

Should We Care about Politics?

CHAPTER

1



Copyright: Oleksii Khmyz/Shutterstock.com

Learning Objectives

When you have completed this chapter, you should be able to:

- Understand the difference between a direct and representative democracy.
- Distinguish between legitimacy and authority.
- Explain how legitimacy and authority are related to power.
- Identify political resources and why they are the tools of power.
- Define elitism and pluralism, and explain how each offers a different view of how resources are distributed in society.
- Differentiate equality of opportunity from equality of outcome.
- Relate political equality to equality of opportunity, and economic and social equality to equality of outcome.
- Define liberty, and explain the trade-offs between liberty and equality of outcome.
- Appreciate government as the arbiter in disputes between liberty and social responsibility.

- 1.1** Introduction
- 1.2** Democracy and Everyday Life
- 1.3** Making Democracy Practical
- 1.4** Buying in to Authority
- 1.5** Inheriting Legitimacy
- 1.6** Earning Legitimacy
- 1.7** Power Surge
- 1.8** It's Not Fair!
- 1.9** Unequal and Different
- 1.10** Equal and Free?
- 1.11** Whose Choice?
- 1.12** So Should I Care about Politics?

Chapter Review

Key Terms

Resources

Notes

1.1 Introduction

During your lifetime, when you may or may not have been paying attention to politics, the United States experienced in rapid succession a string of unprecedented shocks to its political system.

Conservatives, led by Republican Newt Gingrich, swept away forty years of Democratic control of the House of Representatives in a massive upset that installed a new order in Congress that ruled at will—for a little less than a year. The Gingrich group soon overplayed its hand and was repudiated by a crafty Bill Clinton, who used his platform as president to turn public opinion against his political adversaries.



Yet, just as Clinton appeared to ascend politically, events surrounding his extracurricular activities with a White House intern named Monica Lewinsky snowballed into impeachment proceedings against him. It was only the second time in history that a president was brought to the brink of political extinction by a Senate impeachment trial. Clinton survived, only to see his hand-picked successor, Vice President Al Gore, lose the next presidential election, despite winning more votes than his opponent—only the fourth time in history that happened—and only after the election went into a seven-week overtime period of ballot challenges that culminated in an unprecedented 5–4 Supreme Court decision that effectively installed George W. Bush in the White House. No one had ever witnessed anything quite like it.

The Republican Bush took office with razor-thin Republican majorities in the House and Senate, only to see the Senate flip to Democratic control within months of his inauguration when one moderate Republican, feeling ignored by the conservative White House, left his party to become an independent. Nothing like this had ever happened before.

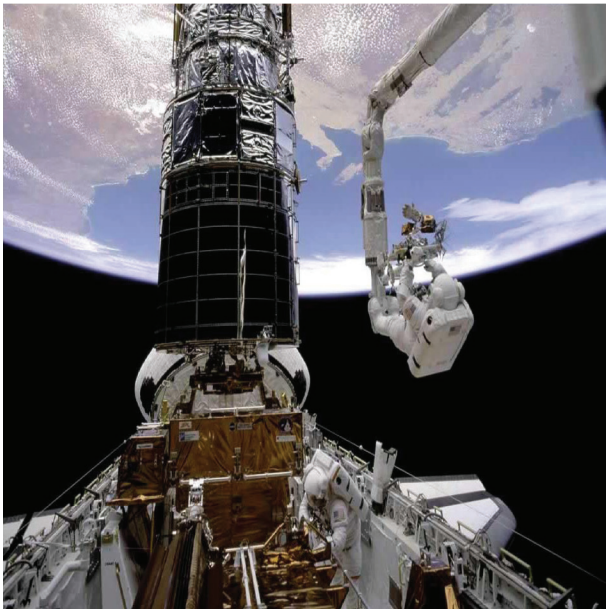
If afternoon soap operas had a political theme, this one would have had enough intrigue, sex, and ego to run a long, long time.

But if you didn't notice much of this, or didn't hear your parents talk too much about it—join the club. For all of its great story elements, during times of peace and prosperity, many of us pay little attention to politics, and even if we do pay attention, we often have vague impressions of what's going on rather than fully formed opinions. That's just the way politics works in our lives.

Then came the horrific events of September 11, 2001: the terrorist attacks on the World Trade Center and the Pentagon, and a virtual declaration of war by Washington on terrorism. For many of us, politics was instantly thrust into the center of our daily lives. As anthrax-coated letters began appearing in the mail, Americans of all generations began turning to our elected leaders for reassurance and to government agencies for help. Such is the way of life in a crisis, when public decisions supersede private actions. This, too, is the way politics works in our lives.

In the days following the attack, Americans experienced a wave of unity and national purpose, and political differences were briefly put aside. But, good feelings soon gave way to an era of partisan rancor greater than anything we saw in the 1990s. The invasion of Iraq, initially supported by members of both major political parties and large majorities of Americans, became bogged down in the wake of an insurgency that could not be tamed or overcome. American casualties grew as more people started to regard Iraq as a war of choice justified by questionable claims about the security threat posed by the regime of Saddam Hussein, rather than as a war of necessity fought to protect us from terrorism.

In 2004, a divided nation re-elected President Bush after a high-decibel campaign marked by shrill rhetoric. By 2005, anti-war sentiment entered the mainstream in response to the actions of Cindy Sheehan, the mother of a fallen soldier, who camped out at Bush's Texas ranch during the president's August vacation, demanding that he answer her questions about why America was in Iraq. Her simple act of defiance gave voice to growing anti-war feelings and spawned an anti-Sheehan counter-movement that vocally defended the president and his policy. With no end to the war in sight, public support



As the twenty-first century began, a long period of peace and prosperity provided the backdrop to a series of wild political swings. Pictured: President Clinton, Israeli Prime Minister Yitzhak Rabin, and Palestinian leader Yasser Arafat agree on the outlines of a Middle East peace settlement (see previous page); the Hubble Space Telescope; the studios of the Oprah Winfrey Show; the original PlayStation.¹¹

for the war dissipated, leaving George W. Bush a deeply unpopular president and many Americans with a sour feeling about the direction of the country.

Then came a deep recession and, in 2008, a financial crisis that rocked confidence in global markets and had some economists speculating about whether we were on the verge of a second Great Depression. Against this backdrop, promising to bridge partisan divisions and re-shape America's direction, Barack Obama was elected the first African American president of the United States—a feat so remarkable that, until it happened, mainstream political commentators wondered whether it was possible despite polling evidence that suggested it was inevitable.

But if Obama's election defied history, his promise to bridge partisan differences fell short. Following a flurry of legislative activity during his first two years in office—including passage of a controversial law to extend health care coverage to the uninsured—a reaction from the right by “Tea Party” patriots casting themselves in the mold of the original American revolutionaries resulted in Republicans regaining control of the House of Representatives in 2010, abruptly dashing the president's legislative plans and ushering in another round of angry partisan gridlock. Just when it appeared the Obama era would be short-lived, a reaction on the political *left* against the perceived excesses of the very wealthy took hold across the country in late 2011 as people took to the streets in solidarity with those who had built a permanent occupation in a park in New York's financial district. Although “Occupy Wall Street” faded from the headlines by the following spring, the nation remained focused on economic inequality. This shift in the political narrative away from the anger generated by Obama's activist first two years, combined with a gradually improving economy, helped lift the president to re-election in 2012, albeit with the continuation of divided government and partisan conflict.

It can be draining to come of age in the midst of such tumultuous political activity—but it can be energizing as well, depending on how we react to it. And our reactions can be critical to determining how political events will play out. Whether we pay a lot of attention to politics or ignore it completely, whether in times of comfort or times of anxiety, we live in a country where you can draw a straight line between your choice of whether or not to get involved and the kind of government we get. No one will make you vote if you don't want to, and no one will make you watch the news (well, your professor might, but you'll be back to having free choice over your news-viewing habits in a few months). You can make your own choices about what you know and whether or how much to get involved. Some combination of these individual decisions—and the choice to be apolitical is a decision—determines what happens in Washington, in your state capital, in your community, and to you.

TABLE 1.1 Is It Relevant?

Here's a list of activities that may or may not constitute ways we can interact with democracy. Select the ones you believe have something to do with your relationship with government or politics.

1. Voting in a congressional election
2. Watching the Daily Show on Comedy Central
3. Joining AAA (American Automobile Association) for towing services
4. Trying to drive 10 miles over the speed limit to avoid getting a ticket
5. Making a \$10 contribution to a candidate for mayor
6. Attending a private college or university
7. Camping out at Yosemite
8. Buying a Diet Coke
9. Buying a lottery ticket
10. Flushing the toilet

They're all "Yes" answers. Surprised? Here are the reasons why:

1. Easy question: voting is the most obvious way we participate in politics.
2. Political and social satire get us to think about what government is doing.
3. Even though it may not be why we join, organizations like AAA lobby elected officials over legislation.
4. Government officials write a lot of rules we live under, like speed limit laws, and enforce them with agents like police officers who determine whether 10 miles over the limit is bending the law too much.
5. Another easy one: money plays a big role in politics.
6. Whether it's adhering to national antidiscrimination policy on admission or hiring decisions, or administering federally subsidized student loans, even private schools find it hard to escape the influence of government.
7. National parks like Yosemite are preserved through government actions.
8. Almost every state imposes a sales tax on food items. If you live in Delaware or New Hampshire and you answered "no," go ahead and give yourself credit because they have no sales tax.
9. Lotteries are established and supported by state governments, and the proceeds are often used to pay for government programs.
10. You can't even find privacy from government actions here. Most places have a sewer system that wouldn't be there if not for the government.

