Chapter 1
Democracy and American Politics

In This Chapter
- An introduction to how government and politics work
- What democracy means, and how it can be used as a standard to evaluate American government and politics
The right to vote in elections is fundamental to democracy. But many Americans have won the right to vote only after long struggles. It took more than 30 years from the adoption of the Constitution, for instance, for most states to allow people without property to vote. Women gained the right to vote in all U.S. elections only in 1920, and young people ages 18 to 20 did so only beginning in 1971. As the following story indicates, African-Americans in the South were not able to vote in any numbers until after 1965 despite the existence of the Fifteenth Amendment—which says that the vote cannot be denied to American citizens on the basis of race, color, or previous condition of servitude—adopted in 1870.

In Mississippi in the early 1960s, only 5 percent of African-Americans were registered to vote, and none held elective office, although they accounted for 43 percent of the population. In Amite County, Mississippi, only one African-American was registered to vote out of approximately 5,000 eligible voters; in Walthall County, not a single black was registered, although roughly 3,000 were eligible to vote. What kept them away from the polls was a combination of biased voting registration rules, economic pressures, and physical intimidation and violence directed against those brave enough to defy the prevailing political and social order. In Ruleville, Mississippi, Mrs. Fannie Lou Hamer was forced out of the house she was renting on a large plantation, fired from her job, and arrested, jailed, and beaten by police after she tried to register to vote. In Mileston, after an unsuccessful attempt to register, Hartman Turnbow lost his house to a Molotov cocktail. He was later arrested for arson.

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

The first of the freedom schools was founded in McComb, Mississippi, by a remarkable young man named Robert Parris Moses who quit his job as a teacher in order to work with other young people in SNCC. Despite repeated threats to his life and more than a few physical attacks, Moses traveled the back roads of Amite and Walthall counties, meeting with small groups of black farmers and encouraging them to attend the SNCC freedom school. At the school, he showed them not only how to fill out the registration forms but also how to read and interpret the constitution of Mississippi for the “literacy test” required to register to vote. Once people in the school gathered the courage to journey to the county seat to try to register, Moses went along with them to lend support and encouragement.

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

Despite the efforts of Bob Moses and other SNCC volunteers and the bravery of African-Americans who dared to defy the rules of black political exclusion in Mississippi, African-American voting registration barely increased in that
state in the early 1960s. Black Americans in Mississippi would have to await the passage of the 1965 Voting Rights Act, which provided powerful federal government protections for all American citizens wishing to exercise their right to vote. The Voter Education Project, however, was one of the key building blocks of a powerful civil rights movement (see Chapter 8) that would eventually force federal action in the 1960s to support the citizenship rights (or civil rights) of African-Americans in the South.

Robert Moses and many other African-Americans in Mississippi were willing to risk all they had, even their lives, to gain full and equal citizenship in the United States. Likewise, throughout our history, Americans from all walks of life have joined the struggle to make the United States a more democratic country. The same thing is happening in many parts of the world today. We live in an age of democratic aspiration and upsurge; people the world over are demanding the right to govern themselves and control their own destinies. Americans are participants in this drama, not only because American political ideas and institutions have often provided inspiration for democratic movements in other countries but also because the struggle for democracy continues in our own society. Although honored and celebrated, democracy remains an unfinished project in the United States. The continuing struggle to expand and perfect democracy is a major feature of American history and a defining characteristic of our politics today. It is a central theme of this book.

**Democracy**

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

—ABRAHAM LINCOLN, FIRST INAUGURAL ADDRESS

When people live together in groups and communities, it is generally understood that a governmental entity of some sort is needed to provide law and order, to protect against external aggressors, and to provide essential public goods such as roads, waste disposal, and clean water. If government is both necessary and inevitable, certain questions become unavoidable: Who is to govern? How are those who govern to be encouraged to serve the best interests of society? How can governments be induced to make policies and laws that
citizens consider legitimate and worth obeying? In short, what is the best form of government? For most Americans—and for increasing numbers of people in other places—the answer is clear: democracy.

The intrinsic attractiveness of democracy’s central ideas—that ordinary people want to rule themselves and are capable of doing so—is only one reason democracy is so popular. For many political thinkers, democracy is simply superior to every other form of political organization. Some have argued, for example, that democracy is the form of government that best protects human rights because it is the only one based on a recognition of the intrinsic worth and equality of human beings. Others believe that democracy is the form of government most likely to reach rational decisions because it can count on the pooled knowledge and expertise of a society’s entire population. Other thinkers have claimed that democracies are more stable and long-lasting because their leaders, elected by their citizens, enjoy a strong sense of legitimacy. Still others suggest that democracy is the form of government most conducive to economic growth and material well-being, a claim that is strongly supported by research findings. Others, finally, believe that democracy is the form of government under which human beings, because they are free, are best able to develop their natural capacities and talents. There are many compelling reasons, then, why democracy has been preferred by so many people.

