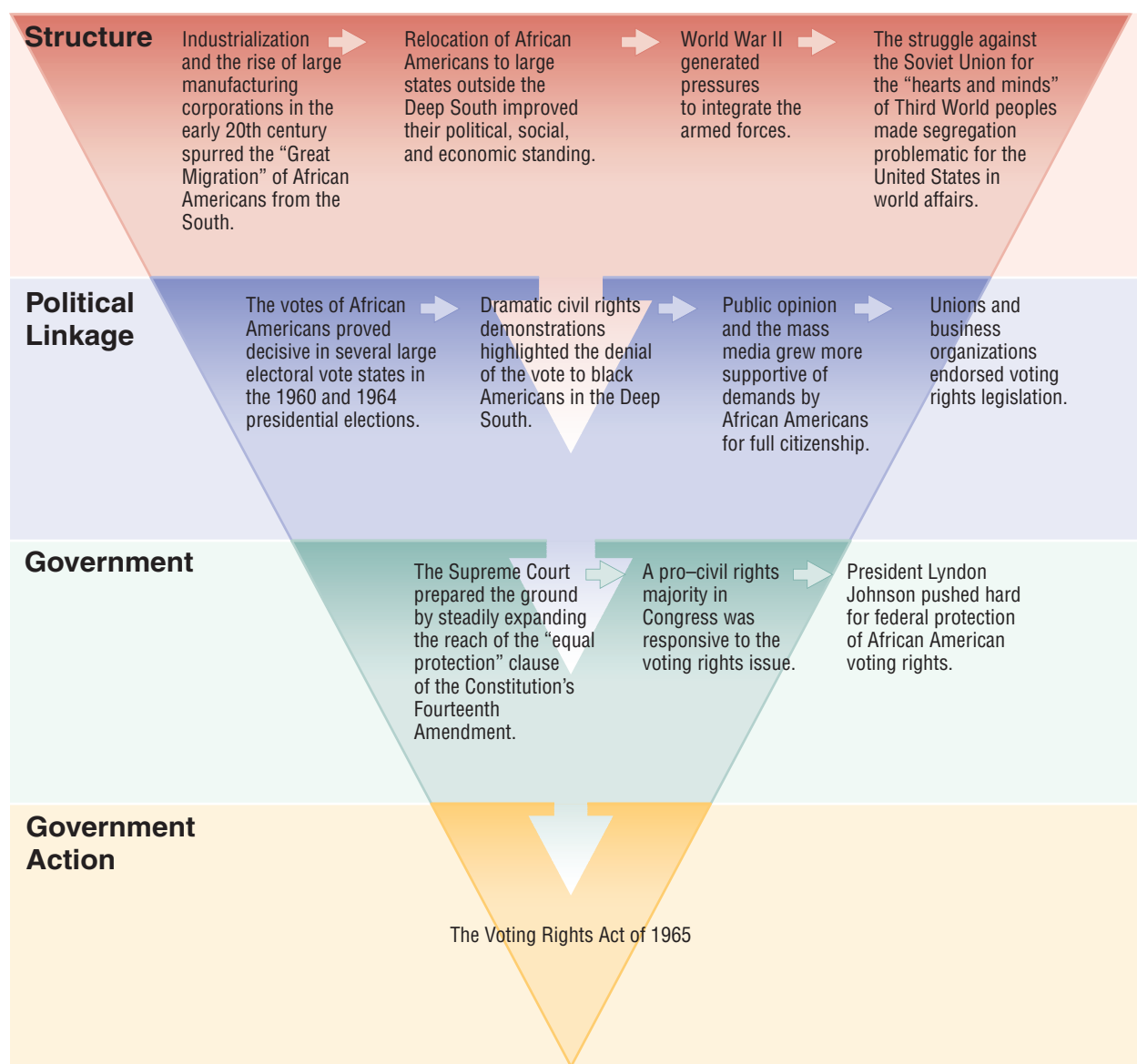
You should also keep in mind that, as in all complex systems, feedback also occurs. That is to say, influences sometimes flow in the opposite direction, from government to political linkage actors and institutions to structural factors. For example, federal tax laws influence the distribution of income and wealth in society, government regulations affect the operations of corporations, and decisions by the courts may determine what interest groups and political parties are able to do. We will want to pay attention, then, to these sorts of influences in our effort to understand how the American political system works.

Using the **FRAMEWORK**

How was Southern resistance to black political participation overcome?

Background: The Voting Rights Act of 1965 transformed the politics of the American South. Under federal government protection, the Act permitted African Americans to vote and run for elected office in states where a combination of violence, economic pressure, and state and local government

rules made political participation difficult if not impossible prior to 1965. We can understand how such a momentous transformation happened by examining structural, political linkage, and governmental factors.



You need not worry about remembering exactly which actors and influences belong to which of the four categories. That will become obvious because the chapters of the book are organized into sections corresponding to them. Nor do you need to worry about exactly how the people and institutions in the different levels interact with one another. This will become clear as materials are presented and learned and as you become more familiar with the American political process.