Score Yourself: If you got 8–10 correct, you pay more attention than most people to politics and government. Odds are you know what C-SPAN is (and if you don't, go to www.cspan.org). If you got 5–7 correct, you have a pretty good feel for the role of government in our lives. If you got fewer than 5 correct, you may be in for some interesting surprises!

So, should we care about what happens in politics? Does it really matter? Does it only matter in times of crisis? Wait—don't answer yet. Let's talk first about where you fit in—about the big and small ways your American citizenship invites you to interact with democracy—before deciding whether it's worth your time and energy to give politics and government a second thought once you're done with this course. Let's use the quiz in Table 1.1 as a starting point.

1.2 Democracy and Everyday Life

Ever since grade school, we've had a pretty basic sense of what it means to live in a democracy. At the same time, we don't always know what democracy means in everyday life, except maybe for some of the obvious things like voting and making contributions to political candidates. These are the most direct and visible ways we interact with government. Think, though, about some of the choices in the "Is it relevant?" quiz. We can also interact indirectly, passively, or without direct knowledge that we're in a political situation at all. We may even interact against our will, like if the dues we pay the American

Ballots That Disenfranchise

Months after the conclusion of the disputed 2000 election, the question of ballot inequity was still a big topic of discussion. George W. Bush had won the presidency following a pitched battle over the official vote count in the state of Florida—a battle that included questions about confusing and irregular ballots, and machines that made a significant number of mistakes reading ballots.

On the surface, counting votes seems straightforward. We've all voted in class elections—you write your choice on a piece of paper, someone reads the votes and adds them up to get a winner. Easy. But when you start to count votes in large numbers, more sources of error are introduced to what seems like such a simple process. In 2000, one of the problems was with punch-card ballots that worked by using a stylus pen to push little perforated squares called chads out of a piece of cardboard. A machine designed to scan the holes created by the vacated chads counted the votes automatically. The only problem was that it didn't always work well. Chads that didn't fully detach or that weren't punched through could confuse the scanner, a mechanical device that couldn't discern the intent of the voter. Votes that confused the scanner would be set aside without being counted. The voter, in essence, would be **disenfranchised**—denied the right to cast a vote—by virtue of his or her ballot not being included in the final tally.

Any mechanical method of vote counting is going to have its problems, and if these problems were spread evenly throughout the country, we might be able to write it off as an unfortunate but necessary side effect of trying to count a lot of votes quickly and efficiently. Even though some individual votes would be lost, the

outcome of the election wouldn't change. But what if there is reason to believe that some groups of people are disproportionately affected by counting errors?

That's the charge leveled by a congressional report released several months after the 2000 election. It found that voting systems like the punch-card method, which tend to make more errors than expensive systems using more advanced technology, were more likely to be used in districts containing low income and minority voters. Consequently, it found a higher rate of uncounted ballots in those districts. If these results are substantiated, they suggest that the inevitable problems caused by vote counting methods fall more heavily on low income and minority voters. In relation to affluent voters, individuals in these groups are disenfranchised at a higher rate.

The seriousness of this charge should be understood in the political environment in which the investigation was undertaken. Congressional Democrats conducted the study, and the groups they allege are being disenfranchised are groups that tend to vote for Democrats. That adds a partisan slant to the issue of disenfranchised voters. At the same time, it's an issue that goes to the core of what it means to have rights in a democracy. So, as we consider the possibility that a balloting method systematically disenfranchises groups of voters with shared characteristics, we might ask another question about finding truth in the political process: Can a group with a partisan stake in the outcome conduct a fair investigation? On the other hand, if a group with a stake in the outcome didn't take the initiative to investigate possible wrongdoing, how would potential problems with the political system ever emerge?

Automobile Association (AAA) for that convenient towing service end up being spent on efforts to get elected officials to support policies we don't agree with.

That's because a democracy as big and complex as ours has great reach in our lives—greater than we probably realize.

In any form, **democracy** entails a few basic things: participation by the people, the willing consent of the people to accept and live by the actions of government, and the recognition that we all have basic rights that government can't take away from us. These are the things Abraham Lincoln was talking about in the passage from the Gettysburg Address that mentions “government of the people, by the people, and for the people.”

It's easy to imagine how these prerequisites for democracy might not always hold. We often choose not to participate—or may end up unknowingly participating without giving consent. At various times in our history, those who did not own property, people of color, women, and young people were denied the most basic political freedoms. Even today there are indications that poor individuals and minorities are more likely to have their voices dismissed through such inequities as living in communities that use cheaper and less reliable methods of counting votes (see *Demystifying Government: Ballots that Disenfranchise*). We saw evidence of this as recently as the 2000 election.

disenfranchised: Losing or being denied the legal right to vote by intentional or unintentional means.

democracy: A government created by the people over whom it rules.

1.3 Making Democracy Practical

L.O. Understand the difference between a direct and representative democracy.

direct democracy: Democracy without representation, where each eligible individual participates in decision making.

representative democracy: A form of democracy in which eligible individuals choose others to make decisions on their behalf.

republic: Any nation with provisions for the selection of representatives who make decisions on behalf of those who select them. James Madison said a republic was “a government in which the scheme of representation takes place,” as compared to direct democracy.

Does this mean that the democratic ideals that our politicians like to praise at Memorial Day parades don’t really work in America? Does it mean that they work, but unevenly? How much does government act poorly or inappropriately, simply because the principles it’s based on don’t fully translate to real world conditions? No system is perfect, but which imperfections are you willing to live with, and which ones, if any, are intolerable? These are hard questions that don’t invite a single answer. And they go to the heart of how we function as a people.

Democracy is both an imperfect system and a complex idea. In fact, the broad principles we’re talking about can take on different forms depending on the circumstances—with different results. In the small towns of colonial New England, a form of **direct democracy** took hold that enabled everyone to have a personal say in what government did. On this small scale, it was possible for every citizen of a town to gather in a meeting place and directly influence the way the community governed itself. When you stop to consider the lines in the parking lot if a nation of 315,248,220 people¹ tried to do something like this, you realize why even when we were a much smaller country we decided to take a different course. Instead of direct democracy, we opted to choose people to represent our wishes in government decision making through the indirect mechanisms of **representative democracy**. This system—also called a republican system (you may have heard the United States referred to as a **republic** for this reason)—depends heavily on some familiar things, like holding free elections and keeping elected officials accountable to the voters. It’s far more practical than direct democracy, but the trade-off is that it’s also more complex.

1.4 Buying in to Authority

L.O. Distinguish between legitimacy and authority.

For a democracy—or any political system—to function effectively, we have to buy in to the basic principles it’s based on. That’s not always so automatic, especially in a large and diverse country like ours where we often disagree on what government should do and even on what society should look like. Some people want government to tax less, while others want it to spend more on social services; some people oppose the death penalty or legal abortion, while others feel differently. Some of these differences take on a moral dimension, where people hold views that they feel reflect the correct way to live, or the way a just society should act. When feelings about these things become intense, people often don’t want to give in. At the same time, governing ourselves in a democracy is all about finding room for compromise.

Against this backdrop of different values and objectives, there has to be some agreement on the rules of the game—on the way we’re going to set up our democracy—or else the entire system could topple under the weight of our vast disagreements.

Let’s say your candidate for president loses the election. What are you going to do about it? You may stage protests against the winner, speak out against his actions, or work against him in the next election. But even if you think the winner is an incompetent swine, you’re probably going to accept what he does as representing the official actions of the president of the United States.

That’s because Americans generally respect the **authority** of a victorious candidate—his or her right to assume office and to carry out the responsibilities pertaining to that office. It’s one of the rules of the game the vast majority of us accept, even if we sometimes don’t like it, and it makes democracy possible. There is nothing automatic about this response; many nations—even democratic ones—struggle to resolve contested claims to authority, sometimes to the point where a military coup results in the overthrow of a legitimately elected government.

Americans have a long history of avoiding violent conflicts over authority disputes. As a society, we’ve shown a preference for investing authority in officials we may not like on the understanding that there will be other elections that may produce outcomes more to our liking. Even the most outspoken opponents of President Bush and his policies worked within the system for his political defeat in 2004, rather than advocating the

authority: The right to act in an official capacity by virtue of holding an office like president or member of Congress.

violent overthrow of the government. During the summer of 2009, some demonstrators fearful that President Obama’s call for health care reform would lead to a government takeover of medical care stormed meetings with their congressional representatives and angrily called for succession, but they continued to protest within the system rather than actually attempt to leave it. Similarly, maybe you don’t like the way one of your professors exercises authority—maybe you feel he or she grades arbitrarily—but you probably try to deal with it by remembering it’s only for a semester or a quarter, and there’ll be other classes.

