

CHAPTER 1

MYTHS & REALITIES

What are the roles of reason, myth, and belief in American government?

Making Sense of American Politics



The Crazy Goat Rodeo

In the early morning hours of November 9, 2016, various news outlets covering the presidential election declared that Republican Donald J. Trump had won enough Electoral College votes—270—to be declared the 45th president of the United States. This was not the outcome that most analysts and pundits expected. Up until election day the national polls on average had put Hillary Clinton, Trump’s Democratic Party opponent, more than 3 percentage points ahead in the polls, and during the final days of the campaign several tracking services which provided daily estimates of the probability of a Clinton victory had estimated that the likelihood of her winning at no less than 65 percent and as much as 99 percent. In addition, there were expert predictions of “down ballot” victories that might give Democrats control of the U.S. Senate and loosen the grip of the Republicans in the U.S. House of Representatives. These predictions proved to be wrong as well.

How could so many “experts” be so wrong? That was the question on everyone’s mind in the days and weeks following the election. After all, these are the individuals who make their living by studying American politics, commenting on political trends, and advising politicians and their campaigns. These are the people many Americans count on to help them make sense of the political world. And yet with very few exceptions they got it wrong.

Several months earlier, Ezra Klein, one of the country’s most respected commentators and founder of vox.com, admitted to an audience of students at Johns Hopkins University that he was having problems making sense of what was happening.

“I come to you with humility,” he declared, and he proceeded to highlight the several ways the campaign

< Flags are like other symbols, and how people treat them indicates their attitudes toward what the symbols represent. Despite the negative view of government that many Americans express in everyday conversation and opinion polls, their level of respect for the political system itself is apparent in their positive reaction to the American flag.

CHAPTER OUTLINE AND FOCUS QUESTIONS

The Nature and Role of Government and Politics

> How do we define government and politics? What has been the role of government in American history?

What Are the Fundamental Issues of Government and Politics?

> How does the U.S. political system deal with the issues of who should govern and where authority should be vested?

Understanding American Government and Politics

> How do we understand and make sense of our political system and government? What are the roles of myths, reason, beliefs, and ideologies in that effort?

defied explanation. It was, he said, a “crazy goat rodeo”—urban slang used to note a chaotic situation that is beyond comprehension.¹

Even that point in the 2016 election cycle it was evident to anyone paying attention to American politics that there was nothing typical or ordinary about that year’s race for the White House. Long-term observers of presidential politics went so far as to characterize what they were witnessing as “insane,” “shocking,” and “toxic.” The leadership of both parties found themselves in disarray as challengers from outside the inner circles made a push toward each party’s presidential nomination. Lindsey Graham, a South Carolina senator who had earlier withdrawn from the Republican race, told one gathering that his party “has gone batshit crazy,”² and Mitt Romney, the 2012 Republican candidate for president, took specific aim at Trump, labeling him a “con man,” a “fake,” a “fraud,” and a “phony” who “creates scapegoats of Muslims and Mexican immigrants,” who “calls for the use of torture” and “cheers assaults on protesters” while promising to “limit First Amendment freedom of the press.”³ Trump rallies, often drawing thousands of followers, were regularly featured on television, and violent confrontations both inside and outside the venues seemed regular occurrences. Commentators could not recall anything like it, and some declared that a “civil war” had broken out within the Republican Party.

In the Democratic race for the nomination, Bernie Sanders, a self-described “democratic socialist” senator from Vermont, mounted a significant challenge against Hillary Clinton, who was favored to win the nomination.⁴ In April 2015, 74-year-old Sanders was registering at less than 6 percent in public opinion polls, but by early March 2016 he was polling at more than 40 percent and winning several primary contests.⁵ Drawing large crowds at campaign rallies and relying on small donations from millions of online contributors to fund his campaign, Sanders “Feel the Bern” movement clearly shook up the Democratic Party establishment and would have an impact on Clinton’s campaign against Trump in the general election.

All this came to a head as the election results came in, and the experts and commentators found themselves asking how so many of them could be so wrong. The election outcome made no sense, and within hours they would start the difficult task of trying to understand what took place.

“It Just Makes No Sense!”

Although the events of 2016 were difficult for even the most seasoned of political analysts to explain, we believe that it is possible and important for students to be able to make sense of the American political system. The events we read or hear about on the daily news often seem confusing and

defy easy explanation. Many of us have trouble figuring out how our political system operates. Consider the following:

- If you awoke on November 9, 2016 and looked to see who won the presidential election, you would notice that with 98 percent of the popular vote counted, Clinton had received more than half a million more votes than Trump. And yet the headline was: Trumps wins! How could this be? It just made no sense.
- On December 12, 2012, twenty first-grade students and six adults were murdered at Sandy Hook Elementary School in Connecticut. A little more than four months later, with many relatives of the slain looking on from the chamber gallery, the U.S. Senate voted 54–46 in support of legislation that would expand background checks on firearm purchases at gun shows. Despite that favorable majority vote, the media would correctly report to the nation that the bill was effectively defeated. For the average American, the news made no sense. How could a majority vote in favor of a bill end up being reported as a defeat?
- In 2003, he was a self-described “skinny kid with a funny name” serving in the Illinois state senate, a relative unknown on the national political scene. Five years later, Barack Obama won the presidency of the United States—and thus became the first African American to hold that post. Most experts and media pundits were astonished at Obama’s meteoric rise; given what they knew and assumed about U.S. politics and voters, this should not have happened. Obama’s reelection in 2012 was also a surprise to many political observers who believed that the depressed state of the U.S. economy would make it difficult for Obama to win reelection to a second term. Nevertheless, he not only won that second term but did so by a four-point margin over his Republican rival, Mitt Romney.
- According to pollsters who monitor public attitudes toward Congress, between 1980 and 2015 “approval ratings” averaged slightly more than 43 percent. But in recent years the ratings became decidedly more negative, with some polls indicating approval ratings of 10 percent and below. The Gallup Poll, which has been tracking public opinion about Congress since 1974, characterized the low approval scores as “dismal” and “historical.”⁶ Yet, over that same period of four decades, no less than 85 percent of the members of the U.S. House of Representative were reelected—and often by large margins.⁷ Why do voters continue to elect the same representatives time and time again despite their relative displeasure with Congress’s overall performance? This, too, just does not make any sense.

