



POLITICS AND CITIZENSHIP

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Introduction to **POLITICS**

WHAT IS
POLITICS?



Well, there is a loaded question. Please, do *not* say out loud the first thoughts that popped into your head.

It's true—we live in tough times for those in the politics business, and tough times for all of us *not* in the biz, who must watch (or try to ignore) the baffling goings-on in Washington, in our state capitals, and even in our county councils and school boards.

Depending on where we get our political info, it's easy to feel like politics is a ridiculous, disappointing, and pointless activity, or to believe that our leaders are incompetent to solve the problems before us—that all politicians are bought and paid for and that people “like us” always get screwed. It's easy to let cynicism take us into some pretty dark places, and we can find ample support for our feelings of skepticism and distrust in the disinformation swamp that much of today's media environment has become.

OH, GREAT. AND I
HAVE TO SPEND A
WHOLE SEMESTER
STUDYING
THIS STUFF?

Yeah, sorry, you do. We may be living in what can feel like a stupid political moment, especially to members of Gen Z who don't have a lot to compare it to, but that doesn't mean that politics is itself stupid. Politics is a tool, a process, a way for human beings to resolve differences and settle disputes about who gets scarce resources in hot demand. It is not something that happens “out there” and then impacts us, as if we were so many oblivious ducks, paddling passively around in our pond, targets of hunters we neither recognize nor understand. At least, if it becomes like that, we have no one to blame but ourselves because we will have chosen to be mindless ducks.

Politics is, simply and elegantly, the way we decide who gets power and influence in a world where there is not enough power for all of us to have as much as we'd like. As a famous political scientist, Harold Lasswell, once defined it, politics is *who gets what and how they get it*. That sums it up neatly. We can do it nice, or we can do it ugly. The blessing of politics for us humans is that, unlike all of our fellow creatures on the planet, we have a choice about whether we want to act like wild animals, or whether we want to resolve disputes like the civilized beings we like to think we are. And that choice can be our saving grace. Politics offers us an alternative to behaving like the beasts we also are.

Most of our political wrangling is about trying to get rules that treat us or people like us favorably. **Rules** are incredibly important because they can help to determine who will win or lose future power struggles.

An essential element of power is having the ability to tell the controlling **political narrative** about who should have power, how it should be used, and to what

end. Telling a political narrative, or a story about power, that other people buy into can give you enormous authority over them.



It can seem like a pretty grimy activity sometimes, but consider this: politics is what saves us from being like the other animals on the planet. It gives us ways to solve disputes over power without resorting to violence. Instead, we have options of bargaining, cooperating, collaborating, and compromising, even bribing and arm twisting and threatening to pull out of the process. We *can* turn to violence, and of course we *do* at times, but the key point is—we *don't have to*!

Spending a semester learning about something with such a valuable payoff is *not* a waste of your time. You never know when understanding how the whole thing works is going to help you use it to improve your life or help people you care about get something they need. In a democracy, if you think politics is in the hands of clowns, fools, and crooks, you can always try to vote them out. Better yet, get out there and run for something yourself! If enough of you do that, the country will be a different place! Students coming up behind you in Gen-Whatever-Comes-After-Z will thank you, as will all the old folks, who got us into this mess.

WHERE WE GO IN THIS CHAPTER

By the time you finish reading this chapter, you will be able to

- 1.1 ➔ Define politics, government, and economics
- 1.2 ➔ Compare the varieties of political and economic systems and explain how they help us understand the differences among nations, including the United States
- 1.3 ➔ Explain why it is so challenging for us to hold objective views about democracy
- 1.4 ➔ Identify and discuss the ideas that underlie the U.S. political system and that bring us together
- 1.5 ➔ Identify and discuss the ideas that divide us despite our being bound by a common culture
- 1.6 ➔ Explain how narratives can perpetuate particular ideas about politics and economics and how living in a mediated world helps to construct those narratives
- 1.7 ➔ Describe the narratives about citizenship that provide the context in which we navigate politics in the United States

1.1

COMING TO TERMS: POLITICS, GOVERNMENT, AND ECONOMICS

ISN'T THAT A LITTLE
REDUNDANT?
AREN'T POLITICS
AND GOVERNMENT
BASICALLY THE
SAME THING?

➤ Actually, no. Politics ≠ government. Although we often use the two words interchangeably, they are not the same thing.

We said earlier that *politics* is the process we use to decide who gets power and influence. **Government**, by contrast, is a system or an organization for exercising authority over a body of people. **Authority** is simply power that people consider legitimate, that is, that they've consented or agreed to, usually because they have been convinced by a compelling political narrative that that is as it should be. If people stop considering government's power to be legitimate (like the American colonists did with the British in the 1700s), they put themselves into a state of rebellion, or revolution against the government.

Politics and *government* are often used interchangeably because they are so closely related. The process of politics—fighting over rules and the power to make rules—can shape the kind of government we end up with. And the kind of government we establish—the rules and the institutions (or arenas for the exercise of power)—can in turn shape the way politics unfolds.

MAKE THIS CONNECTION! *Politics* produces different kinds of *governments*. The key differences among these governments relate to how much power government officials have over how people live their lives and how much power individuals retain to push back against or criticize government.

At one end of the spectrum, government makes all decisions about how individuals live their lives, and individuals are powerless to push back. At the other end, individuals make the decisions for themselves, and government does not exist. Somewhere in the middle is a government that is ultimately controlled by the individuals who live under it and that has processes in place so that individuals can challenge the government if they feel it has overreached its authority.

TYPES OF
GOVERNMENTS OR
POLITICAL SYSTEMS

➤ The types of governments or political systems range from most government power/least individual power to least government power/most individual power:

Authoritarian governments are governments where the rulers have all the power and the rules don't guarantee any power at all

to the people who live under them. The people who live under authoritarian governments are called **subjects** because they are simply subject to the will of the rulers. They have no power of their own to fight back. They might *think* they do, and they might even participate in “elections” that give them the illusion of control, but they have none. The rulers control the elections just like they do everything else.

Non-authoritarian governments are governments generally based on a philosophy about politics called **classical liberalism** that emphasizes limited government and the rule of law. In non-authoritarian governments the rules regulate the people’s behavior in some respects (outlawing murder, theft, and running red lights, for instance) but allow them considerable freedom in others. The individuals who live under these governments are called **citizens** because government doesn’t have all the power over them—citizens retain some power or rights that government cannot take away and that they can use to push back against an encroaching government. Non-authoritarian governments can be democracies or constitutional monarchies or other arrangements where the power of the leaders over the people is limited in some respect external to the leaders.

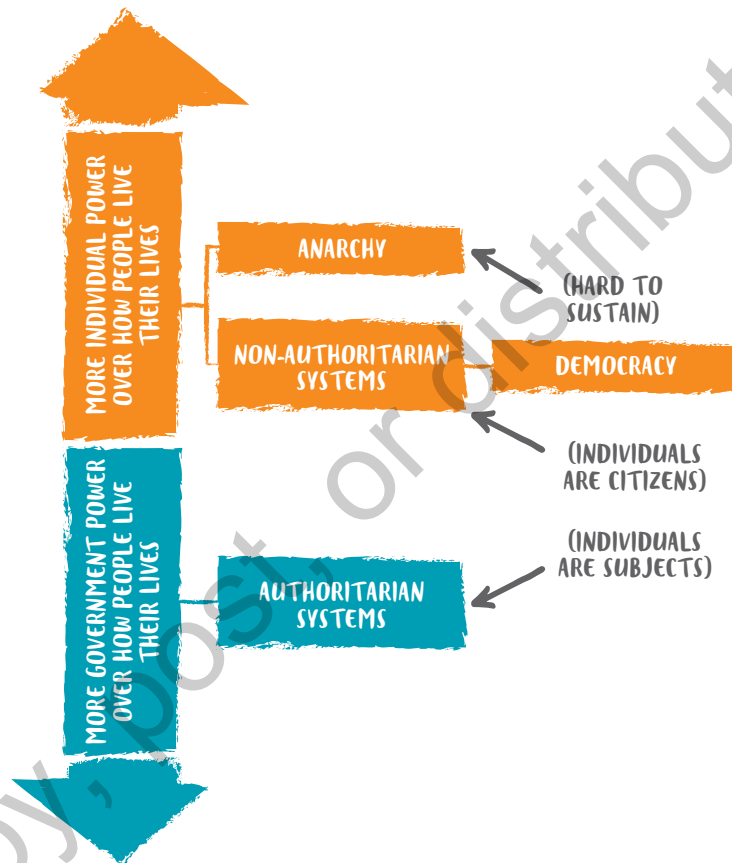
Democracy is a special case of non-authoritarian government in which the citizens have considerable power to make the rules that govern them (based on a theory, called **popular sovereignty**, that says that the people are the ultimate source of power). The degree of that power may vary. In small democracies, citizens may make every decision that affects them. In large ones, they may only choose representatives who exercise power on their behalf. The point is that, in a democracy, collective decisions are made by counting individual preferences about what citizens believe to be best. The individual preference counting processes (more conveniently known as “elections”) are run independently of the people who hold power so that they cannot rig the system to keep themselves there.

Anarchy is no government at all. Individuals are free to do as they wish. The absence of laws means that organizing and transferring power is difficult, if not impossible. We don’t have any lasting real-life examples of societies that even tried to operate as total anarchies.

We can arrange these systems on a continuum ranging from government power to individual power (see Figure 1.1).



1.1: TYPES OF POLITICAL SYSTEMS



WHY DO DISCUSSIONS OF POLITICS USUALLY END UP ALSO BEING ABOUT ECONOMICS?

➤ Power and influence are not the only scarce resources we have disputes over, of course. We also fight over gold and treasure and Maseratis—that is, material stuff. The process for deciding who gets the material resources and how they get them is called *economics*.

Like politics, economics can offer us an alternative to a life of violence and mayhem. If we decide to allow an economic system to make decisions about who gets how much stuff, then we will have a narrative to justify the things we have managed to claim as our own. There will be an agreed-upon distributive system that provides predictability and a story about who deserves what.

TWO SIDES OF THE SAME COIN? Politics and economics are closely related. As you can imagine, the more power you have, the easier it will be to push a narrative that gives you more stuff. The more stuff you have, the more power will come with it. It is impossible to study politics divorced from economics. The language that follows shows how entangled the two are.

TYPES OF ECONOMIC SYSTEMS

➤ Like political systems, economic systems can vary depending on whether they rely on government power or individual choices to make decisions about the distribution of material goods. Kinds of economic systems include

Socialism. Socialist systems are economic systems in which the government (a single ruler, a party, or some other empowered group) decides what to produce and who should get the products. Usually in a socialist system the state or the government owns the utilities, the factories, and other essential property (or, perhaps, all the property). Government may decide that the goods produced should be distributed equally or according to need or only to a valued elite—the point is that who gets the goods is a political decision.

A QUICK HEADS-UP ON USAGE! *Socialism* and *communism* can mean similar things. If you hear references to communism, it may mean something close to what we've described here. To simplify, we'll just go with the term *socialism* in this book. But beware!! Whatever you think these two terms mean, they don't mean what anyone on cable television says they mean. Never has a boring economic system been weaponized to mean so many political and cultural evils or nirvanas as these!!

Mixed economies. Mixed economies are based on modified forms of **capitalism**, an economic system that relies on the **market** to make decisions about who should have what material goods. The market is based on the decisions of myriad individuals about what to buy or sell, creating different levels of demand and supply. When the demand for something (like the latest athletic shoes or a new iPhone) increases, so does its cost until more of it is produced. If production keeps up until the good floods the market and if demand is insufficient to buy all that's been produced, then the price decreases. As in democracies, in mixed economies the fundamental decision makers are regular individuals rather than the government. Also as in democracies, individuals may decide they want the government to step in and regulate behaviors that they think are not in the public interest. It is the type and degree of regulation that determines what kind of mixed economy it is.

Democratic socialism and **social democracy** are, as their names suggest, mixed economies that are a hybrid of democracy and socialism and that span the central divide in Figure 1.2. They are different from the pure socialist economy we just discussed because they combine socialist ideals that empower government to make decisions about how things should be with a commitment to the *political* principle of popular sovereignty and the economic principle of market capitalism that empower individuals. The difference is that

democratic socialists want to achieve socialism through the democratic process, and social democrats are happy to keep the capitalist economy as long as they use the democratic process to attain some of the goals a socialist economy is supposed to produce (like more equality).

Socialism hybrids in theory, and often in practice, try to keep checks on government power to avoid the descent into authoritarianism that plagues most socialist experiments. They generally hold that there is a preferred distribution of stuff that requires prioritizing political goals over the market but that democracy is worth preserving as well. It is democratic governance, a commitment to limiting the sway of government through the power of citizens, that keeps authoritarianism at bay.

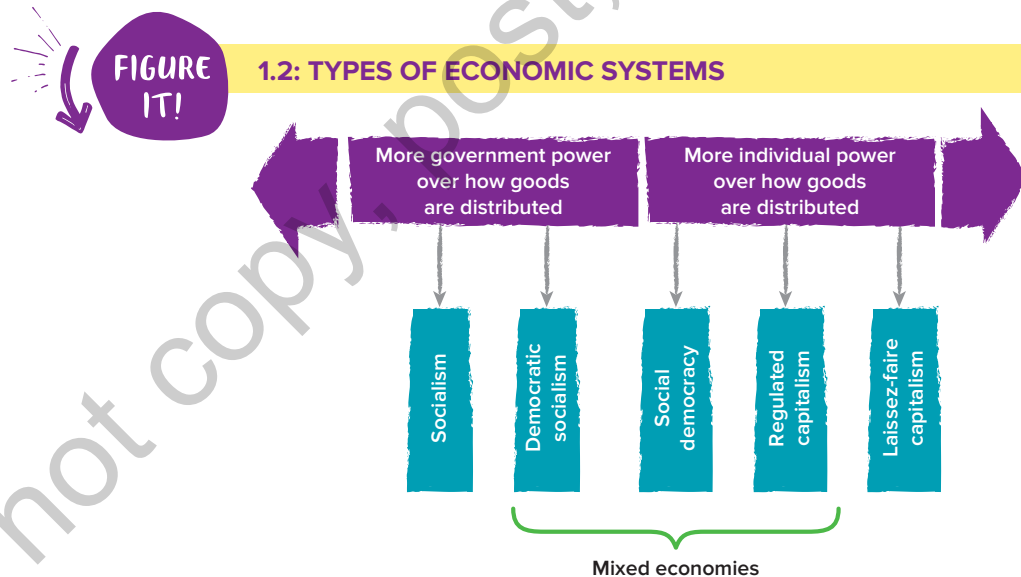
PAY ATTENTION! When people claim to endorse a hybrid of democracy and socialism, note which word is the noun and which is the modifier. The noun will generally tell you where the true commitment lies. Democratic socialists usually prioritize the results of a socialist economy; social democrats tend to prioritize the democratic process over economic outcomes.

Regulated capitalism is also a hybrid system, but, unlike the socialism hybrids, it does not often prioritize political and social goals—like reducing inequality or redressing power inequities—as much as it does economic health. Since the market’s well-being is usually the priority, regulated capitalism enlists government action to that purpose—to limit the formation of monopolies that restrict competition, for instance, or to avoid wild swings of boom and bust that can happen when the market is uncontrolled. Some systems of regulated capitalism may also promote social goals that limit the market somewhat: higher taxation to fund old age pensions, tuition breaks for college, or universal health care, to name a few, but generally not at the expense of market growth or stability.

SEEING BEYOND THE BLURRY LINES. The dividing line between some of the socialism hybrids and regulated capitalism is not always crisp, as one may seem to blend into the other. The distinction to pay attention to is how much political control of the economy the system supports, and to what end. The judgment about what regulations are a legitimate use of government can be the subject of major political debates in democratic countries with mixed economies.

Laissez-faire capitalism. Laissez-faire capitalism (from a French expression meaning essentially “let it—that is, the market—alone”) is what you have when a commitment to capitalism is untempered by any political considerations at all. Laissez-faire capitalism can be subject to wild swings up and down. Some people like to speculate in that environment, but it turns out most people with money want a little bit more stability and predictability when they invest. Governments also find it costly and difficult to deal with the public catastrophes that can result from market crashes (the Great Depression of the 1930s, for instance, or the Great Recession beginning in 2008), or from the displacement, unemployment, and general economic turmoil that followed the COVID pandemic in 2020. Consequently, as with anarchy, laissez-faire systems exist in theory but are problematic in practice. Most capitalist systems find themselves with some sort of mixed economy.

We can also arrange these economic systems on a continuum of more government power over economic decision making to more individual power over economic decision making, as in Figure 1.2.



As you can see, all the mixed economies and laissez-faire capitalism are on the side of more individual power, even though in those systems government might regulate the economy to achieve social goals, like using taxation to provide benefits for the disadvantaged or to provide universal education.

1.2

POLITICAL-ECONOMIC SYSTEMS

THE GRAPHIC
ADVANTAGE

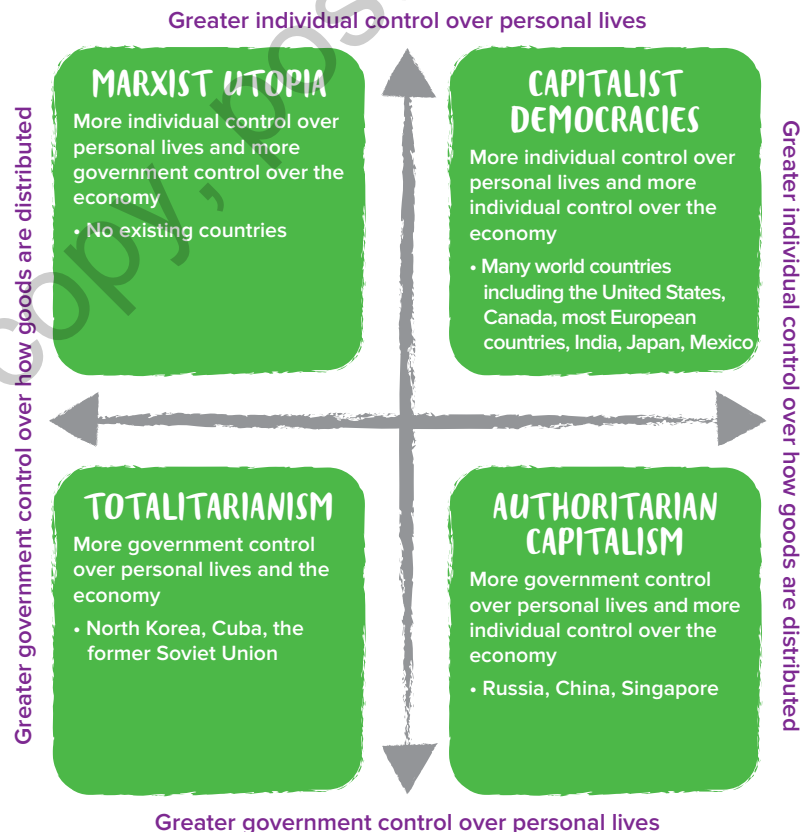
> The advantage of looking at political and economic systems the way we laid them out in the preceding section is that it allows us to understand just how they are different from and similar to each other. And because all nations have a way to manage the distribution of power and material goods, we can layer the two figures from that section on top of each other to create a model that will help us understand the political economic systems of most countries.

Keep in mind that models are just that—they are not detailed depictions of reality. Instead, they focus on key attributes in order to show relationships or structure. *Models are just tools to help us understand.*

So, take a look at Figure 1.3. Here we have placed the vertical axis of politics (ranging from more individual control of how people live on the top to



1.3: A MODEL OF WORLD POLITICAL-ECONOMIC SYSTEMS



FOUR MAIN POLITICAL- ECONOMIC SYSTEMS

more government control toward the bottom) over the horizontal axis of economics (ranging from more individual control of how goods are distributed on the right to more government control on the left). This creates four quadrants where we can place almost any political economic system in the world (and some that have been dreamed of but have never been realized in the world at all).

➤ Think about the kinds of systems that fit into each of these quadrants:

Capitalist democracy. The upper right quadrant includes countries with the most individual control over both political and economic life. These countries have democratic governments and capitalist economies (including democratic socialist economies), although they may be found in different parts of the quadrant depending on how much social and economic regulation they endorse.

The United States has traditionally been in this quadrant, as are the countries of western Europe (although many European countries that are willing to regulate the economy to achieve democratic socialist goals, such as less poverty or a narrower gap between rich and poor, are on the leftward edge of the quadrant). Japan is also in this quadrant, as are India, Mexico, Canada, and many other nations that value individual choices over a heavy government hand.

Totalitarianism. Look diagonally from the capitalist democracies and you find totalitarianism. Totalitarian systems have authoritarian governments that tell people how to live and socialist economic systems where the government also decides who gets what material goods. Governments, not individuals, make the important decisions about power, influence, gold, and treasure.

Countries that fit in here are North Korea and the former Soviet Union. These systems are hard to maintain (witness the demise of the Soviet Union) because they need to keep their populations isolated from the rest of the world lest they be tempted by the freedom and material plenty that exist in richer, capitalist countries.

Authoritarian capitalism. Countries in the lower right quadrant are some of the most interesting. These governments may pretend to have elections, but the electoral process is essentially a sham. Individuals are subjects—they have no rights to push back against a government that might determine how many children they can have or how they dress or grow their hair, or what the media can publish or what websites people can access. They have no legal

recourse or rights of due process if they are convicted of a crime. As far as how individuals live their lives, authoritarian government is the decider.

But—and this is the really interesting part—unlike totalitarian systems, authoritarian capitalist countries are increasingly choosing to let their subjects have some market freedom. Recognizing that global power is economic power, they take advantage of individual entrepreneurship to help drive their national economic engines.

Some authoritarian capitalist states have evolved from totalitarian systems (like Russia and China), and others were structured that way from the start. Singapore has an authoritarian government (at one time chewing gum was illegal because people threw their gum on the ground and defiled public spaces) but also has a thriving capitalist economy and tourist trade.

In 1994, 18-year-old American Michael Fay was convicted of spray-painting cars in Singapore. He was arrested and sentenced to be caned. American claims that his punishment was “cruel and unusual” left Singaporean authorities unmoved since they have no bill of rights that meaningfully limits government action. President Bill Clinton’s administration was able to intervene to get the sentence somewhat reduced, but the example shows dramatically what it can be like to be in a thriving capitalist economy that doesn’t recognize civil liberties.

Note, however, that the evolution can go both ways. Democratic capitalist countries can turn in an authoritarian direction, often through populist or socialist movements led by strong, charismatic figures. We see that today in Venezuela, the Philippines, Turkey, and Brazil. In recent years, movements that feed on a sense of grievance in the population are also picking up steam in Europe and the United States. Although it would have been hard to imagine even a decade or two ago, today it is easy to see how the once-proud American democracy could end up in this quadrant.

Marxist utopia. The upper left quadrant is tough to describe because there are no real-life examples of countries that have a non-authoritarian (democratic) government, where free citizens determine how they will live their lives, and an economy that rejects a capitalist market. The closest we can come to imagining this type of system is probably the society the German theorist Karl Marx thought would emerge after workers had

overthrown capitalism in a revolution (an event he thought was inevitable but that so far has not happened).

MARXISM, TL;DR VERSION. Marx thought that the economic strife inherent in capitalism was at the root of all social conflict, so destroying capitalism would also remove the need for a coercive state to regulate conflict. The revolution would cause the state to wither away, leaving individuals to live their lives freely. Individuals would participate in the production process according to their ability and receive goods according to their need.

Like so many rosy places of imaginary perfection, this one has never survived in the bright sunlight of reality despite the promises of political theorists, party leaders, and political candidates. The promises of democratic socialists to maintain democratic values within a socialist economy have never worked out well for those endorsing democracy.

1.3

POV: WHEN YOUR TEXTBOOK MAKES CERTAIN ASSUMPTIONS ABOUT THE WORLD THAT MAY BE DIFFERENT FROM YOUR OWN

**VALUABLE
PERSPECTIVE TO
HELP YOU LEARN
FROM THIS BOOK!**

➤ Whenever you read a book (or anything, really!), it's a good idea to ask where the authors are coming from. That will make it easier for you to understand what they say, and it will help you unmask any hidden biases. The *whole point* of college is to teach you how to think for yourself, not like your professors or textbook writers, so asking about their perspectives will help you draw *your own* conclusions, not just echo theirs.

Here's what you need to know. This book is written by a political scientist, so, no surprise, it has a pro-science, pro-rigorous critical thinking bias. That means it will push you to think for yourself and to understand complex political situations by referencing what is empirically verifiable where possible, and what is logical, consistent, and reasoned in those cases where empirical evidence is unavailable or nonexistent. There is *a lot* of bad info about politics swirling around in American popular culture these days. Some of it is simply a mistake and some of it deliberately wrong and intended to impact the way we think. Beginning with what we know

to be true, and requiring all the data and info we rely on to stand up to fact-checking, is the best way to arm ourselves against being duped by people with an agenda.

This bias toward science and fact-checking is firmly rooted in a whole system of values that have been a dominant part of American culture for centuries. These are the values that the American founders held and that run strongly through the nation's founding documents, including the Constitution. That value system, older than the republic, comes from the same *classical liberalism* defined earlier as a philosophy based on limited government and the rule of law. Classical liberalism is a world view built on some of the changes that came from the Protestant Reformation, as Europe emerged out of the Middle Ages and into what historians call the Age of Enlightenment (1685–1815). It is in this tradition that most of the capitalist democracies in Figure 1.3 ground their theories about government and individuals.

WAIT—ARE YOU SAYING THAT THE FOUNDERS WERE LIBERALS? No! Well, yes! But not the way you probably think. Today we commonly use the term *liberal* in opposition to *conservative* to distinguish between views that see a positive role for government in making people's lives better and those that prefer to trust the private sector to solve social problems. But both *liberal* and *conservative* in this contemporary sense are in the capitalist democracy quadrant of Figure 1.3, which has its roots in the classical liberal philosophy. To make it less confusing, we will always use *classical* to modify *liberal* when we are referring to the roots of our shared belief system. We talk more about the narratives of classical liberal governance that grew out of the Enlightenment era of the founders later in this chapter.

THE 17TH CENTURY WAS A LONG TIME AGO. CAN WE GET BACK TO THIS BOOK'S POV, PLEASE?

➤ Fair enough. Here's the takeaway: a textbook written from a classical liberal perspective will be based on reality and those propositions that can be tested empirically. It will respect that students, like any democratic citizens, are rational individuals who have the capacity to be critical thinkers and are able to apply the scientific method of empirical verification and provide evidence to back up their arguments and conclusions where appropriate.

SO YOU'RE GOING TO FACT-CHECK US ON EVERYTHING?

➤ Nope! Fact-checking is only appropriate when applied to statements of fact. Fact statements, also called *empirical* statements, use words like "is" or "are" to signal that they are describing something that they propose is true about the world. If we want to claim something is true, we should be able to

back it up with real-world evidence. If we say, “It is raining outside,” a simple look out the window should be sufficient to verify if it is true or false. Whether we want it to be raining or not, we are stuck with the results of our fact-checking. Facts are stubborn things, as they say. They are true regardless of how we feel about them.

If we disagree about whether something is true, we need to review the rules of evidence, retest our claims and continue to research real-world evidence until we can all agree on what the evidence (or science) tells us—again, whether we like the conclusions or not. We don’t just report “two sides” on what is true. That is lazy and misleading. Only one side of an empirical statement can be true at a time.

TO RECAP

- Reality is not subjective. It does not change with the person perceiving it. There are no “two sides” to it and an objective scholar does not have to treat it as though there are. Facts are facts. And facts should be fact-checked.

ARE YOU SAYING THERE ARE NEVER TWO SIDES TO ANYTHING?

- Sorry, but no, again. There are never two sides to a question of fact, but not all statements are factual. Statements about value, or aspirational statements about how we want the world to be are called *normative* statements, the opposite, in a way, of empirical. *Normative* claims are not about how the world *is* but about how we believe it *should*, or *ought* to be. Normative claims are not based in current fact so cannot be fact-checked. Instead, we evaluate them in terms of how clear the terms of argument are, how logically consistent, and how persuasively the claim and the values behind it are justified. In the classical liberal paradigm, it is essential to recognize facts but equally essential that all people have the freedom to own and voice their own normative opinions.

SO WE ARE LOOKING FOR ONE TRUE ANSWER TO EMPIRICAL QUESTIONS AND WE RECOGNIZE MULTIPLE MATTERS OF OPINION TO ANSWER NORMATIVE ONES?

- Bingo. Classical liberalism values science and truth on empirical matters and fairness and impartiality and freedom on normative views.

But—and this is important!!—sometimes people try to confuse the issue by blurring the clean line between fact and opinion, empirical and normative. Maybe they present factual statements as if the truth is debatable and “their truth” is better, or perhaps they try to disguise a normative question as an empirical question of fact that you must agree with. Possibly they are lazy or conflict avoidant or have other reasons to avoid fact-checks. Sometimes this is a simple mistake, and sometimes it is a deliberate political effort to muddy the water. People get their facts wrong all the time. *Misinformation* is simply bad intel, mistaken facts, getting it wrong. Happens to all of us, and we are generally apologetic, embarrassed, and eager to correct the record if we find out. But when false words are spoken or published on purpose,

with an intent to deceive, we are talking about *disinformation*; a bad-faith effort to manipulate people by promoting lies.

As political scientists, we have tools to talk about this, but many people in charge of communicating information in American society—journalists, primarily—get cross-pressured by professional norms and end up failing their audiences by not being clear when it matters.

Take the example of climate change. The actual science here is strong. Climate change is real and happening faster than many scientists had predicted. They may not agree on what we should do about it (note that telltale “should”) or how much of it is due to human behavior versus natural causes, but the scientific writing is on the wall about the thing itself. And yet, some of the people for whom addressing climate change would be costly or disagreeable—a factory owner, for instance, who faces expensive environmental regulations—have decided that rather than arguing on the normative side where it makes sense to argue (what *should* we do and who *should* pay, for instance) they instead argue about the truth of the phenomenon itself. So-called climate deniers hold that climate change is not true—that there is no climate change or that it isn’t harmful to us or that it isn’t caused by humans—and that therefore there is no tough debate to be had about solutions. Problem solved by ... denying there is a problem.

How should we talk about that? How should citizens debate it? How should journalists report it? How does a textbook handle such claims?

Citizens cannot properly process these kinds of disputes unless the people in charge of informing them—teachers (and textbook writers) while they are still in school and journalists for the rest of their lives—play straight with them.

The professional lodestar of journalists is to be fair and “objective,” which to them means not picking sides. Such ethics are laudable when it comes to normative questions or purely political disputes, but they are actually irresponsible when it comes to the truth. They tend to prefer to discuss the “two sides” of the debate over truth as if that were a legitimate disagreement instead of reporting that it is a political tactic designed to help one side win a political battle. In fact, there aren’t two legitimate sides to the truth—not on climate, or vaccines, or contested elections or anything else where politicians decide to play fast and loose with what they (generally) know darn well is true.

**ARE YOU CALLING
ME A LIAR?**

➤ And there it is. Calling something a lie seems harsh or impolite, even when it is true. Calling someone a liar casts aspersions on their honor and integrity, and we are taught, rightly, to be mindful of that. But consider this: if we consider it too rude to call out a political lie, that means that in the name of good manners we are willing to let a mistaken or a dishonest person have an enormous amount of power over the narratives we tell about our communal world. Sometimes, the political actors who are lying strategically to get their way depend on the fact that we are too polite to call them on it. They will get indignant at being called liars and try to shame the truth tellers into silence. Mainstream journalists in particular are susceptible to these disingenuous claims. They are so focused on the need to be objective that they may abdicate their role as truth tellers. They should ask themselves: Is it objective to treat something you know to be a lie as if it might be true? That doesn't seem right, fair, or *objective*.

The scientific perspective holds that it is not unfair to report that one side has factual evidence behind it and another does not, or that one view is based on science and another based on faith, or that political interests who stand to profit from a misunderstanding promote a narrative designed to confuse people about what is true. What is unfair is to create an illusion of multiple truths where none exist, or to cheat people of the chance to know they are being lied to.

Science isn't infallible. It is constantly questioning itself and revising its findings. And yet, there are things we know to be true. Vaccines save millions and millions of lives. There is no systematic, measurable election fraud in the United States. Climate change is real.

Failing to push back on the lies about those issues because we wish to *appear* fair rather than to *be* fair creates the false impression that *everything*, including truth, has two sides; that there is no way to know if one side is right; that declaring that one side is right, even if one brings proof, is somehow pushing one's views unjustly; and, therefore, that good teaching,

**WHAT'S
WRONG WITH
BOTHSIDESING?
DOES IT REALLY
HURT ANYONE?**

good journalism, and good advice generally will be disinterested or impartial to a fault.

The logical consequence of this illusion is a commitment to “*bothsidesing*”—the professional compulsion to soften the claim that someone is lying by defaulting to the “some say A and others say B” format, and providing no guidances as to which is correct, or to blunt the impact of telling the truth about something bad on one political side by finding something just as bad on the other, even if you need to exaggerate in order to make it appear that “both sides are the same.”

➤ The trouble with this practice is that while it might have the virtue of never offending anyone or, conversely, always offending everyone, it creates a false equivalence where none exists. Sometimes one side *is* more correct than the other. By giving equal time to truth and falsehood, one devalues the truth, and promotes confusion. Falsehood does not deserve equal time with the truth.

The deeply cynical goal of disinformation campaigns is to keep people confused so they just give up, concluding that nothing is true. Authoritarian leaders often rely on disinformation campaigns to confuse people, to sap their will and idealism so they don't really notice, or even care, when their governments change from democracies to authoritarianism, and they go from citizens to subjects. To a degree not seen in more than 50 years, the value of the classical liberal model is under assault in the modern world—from China, to Russia, to Turkey and Hungary, even in the United States.

Classical liberal values don't just support our democratic political system and our Constitution; our entire system of education, with its emphasis on academic freedom and the pursuit of truth, depends on them as well. It's hardly surprising that we are sold on this approach but, in increasingly murky times, we think it's important to say so.

1.4

AMERICAN POLITICAL CULTURE

**AMERICANS SEEM
TO BE FIGHTING
ALL THE TIME. DO
WE AGREE ON
ANYTHING?**

➤ Our increasingly media-rich culture gives us many opportunities to hear and participate in political debates, both civil and not so civil. Sometimes it seems like we don't agree on a single thing. But, ironically, it is only because we have traditionally agreed on some fundamentals, in the form of a common political culture, that those disagreements can even take place.

FOUR THINGS TO KNOW ABOUT POLITICAL CULTURE

➤ **Political culture** is a set of *shared* ideas, values, and beliefs that define the role and limitations of government and people's relationship to that government. Because these ideas and values are shared, they pull people together, making them into a single political unit, at least around those basic values and beliefs. Here are five things to know about political culture:

- # Political culture is woven together from political narratives. It is not identical to political narratives, however; political narratives can both unite people and divide them.
- # Political culture is intangible and unspoken. It is hard to get your hands around it or to find the language with which to discuss it. It is especially difficult to be aware of your own political culture. Like the semi-facetious question of whether fish know they are in water, it is interesting to ask whether people recognize their own political cultures if they have never been exposed to another. People who have not traveled or met many people from other countries are more likely to think that everyone thinks like they do, that the beliefs we share are objective reality, not just one optional set of narratives.
- # Political culture is easiest to see when you can step outside of it. Like those fish, it is hard for us to be aware of our environment when we are immersed in it and it's all we have ever known. Unlike fish, we have the ability to transport ourselves out of our environment to get perspective. That is one reason we created the world systems graphic we explored earlier (see Figure 1.3). It allows us to understand our system in relation to others as a first step to understanding the culture that holds our system together.
- # Political culture gives us as Americans (and people of other countries) a common set of assumptions about the world and a common political language within which we can disagree. And boy, do we disagree! Remember that to say that Americans share a political culture is not to say that we agree on everything.
- # *Political cultures do not last forever*, especially if some care isn't taken to preserve them. If a group of people get so divided over their politics that they are no longer in agreement on those basic values and beliefs, they really do not share a language with which they can express their disagreements, and they are more likely to resort to nonverbal and sometimes violent methods to resolve their differences.

SO, WHAT DO AMERICANS BELIEVE?

➤ What does American political culture look like? Our political culture has traditionally been found in the upper right quadrant of Figure 1.3—defined by a preference for more individual control (that is, less government

regulation) of how people live their lives and how they distribute material goods. That means Americans are democratic capitalists whose values are the same Enlightenment values of classical liberalism that were so widely popular during the American founding and that we have already said we see as fundamental to the survival of the democratic tradition.

Within that upper right quadrant, as we saw, there is a fair amount of variation. Many industrialized cultures, especially democratic socialist ones, endorse more regulation to bring about valued social goods like a basic standard of living, guaranteed health care, or more equality, but capitalist democracies take many different positions along that scale. For instance, although universal access to health care is an accepted policy in almost all capitalist democracies, it remains controversial in the United States.

Here are the fundamentals on which Americans seem to have reached a national consensus:

FUNDAMENTALS OF AMERICAN POLITICAL CULTURE

- # **Limited government:** the idea that government cannot really be trusted to be too involved in our lives and that its functions should be restricted to the things individuals cannot do for themselves on their own. (Think national security and bridge building.) Despite the fact that we share no consensus on exactly what constitutes proper government regulation of individual behavior and what is gross and intrusive overreach, Americans tend to believe strongly that governments should not coerce individuals unless it is really necessary for their safety and well-being.
- # **Individualism:** an emphasis on individual rights and what is good for discrete and separate persons rather than what is best for society as a collective whole. In this view, individuals are the best judge of what is good for them, not some governmental authority.
- # **Freedom, equality, and representative democracy:** core values defined in a context of the American commitment to minimal government coercion of the individual, so that ...
- # **Freedom** becomes freedom *from* government. That is different, for instance, from some other democratic capitalist countries whose citizens view their freedom as flowing from a strong government that provides basics like medical care and a social safety net. This gives citizens a level of financial freedom that allows them to focus their time and money elsewhere.

- # **Equality** becomes equality before the law; one person, one vote; and equal opportunity—all forms of equality that require minimal government intervention. Americans tend to reject notions of equality like those realized by affirmative action, in which government steps in to create more actual equality of life chances.
- # **Representative democracy** is a decision-making process by which individuals determine and limit the power that is exercised over them by casting votes to register their preferences for their representatives and the policies they promise. Capitalist democracies cannot exist without a commitment by their citizens to making political decisions through democratic choice and without their guarantee that they will accept the results of that process as the legitimate “will of the people,” whether they win or not—that is, without a commitment to what we call **good loserism**.

HUH? GOOD LOSERISM? IS THAT EVEN A THING? Well, if it's not, perhaps it should be. Because, and this is important, democracies cannot work without a shared commitment to follow the rules of the game. Democracies depend on some people winning and others losing—*all the time*—and the survival of democracies depends on the losers consenting to their loss, having confidence that a loss today does not mean a loss forever, and that another chance to win is around the corner. Trust in the rules of the game and a willingness to accept the loss are not just part of the meaning of democracy. They are essential to the compromise and cooperation valued by the founders and required by the Constitution.

AND IT BEARS REPEATING! Remember that the thing about political cultures is that they are foundational but not eternal. Consensus on the basic elements can weaken, and *without a common culture it is hard, if not impossible, to maintain national unity*. For instance, once a substantial number of colonial Americans had begun to see themselves as a separate people with a distinctly American political culture, union with the British was hard to maintain. Not all Americans shared the desire to break from England, but eventually the cultural, political, and economic forces prevailed, and they severed their ties. Something similar happened in the lead-up to the American Civil War. Where this happened once or twice, it can happen again. The divisions we are about to discuss in American ideologies can become so strained as to damage the underlying cultural foundations. As you read the next section, ask yourself: *What would it mean to the future of the United States if we no longer shared a united political culture?*

THE UPSHOT



Political culture is a gift: it gives Americans a common set of assumptions and a shared language within which to disagree, within bounds, but also the ability to be united when necessary. The challenge is to make sure that differences among citizens do not become so extreme that the political culture can no longer contain them.

1.5

AMERICAN POLITICAL IDEOLOGIES

AH, YES. THOSE DIVISIONS.

- Of course, within the cultural framework of the United States there is plenty of room for disagreement. How limited should government be? How much government regulation should be allowed? How much individualism should citizens endorse? Should government have any role in providing for collective goals? If a majority of citizens have strongly held ideas (religious, ethical, or moral) that they believe everyone should hold, should those ideas be enshrined in government policy, or should government allow the maximum range for individual conscience? How much freedom, equality, and representative democracy should people have, and what should government's role be in guaranteeing it?

The disagreements that citizens have about those sorts of questions are about the boundaries and meaning of the shared political culture. We call the competing narratives we create to explain those disagreements *ideologies*.

THE OLD LEFT-RIGHT SPLIT ON THE ECONOMY

- The traditional ideological division in the United States (as in many industrial countries) has been on the left-right economic dimension, with *conservatives* on the right calling for less regulation of the economy (lower taxes, freer trade, and more competition, to name a few) and *liberals* on the left calling for more government regulation (like government-enforced retirement savings, social welfare programs, universal health care, and free preschool programs).

Over the past century, that economic dimension emerged as the most salient because, in the years after the Great Depression of the 1930s, just making a living was the major concern for most people.

Starting in the 1960s and 1970s, however, other non-economic issues started to motivate voters—issues like racial desegregation; civil rights; women's rights, including reproductive rights; prayer in schools; and crime reduction.

MAKING IT MORE COMPLICATED—THE POLITICAL DIMENSION

- These issues split Americans along a political dimension much like the vertical line we considered earlier, with some Americans saying that government should allow the maximum freedom for all people, regardless of race,

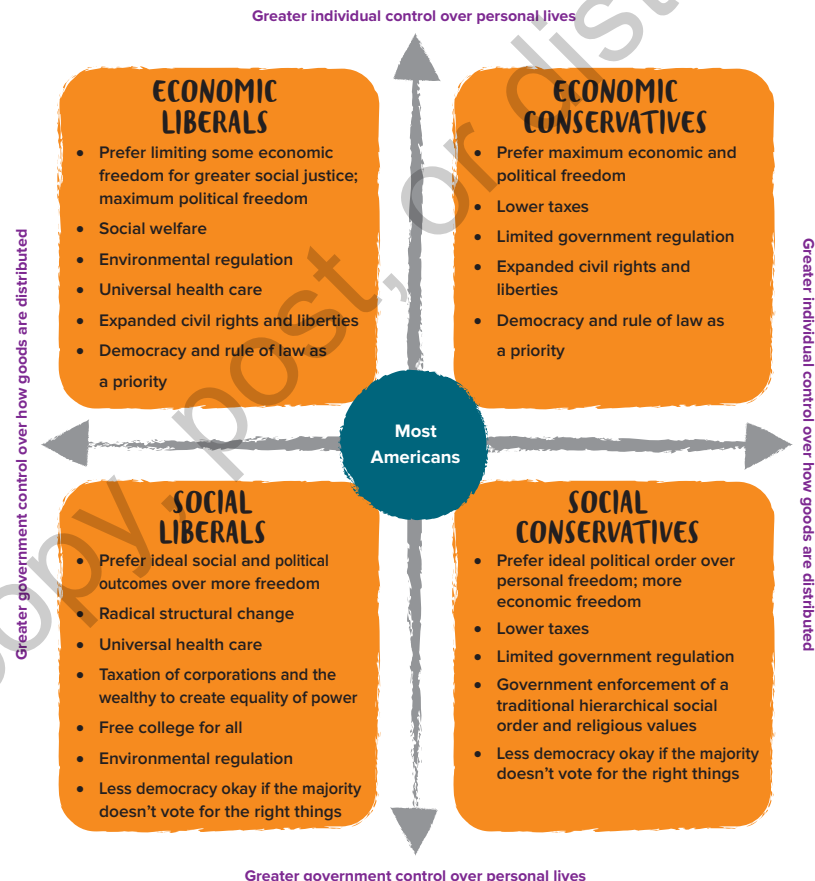
gender, religion, or sexual orientation, and others saying it is government's job to enforce a proper social order defined by their beliefs.

When you combine the horizontal, economic ideological dimension with the vertical, political ideological dimension as in Figure 1.4, you get four ideological categories—roughly parallel to the four world political-economic systems in Figure 1.3—that are important for understanding American politics today.



**FIGURE
IT!**

1.4: AMERICAN IDEOLOGIES TODAY



A CLOSER LOOK AT AMERICAN IDEOLOGIES

> Let's take a closer look at each of these:

Economic conservatives. These are the people who believe in the narrative that the government that governs best governs least. They have a fundamental distrust in the government's ability to solve complex

problems (President Ronald Reagan once said that the scariest words in the English language were “I am from the government, and I’m here to help”) and a deep faith in individual ingenuity to do so. They favor getting government out of the boardroom (economic decisions) and out of the bedroom (decisions of personal morality).

In terms of policy, economic conservatives are close to being **libertarians** (those who believe in minimal government) when it comes to social issues. Consequently, many favor policies like gun rights, reproductive rights, civil rights, LGBTQ+ rights, end-of-life decisions, and legalized marijuana. They are equally libertarian when it comes to economic issues. Although they generally endorse taxation to provide basic police security and military defense, they are more likely to believe that government should leave many of the other things it currently does (collecting and doling out Social Security and health care benefits, building roads, managing the penal system, exploring space, etc.) to the private sector. They are pro-immigration to expand the pool of workers and entrepreneurs. Most want only as much regulation of the economy as it would take to keep competition fair and the market from tanking.

Although economic conservatives generally don’t love government, they embrace the protections in the Constitution and the democratic process as a check on government power. If they fail to win an election, they believe in good loserism—waiting to fight again another day rather than trying to change the rules or discredit or subvert the process in order to create a more favorable political environment for themselves.

Since the rules of the game in the United States tend to benefit the wealthy and powerful even when they lose an election, good loserism doesn’t entail a lot of sacrifice or risk for many economic conservatives, but it still has stabilizing implications for American democracy.

Key to understanding economic conservatives: While economic conservatism clearly supports policies that benefit wealthy people, not all economic conservatives are rich. Some are motivated by a concern for a system that seems rooted in the values of procedural justice, that the rules should treat all people the same and that giving an edge to some people to compensate for some past harm done by the system, possibly risks creating a new harm. They think people should work hard for what they have and should be able to keep the fruits of their labor for themselves and their families, not to allay concerns of social justice. And, of course, there is always the alluring possibility that their

hard work will pay off enough to make them rich, in which case they want rules that will protect their wealth!

Economic liberals. The economic liberal narrative is also founded on the notion that citizens should be able to decide how to live their lives. Where it diverges from the story told by economic conservatives is, first, in seeing citizens not just as individuals but as members of groups, some of which are often not treated equitably by society, and, second, in believing some government action may be necessary for all people to reach their full potential. As you would guess, economic liberals don't trust the government much more than economic conservatives do. They see it as heavy machinery that can be used wisely or foolishly, to be operated with care, and not while under the influence of strong emotion.

Thus, economic liberals favor an expansion of civil rights protections—the elimination of racism and the expansion of immigration, women's rights, LGBTQ+ rights, and the rights of individuals with disabilities. That means they oppose restrictions on voting rights, penal codes that disproportionately jail people of color, and constitutional amendments prohibiting reproductive rights or marriage equality. Economic liberals are very libertarian when it comes to whether individuals get to call their own shots, but their narrative says that some individuals might need a boost from the government to overcome barriers that might prevent them from living fulfilling lives.

Consequently, economic liberals favor economic policies to provide a basic standard of living to all individuals. They support Social Security, Medicare (health care for the elderly), and universal health care, although they disagree on the form it ought to take. They believe in free college education or at least in requiring favorable terms for student loans. They support free lunch programs, free preschools, and free prenatal care to be sure kids from all backgrounds get a good start in life. They are pro-immigration and pro-diversity for its own sake, because they think it makes the United States a more culturally rich country. They support environmental regulation to address the crisis of climate change and using government to provide infrastructure (roads, bridges, dams) to improve life and to provide jobs.

Even though they embrace government action to further their goals, economic liberals, like economic conservatives, practice good loserism, prioritizing the Constitution and the democratic process over their policy preferences. That results in a “two-steps-forward, one-step-back” type of incremental policy change, as the founders had hoped, rather than revolutionary change that could be a shock to the system.

Key to understanding economic liberals: Accepting that sometimes they will lose means that it may take economic liberals multiple runs through the electoral cycle to accomplish their policy goals, and sometimes those goals are undone by their political opponents and have to be established anew. They don't like that, but they know that halting, slow, and incremental policy making is the price they pay to maintain democracy and the principle of limited government. A super-efficient and fast-acting government can make policy quickly, but it would also be powerful enough to stomp all over individual rights and demolish democracy.

Social conservatives. Social conservatives are usually economically conservative but are often not as far to the right on that continuum as economic conservatives. Many support Social Security and Medicare and even the Affordable Care Act (sometimes called Obamacare), but they often see the proper allocation of those resources as having to do with “deservingness,” where they believe that some people have rightly earned those benefits and others have taken advantage of the system unfairly. What distinguishes these folks from most other Americans is that they subscribe to a vision of American society that puts a priority on the maintenance of a traditional social order that they believe is the true way people should live.

For those people who believe strongly that their vision of how people should live their lives reflects absolute truth, it is not unreasonable that they would want to put that vision into law. Social conservatives include several groups who feel that way about their world view. Traditionally, evangelical Christians have believed that the United States is a Judeo-Christian nation (as opposed to one embracing multiple religious traditions, of which only one is Judeo-Christian) and that its laws should flow from that tradition. Consistent with this perspective are the views that abortion and birth control should be outlawed, prayer should be allowed in school, and marriage should be exclusively between a man and a woman.

Non-Christian social conservatives can also have concrete ideas about the way people should live. Those who believe that society has a natural hierarchy where some groups are naturally at the top of the heap—whether that group is men, whites, or some other group or combination of groups—believe there is a particular order, often one that existed in the past (that's what makes it conservative), that the law should promote and enforce.

So, for example, laws consistent with the goal of maintaining a social order that prioritizes the status and power of men might allow the state to regulate birth control, health care, and the availability of abortion services in order to keep women dependent on their male partners. Such laws might promote a tax code that rewards marriage over single

life; and they would likely not include subsidies for childcare that would free up women to work outside the home.

In similar fashion, laws might support a social order that elevates whites or Christians or any other group that the society decides it values. Because these kinds of social orders are difficult to maintain in a democratic society (because the people who belong to groups that are placed lower on the social order can simply vote against them), laws restricting the voting rights of those people become popular with social conservatives, as do rules that require the teaching of a particular interpretation of history that shows the dominant group in the most favorable light. And because the dominant group believes it has truth on its side, democratic values that hold that multiple views should be represented, or academic values that put a priority on challenging conventional wisdom and thinking critically, find few defenders.

Key to understanding social conservatives: Because they hold that there is a “right” way to order society, social conservatives tend to believe that those who disagree with them have failed to see the light, or mistakenly think the power structure should be different from the one social conservatives believe to be the natural order of things: people who disagree with them need to be shown the way or corrected. Social conservatives also believe the appropriate role for government is to play a strong role in creating and enforcing laws that curtail social behaviors they view as “abnormal,” unnatural, or corrosive to society and reinforcing the standing of those they consider to be righteous or deserving. While both economic liberals and conservatives tend to endorse a “live and let live” philosophy, social conservatives are more likely to believe that everyone should live *their* way. Period. They often see individuals or groups in all three of the other ideological quadrants of American culture as opponents who look down on them and reject their values. *The sense of grievance that they are being looked down on is a powerful motivator.*

Social liberals. Social liberals or **progressives** (the use of this term can be confusing as some economic liberals also refer to themselves as progressive) also have a tendency to believe they have a fundamental truth on their side—in their case a belief that human beings are entitled to live a decent life and that it is government’s job to sweep aside any barriers that might prevent them from doing so. They want climate change addressed immediately, regardless of the cost. They want to see the entire private health care system, including private health insurance, replaced with a government-run system that holds down costs and prevents what they see as unacceptable profiteering off human misfortune. They want taxes on wealth and structural changes in the

capitalist economic system that produces huge disparities in income. They want college tuition to be free for all Americans, regardless of income, which requires drastic reform of the higher education system. All told, social liberals want a stronger role for government not only to create social change but also to restructure the economic system so that there is no undue inequality of wealth to privilege some people over others.

Perhaps not surprisingly, social liberals, like their social conservative counterparts, often see people in all three of the other ideological quadrants we have discussed as their political enemies, in this case enemies who stand in the way of progress because they profit from a corrupt or unequal society. And even people who would be their political allies, who encourage them to accept something less than their ideal outcome in order to move forward, are seen as obstacles to the realization of their fundamental values.

Many of the policies advocated by social liberals are generally unpopular with the American public because they are easily labeled as “socialist” by their opponents—a word that carries a lot of baggage in a culture as committed to limited government as the United States. But social liberals believe that government should enact policies based on the values that they hold to be right or true even if they are unpopular—on the grounds, for instance, that most people just don’t know what’s good for them or they are blinded by greed or privilege. Because their supporters are not large in numbers and they often lose elections, good loserism holds few attractions to social liberals. Often they blame losses on a rigged system or unfair behavior on the part of their opponents rather than on their inability to attract majority support. But in rejecting democratic outcomes, they approach authoritarian impulses that, like those of social conservatives, run counter to American political culture.

Key to understanding social liberals: Those who are seriously committed to an ideology of social liberalism generally reject the incremental change that economic liberals are willing to accept as the price of doing business in the United States, in favor of a more radical philosophy that says that incremental change will never be enough and that those who advocate it are part of the problem for supporting a classist, unfair system.

Also, although they can be very vocal, people in this quadrant have so far been a relatively small slice of Americans overall. If you think about it, a country whose culture is in the upper right quadrant of our world graphic (capitalist democracies defined by limited government control over individual lives and the economy) is less likely to generate a lot of supporters of an ideology that endorses stronger government responsibility for both. The social liberal quadrant doesn’t

grab a lot of adherents because it pushes the limits of Americans' limited-government, individualistic political culture.

TRUTH VS. DEMOCRACY? Remember that both social conservatives and social liberals fall in the lower two quadrants of our ideology graphic—that is, in less democratic, less classically liberal, more authoritarian ideological categories where individuals exercise less control over their life choices. Individual choice through the democratic process and the framework of the Constitution is less important to people whose beliefs fall in this quadrant than is following a leader who promises to promote their views on the social order. Especially because they feel they have truth on their side, they may feel obligated to refuse to compromise with their opponents, and are less likely to be good losers, two trends that do not strengthen democracy. Another reason that social conservatives, in particular, may be less committed to democratic processes over their policy goals is that they are a shrinking demographic in this country. As their numbers decline, they face the real possibility that they will lose in a majority-rule decision. As such, good loserism may be costly for them because they are not at all sure that a loss today will be followed by a win tomorrow. Both groups are quick to declare that the system is rigged or that the process is corrupt if it doesn't seem to produce the result they favor, and both have favored redesigning electoral laws to give them political wins when they command less than majority support.



Our in-depth look at American ideologies notwithstanding, most Americans are closer to the middle of the ideological scheme than they are to the extremes of any of the four quadrants. They may be socially liberal on some issues, economically conservative on others. Politics is not equally salient, or relevant, to everyone's lives, so lots of people just ignore it until an election rolls around. It is true that in recent years Americans have gotten more tribal—more likely to want to hang out with other people who share their views—but for many people these categories are just not personally relevant in policy terms.

In Chapter 7, on political parties and interest groups, we talk about where these groups fall along the contemporary political spectrum in the United States and how they got there. Here is the short version: At least since the Great Depression, Republicans have traditionally been the party of economic conservatives. Economic liberals were Democrats, the party of President Franklin Roosevelt, whose “New Deal” launched massive new social programs and projects to get the economy on its feet. Plenty of social conservatives followed Roosevelt into the New Deal, but in the 1960s and 1970s, when the Democrats became the party of civil rights

under Lyndon Johnson, Southern social conservatives split off to the Republican Party.

Today the Republican Party is an uneasy alliance of economic conservatives and the social conservatives who were initially invited in by economic conservatives to shore up their numbers but who ultimately came to shape the party in their own more populist and autocratic image, culminating with the election of Donald Trump, who is not particularly conservative or liberal (although he has identified as both in his time), as president in 2016 and 2024. With Trump's unrelenting insistence (even as he ran for president in 2024) that Republicans accept his lie that he was the real winner of the 2020 election, the party has been further divided between stalwart longtime serious economic conservative Republicans like Liz Cheney, the former Republican Congresswoman from Wyoming, and former Congressman Adam Kinzinger on the one hand and party extremists like Representatives Marjorie Taylor Greene and Matt Gaetz, who in some cases seem to have only the vaguest idea of how American government actually works but who may be far more in tune with the future of their party. The Democrats are having an identity crisis of their own as the economic liberals, who have traditionally defined the ideological parameters of the party, fight off what seems like an effort by social liberals who want to redefine the party in *their* image. For the first years of the Biden administration, the two parties managed to suppress their biggest differences in the interests of getting their common agenda passed, and no officials in the Democratic Party have overtly challenged the fundamentals of classical liberalism. With Kamala Harris's 2024 loss, however, the party began second-guessing the positions it took and reopening old debates about their future. Fun times in American politics!

GEN GAP!

HOW OUR BIRTH YEAR AFFECTS OUR POLITICS

With apologies to The Who—one of the all-time great rock bands of the 20th century—these *Gen Gap!* features in each chapter are talkin' 'bout *your* generation.

Why? Because opinions about public issues are distinctly and measurably different among members of different **generations**—that is, people who were born within the same general time period and share life experiences that help shape their political views. Knowing how different generations think about political issues gives us insight into why certain people are likely to vote the way they do, why politicians make different kinds of policy appeals to different groups, and even what the future of American politics might look like. Knowing how your own generation experiences American politics can help you place your own values and opinions among those of your peers.

There is no universal agreement on the exact years the political generations start and end, but most scholars consider a generation to be a group of people born within the same 15-to-20-year time span. Members of the Greatest Generation fought in World War II, the Silent Generation built the country to postwar prosperity, the Baby Boomers were the hippies and the people who hated the hippies, Gen Xers were the ones without a name who came after the Boomers, and the Millennials were the ones born from about 1980 to the mid-1990s. Gen Zers (most of you probably fit here) are on track to be the most well-educated generation. You are also the first generation to have lived your whole life with a screen in your hand, and the first in a long time to have spent your formative years in a pandemic lockdown and to have lived through one of the most serious challenges to American democracy we have seen. Generations are impacted by their own formative experiences and also by the major events that occur during their lifetimes.

The generations as broken down by birth year, age, and pivotal historical events are shown in Table 1.1, and their diversity is illustrated in Figure 1.5. Throughout the chapters in this book we'll look at some of the data available about how the different generations view various aspects of their lives as Americans. Sometimes the most interesting data are broken up not by generation but by different age cohorts, but it can be very revealing nonetheless about how people of different ages view different aspects of our society.

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TABLE
IT!

1.1: DEFINING EACH GENERATION

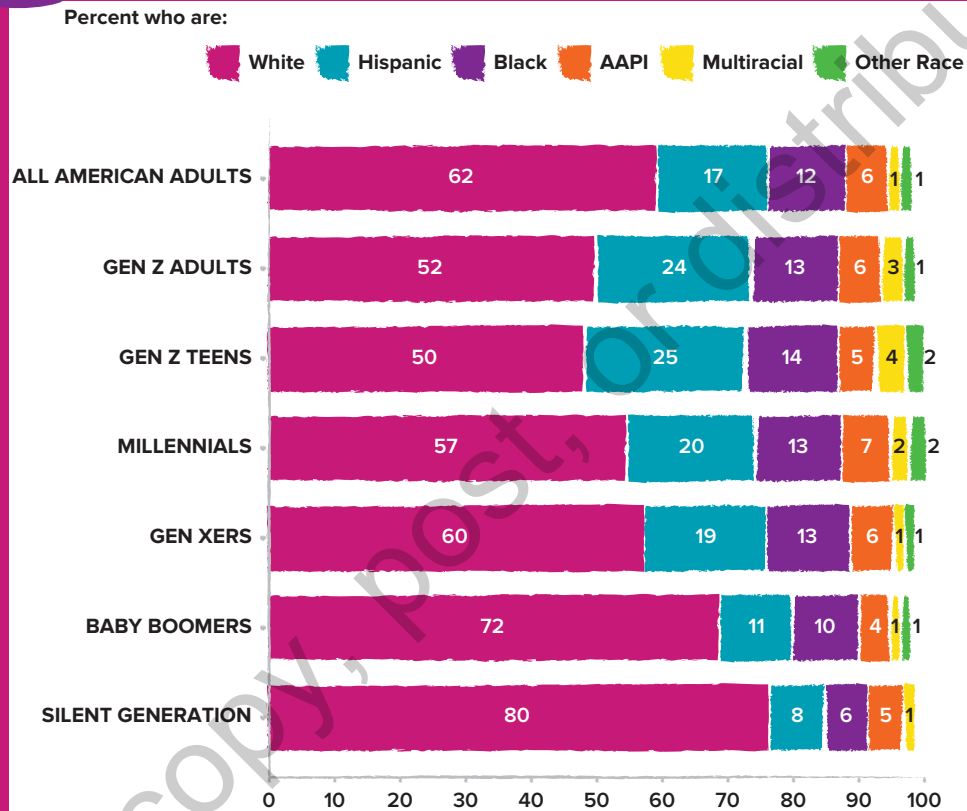
Generation++	Born	Age in 2023	Percentage of Population in 2023*	Pivotal Cultural Events	Percentage of the Electorate in 2023
Gen Z	1997–2012	11–26	23.7%	Pervasiveness of social media Sandy Hook shooting (2012) Parkland, FL, shooting (2018) Uvalde, TX, shooting (2022) COVID pandemic (2020–2022) January 6 insurrection (2021)	15%
Millennials	1981–1996	27–42	24.9%	Terror attack on the Twin Towers in New York City (September 11, 2001) Tech explosion of Internet and social media, including smartphones Columbine shooting (1999) Sandy Hook shooting (2012)	27.7%
Gen X	1965–1980	43–58	22.4%	AIDS crisis (1980s) Debut of MTV (1981) Rise of the personal computer (1990s) End of the Cold War (1991) O. J. Simpson trial (1994) Oklahoma City bombing (1995)	24.9%

Generation++	Born	Age in 2023	Percentage of Population in 2023*	Pivotal Cultural Events	Percentage of the Electorate in 2023
Baby Boomers	1946–1964	59–77	23.2%	TV replaces radio as dominant broadcast medium Civil rights movement (1954–1968) Vietnam War, the draft, and antiwar protests (1960s–1970s) Assassinations of President John F. Kennedy (1963), Martin Luther King Jr. (1968), and Robert Kennedy (1968) Woodstock music festival (1969) <i>Roe v. Wade</i> (1973) Watergate and President Richard Nixon’s resignation (1972–1974)	25.9%
Silent Generation and Greatest Generation	1901–1945	78 and older	5.8%	Financial crash of 1929 and the Great Depression Attack on Pearl Harbor (1941) and World War II President Franklin D. Roosevelt’s New Deal (1933–1939) McCarthyism (1950s) The Cold War (1947–1951)	6.5%

++ The next generation will be *Gen Alpha*, people born between 2013 and, according to most experts, 2024.
* Calculated by the author from "National Population by Characteristics: 2020–2023," U.S. Census Bureau, June 25, 2024, <https://www.census.gov/data/tables/time-series/demo/popest/2020s-national-detail.html#v2023>.

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**FIGURE
IT!****1.5: THE NATION'S GROWING DIVERSITY REFLECTED IN ITS
YOUNGER GENERATIONS**

Source: "A Political and Cultural Glimpse Into America's Future: Generation Z's Views on Generational Change and the Challenges and Opportunities Ahead," Public Religion Research Institute, January 22, 2024, <https://www.prrri.org/research/generation-zs-views-on-generational-change-and-the-challenges-and-opportunities-ahead-a-political-and-cultural-glimpse-into-americas-future/>.

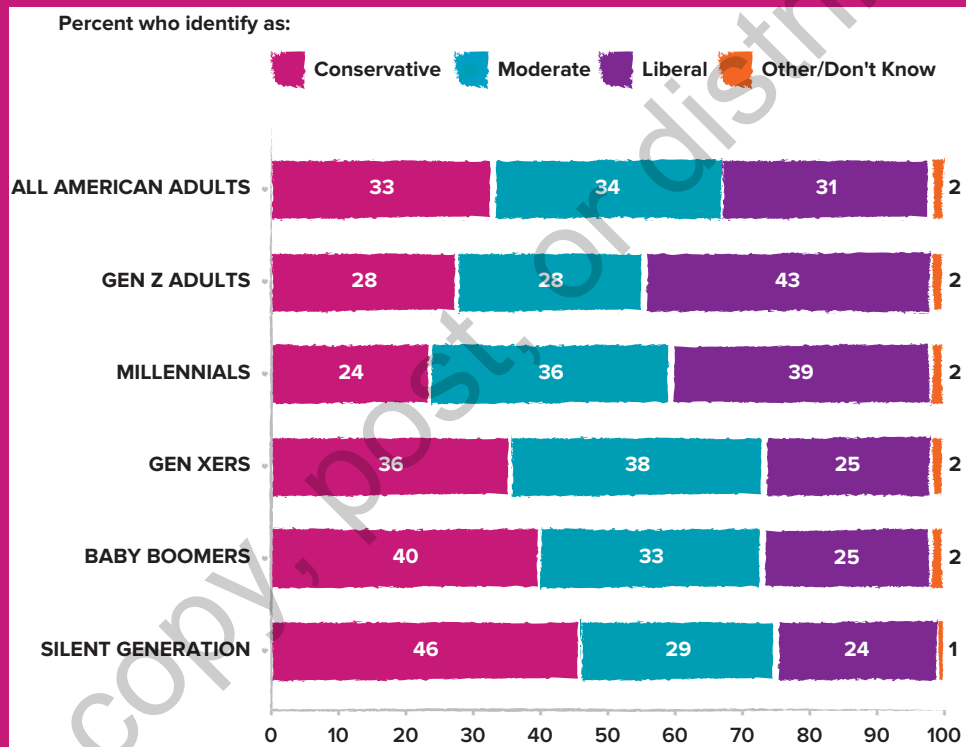
**WHO YOU ARE:
GENERATIONS DEFINED**

Take a minute to study Figure 1.6 and think about the differences in political ideology among the various generations over time. One of the reasons the generations have such different opinions is that they live in different worlds. The members of a generation are affected by

world events and shifts in society, technology, and the economy that occur during their lives, especially during childhood. These formative events contribute to a generation's world view, along with their attitudes, behavior, and lifestyle.

FIGURE IT!

1.6: POLITICAL IDEOLOGY VARIES ACROSS THE GENERATIONS



Source: "A Political and Cultural Glimpse Into America's Future: Generation Z's Views on Generational Change and the Challenges and Opportunities Ahead," Public Religion Research Institute, January 22, 2024, <https://www.prii.org/research/generation-zs-views-on-generational-change-and-the-challenges-and-opportunities-ahead-a-political-and-cultural-glimpse-into-americas-future/>.

TAKEAWAYS

- ➔ **America is becoming more diverse.** Whites have gone from making up 80 percent of the Silent Generation to only 52 percent of Gen Z, who are on track to be the most diverse generation yet. The Center for American Progress predicts that by the year 2050 there will no

(Continued)

(Continued)

longer be any clear racial or ethnic majority. How is that likely to change power politics in the United States?

→ **The Millennial generation continues to grow, with young immigrants adding to its numbers.** Millennials have overtaken Boomers as the nation's largest living adult generation. How will a country dominated by them differ from one led by Boomers?

→ According to the study carried out by the Public Religion Research Institute, older generations tend to be more conservative than younger people. **Gen Z adults are the most likely of any generation to identify as liberal, at 43 percent (although there is a growing gender gap on this), followed by Millennials at 39 percent, compared with just 24 percent of the Silent Generation, 25 percent of Baby Boomers, and 25 percent of Gen Xers.** In what ways might being liberal, an ideology that sees a role for government in improving people's standards of living, be tied to the diversity and socioeconomic plight of younger Americans? How might it reflect their diversity?

1.6

POLITICAL NARRATIVES AND THE MEDIA

THE INTERSECTION OF POLITICAL NARRATIVES AND MEDIATION

→ This section of the chapter is about the power of narratives, but it is also about the ways we receive them and create them—the channels through which they are disseminated to us and by us. It is about the media through which information passes.

WHAT DO YOU MEAN BY MEDIATION?

→ Mediation, from the Latin word for “middle,” is essentially the act of connecting. Think about the word. In law, mediation is the process of introducing a third party into a dispute between two opposing sides to help find a way to bring them together. The mediator is the connector.

In a related way, just as a medium is a person through whom some people try to connect with those who have died, *media* (the plural of medium) are channels of communication and connection. Clearly, the integrity of the medium is going to be critical to the trustworthiness of the things we connect to. A scam artist posing as a person with psychic abilities might make money off the desire of grieving people to contact a lost loved one. In just that way, powerful people might tell false narratives that attempt to manipulate the needs of others in order to fulfill their own craving for personal glory.

CONTROLLING THE NARRATIVE = POWER

ANOTHER WAY TO THINK ABOUT IT. Imagine water running through a pipe. Maybe the pipe is made of lead, or is rusty, or has leaks. Depending on the integrity of the pipe, the water we get will be toxic, or rust colored, or limited. *In the same way, the narratives and information we get can be altered by the way they are mediated by the channels through which we receive them.*

In every one of the political-economic systems we discussed earlier in this chapter, people with opposing views struggle mightily to promote their narrative about who should have power, how it should be used, and to what end. Successfully controlling the political narrative can give the people doing the controlling a great deal of power over others. Here are some important things to understand about how the relationship between power and narratives works:

Political narratives can promote democracy, or not. Democratic narratives hold that all people have a tale to tell and that their voices are worthy of being heard. Agreement on this narrative is essential for the toleration and mutual respect that supports democracy. When that agreement cannot be formed or it erodes, narratives that promote the power of one group over another can flourish. Even in democratic cultures, the narrative is disseminated and communicated through media that can alter the story itself.

In authoritarian governments, the narrative is not open to debate. The rulers set the narrative and control the flow of information so that it supports their story about why they should have power. Subjects of these governments accept the narrative, either because they haven't been exposed to alternatives in the absence of free media or communication with the outside world (think North Korea) or out of fear (think Russia). Authoritarian rulers often use punishment to coerce uncooperative subjects into obedience.

Political narratives were much easier to control before the print media. Authoritarianism used to be a lot easier to pull off in the Middle Ages and earlier, when few people could read, and maintaining a single narrative about power that enforced a dictator's rule was relatively simple. For instance, as we see in Chapter 2, the narrative of the divine right of kings kept monarchs in Europe on their thrones by declaring that those rulers were God's representatives on earth.

Because most people then were illiterate, that narrative was passed to people through select and powerful channels that could shape and influence it. It was mediated by the human equivalent of the pipe we mentioned earlier. Information flowed mostly through medieval clergy

and monarchs, the very people who had a vested interest in getting people to believe it.

Following the development of the printing press in 1439, more people gained literacy. Information could be mediated independently of those in power, and competing narratives could grab a foothold. Martin Luther promoted the narrative behind the Protestant Reformation (1517–1648) to weaken the power of the Catholic Church. The European Age of Enlightenment (1685–1815) gave voice to the multiple narratives about power that weakened the hold of the traditional, authoritarian monarch.

Ideas about the free flow of information flourished in 18th-century political narratives of classical liberalism because they limited government power. The narratives that emerged from the Enlightenment emphasized individual rights and non-authoritarianism, a tradition we have been referring to as classical liberalism. Note that “liberalism” in this context does not mean the same as “liberalism” today. Both liberalism and conservatism today have their roots in the classical liberal tradition produced by Enlightenment thinkers.

One of the key narratives of classical liberalism was a story that said power is derived not from God, but from the consent of the governed. In philosopher John Locke’s version of this narrative, people agreed to enter into a *social contract* whereby they would give up some of their precious natural rights in exchange for the convenience and security government provides. However, they retain enough of those rights to rebel against that government if it fails to protect them. In order for it to work, the social contract requires that people have the freedom to criticize the government (that is, to create counternarratives) and also the protection of the channels through which information and narratives could flow (like a press free of influence by those in power).

The founding political narratives of the United States grew out of the Enlightenment tradition. As we will see in Chapter 2, Thomas Jefferson was clearly influenced by Locke’s work. The Declaration of Independence is itself a founding narrative of the rights of Americans: it tells a story about how the British violated those rights, and it was designed to combat the British narrative that America should remain part of its colonial empire.

At the time of the founding, literacy among average citizens was still very limited. Political elites played a major role in mediating information, but new channels also started to play a part—newspapers, pastors, and independent political actors all began to shape narratives. You can see the American founders’ commitment to the ideal of an independent press to promote those narratives in the fact that they put freedom of the press in the First Amendment to the Constitution.

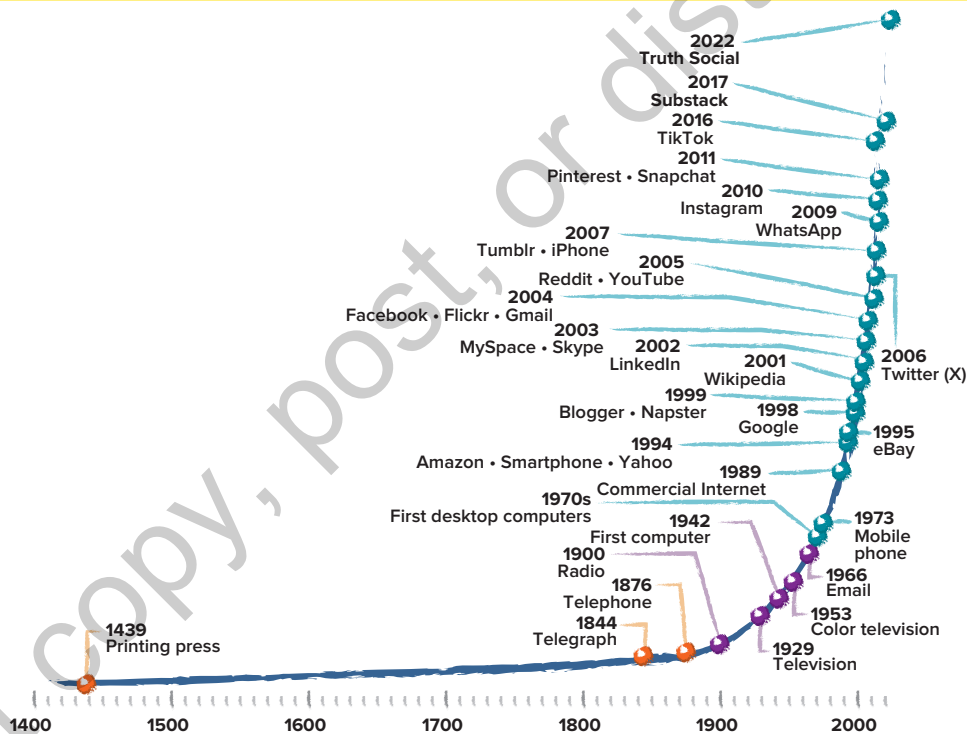
Though Americans today still largely adhere to the basic governing narrative the founders promoted, the country is now light years removed from their era, when communication was limited by illiteracy and the scarcity of channels through which it could pass.

AND TODAY?

- Consider the timeline in Figure 1.7. It illustrates the development of the media through which we get information, receive narratives, and send out our own information.



1.7: MEDIA TIMELINE



KEY POINT! A revolution like the one fought by the Americans against the British would look entirely different in today's highly mediated culture. *But remember, it is because of the revolution they fought and the narrative of a free press that followed (and of course enormous technological development) that the mediated world we live in today is even possible.* It is not possible in places like North Korea that isolate their subjects from information, or places like Russia that weaponize social media and kill journalists and others who are critical of the government.

LIVING IN OUR MEDIATED WORLD

THE UPSHOT



Unlike the founders, certainly, but even unlike most of the people currently running this country (who are, let's face it, kind of old), people born in this century are almost all **digital natives**. They have been born in an era in which not only are most people hooked up to electronic media, but they also live their lives partly in cyberspace as well as in "real space." For many of us, the lives we live are almost entirely mediated. That is, most of our relationships, our education, our news, our travel, our sustenance, our purchases, our daily activities, and our job seeking—our very sense of ourselves—are influenced by, experienced through, or shared via electronic media. If not for Apple, Google, Facebook, and Amazon, how different would our lives be? How much more directly would we need to interact?

We conduct our lives through channels that, like the pipe mentioned earlier, may be made of lead, may be rusty, or may be full of holes. When we do an online search, certain links are on top according to the calculations made by the search engine we use. When we shop online, certain products are urged on us (and then haunt our online life). When we travel, certain flights and hotels are flagged, and when we use social media, certain posts appear while others don't. No one checks very hard to be sure that the information they receive isn't emerging from the cyber equivalent of a lead pipe.

Living mediated lives has all kinds of implications for everyday living and loving and working. The implications we care about here are the political implications for our roles as citizens—the ones to do with how we exercise and are impacted by power. We will be turning to these implications again and again throughout this book.

1.7

MEDIATED CITIZENSHIP

IMAGINE @JMAD
ON INSTA,
#CREATING
AREPUBLIC
#WRITINGTHE
CONSTITUTION
#GROUPWORK
SUCKS

Being a citizen in a mediated world is just flat-out different from being one in the world in which James Madison wrote the Constitution. It's the genius of the Constitution that it has been able to navigate the transition successfully, so far.

After the Constitution had been written, so the story goes, a woman accosted Benjamin Franklin as he was leaving the building where the founders were working. "What have you created?" she asked. "A republic, madam, if you can keep it," he replied.

The mediated world we live in gives us myriad new ways to keep the republic and also some pretty high-tech ways to lose it. That puts a huge burden

MULTIPLE MEANINGS OF CITIZENSHIP

on us as *mediated citizens*—as people who are constantly receiving information through channels that can and do shape our political views—and also opens up a world of opportunity.

Among the things we are divided on in this country is what it means to be a citizen. We know what citizens are: they are people who live under a non-authoritarian government that gives them rights to push back against government action and even to overthrow it if it doesn't protect their rights. Anyone born in the United States is a citizen, as are people born to Americans living abroad. There are also various ways for those not born here or to American parents to become *naturalized citizens* if they arrive legally and follow the procedure that the law lays out.

➤ But once you are a citizen, born or naturalized, what is your role? James Madison had ideas about this. He thought people would be so filled with what he called “republican virtue” that they would put country ahead of self. (The term *republican* here is used in a general sense, to mean a representative form of government, not a particular party.) That is, they would readily put aside their self-interest to advance the public interest. As we will see in Chapter 2, this *public-interested citizenship* proved not to be the rule, much to Madison's disappointment. Instead, most people demonstrated *self-interested citizenship*, trying to use the system to get whatever they could for themselves. This was a dilemma for Madison because he was designing a constitution that depended on the nature of the people being governed.

Today we have that same conflict. There are plenty of people who put country first—who enlist in the armed services, sometimes giving their lives for their nation, or who go into law enforcement or teaching or other lower-paying careers because they want to serve. There are people who cheerfully pay their taxes because it's a privilege to live in a free democracy where you can climb up the ladder of opportunity. Especially in moments of national trouble—when the World Trade Center was attacked in September 2001, for instance—Americans have willingly stepped up to help their fellow citizens. (We should note, however, that such fellow feeling for other Americans may be breaking down amid today's increasingly tribal and fragmented culture. Just consider our polarized vaccination and mask-wearing behaviors!)

At the same time, the day-to-day business of life turns most people inward. Many people care about self and family and friends, but most don't have the energy or inclination to get beyond that. President John F. Kennedy challenged his “fellow Americans” to “ask not what your country can do for

WHAT DOES CITIZENSHIP LOOK LIKE IN TODAY'S MEDIATED WORLD?

you but what you can do for your country,” but only a rare few have the time or motivation to take up that challenge.

The world today is not the same world that Madison wrote about or designed a government for. Mediated citizens experience the world through multiple channels of information and interaction. That doesn't change whether citizens are self-interested or public-interested, but it does give them more opportunities and raise more potential hazards for being both.

Many older Americans who are not digital natives nonetheless experience political life through television (network or cable news) or through web surfing and commenting, usually anonymously. This is not always a positive addition to our civil discourse, but they are trying to adapt. You may have grandparents who fit this description. They want to know why you are not on Facebook.

But younger, more media-savvy digital proficients—Gen Zers, Millennials, Gen Xers, and even some tech-savvy Baby Boomers—not only have access to traditional media, if they choose, but also are accustomed to interacting, conducting friendships and family relationships, and generally attending to the details of their lives through electronic channels. Their digital selves exist in networks of friends and acquaintances who take for granted that they can communicate in seconds. They certainly get their news digitally and increasingly organize, register to vote, enlist in campaigns, and call each other to action that way. We will be following these new patterns of mediated citizenship in the Generation Gap (*Gen Gap!*) features you will find in each chapter.

THE HAZARDS OF DIGITAL PARTICIPATION ...

Hashtag activism, the forming of social movements through viral calls to act politically—whether to march, to boycott, to contact politicians, or to vote—has become common enough that organizers warn that action has to go beyond cyberspace to reach the real world or it will have limited impact. #BlackLivesMatter, #ItGetsBetter, and #NeverAgain are three very different, very viral, very successful ways of using all the channels available to us to call attention to a problem and propose solutions.

An intensely mediated world does not automatically produce public-interested citizens. People can easily remain self-interested in this world. We can custom program our social media to give us only news and information that confirms what we already think. We can live in an **information bubble** where our narratives get reinforced by everything we see and hear. That makes us more or less sitting ducks for whatever media narrative is directed our way, whether from inside an online media source or from a foreign power that uses social media to influence an election.

... AND THE OPPORTUNITIES

In an age of rampant disinformation, not just from foreign sources but from those who seek to create chaos in the United States, information bubbles are more dangerous than ever. Without opening ourselves up to multiple information and action channels, we can live an unexamined mediated life—at best—and do harm to our fellow citizens at worst.

➤ Mediated citizenship also creates enormous opportunities that the founders never dreamed of. Truth to tell, Madison wouldn't have been all that thrilled about the multiple ways to be political that the mediated citizen possesses. For Madison, even public-interested citizens should be seen on Election Day but not heard the rest of the time, precisely because he thought we would push our own interests and destabilize the system. He was reassured by the fact that it would take days for an express letter trying to create a dissenting political organization to reach Georgia from Maine. Our mediated world has blown that reassuring prospect to smithereens.

Here's just one example of how mediated citizenship has upset the founders' applecart. At a time when basic political *norms*—the unspoken, unwritten ideas that support the U.S. Constitution and give structure to democratic government—are being challenged as never before, millions of high school students and their supporters took to the streets after the 2018 mass shooting at Marjory Stoneman Douglas High School in Parkland, Florida, to challenge one of the richest, most powerful groups in America for control of the national narrative on gun safety. And in November 2022, Maxwell Frost, a 25-year-old who had found his political motivation in the March for Our Lives movement that grew out of the aftermath of the Parkland shooting, was elected as the first member of Congress from Generation Z.

As young people transfer that battle from the street to the ballot box, they are following in the footsteps of multiple groups who have fought for their rights in American politics. The U.S. government was not born perfect, but it has proved over time to be an ideal open to the efforts of its citizens to perfect it, to become closer to the inspiring image that President Reagan liked to quote: "the shining city upon a hill."

Whether you agree with the students' political activism or not (and there are many people on both sides of the issue), the fact that *high school* students could organize and execute such a movement is a pretty impressive testament to their own political and digital savviness. It also demonstrates that despite the founders' misgivings about popular government, they gave us a constitutional framework that is strong, adaptable, long lived, and open to citizen action. It has seen the country through a lot.

THE UPSHOT



As the ability of ordinary citizens to create narratives has grown and as the media disseminate them widely, we regularly see and have to evaluate or even participate in these battles about issues that are deeply important to Americans. Throughout this book we will encounter conflicting narratives that define some of our greatest divisions. Read these narratives carefully. Would you frame any of them differently?

Mediated citizens are not just TV-watching couch surfers in their information bubbles receiving and passing on narratives from powerful people. We can be the creators and disseminators of our own narratives, something that would have terrified the old monarchs comfortably ensconced in their divine-right narrative. Even the founders would have been extremely nervous about what the masses might get up to.

As mediated citizens, we have unprecedented access to power, but we are also targets of the use of unprecedented power—attempts to shape our views and control our experiences. That means it is up to us to pay critical attention to what is happening in the world around us.

Big Think

- 1.1 → Can you make a case for authoritarian over democratic values? What would it look like?
- 1.2 → Explain how government and politics differ.
- 1.3 → Determining your biases can be difficult but can also make communication easier since you know where you are coming from. What biases do you bring to political conversation?
- 1.4 → What kinds of things could destroy a political culture, and what would be the result?
- 1.5 → Considering the political ideologies illustrated in Figure 1.4, do you have a good sense of where your own ideology fits? How would you describe your political beliefs?
- 1.6 → Put yourself back in time to the years of the founding and imagine how things might have gone if today's technologies were available to the founders.
- 1.7 → Have the advances in media made us freer or less free to create our own stories?

Key Terms

CONCEPTS

anarchy	generations	norms
authoritarian capitalism	good loserism	political culture
authoritarian governments	government	political narrative
authority	hashtag activism	politics
capitalism	ideologies	popular sovereignty
capitalist democracy	individualism	public-interested citizenship
classical liberalism	information bubble	regulated capitalism
democracy	laissez-faire capitalism	representative democracy
democratic socialism	limited government	rules
disinformation	market	self-interested citizenship
economics	media	social democracy
equality	mixed economies	socialism
freedom	non-authoritarian governments	totalitarianism

KEY INDIVIDUALS AND GROUPS

citizens	liberals	social conservatives
conservatives	libertarians	social liberals
digital natives	mediated citizens	subjects
economic conservatives	naturalized citizens	
economic liberals	progressives	

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