So, even a candidate elected by the slimmest margin assumes the jurisdiction to act with the authority of the office to which he was elected. In 1998, former WWF wrestler Jesse “The Body” Ventura narrowly won a three-way race for Minnesota governor. Almost two-thirds of those voting had chosen someone else. But Ventura became governor and assumed the authority of the office—the jurisdiction to propose legislation, negotiate the state’s budget, grant clemency to prisoners, and a host of other serious functions. Some cringed when he continued to referee World Wrestling Federation matches, but it didn’t interfere with the authority he had from having been duly elected governor of a state.

1.5 Inheriting Legitimacy

Now, some people would say that Jesse Ventura was making a mockery of his office when as governor he dressed in the flamboyant outfits of his wrestling days. (Of course, you might just think it was a pretty cool thing to do—but like we said before, people hold all kinds of opinions about things.) If you’re the type of person who thinks governors should wear suits (or at least shirts), then seeing Ventura in feathers might make you respect him less as governor. Although that does nothing to undermine his formal authority to act as governor, it could diminish his **legitimacy**, the widespread acceptance of his actions. Diminished legitimacy, in turn, could make it harder for him to maneuver politically because of the resistance he would face from people who doubted him.²

legitimacy: Widespread public acceptance of the official standing of a political figure or institution.

Legitimacy is a funny thing because, unlike authority, which is granted by virtue of holding an office, legitimacy is partly inherited and partly earned. One source of legitimacy evolves over time and is rooted in the way we come to accept an office and by extension its occupant as being rightful and appropriate. The German sociologist Max Weber suggested this kind of legitimacy is rooted in tradition and law—that after hundreds of years, for instance, we have come to accept the presidential winner as the legitimate occupant of that office for a period of four years, under a plan set up long ago in the Constitution. This is why most Americans who voted for someone else accept a new president who attains office through normal, legal, time-tested channels. Even his strongest opponents do not call for tanks in the streets.

The legitimacy an official inherits is usually at its peak at the start of a term of office and is often the reason for the “honeymoon” or grace period we tend to give new officials. This was the case with President Obama, who began his administration with strong job approval ratings of 70 percent or higher. But the initial glow from his inauguration faded after a tumultuous first several months spent advocating for an expensive stimulus package targeted at jump-starting a depressed economy, escalating the American presence in Afghanistan, and initiating a controversial effort to overhaul the health care system. By the end of the summer, only a little more than half the country approved his performance, close to the percentage that had voted for him the previous fall. Following his re-election victory, the president experienced a bit of a “second honeymoon” with approval ratings in the low 50 percent range—hardly a ringing endorsement in absolute terms but stronger numbers than Obama had registered since his first year in office.

Obama’s honeymoon experience was more typical than his predecessor’s. The post-election period that resulted in President Bush taking office was highly unorthodox and infused with partisanship on both sides. There was the unsavory spectacle of lawyers for the Bush and Gore teams working to count every ballot in areas where large numbers of their likely supporters lived while trying to disqualify as many ballots as they could in

the other guy's strongholds. The governor of the disputed state of Florida was the brother of the Republican candidate. The question of whether to continue recounting ballots was ultimately decided by the United States Supreme Court in a split decision that broke along ideological lines, with the most conservative justices voting successfully to stop the recount in an action that essentially handed the election to President Bush.

Aspects of legitimacy based in tradition and law were tested and, to a degree, undermined by what happened in November and December 2000. In fact, the circumstances surrounding this postelection period were so unconventional and irregular that some people were led to the unusual position of questioning the legitimacy of the outcome. With lawyers and Supreme Court justices having had a decisive say in Bush's election, some partisan Democrats and even some reporters talked about whether George W. Bush should be regarded as the legitimate presidential winner. This sentiment was particularly pronounced in the African American community because of the sense that African Americans had been disproportionately disenfranchised by the balloting irregularities discussed in the Demystifying Government box.

There is another side to the story, and it speaks to the strength of American political traditions even in the face of actions that question those traditions. Even under the irregular circumstances of Election 2000, a majority of Americans accepted the legitimacy of the Bush administration—even some who did not approve of the way he won the office. This speaks to the depth of the American tradition of accepting the declared winner and moving on. It suggests just how strong American traditions are, and how important Americans feel it is as a nation to legitimize elected officials.

In one important respect, the question of President Bush's legitimacy was put to rest for many Americans on September 11, 2001, when the terrorist attacks on the World Trade Center and the Pentagon created an emergency atmosphere in which Americans sorely needed leadership. Bush used his authority as president to speak out against the attacks and lead the American response against al-Qaeda, earning him a level of acceptance originally denied him by virtue of how the election was decided. Even Al Gore publicly stated that George W. Bush was his commander-in-chief.

1.6 Earning Legitimacy

In order for our elected officials to act effectively—whether it be in addressing terrorist threats or trying to get Congress to approve a budget—we have to accept their actions as appropriate, even if we don't always approve of them. Those who questioned if President Obama was rightfully born in the United States and doubted the validity of his birth certificate raised fundamental questions about his legitimacy in an effort to cast doubt on the legitimacy of all his official actions. Rarely is an American public figure faced with this degree of resistance to his legitimacy, although an official can enhance or squander his well of legitimacy through his behavior in office. Ronald Reagan used his communication skills as president to project an image of strength that enhanced his legitimacy. Bill Clinton's involvement with Monica Lewinsky and his subsequent impeachment diminished his legitimacy in the eyes of some.

Authority and legitimacy may seem like distant abstractions, but we deal with them almost every day. You're dealing with them in your classroom right now, as you navigate your response to the way your professor has decided to structure this class. Before you enrolled, your professor chose to assign this text, and made decisions about the work you would be required to do, the way grades would be calculated, how course material would be presented, whether you would have the opportunity to earn extra credit, how much emphasis to place on attendance and class participation, and a host of related items.

Other professors who teach this course probably would have made different choices because each professor has the authority to define the parameters of instruction—and you're left to contend with those choices. You may find you like that style of instruction, appreciate the course, and end up recommending it to your friends. Or you may take issue with anything from the reading load to how you're evaluated to the way lectures are deliv-

ered. In turn, you may find yourself acquiescing to things you dislike, or you may react by daydreaming during lectures, cutting classes, not reading the material fully, or engaging in any number of time-tested ways to rebel against academic authority figures. Regardless of your reaction, though, chances are you never question your professor's right to teach the course as he or she chooses. In other words, you accept your professor's authority to determine the contours of the course.

That is, unless your professor does something that you feel defies the boundaries of his or her authority. Let's look at a hypothetical example of this. Imagine that your professor randomly assigned everyone in your class to one of two groups and permitted everyone in the other group to skip this week's lectures, declaring that they would not be held accountable for the work they missed. You'd probably agree that your professor has the authority to determine if someone is entitled to an excused absence from class. To do so in an arbitrary manner, though, without explanation, feels wrong.

This capricious quality could well undermine your professor's legitimacy by making it seem as if he or she is acting unfairly. Randomly dismissing some classmates but not others is a heavy-handed thing to do, even if it's technically within your professor's authority to do it, which brings the legitimacy of the act into question. To be legitimate, you might expect everyone to be offered the option to miss the lectures, or at least to be provided with a rationale for why some people will be exempt from attending.

When the legitimacy of authority figures is brought into question, it's natural to raise doubts about their right to act as they did, and your choice of how to respond may take on greater urgency than if you simply took issue with their methods of evaluation or one of the many things a professor plainly has the authority to do. Do you accept it and move on, with their legitimacy permanently diminished in your eyes? Do you take action by confronting your professor, or by lodging a complaint with the dean? When you make your decision, how much do you take into account that you're dealing with someone who for the next few months has some leverage over your future—someone who will grade you at the end of the semester?

1.7 Power Surge

If you find yourself thinking you would probably not want to risk your grade in a confrontation with your professor, you would be giving up doing something you wanted to do in order to protect your GPA. In this case, you would be reacting to the **power** your professor has over you in your class. Someone has power when they can prevent you from doing something you want to do or make you do something you might not want to do. They can do it by coercing you through implied or overt threats or by influencing you with the promise of something you want or need. In the case of our fictional random dismissal from class, your behavior would be in response to a calculation about the likely cost of a confrontation with the professor. No words have to be spoken because the threat of a lower grade would be implied by the situation.

In a raw, basic sense, power is about might rather than right. You could even say that, initially, the people who get to decide the right way of doing things—who determine how authority is constituted—are the ones who wield power most successfully. Power isn't simply the use of force, though. It's subtler than that. It's about convincing other people of mutually shared interests, or threatening them with the loss of something they want, or actually denying them something they want, or providing them with a favor, or any number of other things that might move someone to act the way the person with power wants them to. In this regard, the person with power has tools in his or her arsenal—**resources** that may be used to change another person's behavior.

When the president says he'll veto an act of Congress in an effort to prevent its passage, he is exercising power over Congress, and the resource he's using is the threat of the veto. But the president can also exercise power by using personal charm or sharing the glow of his popularity—if he happens to have these resources at his disposal because he's charming or popular. Computer firms that make contributions to congressional candidates

L.O. Explain how legitimacy and authority are related to power.

power: The ability to make others act in a way that they otherwise might not have done.

L.O. Identify political resources and why they are the tools of power.

resources: Anything of value to others that can be used to sway another individual.