Americans prefer democracy to other forms of government, and they have helped make the nation more democratic over the course of our history. Nevertheless, democracy remains a work in progress in the United States, an evolving aspiration rather than a finished product. Our goal in this book is to help you think carefully about the quality and progress of democracy in the United States. We want to help you reach your own independent judgments about the degree to which politics and government in the United States make our country more or less democratic. We want to help you draw your own conclusions about which political practices and institutions in the United States encourage and sustain democracy and which ones discourage and undermine it. To do this, we must be clear about the meaning of democracy.

Web Exploration
The Diffusion of Democracy

**Issue:** Around the world, over the course of the twentieth century, democracy has both advanced and receded in a series of waves.

**Site:** Go to the Historical Atlas of the Twentieth Century on our Website at [www.ablongman.com/greenberg](http://www.ablongman.com/greenberg). In the “Web Explorations” section for Chapter 1, open the “diffusion of democracy” link, then click on “Historical Atlas.” Under “General Trends,” select Government, then look at each decade of the Twentieth Century.

**What You’ve Learned:** What conclusions can you make about the spread of democracy over the course of the century? When and where were the greatest gains made? What factors do you think explain the patterns you have discovered?
**The Democratic Idea**

Many of our ideas about democracy originated with the ancient Greeks. The Greek roots of the word *democracy* are *demos*, meaning “the people,” and *kratein*, meaning “to rule.” Democracy, then, is “rule by the people” or, to put it another way, self-government by the many, as opposed to the few or the one.

Most Western philosophers and rulers before the eighteenth century were not friendly to the idea of rule by the many. Most believed that governing was a difficult art, requiring the greatest sophistication, intelligence, character, and training—certainly not the province of ordinary people. Most preferred rule by a select few (such as an aristocracy, in which a hereditary nobility rules) or by an enlightened one (such as a king or a military chieftain). In practice, most governments were quite undemocratic. The idea that ordinary people might rule themselves represents an important departure from such beliefs.4

Also crucial to the concept of democracy is the idea that it is the purpose of a government to serve all of its people and that ultimately none but the people themselves can be relied on to know and hence to act in accordance with their own values and interests. Power in any other hands will eventually lead to tyranny, a society where leaders abuse their power.

**Direct Versus Representative Democracy**

To the ancient Greeks, democracy meant rule by the common people exercised *directly* in open assemblies. They believed that democracy implied face-to-face deliberation and decision making about the public business. Direct democracy requires, however, that all citizens be able to meet together regularly to debate and decide the issues of the day. Such a thing was possible in fifth century B.C. Athens, which was small enough to allow all male citizens to gather in one place. In Athens, moreover, male citizens had time to meet and to deliberate because women provided household labor and slaves accounted for most production.

Because direct, participatory democracy is possible only in small communities where citizens with abundant leisure time can meet often on a face-to-face basis, it is an unworkable arrangement for a large and widely dispersed society such as the United States.5 Democracy in large societies must take the representative form, since millions of citizens cannot meet in open assembly. By representative democracy we mean a system in which the people select others, called representatives, to act in their place.

Although representative (or indirect) democracy seems to be the only form of democracy possible in large-scale societies, some political commentators argue that the participatory aspects of direct democracy are worth preserving as an ideal and that certain domains of everyday life—workplaces and schools, for instance—could be enriched by more direct democratic practices.6 It is worth pointing out, moreover, that direct democracy can and does flourish in some local communities today. In many New England towns, for example, citizens make decisions directly at town meetings. Some observers believe that the Internet will enable more people to become directly involved in political deliberations and decision making in the future.7

**Fundamental Principles of Representative Democracy**

In large societies such as our own, then, democracy means rule by the people, exercised indirectly through representatives elected by the people. Still, this definition is not sufficiently precise to use as a standard by which to evaluate the American political system. To help further clarify the definition of democ-
The essence of the classical Greek idea of democracy was face-to-face deliberations among citizens in open assemblies. This is difficult to achieve in societies with large populations where democracy depends instead on the election of representatives.
PART ONE Introduction: Main Themes

Government Leaders Are Elected The existence of a close match between what the people want and what government does, however, does not necessarily prove that the people are sovereign. In a dictatorship, for example, the will of the people can be consciously shaped to correspond to the wishes of the leadership. For the direction of influence to flow from the people to the leadership, some mechanism must exist for forcing leaders to be responsive to the people’s wishes and to be responsible to them for their actions. The best mechanism ever invented to achieve these goals is the election in which both existing and aspiring government leaders must periodically face the people for judgment.

