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CHAPTER 1

The Study of American Government

AP[®] LEARNING OBJECTIVE

- Representative democracy is shaped by its institutions, policies, events, and debates.

AP[®] ESSENTIAL KNOWLEDGE

- The U.S. government is based on ideas of limited government, including natural rights, popular sovereignty, republicanism, and social contract.
- Representative democracies can take on several forms, including participatory democracy, pluralist democracy, and elite democracy.

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Today, Americans and their elected leaders are hotly debating the federal government's fiscal responsibilities, for both spending and taxation.

Some things never change.



THEN

In 1786, a committee of Congress reported that since the Articles of Confederation were adopted in 1781, the state governments had paid only about one-seventh of the monies requisitioned by the federal government. The federal government was broke and sinking deeper into debt, including debt owed to foreign governments. Several states had financial crises, too.

In 1788, James Madison, the proposed Constitution's chief architect, argued that while the federal government needed its own "power of taxation" and "collectors of revenue," its overall powers would remain "few and defined" and its taxing power would be used sparingly.¹ In reply, critics of the proposed Constitution, including the famous patriot Patrick Henry, mocked Madison's view and predicted that if the Constitution were ratified, there would over time be "an immense increase of taxes" spent by an ever-growing federal government.²



NOW

The federal budget initially proposed for 2017 called for spending more than \$4 trillion, with a \$500 billion deficit (i.e., spending half a trillion more than projected government revenues). An expected national debt of more than \$20 trillion, much of it borrowed from foreign nations, was projected to balloon to \$27 trillion by 2026. Projected interest on the national debt in 2017 would be more than \$300 billion, and was expected to triple by 2026.³

The Budget Control Act of 2011 had called for long-term deficit reduction, but when the White House and Congress could not reach agreement in 2013, automatic spending cuts—known as "sequestration"—went into effect, and the federal government even shut down for 16 days in October 2013. The two branches ultimately produced the Bipartisan Budget Act of 2013, but could not find common ground on questions about long-term revenue and spending goals.

So, in the 1780s, as in the 2010s, nearly everyone agreed that government's finances were a huge mess

and that bold action was required, and soon; but in each case, then and now, there was no consensus about what action to take, or when.

issue A conflict, real or apparent, between the interests, ideas, or beliefs of different citizens.

1-1 Politics and Democracy

This might seem odd. After all, it may seem that the government's financial problems, including big budget deficits and revenue shortfalls, could be solved by simple arithmetic: either spend and borrow less, or tax more, or both. But now ask: Spend or borrow less for what, and raise taxes on whom, when, how, and by how much? For example, should we cut the defense budget but continue to fund health care programs, or the reverse? Or should we keep defense and health care funding at current levels but reduce spending on environmental protection or homeland security? Should we perhaps increase taxes on the wealthy (define *wealthy*) and cut taxes for the middle class (define *middle class*), or . . . what?

Then, as now, the fundamental government finance problems were *political*, not mathematical. People disagreed not only over how much the federal government should tax and spend, but also over whether it should involve itself at all in various endeavors. For example, in 2011, the federal government nearly shut down, not mainly over disagreements between the two parties about how much needed to be cut from the federal budget (in the end, the agreed-to cuts totaled \$38.5 billion), but primarily over whether any federal funding at all should go to certain relatively small-budget federal health, environmental, and other programs.

Fights over taxes and government finances; battles over abortion, school prayer, and gay rights; disputes about where to store nuclear waste; competing plans on immigration, international trade, welfare reform, environmental protection, or gun control; and contention surrounding a new health care proposal. Some of these matters are mainly about money and economic interests; others are more about ideas and personal beliefs. Some people care a lot about at least some of these matters; others seem to care little or not at all.

Regardless, all such matters and countless others have this in common: each is an **issue**, defined as a conflict, real or apparent, between the interests, ideas, or beliefs of different citizens.⁴

An issue may be more apparent than real; for example, people might fight over two tax plans that, despite superficial differences, would actually distribute tax burdens on different groups in exactly the same way. Or an issue may

politics *The activity by which an issue is agitated or settled.*

power *The ability of one person to get another person to act in accordance with the first person's intentions.*

authority *The right to use power.*

be as real as it seems to the conflicting parties, as, for example, it is in matters that pose clear-cut choices (high tariffs or no tariffs; abortion legal in all cases or illegal in all cases). And an issue might be more about conflicts over means than over ends. For example, on health care reform or other issues, legislators who are in the same party and have similar ideological leanings (like a group of liberal Democrats, or a group of conservative Republicans) might agree on objectives but still wrangle bitterly with each other over different means of achieving their goals. Or they might agree on both ends and means but differ over priorities (which goals to pursue first), timing (when to proceed), or tactics (how to proceed).

Whatever form issues take, they are the raw materials of politics. By **politics** we mean “the activity—negotiation, argument, discussion, application of force, persuasion, etc.—by which an issue is agitated or settled.”⁵ Any given issue can be agitated (brought to attention, stimulate conflict) or settled (brought to an accommodation, stimulate consensus) in many different ways. And government can agitate or settle, foster or frustrate political conflict in many different ways.

As you begin this textbook, this is a good time to ask yourself which issues matter to you. In general, do you care a lot, a little, or not at all about economic issues, social issues, or issues involving foreign policy or military affairs? Do you follow any particular, ongoing debates on issues such as tightening gun control laws, expanding health care insurance, regulating immigration, or funding antipoverty programs?

As you will learn in Unit 5 of this textbook, some citizens are quite issue oriented and politically active. They vote and try to influence others to vote likewise; they join political campaigns or give money to candidates; they keep informed about diverse issues, sign petitions, advocate for new laws, or communicate with elected leaders; and more.

But such politically attentive and engaged citizens are the exception to the rule, most especially among young adult citizens under age 30. According to many experts, evermore young Americans are closer to being “political dropouts” than they are to being “engaged citizens” (a fact that is made no less troubling by similar trends in the United Kingdom, Canada, Scandinavia, and elsewhere).⁶ Many high school and college students believe getting “involved in our democracy” means volunteering for community service, but not voting.⁷ Most young Americans do not regularly read or closely follow political news, and most know little about how government works and exhibit no “regular interest in politics.”⁸ In response

to such concerns, various analysts and study commissions have made proposals ranging from compulsory voting to enhanced “civic education” in high schools.⁹

The fact that you are reading this textbook tells us that you probably have some interest in American politics and government. Our goal in this textbook is to develop, enliven, and inform that interest through examining concepts, interests, and institutions in American politics from a historical perspective as well as through current policy debates.

Power, Authority, and Legitimacy

Politics, and the processes by which issues are normally agitated or settled, involves the exercise of power. By **power** we mean the ability of one person to get another person to act in accordance with the first person's intentions. Sometimes an exercise of power is obvious, as when the president tells the Air Force that it cannot build a new bomber, or orders soldiers into combat in a foreign land. Other times an exercise of power is subtle, as when the president's junior speechwriters, reflecting their own evolving views, adopt a new tone when writing about controversial issues such as immigration. The speechwriters may not think they are using power—after all, they are the president's subordinates and may see their boss face-to-face infrequently. But if the president speaks the phrases that they craft, then they have used power.

Power is found in all human relationships, but we are concerned here only with power as it is used to affect who will hold government office and how government will behave. We limit our view here to government, and chiefly to the American federal government. However, we repeatedly pay special attention to how things once thought to be “private” matters become “public”—that is, how they manage to become objects of governmental action. Indeed, as we discuss more later, one of the most striking transformations of American politics has been the extent to which, in recent decades, almost every aspect of human life has found its way onto the political agenda.