DEMYSTIFYING GOVERNMENT

Information and Power in the Twenty-first Century

It's been widely said that knowledge is power. It's been just as widely said that we're living in the information age and that what we know defines our place in society. These may be overworked sayings, but they're overworked for a reason. The fact is that our world is so technical and so specialized that what we know really does go a long way to determining how powerful we are. That's just another way of saying that information is one of the most important resources we'll encounter in our exploration of politics and government.

It shouldn't take too much thought to find places where information matters. Computers are obviously about information, and as we'll find out in a few weeks, the signature media of the twenty-first century like the

Internet and twenty-four-hour cable television play a huge role in how we understand political issues, how candidates get elected, and a host of other situations where power is at stake.

We'll also find information popping up (literally and figuratively) in less expected places. Members of Congress can't survive without it. Neither can bureaucrats. Next to money, it's the lifeblood of many interest groups. The president relies on all sorts of information about public preferences before making decisions that could affect his political career. So, when you think about power, think about information as one of the foremost tools of power.

politics: The process of determining who gets what, when, and how.

elitism: The theory that government responds to a small, stable, centralized hierarchy of corporate and academic leaders, military chiefs, people who own big media outlets, and members of a permanent government bureaucracy. People who subscribe to this position believe that the actions of regular citizens, like voting and joining groups, simply mask the real power exercised by elites.

pluralism: The theory that government responds to individuals through their membership in groups, assuring that government is responsive to a wide range of voices. People who subscribe to this position believe that the wide distribution of resources in society drives the decisions government officials make.

L.O. Define elitism and pluralism, and explain how each offers a different view of how resources are distributed in society.

in an effort to influence their positions on high-tech matters exercise power with the use of money. Lawyers with expertise, lobbyists with information (see *Demystifying Government: Information and Power in the Twenty-first Century*), you with your ability to vote in elections—all have resources that are desired by others in the political process. Power is exercised when resources are used to achieve a desired outcome.

When you stop to think about it, we're involved in power relationships with other people all the time. Sometimes we are in the powerful position of being able to offer or withhold resources others want. Sometimes people have power over us because they control resources—like grades—that matter to us. Any individual or group with resources can engage in a power relationship, and power relationships are among the most fundamental at every level of politics from the White House to school boards. Quite often, maybe surprisingly, a mutually beneficial exchange of resources gets others to act in a way they might not have intended. In the American political system, the exercise of power is about mutual benefit a lot more than we might suspect.

When we start to think of power in terms of relationships, we're getting to the heart of what **politics** means. We all have things we want to accomplish and things we want to avoid. And we're always involved in relationships with other people. When you bring human desire and human relationships together, you have the essentials of a process that ultimately determines who gets what. When this process happens in a public sphere so that everyone in the country is potentially affected by what happens, we have politics of the sort that matters in government. Almost seventy years ago, a student of the process, Harold Lasswell, called politics "the study of who gets what, when and how."³

Some of us may be more powerful by virtue of having more resources (see *Demystifying Government: Do I Have the Resources That Matter?*); some of us may get heavily involved by virtue of our interest in what government does. But regardless of our level of power or interest in this process, we are all affected by it—even if you never had a single thought about politics before you registered for this course. That's because politics produces winners and losers on everything from whether we'll be sent to war to how much we'll have to pay in taxes to who gets to operate your favorite TV station to whether embryonic stem cells can be used for scientific research to whether you may legally drink beer. Think of something you encounter in your daily life, and the chances are that in some way it's influenced by politics.

1.7a Facts and Judgments

Before we go forward, let's determine how facts are distinguished from judgments. Throughout this course, we're going to be making observations based on analysis of

DEMYSTIFYING GOVERNMENT

Do I Have the Resources That Matter?

Everyone has resources, but you can argue—to borrow from George Orwell—that some resources are more equal than others. Some people believe that the resources that most influence political officials are concentrated in the hands of a few, giving this small group disproportionate power to determine political outcomes. Others point to the way Americans like to join groups and feel that the resources held by groups with broad memberships greatly influence the decisions that come out of the political process. Whether you believe the resources that move the political system are held by a few people or many people determines whether you believe political power is wielded by the few or the many.

You may know people who say there's no reason to vote because your vote really doesn't matter, since voting doesn't overrule the actions of powerful, unelected people with wealth, prestige, or access to sophisticated information who make decisions that affect our lives. People who think like this have a lot in common with people who say the political system is characterized by **elitism**, or the belief that government is in practice controlled by a small, centralized hierarchy of people with a wealth of resources at their disposal. Advocates of elitism believe that a stable, resource-rich, permanent elite drives political decisions in the United States, rendering the vast majority of Americans effectively powerless.

On the other hand, many Americans join groups like service organizations; mosques, churches, or synagogues; and other community groups—all sorts of organizations where we expend time (a resource) pursuing matters of interest to us. These groups operate in public, allowing us to voice our interests and concerns in a manner in which they'll be heard. As these groups compete with each other for public attention, it's possible that they shape the way government officials listen and respond. If you agree with this assessment, you're in line with those who say the political system is characterized by **pluralism**, or the belief that government in practice responds to the many (plural) voices expressed through group membership. One advocate of this position is political theorist Robert Dahl, who once wrote of the central role of "all the active and legitimate groups in the population," who "can make themselves heard at some crucial stage in the process of decision."

Obviously, pluralism and elitism present divergent and mutually exclusive ways of understanding who holds power, and sorting through the two approaches is not that simple because it's easy to see where each has merit. It may even be tempting to say that they both describe our political system, but you shouldn't lose sight of the fact that pluralism and elitism assume the system is structured in entirely different ways. Figure 1 (immediately below) illustrates the different ways elitists and pluralists describe the structure of the political system.

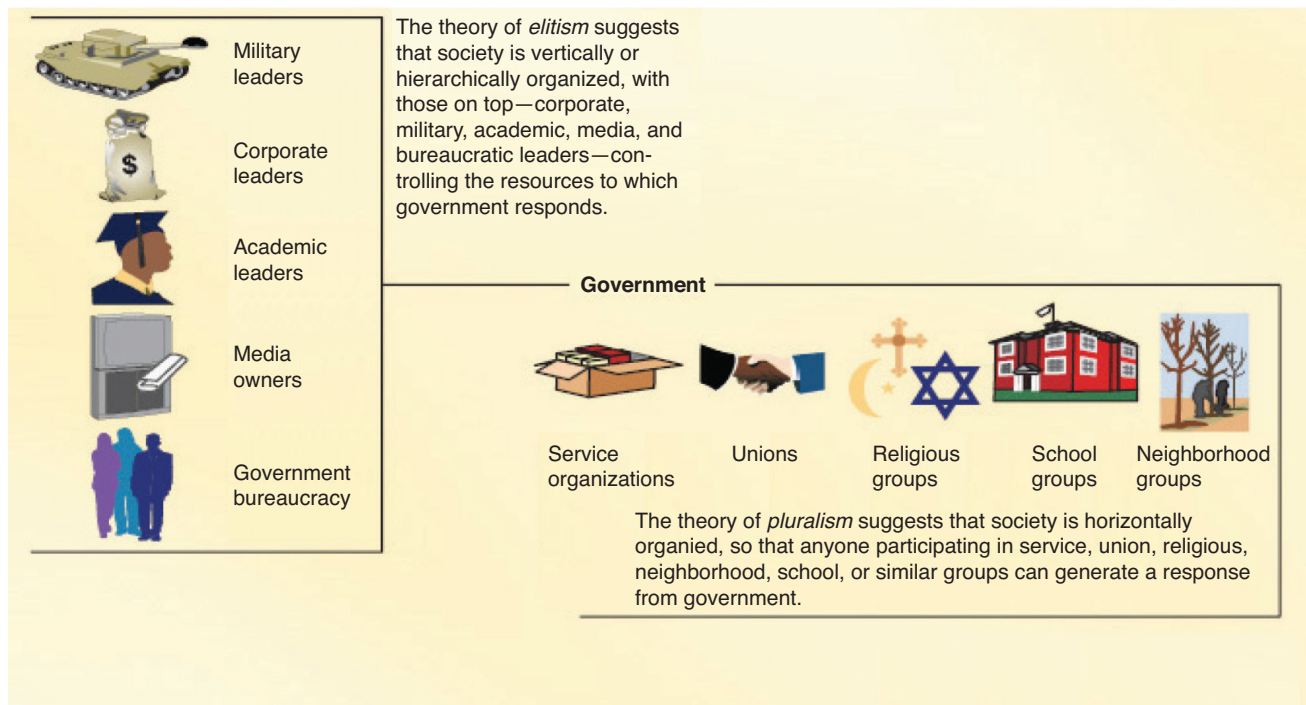


FIGURE 1 Elitism vs. Pluralism

TABLE 1.2 Normative or Empirical?

