CHAPTER 1

Why Should We Care about Politics?

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Learning Objectives

When you have completed this chapter, you should be able to:

- Understand the difference between a direct and representative democracy.
- Distinguish between legitimacy and authority.
- Explain how legitimacy and authority are related to power.
- Identify political resources and why they are the tools of power.
- Define elitism and pluralism, and explain how each offers a different view of how resources are distributed in society.
- Differentiate equality of opportunity from equality of outcome.
- Relate political equality to equality of opportunity, and economic and social equality to equality of outcome.
- Define liberty, and explain the trade-offs between liberty and equality of outcome.
- Appreciate government as the arbiter in disputes between liberty and social responsibility.

Chapter Outline

1.1 Introduction

We live in a time of profound political, economic, and social change. It is buffeting our social fabric and testing our political institutions. The Millennial generation and Gen Z, with attitudes and ideas rooted in different lived experiences from their elders, are replacing Baby Boomers, who for their whole lives have been accustomed to having the stage to themselves, uprooting long-settled social norms and challenging traditional ideas about who holds power. As the nature of our economy changes, a small number of people have become unimaginably wealthy while many others find it harder each year to get by. Our public discourse has become coarse and contentious. We struggle to understand each other, to get along with each other, to function as a nation.

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Since the turn of the century, we have experienced a cascade of events that would have seemed unreal in an earlier time, like they belonged in a novel or a movie instead of everyday life. The millennium started with a presidential election that was seemingly impossible to resolve. The 2000 election turned on the outcome in Florida, where Democrat Al Gore and Republican George W. Bush were effectively tied. An extended recount of votes sent the election into a seven-week overtime period that culminated in an unprecedented 5–4 Supreme Court decision that stopped the recount with Bush ahead by just a few hundred votes, handing him an Electoral College win and the presidency despite having won fewer votes nationally than Gore.

No one had ever witnessed anything quite like it, but it was only the first of a series of unprecedented events that would define politics in your lifetime. Less than a year later, terrorist attacks on the World Trade Center and the Pentagon on September 11, 2001, stunned the nation and thrust politics into the center of daily life. As anthrax-coated letters began appearing in the mail, Americans of all generations turned to elected leaders for reassurance and to government agencies for help. Such is the way of life in a crisis, when public decisions supersede private actions.

In the days following the attack, Americans experienced a wave of unity and national purpose, and political differences were briefly put aside. But the good feelings soon gave way to an era of partisan rancor, as America became involved in intractable wars in Afghanistan and Iraq. Support for these conflicts, initially backed by leaders of both major political parties and large majorities of Americans, plummeted as they became bogged down by insurgencies and American casualties grew. Iraq, in particular, came to be regarded by many as an unnecessary war of choice justified by questionable claims about the security threat posed by the regime of Saddam Hussein.

Then came a deep recession and, in 2008, a financial crisis that rocked confidence in global markets and had some economists speculating about whether we were on the verge of a second Great Depression. Against this backdrop, promising to bridge partisan divisions and reshape America's direction, Barack Obama was elected the first Black president of the United States—a feat so remarkable that, until it happened, mainstream political commentators wondered whether it was possible despite polling evidence that suggested it was inevitable.

Although Obama's election defied history, his promise to bridge partisan differences fell short. Following a flurry of legislative activity during his first two years in office—including passage of a controversial law to extend health-care coverage to the uninsured—a reaction from the right by "Tea Party" patriots casting themselves in the mold of the original American revolutionaries resulted in Republicans regaining control of the House of Representatives in 2010, abruptly dashing the president's legislative plans and ushering in another round of angry partisan gridlock.

The twenty-first century has been filled with political surprises and turmoil, from a tied presidential election that was decided by the Supreme Court to the election of the first Black president to the unprecedented resistance that greeted his successor. Pictured: 2000 electoral vote loser Al Gore; Barack and Michelle Obama acknowledge their supporters; Donald Trump sports a "Make America Great Again" cap. *Sources:* Top left: Joseph Sohm/Shutterstock. Right: Everett Collection/Shutterstock. Bottom left: Joseph Sohm/Shutterstock

Just when it appeared the Obama era would be short-lived, a reaction from the political left against the perceived excesses of the very wealthy took hold across the country in late 2011 as people took to the streets in solidarity with those who had built a permanent occupation in a park in New York's financial district. Although "Occupy Wall Street" had faded from the headlines by the following spring, the nation remained focused on economic inequality. This shift in the political narrative away from the anger generated by Obama's activist first two years, combined with a gradually improving economy, helped lift Obama to reelection in 2012, albeit with the continuation of divided government and partisan conflict.

Then, in 2016, Donald Trump was elected president. It was a shock to the political system unlike anything in modern times. Even as he rose to the top of a crowded field of Republican candidates, Trump's candidacy was dismissed as a sideshow by most political professionals. Although he won the Republican presidential nomination, many Republican leaders believed he would lose the general election. Trump consistently trailed former Secretary of State Hillary Clinton in opinion polls. His nominating convention failed to inspire the public. Survey data indicated he lost all three presidential debates.[1] He shook up his campaign leadership twice, inexplicably campaigned in states where the election was not competitive, and faced blistering allegations about his personal and professional behavior.

When the votes were counted, Clinton ended up with a national plurality in excess of 2.8 million, or approximately 2.1 percentage points.[2] She won the popular vote by a larger margin than John F. Kennedy in 1960 and Richard Nixon in 1968. But in states that Democrats had won reliably for twenty-four years, Trump staged one of the greatest upsets in American political history. In Pennsylvania, Michigan, and Wisconsin, he mobilized White voters in rural and exurban counties in numbers few experts believed

possible—just enough voters to give him slender victories in these states and more than enough votes in the Electoral College to claim the presidency, marking the second time in sixteen years that the popular vote runner-up would go to the White House after that hadn't happened since 1888.

Donald Trump was a pop-culture figure, a reality television star known for his real estate empire and a business mogul who crafted a public persona through careful branding. Unlike his predecessors, the presidency for him was an entry-level job; he had never held an elected or military office. To his supporters, this was his appeal: at a time when so many Americans felt the country was off course, he was the outsider who promised to disrupt Washington. To his detractors, his lack of experience was a source of worry. You can read more about Trump's hold on the Republican electorate and how he claimed his party's nomination in Demystifying Government: The Antisystem Appeal of Donald Trump.

After an election that was anything but normal, the Trump administration was anything but typical. Things transpired at the whirlwind pace of a reality show hungry to maintain the attention of its viewers. Hardly a week went by without something unprecedented happening. Consider that in the first months of his administration, Trump

- Issued an executive order to begin building a wall on the Mexican border and insisted Mexico would pay for it
- Issued an executive order to ban entry to the United States from seven Muslim-majority countries, which was partially reversed by the courts
- Fired the acting attorney general, forty-six U.S. attorneys, the FBI director, and his first chief of staff
- Accepted the resignation of his first National Security Advisor, who later pled guilty to making false statements to the FBI, then retracted his guilty plea, then was granted a presidential pardon during the final days of the administration
- Accepted the resignation of his first press secretary
- Blocked reporters from the *New York Times*, CNN, and other media outlets from attending press briefings
- Ordered a missile strike on Syria and bombed Afghanistan
- Withdrew from the Paris Agreement on climate change
- Became the subject of an investigation into Russian interference in the 2016 campaign, which led to the appointment of a special counsel
- Became the subject of a lawsuit claiming violations of the Constitution's emoluments clause prohibiting the president from profiting from his office
- Filed for reelection and continued holding campaign-style rallies with supporters

And these are just highlights of the first six months of an administration that would see the longest shutdown of the federal government in history, an impeachment trial, and a presidential brush with COVID-19 amidst controversy over the administration's handling of the pandemic. It culminated in Trump's defeat to Joe Biden in the 2020 election, making him the first president since 1992 to be voted out of office. But the election was not Trump's final act. He refused to admit defeat and claimed he was denied victory by widespread voter fraud that he was unable to prove in multiple court appearances.

Source: Iev Radin/Shutterstock

Against this backdrop, Joe Biden took office promising a return to stable times. But the conditions that elevated Trump to the presidency are unlikely to be reversed by an election. The Trump era can be understood as a reaction to the events of the Obama years, when deepening inequality precluded many Americans from sharing the gains of a rebounding economy and when social progress for previously excluded groups pro-

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The Antisystem Appeal of Donald Trump

Donald Trump told Republican voters that their leaders had betrayed them. He spoke directly to older, White, less-well-educated individuals who would form the core of his coalition, contending that Republican leaders didn't have their economic concerns at heart and were hapless in their efforts to take on the legacy achievements of the Obama years, such as the Affordable Care Act. Trump's rhetoric positioned him as a populist, someone who would empower ordinary people in his base and make their lives better by upending a Washington establishment he claimed didn't work for them. He had an uncanny ability to channel their economic and social grievances, and they were hungry to support someone who spoke their language. That Trump was a wealthy real estate investor and thus part of an economic elite did not undermine the potency of his message; instead, he was able to present himself as a "winner" who would make winners out of supporters who cheered the candidate's promise to blow up the Washington establishment. Trump's base was so loyal that he told a campaign audience in Iowa he could "stand in the middle of Fifth Avenue and shoot somebody and [he] wouldn't lose voters."[T1] He was probably right.

Trump played a large field of 2016 Republican candidates to his advantage during a string of debates that punctuated the primary calendar. Former Florida Governor Jeb Bush, in particular, proved to be a perfect foil for Trump. Other than the Clintons, no family is more associated with the politics of the previous three decades than the Bushes. Trump understood that a share of the Republican electorate saw Bush as the embodiment of everything they detested about Washington, and he used Bush's privilege as a weapon against him. With trademark swagger, Trump swatted away Bush as a politician bought and paid for by special interests, establishing dominance over the former governor by dismissing him with scorn and derision. This put Bush—and other Republicans who would later fall by the wayside—in a defensive position that made them appear weak and hapless.