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

Is voting turnout declining in the United States?

Commentators have been decrying the declining rate of voting in the United States for many years now. All sorts of explanations have been advanced to explain the decline; all sorts of remedies for the problem have been proposed. But what if there really hasn’t been a decline in voting at all?

Why It Matters: We have argued in this chapter that widespread participation in voting and other civic activities is one measure of the health of democracy in any society. If the way we measure participation is inaccurate, we cannot do a good job of assessing the quality of democracy in the United States, or identify what problems and shortcomings in our political system need to be addressed to make it more democratic.

Behind the Traditional Voting Turnout Measure: Voter turnout in American elections is determined by a very simple calculation: the number of people who vote in a national election divided by the number of people in the United States who are of voting age, that is, 18 years of age and older. The denominator for this equation—voting age population, or VAP—is provided by the Census Bureau. But there is a problem: The denominator may be misleading. The Census Bureau includes in its VAP numbers millions of people who are not eligible to vote at all: non-citizens, felons (some states), people with past felonies (some states), and the mentally incompetent. If we calculated voting turnout as the number of voters divided by the number of people in the United States who are eligible to vote—the voting eligible population, or VEP—turnout would always be higher than is now reported because the denominator would be smaller.

Calculating a VEP-based Measure of Turnout: Two political scientists, Michael McDonald and Samuel Popkin, have done us the great service of transforming the Census Bureau’s VAP (voting age population) number to a VEP (voting eligible population) number for every national election since 1948, pulling out non-citizens, ineligible felons, and former felons. Using the voting eligible population rather than the resident population over the age of 18 as the denominator in the voting turnout equation, McDonald and Popkin found the following:

• Voting turnout is actually 4 or 5 percentage points higher in recent elections than usually reported.
People Participate in the Political Process Though government leaders may be elected in a balloting process that is free and fair, such a process is useful in conveying the will of the people and keeping leaders responsive and responsible only if the people participate. If elections and other forms of political participation only attract a minority of the eligible population, they cannot serve as a way to understand what the broad public wants or as an instrument forcing leaders to pay attention to it. Widespread participation in politics—including voting in elections, contacting public officials, working with others to bring matters to public attention, joining associations that work to shape government actions, and more—is necessary to ensure not only that responsive representatives will be chosen, but that they will have continuous incentives to pay attention to the people. Because widespread participation is so central to popular sovereignty, we can say that the less political participation there is in a society, the weaker the democracy. (See “By the Numbers: Is voting turnout declining in the United States?” to get a sense of how much Americans participate.)
PART ONE Introduction: Main Themes

Most Americans believe that all ballots are counted, when, in fact, many go uncounted because of intentional or accidental mistakes by the voter or voting machine errors. Here an election official examines a ballot for “hanging chads” and “dimples” to try to determine voter intentions during the vote recount in Broward County, Florida. The recount was eventually stopped by the U.S. Supreme Court, leaving George H. W. Bush the winner of Florida’s electoral college votes and the presidency.

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

The Majority Rules How can the opinions and preferences of many individual citizens be combined into a single binding decision? Since unanimity is unlikely—so the insistence that new policies should require unanimous agreement for them to be adopted would simply enshrine the status quo—reaching a decision requires a decision rule. If the actions of government are to respond to all citizens, each citizen being counted equally, the only decision rule that makes sense is **majority rule**, which means that the government adopts the policy that the most people want. In practical terms, what this means is that the popular will, formed in the best circumstances after careful deliberation, is discovered by ascertaining the positions on public issues of the majority of citizens. The only alternative to majority rule is minority rule, which would unacceptably elevate the few over the many.

**Political Equality** The second fundamental principle of democracy is **political equality**, the idea that each person carries the same weight in voting and other political decision making. Imagine, if you will, a society in which one person could cast 100 votes in an election, another person 50 votes, and still an-
other 25 votes, while many unlucky folks had only 1 vote each—or none at all. We would surely find such an arrangement a curious one, especially if that society described itself as democratic. We would react in this way because equality of citizenship has always been central to the democratic ideal. Democracy is a way of making decisions in which each person has one, and only one, voice.