These are just a few examples of the many things about American government and politics that often baffle and confuse those of us who are trying to understand our complex political system and how it operates. It does not matter whether you are a professional political pundit or a casual observer of political life; surprising and puzzling events are common.

Although few Americans will admit it to even their closest friends, most share an uneasiness about their lack of understanding about politics and government. After all, this country is a democracy, where citizens are expected to be well-informed as well as active participants in the political system. Being somewhat embarrassed, many of us avoid discussing politics, “tuning out” rather than engaging in the civic lives of our communities.

But that civic life is impossible to avoid in this day and age. Government and the policies it generates are a pervasive fact of modern life. From the light switch at our bedside when we awaken and the roads on which we ride to work to the critical decisions we make about whether (and whom) to marry and where to live, we are constantly connected to the actions that take place in the political arena.

Myths and Reason

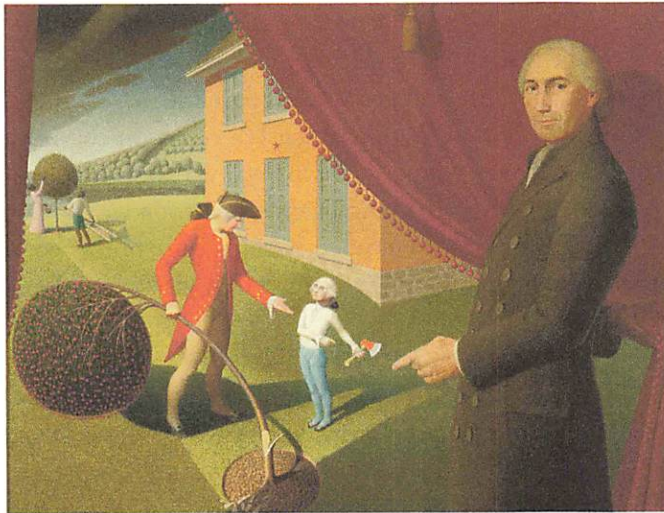
Dealing with these facts means that we cannot avoid the challenge of making sense of that baffling world, and we often do so by relying on **myths**—that is, those stories and narratives we tell ourselves or share with friends and family that help us better comprehend our surroundings. Unlike novels, short stories, and the plots of movies, these sense-making tales are not the product of creative writers who design their work to entertain or generate some aesthetic response. Nor are they the journalistic reports we read daily that are designed to tell us the “who, what, when, where, and why” of some newsworthy event. Rather, these myths are the tales and narratives we tell ourselves when confronted with things that initially make little or no sense.

Myths are neither true nor false and can best be regarded as a particular form of what is often called “the conventional wisdom”—that is, those widely held beliefs assumed to be true within a given community.⁸ In some cases, those beliefs are held with such conviction that any contrary evidence is either ignored or dismissed. In other cases, the conventional wisdom is tied to some theory that is itself based on unquestioned assumptions. Myths are thus best understood as “the instruments by which we continually struggle to make our experience intelligible to ourselves.”⁹ Moreover, they are instruments we apply to help us deal with many different aspects of our lives, from politics to sports and from science to religion.¹⁰

Myths Those stories, proverbial sayings, pervasive attitudes, and other narratives that we use to help us think about the world around us.

Many of the myths we rely on are often drawn from those we learn while growing up (see the discussion of political socialization in Chapter 6). Over time, we come to question many of those myths. In fact, because many of the stories and narratives we hear and read seem to play fast and loose with the facts, it is commonplace for us to think of myths as synonymous with lies and falsehoods. But equating myths with lies ignores the fact that storytelling plays an important role in our lives and how we make sense of the world. Although they may involve some partial truths or even outright falsehoods, myths also contain what comedian Stephen Colbert has called “truthiness”—“truth that comes from the gut, not books.”¹¹

Many of the myths we learn as children contain moral lessons. For example, throughout most of the nineteenth century and well into the twentieth, the elementary schoolbook “readers” used by American schoolchildren included the parable of a young George Washington who could not tell a lie or the tale of a young store clerk named Abe Lincoln who walked miles to repay a customer whom he had inadvertently short-changed by a few pennies. Later in life we find ourselves relying on stories to make sense of events that, at the moment they occur, seem unfathomable or inexplicable. This was the case, for example, for a generation of Americans who heard many conspiracy theories about the assassination of President John F. Kennedy or the attacks of September 11, 2001.



When Americans are asked about the nation’s most significant presidents, almost all lists include Washington and Lincoln. Their answers have been supported over the years by stories that stress their honesty. The myths of Washington admitting to cutting down the cherry tree (“I cannot tell a lie”) and Lincoln’s honesty in his work as a shop clerk have been part of the elementary school curriculum since the nineteenth century.



When faced with events such as presidential assassinations or terrorist attacks, many people turn to conspiracy theories. As a form of myth, we use these narratives to make sense of unfathomable realities. Unfortunately, almost all provide a distorted view of the facts and make it difficult to understand what really took place.

Why do we turn to myths so often to help us make sense of the world? Psychologists, anthropologists, and others who study child development in cultures the world over note that myth making is a common cognitive skill we develop when we are very young.¹² As we grow up, we learn about the stories and narratives of our families and friends, and soon we develop a repertoire of myths we rely on to help us make greater sense of the world in general. It is little wonder that we initially turn to myths when faced with new or baffling situations.