The painting contains three shades of blue oil paint.	Empirical: the artist or art expert can factually distinguish paint shades.
The painting would be more dramatic if it contained nine shades of blue paint.	Normative: this is an opinion, not a statement of fact.
The painting would be more effective if it were displayed in a brighter light.	Normative: this is an opinion, not a statement of fact.
The United States may be classified as a republic rather than as a direct democracy because elected representatives make decisions on behalf of the public.	Empirical: this is based on facts as opposed to value judgments.
The United States is better suited to being a republic than a direct democracy because of the vast size of the country.	Normative: this is an opinion, not a statement of fact.

empirical: Any statement based on the assessment of data or the analysis of information, without regard to value judgments.

normative: Any statement that invokes a judgment or evaluation.

information and observations based on our judgments or evaluations of circumstances. These are different kinds of observations. When we evaluate data or information, we make **empirical** or factual observations about the world around us. No value judgments are involved when we do this. When we say something like, “The president can use his veto power to prevent an act of Congress from becoming law,” we’re making an empirical observation based on our understanding of the president’s powers under the Constitution.

But when we say something like, “It’s a good thing for the president to veto an act of Congress,” we’re making a **normative** observation or value judgment that involves assessing a standard or making an evaluation. We could easily apply different norms or standards and argue that it’s not a good thing for the president to issue a veto.

Let’s do a quick check. Cover the right-hand column of Table 1.2 and see if you can figure out which of the statements in the left column are normative and which ones are empirical. If some of the statements appear to fit into both categories, it’s because the line between a factual evaluation and a value judgment is not always as clean as you might think—which can be a source of misunderstanding in a political discussion if someone makes a value judgment that you take to be a statement of fact!

1.8 It’s Not Fair!

L.O. Differentiate equality of opportunity from equality of outcome.

Let’s return one more time to the hypothetical example of your professor randomly dismissing part of your class. Whether you thought it was ridiculous that a professor would dismiss some of the class at random, or whether you thought it was wrong that someone else would get to be excused from work for what appeared to be no good reason, your reaction to the example was based on an assumption about how people should be treated. It must seem fairly obvious that if you’re going to make an exception for someone, there had better be a good reason for it.

What may seem less obvious is that sentiment like this doesn’t have to be automatic or universal. It’s a value judgment, and we’re going to find that people make all kinds of judgments about what seems right and fair—judgments that, in their scope and range, contribute to the complexity of political debate. If this sounds normative to you, then you were paying attention when you read Section 1.7a (and if this doesn’t make sense, you might want to take a minute and review Table 1.2). Either way, before moving on, take a few minutes to look at Global Topics: Different Countries, Different Choices, where you’ll learn an important distinction about normative judgments like this, which are based on values, and empirical observations based on fact.

Once you’re clear about what constitutes a normative judgment, we can return to the matter at hand—fairness. Would it have been different if you and everyone else had been given the choice to stay or go? Perhaps that would seem less arbitrary and, accordingly,

Different Countries, Different Choices

Why do Scandinavian countries provide far more extensive social services to their citizens than the United States? Why do their citizens agree to pay far more in taxes than most Americans would ever accept? Or, to put it another way, why do Scandinavians value equality of outcome so much more than Americans?

Political scientist John Kingdon has a theory. He speculates that the immigrants who settled the United States and influenced the development of its political system—groups we will discuss in detail in Chapter 4—were fundamentally different from the groups that determined the political rules in other nations. Starting with the original settlers from Great Britain who colonized North America, the United States has long attracted immigrants from other countries who were motivated by religious, economic, or political freedom to take up a new life in an unfamiliar place. These immigrants shared a mistrust of government, either because it stood in the way of worshiping as they pleased or posed an obstacle to self-betterment. They valued self-reliance and were risk-takers, willing to depart familiar surroundings to take a chance on a new life with unknown hazards. And, the choices they made based on the values they held were influential to the development of the United States. In contrast, Native Americans and African Americans who also populated North

America and may have made different choices were denied political rights and therefore were shut out of decision making.

As a group, white immigrants to America were more likely than their counterparts who remained in Europe to believe that individuals can make better decisions for themselves than government can make on their behalf. They were more likely to regard government as a force that blocks individual initiative. In a land that lacked the rigid class structures prevalent in Europe, they were more likely to value opportunity and regard government as a potential obstacle to achieving it. These were not people who would look kindly on paying as much as Norwegians do in taxes (see Figure 15.3 for a comparison of tax revenues in the United States and Scandinavia), or would want government to provide the wide array of social services that Norwegians receive in exchange for their hefty tax payments.

The decisions made by these earliest of settlers structured the choices available to future generations and set the United States on a course that differs significantly from nations, like the countries of Scandinavia, where government is viewed as a source of lifelong social services and as a mechanism for correcting economic and social disparities.^{T2}

more acceptable. If it feels this way, you're tuned into a prominent way many Americans understand the notion of equality. It's called **equality of opportunity**, and it's about everyone having the same chance for advancement, free from obstacles that might limit some people from realizing their potential. This is essentially what Thomas Jefferson had in mind when he wrote in the Declaration of Independence that "all men are created equal," although his eighteenth-century perspective excluded women, African American slaves, and Native Americans from consideration. Over time, efforts have been made to incorporate groups Jefferson left out, but the basic idea that people are "created equal" still applies to where we start out in life, not where we end up—to the chances life affords us rather than to the results we achieve.

Valuing equality of opportunity is consistent with supporting government efforts to make the "starting line" more equal. That's why Americans usually support government programs to help underprivileged kids have access to higher education, because education is considered the gateway to opportunity. It's also why Americans generally value **political equality** and believe that everyone should have the same political and legal rights as everyone else. If all votes count the same and if everyone has the same rights in a court of law, the theory goes, then the playing field isn't tilted toward some groups and away from others. Everyone has the same opportunity to make the most of themselves without the political or legal system getting in the way. When you think about it this way, you can apply the language of equal opportunity to the question we were discussing earlier about whether some individuals or groups were disenfranchised during the 2000 election.

To value opportunity is a choice, and it's a different choice than some other countries make. In places like Norway and Sweden, for instance, people place more emphasis than

equality of opportunity: One of several ways of understanding equality. This way values giving people comparable advantages for succeeding in life, regardless of the unequal outcomes that may result.

L.O. Relate political equality to equality of opportunity, and economic and social equality to equality of outcome.

political equality: Establishing political and legal rights on the basis of the individual, so that everyone has the same right to vote and is equal under the law. An alternative would be to grant political rights to elite individuals based on wealth or social standing.

equality of outcome: One of several ways of understanding equality. This way values leveling the social and economic inequalities among people, rather than attempting to give people comparable advantages for succeeding in life.

economic equality: A form of equality of outcome that values using government policy to minimize the economic disparities found in society.

social equality: A form of equality of outcome that values using government policy to minimize the social class distinctions found in society.

Americans do on **equality of outcome**, on diminishing economic and social disparities among people through government actions that try to level off differences between rich and poor by redistributing resources from top to bottom. If Americans as a group were as interested as Scandinavians in equality of outcome, then our government might provide cradle-to-grave health care, long stretches of paid maternity leave, and generous retirement benefits like they do in Norway and Sweden. Of course, we'd have to pay a lot more in taxes to support programs like these, and that would result in a lot of resources shifting around so that rich and poor alike would benefit equally. A country makes choices like that when it primarily values **economic equality** and **social equality**—both forms of equal outcomes—in which economic and social distinctions are minimized as a matter of policy and choice. When the Occupy Wall Street protesters tried to draw attention to economic inequity in the United States, they were operating in a political context often unaccommodating to discussions of equality of outcome.

Just take a quick look at social and economic patterns in the United States, and you'll probably begin to realize how much equality of outcome takes a backseat to equality of opportunity. We're aware of the existence of social classes, of the great distance there is between the wealth of someone like software magnate Bill Gates and people who have to work for a living, to say nothing of people who can't find work at all or who live in poverty. But the size of the disparity might be even greater than you imagine. In 2007, the combined wealth of the six heirs to the Wal-Mart fortune—all members of the same family—equaled the combined wealth of *the bottom 30 percent of all Americans*.⁴ The same disparity applies to income. In 2011, the bottom 20 percent of American households combined for only 3.2 percent of all income, while the top 20 percent received more than half. Figure 1.1 illustrates how these differences contrast with pure economic equality. And the disparity has been growing for many years. In the 28 years prior to 2007, income growth for the lowest one-fifth of the population was 18 percent—compared with 275 percent for the wealthiest 1 percent of the population.⁵ Nonetheless, although we'll find that some efforts are made to address these inequalities, as a matter of policy—and as a