SUMMARY

1.1 Explain the meaning of democracy and its use as a standard to evaluate American government and politics.

- Democracy is a system of rule by the people, rooted in three fundamental principles: popular sovereignty (meaning that the people ultimately rule), political equality (meaning that each person has equal say in determining what government does), and political liberty (meaning that the people are protected from government interference in exercising their rights).
- Ensuring that all three aspects of democracy are available and practiced has played an important role in American history, and remains an important theme in our country—as well as many other parts of the world—today.
- The United States is a liberal representative democracy—meaning that the people do not rule directly but through elected representatives, and have broad

civil and political rights, but the majority does not always get its way.

- Because democracy holds a very special place in Americans' constellation of values and is particularly relevant to judging political processes, it is the standard used throughout this text to evaluate the quality of our politics and government.

1.2 Outline a systematic framework for thinking about how government and politics work.

- The organizing framework presented in this chapter visualizes the world of American politics as a set of interrelated *actors* and *influences*—institutions, groups, and individuals—that operate in three interconnected realms: the *structural*, *political linkage*, and *governmental* sectors. This way of looking at American political life as an ordered, interconnected whole will be used throughout the remainder of the book.

TEST YOURSELF

Answer key begins on page T-1.

1.1 Explain the meaning of democracy and its use as a standard to evaluate American government and politics.

1. Which of the following is the essence of democracy?
 - a. Economic well-being
 - b. Self-government
 - c. Promotion of moral values
 - d. Protection of human rights
 - e. Creation of rational public policies
2. Which of the following is an essential component of a healthy representative democracy?
 - a. Direct democracy
 - b. Social equality
 - c. Government policies that reflect the wishes of the people
 - d. The selection of government leaders according to merit and experience
 - e. The proliferation of uncontested elections

3. Some people claim that political actors such as politicians, interest groups, the media, and political parties propagate misleading or biased information about politics. If this claim has merit, why might it suggest that American democracy is unhealthy?
 - a. Popular sovereignty requires the availability of high-quality information about politics.
 - b. Misleading or biased information violates the principles of political liberty.
 - c. Political decisions should be based on the principle of unanimity whenever possible.
 - d. Political equality requires that the public be presented with all sides of an issue, with each side receiving equal representation.
 - e. Misleading or biased information violates the bedrock principles of citizens' social contract with government.

1.2 Outline a systematic framework for thinking about how government and politics work.

4. Which of the following aspects of American politics is most durable?
 - a. Legislative factors
 - b. Structural factors
 - c. Political linkage factors
 - d. Government factors
 - e. Government actions
5. Select a recent government action, and describe how it was influenced by structural, political linkage, and governmental factors.

PEARSON mypoliscilab EXERCISES

INTERNET SOURCES

A number of sites on the Internet serve as “gateways” to vast collections of material on American government and politics. In subsequent chapters, we will indicate the location of sites on the Web to begin searches on the specific subject matter of the chapters. Here we concentrate on the general gateways, the starting points for wide-ranging journeys through cyberspace, geared to governmental and political subjects. Also included are gateways to the multitude of political Web logs (blogs). Here are the gateways:

About.com US Politics Blogs
<http://uspolitics.about.com/od/blogs/>

The Corner; National Review (conservative Web log)
<http://corner.nationalreview.com>

The Daily Kos (liberal Web log)
<http://www.dailykos.com>

The Internet Public Library
www.ipl.org/div/subject/browse/law00.00.00/

New York Times, Politics Navigator
www.nytimes.com/library/politics/polpoints.html

Political Index
www.politicalindex.com

Real Clear Politics
www.realclearpolitics.com

SUGGESTIONS FOR FURTHER READING

Bartels, Larry M. *Unequal Democracy: The Political Economy of the New Gilded Age*. New York and Princeton, NJ: The Russell Sage Foundation and Princeton University Press, 2008.

An examination of rising income inequality and how it undermines several of the basic foundational requirements of political democracy.

Dahl, Robert A. *Democracy and Its Critics*. New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 1989.

A sweeping defense of democracy against its critics by one of the most brilliant political theorists of our time.

24 | Part One Introduction: Main Themes

Dahl, Robert A. *On Democracy*. New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 1998.

A brief yet surprisingly thorough examination of classical and contemporary democracy, real and theoretical.

Putnam, Robert D. *Making Democracy Work: Civic Traditions in Modern Italy*. Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1993.

A brilliant and controversial argument that the success of democratic government depends on the vitality of a participatory and tolerant civic culture.

Wolfe, Alan. *Does American Democracy Still Work?* New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 2006.

A pessimistic reading of trends in American politics, society, and economy that are diminishing the quality of American democracy.

Zakaria, Fareed. *The Future of Freedom: Illiberal Democracy at Home and Abroad*. New York: Norton, 2004.

The author suggests that majority rule democracy can only happen and be sustained in societies where individual freedom and the rule of law already exist, suggesting that democracy is unlikely to take hold in places such as Russia and Iraq.