Republican leaders initially disregarded Trump's campaign even though he performed well in opinion polls. It was easy to dismiss someone with no political experience and a makeshift organization as unserious—until he started winning primaries. At that point, various "Never Trump" efforts began to materialize, but because they were swimming against a populist tide, they had the feel of a party establishment attempting to shape the process for their own benefit. When Trump characterized these efforts as an attempt to rig the primaries for elite interests at the expense of the people, he deepened his connection with the largest and most animated group of Republican primary voters. Although a majority of Republicans supported other candidates, their loyalties were spread across a large field, and efforts to block Trump from the nomination proved fruitless.

duced a backlash that found voice in a candidate who promised to close the nation's borders to Muslims and deport millions of undocumented immigrants. Trump promised to hear the voices of those who feel that the economic changes of the young century have left them behind or who express anger and anxiety about America's growing multiculturalism. Whether or not he did, these concerns are likely to continue to shape our politics long after Trump's departure.

Much more than a sea change in policy came out of the most disruptive presidency in memory. Trump was a polarizing figure who generated great passion and intense animosity, and the Trump years accelerated the division of the country into opposite camps that feared seeing the other empowered. Immediately following the 2016 election, 72 percent of Clinton voters said they were afraid of what was to come (whereas on the winning side, a comparable 40 percent described themselves as relieved).[3] In 2020, voters on both sides feared violence from supporters of the losing candidate.[4] These are not typical reactions to an election, but they are signs that we are living through an unusually precarious moment.

Profound political, economic, and social change can be exhausting—or it can be energizing, depending on how we react. And our reactions can be critical to determining how political events will play out. Whether we pay a lot of attention to politics or ignore it completely, whether in times of comfort or times of distress, we live in a country where you can draw a straight line between your choice of whether or not to get involved and the kind of government we get. No one will make you vote if you don't want to, and no one will make you keep up with the news (well, your professor might, but you'll be back

to having free choice over your news habits in a few months). You can make your own choices about what you know and whether or how much to get involved. Some combination of these individual decisions—and the choice to be apolitical is a decision—determines what happens in Washington, in your state capital, in your community, and to you.

So how much should you care about what happens in politics? How much does political participation mean to you personally? Wait—don't answer yet. Let's talk first about where you fit in—about the big and small ways being a citizen invites you to engage in the political process—before deciding whether it's worth your time and energy to give politics and government a second thought once you're done with this course. Let's use the quiz in Table 1.1 as a starting point.

1.2 Democracy and Everyday Life

Ever since grade school, we've had a pretty basic sense of what it means to live in a democracy. At the same time, we don't always know what democracy means in everyday life, except maybe for some of the obvious things like voting and making contributions to political candidates. These are the most direct and visible ways we interact with government and politics. Think, though, about some of the choices in the "Is it relevant?"

TABLE 1.1 Is It Relevant?

Here's a list of activities that may or may not constitute ways we can interact with the political process. Select the ones you believe have something to do with your relationship with government or politics.

1. Voting in a congressional election
2. Watching the *Daily Show* on Comedy Central
3. Joining AAA (American Automobile Association) for towing services
4. Driving no more than 10 mph over the speed limit to avoid getting a ticket
5. Making a $10 contribution to a candidate for mayor
6. Attending a private college or university
7. Camping at Yosemite
8. Buying a Diet Coke
9. Buying a lottery ticket
10. Flushing the toilet

If you selected all ten choices—you're right. Surprised? Here are the reasons why:

1. Easy question: voting is the most obvious way we participate in politics.
2. Political and social satire get us to think about what government is doing.
3. Even though it may not be why we join, organizations like AAA lobby elected officials over legislation.
4. Government officials write a lot of rules we live under, like speed limit laws, and enforce them with agents like police officers who determine whether 10 mph over the limit is bending the law too much.
5. Another easy one: money plays a big role in politics.
6. Whether it's adhering to national antidiscrimination policy on admission or hiring decisions, or administering federally subsidized student loans, even private schools find it hard to escape the influence of government.
7. National parks like Yosemite are preserved through government actions.
8. Almost every state imposes a tax on food items. If you live in Delaware, New Hampshire, Montana, or Oregon and you answered "no," go ahead and give yourself credit because they have no sales tax.[5]
9. Lotteries are established and supported by state governments, and the proceeds are often used to pay for government programs.
10. You can't even find privacy from government actions here. Most places have a sewer system that wouldn't be there if not for the government.

Score Yourself: If you got 8–10 correct, you pay more attention than most people to politics and government. Odds are you know what C-SPAN is (and if you don't, go to https://www.c-span.org). If you got 5–7 correct, you have a pretty good feel for the role of government in our lives. If you got fewer than 5 correct—keep reading!

quiz. We can also interact indirectly, passively, or without direct knowledge that we're in a political situation at all.

That's because a government as big and complex as ours has great reach in our lives—greater than we probably realize.

In any form, **democracy** entails a few basic things: participation by the people, the willing consent of the people to accept and live by the actions of government, and the recognition that we all have basic rights that government can't take away from us. These are the things Abraham Lincoln was talking about in the passage from the Gettysburg Address that mentions "government of the people, by the people, and for the people."

democracy: A government created by the people over whom it rules.

It's easy to imagine how these prerequisites for democracy might not always hold. We often choose not to participate—or may end up unknowingly participating without giving consent. At various times in our history, those who did not own property, people of color, women, and young people were denied the most basic political freedoms. Even today there are obstacles to voting that fall disproportionately on poor individuals and minorities (see Demystifying Government: When Laws Make It Hard to Vote).

disenfranchised: Losing or being denied the legal right to vote by intentional or unintentional means.

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When Laws Make It Hard to Vote

The basic question of who would get to vote cast a long shadow over the 2020 election. With the COVID-19 pandemic raging and health officials warning people not to assemble in close proximity, most states offered a vote-by-mail option. But President Trump lashed out at the procedure, calling it a source of fraud and claiming without proof that among the almost 64 million mail ballots cast were enough fraudulent votes to tip the election to Joe Biden.[T2] Given the president's attempts to undermine mail-in voting, it's not surprising that more mail ballots were cast by Democrats, and Trump tried to have those ballots set aside in states he lost. He was unsuccessful, but his efforts represented only one way that voters in 2020 faced being **disenfranchised**—denied the right to cast a vote because of hurdles that aren't in the way of other voters.

In some instances, the government itself was the source of these roadblocks. Voter ID laws, on the books in a number of states, can be a source of disenfranchisement. Thirty-six states have embraced these laws to prevent people from voting multiple times or registering to vote in multiple locations. Most states request voters to provide a form of identification; six require a photo ID, such as a driver's license.[T3]

Voter ID requirements sound like a simple way to protect the vote, but they run the risk of undermining it. That's because some groups are less likely than others to have the identification needed to vote. A 2014 report by the federal Government Accountability Office found that voter ID laws reduced turnout among young people and new voters,[T4] and other studies have found evidence of decreased turnout among Latinx, Black, Asian American, and multiracial voters.[T5]

The politics of voter ID laws complicates things because support or opposition to the policy plays out along partisan lines. Individuals who are more likely to be disenfranchised by voter ID laws tend to be Democrats, and those promoting the laws tend to be Republicans. In close elections, even a small difference in turnout between Democrats and Republicans can be decisive, so the effects of ID laws can be profound. Some Republican officials have openly acknowledged this advantage. In 2019, a senior advisor to the Trump campaign candidly admitted that his party "traditionally" relied on voter suppression methods to compete in close states, echoing the sentiment expressed by Republican officials in Florida, Pennsylvania, and Wisconsin that voter ID laws were designed solely to reduce turnout among Democrats.[T6]

Complicating things further is the lack of support for the claims of widespread voter fraud used to justify the laws. Over a period of fourteen years, one investigator found only thirty-one cases of voter misrepresentation, the kind of fraud that voter ID could prevent. During this time, over 1 billion votes were cast in federal, state, and local elections.[T7]

Although the evidence for widespread misrepresentation may not be there, people certainly believe voter fraud is a problem. The sentiment that voter fraud happens with great or some frequency was expressed by almost half the respondents to a *Washington Post*-ABC News poll taken before the 2016 election. Only 1 percent of respondents held the correct view that voter fraud almost never occurs.[T8] Immediately following the 2020 election, fully 70 percent of Republicans felt the election wasn't free and fair, with almost eight in ten echoing President Trump's assertion that mail-in balloting was a source of fraud.[T9]

1.3 Making Democracy Practical

LEARNING OBJECTIVE
Understand the difference between a direct and representative democracy.

direct democracy: Democracy without representation, where each eligible individual participates in decision making.

representative democracy: A form of democracy in which eligible individuals choose others to make decisions on their behalf.

republic: Any nation with provisions for the selection of representatives who make decisions on behalf of those who select them. James Madison said a republic was "a government in which the scheme of representation takes place," as compared to direct democracy.

Does this mean that the democratic ideals that our politicians like to praise at Memorial Day parades don't really work in America? Does it mean that they work, but unevenly? How much does government act poorly or inappropriately, simply because the principles it's based on don't fully translate to real-world conditions? No system is perfect, but which imperfections are you willing to live with, and which ones, if any, are intolerable? These are hard questions that don't invite a single answer. And they go to the heart of how we function as a people.

Democracy is both an imperfect system and a complex idea. In fact, the broad principles we're talking about can take on different forms depending on the circumstances—with different results. In the small towns of colonial New England, a form of **direct democracy** took hold that enabled everyone to have a personal say in what government did. On this small scale, it was possible for every citizen of a town to gather in a meeting place and directly influence the way the community governed itself. When you stop to consider the lines in the parking lot if a nation of 330,658,842 people[6] tried to do something like this, you realize why even when we were a much smaller country we decided to take a different course. Instead of direct democracy, we opted to choose people to represent our wishes in government decision making through the indirect mechanisms of **representative democracy**. This system—also called a republican system (you may have heard the United States referred to as a **republic** for this reason)—depends heavily on some familiar things, like holding free elections and keeping elected officials accountable to the voters. It's far more practical than direct democracy, but the trade-off is that it's also more complex.

1.4 Buying into Authority

LEARNING OBJECTIVE
Distinguish between legitimacy and authority.

Maybe you don't like the way one of your professors assigns grades—perhaps you feel he or she grades arbitrarily. You might complain about it (and you should), but you probably won't question that professor's *right* to assign course grades. You recognize that assigning grades is part of a professor's job.

It's the same with governments. For a democracy—or any political system—to function effectively, we have to buy into the basic principles it's based on. That's not always so automatic, especially in a large and diverse country like ours where we often disagree on what government should do and even on what society should look like. Some people want government to tax less, whereas others want it to spend more on social services; some people oppose the death penalty or legal abortion, whereas others feel differently. Some of these differences take on a moral dimension, where people hold views that they feel reflect the correct way to live or the way a just society should act. When feelings about these things become intense, people often don't want to give in. At the same time, governing ourselves in a democracy is all about finding room for compromise.

Against this backdrop of different values and objectives, there has to be some agreement on the rules of the game—on the way we're going to set up our democracy—or else the entire system could topple under the weight of our vast disagreements.

This agreement begins with accepting election outcomes—even if your preferred candidate lost. After almost every presidential election dating back to 1788, even when they were bitterly fought, most people have been able to accept the outcome as an accurate reflection of voter preferences. When you consider an exception like the election of 1860, when much of the South refused to accept Abraham Lincoln's victory and opted instead for secession and civil war, you can probably see why the act of acknowledging election outcomes is fundamental to the functioning of the political system.

This is why it was so exceptional that President Trump did not accept his loss in the 2020 election and encouraged his supporters to reject the outcome of an election he claimed he had won. Where his predecessors had conceded defeat and congratulated their opponents once it became clear that they had lost, Trump instead insisted that fraudulent ballots cost him victory, even though his legal challenges to the election failed to reveal any foul play. In an extraordinary turn of events, his words to a rally of supporters on

January 6, 2021 preceded a deadly riot at the capitol that led to Trump's impeachment on charges of incitement of insurrection.

That's not to say that defeated candidates are always at peace with losing or that voters invested in a losing candidate happily embrace the winner. People may take to the streets and demonstrate against the winner, speak out against his actions, or work to defeat him in the next election. In 2016, opponents of President Trump planned protests to coincide with his inauguration. These forms of expression voice disapproval of the outcome, but not rejection of the process that produced it.

That's because Americans have historically respected the **authority** of a victorious candidate—his or her right to assume office and to carry out the responsibilities pertaining to that office. It's one of the rules of the game the vast majority of us accept, even if we sometimes don't like it, and it makes democracy possible. As we can see in President Trump's rejection of his defeat, there is nothing automatic about this response; many nations—even democratic ones—struggle to resolve contested claims to authority, sometimes to the point where a military coup results in the overthrow of a legitimately elected government.

authority: The right to act in an official capacity by virtue of holding an office like president or member of Congress.

Americans have a long history of avoiding violent conflicts over authority disputes. As a society, we've shown a preference for investing authority in officials we may not like on the understanding that there will be other elections that may produce outcomes more to our liking. The 2016 election was fraught with concerns by partisans on both sides that the winner would lead the country to ruin, and at times, the tensions this created spilled over into physical altercations at Trump campaign rallies, but Election Day transpired largely without incident. Hillary Clinton's supporters may have experienced shock and disappointment when their candidate lost, but they did not deny that an election had taken place and accepted that if the results could not be legally challenged, then Donald Trump would become president. During the summer of 2009, some demonstrators fearful that President Obama's call for health-care reform would lead to a government takeover of medical care stormed meetings with their congressional representatives and angrily confronted them, but they continued to protest within the system rather than attempt to overturn it.

Historically, even a candidate elected by the slimmest margin assumes the jurisdiction to act with the authority of the office to which he was elected. In 2016, more than half the electorate supported someone other than Donald Trump, as both he and Hillary Clinton finished with less than 50 percent of the vote in a field where minor candidates combined for several percentage points. But this was irrelevant to President Trump's claims to the authority of the presidency. By virtue of assuming the office, he had access to the powers of the presidency just as he would have if he had received majority support.

1.5 Inheriting Legitimacy

A grant of authority may automatically flow to the winner of an election, but it is up to the victor to determine how to exercise the authority of his or her office. In the case of a new president, prudence might call for considering protocol and tradition when deciding what actions to take and when to take them. Even incoming presidents who intend to move the country in a different direction than their predecessors generally try not to exercise authority in a disruptive way, although President Trump—who was elected on the promise to be disruptive—did not always exhibit such caution (see Demystifying Government: Trump, Authority, and Tradition).

The risk to an officeholder of pressing his or her advantages beyond customary limits is that it could diminish his or her **legitimacy**, the widespread acceptance of his or her actions. Diminished legitimacy, in turn, could make it harder for the officeholder to maneuver politically because of greater popular resistance.

legitimacy: Widespread public acceptance of the official standing of a political figure or institution.

Legitimacy is a funny thing because, unlike authority, which is granted by virtue of holding an office, legitimacy is partly inherited and partly earned. One source of legitimacy evolves over time and is rooted in the way we come to accept an office and by extension its occupant as being rightful and appropriate. The German sociologist Max Weber suggested this kind of legitimacy is rooted in tradition and law—that after hundreds of years, for instance, we have come to accept the presidential winner as the

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Trump, Authority, and Tradition

Presidents are called upon to exercise their authority every day in response to a range of domestic and foreign policy concerns. That they *can* exercise authority is unquestioned—they have a right to do so by virtue of occupying the office. *How* they exercise their authority is a different matter. Typically, the public will expect presidents not to exceed the limits of their office or to exercise authority arbitrarily or for personal gain. It is also assumed, but not stated, that presidents will exercise authority with caution. One way for presidents to assure that they do not overstep their boundaries is by acting in accordance with how their predecessors treated their authority during their time in office. Traditions and protocols developed over time in national and international affairs have guided past presidents and helped maintain continuity during presidential transitions.

President Trump was different from his predecessors on this score, as he came from a nonpolitical tradition and won the presidency on the express promise *not* to conduct business as usual. Shortly after his election, Trump engaged in a series of casual phone conversations with world leaders, including one with the president of Taiwan that was rebuked by China as a violation of long-standing American policy in the region (China does not recognize Taiwan as an independent nation, and no American leader had spoken with a Taiwanese leader since the United States recognized the People's Republic of China in 1979).[T10] That the incoming president had the authority to engage in the conversation was not in question. But that doesn't mean it was without ramifications for Sino-American relations. Actions generate reactions, and presidents acting within their authority but outside of long-established traditions can behave in ways that have unwanted or unexpected consequences.

Protesters push back against the election of Donald Trump. *Source:* Christopher Penler/Shutterstock

legitimate occupant of that office for a period of four years, under a plan set up long ago in the Constitution. This is why most Americans who voted for someone else usually accept a new president who attains office through normal, legal, time-tested channels, as we discussed in section 1.4.

The legitimacy an official inherits is usually on display at the start of a term of office through a "honeymoon" or grace period. This was the case with President Obama, who began his administration with the support of 70 percent of the country. But it was not the case for President Trump, who was surrounded by unusually strong doubts about his legitimacy that prevented a significant upsurge of goodwill after his election. A divisive campaign resulting in a second-place finish in the popular vote created legitimacy issues for the new president as he assumed office against the backdrop of Facebook groups and Twitter hashtags proclaiming Donald Trump is #NotMyPresident.

Following a bitter campaign where he questioned the integrity of the electoral process and suggested it might be rigged against him, Trump remained a polarizing figure as he entered the White House and the least popular new president in the history of opinion polling. One month after his election, his favorable rating in the Gallup Poll was 42 percent, with 55 percent disapproving, a deficit of 13 points. This is far below levels of public support for Joe Biden (55 percent approval), Barack Obama (68 percent approval), George W. Bush (59 percent approval), and Bill Clinton (58 percent approval) at comparable points in their transitions.[7]

Favorable Ratings of Recent Presidents-Elect[T11]

	Date	*Favorable %*	*Unfavorable %*
Joe Biden	Nov. 5–19, 2020	55	41
Donald Trump	Nov. 9–13, 2016	42	55
Barack Obama	Nov. 7–9, 2008	68	27
George W. Bush	Dec. 15–17, 2000	59	36
Bill Clinton	Nov. 10–11, 1992	58	35

The discrepancy between Hillary Clinton's popular vote win and Donald Trump's comfortable electoral vote tally compounded Trump's early legitimacy problems. We will learn in Chapter 7 that the Electoral College was designed by the Constitution's framers as a means to place the final decision for presidential selection in the hands of an elite. Most states award electoral votes as a unit to the candidate who wins the most popular votes, resulting in an electoral vote total that is in excess of the percentage of popular votes received. This usually serves to boost the winner's legitimacy by resoundingly ratifying his win. But when the winner of the electoral vote does not win the popular vote, the new president may experience a drag on his legitimacy as he operates under the shadow of having finished second.

This situation has happened five times in our history, typically producing a high degree of bitterness about the outcome. Four of these "minority" presidents served single terms:

- *1824:* In a disputed multiple-candidate election that was decided by the House of Representatives when no candidate won a majority of electoral votes, John Quincy Adams was chosen president, despite the fact that Andrew Jackson had finished ahead of him. Adams served one term and was defeated by Jackson four years later.
- *1876:* In another disputed election involving questions about the accuracy of the vote in three southern states, Rutherford B. Hayes was elected president by the vote of a divided congressional commission established to resolve a number of ballot irregularities, despite having lost the popular vote to Samuel Tilden by three percentage points. As part of the resolution, Hayes agreed to serve one term.
- *1888:* In an undisputed election, Grover Cleveland won a majority of popular votes but lost the electoral count to Benjamin Harrison. Cleveland defeated Harrison in a rematch four years later.
- *2000:* In the closest election of our time, George W. Bush narrowly prevailed over Al Gore in the Electoral College on the basis of a contested victory in Florida, despite finishing second in the national popular vote count.
- *2016:* Hillary Clinton finished comfortably ahead of Donald Trump in the popular vote but lost the Electoral College and the presidency by virtue of slender popular vote losses in Pennsylvania, Michigan, and Wisconsin. Trump would lose to Joe Biden four years later.

When Bush lost the popular vote but defeated Gore in 2000, it took the terror attacks of September 11, 2001, and subsequent invasions of Iraq and Afghanistan to put to rest questions about the incumbent's legitimacy. Even so, Bush was reelected narrowly, with a 2.4 percentage-point margin and 50.7 percent of the overall popular vote.

1.6 Earning Legitimacy

For our elected officials to act effectively—whether by addressing terrorist threats or trying to get Congress to approve a budget—we have to accept their actions as appropriate, even if we don't always approve of them. This means the president can ease or compound legitimacy issues through his words and actions. After the tumultuous Trump years, President Biden accepted victory in the 2020 election by speaking directly to Trump voters and promising them that he would be a president for all Americans:

> For those of you who voted for President Trump, I understand the disappointment tonight. I've lost a couple of times myself. But now, let's give each other a chance. It's time to put away the harsh rhetoric, lower the temperature, see each other again, listen to each other again. And to make progress we have to stop treating our opponents as enemies.[8]

Like Donald Trump, President Obama faced a high degree of resistance to his legitimacy, although not because of his actions. Those who questioned if he was rightfully born in the United States and doubted the validity of his birth certificate raised fundamental questions about his legitimacy to hold office in an effort to cast doubt on the legitimacy of his presidency. Other presidents experienced legitimacy crises because of their behavior.

Bill Clinton's involvement with a White House intern and his subsequent impeachment diminished his legitimacy in the eyes of some. In the waning days of the Nixon administration, the president's legitimacy had been greatly diminished as a consequence of his role in the Watergate scandal.

Authority and legitimacy may seem like distant abstractions, but we deal with them almost every day. You're dealing with them in your classroom right now as you navigate your response to the way your professor has decided to structure this class. Before you enrolled, your professor chose to assign this text and made decisions about the work you would be required to do, the way grades would be calculated, how course material would be presented, whether you would have the opportunity to earn extra credit, how much emphasis to place on attendance and class participation, and a host of related items.

Other professors who teach this course probably would have made different choices because each professor has the authority to define the parameters of instruction—and you're left to contend with those choices. You may find that you like the professor's style of instruction and appreciate the course, and you may end up recommending it to your friends. Or you may take issue with anything from the reading load to how you're evaluated to the way lectures are delivered. In turn, you may find yourself acquiescing to things you dislike, or you may react by daydreaming during lectures, cutting classes, not reading the material fully, or engaging in any number of time-tested ways to rebel against academic authority figures. Regardless of your reaction, though, the chances are good that you will never question your professor's right to teach the course as he or she chooses. In other words, you accept your professor's authority to determine the contours of the course.

That is, unless your professor does something that you feel defies the boundaries of his or her authority. Let's look at a hypothetical example. Imagine that your professor randomly assigned everyone in your class to one of two groups and permitted everyone in the other group to skip this week's lectures, declaring that they would not be held accountable for the work they missed. You'd probably agree that your professor has the authority to determine if someone is entitled to an excused absence from class. To do so in an arbitrary manner, though, without explanation, feels wrong.

This capricious quality could well undermine your professor's legitimacy by making it seem as if he or she is acting unfairly. Randomly dismissing some classmates but not others is a heavy-handed thing to do, even if it's technically within your professor's authority to do it, which brings the legitimacy of the act into question. To be legitimate, you might expect everyone to be offered the option to miss the lectures or at least to be provided with a rationale for why some people will be exempt from attending.

When the legitimacy of authority figures is brought into question, it's natural to raise doubts about their right to act as they did, and your choice of how to respond may take on greater urgency than if you simply took issue with a professor's methods of evaluation or one of the many things a professor plainly has the authority to do. Do you accept it and move on, with the professor's legitimacy permanently diminished in your eyes? Do you take action by confronting your professor or by lodging a complaint with the dean? When you make your decision, how much do you take into account that you're dealing with someone who has some leverage over your future for the next few months—someone who will grade you at the end of the semester?

1.7 Power Surge

LEARNING OBJECTIVE
Explain how legitimacy and authority are related to power.

power: The ability to make others act in a way that they otherwise might not have done.

If you find yourself thinking you would probably not want to risk your grade in a confrontation with your professor, you would be giving up doing something you wanted to do in order to protect your GPA. In this case, you would be reacting to the **power** your professor has over you in your class. People have power when they can prevent you from doing something you want to do or make you do something you might not want to do. They can do it by coercing you through implied or overt threats or by influencing you with the promise of something you want or need. In the case of our fictional random dismissal from class, your behavior would be in response to a calculation about the likely

cost of a confrontation with the professor. No words have to be spoken because the threat of a lower grade would be implied by the situation.

LEARNING OBJECTIVE
Identify political resources and why they are the tools of power.

In a raw, basic sense, power is about might rather than right. You could even say that, initially, the people who get to decide the right way of doing things—who determine how authority is constituted—are the ones who wield power most successfully. Power isn't simply the use of force, though. It's subtler than that. It's about convincing other people of mutually shared interests, or threatening them with the loss of something they want, or actually denying them something they want, or providing them with a favor, or any number of other things that might move individuals to act the way the person with power wants them to. In this regard, the person with power has tools in his or her arsenal—**resources** that may be used to change another person's behavior.

resources: Anything of value to others that can be used to sway another individual.

When the president says he'll veto an act of Congress in an effort to prevent its passage, he is exercising power over Congress, and the resource he's using is the threat of the veto. But the president can also exercise power by using personal charm or sharing the glow of his popularity—if he happens to have these resources at his disposal because he's charming or popular. Computer firms that make contributions to congressional candidates in an effort to influence their positions on high-tech matters exercise power with the use of money. Lawyers with expertise, lobbyists with information (see Demystifying Government: Information and Power in the Twenty-first Century), you with your ability to vote in elections—all have resources that are desired by others in the political process. Power is exercised when resources are used to achieve a desired outcome.

When you stop to think about it, we're involved in power relationships with other people all the time. Sometimes we are in the powerful position of being able to offer or withhold resources others want. Sometimes people have power over us because they control resources—such as grades—that matter to us. Any individual or group with resources can engage in a power relationship, and power relationships are among the most fundamental elements at every level of politics, from the White House to school boards. Quite often, maybe surprisingly, a mutually beneficial exchange of resources gets others to act in a way they might not have intended. In the American political system, the exercise of power is about mutual benefit a lot more than we might suspect.

When we start to think of power in terms of relationships, we're getting to the heart of what **politics** means. We all have things we want to accomplish and things we want to avoid. And we're always involved in relationships with other people. When you bring human desire and human relationships together, you have the essentials of a process that ultimately determines who gets what. When this process happens in a public sphere so that everyone in the country is potentially affected by what happens, we have politics

politics: The process of determining who gets what, when, and how.

DEMYSTIFYING GOVERNMENT

Information and Power in the Twenty-first Century

It's been widely said that knowledge is power. It's been just as widely said that we're living in the information age and that what we know defines our place in society. These may be overworked sayings, but they're overworked for a reason. The fact is that our world is so technical and so specialized that what we know really does go a long way toward determining how powerful we are. That's just another way of saying that information is one of the most important resources we'll encounter in our exploration of politics and government.

It shouldn't take too much thought to find places where information matters. Computers are obviously about information, and as we'll find out in a few weeks, the signature media of the twenty-first century, such as social media and twenty-four-hour cable television, play a huge role in how we understand political issues, how candidates get elected, and a host of other situations where power is at stake.

We'll also find information popping up (literally and figuratively) in less expected places. Members of Congress can't survive without it. Neither can bureaucrats. Next to money, it's the lifeblood of many interest groups. The president relies on all sorts of information about public preferences before making decisions that could affect his political career. So, when you think about power, think about information as one of the foremost tools of power.

of the sort that matters in government. Over eight decades ago, a student of the process, Harold Lasswell, called politics "the study of who gets what, when and how."[9]

Some of us may be more powerful by virtue of having more resources (see Demystifying Government: Do I Have the Resources That Matter?); some of us may get heavily involved by virtue of our interest in what government does. But regardless of our level of power or interest in this process, we are all affected by it—even if you never had a single thought about politics before you registered for this course. That's because politics produces winners and losers on everything from whether we'll be sent to war to how much we'll have to pay in taxes to who gets to operate your favorite TV channel to whether embryonic stem cells can be used for scientific research to whether you may legally drink beer. Think of something you encounter in your daily life, and the chances are that in some way it's influenced by politics.

LEARNING OBJECTIVE
Define elitism and pluralism, and explain how each offers a different view of how resources are distributed in society.

empirical: Any statement based on the assessment of data or the analysis of information, without regard to value judgments.

normative: Any statement that invokes a judgment or evaluation.

elitism: The theory that government responds to a small, stable, centralized hierarchy of corporate and academic leaders, military chiefs, people who own big media outlets, and members of a permanent government bureaucracy. People who subscribe to this position believe that the actions of regular citizens, like voting and joining groups, simply mask the real power exercised by elites.

pluralism: The theory that government responds to individuals through their membership in groups, assuring that government is responsive to a wide range of voices. People who subscribe to this position believe that the wide distribution of resources in society drives the decisions government officials make.

1.7a Facts and Judgments

Before we go forward, let's determine how facts are distinguished from judgments. Throughout this course, we're going to be making observations based on analysis of information and observations based on our judgments or evaluations of circumstances. These are different kinds of observations. When we evaluate data or information, we make **empirical** or factual observations about the world around us. No value judgments are involved when we do this. When we say something like, "The president can use his veto power to prevent an act of Congress from becoming law," we're making an empirical observation based on our understanding of the president's powers under the Constitution.

But when we say something like, "It's a good thing for the president to veto an act of Congress," we're making a **normative** observation or value judgment that involves assessing a standard or making an evaluation. We could easily apply different norms or standards and argue that it's not a good thing for the president to issue a veto.

Let's do a quick check. Cover the right-hand column of Table 1.2 and see if you can figure out which of the statements in the left column are normative and which ones are empirical. If some of the statements appear to fit into both categories, the reason is that the line between a factual evaluation and a value judgment is not always as clean as you might think—which can be a source of misunderstanding in a political discussion if someone makes a value judgment that you take to be a statement of fact!

1.8 It's Not Fair!

Let's return one more time to the hypothetical example of your professor randomly dismissing part of your class. Whether you thought it was ridiculous that a professor would dismiss some of the class at random, or whether you thought it was wrong that someone

TABLE 1.2 Normative or Empirical?

The painting contains three shades of blue oil paint.	**Empirical:** the artist or art expert can factually distinguish paint shades.
The painting would be more dramatic if it contained nine shades of blue paint.	**Normative:** this is an opinion, not a statement of fact.
The painting would be more effective if it were displayed in a brighter light.	**Normative:** this is an opinion, not a statement of fact.
The United States may be classified as a republic rather than as a direct democracy because elected representatives make decisions on behalf of the public.	**Empirical:** this is based on facts as opposed to value judgments.
The United States is better suited to being a republic than a direct democracy because of the vast size of the country.	**Normative:** this is an opinion, not a statement of fact.

DEMYSTIFYING GOVERNMENT

Do I Have the Resources That Matter?

Everyone has resources, but you can argue—to borrow from George Orwell—that some resources are more equal than others. Some people believe that the resources that most influence political officials are concentrated in the hands of a few, giving this small group disproportionate power to determine political outcomes. Others point to the way Americans like to join groups and feel that the resources held by groups with broad memberships greatly influence the decisions that come out of the political process. Whether you believe the resources that move the political system are held by a few people or many people determines whether you believe political power is wielded by the few or the many.

You may know people who say there's no reason to vote because your vote really doesn't matter, since voting doesn't overrule the actions of powerful, unelected people with wealth, prestige, or access to sophisticated information who make decisions that affect our lives. People who think like this have a lot in common with people who say the political system is characterized by **elitism**, or the belief that government is in practice controlled by a small, centralized hierarchy of people with a wealth of resources at their disposal. Advocates of elitism believe that a stable, resource-rich, permanent elite drives political decisions in the United States, rendering the vast majority of Americans effectively powerless.

On the other hand, many Americans join groups like service organizations; mosques, churches, or synagogues; and other community groups—all sorts of organizations where we expend time (a resource) pursuing matters of interest to us. These groups operate in public, allowing us to voice our interests and concerns in a manner in which they'll be heard. As these groups compete with each other for public attention, it's possible that they shape the way government officials listen and respond. If you agree with this assessment, you're in line with those who say the political system is characterized by **pluralism**, or the belief that government in practice responds to the many (plural) voices expressed through group membership. One advocate of this position is political theorist Robert Dahl, who once wrote of the central role of "all the active and legitimate groups in the population," who "can make themselves heard at some crucial stage in the process of decision."

Obviously, pluralism and elitism present divergent and mutually exclusive ways of understanding who holds power, and sorting through the two approaches is not that simple because it's easy to see where each has merit. It may even be tempting to say that they both describe our political system, but you shouldn't lose sight of the fact that pluralism and elitism assume the system is structured in entirely different ways. Figure 1 illustrates the different ways elitists and. pluralists describe the structure of the political system.

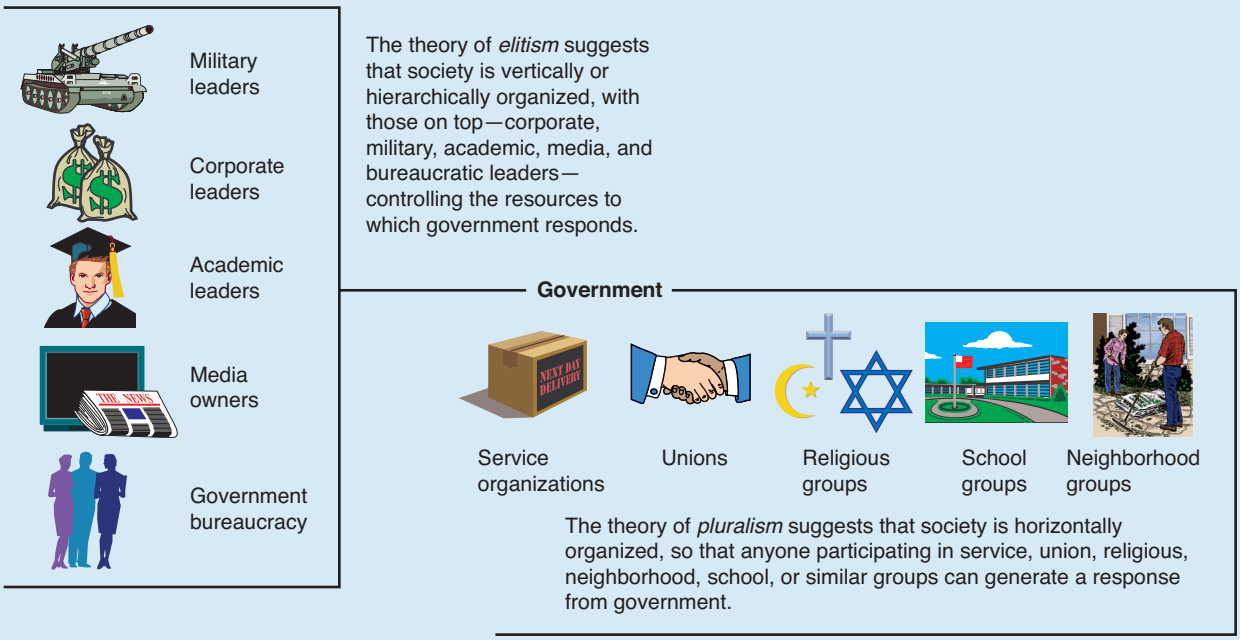

FIGURE 1 Elitism vs. Pluralism

else would get to be excused from work for what appeared to be no good reason, your reaction to the example was based on an assumption about how people should be treated. It must seem fairly obvious that if you're going to make an exception for someone, there had better be a good reason for it.

What may seem less obvious is that sentiment like this doesn't have to be automatic or universal. It's a value judgment, and we're going to find that people make all kinds of judgments about what seems right and fair—judgments that, in their scope and range, contribute to the complexity of political debate. If this sounds normative to you, then you were paying attention when you read Section 1.7a (and if this doesn't make sense, you might want to take a minute and review Table 1.2). Either way, before moving on, take a few minutes to look at Global Topics: Different Countries, Different Choices, where you'll learn an important distinction about normative judgments like this, which are based on values, and empirical observations based on fact.

LEARNING OBJECTIVE
Differentiate equality of opportunity from equality of outcome.

equality of opportunity: One of several ways of understanding equality. This way values giving people comparable advantages for succeeding in life, regardless of the unequal outcomes that may result.

Once you're clear about what constitutes a normative judgment, we can return to the matter at hand—fairness. Would it have been different if you and everyone else had been given the choice to stay or go? Perhaps that would seem less arbitrary and, accordingly, more acceptable. If it feels this way, you're tuned into a prominent way many Americans understand the notion of equality. It's called **equality of opportunity**, and it's about everyone having the same chance for advancement, free from obstacles that might limit some people from realizing their potential. This is essentially what Thomas Jefferson had in mind when he wrote in the Declaration of Independence that "all men are created

GLOBAL TOPICS

Different Countries, Different Choices

Why do Scandinavian countries provide far more extensive social services to their citizens than the United States? Why do their citizens agree to pay far more in taxes than most Americans would ever accept? Or, to put it another way, why do Scandinavians value equality of outcome so much more than Americans?

Political scientist John Kingdon has a theory. He speculates that the immigrants who settled the United States and influenced the development of its political system—groups we will discuss in detail in Chapter 4—were fundamentally different from the groups that determined the political rules in other nations. Starting with the original settlers from Great Britain who colonized North America, the United States has long attracted immigrants from other countries who were motivated by religious, economic, or political freedom to take up a new life in an unfamiliar place. These immigrants shared a mistrust of government, either because it stood in the way of worshiping as they pleased or posed an obstacle to self-betterment. They valued self-reliance and were risk-takers, willing to depart familiar surroundings to take a chance on a new life with unknown hazards. And, the choices they made based on the values they held were influential to the development of the United States. In contrast, Native Americans and Blacks who also populated North America and may have made different choices were denied political rights and therefore were shut out of decision making.

As a group, White immigrants to America were more likely than their counterparts who remained in Europe to believe that individuals can make better decisions for themselves than government can make on their behalf. They were more likely to regard government as a force that blocks individual initiative. In a land that lacked the rigid class structures prevalent in Europe, they were more likely to value opportunity and regard government as a potential obstacle to achieving it. These were not people who would look kindly on paying as much as Norwegians do in taxes (see Figure 15.3 for a comparison of tax revenues in the United States and Scandinavia), or would want government to provide the wide array of social services that Norwegians receive in exchange for their hefty tax payments.

The decisions made by these earliest of settlers structured the choices available to future generations and set the United States on a course that differs significantly from nations, like the countries of Scandinavia, where government is viewed as a source of lifelong social services and as a mechanism for correcting economic and social disparities.[T12] This is reflected in political rhetoric of the sort expressed as recently as the 2020 presidential campaign, when Donald Trump and his allies warned against a Democratic Party with socialist tendencies eager to raise taxes and spend profusely—a charge that might not find a receptive audience in countries where providing extensive social services in exchange for high taxes is the norm.

equal," although his eighteenth-century perspective excluded women, Black slaves, and Native Americans from consideration. Over time, efforts have been made to incorporate groups Jefferson left out, but the basic idea that people are "created equal" still applies to where we start out in life, not where we end up—to the chances life affords us rather than to the results we achieve.

Valuing equality of opportunity is consistent with supporting government efforts to make the "starting line" more equal. That's why Americans usually support government programs to help underprivileged kids have access to higher education, because education is considered the gateway to opportunity. It's also why Americans generally value **political equality** and believe at least in theory that everyone should have the same political and legal rights as everyone else. If all votes count the same and if everyone has the same rights in a court of law, the theory goes, then the playing field isn't tilted toward some groups and away from others. Everyone has the same opportunity to make the most of themselves without the political or legal system getting in the way. When you think about it this way, you can apply the language of equal opportunity to the issue we were discussing earlier about some groups of voters being disproportionately affected by voter ID laws.

To value opportunity is a choice, and it's a different choice than some other countries make. In places like Norway and Sweden, for instance, people place more emphasis than Americans do on **equality of outcome**, on diminishing economic and social disparities among people through government actions that try to level off differences between rich and poor by redistributing resources from top to bottom. If Americans as a group were as interested as Scandinavians in equality of outcome, then our government might provide cradle-to-grave health care, long stretches of paid maternity leave, and generous retirement benefits like they do in Norway and Sweden. Of course, we'd have to pay a lot more in taxes to support programs like these, and that would result in a lot of resources shifting around so that rich and poor alike would benefit equally. A country makes choices like that when it primarily values **economic equality** and **social equality**—both forms of equal outcomes—in which economic and social distinctions are minimized as a matter of policy and choice. When Vermont Senator Bernie Sanders talked about policies to address economic inequity in the United States during his 2016 and 2020 presidential campaigns, he was speaking about equality of outcome in a way that was rare for an American politician.

Just take a quick look at social and economic patterns in the United States, and you'll probably begin to realize how much equality of outcome takes a backseat to equality of opportunity. We're aware of the existence of social classes, of the great distance there is between the wealth of someone like software magnate Bill Gates and people who have to work for a living, to say nothing of people who can't find work at all or who live in poverty. But the size of the disparity might be even greater than you imagine. During his presidential campaigns, Bernie Sanders was fond of pointing out that the combined wealth of the six heirs to the Wal-Mart fortune—all members of the same family—equaled the combined wealth of *the bottom 40 percent of all Americans*.[10]

The same disparity applies to income. Figure 1.1 shows that in 2018, the average annual income of the bottom 90 percent of American households was $36,797, whereas the top one-tenth of 1 percent averaged over $7.2 million, or 196 times as much. Figure 1.2 demonstrates how far this puts us from income equality. If we valued equality of income, the bars in this figure would be the same size. Instead, income disparities are large and have been growing for many years. Since 1979, American households in the top 1 percent have seen their income grow at seven times the rate of that of the bottom one-fifth.[11] Nonetheless, although we'll find that some efforts are made to address these inequalities, as a matter of policy—and as a matter of choice—Americans tend to make the normative judgment that providing opportunity is generally preferred over equalizing outcomes.

Because we tend not to value equality of outcome, groups that have historically met with discrimination lag behind in their share of economic resources. The earning

LEARNING OBJECTIVE
Relate political equality to equality of opportunity, and economic and social equality to equality of outcome.

political equality: Establishing political and legal rights on the basis of the individual, so that everyone has the same right to vote and is equal under the law. An alternative would be to grant political rights to elite individuals based on wealth or social standing.

equality of outcome: One of several ways of understanding equality. This way values leveling the social and economic inequalities among people, rather than attempting to give people comparable advantages for succeeding in life.

economic equality: A form of equality of outcome that values using government policy to minimize the economic disparities found in society.

social equality: A form of equality of outcome that values using government policy to minimize the social class distinctions found in society.

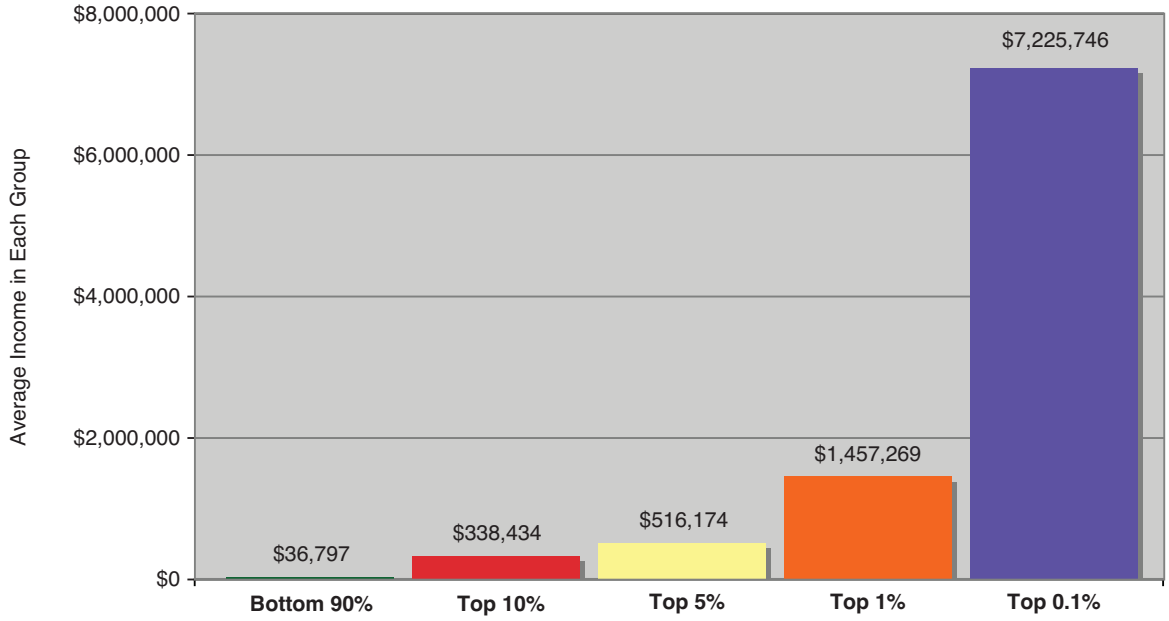

FIGURE 1.1 The Top Overshadows Everyone[T13]

Top 10 percent of the population dwarfs the bottom 90 percent in average income, and the top one-tenth of 1 percent overshadows everyone.

power of Blacks, Hispanics, and other minority groups falls below the earning power of Whites—sometimes well below. For instance, according to the U.S. Census Bureau, in 2019, 7.3 percent of Whites lived in poverty, compared with 18.8 percent of Blacks and 15.7 percent of Hispanics.[12]

Similarly, the earning power of women is less than the earning power of men. In 2020, the median annual income for women was 82.3 percent of the median annual income for men, according to the Institute for Women's Policy Research, and has changed so slowly since 1960 that if it continues at the same rate it will take until 2059 to reach parity.[13] The federal government is quite aware of these disparities—there's even a Women's Bureau at

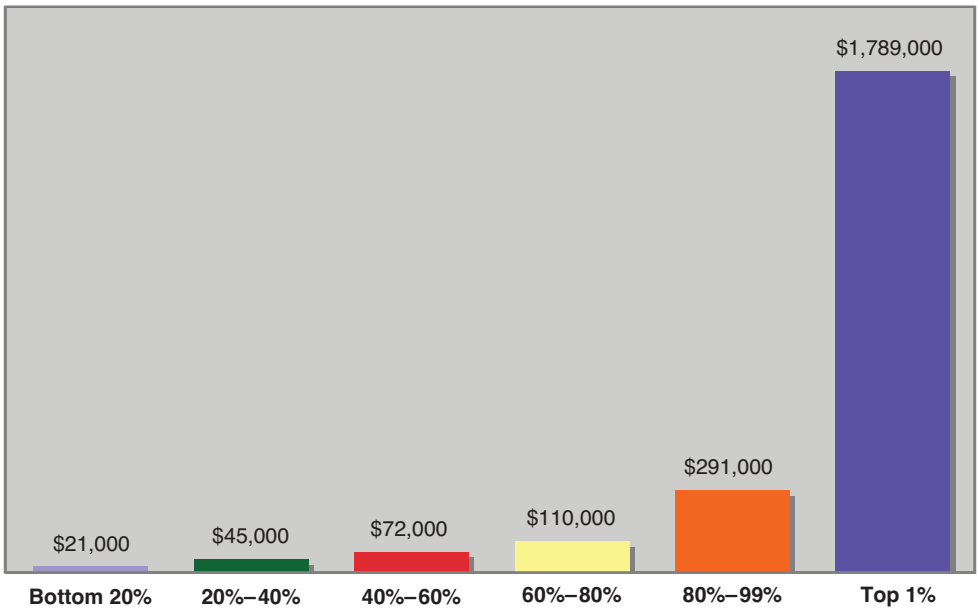

FIGURE 1.2 Income Inequality in America[T14]

If income were distributed equally across the population, then there would be no income classes. Each of the bars in this figure would be the same size. In reality, we're very far from this equal outcome in the United States.

the U.S. Department of Labor that in past administrations provided a checklist you could use if you were a working woman and you thought you were being unfairly compensated for your work.[14] Still the inequalities remain, as the statistics show, in violation of a primary assumption about how equality of opportunity should work.

1.9 Unequal and Different

The tendency in the United States to emphasize opportunity over outcomes raises important questions about the relationship between the condition of being unequal and simply being different.

Think of someone you know—perhaps a friend, significant other, or classmate. Start thinking of some of the outward differences between you. Maybe there are gender differences, or differences in eye, skin, or hair color. You could be different heights or weigh different amounts. The more you think about it, the longer the list of differences should become because so many factors contribute to the unique way we look.

You would no sooner want these physical differences to determine how others treat you than you would for your professor to randomly determine who gets to be excused from your next class. Neither, in a normative sense, is fair. Both undermine the central idea of equality of opportunity, which is that all people should be in a roughly comparable situation that permits them to express their talents and abilities.

In theory, we should have the same chance to succeed despite these many differences. Rather, our capabilities and interests should determine what we achieve. Some of us will become shopkeepers, while others become bookkeepers; there will be lawyers and landscapers and teachers and daycare providers and salespeople and waiters and chief operating officers. If we have an even shot at all these outcomes and reach the one we choose because of where we decide to direct our energy, you could say equality of opportunity is working well. There should be no relationship between the outcomes we choose and our surface differences, which have no bearing on our talents and interests.

The fact that we see disparities in outcome based on gender, racial, and ethnic characteristics is a sign that equality of opportunity does not work in practice the way it does in theory. Remember, the dilemma isn't that people end up in different places—that's to be expected—it's that people end up in different places for reasons that have no bearing on their talents or ability. It suggests that some groups face obstacles to achievement or are disadvantaged because they are different.

Consider how the economic inequalities we just discussed can disproportionately affect groups that have historically met with discrimination. If a rural Latinx teenager who attends an underfunded public school scores lower on the SAT than a White suburban teenager who attends a well-funded public school, she likely will face a more limited set of college options. But is her score lower because she isn't as bright as her suburban counterpart, or is it because she didn't have access to resources such as academic counselors or SAT prep classes? Is it possible that if she had had the advantages of a wealthier school system, her SAT scores would have been higher, and she would have had the same educational opportunities as someone who lived in an affluent school district?

Other groups—such as Blacks facing hiring discrimination and women who are paid less money to do the same work as men—find the playing field tilted against them because of race and gender differences. At times in our history, these obstacles have become political issues, in that they became the focus of public debate. But the fact that the debate over advancing equality of opportunity needs to consider group differences says a lot about the tricky nature of how our society handles diversity and how diversity poses a challenge to the fundamental American idea that individuals should be provided opportunity free from arbitrary obstacles.

1.10 Equal and Free?

LEARNING OBJECTIVE
Define liberty, and explain the trade-offs between liberty and equality of outcome.

How much of your income would you be willing to pay in taxes if you received government benefits in return? Twenty percent? Thirty? Fifty? Eighty? At some point, it'll feel

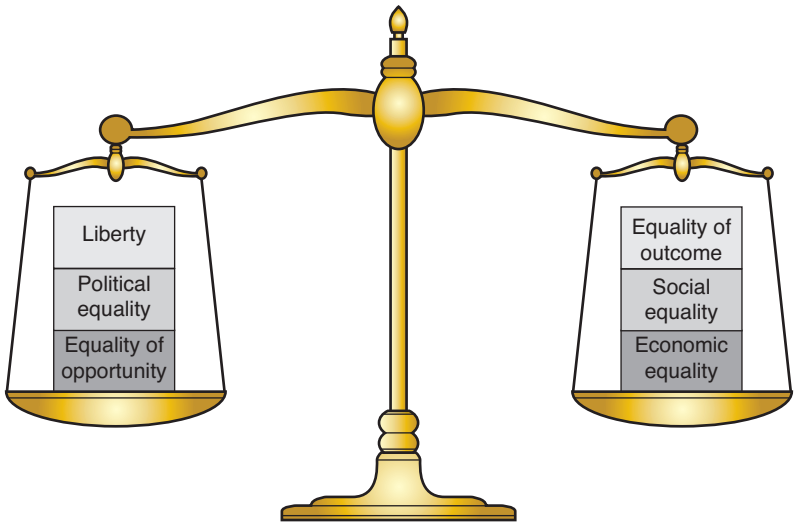

FIGURE 1.3 Balancing Liberty and Equality

like a drag on your earning power and you'll resist. In America, we tend to reach that point pretty quickly. We see taxes—along with some of the government programs the taxes pay for—as an imposition on our ability to make choices for ourselves about what to do with our money. Many Americans prefer voluntary action to government mandates.

This resistance to being told what to do has deep roots in our country, which was born in a rebellion against a strong central government. It's about **liberty**, about having the freedom to act without others interfering with what we do, and it's at the center of so many of the choices we make when we govern ourselves. Americans place a premium on preserving liberty. It was the rationale for fighting two world wars and the cold war with the former Soviet Union, and it's the thing Americans most fear losing to terrorists. Hours after the World Trade Center was destroyed, President Bush told the nation, "Our way of life, our very freedom came under attack."[15]

liberty: The ability to pursue your ends and objectives, tempered by socially defined boundaries and limited government impediments.

In an absolute sense, if we had total liberty, there would be chaos because everyone would do whatever he or she wanted. So, we make choices. One of the biggest trade-offs we make is between liberty and equality. We've already seen how there are several ways to understand what it means for people to be equal. Certain types of equality are more compatible with having liberty, while others may be attained only by placing restrictions on liberty.

Let's see if you can identify the trade-offs between liberty and the five types of equality we've talked about: equality of opportunity, equality of outcome, political equality, social equality, and economic equality. Take a look at Figure 1.3 to gain a sense of the balancing act that has to be maintained in order to preserve both liberty and equality.

1.11 Whose Choice?

LEARNING OBJECTIVE
Appreciate government as the arbiter in disputes between liberty and social responsibility.

We've been saying that society makes choices between liberty and equality, normative choices that involve judgments about what we value and what we're willing to trade off to achieve those values. And while this is the case, it's also very abstract. Who is society, after all, but you and me? We didn't write the rules of the game—other people for a complicated set of reasons made the choice to value liberty over equality of outcome long ago—but on an everyday basis, we're faced with lots of choices that we can affect.

We're constantly faced with situations where we are asked voluntarily by others or involuntarily by government to give up some of our liberty to act in order to benefit others. Sometimes, we do this with no problem; other times, it's inconvenient, and we gripe about it or perhaps take things into our own hands and resist the restrictions placed on us.

Take, for instance, the simple act of wearing a mask during the COVID-19 pandemic. Infectious disease experts advised that wearing masks while in the presence of others

during the pandemic was an effective way to prevent the spread of the virus. Significantly, wearing masks was regarded as an effective way to protect others we encountered, who could then protect us by wearing masks themselves. If everyone wore masks, then everyone would be contributing to the overall safety of the public at large, because our masks would be helping to keep others safe. From this perspective, wearing masks is about taking care of the greater good.

However, wearing masks took on social and political significance for many people during the pandemic. Some people objected to being told by government officials that they had to wear a mask, feeling it should be a matter of personal choice. Not having the choice to make the decision was regarded as government overreach. From this perspective, being told to wear a mask became synonymous with the loss of personal liberty.

President Trump took the position that wearing masks was a violation of liberty. President Biden took the position that wearing masks is a matter of helping the larger community. Conflicts like this between personal liberty and the rights of others are the very things government tries to resolve every day. These conflicts involve trade-offs between liberty and **social responsibility**, or the concern for the rights of others in society. Because our actions constantly affect other people, and because it's human nature to want to pursue our desires and objectives despite this, we are continually asking government to resolve disputes between personal liberty and social responsibility. Essentially, we turn to government to draw the boundaries that determine where individual liberty stops and the needs of society start.

social responsibility: Concern for the protection of the rights of individuals in a community or society, at the expense of some degree of personal liberty.

Obviously, not everyone will draw that line in the same place. Not everyone believes that government is always the appropriate arbiter, either, believing instead that individuals should work out their conflicts without government getting involved. A lot of political debate turns on these two facts.

Drinking laws are among those that you may have strong feelings about. As a society, as you're no doubt quite aware, we've decided that it is illegal to purchase or consume alcohol until you turn twenty-one. You probably know the rationale for this, which has to do with the desire to cut down on alcohol-related driving accidents. Essentially, if you are under twenty-one, your liberty (some would call it a right) to drink has been curtailed by government action in favor of the socially responsible position that it is more important to protect the lives of everyone on the roads. That's a choice that stems from a value judgment. You may agree with it or not. But it's the law.

So, what do you do about it? One option is to do nothing—to plan a big celebration on your twenty-first birthday and to do nothing before then. You might take this course of action if you agree with the law or even if you disagree with it but recognize its legitimacy. Another option is to violate the law and try not to get caught. You might do this if you disagree with the trade-offs behind the law, or if you feel drinking alcohol should be a matter of personal choice and not a matter for government to consider. There would be sanctions if you were caught because you would be breaking the law, not changing it. But that would be a consequence you would have to face.

The dual questions of when to give up liberty to protect the rights of others and whether government or private individuals should make the decision have a long history in our country's political debates. As you can probably see, when your liberty is at issue, feelings can get pretty intense. Also, as with all interesting political questions, there are winners and losers, which can make the result of what government does hard for some to swallow.

Compounding the issue is the great range of reactions we have to the tension between liberty and responsibility as well as other questions regularly placed before our political system. The great diversity of America that we were talking about before is both a strength and a complicating factor for our politics. It's a strength inasmuch as the expression of a wide range of viewpoints tends to enhance the decisions we make for ourselves, because a variety of voices coming from different vantage points can make for intelligent and gratifying solutions to problems, much like the blending of many ingredients can make food tastier and more satisfying.

At the same time, diverse perspectives can make it harder to reach a conclusion, complicating the process by which decisions are made. A system designed over two centuries ago to hear primarily the voices of White land-owning males has been required to expand to accommodate the views and desires of people with a wide range of backgrounds, perspectives, and beliefs. How it has managed to do this, and what it means in real terms for you and me, is part of the story you'll read in the next chapter.

1.12 So—Should I Care about Politics?

Whether you should personally care about politics is a normative judgment. It's also a personal matter that you'll probably approach differently from your friends. You'll make a judgment that depends in part on how much you think politics matters in your life. No one else can make that judgment for you.

We started out by asking whether it makes sense to care about the political system enough to engage in it because the question goes right to the heart of why you're in this course. If there's absolutely no reason to care about politics, then it's going to be a long semester or quarter! There are certainly reasons to get involved, but you may feel they don't apply to you. In the end, you may decide like many people that you're just not a political person. At that point, you'll be able to draw your conclusions with your eyes open to the evidence.

But before we can make an informed decision about whether and how much we should care about the public side of life, we should grow to understand it much better. There may already be things you know now that you didn't realize before you started reading this chapter, like how you're involved in power relationships at times when you're totally unaware of them—whether it's in the classroom with your professor or with a membership you may have in the American Automobile Association.

We've already seen that we can be involved in politics even if we don't care about it and even if we're not paying attention. We've talked about how the republican form of democracy we practice in this country reaches into things we may take for granted in our daily life, like having other people elected by us (or by our neighbors if we don't take part) make decisions on our behalf. We've talked about how we tend to act around authority figures, whether they're our professor or our president, and how their ability to wield resources can influence our lives—especially if we see their actions as legitimate.

We identified ways we're involved in power relationships with people every day—directly with people we work and live with, indirectly through the actions of political figures that make decisions on our behalf. We even looked at equity issues—matters of fairness—and how they balance the freedoms that a lot of us feel are extremely important in our lives. We talked about how liberty and equality are much more than abstractions. They're values, and as such, the extent to which we enjoy them, as well as the form they take, are the product of choices and trade-offs made by our society and shaped by government action. Whether we feel it's important to try to contribute to the political dialogue that shapes those trade-offs may be one part of the answer to our question about whether political involvement matters to us.

We've hinted at the idea that in order to make choices about who gets what, when, and how, we set up rules and then play by them (to a greater or lesser extent). In fact, a specific set of rules is in place that determines how politics works in this country. Some of the rules are legal in nature; a lot of them are set out in the Constitution. But even the Constitution has its roots in a struggle between different ways to define the political ground rules. As we understand those rules, we'll probably come to recognize a little more about where we come from as a nation, and how the resolution of some of our earliest political struggles shaped the political options before us today, some two centuries later. How can the struggles of people long gone be relevant to how we live our lives in the twenty-first century? Chapter 2 has some answers to that question.

Chapter Review

Understand the difference between a direct and representative democracy.

Even though people often speak of America as a democracy, it is best understood as a republic because we elect representatives to make decisions on our behalf. In that respect, our country is a representative democracy rather than a direct democracy, where people would make decisions on their own behalf. A representative democracy is far more practical for a nation as large as the United States, but it is also more complex and can be controversial inasmuch as there can be strong differences of opinion about what representatives should do in our name.

Distinguish between legitimacy and authority.

For a republic to function effectively, there has to be agreement on the principles on which it's based. Americans typically respect the authority of elected representatives to act in an official capacity by virtue of holding an office, and for the most part, grant legitimacy to elected officials even when they disagree with them. However, political figures can undermine their legitimacy through their actions because, unlike authority, legitimacy is partly earned.

Explain how legitimacy and authority are related to power.

Elected officials can use their authority and legitimacy to exercise power, although their ability to do so is hardly automatic. Power is about getting others to act the way you want them to, even if they prefer to act otherwise, in order to determine who gets what, when, and how.

Identify political resources and why they are the tools of power.

Resources are the tools of power, which can encompass a wide range of things, such as a politician's personal charm, the information supplied to members of Congress by a lobbyist, or the promise of campaign money.

Define elitism and pluralism, and explain how each offers a different view of how resources are distributed in society.

Who gets to exercise power is an important—and open—question. Those who subscribe to the theory of elitism believe that a permanent, unelected elite of corporate and academic leaders, military chiefs, media operators, and bureaucrats holds the resources that matter in government decision making. Those who subscribe to the theory of pluralism believe that ordinary individuals can exercise power in a republic because the resources that matter to people in government are widely distributed in society.

Differentiate equality of opportunity from equality of outcome.

Many Americans value equality of opportunity, or trying to give people a fair start in life, understanding that people of different interests and abilities will end up in different places. Equality of opportunity comes at the expense of equality of outcome and produces economic and social disparities in the name of protecting individual initiative. Many value political equality on the assumption that ensuring everyone the same right to vote and equal rights under the law promotes equal opportunity.

Relate political equality to equality of opportunity, and economic and social equality to equality of outcome.

In truth, we have neither equality of opportunity nor equality of outcome in America, although we are much more likely to support government actions that promote the former. One place where equal opportunity breaks down is in the unequal economic and social outcomes of women and historically disadvantaged racial and ethnic groups because unequal outcomes are supposed to be a product of our different talents, interests, and abilities, not our physical or ethnic differences.

Define liberty, and explain the trade-offs between liberty and equality of outcome.

There are also important trade-offs to be made between equality of opportunity and liberty, which is the ability to pursue our objectives, tempered by socially defined boundaries and limited government impediments. Liberty is consistent with equal opportunity because it supplies the freedom to make individual choices. Absolute liberty would generate chaos, so liberty is bounded by social responsibility, or the concern for the rights of others in society.

Appreciate government as the arbiter in disputes between liberty and social responsibility.

We turn to government to draw the boundaries that determine where individual liberty stops and the needs of society start. But we won't all draw that boundary in the same place, which can lead to political disputes over whether government should create boundaries or leave matters of social responsibility to individuals.

Key Terms

authority The right to act in an official capacity by virtue of holding an office like president or member of Congress. (p. 9)

democracy A government created by the people over whom it rules. (p. 7)

direct democracy Democracy without representation, where each eligible individual participates in decision making. (p. 8)

disenfranchised Losing or being denied the legal right to vote by intentional or unintentional means. (p. 7)

economic equality A form of equality of outcome that values using government policy to minimize the economic disparities found in society. (p. 17)

elitism The theory that government responds to a small, stable, centralized hierarchy of corporate and academic leaders, military chiefs, people who own big media outlets, and members of a permanent government bureaucracy. People who subscribe to this position believe the actions of regular citizens, like voting and joining groups, simply mask the real power exercised by elites. (p. 15)

empirical Any statement based on the assessment of data or the analysis of information, without regard to value judgments. (p. 14)

equality of opportunity One of several ways of understanding equality. This way values giving people comparable advantages for succeeding in life, regardless of the unequal outcomes that may result. (p. 16)

equality of outcome One of several ways of understanding equality. This way values leveling the social and economic inequities among people, rather than attempting to give people comparable advantages for succeeding in life. (p. 17)

legitimacy Widespread public acceptance of the official standing of a political figure or institution. (p. 9)

liberty The ability to pursue your ends and objectives, tempered by socially defined boundaries and limited government impediments. (p. 20)

normative Any statement that invokes a judgment or evaluation. Think of the word *norm*, which implies a standard for evaluating something. (p. 14)

pluralism The theory that government responds to individuals through their memberships in groups, assuring that government is responsive to a wide range of voices. People who subscribe to this position believe that the wide distribution of resources in society drives the decisions government officials make. (p. 15)

political equality Establishing political and legal rights on the basis of the individual, so that everyone has the same right to vote and is equal under the law. An alternative would be to grant political rights to elite individuals based on wealth or social standing. (p. 17)

politics The process of determining who gets what, when, and how. (p. 13)

power The ability to make others act in a way that they otherwise might not have done. (p. 12)

representative democracy A form of democracy in which eligible individuals choose others to make decisions on their behalf. (p. 8)

republic Any nation with provisions for the selection of representatives who make decisions on behalf of those who select them. James Madison said a republic was "a government in which the scheme of representation takes place," as compared to direct democracy. (p. 8)

resources Anything of value to others that can be used to sway another individual. (p. 13)

social equality A form of equality of outcome that values using government policy to minimize social class distinctions found in society. (p. 17)

social responsibility Concern for the protection of the rights of individuals in a community or society, at the expense of some degree of personal liberty. (p. 21)

Resources

You might be interested in examining some of what the following authors have said about the topics we've been discussing:

Dahl, Robert. *Preface to Democratic Theory*. Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1956; reprinted 2006. Different approaches to American democratic theory, with special attention paid to majority and minority rule—things we're going to talk more about in Chapter 2.

Lasswell, Harold D. *Politics: Who Gets What, When, How*. New York: Whittlesey House, 1936; reprinted 2018. A classic discussion of the meaning of power.

Machiavelli, Niccolò. *The Prince*. New York: Penguin Books, 2003. Originally published in 1532, it contains observations about power that still ring true.

You may also be interested in looking at these resource sites:

You can find a good starting place for information on the U.S. government and the people who work in it by going to http://www.usa.gov.

What was government like during its formative years? Frenchman Alexis de Tocqueville traveled America from one end to the other in search of true democracy, and you can find his observations at http://xroads.virginia.edu/~Hyper/detoc.

Notes

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