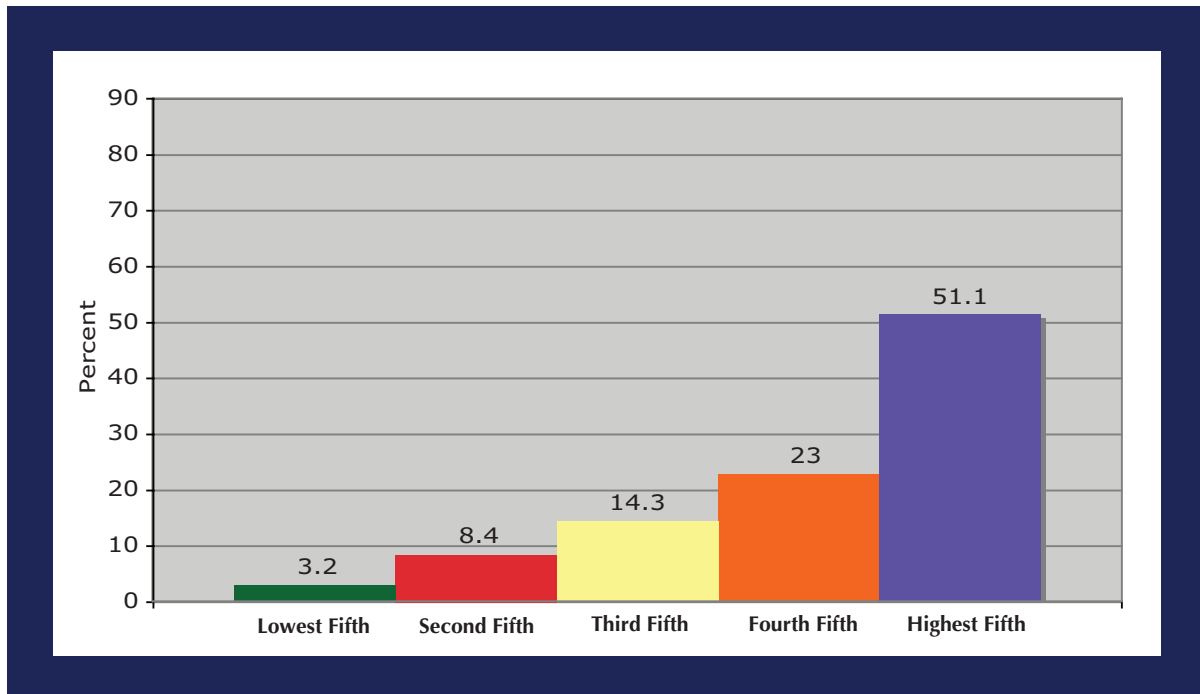


FIGURE 1.1 Economic Equality and Inequality^{T3}

If income was distributed equally across the population, then there would be no income classes. Everyone would earn the same—that is, each one-fifth of the population would earn one-fifth of the income. In reality, we're very far from this equal outcome in the United States. The upper one-fifth of the population earns more income than the bottom four-fifths combined. Wealth disparities are even greater.

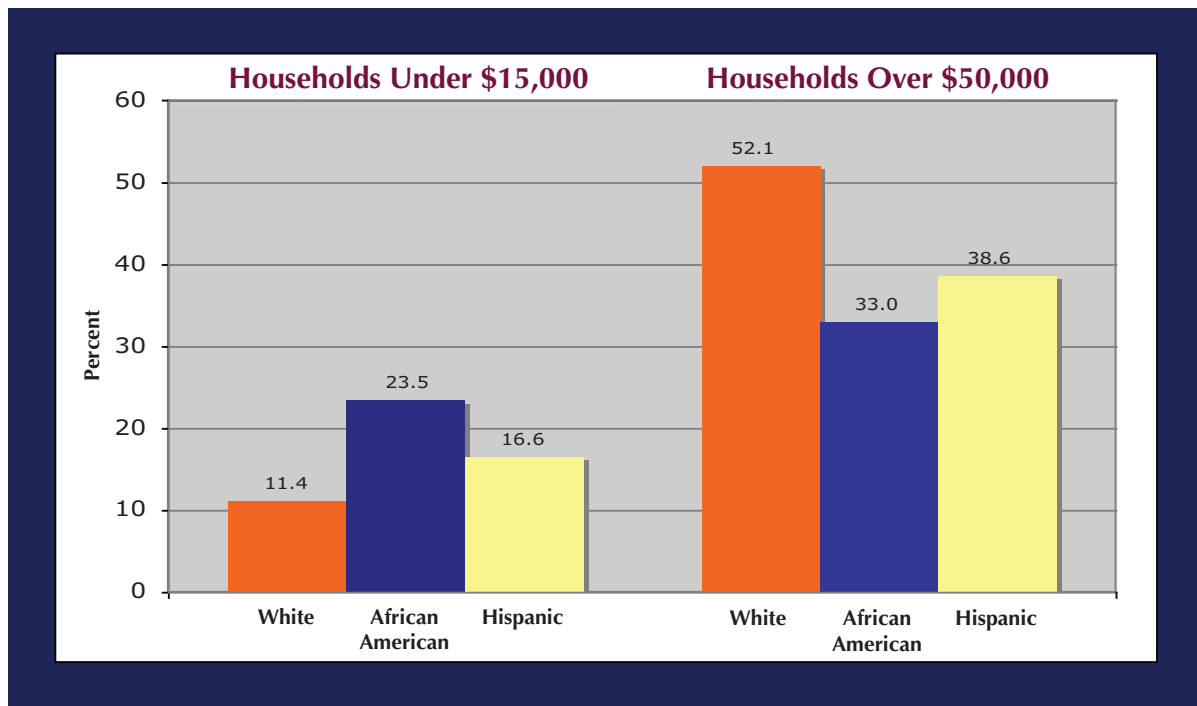


FIGURE 1.2 Minority Income Levels^{T4}

African American and Hispanic households are more likely than white households to be among those with annual incomes under \$15,000. But white households are far more likely to be among those with incomes of \$50,000 or more.

matter of choice—Americans tend to make the normative judgment that providing opportunity is generally preferred over equalizing outcomes.

Because we tend not to value equality of outcome, groups that have historically met with discrimination lag behind in their share of economic resources. The earning power of African Americans, Hispanics, and other minority groups falls below the earning power of whites—sometimes well below. For instance, according to the U.S. Census Bureau, in 2010 one in ten whites lived in poverty, compared with better than one in four African Americans and Hispanics. Figure 1.2 explains.

Similarly, the earning power of women is less than the earning power of men who do comparable work. In 2011, women were paid only 82 percent of what men in comparable jobs were paid—a difference that amounts to over \$700,000 dollars for the average full-time woman worker over the course of her working life.⁶ The federal government is quite aware of these disparities—there’s even a Women’s Bureau at the U.S. Department of Labor that in past administrations provided a checklist you could use if you were a working woman and you thought you were being unfairly compensated for what you do.⁷ Still the inequalities remain, as the statistics show, in violation of a primary assumption about how equality of opportunity should work.

1.9 Unequal and Different

The tendency in the United States to emphasize opportunity over outcomes raises important questions about the relationship between the condition of being unequal and simply being different.

Think of someone you know—perhaps a friend, significant other, or classmate. Start thinking of some of the outward differences between you. Maybe there are gender differences, or differences in eye, skin, or hair color. You could be different heights or weigh different amounts. The more you think about it, the longer the list of differences should become because so many factors contribute to the unique way we look.

You would no sooner want these physical differences to determine how others treat you than you would for your professor to randomly determine who gets to be excused from

your next class. Neither, in a normative sense, is fair. Both undermine the central idea of equality of opportunity, which is that all people should be in a roughly comparable situation that permits them to express their talents and abilities.

In theory, we should have the same chance to succeed despite these many differences. Rather, our capabilities and interests should determine what we achieve. Some of us will become shopkeepers, while others become bookkeepers; there will be lawyers and landscapers and teachers and daycare providers and salespeople and waiters and chief operating officers. If we have an even shot at all these outcomes and reach the one we choose because of where we decide to direct our energy, you could say equality of opportunity is working well. There should be no relationship between the outcomes we choose and our surface differences, which have no bearing on our talents and interests.

The fact that we see disparities in outcome based on gender, racial, and ethnic characteristics is a sign that equality of opportunity does not work in practice the way it does in theory. Remember, the dilemma isn't that people end up in different places—that's to be expected—it's that people end up in different places for surface reasons that have no bearing on their talents or ability. It suggests that some groups face obstacles to achievement simply because they are different.

If an inner-city Hispanic teen scores lower on the SAT than does a white suburban kid, she will likely be denied admission to the best state and private schools and will face a more limited set of college options. Is her score lower because she isn't as bright as her suburban counterpart, or is it because she attended an overcrowded high school and didn't have access to good academic counselors or SAT prep classes? Is it possible that if she had had the advantages of a wealthier school system, her SAT scores would have been higher, and she would have had the same educational opportunities as someone from an affluent suburb?

Like the inner-city teen, other groups—like African Americans facing hiring discrimination and women who are paid less money to do the same work as men—find the playing field tilted against them because of surface differences. At times in our history, these obstacles have become political issues, in that they became the focus of public debate. But the fact that the debate over advancing equality of opportunity needs to consider group differences says a lot about the tricky nature of how our society handles diversity and how diversity poses a challenge to the fundamental American idea that individuals should be provided opportunity free from arbitrary obstacles.

1.10 Equal and Free?

How much of your income would you be willing to pay in taxes if you received government benefits in return? Twenty percent? Thirty? Fifty? Eighty? At some point, it'll feel like a drag on your earning power and you'll resist. In America, we tend to reach that point pretty quickly. We see taxes—along with some of the government programs the taxes pay for—as an imposition on our ability to make choices for ourselves about what to do with our money. Many Americans prefer voluntary action to government mandates.

This resistance to being told what to do has deep roots in our country, which was born in a rebellion against a strong central government. It's about **liberty**, about having the freedom to act without others interfering with what we do, and it's at the center of so many of the choices we make when we govern ourselves. Americans place a premium on preserving liberty. It was the rationale for fighting two world wars and the cold war with the former Soviet Union, and it's the thing Americans most fear losing to terrorists. Hours after the World Trade Center was destroyed, President Bush told the nation, "Our way of life, our very freedom came under attack."⁸

In an absolute sense, if we had total liberty, there would be chaos because everyone would do whatever he or she wanted. So, we make choices. One of the biggest trade-offs we make is between liberty and equality. We've already seen how there are several ways to understand what it means for people to be equal. Certain types of equality are more compatible with having liberty, while others may only be attained by placing restrictions on liberty.