Perhaps no society in history better exemplified the role played by myths in everyday life (social, economic, and political) than the city-states of ancient Greece, and in fact the term *myth* itself is derived from the Greek concept of *mythos*.¹³ For the ancient Greeks, *mythos* was composed of the stories about their heroes and gods, and it helped them make sense of everything from daily routines to the tragedies and disasters that befell them.¹⁴ As much as they relied on *mythos*, the Greeks also understood that relying on myths alone was not enough. They also relied on what they called *logos*—what we regard as the power of reasoned analysis and logic.

In a similar way, when it comes to making sense of our complex political world, we often start with the stories and narratives of myths, but just as often, we turn to other ways to comprehend and make sense of political realities. But we never completely abandon those myths. It is that tendency to initially rely on myths and eventually turn to other means for understanding the complexities of American government and politics that informs and shapes the following chapters.

Making Sense of Trump and Sanders. Consider some of the widely held views about presidential elections that were being challenged as the 2016 race unfolded. The most obvious myth to fall was that party elites control the nomination process and determine who will emerge as the nominee. The widely held image of decisions being made by party leaders in a “smoke-filled room” was replaced by the view that the primary election system was structured to favor mainly establishment candidates. But the fact that both Donald Trump and Bernie Sanders were able to threaten more mainstream candidates undermined that belief. If anything, the very system of primaries developed by each party seemed to foster successful challenges.

Another major belief going into the 2016 election was that the campaign finance system that permitted almost unlimited funding through large super PACs would mean that only those favored by the very wealthy would get the support needed to run a successful campaign for president (see Chapter 8). In the fall of 2015, *The New York Times* published a study reporting that nearly half of the money given to campaigns early in the race (\$176 million) came from 158 families and the companies they own or control.¹⁵ In addition, a coalition of wealthy donors publicly committed to spend \$889 million in support of conservative candidates for president and Congress.¹⁶ And yet the two candidates who relied primarily on self-funding (Trump) and millions of small donations raised online (Sanders) were proving that support of the super PACs was not necessarily the most effective path to electoral success.

Although myths are important and necessary in helping us understand the political world, there are many tools that can help us make better sense of the U.S. government and politics, and not all require specialized knowledge or sophisticated statistical models. In fact, you are probably already using many of them. Throughout this book you will encounter views of the realities of American government and politics based on credible but admittedly imperfect sense-making tools. In the final sections of this chapter we consider some of those tools, but before doing so we must address some basic questions and important concepts that will make our journey to understanding much easier.

The Nature and Role of Government and Politics

> How do we define government and politics? What has been the role of government in American history?

We begin by addressing three fundamental questions:

1. What is government, and how does it carry out its varied responsibilities?
2. What is politics, and how does it relate to the work of government?
3. How important has government been in our lives and in those of past Americans?

What Is Government?

Government Those institutions and officials whose purpose it is to write and enact laws and to execute and enforce public policy.

What is **government**, and how does it carry out its varied responsibilities? In brief, government consists of those institutions and officials whose purpose it is to write and enact laws and to execute and enforce public policy. In broader perspective, we can regard government as the major mechanisms through which we determine, articulate, adopt, and carry out collective actions to deal with problems that cannot be addressed individually. Some of those problems are of a very general nature and some are quite specific. Thus, Americans generally rely on government (1) to maintain order through the rule of law, (2) to provide goods and services that benefit the lives of all citizens, and (3) to promote equality among members of society. On a more specific level, we turn to government to make certain the water we drink is safe, the roads we drive on are clear on a snowy morning, and the food on our tables is plentiful. Of course, there are other mechanisms (such as the marketplace) we can rely on to achieve these objectives, but it is government we often depend on.

The activities directed at solving those problems and achieving those goals are conducted by legislators, presidents or other chief executive officers (such as governors and mayors), judges, bureaucrats, and other elected and appointed officials who work in the institutions that make up the executive, legislative, and judicial branches of federal, state, and local governmental systems. Ultimately, these officials carry out their responsibilities through their authority to enact and enforce laws and public policies that are crucial to the functioning of government.

What Is Politics?

Politics Those activities aimed at influencing or controlling government for the purpose of formulating or guiding public policy.

In its most general sense, **politics** refers to activities aimed at influencing or controlling government for the purpose of formulating or guiding public policy. All too often, politics is viewed in a negative light since it is popular to think of efforts to “influence” and “control” government as equal to the use of power to corrupt public officials. As we see in the chapters that follow, the reality is that without politics, government can become undemocratic and even authoritarian. By engaging in the sometimes messy business of politics, individuals and groups help maintain an open and responsive government.

For example, if you are unhappy about the current funding of higher education or the operations of the student loan program, there are ways to try to change both. Or perhaps you are concerned about the U.S. immigration policies or U.S. policies in the Middle East. In all such cases, you would bring about change by engaging in politics. Ironically, if you think that Wall Street or the media have too much political influence or control, you would need to engage in politics to bring about the needed reforms.

In 2010, for example, the Supreme Court issued a decision in *Citizens United v. Federal Election Commission* that effectively lifted the limits on how much money corporations and individuals could spend on political campaigns (see Chapter 7). Those who had supported restricting the influence of big money interests in politics soon mobilized to form organizations dedicated to overturning *Citizens United*, and at times these groups have had to rely on funds donated by wealthy individuals who could do so under provisions of the very decision they were attempting to overturn. In short, they needed to engage in the messier side of politics to bring about political reform.

The Role of Government in American History

Government has always been important in the lives of most Americans. On this point, however, we encounter one of the most important myths about American politics—and the realities behind it. Historian Arthur M. Schlesinger Jr. has pointed to a “cherished national myth” ascribing the economic development of the nation “to the operations of unfettered individual enterprise.”¹⁷ In fact, history shows that American government has always played an influential role in the lives of Americans. As early as colonial times, citizens expected government to perform such traditional functions as ensuring law and order and resisting foreign aggression. But even then, government often did more.

