



Dogs are not just man's best friend. They are also a source of money for government.

ArtistGNDphotography/E+/Getty Images

1

INTRODUCTION TO STATE AND LOCAL GOVERNMENT

They Tax Dogs in West Virginia, Don't They?

CHAPTER OBJECTIVES

After reading this chapter, you will be able to

- Identify the ways state and local governments can affect daily life.
- Discuss how the comparative method can help explain differences between states.
- List some of the basic differences that occur among states and localities.
- Describe the importance of state and local government within the wider context of American government.

Caleb Hanna did his freshman year twice. Same year, but in very different institutions. In 2018, then 19-year-old Hanna enrolled in West Virginia State University. He also won election to the West Virginia House of Delegates and became not only a freshman lawmaker, but the youngest African American ever elected to state office.

Hanna received national attention for his electoral victory, not just because of his youth, but because he combines an unusual combination of demographics, ideology, and political power. Hanna is Black, was elected to office in a state that is more than 90 percent white, is politically conservative, and belongs to the Republican Party. Gen Z racial minorities advocating for the political right in the halls of power of an overwhelmingly white state are, by any measure, pretty rare.¹ A more typical state legislator is middle-aged (see Chapter 7) and white, has significant political experience, and has not worried about term papers or final exams in a long, long time.

Hanna was not just an unusual legislator, but an unusual college student. Interested in politics from a young age—high school class president for three years—and more particularly interested in *state* politics. Interested enough to knock on the door of every registered Republican in his legislative district. Interested enough to run a focused campaign that exceeded all expectations by ending in a 25-point victory over an incumbent Democrat. Interested enough that as a freshman he was helping make laws his classmates might only come across in a political science course. Most college freshmen are nowhere near that interested in politics. Nationwide, most freshmen say they will vote if eligible, but that's about the extent of their political involvement. Less than half say that keeping up with political affairs is important.² Only about a quarter think it is important to exert influence on the political system.³ The huge distance in political interest between Hanna and the vast majority of college students creates a big problem for a textbook like this. The data suggest that we can expect, at most, that roughly half the people reading this book have some sort of minimal threshold interest in politics generally, and the proportion with a genuine interest in and curiosity about state and local politics is, without doubt, lower. To those who do have that interest, to the Caleb Hannas in our audience, we say welcome and enjoy the ride—given your interest in state politics, there is a lot to enjoy and soak up in what follows.

What about the rest of you, though—why should you care? Why should you bother to have an interest in politics? More specifically, why should you give a hoot about politics and government at the state and local level? Fair question. The first goal of this textbook is to answer it. Everyone, and we mean *everyone*, should be interested in state and local politics. Let us start by explaining why.



As a general rule, young people are less interested in politics than older people. Not Caleb Hanna—he was elected to the West Virginia House of Delegates right out of high school.

AP Photo/Rick Barbero

THE IMPACT OF STATE AND LOCAL POLITICS ON DAILY LIFE

Regardless of who you are, what you do, or what you want to do, if you reside in the United States, state and local governments play a large role in your life. Regardless of what you are interested in—graduating, starting a career, beginning a family, or just good old-fashioned sex, drugs, and rock 'n' roll—state and local governments shape how, whether, and to what extent you are able to pursue those interests. To make things immediately relevant, let us consider your college education. The vast majority of college students in the United States—more than 70 percent—attend public institutions of higher education.⁴ Public colleges and universities are created and supported by state governments. For many readers of this book, the opportunity to get a college education is possible only because each state government created a system of higher education. For example, California has three major higher education systems: the University of California, California State University, and California Community Colleges systems. State governments require that taxpayers subsidize the operation of these education systems; in other words, the systems were designed not just to provide educational opportunities but also to make those opportunities broadly accessible, with tuition covering only a portion of the actual costs of a student's education.

Much of the rest comes from the taxpayers' pockets via the state government. When that state subsidy falls, college students inevitably end up paying more in tuition. If you wonder why your tuition bill keeps going up, wonder no more. Adjusted for inflation, state governments spent less on higher education in 2018 than they did in 2008.⁵ In 2000, state government appropriations in 47 states covered a bigger portion of higher education costs than student tuition and fees. In other words, if you went to a public university or college 20 years ago, there was a very good chance that your state government paid more for your college education than you did. That is no longer true. Today, students at public universities routinely cover more of the cost than state government does.⁶ The budgetary math here is pretty simple: the lower the subsidy from state government, the higher your tuition bill.

State governments do not just play an outsize role in what you pay to go to college; they may also determine what classes you pay for, whether you want to take those classes or not. Some states have curriculum mandates. You may be taking a course on state and local politics—and buying and reading this book—because your state government decided it was a worthy investment of your time and money. In Texas, for example, a state politics course is not just a good idea; it's the law. According to Section 51.301 of the Texas Education Code, to receive a bachelor's degree from any publicly funded college in the state, a student must successfully complete a course on state politics.

And, dear college student, if you think all of this adds up to government having a big impact on your life, dream on. The government's role in shaping your college education is actually pretty small. Compared with the heavy involvement of state and local governments in shaping K–12 education, colleges have pretty much free rein. In 2022, roughly 90 percent of students in Grades 9–12 were attending public high schools.⁷ Local units of government operate most of these schools. Private grade schools also are subject to a wide variety of state and local government regulations, from teacher certification and minimum curriculum requirements to basic health and safety standards. Whether you attended public or private school—or were home-schooled—at the end of the day, you had no choice in the decision to get a basic grade school education. Although the minimum requirements vary, every state in the union requires that children receive at least a grade school education.

Believe it or not, state and local governments do not exist simply to regulate large areas of your life, even if it sometimes seems that way. Their primary purpose is to provide services to their respective populations. In providing these services, state and local governments shape the social and economic lives of their citizens. The roads you use to get to school are there because state and local authorities built them and maintain them. The electricity that runs your computer comes from a utility grid regulated by state government, local government, or both. State and local governments are responsible for the sewer and water systems that make the bathroom down the hall functional. They make sure that the water you drink is safe and that the burger, sushi, or salad you bought in your student union does not make you sick.⁸ State governments determine the violations and punishments that constitute criminal law. Local governments are responsible primarily for law enforcement and fire protection. The services that state and local governments supply are such a part of our lives that in many cases we notice only their absence—when the water does not run, when the road is closed, or when the educational subsidy either declines or disappears.

THE COMPARATIVE METHOD IN PRACTICE: YES, THEY REALLY DO TAX DOGS IN WEST VIRGINIA

Recognizing the impacts of state and local government may be a reasonable way to spark an interest in the topic, but interest alone does not convey knowledge. To gain a coherent understanding of the many activities, responsibilities, and levels of state and local governments, you need a systematic approach to learning. In this book, that systematic approach is the **comparative method**, which uses similarities and differences as the basis for explaining why the world is the way it is. Think of it this way: Any two states or localities that you can think of will differ in a number of ways. For example, they really do tax dogs in West Virginia—a dollar per head for male and spayed female dogs and two dollars a head for unspayed females. This is not the case in, say, Nebraska, where dogs have to be licensed but are not taxed.⁹

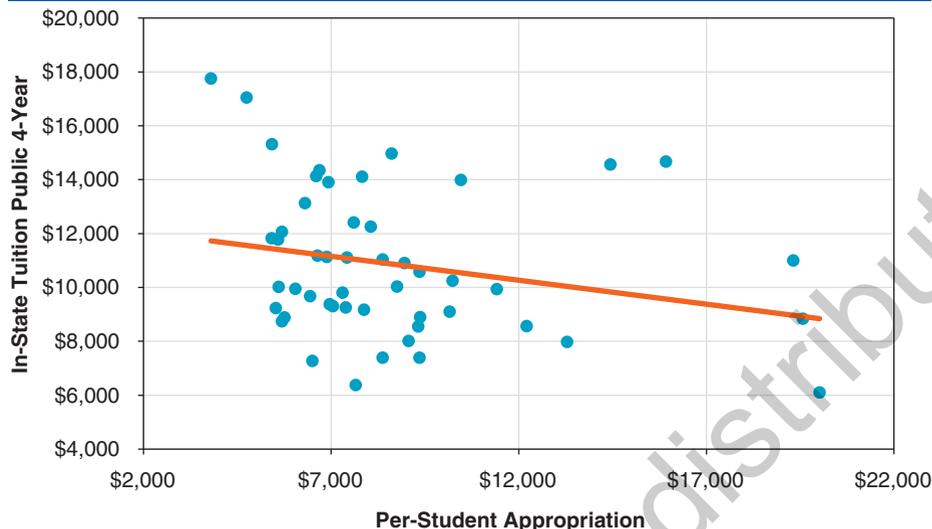
Or consider the electoral differences among states. Kansans and Nebraskans reliably send Republicans to the U.S. House of Representatives, while the people of Massachusetts send Democrats. Differences among states and localities are not limited to oddities like the tax status of the family pet or such big political questions as the balance of power in the House of Representatives. Those of you who do something as ordinary as buying a soda after class may pay more than your peers in other states or cities. Some readers of this book are certainly paying more in tuition and fees than those attending other colleges. Why is that? Why do those differences exist?

The comparative method seeks answers to these kinds of questions by looking for systematic **variance**, or differences, between comparable units of analysis. For our purposes, states are comparable units of analysis. Local governments—governments below the state level, such as county boards of commissioners and city councils—are another. Governments at each of these levels, state or local, have basic similarities that make comparisons of their differences meaningful. One way to think of this is that the comparative method is based on the idea that you can learn more about apples by comparing them with other apples than you can by comparing them with oranges or bananas.

For example, governmentally speaking, all 50 states have a lot in common. Their governmental structures are roughly the same. All have a basic division of powers among the executive, legislative, and judicial branches of government. All have to operate within the broad confines of the single set of rules that is the U.S. Constitution. There's a bit more variety below the state level, with many different kinds and levels of local government (counties, municipalities, townships, and so forth), but broadly speaking, all these governments share a basic set of responsibilities, and all have to operate within the rules set down within their respective state constitutions. These similarities among states and among local governments make meaningful comparisons possible. Paradoxically, what makes such comparisons meaningful are not the similarities but the differences. This is because even though states share similar political structures and follow the same overall set of rules, they make very different choices. These differences have consequences—as in the example of college tuition and fees. Figure 1.1 shows how differences in the size of a state government's contribution to higher education relate to differences in the tuition and fees paid. See the trend? As the per-student state appropriation—the amount the state kicks in per student—goes up, the average tuition bill goes down. In short, the state-level differences plotted on the horizontal axis systematically map onto the state-level differences on the vertical axis. That's an example of the comparative method in action. Similar sorts of systematic differences among the states explain why some of you will pay more for a soda after class than others will. Depending on the city and state, sales taxes can range from zero to more than 9 percent, meaning what you pay depends on not just what you buy, but where you buy it.¹⁰ These examples demonstrate the essence of the comparative method—from your tuition bills to the price of soda, differences among political jurisdictions make a difference in the daily lives of citizens.

Such differences can lend themselves to sophisticated and useful statistical analyses. For example, exactly how much is a tuition bill influenced by state support of public higher education? Using the data in Figure 1.1, we can calculate a precise relationship between contributions from state government and college costs. In 2021, tuition and fees at public four-year universities were lowered about \$180 for each additional \$1,000 per student provided by state government.¹¹

This basic approach of looking for differences that make a difference can be used to answer a broad range of “why” questions. For example, we know that how much a state gives to higher education helps determine how much you pay in tuition. So why do some states provide more support to higher education than others do? This is a question about one difference (variation

FIGURE 1.1 ■ State Appropriations and Tuition, 2021

Source: Data from College Board, "Trends in College Pricing 2021," <https://research.collegeboard.org/trends/college-pricing>.

in how much state governments spend on higher education) that can be answered by looking at other differences. What might these differences be? Well, they could stem from partisan politics in a state's legislature, a state's traditions and history, or a state's relative wealth, among many other possibilities. As a starting point for using the comparative approach to analyze such questions, consider the following basic differences among states and among localities.

BASIC DIFFERENCES AMONG STATES AND LOCALITIES

As a starting point for using the comparative approach to analyze such questions, consider the following basic differences among states and among localities.

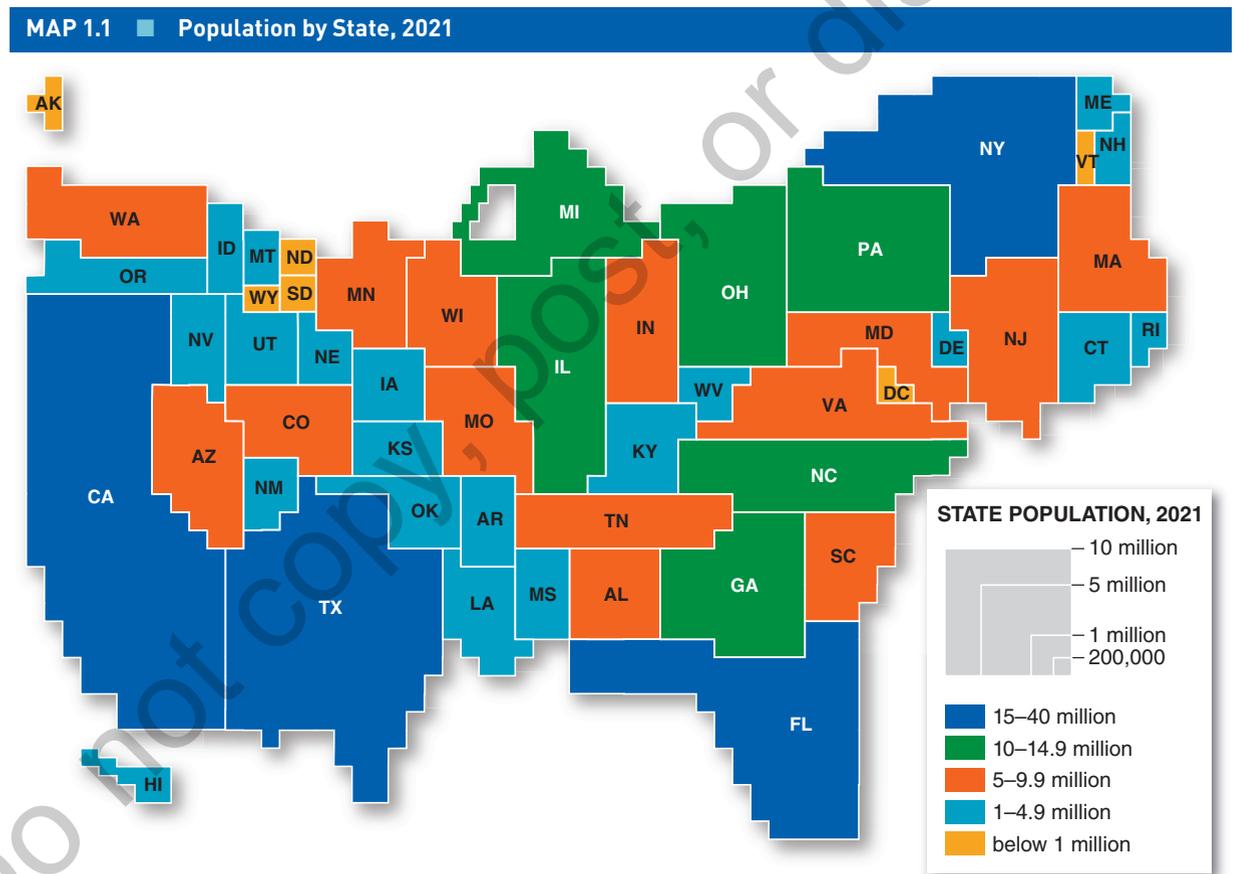
Sociodemographics

The populations of states and localities vary enormously in size, age, and ethnicity. The particular mix of these characteristics, or **sociodemographics**, in a specific state or community has a profound impact on the state or community's politics. California is the most populous state in the nation, with nearly 39 million residents. This is a racially and ethnically diverse population, about 39 percent Hispanic and Latino, about 38 percent white, nearly 15 percent Asian, and around 7 percent Black. Roughly 14 percent of Californians live in poverty. Compare this with New Hampshire, which has about 1.3 million residents, more than 90 percent of whom are non-Hispanic and white and only about 7 percent of whom live below the poverty line.¹² These population characteristics present different challenges to the governments in these two states. Differences in populations are likely to promote different attitudes about and policies on welfare, affirmative action, bilingual education programs, and even the roles and responsibilities of government in general.

All these sorts of population characteristics are dynamic—that is, they change. Between 2020 and 2021, Georgetown, Texas, welcomed more than 75,000 new residents—an astonishing

annual growth rate of 10 percent. That same year, San Francisco, California, saw its population decline by more than 6 percent as more than 50,000 moved elsewhere.¹³ Population expansion and population contraction create very different problems and policy priorities for local governments—the struggle to accommodate new growth in a fast-developing area versus the challenge of managing decline. The same is true at the state level. Population-wise, some states are actually shrinking. Illinois, West Virginia, and Mississippi all had fewer people in 2020 than they did in 2010. During the same decade, Texas and Florida saw steady population growth as millions moved south and west.¹⁴ Such population shifts have potentially huge impacts, influencing everything from housing starts to job creation to demand for public services to state and local tax collections.

Study Map 1.1 for a moment. Believe it or not, you are actually looking at the United States. The reason the states look so strange is that this is a special kind of map called a cartogram. Instead of using actual geographical space to determine the size of a particular area represented in the map—the number of square miles in each state, for instance—cartograms use other



Source: U.S. Census Bureau, “Estimates of Resident Population Change for the United States, Regions, States, and Puerto Rico: July 1, 2020 to July 1, 2021,” <https://www.census.gov/data/tables/time-series/demo/popest/2020s-state-total.html>.

Notes: The estimates are developed from a base that incorporates the 2020 Census, Vintage 2020 estimates, and 2020 Demographic Analysis estimates. For population estimates methodology statements, see www.census.gov/programs-surveys/popest/technical-documentation/methodology.html. See geographic terms and definitions at www.census.gov/programs-surveys/popest/guidance-geographies/terms-and-definitions.html for a list of the states that are included in each region. The estimates feature geographic boundaries from the Vintage 2020 estimates series; the geographic boundaries for these 2021 population estimates are as of January 1, 2020.

variables to determine how size is represented. This cartogram depicts the size of each state's population, another useful way to compare states. Notice that some states that are geographically pretty big, such as New Mexico at 122,000 square miles, are very small on this map because they have small populations. Other states that are geographically quite small, such as Connecticut (with only 5,000 square miles), look much bigger on this map because they have large populations. Some states, such as Virginia, don't look that different in size from their appearance on a traditional map.

Culture and History

States and localities have distinct “personalities” that are apparent in everything from the “bloody bucket” shoulder patch worn by the Pennsylvania National Guard to the drawl that distinguishes the speech of West Texas natives. Some states have been part of the union for more than 200 years and still project an Old World connection to Europe. Hawaii and Alaska became states within living memory and are more associated with the exoticism of the Pacific and the Old West. New York City prides itself on being a cosmopolitan center of Western civilization. The visitors' bureau of Lincoln, Nebraska, touts the city's small-town ambience and Middle American values. These differences are more than interesting variations in accent and local points of pride; they are visible symbols that represent distinct values and attitudes. Political scientists generally accept that these differences extend to government and that each state has a distinct **political culture**, identifiable general attitudes and beliefs about the role and responsibility of government.

Daniel Elazar's *American Federalism: A View from the States* is the classic study of political culture. In this book, first published more than 50 years ago, Elazar not only describes different state cultures and creates a classification of those still in use today but also explains why states have distinctly different political cultures. Elazar argues that political culture is a product of how the United States was settled. He says that people's religious and ethnic backgrounds played the dominant role in establishing political cultures. On this basis, there were three distinct types of settlers who fanned out across the United States in more or less straight lines from the East Coast to the West Coast. These distinct migration patterns created three different types of state political cultures: moralistic, individualistic, and traditionalistic.¹⁵

States with **moralistic cultures** are those in which politics is the means used to achieve a good and just society. Such states tend to be clustered in the northern parts of the country (New England, the upper Midwest, and the Pacific Northwest). Elazar argues that the Puritans who originally settled the Northeast came to the New World seeking religious freedom. Their political culture reflected a desire to use politics to construct the best possible society. This notion, that government and politics represent the means to the greater good, creates a society that values involvement in politics and views government as a positive force for addressing social problems. This general orientation toward government and politics spread across the northern and middle parts of the country in successive waves of migration. Wisconsin, for example, is a classic moralistic state. First settled by Yankees and later by Scandinavians, Germans, and Eastern Europeans, the state has long had a reputation for high levels of participation in politics (e.g., high levels of voter turnout), policy innovation, and scandal-free government.

States with **individualistic cultures** have a different view of government and politics. In individualistic cultures, people view government as an extension of the marketplace, something in which people participate for individual reasons and to achieve individual goals. Government should provide the services people want, but it is not viewed as a vehicle to create a “good society” or intervene in private activities. In individualistic states, politics is viewed the same as any other

business. Officeholders expect to be paid like professionals, and political parties are, in essence, corporations that compete to provide goods and services to people. Unlike those in moralistic states, as long as the roads are paved and the trains run on time, folks in individualistic states tend to tolerate a certain level of corruption in government. Illinois is a classic individualistic culture state—and 4 of its last 10 governors have served jail terms for corruption, bribery, and fraud.

In a **traditionalistic culture**, politics is the province of elites, something that average citizens should not concern themselves with. Traditionalistic states are, as their name suggests, fundamentally conservative, in the sense that they are concerned with preserving a well-established society. Like moralistic states, traditionalistic states believe that government serves a positive role. But there is one big difference—traditionalistic states believe the larger purpose of government is to maintain the existing social order. Those at the top of the social structure are expected to play a dominant role in politics, and power is concentrated in the hands of these elites. Traditionalistic states tend to be rural (at least historically); in many of these states, agriculture, rather than a broader mix of competing commercial activities, is the main economic driver.

Traditionalistic cultures tend to be concentrated in the Deep South, in states such as Georgia, Mississippi, and South Carolina. In these states, politics is significantly shaped by tradition and history. Like the settlers of individualistic states, those who settled the South sought personal opportunity. The preindustrial, agrarian economy of the South, however, led to a culture that was little more than a variation of the feudal order of the European Middle Ages. As far back as the 1830s, French aristocrat and writer Alexis de Tocqueville, writing about the United States, noted that “as one goes farther south . . . the population does not exercise such a direct influence on affairs. . . . The power of the elected officials is comparatively greater and that of the voter less.”¹⁶

A DIFFERENCE THAT MAKES A DIFFERENCE: IS IT BETTER TO BE A WOMAN IN MARYLAND OR A GAL IN MISSISSIPPI?

According to the Institute for Women’s Policy Research (IWPR), it is better to be a woman in Maryland than a gal in Mississippi, at least economically speaking.

Why? Well, in a 2018 analysis of the economic status of women in the states, the IWPR had several reasons for ranking Maryland as the best state for women and Mississippi as the worst. For each state, the IWPR looked at how women were doing economically in two broad areas. They used a variety of indicators to create a composite index of employment and earnings (using earnings, the gender wage gap, female labor force participation, and female representation in professional and managerial occupations) and a companion index for poverty and opportunity (using percent living above poverty, percent with health insurance, percent college educated, and percent of businesses owned by women).

Maryland was the top-ranked state in both composite indexes. Mississippi came in dead last in both indexes. This suggests, then, that women are considerably better off in Maryland than they are in Mississippi—they have higher earnings, are more likely to own a business, and are more likely to have a college education and health insurance. For half the population, those are some pretty important differences. The question, though, is why. Why are states like Maryland so different from states like Mississippi on these sorts of differences? The comparative approach to answering this question involves looking for other differences between Maryland and Mississippi—differences that might explain the variance in the status of women. One candidate for an explanatory difference is presented in Table 1.1, which shows

the top five and the bottom five states in the 2018 IWPR economic rankings along with the dominant political culture in each state. Notice any patterns?

TABLE 1.1 ■ Political Culture and the Status of Women in the States, 2018

Five Best States for Women	Dominant Political Culture
1. Maryland	Individualistic
2. Massachusetts	Individualistic
3. Connecticut	Individualistic
4. New York	Individualistic
5. New Jersey	Individualistic
Five Worst States for Women	Dominant Political Culture
46. Alabama	Traditionalistic
47. Louisiana	Traditionalistic
48. Idaho	Moralistic
49. West Virginia	Traditionalistic
50. Mississippi	Traditionalistic

Sources: Julie Anderson and Jennifer Clark, *The Economic Status of Women in the States* (Washington, DC: Institute for Women's Policy Research, 2018), <https://statusofwomendata.org/fact-sheet/economic-status-women-states-2018/>; Daniel J. Elazar, *American Federalism: A View from the States* (New York: Crowell, 1966); National Conference of State Legislatures, "Women in State Legislatures for 2022," January 18, 2022, <https://www.ncsl.org/womens-legislative-network/women-in-state-legislatures-for-2022>.

You may have caught that all the top five states have individualistic cultures, and all but one of the bottom five states have traditionalistic cultures. Political culture thus might explain some of the differences in women's status. States in which the dominant political values include individualism and letting the market do its thing seem to have lower barriers to women doing pretty well economically. Women seem to have a harder time economically in states that tend to value the preservation of traditional ways of doing things.

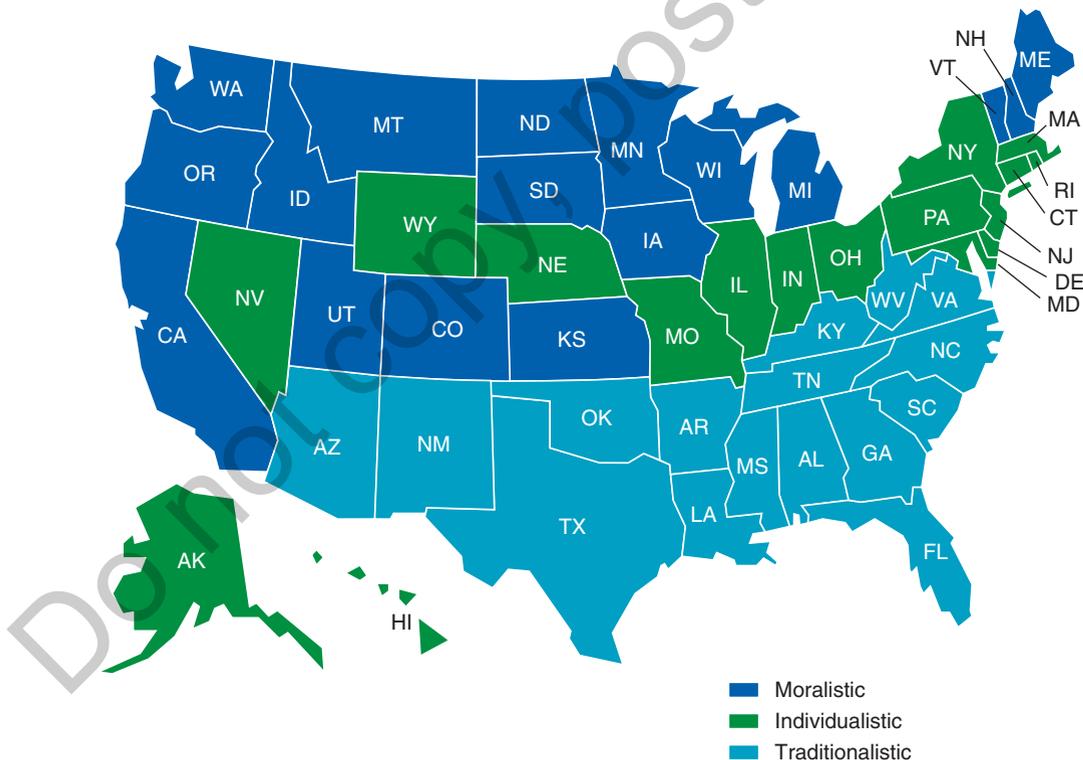
Political culture is not the be-all and end-all of the comparative method. Other differences might help explain why women's economic well-being and opportunity vary so much across states. For example, the five best states in Table 1.1 also tend to be pretty urbanized, while the bottom five states are less urbanized. Why might that make a difference? Well, more urbanized regions may have more diverse economies with better opportunities for women than more rural states with less diversified economies. The point here is not to provide the definitive answer of why some states seem to be more economically advantageous to women, but to get you to start thinking using the comparative method. Once you get the hang of using the comparative method to frame a state-level question or analysis, it's easy to see its application to a wide variety of important political, social, and economic questions.

States have changed considerably since Elazar's pioneering research. Some traditionalistic states (e.g., Florida) have seen huge influxes of people from northern states, people who often are not from traditionalistic cultures. The Deep South is also considerably more urban than it used to be; thus the agricultural foundation of many traditionalistic states has changed. The

upshot of these sorts of shifts is that many states these days tend to encompass a mix of two or even all three cultures.

Even with such changes, however, political culture is remarkably resilient. In most states, one of Elazar's three political cultures is likely to be dominant, as shown in Map 1.2. More than a half-century after Elazar first introduced these ideas, his cultural classifications still hold explanatory power and are likely to do so for the foreseeable future.¹⁷ There have been other attempts to measure state political culture. For example, a 2014 academic study conducted a highly sophisticated statistical analysis of state differences based on a wide range of variables—from disease rates to the threat of natural disasters—to identify cultural differences among states. The resulting state rankings turned out to be highly correlated with the moralistic/traditionalistic/individualistic typology—indeed, so highly correlated that it is reasonable to argue that these researchers used different methods to rediscover what Elazar had already found more than 50 years previously.¹⁸ This new cultural ranking scheme joins a long list of studies that have found that political culture (however measured) shapes politics and policy in important ways. Policy change and innovation, for example, are more likely in moralistic states. Individualistic states are more likely to offer businesses tax breaks. Traditionalistic states tend to commit less public money to areas such as education.¹⁹ Faced with similar problems, therefore, the Texas and California state legislatures may propose radically different policy responses. These differences are at least partially products of the political cultures that still distinguish each state. In other words, culture and history matter.

MAP 1.2 ■ Dominant Political Culture



Source: Virginia Gray, "The Socioeconomic and Political Contexts of States," in *Politics in the American States: A Comparative Analysis*, 10th ed., ed. Virginia Gray and Russell Hanson (Washington, DC: CQ Press, 2013), 22.

These cultural differences certainly are apparent when it comes to states' support for higher education. Moralistic states commit considerably more resources to higher education than do individualistic and traditionalistic states. They spend about 13 percent more per capita on colleges and universities than do states with the other two cultures. Because moralistic states are those in which attitudes support higher levels of commitment to the public sector, these spending differences make sense in cultural terms. Why do some states provide more support to higher education than others do? Apparently, another part of the answer is that some political cultures see higher education in more communal than individual terms. See Table 1.2 for a summary of the three political cultures as classified by Elazar.

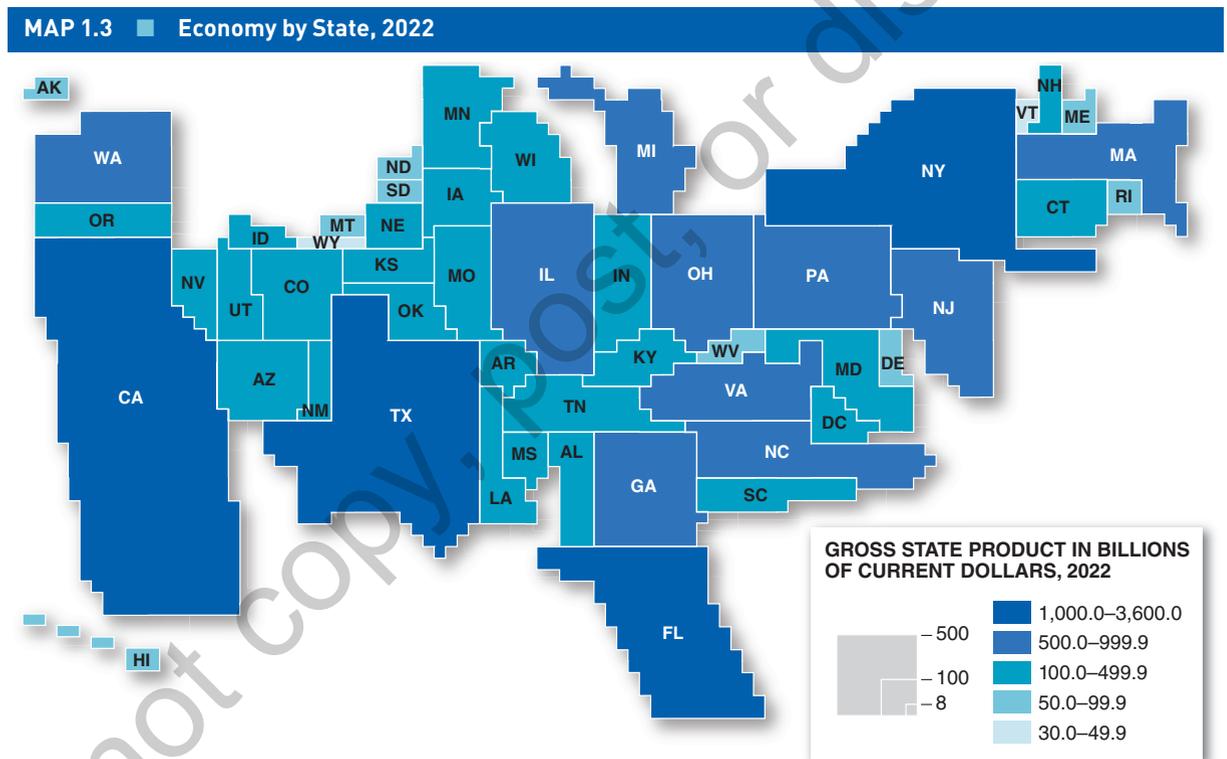
TABLE 1.2 ■ Political Cultures at a Glance

	Elazar Classification		
	Moralistic	Individualistic	Traditionalistic
Role of Government	Government should act to promote the public interest and policy innovation.	Government should be utilitarian, a service provider.	Government should help preserve the status quo.
Attitude of Public Representatives	Politicians can effect change; public service is worthwhile and an honor.	Businesslike—politics is a career like any other, and individual politicians are oriented toward personal power. High levels of corruption are more common.	Politicians can effect change, but politics is the province of the elites.
Role of Citizens	Citizens actively participate in voting and other political activities; individuals seek public office.	The state exists to advance the economic and personal self-interest of citizens; citizens leave politics to the professionals.	Ordinary citizens are not expected to be politically involved.
Degree of Party Competition	Highly competitive	Moderate	Weak
Government Spending on Services	High	Moderate—money goes to basic services but not to perceived “extras.”	Low
Political Culture	Strong	Fragmented	Strong
Most Common in . . .	Northeast, northern Midwest, Northwest	Middle parts of the country, such as the Mid-Atlantic; parts of the Midwest, such as Missouri and Illinois; parts of the West, such as Nevada	Southern states, rural areas

Source: Adapted from Daniel J. Elazar, *American Federalism: A View from the States*, 2nd ed. (New York: Crowell, 1972).

Economy

The relative size and health of a state’s economy has a huge impact on its capacity to govern and provide public services. State-level gross domestic product—the state equivalent of the gross national product—varies wildly, from Vermont’s \$38 billion to California’s roughly \$3.6 trillion (see Map 1.3). If we standardize that on a per capita basis, state economies range from about \$38,000 in Mississippi to about \$86,000 in New York.²⁰ This means government in New York has the ability to tap a greater amount of resources than can government in Mississippi. The difference in wealth, in effect, means that if New York and Mississippi were to implement identical and equivalent public services, Mississippi would have a considerably higher tax rate. This is because Mississippi would have to use a greater proportion of its smaller amount of resources, compared with New York. These sorts of differences also are visible at the local level. Wealthy suburbs can enjoy lower tax rates and still spend more on public services than can economically struggling urban or rural communities.



Source: Bureau of Economic Analysis, “Current-Dollar Gross Domestic Product (GDP) by State and Region, 2021:Q1–2022:Q1,” press release, July 25, 2019, <https://www.bea.gov/data/gdp/gdp-state>.

Regional economic differences do not determine only tax burdens and the level of public services; they also determine the relative priorities of particular policy and regulatory issues. Fishing, for example, is a sizable industry in coastal states in the Northeast and Northwest. States such as Maine and Washington have numerous laws, regulations, and enforcement responsibilities tied to the catching, processing, and transporting of fish. Regulating the economic exploitation of

marine life occupies very little government attention and resources in places such as Kansas and Nevada, although agriculture in the former and gambling in the latter create just as many policy challenges and demands for government action.

Regardless of the basis of a state's economy, greater wealth does not always translate into more support for public programs. States with above-average incomes actually tend to spend *less* per capita on higher education. Why would less wealthy states concentrate more of their resources on higher education? There are a number of possible explanations. Education is a critical component of a postindustrial economy, so states that are less well-off may direct more of their resources into education in hopes of building a better economic future. Citizens in wealthy states simply may be better able to afford higher tuition costs. Whatever the explanation, this example suggests another advantage of employing the comparative method—it shows that the obvious assumptions are not always the correct ones.

Geography and Topography

There is wild variation in the physical environments in which state and local governments operate. Hawaii is a lush tropical island chain in the middle of the Pacific Ocean, Nevada encompasses a large desert, Michigan is mostly heavily forested, and Colorado is split by the Rocky Mountains. Such geographical and topographical variation presents different challenges to governments. State and local authorities in California devote considerable time and resources to preparing for earthquakes. Their counterparts in Texas spend comparatively little time thinking about earthquakes, but they do concern themselves with tornadoes, grass fires, and hurricanes.

Combine geography with population characteristics, and the challenges become even more complex. Montana is a large rural state in which the transportation logistics—simply getting students to school—can present something of a conundrum. Is it better to bus students long distances to large, centrally located schools, or should there be many smaller schools within easy commuting distance for relatively few students? The first is cheaper. Larger schools can offer academic and extracurricular activities that smaller schools cannot afford. But the busing exacts a considerable cost on students and families. The second alternative eases transportation burdens, but it requires building more schools and hiring more teachers, which means more taxes. Geographical and population differences often not only shape the answers to such difficult policy issues but also pose the questions.

Consider the variety of seasonal weather patterns that occur within the enormous geographical confines of the United States. In Wisconsin, snow removal is a key service provided by local governments. Road-clearing crews are often at work around the clock during bad weather. The plows, the crews, and the road salt cost money. They all require a considerable investment in administration and coordination to do the job effectively. In Florida, snow removal is low on local governments' lists of priorities, for good reason—it rarely snows in the Sunshine State. On the other hand, state and local authorities in Florida do need to prepare for the occasional hurricane. Hurricanes are less predictable and less common than snow in Wisconsin, and it takes only one to create serious demands on the resources of local authorities.

And, yes, even basic geography affects your tuition bill, especially when combined with some of the other characteristics discussed here. Many large public colleges and universities are located in urban centers because central geographical locations serve more people more efficiently. Delivering higher education in rural areas is a more expensive proposition simply because there are fewer people in the service area. States with below-average population densities tend to be larger and more sparsely populated. They also tend to spend more on higher education. Larger government subsidies are necessary to make tuition affordable.



Weather and climate are differences that make a difference. Some states need to prepare for tornadoes or hurricanes. Others need to have the ability to respond to devastating wildfires.

David McNew / Stringer/Getty Images

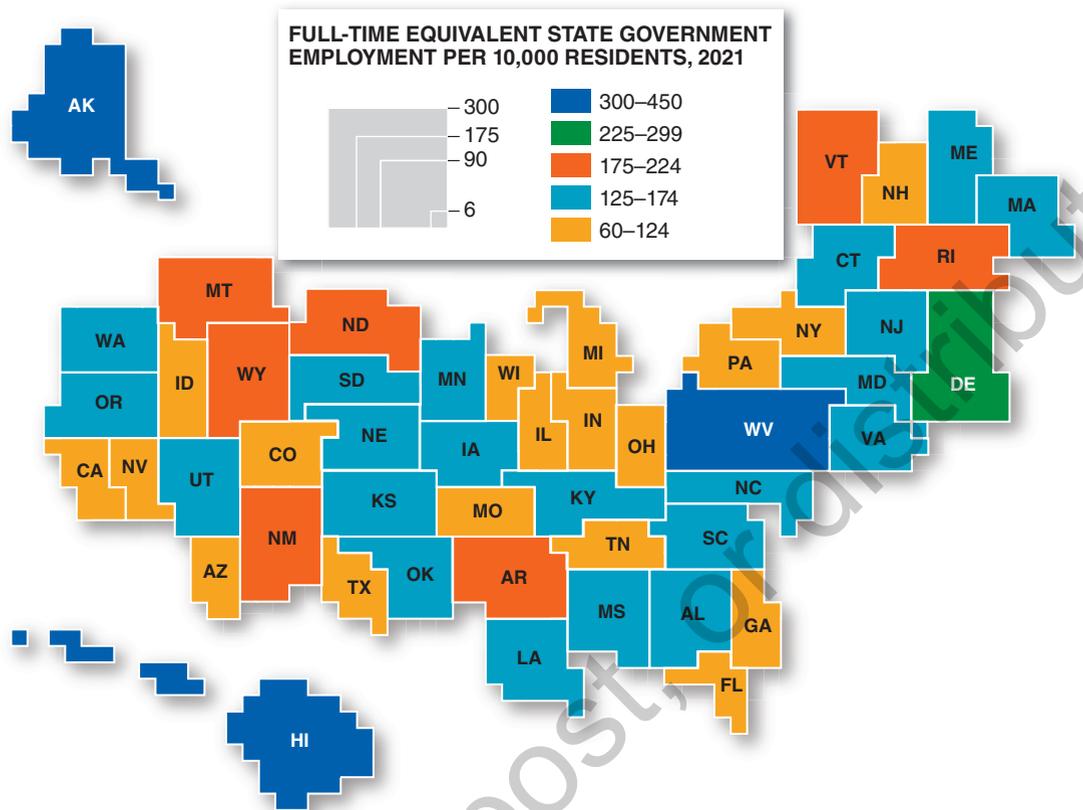
RECOGNIZING THE STAKES

The variation across states and localities offers more than a way to help make sense of your tuition bill or to explain why some public school systems are better funded or to understand why taxes are lower in some states. These differences also serve to underline the central role of states and localities in the American political system. Compared with the federal government, state and local governments employ more people and buy more goods and services from the private sector. They have the primary responsibility for addressing many of the issues that people care about the most, including education, crime prevention, transportation, health care, and the environment. Public opinion polls often show that citizens place more trust in their state and local governments than in the federal government. These polls frequently express citizens' preference for having the former relieve the latter of a greater range of policy responsibilities.²¹ With these responsibilities and expectations, it should be obvious that state and local politics are played for high stakes.

High stakes, yes, but it is somewhat ironic that state and local governments tend to get less attention in the media, in private conversation, and in curricula and classrooms than does their federal counterpart.²² Ask most people to think about American government, and chances are they will think first about the president, Congress, Social Security, or some other feature of the national government. Yet most American governments are state or local. Only 535 elected legislators serve in the U.S. Congress. Thousands of legislators are elected at the state level, and tens of thousands more serve in the legislative branches of local government.

In terms of people, state and local governments dwarf the federal government. There are more teachers working for public schools—about 3.3 million—than the entire combined civilian workforce of the federal government (about 2.7 million).²³ Combined, state and local governments employ roughly 15 million. (See Map 1.4.) In terms of dollars, state and local governments combined represent about the same spending force as the federal government. In 2019, state and local government expenditures totaled about \$4.1 trillion.²⁴

MAP 1.4 ■ Number of State Government Employees by State, 2021



Source: U.S. Census Bureau, "State Government: Employment and Payroll Data," <https://www.census.gov/data/datasets/2021/econ/apes/annual-apes.html>.

The size of state and local government operations is commensurate with these governments' 21st-century role in the political system. After spending much of the 20th century being drawn closer into the orbit and influence of the federal government, states and localities have spent the last few decades aggressively asserting their independence. This maturing of nonfederal, or subnational, government made its leaders and policies—not to mention its differences—among the most important characteristics of our political system.

The context of the federal system of government, and the role of state and local governments within that system, is given more in-depth coverage in Chapter 2. For now, it is important to recognize that governance in the United States is more of a network than a hierarchy. The policies and politics of any single level of government are connected and intertwined with the policies and politics of the other levels of government in a complex web of interdependent relationships. The role of states and localities in these governance partnerships has changed considerably in the past few decades.

What states and localities do, and how they go about doing it, turns out to shape national life overall, as well as the lives of individual citizens. Given what is at stake at the state and local levels, no citizen can fully comprehend the role and importance of government without understanding subnational politics.

Laboratories of Democracy: Devolution and the Limits of Government

U.S. Supreme Court justice Louis Brandeis famously described the states as **laboratories of democracy**. This metaphor refers to the ability of states—and, to a lesser extent, localities—to

experiment with policy. Successful experiments can be replicated by other states or adopted by the national government. For much of the past 30 years, state–federal relations have been characterized by **devolution**, or the process of taking power and responsibility away from the federal government and giving it to state and local governments. As a result, the states for a time aggressively promoted new ways to solve old problems in such high-profile policy areas as welfare, gun control, and education. That trend of increasing state policy autonomy was temporarily halted by the severe economic contraction of 2007–2009, the so-called Great Recession. For several years after the Great Recession, states became critically dependent on federal money to stay solvent, and that meant they had to pay attention to federal policy priorities. As the economy recovered and states became less reliant on federal grant dollars, however, states in the past decade have once again begun to assert their independence from the federal government. This independence is increasingly characterized by deep ideological and partisan differences. States with conservative Republican governors sought to resist the health care, immigration, and environmental policy priorities of Democratic presidents Barack Obama and Joe Biden, and blue state Democratic governors aggressively opposed Republican president Donald Trump’s priorities on those same issues. We’ll take a closer look at the details of intergovernmental relations in the next chapter, but it is important here to recognize that how state and local governments exercise their independent decision-making authority is dependent on a number of factors. Some of these factors are external. The U.S. Constitution, federal laws and regulations, nationwide recessions, and the like constrain what states and localities can and cannot do. Internal factors, such as the characteristics of a particular state, also play a critical role in setting limits on what the state decides to do.

The big three of these internal factors are wealth, the characteristics of the state’s political system, and the relative presence of organized interest groups, those individuals who organize to support policy issues that concern them. For states and localities, money is the biggest factor limiting independent policy action. Launching new policy initiatives tends to be expensive, and simply continuing to support existing programs and services (higher education, for example) at historical levels can require ever-increasing infusions of cash. While critically important, money is not the only factor that influences policy directions at the subnational level. Political system characteristics are the elements of the political environment that are specific to a state. States in which public opinion is relatively conservative are likely to pursue different policy avenues than are states in which public opinion is more liberal. States in which Republicans dominate the government are likely to opt for different policy choices than are states in which Democrats dominate. States with professional full-time legislatures are more likely to formulate and pursue sustained policy agendas than are states in which legislators are part-timers who meet only periodically. States in which the government perceives an electoral mandate to reform government are more likely to be innovative than are states in which the government perceives an electoral mandate to retain the status quo.²⁵ Organized interest group activity helps determine what sorts of policy demands government responds to. Governments in states with powerful teachers’ unions, for example, experience different education policy pressures than do governments in states where teachers’ unions are politically weak. These three factors constitute the basic ingredients for policymaking in the states. Specifics vary enormously from state to state, and the potential combinations in this democratic laboratory are virtually infinite.

Localities face more policymaking constraints than states do because they typically are not sovereign governments. This means that, unlike states, local governments get their power from the level of government above them rather than directly from citizens. The states have much greater control over local governments than the federal government has over the states. Yet, even though local governments are much more subordinate to state government than state government is to the federal government, they do not simply take orders from the state capitol. Many

have independent taxing authority and broad discretion to act within their designated policy jurisdictions.

These policy jurisdictions, nevertheless, are frequently subject to formal limits. The authority of school districts, for example, extends only to funding and operating public schools. State government may place limits on districts' tax rates and set everything from minimal employment qualifications to maximum teacher-to-pupil ratios. Even within this range of tighter restrictions, however, local governments retain considerable leeway to act independently. School districts often decide to contract out cafeteria and janitorial services, cities and counties actively seek to foster economic development with tax abatements and loan guarantees, and police commissions experiment with community-based law enforcement. During the past two decades, many of the reforms enthusiastically pursued at all levels of government—reforms from innovative management practices to the outright privatization of public services—have had their origins in local government.²⁶

What all this activity shows is that states and localities are not only the laboratories of democracy but also the engines of the American republic. States and localities are not just safe places to engage in limited experimentation; they are the primary mechanisms connecting citizens to the actions of government.

CONCLUSION

There are good reasons for developing a curiosity about state and local governments. State politics determines everything from how much you pay for college to whether your course in state and local governments is required or elective. Above and beyond understanding the impact of state and local governments on your own life and interests, studying such governments is important because of their critical role in the governance and life of the nation. Subnational, or nonfederal, governments employ more people than the federal government and spend as much money. Their responsibilities include everything from repairing potholes to regulating pot. It is difficult, if not impossible, to understand government in the United States and the rights, obligations, and benefits of citizenship without first understanding state and local governments.



Washington, D.C., is neither a state nor a local government in the traditional sense. It has a municipal government like a city and electoral votes like a state. It is ultimately ruled by Congress, even though it has no voting representatives in the federal legislature.

iStock/vichie81

LOCAL FOCUS: THE STATES THAT AREN'T

Most people think of the United States as being composed of 50 states. And it is. But the United States also includes areas that look like states and are governed like states, but are most definitely not states. The United States also includes a big, important city that is not in any state at all. Confused? Welcome to the world of the territories of the United States.

Territories are geographical, administrative subdivisions of the United States. People who live in them are U.S. citizens, and they have legislatures, governors, and courts. Sounds pretty state-like, right? Not so fast. Unlike states, territories have no voting representation in Congress, and they have a much higher degree of legal subordination to the federal government.

The territory familiar to most people is Puerto Rico, a Caribbean island roughly a thousand miles off the southern coast of Florida. With 3.2 million residents, Puerto Rico has a population larger than Wyoming, Vermont, Alaska, North Dakota, and South Dakota combined. Unlike any of those states, though, citizens in Puerto Rico have no say in electing the president, and have no one to vote on their behalf in the U.S. Senate or House of Representatives; they have only a nonvoting commissioner to represent their interests. Other U.S. territories are scattered across the globe—Guam in the western Pacific, American Samoa in the South Pacific, the Northern Mariana Islands in the North Pacific, and the U.S. Virgin Islands in the Caribbean.

The not-quite-in-the-system status of territories is, historically speaking, not as odd as it sounds to contemporary ears. Alaska and Hawaii, for example, were territories before they became states, and many other states were carved out of geographical areas originally governed as territories. Periodically, statehood is still seriously mooted for Puerto Rico. Mostly, though, territories are holdovers from a different era, strongly tied to the United States, but separated by geographical distance and legal standing.

In addition to these not-quite states, the United States includes a sort-of city-state. This is the District of Columbia, or Washington, D.C., the nation's capital. Technically, Washington, D.C., is a federal city, and the power to govern it is given to Congress in Article I, Section 8, Paragraph 17, of the U.S. Constitution. Congress has used that power inconsistently over the years, and Washington, D.C.'s status within the American political system has varied a lot over the years. Unlike the territories, the District of Columbia does help elect the president—the Twenty-Third Amendment to the U.S. Constitution, ratified in 1961, explicitly granted the district electors in the Electoral College. Like the territories, though, it has no voting representation in Congress.

You will not hear much about Washington, D.C., or the territories in this textbook, which explicitly focuses on states and the localities within them. It is important to recognize, though, that as broad as that scope is, it does not cover the governing realities of a huge swath of Americans living in America. Collectively, the district and the U.S. territories constitute more than 4 million U.S. citizens who live and work on American soil, but they are not fully incorporated in the American political system in the same sense as states and cities that are located within states.

This book fosters such an understanding through the comparative method. This approach involves looking for patterns in the differences among states and localities. Rather than advocating a particular perspective on state and local politics, the comparative method is predicated, or based, on a systematic way of asking and answering questions. Why is my tuition bill so high? Why does Massachusetts send mostly Democrats to the U.S. House of Representatives? Why are those convicted of capital crimes in Texas more likely to be executed than those convicted of comparable crimes in Connecticut? Why are sales taxes high in Alabama? Why is there no state income tax in South Dakota? We can answer each of these questions by comparing states and looking for systematic patterns in their differences. The essence of the comparative method is to use one difference to explain another.

THE LATEST RESEARCH

As discussed extensively in this chapter, the comparative method is an important tool used by scholars to understand how state-level differences translate into meaningful political and policy differences. A lot of these differences that make a difference are not static—indeed, some may be changing even as you read this textbook.

The “granddaddy” of all differences—though far from the only one—is political culture, a concept originated by Daniel Elazar that continues to be widely respected for its explanatory power. While scholars in the past few decades have conducted a number of more fine-grained analyses of political culture that take advantage of new data sources and more sophisticated statistical techniques, Elazar’s original classification system remains a disciplinary standard. In this section we summarize some of the newest research that uses the comparative method and investigates state political cultures and their impact on politics and policy.

- **Nolasco, Claire Angelique, and Daniel Braaten.** “The Role of Hospitable and Inhospitable States in the Process of Refugee Resettlement in the United States.” *Journal of Refugee Studies* 34, no. 1 (2021): 634–62.
- **Kang, Seong C.** “The Politics of Regulatory Design: Evidence from State-Level Energy Regulations in the United States.” *Policy Studies* 43, no. 6 (2022): 1322–39. <https://doi.org/10.1080/01442872.2021.1948984>.

Nolasco and Braaten use Elazar’s classic classification of political culture to help understand why some states are more welcoming to refugees than other states. Unsurprisingly, at least to students of state politics, they find that one of the strongest predictors of refugee resettlement is the presence of a moralistic political culture. Moralistic cultures are more likely to have governments willing to support immigrants, and provide high-quality public services like education. That combination makes them an attractive landing spot for refugees. Kang is interested in a very different policy question: Why do some states have stricter energy and environmental regulations? The answer, at least partially, is political culture, with traditionalistic states tending to have weaker regulatory regimes and moralistic states stronger regulatory regimes. What these studies show is that more than 50 years after Elazar first developed his theory of political culture, contemporary scholars continue to find his cultural classifications have a lot of explanatory power across various dimensions of politics and policy.

- **Harrington, Jesse R., and Michele J. Gelfand.** “Tightness-Looseness across the 50 United States.” *Proceedings of the National Academy of Sciences* 111, no. 22 (2014): 7990–95.

This study is a little older but remains interesting for what it says about what scholars have learned—and have not learned—about political culture since Elazar’s groundbreaking work a half-century ago. Harrington and Gelfand are not using an existing concept of state-level culture but trying to create a new one. Specifically, they take a theory used to explain differences in political culture between nations and see if it works for the states. This theory distinguishes between “tight” and “loose” cultures. Tight cultures strongly enforce rules and norms, with less tolerance for deviance. Loose cultures have fewer strongly enforced rules and higher levels of tolerance. The basic idea is that nations that face a lot of stress—wars, environmental or economic threats, internal strife—gravitate toward a tighter culture to maintain social cohesion (or even survival). Nations that face fewer threats tend to gravitate toward a looser culture. Harrington and Gelfand find that the basic idea also works at the state level. They create a state-level index of cultural “tightness” that successfully predicts various state characteristics in exactly the way you would expect culture to affect laws and policy choices. This “new” index also turns out to be very highly correlated with Elazar’s measure, suggesting that new dogs sometimes discover old tricks.

This book's examination of state and local politics is organized into three distinct sections. The first section consists of five chapters designed to set the basic context for studying state and local politics. Included here are chapters on federalism, state constitutions, budgets, political participation, and political parties and interest groups. The second section covers the institutions of state and local government: legislatures, executives, courts, and bureaucracy. Although elements of local government are discussed in all these, there are also two chapters in this section devoted solely to local politics and government. The final section covers a series of distinct policy areas: education, crime, health care, and the environment. These chapters not only cover areas of substantive policy interests but also offer concrete examples of how a broad understanding of the context and institutions of state and local governments can be combined with the comparative method to promote a deeper understanding of the politics of states and localities.

TOP TEN TAKEAWAYS

1. Most citizens know comparatively little about state and local politics, even though these governments have a significant impact on their daily lives.
2. State and local governments have the primary policy responsibility in areas such as education and law enforcement, and decisions made by these governments affect everything from the size of a tuition bill to the size of an elementary school class, from the licensing requirements to become a barber to the licensing requirements to become a doctor.
3. States are different in many ways, from topography and weather to population size and sociodemographics.
4. Despite their differences, all states have a core set of political similarities—they all must operate within the guidelines of the U.S. Constitution, and they have similarly structured governments, with an elected legislature, an independently elected executive, and an independent judiciary.
5. States are sovereign governments. In other words, as long as they are not in violation of the U.S. Constitution, they are free to do as they please. They draw their power not from the federal government, but from the U.S. Constitution, their own state constitutions, and their own citizens.
6. These differences and similarities make the states unique laboratories for investigating a wide range of important political and policy questions. The states constitute 50 truly comparable and sovereign governments.
7. The comparative method uses the similarities and differences of the states as a basis for looking at systematic variance. In other words, this method seeks to see whether one set of differences among the states can help explain other differences.
8. There are three basic types of political culture in the states. Moralistic cultures tend to view government as a means to make society better. Individualistic cultures view government as an extension of the marketplace. Traditionalistic cultures tend to view government and politics as the concern of elites, not average citizens.
9. Political culture provides a good example of how “a difference makes a difference.” Variation in political culture helps explain a wide variety of political and policy

differences among the states—everything from differences in voter turnout to differences in the political status of women.

10. It is virtually impossible to understand politics, policy, and governance in the United States without understanding state and local government.

KEY CONCEPTS

Comparative method	Political culture
Devolution	Sociodemographics
Individualistic culture	Traditionalistic culture
Laboratories of democracy	Variance
Moralistic culture	

DISCUSSION QUESTIONS

1. Write a list of all the things you typically do every day—everything from turning on a light to checking social media to walking on a sidewalk to buying lunch. How many of these are in some way touched by policies and programs managed by state and local governments? How many of the things on your list would be hard, or even impossible, to do without those policies and programs?
2. After reading this chapter, you should have a basic understanding of the comparative method. Try to apply this to a question that interests you (e.g., Where can you find the most and best-paying jobs?). What “difference that makes a difference” among states would be your main analytical target (e.g., unemployment rates, average wages, or tuition), and what other state-level differences would you use to try and answer your question (e.g., income tax rates, graduation rates, or state expenditures)?
3. This chapter discusses a range of “differences that make a difference,” everything from culture to geography. Which of these do you think plays the biggest role in making states different economically and socially? If you had to identify one difference among states that causes the most social and economic variation, what would that difference be?
4. Given the importance of state and local governments across a range of crucially important programs and policies, why do you think most people know much less about them compared to the federal government? Is it really important to know as much about state and local governments as the federal government? Why or why not?