People who exercise political power may or may not have the authority to do so. By **authority** we mean the right to use power. The exercise of rightful power—that is, of authority—is ordinarily easier than the exercise of power not supported by any persuasive claim of right. We accept decisions, often without question, if they are made by people who we believe have the right to make them; we may bow to naked power because we cannot resist it, but by our recalcitrance or our resentment we put the users of naked power to greater trouble than the wielders of authority. In this book, we on occasion speak of “formal authority.” By this we mean that the right to exercise power is vested in a

governmental office. A president, a senator, and a federal judge have formal authority to take certain actions.

What makes power rightful varies from time to time and from country to country. In the United States, we usually say a person has political authority if his or her right to act in a certain way is conferred by a law or by a state or national constitution. But what makes a law or constitution a source of right? That is the question of **legitimacy**. In the United States, the Constitution today is widely, if not unanimously, accepted as a source of legitimate authority, but that was not always the case.

Defining Democracy

On one matter, virtually all Americans seem to agree: no exercise of political power by government at any level is legitimate if it is not in some sense democratic. That wasn't always the prevailing view. In 1787, as the Framers drafted the Constitution, Alexander Hamilton worried that the new government he helped create might be too democratic, whereas George Mason, who refused to sign the Constitution, worried that it was not democratic enough. Today, however, almost everyone believes that democratic government is the only proper kind. Most people believe that American government is democratic; some believe that other institutions of public life—schools, universities, corporations, trade unions, churches—also should be run on democratic principles if they are to be legitimate; and some insist that promoting democracy abroad ought to be a primary purpose of U.S. foreign policy.

Democracy is a word with at least two different meanings. First, the term *democracy* is used to describe those regimes that come as close as possible to Aristotle's definition—the "rule of the many."¹⁰ A government is democratic if all, or most, of its citizens participate directly in either holding office or making policy. This often is called **direct or participatory democracy**. In Aristotle's time—Greece in the 4th century B.C.—such a government was possible. The Greek city-state, or *polis*, was quite small; within it citizenship was extended to all free adult male property holders. (The enslaved, women, minors, and those without property were excluded from participation in government.) In more recent times, the New England town meeting approximates the Aristotelian ideal. In such a meeting, the adult citizens of a community gather once or twice a year to vote directly on all of the town's major issues and expenditures. As towns have become larger and issues more complicated, many town governments have abandoned the pure town meeting in favor of either the representative town meeting (in which a large number of elected representatives, perhaps 200–300, meet to vote on town affairs) or representative government (in which a small number of elected city councilors make decisions).



IMAGE 1-1 On November 4, 2020, protesters call for all votes, especially mail-in ballots, to be counted fairly in Philadelphia, Pennsylvania, a major district and swing-state in the 2020 presidential election.

The second definition of *democracy* is the principle of governance of most nations that are called democratic. It was most concisely stated by the economist Joseph Schumpeter: "The democratic method is that institutional arrangement for arriving at political decisions in which individuals [i.e., leaders] acquire the power to decide by means of a competitive struggle for the people's vote."¹¹ Sometimes this method is approvingly called **representative democracy**; at other times it is disapprovingly referred to as the elitist theory of democracy. It is justified by one or both of two arguments. First, it is impractical, owing to limits of time, information, energy, interest, and expertise, for the public at large to decide on public policy, but it is not impractical to expect them to make reasonable choices among competing leadership groups. Second, some people (including, as we shall see in the next chapter, many of the Framers of the Constitution) believe direct democracy is likely to lead to bad decisions because people often decide large issues on the basis of fleeting passions and in response to popular demagogues, or leaders who appeal to emotions rather than reason to gain support. This concern about direct democracy persists today, as evidenced by the statements of leaders who disagree with voter decisions. For example, voters in many states have rejected referenda that would have increased public funding for private schools. Politicians who oppose the defeated referenda speak approvingly

legitimacy Political authority conferred by law or by a state or national constitution.

democracy The rule of the many.

direct or participatory democracy A government in which all or most citizens participate directly.

representative democracy A government in which leaders make decisions by winning a competitive struggle for the popular vote.

of the “will of the people,” but politicians who favor them speak disdainfully of “mass misunderstanding.”

Whenever we refer to that form of democracy involving the direct participation of all or most citizens, we use the term *direct* or *participatory* democracy. Whenever the word *democracy* is used alone in this book, it will have the meaning Schumpeter gave it. Schumpeter’s definition usefully implies basic benchmarks that enable us to judge the extent to which any given political system is democratic.¹² A political system is *nondemocratic* to the extent that it denies equal voting rights to part of its society and severely limits (or outright prohibits) “the civil and political freedoms to speak, publish, assemble, and organize,”¹³ all of which are necessary to a truly “competitive struggle for the people’s vote.” A partial list of nondemocratic political systems would include absolute monarchies, empires, military dictatorships, authoritarian systems, and totalitarian states.¹⁴

Scholars of comparative politics and government have much to teach about how different types of political systems—democratic and nondemocratic—arise, persist, and change. For our present purposes, however, it is most important to understand that America itself was once far less democratic than it is today and that it was so not by accident but by design. As we discuss in the next chapter, the men who wrote the Constitution did not use the word *democracy* in that document. They wrote instead of a “republican form of government,” but by that they meant what we call “representative democracy.” And, as we emphasize when discussing civil liberties and civil rights (see Chapters 9 and 10), and again when discussing political participation (see Chapter 12), the United States was not born as a full-fledged representative democracy; and, for all the progress of the past half-century or so, the nation’s representative democratic character is still very much a work in progress.

Of course, for any representative democracy to work, there must be an opportunity for genuine competition

for leadership. This requires that individuals and parties be able to run for office, that communications (through speeches or the press, in meetings, and on the Internet) be free, and that the voters perceive that a meaningful choice exists. But what, exactly, constitutes a “meaningful choice”? How many offices should be elective and how many appointive? How many candidates or parties can exist before the choices become hopelessly confused? Where will the money come from to finance electoral campaigns? Such questions have many answers. In some European democracies, for example, very few offices—often just those in the national or local legislature—are elective, and much of the money for campaigning for these offices comes from the government. In the United States, many offices—executive and judicial as well as legislative—are elective, and most of the money the candidates use for campaigning comes from industry, labor unions, and private individuals.

Some people have argued that the virtues of direct or participatory democracy can and should be reclaimed even in a modern, complex society. This can be done either by allowing individual neighborhoods in big cities to govern themselves (community control) or by requiring those affected by some government program to participate in its formulation (citizen participation). In many states, a measure of direct democracy exists when voters can decide on referendum issues—that is, policy choices that appear on the ballot. The proponents of direct democracy defend it as the only way to ensure that the “will of the people” prevails.

As we discuss in the Constitutional Connections feature on page 7, and as we explore more in Chapter 2, the Framers of the Constitution did not think that the “will of the people” was synonymous with the “common interest” or the “public good.” They strongly favored representative democracy over direct democracy, and they believed that elected officials could best ascertain what was in the public interest.

1-2 Political Power in America: Five Views

Scholars differ in their interpretations of the American political experience. Where some see a steady march of democracy, others see no such thing; where some emphasize how voting and other rights have been steadily expanded, others stress how they were denied to so many for so long, and so forth. Short of attempting to reconcile these competing historical interpretations, let us step back for a moment to our definition of representative democracy and five competing views about how political power has been distributed in America.