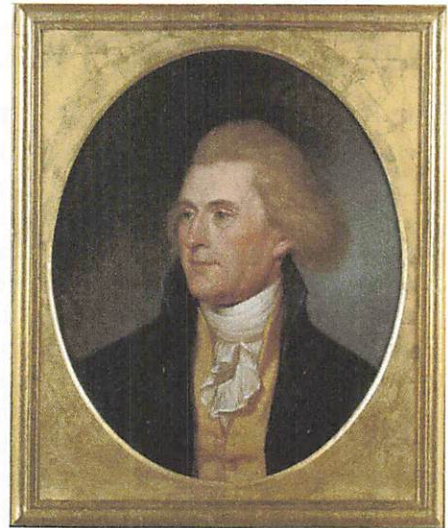
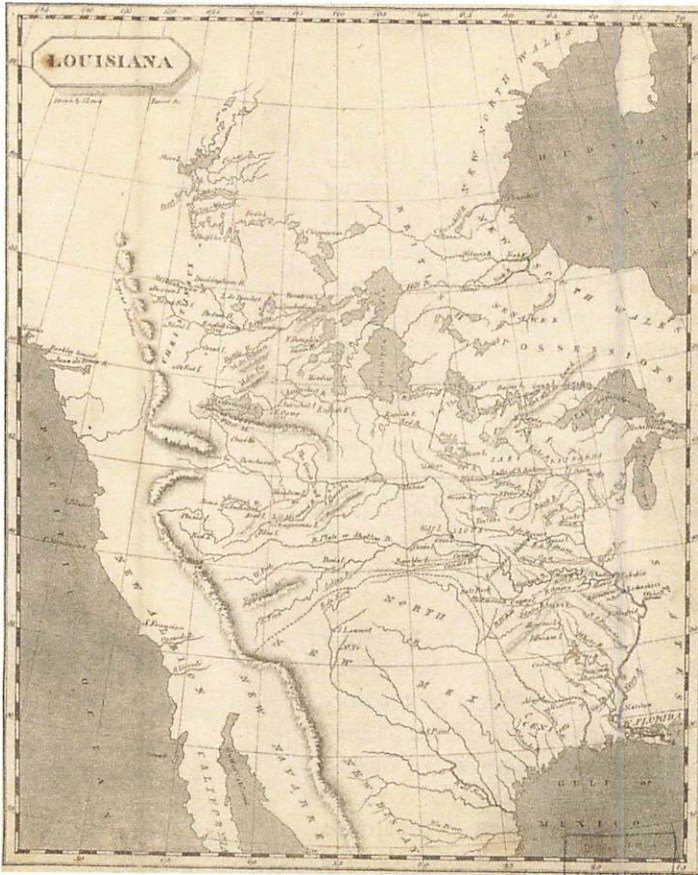
From the time the first European settlers established communities in America, colonial governments, under the general authority of the British government, played a major role in developing and regulating local economies. Colonial (and later state) governments helped finance new enterprises, build ports, and construct turnpikes and canals; they sometimes even controlled wages and prices in local markets.

Shortly after the United States gained its independence, Congress wrote a series of laws collectively called the Northwest Ordinance, which established rules for selling land and organizing local governments in the large territory stretching from the Ohio River to the Mississippi River and north to the Great Lakes. Land was even reserved to support public schools. One of the earliest examples of the national government’s role as an active promoter of the economy was its 1803 purchase of the Louisiana Territory. That vast region was vital to the prosperity of the farmers who worked the lands along the entire length of the Mississippi. Historians have also found other examples of early government efforts to plan, manage, and promote the new country’s resources.¹⁸

The role of government continued to expand during the 1800s and early 1900s. Attempts to solve the economic and social problems that arose during the Great Depression of the 1930s—an economic downturn that left millions of Americans jobless and homeless—led to an explosion of new programs that are

associated with Franklin D. Roosevelt's "New Deal" presidency. Soon an army of bureaucrats was managing the economy, promoting stable economic growth by helping to find jobs for the unemployed, and enforcing price controls designed to hold down the prices of goods and services.

As the United States became a more complex society, Americans demanded that the national government pay more attention to problems that had once been solved by families and communities: problems of the poor, the handicapped, and the elderly, among others. Ever since the New Deal, all Americans have been touched directly or indirectly by programs in such areas as early childhood nutrition, health care, unemployment benefits, food stamps, and Social Security.¹⁹



Thomas Jefferson took advantage of an opportunity to purchase the Louisiana Territory from France in 1803. As this 1805 map indicates, Americans did not have a clear idea of what they acquired. Jefferson sent Meriwether Lewis and William Clark on a three-year expedition to explore the new territory.

Moreover, the government has not limited its interest to economic and social welfare programs. As destruction threatened the vast American forests and pollution tainted air and water, Americans turned to government for environmental management in the form of interventions ranging from conservation programs to regulations affecting many polluting industries. In support of such goals as preventing environmental damage and ensuring a steady supply of energy, the government has lowered speed limits on highways, pushed for the development of nuclear energy, and implemented a variety of other policies.²⁰

In recent years, a growing number of Americans have concluded that perhaps we have been depending too much on government to solve our problems. In his 1981 inaugural address, Ronald Reagan famously noted that “government is not the solution to our problem; government is the problem”; by 1996 the Clinton White House was also admitting that it was time for a change. “The era of big government is over,” declared president Bill Clinton in his State of the Union address.

But the arguments against “big” government failed to undermine the public’s demand for government action, especially when crises struck. Demands for more government action followed the events of September 11, 2001. When Hurricane Katrina devastated the Gulf Coast region in 2005 and Hurricane Sandy ravaged the New Jersey and New York shorelines in 2012, calls went out for a major federal government response. Flooding that left thousands homeless in the Baton Rouge area in 2016 led to calls for more assistance from Washington. The same was true years before when the financial crisis of 2007–2008 nearly brought the United States and global economies to a standstill. Each event generated calls for more and speedier federal government action, and opinion surveys reflect the fact that a growing number of Americans believe that government—and especially the national government—should do more to solve problems and help meet the needs of people (see Figure 1.1).