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

Political equality also involves what the Fourteenth Amendment to the Constitution calls “equal protection,” meaning that everyone in a democracy is treated the same by government. Government programs, for example, should not favor one group over another or deny benefits or protections to identifiable groups in the population, such as racial and religious minorities. Nor should people be treated better or worse than others by law enforcement agencies and the courts.

Does democracy require substantial equality in the distribution of income and wealth? While many do not think this to be the case, thinkers as diverse as Aristotle, Rousseau, and Jefferson thought so, believing that great inequalities in economic circumstances are almost always translated into political inequality. Political scientist Robert Dahl describes the problem in the following way:

> If citizens are unequal in economic resources, so are they likely to be unequal in political resources; and political equality will be impossible to achieve. In the extreme case, a minority of rich will possess so much greater political resources than other citizens that they will control the state, dominate the majority of citizens, and empty the democratic process of all content.\(^\text{10}\)
Although political equality is a cornerstone of American democracy, the nation’s understanding of who is entitled to equal status has changed over the years. The right to vote was granted to all men regardless of race in 1870, although stringent registration rules made it very difficult for nonwhites to exercise that right. It wasn’t until 1920 that the Nineteenth Amendment extended the right to vote to women; in 1971, a constitutional amendment lowered the voting age from 21 to 18.

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

Political Liberty The third element of democracy is political liberty. Political liberty refers to basic freedoms essential to the formation and expression of the popular will and its translation into policy. These essential liberties include the freedoms of speech, of conscience and religion, of the press, and of assembly and association, embodied in the First Amendment to the U.S. Constitution.

Without these liberties (and a few more, including freedom from arbitrary arrest and imprisonment), the other fundamental principles of democracy could not exist. Popular sovereignty cannot be guaranteed if people are prevented from participating in politics or if opposition to the government is crushed by the authorities. Popular sovereignty cannot prevail if the voice of the people is silenced and if citizens are not free to argue and debate, based on their own ideas, values, and personal beliefs, and form and express their political opinions. Political equality is violated if some people can speak out but others cannot.

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

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

**Objections to Majoritarian Representative Democracy**

Not everyone is convinced that majoritarian, representative democracy is the best form of government. Here are the main criticisms that have been leveled against democracy as we have defined it.

**“Majority Tyranny” Threatens Liberty**  James Madison and the other Founders of the American republic feared that majority rule was bound to undermine freedom and threaten the rights of the individual. They created a constitutional system (as you will see in Chapter 2) that was in fact designed to protect certain liberties against the unwelcome intrusions of the majority. The fears of the Founders were not without basis. What they called the “popular passions” have sometimes stifled the freedoms of groups and individuals who have dared to be different. Until quite recently, for instance, a majority of Americans were unwilling to allow atheists or communists the same rights of free speech that they allowed others, and conscientious objectors were treated harshly during both world wars. In the 1950s, many people in the movie industry, publishing, and education lost their jobs because of the anti-left hysteria whipped up by Senator Joseph McCarthy and others.

Although there have been instances during our history of majority tyranny, in which the majority violated the citizenship rights of a minority—the chapter opening vignette is a good example—there is no evidence that the many consistently threaten liberty more than the few or the one. To put it

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Political hysteria has periodically blemished the record of American democracy. Fear of domestic communism, captured in this editorial cartoon, was particularly potent in the twentieth century and led to the suppression of political groups deemed threatening by the authorities.
another way, the majority does not seem to be a special or unique threat to liberty. Violations of freedom seem as likely to come from powerful individuals and groups or from government officials as from the majority.

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

**The People Are Irrational and Incompetent** Political scientists have spent decades studying the attitudes and behaviors of citizens in the United States, and some of the findings are not encouraging. For the most part, the evidence shows that individual Americans do not care a great deal about politics and are rather poorly informed, unstable in their views, and not much interested in participating in the political process. These findings have led some observers to assert that citizens are ill-equipped for the responsibility of self-governance and that public opinion (the will of the majority) should not be the ultimate determinant of what government does.

We will see in Chapter 5, however, that this evidence about individuals has often been misinterpreted and that the American public taken collectively is more informed, sophisticated, and stable in its views than it is generally given credit for.

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

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

As Robert Dahl points out, however, there is no evidence to support the belief that the rights of minorities are better protected under alternative forms of political government, whether rule by the few or by the one (fascism, communism, authoritarian dictatorship, theocracy, and the like), and that given the other benefits of majority rule democracy, it is to be preferred.