IMAGE 1-2 After the 2016 presidential election, some protestors criticized incoming President Donald Trump’s plans to restrict immigration.



Deciding What's Legitimate

Much of American political history has been a struggle over what constitutes legitimate authority. The Constitutional Convention in 1787 was an effort to determine whether a new, more powerful federal government could be made legitimate; the succeeding administrations of George Washington, John Adams, and Thomas Jefferson were in large measure preoccupied with disputes over the kinds of decisions that were legitimate for the federal government to make. The Civil War was a bloody struggle over slavery and the legitimacy of the federal union; the New Deal of Franklin Roosevelt was hotly debated by those who disagreed over whether it was legitimate for the federal government to intervene deeply in the

economy. Not uncommonly, the federal judiciary functions as the ultimate arbiter of what is legitimate in the context of deciding what is or is not constitutional (see Chapter 8). For instance, in 2012, amidst a contentious debate over the legitimacy of the federal health care law enacted in 2010, the U.S. Supreme Court decided that the federal government could require individuals to purchase health insurance but could not require states to expand health care benefits for citizens participating in the federal-state program known as Medicaid. In the spring and summer of 2017, the Trump White House and the Republican-led Congress tried unsuccessfully to repeal the 2010 law. As of the third quarter 2020, it still has not been repealed.

Representative democracy is defined as any system of government in which leaders are authorized to make decisions—and thereby to wield political power—by winning a competitive struggle for the popular vote. It is obvious then that very different sets of hands can control political power, depending on what kinds of people can become leaders, how the struggle for votes is carried on, how much freedom to act is given to those who win the struggle, and what other sorts of influence (besides the desire for popular approval) affect the leaders' actions.

The actual distribution of political power in a representative democracy depends on the composition of the political elites who are involved in the struggles for power and over policy. By **elite** we mean an identifiable group of people who have a disproportionate share of some valued resource—in this case, political power.

At least five views exist about how political power is distributed in America: (1) the **class view** (wealthy capitalists and other economic elites determine most policies), (2) the **power elite view** (a group of business, military, labor union, and elected officials controls most decisions), (3) the **bureaucratic view** (appointed bureaucrats ultimately run everything), (4) the **pluralist view** (representatives of a large number of interest groups are in charge), and (5) the **creedal passion view** (morally impassioned elites drive political change).

The first view began with the theories of Karl Marx, who, in the 19th century, argued that governments were dominated by business owners (the “bourgeoisie”) until a revolution replaced them with rule by laborers (the “proletariat”).¹⁵ But strict Marxism has collapsed in most countries. Today, a class view, though it may derive inspiration

from Marx, is less dogmatic and emphasizes the power of “the rich” or the leaders of multinational corporations.

The second view ties business leaders together with other elites whose perceived power is of concern to the view's adherents. These elites may include top military officials, labor union leaders, mass media executives, and the heads of a few special-interest groups. Derived from the work of sociologist C. Wright Mills, this power elite view argues that American democracy is dominated by a few top leaders, many of them wealthy or privately powerful, who do not hold elective office.¹⁶

The third view is that appointed officials run everything despite the efforts of elected officials and the public to control them. The bureaucratic view was first set forth by German scholar Max Weber (1864–1920). He argued that the modern state, in order to become successful, puts its affairs in the hands of appointed bureaucrats whose competence is essential to the management of complex affairs.¹⁷ These

elite *Persons who possess a disproportionate share of some valued resource, such as money, prestige, or expertise.*

class view *View that the government is dominated by capitalists.*

power elite view *View that the government is dominated by a few top leaders, most of whom are outside of government.*

bureaucratic view *View that the government is dominated by appointed officials.*

pluralist view *View that competition among all affected interests shapes public policy.*

creedal passion view *View that morally impassioned elites drive important political changes.*

officials, invisible to most people, have mastered the written records and legislative details of the government and do more than just implement democratic policies; they actually make those policies.

The fourth view holds that political resources—such as money, prestige, expertise, and access to the mass media—have become so widely distributed that no single elite, no social class, no bureaucratic arrangement can control them. Many 20th-century political scientists, among them David B. Truman, adopted a pluralist view.¹⁸ In the United States, they argued, political resources are broadly shared in part because there are so many governmental institutions (cities, states, school boards) and so many rival institutions (legislatures, executives, judges, bureaucrats) that no single group can dominate most, or even much, of the political process.

The fifth view maintains that while each of the other four views is correct with respect to how power is distributed on certain issues or during political periods of “business as usual,” each also misses how the most important policy decisions and political changes are influenced by morally impassioned elites who are motivated less by economic self-interest than they are by an almost religious zeal to bring government institutions and policies into line with democratic ideals. Samuel P. Huntington articulated this creedal passion view, offering the examples of Patrick Henry and the revolutionaries of the 1770s, the advocates of Jackson-style democracy in the 1820s, the progressive reformers of the early 20th century, and the leaders of the civil rights and antiwar movements in the mid-20th century.¹⁹

1-3 Who Governs? To What Ends?

So, which view is correct? At one level, all are correct, at least in part: Economic class interests, powerful cadres of elites, entrenched bureaucrats, competing pressure groups, and morally impassioned individuals have all at one time or another wielded political power and played a part in shaping our government and its policies.

But, more fundamentally, understanding any political system means being able to give reasonable answers to each of two separate but related questions about it: Who governs, and to what ends?

We want to know the answer to the first question because we believe that those who rule—their personalities and beliefs, their virtues and vices—will affect what they do to and for us. Many people think they already know the answer to the question, and they are prepared to talk and vote on that basis. That is their right, and the

opinions they express may be correct. But they also may be wrong. Indeed, many of these opinions must be wrong because they are in conflict. When asked, “Who governs?” some people will say “the unions” and some will say “big business”; others will say “the politicians,” “the people,” or “the special interests.” Still others will say “Wall Street,” “the military,” “crackpot liberals,” “the media,” “the bureaucrats,” or “White males.” Not all these answers can be correct—at least not all of the time.

The answer to the second question is important because it tells us how government affects our lives. We want to know not only who governs, but what difference it makes who governs. In our day-to-day lives, we may not think government makes much difference at all. In one sense that is right because our most pressing personal concerns—work, play, love, family, health—essentially are private matters on which government slightly touches. But in a larger and longer perspective, government makes a substantial difference. Consider that in 1935, 96 percent of all American families paid no federal income tax, and for the 4 percent or so who did pay, the average rate was only about 4 percent of their incomes. Today almost all families pay federal payroll taxes, and the average rate is about 21 percent of their incomes. Or consider that in 1960, in many parts of the country, African Americans could ride only in the backs of buses, had to use washrooms and drinking fountains that were labeled “colored,” and could not be served in most public restaurants. Such restrictions have almost all been eliminated, in large part because of decisions by the federal government.

It is important to bear in mind that we wish to answer two different questions, and not two versions of the same question. You cannot always predict what goals government will establish by knowing only who governs, nor can you always tell who governs by knowing what activities government undertakes. Most people holding national political office are middle-class, middle-aged, White Protestant males, but we cannot then conclude that the government will adopt only policies that are to the narrow advantage of the middle class, the middle-aged, Whites, Protestants, or men. If we thought that, we would be at a loss to explain why the rich are taxed more heavily than the poor, why the War on Poverty was declared, why constitutional amendments giving rights to African Americans and women passed Congress by large majorities, or why Catholics and Jews have been appointed to so many important governmental posts.