L.O. Define liberty, and explain the trade-offs between liberty and equality of outcome.

liberty: The ability to pursue your ends and objectives, tempered by socially defined boundaries and limited government impediments.

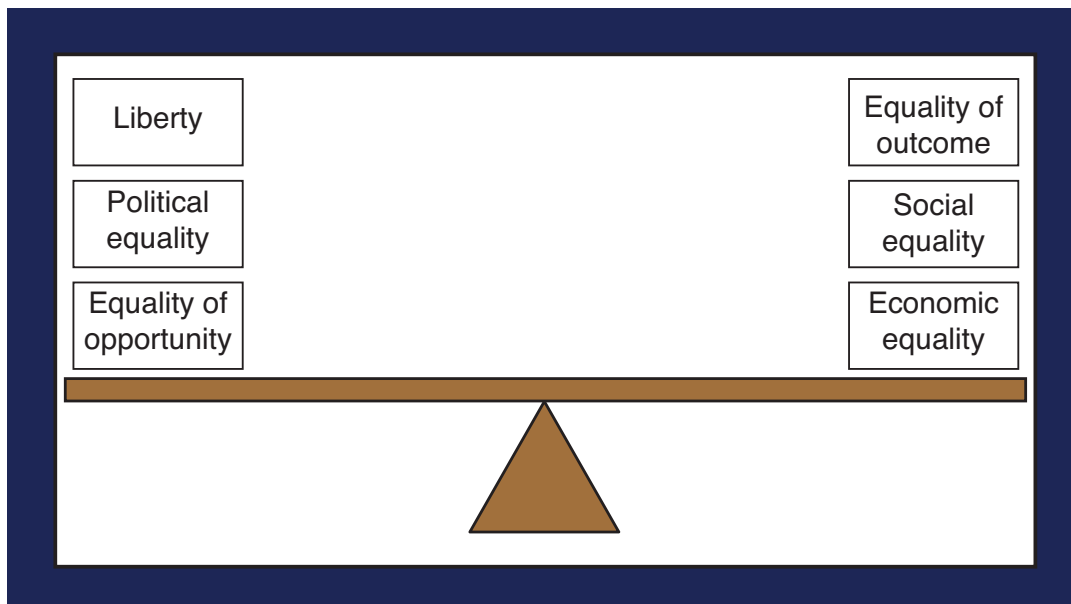


FIGURE 1.3 Balancing Liberty and Equality

Let’s see if you can identify the trade-offs between liberty and the five types of equality we’ve talked about: equality of opportunity, equality of outcome, political equality, social equality, and economic equality. Take a look at Figure 1.3 to gain a sense of the balancing act that has to be maintained in order to preserve both liberty and equality.

1.11 Whose Choice?

We’ve been saying that society makes choices between liberty and equality, normative choices that involve judgments about what we value and what we’re willing to trade off to achieve those values. And while this is the case, it’s also very abstract. Who is society, after all, but you and me? We didn’t write the rules of the game—other people for a complicated set of reasons made the choice to value liberty over equality of outcome long ago—but on an everyday basis, we’re faced with lots of choices that we can affect.

We’re constantly faced with situations where we are asked voluntarily by others or involuntarily by government to give up some of our liberty to act in order to benefit others. Sometimes, we do this with no problem; other times, it’s inconvenient, and we gripe about it or perhaps take things into our own hands and resist the restrictions placed on us.

Take, for instance, the simple act of listening to music. Maybe you live in a dorm or apartment and have a roommate or two. If your roommate isn’t around in the middle of the afternoon and you can’t find your iPod, you can probably feel pretty good about blasting a CD if you want to without having to think about how it affects anyone else. Your liberty to act is absolute. But if your roommate is there and you have different musical tastes, you’ve got a choice to make between doing what you want—exercising your liberty to listen to music—and imposing a restriction on your wishes in order to take your roommate’s feelings into account. Some of us might factor our roommate’s wishes heavily into our decision, whereas some of us might not consider them at all.

If our decision caused conflict, we may or may not be able to manage it privately and peacefully without an RA (a resident advisor in a dorm) or the campus police intervening. If our decision entailed curtailing what we would have done if we were left alone, like listening to a different CD or turning down the volume, we might grumble at our loss of liberty but accept it as a condition of having a roommate.

On a larger scale, conflicts like this between personal liberty and the rights of others are the very things government tries to resolve every day. These conflicts involve trade-offs between liberty and **social responsibility**, or the concern for the rights of others in society. Because our actions constantly affect other people, and because it’s human nature

L.O. Appreciate government as the arbiter in disputes between liberty and social responsibility.

social responsibility: Concern for the protection of the rights of individuals in a community or society, at the expense of some degree of personal liberty.

to want to pursue our desires and objectives despite this, we are continually asking government to resolve disputes between personal liberty and social responsibility. Essentially, we turn to government to draw the boundaries that determine where individual liberty stops and the needs of society start.

Obviously, not everyone will draw that line in the same place. Not everyone believes that government is always the appropriate arbiter, either, believing instead that individuals should work out their conflicts without government getting involved. A lot of political debate turns on these two facts.

Drinking laws are among those that you may have strong feelings about. As a society, as you're no doubt quite aware, we've decided that it is illegal to purchase or consume alcohol until you turn twenty-one. You probably know the rationale for this, which has to do with the desire to cut down on alcohol-related driving accidents. Essentially, if you are under twenty-one, your liberty (some would call it a right) to drink has been curtailed by government action in favor of the socially responsible position that it is more important to protect the lives of everyone on the roads. That's a choice that stems from a value judgment. You may agree with it or not. But it's the law.

So, what do you do about it? One option is to do nothing—to plan a big celebration on your twenty-first birthday and to do nothing before then. You might take this course of action if you agree with the law or even if you disagree with it but recognize its legitimacy. Another option is to violate the law and try not to get caught. You might do this if you disagree with the trade-offs behind the law, or if you feel drinking alcohol should be a matter of personal choice and not a matter for government to consider. There would be sanctions if you were caught because you would be breaking the law, not changing it. But that would be a consequence you would have to face.

The dual questions of when to give up liberty to protect the rights of others and whether government or private individuals should make the decision have a long history in our country's political debates. As you can probably see, when your liberty is at issue, feelings can get pretty intense. Also, as with all interesting political questions, there are winners and losers, which can make the result of what government does hard for some to swallow.

Compounding the issue is the great range of reactions we have to the tension between liberty and responsibility as well as other questions regularly placed before our political system. The great diversity of America that we were talking about before is both a strength and a complicating factor for our politics. It's a strength inasmuch as the expression of a wide range of viewpoints tends to enhance the decisions we make for ourselves, because a variety of voices coming from different vantage points can make for intelligent and gratifying solutions to problems, much like the blending of many ingredients can make food tastier and more satisfying.

At the same time, diverse perspectives can make it harder to reach a conclusion, complicating the process by which decisions are made. A system designed over two centuries ago to hear primarily the voices of white land-owning males has been required to expand to accommodate the views and desires of people with a wide range of backgrounds, perspectives, and beliefs. How it has managed to do this, and what it means in real terms for you and me, is part of the story you'll read in the next chapter.

1.12 So—Should I Care about Politics?

Whether you should personally care about politics is a normative judgment. It's also a personal matter that you'll probably approach differently from your friends. You'll make a judgment that depends in part on how much you think politics matters in your life. No one else can make that judgment for you.

We started out by asking whether it makes sense to care about the political system enough to engage in it because the question goes right to the heart of why you're in this course. If there's absolutely no reason to care about politics, then it's going to be a long semester or quarter! There are certainly reasons to get involved, but you may feel they don't apply to you. In the end, you may decide like many people that you're just not a

political person. At that point, you'll be able to draw your conclusions with your eyes open to the evidence.

But before we can make an informed decision about whether and how much we should care about the public side of life, we should grow to understand it much better. There may already be things you know now that you didn't realize before you started reading this chapter, like how you're involved in power relationships at times when you're totally unaware of them—whether it's in the classroom with your professor or with a membership you may have in the American Automobile Association.

We've already seen that we can be involved in politics even if we don't care about it and even if we're not paying attention. We've talked about how the republican form of democracy we practice in this country reaches into things we may take for granted in our daily life, like having other people elected by us (or by our neighbors if we don't take part) make decisions on our behalf. We've talked about how we tend to act around authority figures, whether they're our professor or our president, and how their ability to wield resources can influence our lives—especially if we see their actions as legitimate.

We identified ways we're involved in power relationships with people every day—directly with people we work and live with, indirectly through the actions of political figures that make decisions on our behalf. We even looked at equity issues—matters of fairness—and how they balance the freedoms that a lot of us feel are extremely important in our lives. We talked about how liberty and equality are much more than abstractions. They're values, and as such, the extent to which we enjoy them, as well as the form they take, are the product of choices and trade-offs made by our society and shaped by government action. Whether we feel it's important to try to contribute to the political dialogue that shapes those trade-offs may be one part of the answer to our question about whether interacting with government matters to us.