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

**Democracy as an Evaluative Standard: How Democratic Are We?**

After this discussion, it should be easy to see how and why the democratic ideal can be used as a measuring rod with which to evaluate American politics. We have learned that the fundamental attributes of democracy are popular sovereignty, political equality, and political liberty. Each suggests a set of questions that will be raised throughout this book to encourage critical thinking about American political life.

- **Questions about popular sovereignty.** Does government do what citizens want it to do? Do citizens participate in politics? Can citizens be involved when they choose to be, and are political leaders responsive? Do political linkage institutions, such as political parties, elections, interest groups, and social movements, effectively transmit what citizens want to political leaders? What is the quality of the public deliberation on the major public policy issues of the day? Do the media and political leaders provide accurate and complete information?

- **Questions about political equality.** Do some individuals and groups have persistent and substantial advantages over other individuals and groups in the political process? Or is the political game open to all equally? Do government decisions and policies benefit some individuals and groups more than others?

- **Questions about political liberty.** Are citizens’ rights and liberties universally available, protected, and used? Are people free to vote? Can they speak openly and form groups freely to petition their government? Do public authorities, private groups, or the majority threaten liberty or the rights of minorities?

These questions will help us assess where we are and where we are going as a democracy. We do not believe that popular sovereignty, political equality, and political liberty are attainable in perfect form. They are, rather, ideals to which our nation can aspire and standards against which we can measure everyday reality.

**A Framework for Understanding How American Politics Works**

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

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

- **Structure.** This category includes the economy and society, the constitutional rules, the political culture, and the international system: the most fundamental and enduring factors that influence government and politics. They form the foundation upon which all else is built. They determine, to a very large extent, what issues become a part of the political agenda, how political power is distributed among the population, what rules structure how government works, and what values Americans bring to their political deliberations.

- **Political linkage.** This category includes all of the political actors, institutions, and processes that transmit the wants and demands of people and groups in our society to government officials and that together help shape what government officials do and what policies they adopt. These include public opinion, political parties, interest groups, the mass media, and elections.

- **Government.** This category includes all public officials and institutions (Congress, the president, the federal bureaucracy, and the Supreme Court) that have formal, legal responsibilities for making public policy.

- **Government action.** This category includes the wide range of actions carried out by government: making laws, issuing rules and regulations, waging war and providing national defense, settling civil disputes, providing order, and more.

**Web Exploration**

**Understanding What Government Does**

**Issue:** What government does can only be understood by taking into account how government, political linkage, and structural factors interact with one another.

**Site:** On our Website at www.ablongman.com/greenberg go to the “Web Explorations” section for Chapter 1. Open the “understanding what government does” link, and look at two of the nation’s leading newspapers. Select a story about some domestic federal government action (e.g., a new law, a Supreme Court decision, an action by a bureaucratic agency, an executive order, and so on) for each newspaper.

**What You’ve Learned:** See if you can organize the story of the government action you have selected according to the categories of the analytical framework explained in this section and shown in Figure 1.1. Does this help you better understand why the government action happened?

**Hint:** Be sure you have information for each of the categories in the framework.
This textbook is organized around these four categories. The chapters in Part Two focus on structural level factors. The chapters in Part Three are about political linkage processes and institutions. The chapters in Part Four attend to government institutions and leaders. Finally, the chapters in Part Five examine what government does.

**Connecting the Main Factors of Political Life**

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

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

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

African-American combat service in World War II and in Korea helped transform white attitudes about racial equality in the United States and contributed to the emergence of a supportive environment for the civil rights movement. Shown here are six gunners from the 17th Bomb Wing night interdiction team that saw heavy action in Korea.
Even knowing these things, however, would not tell us all that we needed to know about why the 1965 Voting Rights Act happened. Our inquiry would have to go deeper to include structural factors: economic, cultural, and social change; constitutional rules; and the international position of the United States.
States. For example, economic changes in the nation over the course of many decades triggered a “great migration” of African-Americans from the rural South to the urban North. Over the long run, this population shift to states with large blocks of electoral college votes, critical to the election of presidents, increased the political power of African-Americans. Cultural change increased the number of Americans bothered by the second-class citizenship of African-Americans, even as combat service in World War II and the Korean War led many black Americans to insist on full citizenship rights. Finally, the Cold War struggle of the United States against the Soviet Union played an important role. Many American leaders, recognizing the contradiction between asking for the support of people of color in Third World countries in the struggle against communism while treating African-Americans in the United States as second-class citizens, sought an end to the system of official segregation in the South (known as Jim Crow).  

We see, then, that a full explanation of why the 1965 Voting Rights Act happened (government action) requires that we take into account how governmental, political linkage, and structural factors interact with one another to bring about significant change in American politics.

Understanding American Politics Holistically

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

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

You need not worry about remembering exactly which actors and influences belong to which of the four categories. That will become obvious because the chapters of the book are organized into sections corresponding to them. Nor do you need to worry about exactly how the people and institutions in the different levels interact with one another. This will become clear as materials are presented and learned and as you become more familiar with the American political process.
Background: The Voting Rights Act of 1965 transformed the politics of the American South. Under federal government protection, the Act permitted African-Americans to vote and run for elected office in states where a combination of violence, economic pressure, and state and local government rules made political participation difficult if not impossible prior to 1965. We can understand how such a momentous transformation happened by examining structural, political linkage, and governmental factors.

**Governmental Action**
- The Voting Rights Act of 1965

**Governmental Level**
- The Supreme Court prepared the ground by steadily expanding the reach of the "equal protection" clause of the Constitution’s Fourteenth Amendment.
- A pro-civil rights majority in Congress was responsive to the voting rights issue.
- President Lyndon Johnson pushed hard for federal protection of African-American voting rights.

**Political Linkages Level**
- The votes of African-Americans proved decisive in several large electoral vote states in the 1960 and 1964 presidential elections.
- Dramatic civil rights demonstrations highlighted the denial of the vote to black Americans in the Deep South.
- Public opinion and the mass media grew more supportive of demands by African-Americans for full citizenship.
- Unions and business organizations endorsed voting rights legislation.

**Structural Level**
- Industrialization and the rise of large manufacturing corporations spurred the "Great Migration."
- Relocation of African-Americans to large states outside the Deep South improved their political, social, and economic standing.
- World War II generated pressures to integrate the armed forces.
- The struggle against the Soviet Union for the “hearts and minds” of Third World peoples made segregation problematic for the United States in world affairs.

**Using the Framework: The Voting Rights Act**

How was it possible to overcome Southern resistance to black political participation?
Summary

The struggle for democracy has played an important role in American history and remains an important theme in our country today, as well as in many other parts of the world. The struggle has involved the effort to make popular sovereignty, political equality, and political liberty more widely available and practiced. Because democracy holds a very special place in Americans' constellation of values and is particularly relevant to judging political processes, it is the standard used throughout this text to evaluate the quality of our politics and government.

The materials about politics and government are organized in a way that will allow us to make sense of the confusing details of everyday events and see why things happen the way they do. The organizing framework presented in this chapter visualizes the world of American politics as a set of interrelated actors and influences— institutions, groups, and individuals—that operate in three interconnected realms: the structural, political linkage, and governmental sectors. This way of looking at American political life as an ordered, interconnected whole will be used throughout the remainder of the book.

Suggestions for Further Reading


The case for direct, participatory democracy by a leading contemporary political theorist.


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


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


A compelling examination of why deliberation is so important to genuine democracy and how more deliberative processes might be incorporated into contemporary democratic societies.


A highly accessible review of the many possible meanings of democracy.


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

Internet Sources

A number of sites on the World Wide Web serve as “gateways” to vast collections of material on American government and politics. In subsequent chapters, we will indicate the location of sites on the Web to begin searches on the specific subject matter of the chapters. Here we concentrate on the general gateways, the starting points for wide-ranging journeys through cyberspace, geared to subjects governmental and political.
For most students, connections to the Internet will be through systems already in operation at most colleges and universities. For some students, connections will be through one of the commercial services such as America Online, CompuServe, or the Microsoft Network. As part of its service, each has a browser, a tool used to get around the Internet and find what one wants. University and college systems are likely to have Netscape Navigator or Microsoft Explorer. Whichever browser one uses, simply type in the addresses of the gateways listed here and the browser will do the rest. Once at the gateway, a simple click on highlighted words and phrases (hyperlinks) will take users to a particular body of information.

Here are the gateways:

Internet Public Library  http://ipl.org/ref/RR/static/gov0000.html
The Jefferson Project  http://solstice.stardot.com/jefferson
Political Resources on the Web  www.politicalresources.net
Yahoo/Government  http://www.yahoo.com/Government/

Notes

2. Chafe, Unfinished Journey, p. 305.