This book is chiefly devoted to answering the question, who governs? It is written in the belief that this question cannot be answered without looking at how government makes—or fails to make—decisions about a large variety

of concrete issues. Thus, in this book we inspect government policies to see what individuals, groups, and institutions seem to exert the greatest power in the continuous struggle to define the purposes of government.

Expanding the Political Agenda

No matter who governs, the most important decision that affects policymaking is also the least noticed one: deciding what to make policy *about*, or in the language of political science, deciding what belongs on the **political agenda**. The political agenda consists of issues that people believe require governmental action. We take for granted that politics is about certain familiar issues such as taxes, energy, welfare, civil rights, and homeland security. We forget that there is nothing inevitable about having these issues—rather than some other ones—on the nation's political agenda.

For example, at one time, it was unconstitutional for the federal government to levy income taxes; energy was a nonissue because everyone (or at least everyone who could chop down trees for firewood) had enough; welfare was something for cities and towns to handle; civil rights were supposed to be a matter of private choice rather than government action; “homeland security” was not in the political lexicon, and a huge federal cabinet department by that name was nowhere on the horizon.

At any given time, what is on the political agenda is affected by at least four things:

- *Shared political values*—for example, if people believe that poverty is the result of social forces rather than individual choices, then they have a reason to endorse enacting or expanding government programs to combat poverty.
- *The weight of custom and tradition*—people usually will accept what the government customarily does, even if they are leery of what it proposes to do.
- *The importance of events*—wars, terrorist attacks, and severe or sustained economic downturns can alter our sense of the proper role of government.
- *Terms of debate*—the way in which political elites discuss issues influences how the public views political priorities.

Because many people believe that whatever the government now does it ought to continue doing, and because changes in attitudes and the impact of events tend to increase the number of things that government does, the political agenda is always growing larger. Thus, today there are far fewer debates about the legitimacy of a proposed government policy than there were in the 1920s or the 1930s.

For instance, in the 1930s, when what became the Social Security program was first proposed, the debate was largely about whether the federal government should have any role whatsoever in providing financial support for older adults or disabled citizens. In stark contrast, today, not a single member of Congress denies that the federal government should have a *major* role in providing financial support for older adults or disabled citizens, or advocates ending Social Security. Instead, today's debates about the program are largely over competing plans to ensure its long-term financial solvency.

Popular views regarding what belongs on the political agenda often are changed by events. During wartime or after a terrorist attack on this country, many people expect the government to do whatever is necessary to win, whether or not such actions are clearly authorized by the Constitution. Economic depressions or deep recessions, such as those that began in 1929 and 2007, also lead many people to expect the government to take action. A coal mine disaster leads to an enlarged role for the government in promoting mine safety. A series of airplane hijackings leads to a change in public opinion so great that what once was unthinkable—requiring all passengers at airports to be searched before boarding their flights—is now routine.

But sometimes the government enlarges the political agenda, often dramatically, without any crisis or widespread public demand. This may happen even at a time when the conditions at which a policy is directed are improving. For instance, there was no mass public

political agenda

Issues that people believe require governmental action.



IMAGE 1-3 Seeing first responders in action in the immediate aftermath of 9/11, Americans felt powerfully connected to their fellow citizens.

Steve Wood/FEX/Newscom

demand for government action to make automobiles safer before 1966, when a law was passed imposing safety standards on cars. Though the number of auto fatalities (per 100 million miles driven) had gone up slightly just before the law was passed, in the long term, highway deaths had been more or less steadily trending downward.

It is not easy to explain why the government adds new issues to its agenda and adopts new programs when little public demand exists and when, in fact, the conditions to which the policies are addressed have improved. In general, the explanation may be found in the behavior of groups, the workings of institutions, the media, and the action of state governments.

Groups

Many policies are the result of small groups of people enlarging the scope of government by their demands. Sometimes these are organized interests (e.g., corporations or unions); sometimes they are intense but unorganized groups (e.g., urban minorities). The organized groups often work quietly, behind the scenes; the intense, unorganized ones may take their causes to the streets.

For example, organized labor favored a tough federal safety law governing factories and other workplaces, not because it was unaware that factory conditions had been improving, but because the standards by which union leaders and members judged working conditions had risen even faster. As people became better off, conditions that once were thought normal became intolerable.

On occasion, a group violently expresses its dissatisfaction with what it judges to be intolerable conditions. The riots in American cities during the mid-1960s had a variety of causes, and people participated out of a variety of motives. For many, rioting was a way of expressing pent-up anger at what they regarded as an unresponsive and unfair society. A sense of relative deprivation—of being worse off than one thinks one *ought* to be—helps explain why such a large proportion of the rioters were not uneducated, unemployed recent migrants to the city, but rather young men and women who were born, educated, and employed in the North.²⁰ Life under these conditions turned out to be not what they had come to expect or what they were prepared to tolerate.

The new demands of such groups need not result in an enlarged political agenda, and they often do not produce such results when society and its governing institutions are confident of the rightness of the existing state of affairs. Unions could have been voted down on the occupational safety bill; rioters could have been jailed and ignored. At one time, this is exactly what would have happened. But society itself had changed: many people

who were not workers sympathized with the plight of the injured worker and distrusted the good intentions of business in this matter. Many well-off citizens felt a constructive response to the urban riots was required and thus urged the formation of commissions to study—and the passage of laws to deal with—the problems of inner-city life. Such changes in the values and beliefs of people generally—or at least of people in key government positions—are an essential part of any explanation of why policies not demanded by public opinion nonetheless become part of the political agenda.

Government Institutions

Among the institutions whose influence on agenda-setting has become especially important are the courts, the bureaucracy, and the Senate.

The courts can make decisions that force the hand of the other branches of government. For example, when in 1954 the Supreme Court ordered schools desegregated, Congress and the White House could no longer ignore the issue. Local resistance to implementing the order led President Dwight D. Eisenhower to send troops to Little Rock, Arkansas, despite his dislike for using force against local governments. Similarly, when the Supreme Court ruled in 1973 that the states could not ban abortions during the first trimester of pregnancy, abortion suddenly became a national political issue. Right-to-life activists campaigned to reverse the Court's decision or, failing that, to prevent federal funds from being used to pay for abortions. Pro-choice activists fought to prevent the Court from reversing course and to get federal funding for abortions. In these and many other cases, the courts act like trip wires: when activated, they set off a chain reaction of events that alters the political agenda and creates a new constellation of political forces.

Indeed, the courts can sometimes be more than trip wires. As the political agenda has expanded, the courts have become the favorite method for effecting change for which there is no popular majority. Little electoral support may exist for allowing abortion on demand, eliminating school prayer, ordering school busing, or attacking tobacco companies, but elections do not matter in the courts. The courts are the preferred vehicles for the advocates of unpopular causes.

The bureaucracy has acquired a new significance in American politics not simply because of its size or power, but also because it is now a source of political innovation. At one time, the federal government *reacted* to events in society and to demands from segments of society; ordinarily it did not itself propose changes and new ideas. Today, the bureaucracy is so large and includes such a great variety of experts and advocates, that it has become a *source* of

policy proposals as well as an implementer of those that become law. The late U.S. Senator Daniel Patrick Moynihan called this the “professionalization of reform.” By this he meant, in part, that the government bureaucracy had begun to think up problems for government to solve rather than simply respond to the problems identified by others.²¹ In the 1930s, many of the key elements of the New Deal—Social Security, unemployment compensation, public housing, old-age benefits—were ideas devised by nongovernment experts and intellectuals here and abroad and then, as the crisis of the Great Depression deepened, taken up by the federal government. By contrast, most of the measures in the 1960s that became known as part of Lyndon Johnson’s “Great Society”—federal aid to education, manpower development and training, Medicare and Medicaid, the War on Poverty, the “safe-streets” act providing federal aid to local law enforcement agencies—were developed, designed, and advocated by government officials, bureaucrats, and their political allies.

Chief among these political allies are U.S. senators and their staffs. Once the Senate was best described as a club that moved slowly, debated endlessly, and resisted, under the leadership of conservative Southern Democrats, the plans of liberal presidents. With the collapse of the one-party South and the increase in the number of liberal activist senators, the Senate became an incubator in the 1960s for developing new policies and building national constituencies.²²

Media

The national press can either help place new matters on the agenda or publicize matters placed there by others. There was a close correlation between the political attention given in the Senate to proposals for new safety standards for industry, coal mines, and automobiles and the amount of space devoted to these questions in the *New York Times*. Newspaper interest in the matter, which was low before the issue was placed on the agenda, peaked at about the time the safety standards bill was passed.²³

Of course, it is difficult to decide which is the cause and which is the effect. The press may have stimulated congressional interest in the matter or merely reported on what Congress had already decided to pursue. Nonetheless, the press must choose which of thousands of proposals it will cover. The beliefs of editors and reporters led it to select the safety issue.

Action by the States

National policy is increasingly being made by the actions of state governments. You may wonder how. After all, a state can only pass laws that affect its own citizens. Of course, the national government may later

adopt ideas pioneered in the states, as it did when Congress passed a “Do Not Call” law to reduce how many phone calls you will get from salespeople while you are trying to eat dinner. The states had taken the lead on this issue.

But there is another way in which state governments can make national policy directly without Congress ever voting on the matter. The attorneys general of states may sue a business firm and settle the suit with an agreement that binds the industry throughout the country. The effect of one suit was to raise prices for consumers and create a new set of regulations. This is what happened in 1998 with the tobacco agreement negotiated between cigarette companies and some state attorneys general. The companies agreed to raise their prices, pay more than \$240 billion to state governments (to use as they wished) and several billion dollars to private lawyers, and comply with a massive regulatory program. A decade later, the federal government passed laws that reinforced the state’s regulations, culminating in the Family Smoking Prevention Tobacco Control Act of 2009.

cost A burden that people believe they must bear if a policy is adopted.

benefit A satisfaction that people believe they will enjoy if a policy is adopted.

1-4 The Politics of Different Issues

Once an issue is on the political agenda, its nature affects the kind of politicking that ensues. Some issues provoke intense conflict among interest groups; others allow one group to prevail almost unchallenged. Some issues involve ideological appeals to broad national constituencies; others involve quiet bargaining in congressional offices. We all know that private groups try to influence government policies; we often forget that the nature of the issues with which government is dealing influences the kinds of groups that become politically active.

One way to understand why government handles a given issue as it does is to examine what seem to be the costs and benefits of the proposed policy. The **cost** is any burden, monetary or nonmonetary, that some people must bear, or believe they must bear, if the policy is adopted. The costs of a government spending program are the taxes it entails; the cost of a foreign policy initiative may be the increased chance of having the nation drawn into war.

The **benefit** is any satisfaction, monetary or nonmonetary, that people believe they will enjoy if the policy is adopted. The benefits of a government

spending program are the payments, subsidies, or contracts received by some people; the benefits of a foreign policy initiative may include the enhanced security of the nation, the protection of a valued ally, or the vindication of some important principle such as human rights.

Two aspects of these costs and benefits should be borne in mind. First, it is the *perception* of costs and benefits that affects politics. People may think the cost of an auto emissions control system is paid by the manufacturer, when it is actually passed on to the consumer in the form of higher prices and reduced performance. Political conflict over pollution control will take one form when people think that the polluting industries pay the costs and another form when they think that the consumers pay.

Second, people take into account not only who benefits, but also whether it is legitimate for that group to benefit. When programs providing financial assistance to women with dependent children were first developed in the early 20th century, they were relatively noncontroversial because people saw the money as going to widows and orphans who deserved such aid. Later, giving aid to mothers with dependent children became controversial because some people now perceived the recipients not as deserving widows but as irresponsible women who had never married. Whatever the truth of the matter, the program had lost some of its legitimacy because the beneficiaries were no longer seen as “deserving.” By the same token, groups once thought undeserving, such as people out of work, were later thought to be entitled to aid, and thus the unemployment compensation program acquired a legitimacy that it once lacked.

Politics is largely a process of raising and settling disputes over who *will* benefit or pay for a program and who *ought* to benefit or pay. Because beliefs about the results of a program and the rightness of those results are matters of opinion, ideas are at least as important as interests in shaping politics. In recent years, ideas have become especially important with the rise of issues whose consequences are largely intangible, such as abortion, school prayer, and gay rights.

Though perceptions about costs and benefits change, most people most of the time prefer government programs that provide substantial benefits to them at low cost. This can have important implications for how politics is carried out. In a political system based on some measure of popular rule, public officials have a strong incentive to offer programs that confer—or seem to confer—benefits on people with costs either small in amount, remote in time, or borne by “somebody else.” Policies that seem to impose high, immediate costs in return for small or remote benefits will be

avoided, enacted with little publicity, or proposed only in response to a real or apparent crisis.

Ordinarily, no president would propose a policy that would immediately raise the cost of fuel, even if he or she were convinced that future supplies of oil and gasoline were likely to be exhausted unless higher prices reduced current consumption. But when a crisis occurs, such as the Arab oil cartel’s price increases beginning in 1973, it becomes possible for the president to offer such proposals—as did Nixon, Ford, and Carter in varying ways. Even then, however, people are reluctant to bear increased costs, and thus many dispute the president’s claim that an emergency actually exists.

Four Types of Politics

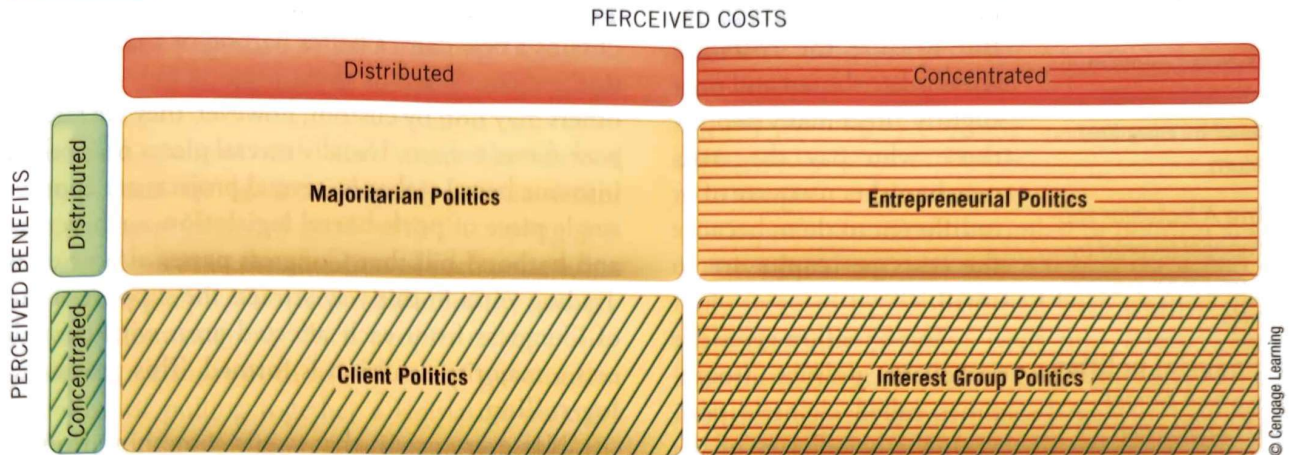
These entirely human responses to the perceived costs and benefits of proposed policies can be organized into a simple theory of politics.²⁴ It is based on the observation that the costs and benefits of a policy may be *widely distributed* (spread over many, most, or even all citizens) or *narrowly concentrated* (limited to a relatively small number of citizens or to some identifiable, organized group).