We've hinted at the idea that in order to make choices about who gets what, when, and how, we set up rules and then play by them (to a greater or lesser extent). In fact, a specific set of rules is in place that determines how politics works in this country. Some of the rules are legal in nature; a lot of them are set out in the Constitution. But even the Constitution has its roots in a struggle between different ways to define the political ground rules. As we understand those rules, we'll probably come to recognize a little more about where we come from as a nation, and how the resolution of some of our earliest political struggles shaped the political options before us today, some two centuries later. How can the struggles of people long gone be relevant to how we live our lives in the twenty-first century? Chapter 2 has some answers to that question.

Chapter Review

Understand the difference between a direct and representative democracy.

Even though people often speak of America as a democracy, it is best understood as a republic because we elect representatives to make decisions on our behalf. In that respect, our country is a representative democracy rather than a direct democracy, where people would make decisions on their own behalf. A representative democracy is far more practical for a nation as large as the United States, but it is also more complex and can be controversial inasmuch as there can be strong differences of opinion about what representatives should do in our name.

Distinguish between legitimacy and authority.

For a republic to function effectively, there has to be agreement on the principles on which it's based. Americans typically respect the authority of elected representatives to act

in an official capacity by virtue of holding an office, and for the most part, grant legitimacy to elected officials even when they disagree with them. However, political figures can undermine their legitimacy through their actions because, unlike authority, legitimacy is partly earned.

Explain how legitimacy and authority are related to power.

Elected officials can use their authority and legitimacy to exercise power, although their ability to do so is hardly automatic. Power is about getting others to act the way you want them to, even if they prefer to act otherwise, in order to determine who gets what, when, and how.

Identify political resources and why they are the tools of power.

The tools of power are resources, which can encompass a wide range of things, such as a politician's personal

charm, the information supplied to members of Congress by a lobbyist, or the promise of campaign money.

Define elitism and pluralism, and explain how each offers a different view of how resources are distributed in society.

Who gets to exercise power is an important—and open—question. Those who subscribe to the theory of elitism believe that a permanent, unelected elite of corporate and academic leaders, military chiefs, media operators, and bureaucrats holds the resources that matter in government decision making. Those who subscribe to the theory of pluralism believe that ordinary individuals can exercise power in a republic because the resources that matter to people in government are widely distributed in society.

Differentiate equality of opportunity from equality of outcome.

Many Americans value equality of opportunity, or trying to give people a fair start in life, knowing that people of different interests and abilities will end up in different places. Equality of opportunity comes at the expense of equality of outcome and produces economic and social disparities in the name of protecting individual initiative. Many value political equality on the assumption that ensuring everyone the same right to vote and equal rights under the law promotes equal opportunity.

Relate political equality to equality of opportunity, and economic and social equality to equality of outcome.

In truth, we have neither equality of opportunity nor equality of outcome in America, although we are much more

likely to support government actions that promote the former. One place where equal opportunity breaks down is in the unequal economic and social outcomes of women and historically disadvantaged racial and ethnic groups because unequal outcomes are supposed to be a product of our different talents, interests, and abilities, not our physical or ethnic differences.

Define liberty, and explain the trade-offs between liberty and equality of outcome.

There are also important trade-offs to be made between equality of opportunity and liberty, which is the ability to pursue our objectives, tempered by socially defined boundaries and limited government impediments. Liberty is consistent with equal opportunity because it supplies the freedom to make individual choices. Absolute liberty would generate chaos, so liberty is bounded by social responsibility, or the concern for the rights of others in society.

Appreciate government as the arbiter in disputes between liberty and social responsibility.

We turn to government to draw the boundaries that determine where individual liberty stops and the needs of society start. But we won't all draw that boundary in the same place, which can lead to political disputes over whether government should create boundaries or leave matters of social responsibility to individuals.

Key Terms

authority The right to act in an official capacity by virtue of holding an office like president or member of Congress. (p. 6)

democracy A government created by the people over whom it rules. (p. 5)

direct democracy Democracy without representation, where each eligible individual participates in decision making. (p. 6)

disenfranchised Losing or being denied the legal right to vote by intentional or unintentional means. (p. 5)

economic equality A form of equality of outcome that values using government policy to minimize the economic disparities found in society. (p. 14)

elitism The theory that government responds to a small, stable, centralized hierarchy of corporate and academic leaders, military chiefs, people who own big media outlets, and members of a permanent government bureaucracy. People who subscribe to this position believe the actions of regular citizens, like voting and joining groups, simply mask the real power exercised by elites. (p. 11)

empirical Any statement based on the assessment of data or the analysis of information, without regard to value judgments. (p. 12)

equality of opportunity One of several ways of understanding equality. This way values giving people comparable advantages for succeeding in life, regardless of the unequal outcomes that may result. (p. 13)

equality of outcome One of several ways of understanding equality. This way values leveling the social and economic inequities among people, rather than attempting to give people comparable advantages for succeeding in life. (p. 14)

legitimacy Widespread public acceptance of the official standing of a political figure or institution. (p. 7)

liberty The ability to pursue your ends and objectives, tempered by socially defined boundaries and limited government impediments. (p. 16)

normative Any statement that invokes a judgment or evaluation. Think of the word *norm*, which implies a standard for evaluating something. (p. 12)

pluralism The theory that government responds to individuals through their memberships in groups, assuring that government is responsive to a wide range of voices. People who subscribe to this position believe that the wide distribution of resources in society drives the decisions government officials make. (p. 11)

political equality Establishing political and legal rights on the basis of the individual, so that everyone has the same right to vote and is equal under the law. An alternative would be to grant political rights to elite individuals based on wealth or social standing. (p. 13)

politics The process of determining who gets what, when, and how. (p. 10)

power The ability to make others act in a way that they otherwise might not have done. (p. 9)

representative democracy A form of democracy in which eligible individuals choose others to make decisions on their behalf. (p. 6)

republic Any nation with provisions for the selection of representatives who make decisions on behalf of those who

select them. James Madison said a republic was “a government in which the scheme of representation takes place,” as compared to direct democracy. (p. 6)

resources Anything of value to others that can be used to sway another individual. (p. 9)

social equality A form of equality of outcome that values using government policy to minimize social class distinctions found in society. (p. 14)

social responsibility Concern for the protection of the rights of individuals in a community or society, at the expense of some degree of personal liberty. (p. 17)

Resources

You might be interested in examining some of what the following authors have said about the topics we’ve been discussing:

Dahl, Robert. *Preface to Democratic Theory*. Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1956. Different approaches to American democratic theory, with special attention paid to majority and minority rule—things we’re going to talk more about in Chapter 2.

Lasswell, Harold D. *Politics: Who Gets What, When, How*. New York: Meridian Books, 1958. A classic discussion of the meaning of power.

Machiavelli, Niccolò. *The Prince*. New York: Penguin Books, 1999. Written 500 years ago, it contains observations about power that still ring true.

You may also be interested in looking at these resource sites:

You can find a good starting place for information on the U.S. government and the people who work in it by going to <http://www.usa.gov>.

What was government like during its formative years? Frenchman Alexis de Tocqueville traveled America from one end to the other in search of true democracy, and you can find his observations at <http://xroads.virginia.edu/~Hyper/detoc>.

Notes

1 Population estimate as of January 31, 2013 from the U.S. Census Bureau U.S. Population Clock, at: <http://www.census.gov/main/www/popclock.html>.

2 In fact, toward the end of his single term as governor, Ventura found that a large number of Minnesotans had soured on his persona or were unhappy with his official performance. This made it difficult for him to maneuver politically.

3 Harold D. Lasswell, *Who Gets What, When, How* (New York: Meridian Books, 1958).

4 Pat Garofolo, “The Walmart Heirs Have the Same Net Worth as the Bottom 30 Percent of Americans,” ThinkProgress.com, December 9, 2011.

5 Congressional Budget Office.

6 U.S. Bureau of Labor Statistics.

7 You may access the Women’s Bureau at the U.S. Department of Labor website, at <http://www.dol.gov/wb/>.

8 “Day of Infamy,” *Time*, September 12, 2001.

Table, Figure and Box Notes

T1 Israeli Prime Minister Yitzhak Rabin, U.S. President Bill Clinton, and PLO chairman Yasser Arafat; property of U.S. Government. The Hubble Space Telescope as seen from the departing Space Shuttle Atlantis, flying Servicing Mission 4 (STS-125), the fifth and final human spaceflight to visit the observatory; photo property of U.S. Government, compliments of NASA. Marquee for The Oprah Winfrey Show, at Harpo Studios in Near West Side, Chicago; photo licensed under the Creative Commons. The PlayStation was released in the mid-1990s and became the best-selling gaming console of its time; photo compliments of Nicholas Wang from Tokyo, Japan; photo licensed under the Creative Commons.

T2 John W. Kingdon, *America the Unusual*. New York: Worth Publishers, 1999.

T3 U.S. Census Bureau, Income, Poverty, and Health Insurance Coverage in the United States, Table A-2, 2011.

T4 U.S. Census Bureau, Statistical Abstract of the U.S. 2012, p. 455.