Thus, instead of focusing on shrinking the size of government, policymakers have turned their attention toward reorganizing and enhancing government agencies at all levels to deal with the threats posed by terrorists, natural disasters, and economic vulnerabilities. Thus, government has played, and continues to play, an important role in the development of the modern American social and economic system.

What Are the Fundamental Issues of Government and Politics?

- How does the U.S. political system deal with the issues of who should govern and where authority should be vested?

The fact that government has always played an important role in the lives of Americans does not mean that its activities have not been controversial. Two basic questions about government and politics have consistently emerged: “Who should govern?” and “Where should governmental authority be located?”

Evaluating the role of the federal government

Role federal government should play in each area . . . (%)

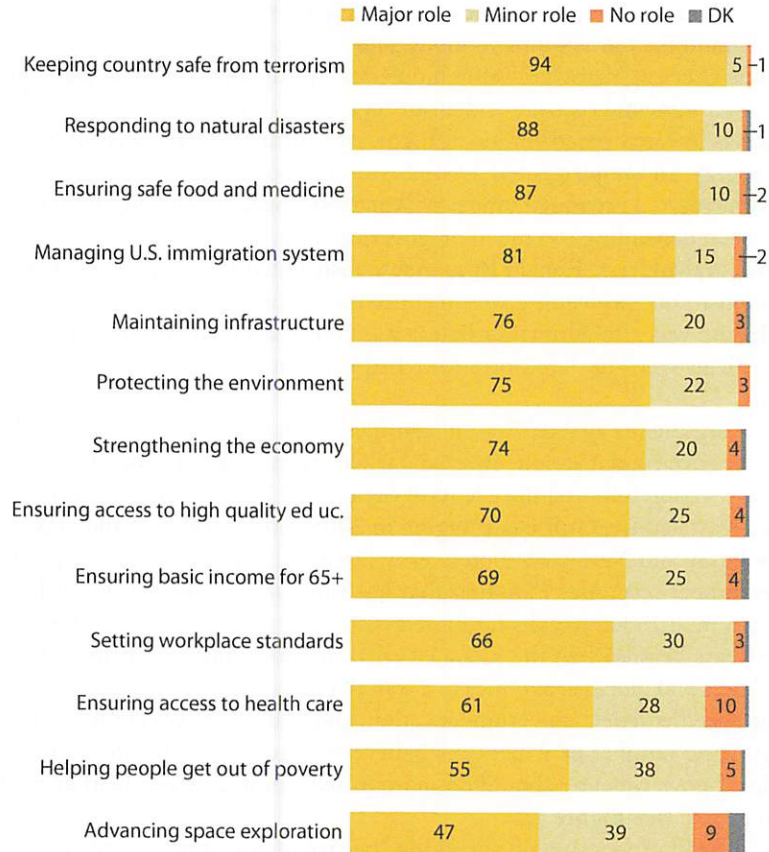


FIGURE 1.1 Role of Government

A 2015 survey conducted by the PEW Research Center focusing on a range of different issues indicates that although public support for federal government activism varies from issue to issue, there is a general acceptance of the need for government's role.

Source: Pew Research Center, November 2015, "Beyond Distrust: How Americans View Their Government," p. 45.

Who Should Govern?

Because the government plays such a critical and pervasive role in everyone's life, it is natural that questions arise about who should control the use of this important social institution. In other words, who should govern? Answers to that general question have taken two forms, one focused on governmental authority and one on the wielding of governmental power.

Authority. For many students of government, the question "Who should govern?" refers to who should be officially authorized to control governmental institutions. In other words, who should exercise formal authority in government? **Authority** can be defined as the capacity to make and enforce public policies that is possessed by individuals who occupy formal governmental roles.²¹

As previously noted, government is composed of the institutions and officials who make and enforce public policies. The roles that those officials play in

Authority The capacity to make and enforce public policies that is possessed by individuals who occupy formal governmental roles.

conducting the business of government are derived from a variety of sources. Some roles are defined in constitutions and other legal documents (see the discussion of constitutional foundations in Chapter 2), whereas others may be the result of long-standing traditions. In either case, when we are concerned with who should occupy those official roles, we are dealing with the issue of authority.

Among the first to try to answer the question of who should govern through the exercise of authority was the ancient Greek philosopher Aristotle (382–322 B.C.E.). He classified governments into three types: government by one, government by the few, and government by the many. Each type, he believed, has a good, or “right,” form and a bad, or “wrong,” form. A right form of government by the one—a monarchy—serves the common interests of the community, whereas a wrong form—tyranny—serves the personal interests of the ruler. In the same way, the good form of rule by the few—aristocracy—stood in contrast to a bad form—known as oligarchy—in which those few would govern in a manner that would serve their own interests.

When it came to rule by the many, or democracy, Aristotle believed that the best form of government would be that in which the population was capable of ruling in the interests of all, but he was realistic enough to know that this was unlikely. In any community, he argued, it is the poor who would dominate such a government, and they would not be capable by themselves of putting aside their own needs on behalf of the common interests of society. Aristotle’s solution was to call for a modified form of democratic governance—which he termed a polity—in which the many would rule in conjunction with an aristocratic few. In his well-known work *Politics*,²² Aristotle offers an elaborate description of all the ways that democracies can deteriorate into tyrannical, oligarchical, or even mob rule, but in the end he regards the mixed-rule polity as the best alternative.

The notion of **democracy** held by most Americans can best be summed up as a belief in government in which authority is based on the consent and will of the majority. If asked the question “Who should govern?” a vast majority of Americans would respond that the people should.

Nevertheless, the American concept of democracy does not mean a commitment to direct rule by the majority. As we will see (in Chapter 2), the Framers of the Constitution did not believe that governmental authority should be directly in the hands of the people. They envisioned the United States as a **republic**, or **representative democracy**, in which the people govern indirectly by electing certain individuals—the president, members of Congress, governors, mayors, state legislators, and others—to make decisions on their behalf. Thus, the people do not vote on or directly make specific policy decisions; they do so indirectly, through the individuals they elect to represent their interests.

Despite this general acceptance of representative democracy, controversies still arise over the need for greater or lesser citizen participation in government decision making. Some observers argue that much more should be done to increase public input into policy decisions through electoral procedures (see the discussion of initiative and referendum in Chapter 8). Others have called for greater public involvement in the deliberative processes that lead to policy

Democracy To Americans, a government in which authority is based on the consent and will of the majority.

Republic A system in which people govern indirectly by electing certain individuals to make decisions on their behalf.

Representative democracy See Republic.

decisions that impact their lives, especially at the local government level (see Chapter 3 on federalism and intergovernmental relations). In contrast, others believe—as Aristotle did—that too much democracy can produce bad outcomes. For them, institutional authority must be designed to offset the misuse and abuse of the power that comes along with authority.

Power The capacity and ability to influence the behavior and choices of others through the use of politically relevant resources.

Majoritarian view of power The view that political power should be distributed as equally as possible in a political system to facilitate meaningful majority rule.

Elitist view of power The view that political power should be in the hands of a relatively small part of the general population that shares a common understanding about the fundamental issues facing society and government.

Pluralist view of power The view that political power should be dispersed among many elites who share a common acceptance of the rules of the game.

Power. We can also approach the question “Who should govern?” from the perspective of political **power**. As defined previously, politics involves activities intended to influence or control what goes on in government. Those who have the ability to wield such influence are said to possess power. From this perspective, the question about who governs should really be “Who should wield power over the operations of government?”

What does it take to possess power?²³ Reduced to its basics, power is a relationship between two parties, A and B. Suppose that A (we’ll call her Alice) has power relative to B (we’ll call him Ted) if Alice can influence Ted’s choices or decisions. To do that, Alice should probably possess something that Ted finds desirable or irresistible. That something, called a resource, can be some special knowledge or expertise, a dynamic and winning personality, the promise of financial reward, or even an outright threat to do Ted harm if he does not cooperate. Just as important, Ted must find Alice’s knowledge, reward, or threat credible. If Ted, for instance, does not believe that Alice is an expert, then Alice will not have that form of influence over him.

From the perspective of power, the answer to the question “Who should govern?” rests on how dispersed the resources for wielding power are in a society. Those who believe in democracy want to see such resources distributed as widely as possible. For them, the ideal situation would be that every citizen is able to exercise the same degree of influence over governmental actions. Under such conditions, government would do what the majority of citizens want done. This is called the **majoritarian view of power**.

However, most students of government agree that politically influential resources are unequally distributed in society; consequently, some members of society will be able to influence governmental actions more than others. Thus, the question really becomes whether it is more desirable to have those resources concentrated in the hands of a few (elitism) or dispersed as widely as possible (pluralism).

Those who advocate the **elitist view of power** argue that the general public is best served when a basic consensus regarding fundamental issues exists among a country’s top leaders. Although these leaders may disagree on minor issues or may even compete against one another for positions of authority in government, the fact that they share a common view on issues that might otherwise split the nation is regarded as an important foundation for governing.

In contrast, although they do not deny that power-relevant resources are unequally distributed in society, those who support the **pluralist view of power** advocate a political system in which many elites, not just one, influence government. For pluralists, it is not important that members of some small elite agree on fundamental issues. Rather, it is crucial that membership in the elite be open

to all in society; members need only agree to abide by the rules of the game in government and politics. From the pluralist perspective, members of this open elite serve the public good by competing among themselves for the attention of government, as well as for control of public offices.

Whether it is focused on authority or on power, the issue of who should govern is an important one. It helped to shape the American political system, and as we will see in our discussions of public opinion, political parties, and campaigns and elections in Chapters 6 through 8, it remains a critical question in today's hotly contested political environment.

Where Should Governmental Authority Be Vested?

Should governmental authority be vested in local communities, in governments close to the people? Should it be vested in the political center of the nation, Washington, DC? Or should it be vested in the fifty state capitals—in Harrisburg, Springfield, Austin, Sacramento, Columbus, Tallahassee, and all the others? Because of the broad range of governmental activities, these questions do not have simple answers.

To illustrate, would it make sense for the national government to run your town's fire department? Who should be responsible for collecting your town's garbage, running your town's parks, and hiring your school district's teachers? Many people trust local government to deal with these important issues because towns and cities or even states are regarded as better able to do so. At the same time, it is generally agreed that local governments cannot deal effectively with foreign policy, national defense, regional unemployment, and other major economic and social issues that challenge the nation as a whole. Therefore, many Americans believe that the national government, with its vast economic resources and national perspective, should tackle these issues. Many also argue that national policies can better reflect the general will and values of the American people and are less likely to discriminate against racial, religious, and political minorities than local policies are.

However, views about which level of government is best suited to carry out the functions of government will vary depending on the level of trust reflected in public attitudes. The Pew Research Center has been tracking the public's views toward different levels of government since 1997, and although federal government has been viewed favorably in the past (especially immediately following the terrorist attacks of September 11, 2001), the trend since 2005 has been steadily downward for the national government and relatively positive for both state and local governments during that same period.²⁴

Most complex societies have found that to ensure effective governance, they need intermediate levels of government as well. Different nations have solved this problem in different ways. The United States has developed a unique solution that allows national, state, and local governments to share power. But even this solution is incomplete, and the debate continues over the role of each level of government in delivering services to the American public. We will discuss the struggles over the vesting of power in greater detail in Chapter 3, when we examine federalism and intergovernmental relations.

Understanding American Government and Politics

- How do we understand and make sense of our political system and government? What are the roles of myths, reason, beliefs, and ideologies in that effort?

With some of these basic definitions and concepts in mind, we can now return to the major question addressed in this book: How do we understand the world around us? This question has intrigued philosophers for centuries and is still being studied daily by a range of scholars from psychologists and neuroscientists to sociologists and literature professors. The answers provided by all these students of human understanding are as varied as their approaches to the subject. But one thing they seem to have in common is the assumption that the world around us is much too complex for anyone to easily make sense of, and therefore each of us uses some form of mental tool or intellectual shortcut to make sense of our surroundings.

Political Myths

We have already discussed the tendency for most of us to rely on myths (i.e., stories and narratives) to make sense of the political world. As each of the following chapters demonstrates, myths can play and have played an influential role in shaping how we view the U.S. political system—and how others might view us. Two significant examples are discussed in the “Policy Connection” following this chapter: the myth of American exceptionalism and the myth of American vulnerability. Another example is featured in Chapter 2, which discusses America’s constitutional foundations. There, we focus on the myth of the “living Constitution”—a perspective that has helped shape the way the public and the courts have interpreted what the various provisions of the 228-year-old document mean today. As we will learn in that discussion, even widely held myths can prove controversial, because in recent years an alternative myth of the “enduring Constitution” has found expression among some of today’s Supreme Court justices.

As noted earlier, myths come in a variety of forms. In some cases, the myths we will encounter take the form of stories (fictional as well as historical) about national heroes. Generations of school-age children have often been told stories about the young “I cannot tell a lie” George Washington and about “Honest Abe” Lincoln, as well as tales about the military genius of Andrew Jackson at the Battle of New Orleans and the bravery of Theodore Roosevelt as he led the cavalry charge up San Juan Hill in the Spanish–American War.

The media have played a major role in developing and sustaining many of the most popular myths. In the nineteenth century, widely read rags-to-riches novels by Horatio Alger Jr. promoted the sense that anyone can succeed in America through commitment and hard work. During the 1950s and 1960s, prime-time television featured the heroic, justice-seeking exploits of characters such as the Lone Ranger and Marshal Matt Dillon on *Gunslinger*. For more than two decades,

the series *Law & Order* (along with its various spinoffs) created a popular narrative about the interaction between police investigations and criminal prosecution. Equally powerful stories abound in the popular press about our nation's leaders—about the lives and accomplishments of political families like the Roosevelts, Kennedys, Bushs, and Clintons; about individual presidents like Richard Nixon and Barack Obama; and about key institutions like the U.S. Senate and the Pentagon.

Such stories are powerful forces in shaping the public's views about government, as are stories about the actions of bureaucratic agencies and historical figures. A story about a government agency spending tens of thousands of taxpayer dollars on Las Vegas “training” conferences confirms for many people the widely held belief that government bureaucracy is inefficient and wasteful (see Chapter 13).²⁵ On a different level, the story of John Hancock signing the Declaration of Independence supports the popular images of the American Revolution, what it stood for, and the risks and sacrifices made by those who chose to break with England in 1776. In each case, the story-turned-myth helps to shape our understanding of and attitudes toward our system of government.

But not all myths involve stories in the form of straightforward narratives. Instead, some of today's most important myths take the form of stereotypes (such as “All Democrats are big-spending liberals” and “The Republican party represents big business”), proverbial sayings (such as “You can't fight city hall”), and pervasive attitudes (such as “All politicians are crooks”) that impact the way we think about government and the American political system. Although they are not full-blown narratives in the standard sense, myths in these forms imply an underlying storyline that has gained wide and unquestioned acceptance.

Five Functions of Political Myths

Although there is no denying the pervasive presence of myths in our lives, the fact that many are based at least in part on falsehoods and distortions raises the question of why we would even consider maintaining our reliance on them. Why not acknowledge their shortcomings as reflections of reality and just toss them? The answer lies in the important functions that myths perform—functions that have helped provide us with a relatively stable political system for more than two very tumultuous centuries. Among other things, we depend on myths because we need them to do the following:²⁶

- Simplify our complex world.
- Define our place in the world and provide us with a shared identity.
- Guide and rationalize our behavior.



In 1802, John James Barralet issued this print, which depicts George Washington being raised from his tomb by Father Time and the Angel of Immortality. Such myth-creating imagery would eventually adorn everything from household china to the dome of the U.S. Capitol Building.

- Make sense of the behavior of others.
- Orient our views of the past, present, and future.

Simplifying the Complex. First, like the ancients, we sometimes use myths to help us simplify the complex world in which we live. Myths help us “to live in a world in which the causes” of our problems “are simple and neat and the remedies are apparent.”²⁷ During the economic downturn of the early 1990s, for example, many Americans blamed the Japanese for the United States’ economic woes. Stories about unfair pricing strategies used by Japanese firms as well as widely publicized remarks by Japanese officials regarding poor American work habits helped to fuel a myth about an “economic war” with Japan.²⁸ The Great Recession of 2007–2009 has also generated simplifying myths. Although a formal public inquiry into the causes of the Great Recession indicated that the severe economic downturn was the product of a complex array of factors,²⁹ a number of simplifying myths have emerged, focusing on specific causes such as “housing bubbles,” government deregulation, and “Wall Street greed.” Such simplifying myths can help us understand what took place, but often at the cost of distorting complex realities that should be taken into account when considering how to respond to the issues raised by such crises.

Defining Our Place in the World. Second, myths often help us define our place in the world and provide us with a common social and political identity.³⁰ Many of us perceive the United States in mythical terms: “as a community of free and equal self-governing citizens pursuing their individual ends in a spirit of tolerance for their religious and other forms of diversity.”³¹ This and other myths held by Americans are supported by stories—for example, of the first Thanksgiving, Washington’s cutting down the cherry tree, and the noble deeds of young Abe Lincoln—that reinforce our national “belief in innocence, in honesty, in freedom, in the use of the wilderness, in adaptability, in the right of the individual to act freely without restraint. . . . Like all myths, their function is to say this is the way it was with Americans, this is the way it is, and this is the way it ought to be.”³² Without such myths, the political system might crumble, as those of the former Soviet Union and other parts of Eastern Europe did in the late 1980s and early 1990s.³³

Guiding Our Behavior. Third, we frequently depend on myths to help guide and rationalize our behavior. The myth of good citizenship tells us that we ought to vote because that is the only effective way to influence the behavior of government officials.³⁴ As already noted, myths can also have a profound impact on how we conduct our foreign policy.³⁵ In addition to the myth of American exceptionalism (see “Policy Connection” at the end of this chapter) and the myth of vulnerability (see Chapter 16, online), many critics of American foreign policy feel that our national behavior in international affairs is shaped by a national myth of progress—a vision of “America as the wave of the future.”³⁶ “Americans see history as a straight line,” comments essayist Frances FitzGerald, “and themselves standing at the cutting edge of it as representatives for all mankind.”³⁷

Making Sense of Others. Fourth, myths often help us make sense of the behavior of others. In foreign affairs, and especially during wartime or periods of great tension, we often rely on images and stories of our enemies and allies that help guide our behavior. The negative images of our German and Japanese enemies found in movies and posters during both world wars helped to keep the war efforts going, as did the stereotypical pictures of the Soviets during the Cold War. President Ronald Reagan, for example, labeled the Soviet Union an “evil empire” during his terms in office, and after September 11, president George W. Bush spoke of the “evildoers” and the “axis of evil” when referring to those countries that he claimed supported terrorism. In contrast, positive images and stories of our allies took on mythical tones during the same periods.³⁸

Past, Present, Future. A fifth and final function of myths is that many of the most significant ones reflect views of the past or the future, as well as the present. Many of the myths surrounding our most important governmental institutions—the U.S. Constitution, the presidency, Congress, and the Supreme Court—reflect the judgments of history on those bodies and the people who served in them. For example, although Abraham Lincoln is regarded today as one of the nation’s great presidents, he was highly criticized by other politicians and the media while he occupied the White House. His status as a great president—much of it reflected in stories and myths—is well established in our eyes, despite the low regard in which he was held by many of his contemporaries.

We also adopt many future-oriented myths that often shape our expectations of what government officials can or will do. For example, among military



In today’s American mythology, Abraham Lincoln is venerated and rarely ridiculed. While he was president, however, he was often the subject of critical attacks questioning his wisdom and motives.

professionals, the failure of America's military venture in Vietnam during the 1960s and early 1970s was often blamed on the civilian authorities' lack of commitment to the military's efforts. What emerged from that experience can be called the Vietnam War myth, a widely held belief among our nation's top military leaders that American military forces will not be successful in the future unless enough forces are sent to do the job and military commanders are allowed to act without interference from the politicians back in Washington. This myth had a significant influence on the decisions of president George H. W. Bush concerning the use of military force against Iraq in 1991: He committed more than 500,000 U.S. troops and gave military commanders considerable freedom to determine how to deal with the forces of Saddam Hussein that had invaded Kuwait.³⁹ Given the relative success of that mission, some would argue that the myth was proved correct. However, for our purposes, what is important is that the Vietnam War myth had a significant impact on the attitudes and decisions of key policymakers as well as those of the American public.

Many of our myths also focus on the present to help us deal with what is taking place in Washington, Topeka, or Sacramento, for example, right at this moment. Many people believe in the myth of special-interest government, which, correctly or incorrectly, helps many of us understand why Congress or a state legislature passes a law providing a new tax break for some major or local industry, although this action will ultimately increase the general taxpayer's burden. According to this myth, such laws are passed because special interests are able to hire high-priced lobbyists in Washington or a state capital who are effective in influencing legislators, whereas the general public has no one representing its interests (see Chapter 9 on interest groups).

From these examples, it should be obvious that myths focus on a wide range of subjects—from the nature of American society and our national Constitution to everyday political and governmental activities and our perception of world affairs. Individually, many of us have adopted myths about whether American society is racist or sexist, about the efficiency and effectiveness of local firefighters and law enforcement personnel, and about how important our participation in the political system is or can be. The wide range of topics covered by myths will become increasingly evident as you read through this textbook.

The Power of Reason

We noted earlier how the ancient Greeks used both myths and reason to make sense of the world. The fact that myths shape our view of political reality does not mean we must rely on stories and narratives alone. Rather, we can apply a variety of other cognitive tools to make sense of political complexities, each of which can provide us with important and useful perspectives on what is really taking place. Another way of thinking about these tools is that they offer a way of enhancing and/or modifying our myth-based understanding of political life by suggesting a number of different realities to compare it with.

Just as the ancient Greeks turned to *logos* as an alternative to myth-based thinking, today we regard reasoned analysis as the ideal means for making sense of our political world. We typically hope that the reasonable citizen has a

basic knowledge about the political system and its government institutions and is capable of making sense of what he or she reads or hears in news reports. A knowledgeable and well-informed citizen who has access to relevant facts and evidence is able to understand by applying his or her analytic skills in a reasoned way.

Although some Americans can live up to that ideal, the complex nature of the U.S. political system often proves too difficult and time-consuming for many people to comprehend (recall the perplexing examples at the beginning of the chapter). In addition, some would argue that, as our private lives become more hectic and complicated, we have less and less time to deal with our public or civic lives.

The results are evident in recent surveys that tested the “civic literacy” of Americans. In 2006 and 2007, the Intercollegiate Studies Institute (ISI) funded a study in which 28,000 college freshman and seniors were quizzed on their knowledge of American institutions and history. Most failed. The institute followed up with a similar survey in 2008, using a random sample of 2,508 American adults who were asked to complete a thirty-three-question “quiz” involving basic civic knowledge drawn from a variety of sources. Of those who participated, more than 70 percent had failing grades (scored below 60 percent correct) (see Figure 1.2; see also *Asked & