

challenges. Some optimistic observers see these developments as offering “the prospect of a revitalized democracy characterized by a more active and informed citizenry.”⁹ Political junkies will certainly find more political information available than ever before, and electronic communications will make it easier for people to express their political views in various forums and directly to public officials. However, with so many media choices for so many specific interests, it will also be easy to avoid the subject of public affairs. It may also be easier to avoid a range of opinions. Political scientist Jeremy Mayer argues that “if we all get to select exactly how much campaign news we will receive, and the depth of that coverage, it may be that too many Americans will choose shallow, biased sources of news on the Internet.”¹⁰

Groups that are concerned about low youth turnout are focusing on innovative ways of reaching out to young people via new technologies, such as social networking sites like Facebook, to make them more aware of politics. In doing so, they are encouraged and spurred by the fact that young people are far from inactive in American society and in recent years have been doing volunteer community service at record rates. As Harvard students Ganesh Sitaraman and Previn Warren write in *Invisible Citizens: Youth Politics After September 11*, “Young people are some of the most active members of their communities and are devoting increasing amounts of their time to direct service work and volunteerism.”¹¹ It is only when it comes to politics that young people seem to express indifference about getting involved.

It is our hope that after reading this book, you will be persuaded that paying attention to politics and government is important. Government has a substantial impact on all our lives. But it is also true that we have the opportunity to have a substantial impact on government. Involvement in public affairs can take many forms, ranging from simply becoming better informed by browsing through political Web sites to running for elected office. In between are countless opportunities for *everyone* to make a difference.

Government

1.1 Identify the key functions of government and explain why they matter.

The institutions that make public policy decisions for a society are collectively known as **government**. In the case of our own national government, these institutions are Congress, the president, the courts, and federal administrative agencies (“the bureaucracy”). Thousands of state and local governments also decide on policies that influence our lives. There are about 500,000 elected officials in the United States. Thus, policies that affect you are being made almost constantly.



When elections result in a change of party control, power is transferred peacefully in the United States. In this 2011 photo, the outgoing Speaker of the House, Democrat Nancy Pelosi, symbolically passes the gavel to the incoming Speaker, Republican John Boehner.

government

The institutions through which public policies are made for a society.

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Because government shapes how we live, it is important to understand the process by which decisions are made as well as what is actually decided. Two fundamental questions about governing will serve as themes throughout this book:

- **How should we govern?** Americans take great pride in calling their government democratic. This chapter examines the workings of democratic government; the chapters that follow will evaluate the way American government actually works compared to the standards of an “ideal” democracy. We will continually ask, “Who holds power and who influences the policies adopted by government?”
- **What should government do?** This text explores the relationship between *how* American government works and *what* it does. In other words, it addresses the question, “Does our government do what we want it to do?” Debates over the scope of governmental power are among the most important in American political life today. Some people would like to see the government take on more responsibilities; others believe it already takes on too much.

While citizens often disagree about what their government should do for them, all governments have certain functions in common. National governments throughout the world perform the following functions:

- **Maintain a national defense.** A government protects its national sovereignty, usually by maintaining armed forces. In the nuclear age, some governments possess awesome power to make war through highly sophisticated weapons. The United States currently spends over \$650 billion a year on national defense. Since September 11, 2001, the defense budget has been substantially increased in order to cope with the threat of terrorism on U.S. soil.
- **Provide public goods and services.** Governments in this country spend billions of dollars on schools, libraries, hospitals, highways, and many other public goods



Governments provide a wide range of public services, including providing a national defense. Because of the threat from Al Qaeda, U.S. troops have been in Afghanistan since 2001. Here, an Afghan farmer walks by while U.S. troops work to secure the road against improvised explosive devices planted by Taliban insurgents.

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and services. These goods and services are of two types. Some are what is called **collective goods**; if they exist, by their very nature they cannot be denied to anyone and therefore must be shared by everyone. Access to highways, for example, cannot be denied. As the private sector would have no incentive to provide goods and services that everyone automatically has access to, these can be provided only by government. Other public goods and services, such as college or medical care, can be provided to some individuals without being provided to all; these are widely provided by the private sector as well as by government.

- **Preserve order.** Every government has some means of maintaining order. When people protest in large numbers, governments may resort to extreme measures to restore order. For example, the National Guard was called in to stop the looting and arson after rioting broke out in Los Angeles following the 1992 Rodney King verdict.
- **Socialize the young.** Governments politically socialize the young—that is, instill in children knowledge of and pride in the nation and its political system and values. Most modern governments pay for education, and school curricula typically include a course on the theory and practice of the country's government. Rituals like the daily Pledge of Allegiance seek to foster patriotism and love of country.
- **Collect taxes.** Approximately one out of every three dollars earned by American citizens goes to national, state, and local taxes—money that pays for the public goods and services the government provides.

All these governmental tasks add up to weighty decisions that our political leaders must make. For example, how much should we spend on national defense as opposed to education? How high should taxes for Medicare and Social Security be? We answer such questions through politics.

Politics

1.2 Define politics in the context of democratic government.

Politics determines whom we select as our governmental leaders and what policies these leaders pursue. Political scientists often cite Harold D. Lasswell's famous definition of politics: "Who gets what, when, and how."¹² It is one of the briefest and most useful definitions of politics ever penned. Admittedly, this broad definition covers a lot of ground (office politics, sorority politics, and so on) in which political scientists are generally not interested. They are interested primarily in politics related to governmental decision making.

The media usually focus on the *who* of politics. At a minimum, this includes voters, candidates, groups, and parties. *What* refers to the substance of politics and government—benefits, such as medical care for the elderly, and burdens, such as new taxes. *How* refers to the ways in which people participate in politics. People get what they want through voting, supporting, compromising, lobbying, and so forth. In this sense, government and politics involve winners and losers. Behind every arcane tax provision or item in an appropriations bill, there are real people getting something or getting something taken away.

The ways in which people get involved in politics make up their **political participation**. Many people judge the health of a government by how widespread political participation is. America does quite poorly when judged by its voter turnout, which is one of the lowest in the world. Low voter turnout has an effect on who

collective goods

Goods and services, such as clean air and clean water, that by their nature cannot be denied to anyone.

politics

The process determining the leaders we select and the policies they pursue. Politics produces authoritative decisions about public issues.

political participation

All the activities by which citizens attempt to influence the selection of political leaders and the policies they pursue. Voting is the most common means of political participation in a democracy. Other means include contacting public officials, protest, and civil disobedience.

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1.1 single-issue groups

Groups that have a narrow interest on which their members tend to take an uncompromising stance.

1.2 policymaking system

The process by which policy comes into being and evolves. People's interests, problems, and concerns create political issues for government policymakers. These issues shape policy, which in turn impacts people, generating more interests, problems, and concerns.



Pro-life and pro-choice groups are single-minded and usually uncompromising. Few issues stir up as much passion as whether abortion should be permitted and, if so, under what conditions.

holds political power. Because so many people do not show up at the polls, voters are a distorted sample of the public as a whole. Groups with a high turnout rate, such as the elderly, benefit, whereas those with a low turnout rate, such as young people, lack political clout.

Voting is only one form of political participation, as you'll see in later chapters. For a few Americans, politics is a vocation: they run for office, and some even earn their livelihood from holding political office. In addition, there are many Americans who treat politics as critical to their interests. Many of these people are members of **single-issue groups**—groups so concerned with one issue that members often cast their votes on the basis of that issue only, ignoring a politician's stand on everything else. Groups of activists dedicated either to outlawing abortion or to preserving abortion rights are good examples of single-issue groups.

Individual citizens and organized groups get involved in politics because they understand that public policy choices made by governments affect them in significant ways. Will all those who need student loans receive them? Will everyone have access to medical care? Will people be taken care of in their old age? Is the water safe to drink? These and other questions tie politics to policymaking.

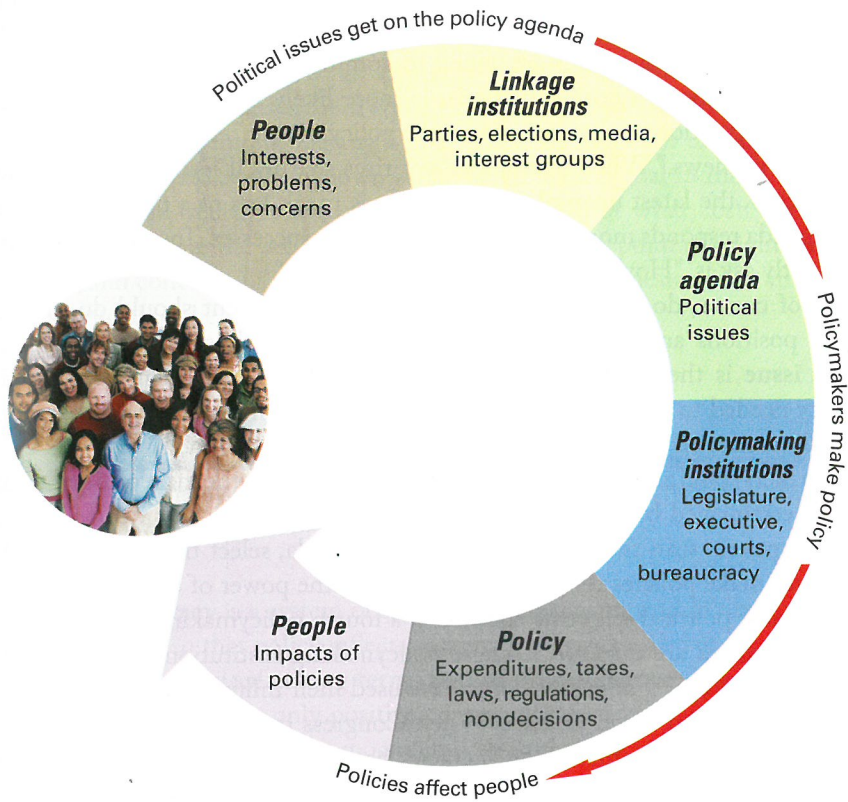
The Policymaking System

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Assess how citizens can have an impact on public policy and how policies can impact people.

Americans frequently expect the government to do something about their problems. For example, the president and members of Congress are expected to keep the economy humming along; voters will penalize them at the polls if they do not. It is through the **policymaking system** that our government responds to the priorities of its people. Figure 1.4 shows a skeletal model of this system, in which people shape policies and in turn are impacted by them. The rest of this book will flesh out this model, but for now it will help you understand how government policy comes into being and evolves over time.

FIGURE 1.4 THE POLICYMAKING SYSTEM



□ People Shape Policy

The policymaking system begins with people. All Americans have interests, problems, and concerns that are touched on by public policy. Some people think the government should spend more to train people for jobs in today's increasingly technology-oriented economy; others think that the government is already spending too much, resulting in high taxes that discourage business investments. Some citizens expect government to do something to curb domestic violence; others are concerned about prospects that the government may make it much harder to buy a handgun.

What do people do to express their opinions in a democracy? As mentioned, people have numerous avenues for participation, such as voting for candidates who represent their opinions, joining political parties, posting messages to Internet chat groups, and forming *interest groups*—organized groups of people with a common interest. In this way, people's concerns enter the linkage institutions of the policymaking system. **Linkage institutions**—parties, elections, interest groups, and the media—transmit Americans' preferences to the policymakers in government. Parties and interest groups strive to ensure that their members' concerns receive appropriate political attention. The media investigate social problems and inform people about them. Elections provide citizens with the chance to make their opinions heard by choosing their public officials.

All these institutions help to shape the government's **policy agenda**, the issues that attract the serious attention of public officials and other people actively involved in politics at a given time. Some issues will be considered, and others will not. If politicians want to get elected, they must pay attention to the problems that concern voters. When you vote, you are partly looking at whether a candidate shares your agenda. If you are worried about rising health care costs and a certain candidate talks only about America's moral decay and ending legalized abortions, you will probably support another candidate.

linkage institutions

The political channels through which people's concerns become political issues on the policy agenda. In the United States, linkage institutions include elections, political parties, interest groups, and the media.

policy agenda

The issues that attract the serious attention of public officials and other people involved in politics at a point in time.

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