For instance, a widely distributed cost would include an income tax, a Social Security tax, or a high rate of crime; a widely distributed benefit might include retirement benefits for all citizens, clean air, national security, or low crime rates. Examples of narrowly concentrated costs include a factory’s expenditures to reduce its pollution, government regulations imposed on doctors and hospitals participating in the Medicare program, or restrictions on freedom of speech imposed on a dissident political group. Examples of narrowly concentrated benefits include subsidies to farmers or merchant ship companies, the enlarged freedom to speak and protest afforded a dissident group, or protection against competition given to an industry because of favorable government regulation.

The perceived distribution of costs and benefits shapes the *kinds of political coalitions that will form*—but it does not necessarily determine *who wins*. Four types of politics exist, and a given popular majority, interest group, client, or entrepreneur may win or lose depending on its influence and the temper of the times.

Majoritarian Politics: Distributed Benefits, Distributed Costs

Some policies promise benefits to large numbers of people at a cost they will have to bear (see Figure 1.1). For example, sooner or later almost everyone will receive Social Security benefits, and almost everyone who works has to pay Social Security taxes.

FIGURE 1.1 A Way of Classifying and Explaining the Politics of Different Policy Issues

Such **majoritarian politics** are usually not dominated by pulling and hauling among rival interest groups; instead, they involve making appeals to large segments of voters and their representatives in hopes of finding a majority. Interest groups are not so important in majoritarian politics because citizens rarely will have much incentive to join an interest group if the policy that such a group supports will benefit everybody, whether or not they are members of the group. This is the “free-rider” problem. Why join the Committee to Increase (or Decrease) the Defense Budget when what you personally contribute to that committee makes little difference in the outcome and when you will enjoy the benefits of more (or less) national defense even if you stay on the sidelines?

Majoritarian politics may be controversial, but the controversy is usually over matters of cost or ideology, not between rival interest groups. For example, intense controversy ensued over the health care plan that President Barack Obama signed into law, but the debate was not dominated by interest groups, and many different types of politics were at play (see *Policy Dynamics: Inside/Outside the Box* on page 17). The military budget went up during the early 1980s, down in the late 1980s, up after 2001, and down again after 2010. These changes reflected different views on how much we need to spend on our military operations abroad.

Interest Group Politics: Concentrated Benefits, Concentrated Costs

In **interest group politics**, a proposed policy will confer benefits on some relatively small, identifiable group and impose costs on another small, equally identifiable group. For example, when Congress passed a bill requiring companies to give 60 days’ notice of a plant closing or a large-scale layoff, labor unions (whose members would benefit) backed the bill, and many business firms (which would pay the costs) opposed it.

Issues of this kind tend to be fought out by organized interest groups. Each side will be so powerfully affected by the outcome that it has a strong incentive to mobilize: Union members who worry about layoffs will have a personal stake in favoring the notice bill; business leaders who fear government control of investment decisions will have an economic stake in opposing it.

Interest group politics often produces decisions about which the public is uninformed. For instance, bitter debates have occurred between television broadcasters and cable companies over who may send what kind of signals to which homes. But these debates hardly draw any public notice—until after a law is passed and people see their increased cable charges.

Though many issues of this type involve monetary costs and benefits, they can also involve intangible considerations. If the American Nazi Party wants to march through a predominantly Jewish neighborhood carrying flags with swastikas on them, the community may organize itself to resist out of revulsion due to the horrific treatment of Jews by Nazi Germany. Each side may hire lawyers to debate the issue before the city council and in the courts.

Client Politics: Concentrated Benefits, Distributed Costs

With **client politics** some identifiable and often small group will benefit, but everybody—or at least a large part of society—will pay the costs. Because the benefits are concentrated, the group to receive those benefits

majoritarian politics

A policy in which almost everybody benefits and almost everybody pays.

interest group politics

A policy in which one small group benefits and another small group pays.

client politics *A policy in which one small group benefits and almost everybody pays.*

pork-barrel legislation

Legislation that gives tangible benefits to constituents in several districts or states in the hope of winning their votes in return.

log-rolling *A legislator supports a proposal favored by another in return for support of his or hers.*

entrepreneurial politics

A policy in which almost everybody benefits and a small group pays.

many farmers benefit substantially from agricultural price supports, but many food consumers have no idea what these price supports cost them in taxes and higher food prices. Similarly, for some time airlines benefited from the higher prices they were able to charge on certain routes as a result of government regulations that restricted competition over prices. But the average passenger was either unaware that costs were higher or did not think the higher prices were worth complaining about.

has an incentive to organize and work to get them. But because the costs are widely distributed and only slightly affect many people, those who pay the costs may be either unaware of or indifferent to them because the costs per capita are so small.

This situation gives rise to client politics (sometimes called clientele politics); the beneficiary of the policy is the “client” of the government. For example,

Not all clients have economic interests. Localities can also benefit as clients when, for example, a city or county obtains a new dam, a better harbor, or an improved irrigation system. Some of these projects may be worthwhile, others may not; by custom, however, they are referred to as *pork-barrel projects*. Usually several pieces of “pork” are put into one barrel—that is, several projects are approved in a single piece of **pork-barrel legislation**, such as the “rivers and harbors” bill that Congress passes almost every year. Trading votes in this way attracts the support of members of Congress from each affected area; with enough projects a majority coalition is formed. This process is called **log-rolling**.

Not every group that wants something from government at little cost to the average citizen will get it. Welfare recipients cost the typical taxpayer a small amount each year, yet there was great resistance to increasing these benefits. The homeless have not organized themselves to get benefits; indeed, most do not even vote. Yet benefits are being provided (although in modest amounts). These examples illustrate the importance of popular views concerning the legitimacy of client claims as a factor in determining the success of client demands.

By the same token, groups can lose legitimacy that they once had. People who grow tobacco once were supported simply because they were farmers, and were thus seen as both “deserving” and politically important. But when people began worrying about the health risks associated with using tobacco, tobacco farmers lost some legitimacy compared with corn or cotton farmers. As a result, it became harder to get votes for maintaining tobacco price supports and easier to slap higher taxes on cigarettes.

Entrepreneurial Politics: Distributed Benefits, Concentrated Costs

In **entrepreneurial politics**, society as a whole or some large part of it benefits from a policy that imposes substantial costs on some small, identifiable segment of society. The antipollution and safety requirements for automobiles were proposed as ways of improving everyone’s health and well-being at the expense (at least initially) of automobile manufacturers.

It is remarkable that policies of this sort are ever adopted, and in fact many are not. After all, the American political system creates many opportunities for checking and blocking the actions of others. The Founders deliberately arranged things so that it would be difficult to pass a new law; a determined minority therefore has an excellent chance of blocking a new policy. And any organized group that fears the loss of some privilege or the imposition



IMAGE 1-4 During the Great Depression, depositors besieged a bank, hoping to get their savings out.

of some burden will become a very determined minority indeed. The opponent has every incentive to work hard; the large group of prospective beneficiaries may be unconvinced of the benefit or regard it as too small to be worth fighting for.

Nonetheless, policies with distributed benefits and concentrated costs are in fact adopted, and in recent decades they have been adopted with increasing frequency. A key element in the adoption of such policies has been the work of people who act on behalf of the unorganized or indifferent majority. Such people, called **policy entrepreneurs**, are those both in and out of government who find ways of pulling together a legislative majority on behalf of interests that are not well represented in the government. These policy entrepreneurs may or may not represent the interests and wishes of the public at large, but they do have the ability to dramatize an issue in a convincing manner. Ralph Nader is perhaps the best-known example of a policy entrepreneur, or as he might describe himself, a “consumer advocate.” But there are other examples from both ends of the political spectrum, conservative as well as liberal.

Entrepreneurial politics can occur without the leadership of a policy entrepreneur if voters or legislators in large numbers suddenly become disgruntled by the high cost of some benefit that a group is receiving (or become convinced of the urgent need for a new policy to impose such costs). For example, voters may not care about government programs that benefit the oil industry when gasoline costs only one dollar a gallon, but they might care very much when the price rises to three dollars a gallon, even if the government benefits had nothing to do with the price increase. By the same token, legislators may not worry much about the effects of smog in the air until a lot of people develop burning eyes and runny noses during an especially severe smog attack.

In fact, most legislators did not worry very much about toxic or hazardous wastes until 1977, when the Love Canal dump site near Buffalo, New York, spilled some of its toxic waste into the backyards of an adjacent residential neighborhood and people were forced to leave their homes. Five years later, anyone who had forgotten about the Love Canal was reminded of it when the town of Times Beach, Missouri, had to be permanently evacuated because it had become contaminated with the chemical dioxin. Only then did it become widely known that more than 30,000 toxic waste sites nationwide posed public safety risks. The Superfund program was born in 1980 of the political pressure that developed in the wake of these and other highly publicized tales of toxic waste dangers. Superfund was intended to force industries to clean up their own toxic waste sites. It also authorized the

Environmental Protection Agency (EPA) to act speedily, with or without cooperation from industries, in identifying and cleaning up any sites that posed a large or imminent danger.

policy entrepreneurs

Activists in or out of government who pull together a political majority on behalf of unorganized interests.

Superfund suffered a number of political and administrative problems, and only a few of the 1,300 sites initially targeted by the EPA had been cleaned up a dozen years after the program went into effect.²⁵ Regardless, Superfund is a good illustration of entrepreneurial politics in action. Special taxes on once largely unregulated oil and chemical companies funded the program. These companies once enjoyed special tax breaks, but as the politics of the issue changed, they were forced to shoulder special tax burdens. In effect, the politics of the issue changed from client politics to entrepreneurial politics.

Policy Dynamics: Inside/Outside the Box

Superfund also thereby illustrates how dynamic the politics of policymaking can be. Once an issue makes its way onto the political agenda, the politics of the issue can remain stable, change a little or a lot, and change very slowly or quite suddenly. And policy issues can “migrate” from one type of politics (and one of the four boxes) to another.

By the same token, the policy dynamics of some issues are simply harder to categorize and explain than the policy dynamics of others. For instance, in the mid-2000s, 13 states amended their state constitutions to prohibit or further restrict gay marriage. In 2008, California voters approved a ballot measure, Proposition 8, banning gay marriage. But virtually all of these policies were enacted at a time when popular support for gay rights including same-sex marriage was rising. In 2001, by a margin of 57 percent to 35 percent, Americans opposed gay marriage; but, by 2013, a 49 percent to 44 percent plurality favored gay marriage. In 2012, President Barack Obama, having previously ordered an end to the ban on gays in the U.S. military, publicly declared his support for legalizing same-sex marriage. Surveys indicated that the only groups still harboring wide majorities opposed to same-sex marriage were evangelical Christians and adults born in 1945 or earlier.²⁶ In 2013, the U.S. Supreme Court struck down a 1996 law that allowed the federal government to discriminate against same-sex married couples; two years later, the Court declared that same-sex marriages are constitutional.

So, how best can we categorize or explain the politics of this issue? Which type of politics—majoritarian, client, interest group, or entrepreneurial—were most

important to policymaking? Why did state laws become more restrictive at the very time that both mass public opinion and elite opinion were trending toward greater acceptance? Do the still-unfolding policy dynamics of this issue fit neatly (or fit at all) in any of our four boxes? Start thinking about these questions; we revisit them in Chapters 3 and 10.

Finally, while the politics of some issues do fit neatly into one box or another, the politics of other issues reflect several different types of politics.

For example, most major pieces of social legislation reflect *majoritarian* politics. Social Security remains a prime example—but health care issues often have played out within all four boxes—majoritarian, client, interest group, and entrepreneurial—at once. This was certainly true of the politics of the Patient Protection and Affordable Care Act of 2010, better known as “Obamacare.” As we illustrate in our first Policy Dynamics: Inside/Outside the Box feature on page 17, the perceived costs and benefits of the Obama plan affected the political coalitions that formed around it and involved all four types of politics.

Understanding Politics

Whether pondering one’s own positions on given issues, attempting to generalize about the politics of different policy issues, or tackling questions about American government, institutions, and policies, an astute student will soon come to know what Aristotle meant when he wrote that it is “the mark of the educated person to look for precision in each class of things just so far as the nature of the subject admits.”²⁷

Ideally, political scientists ought to be able to give clear answers, amply supported by evidence, to the questions we have posed about American democracy, starting with “who governs?” In reality they can (at best) give partial, contingent, and controversial answers. The reason is to be found in the nature of our subject. Unlike economists, who assume that people have more or less stable preferences and can compare ways of satisfying those preferences by looking at the relative prices of various goods and services, political scientists are interested in how preferences are formed, especially for those kinds of services, such as national defense or pollution control, that cannot be evaluated chiefly in terms of monetary costs.

Understanding preferences is vital to understanding power. Who did what in government is not hard to find out, but who wielded power—that is, who made a difference in the outcome and for what reason—is much harder to discover. *Power* is a word that conjures up images of deals, bribes, power plays, and arm-twisting. In fact, most power exists because of shared understanding, common friendships, communal or organizational loyalties, and

different degrees of prestige. These are hard to identify and almost impossible to quantify.

Also, the distribution of political power cannot be inferred simply by knowing what laws are on the books or what administrative actions have been taken. The enactment of a consumer protection law does not mean that consumers are powerful, any more than the absence of such a law means that corporations are powerful. The passage of such a law could reflect an aroused public opinion, the lobbying of a small group claiming to speak for consumers, the ambitions of a senator, or the intrigues of one business firm seeking to gain a competitive advantage over another. A close analysis of what the law entails and how it was passed and administered are necessary before much of anything can be concluded.

This book makes no claims that we have an “imperial” presidency (or an impotent one), an “obstructionist” Congress (or an innovative one), or “captured” regulatory agencies. Such labels do an injustice to the different roles that presidents, members of Congress, and administrators play in different kinds of issues and in different historical periods.

The view taken in this book is that judgments about institutions and interests can be made only after one has seen how they behave on a variety of important issues or potential issues, such as economic policy, the regulation of business, social welfare, civil rights and liberties, and foreign and military affairs. The policies adopted or blocked, the groups heeded or ignored, the values embraced or rejected—these constitute the raw material from which one can fashion an answer to the central questions we have asked: Who governs, and to what ends?

The way in which our institutions of government handle social welfare, for example, differs from the way other democratic nations handle it, and it differs as well



IMAGE 1-5 Health workers and other concerned New Yorkers call attention to the human toll of the American health insurance system in response to the fight to repeal Obamacare by the Trump administration in 2017.



POLICY DYNAMICS: INSIDE/OUTSIDE THE BOX

Obamacare: All Four Boxes?

When Medicare was enacted in 1965, Democrats in the House and Senate voted for it by a wide margin, but roughly half of the Republicans in each chamber also supported it. But the 2010 health care bill was passed without any Republican support. In other words, the 1965 Medicare bill that President Lyndon Johnson signed into law had broad bipartisan backing, but the 2010 health care bill that President Obama signed into law had none. Using the model of the policy process explained in this chapter, here is a summary of how the costs and benefits of the Obama plan affected the political coalitions that formed around health care.

Majoritarian Politics: The bill was opposed by a majority of Americans for a variety of reasons. Many thought it too expensive (\$940 billion over 10 years) or worried about the government regulations the law contained.

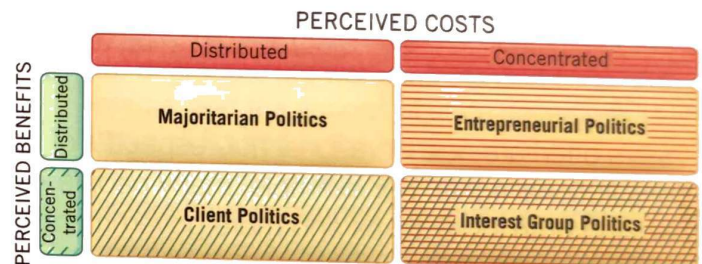
Client Politics: Drug manufacturers looked forward to having many new customers as more people owned health insurance. To get this benefit, the pharmaceutical companies agreed to pay up to \$85 billion in higher taxes. Many hospitals thought they would be helped by having more patients who could pay their bills with health insurance.

Interest Group Politics: Labor unions wanted health care coverage, but business firms were upset by the higher taxes and fees they would have to pay. Poorer people liked it, but those earning \$200,000 a year or more would see their taxes escalate. Older adults on Medicare and many doctors worried that the new law promised to cut payments to physicians, but the American Medical Association and the AARP (the largest organization representing senior citizens) endorsed the law.

Policy Entrepreneurs: In early 2010, the winners were President Obama and the Democratic leaders in the House who got a bill passed over popular and interest group opposition. In the latter half of 2010, however, the winners were the Republicans who opposed “Obamacare” and used the issue on the way to sweeping GOP* victories in the

November 2010 elections. When the 112th Congress was seated in 2011, Republicans in the House made good on a pledge to vote for the outright repeal of the new law (the symbolic bill died in the Senate), and several state attorneys general challenged the law’s constitutionality in the federal courts (focusing mainly on the provision mandating that individuals purchase health insurance). In 2012, the U.S. Supreme Court upheld the constitutionality of the law’s individual mandate, but ruled against certain other provisions of the law, including ones pertaining to changes in the federal-state program known as Medicaid, a program that was created in 1965 alongside Medicare (see Chapter 17).

The Medicare law and the new health care law mobilized very different coalitions, in part because, between 1965 and 2010, Congress became a far more polarized institution (see Chapter 5). The Obamacare policy was based on a combination of majoritarian, client, interest group, and entrepreneurial politics. The politics of the issue was neither inside nor outside any one of the four boxes, but spread across all four.



► **PRACTICE POLITICAL SCIENCE** Describe a contemporary health care issue that Congress is debating. Choose one of the four boxes of politics (Majoritarian Politics, Client Politics, Interest Group Politics, Policy Entrepreneurs) and explain how the political coalitions represented within this box have changed or remained the same since the passage of the 2010 health care bill that President Obama signed into law.

*“GOP” refers to “Grand Old Party,” a widely used synonym for the Republican Party.

from the way our own institutions once treated it. The description of our institutions in Unit 2 will therefore include not only an account of how they work today but also a brief historical background on their workings and a comparison with similar institutions in other countries. We tend to assume that how we do things today is the only way they could possibly be done. In fact, a government can operate in other ways, based on some measure of popular rule. History, tradition, and belief weigh heavily on all that we do.

Although political change is not always accompanied by changes in public laws, the policy process is arguably one of the best barometers of changes in who governs. Our way of classifying and explaining the politics of different policy issues has been developed, refined, and tested over more than four decades (longer than most of our readers have been alive!). Our own students and others have valued it mainly because they have found it helps to answer such questions about who governs: How do political issues get on the public

agenda in the first place? How, for example, did sexual harassment, which was hardly ever discussed or debated by Congress, burst onto the public agenda? Once on the agenda, how does the politics of issues like income security for older Americans—for example, the politics of Social Security, a program that has been on the federal books since 1935 (see Chapter 17)—change over time? And if, today, one cares about expanding civil liberties (see Chapter 9) or protecting civil rights (see Chapter 10), what political obstacles and opportunities will one likely face? What role will public opinion, organized interest groups, the media, the courts, political parties, and other institutions likely play in frustrating

or fostering one's particular policy preferences, whatever they might be?

Peek ahead if you wish, but understand that the place to begin a search for how power is distributed in national politics and what purposes that power serves is with the founding of the federal government in 1787: the Constitutional Convention and the events leading up to it. Though the decisions of that time were not made by philosophers or professors, the practical men who made them had a philosophic and professorial cast of mind, and thus they left behind a fairly explicit account of what values they sought to protect and what arrangements they thought ought to be made for the allocation of political power.

LEARNING OBJECTIVES

1-1 Explain how politics drives democracy.

Politics is the activity by which an issue is agitated or settled. Politics occurs because people disagree and the disagreement must be managed. Disagreements over many political issues, including disputes over government budgets and finances, are often at their essence disagreements over what government should or should not do at all. Democracy can mean either that everyone votes on all government issues (direct or participatory democracy) or that the people elect representatives to make most of these decisions (representative democracy).

1-2 Discuss five views of how political power is distributed in the United States.

Some believe that political power in America is monopolized by wealthy business leaders, by other powerful elites, or by entrenched government bureaucrats. Others believe that political resources such as money, prestige, expertise, organizational position, and access to the mass media are so widely dispersed in American society, and the governmental institutions and offices in which power may be exercised so numerous and varied, that no single group truly has all or most political power. In this view, political power in America is distributed more or less widely. Still others suggest that morally impassioned leaders have at times been deeply influential in our politics. No one, however, argues that political resources are distributed equally in America.

1-3 Explain why “who governs?” and “to what ends?” are fundamental questions in American politics.

The political agenda consists of those issues that people with decision-making authority believe require government action. The behavior of groups, the workings of institutions, the media, and the actions of state governments have all figured in the expansion of America's political agenda, and understanding how those actors have expanded the agenda—that is, “who governs?”—is necessary to understand the nature of American politics. Similarly, the great shifts in the character of American government—its size, scope, institutional arrangements, and the direction of its policies—have reflected complex and sometimes sudden changes in elite or mass beliefs about what government is supposed to do—that is, “to what ends?” The federal government now has policies on street crime, the environment, homeland security, and many other issues that were not on the federal agenda a half-century (or, in the case of homeland security, some 20 years) ago.

1-4 Summarize the key concepts for classifying the politics of different policy issues.

One way to classify and explain the politics of different issues is in relation to the perceived costs and benefits of given policies and how narrowly concentrated (limited to a relatively small number of identifiable citizens) or widely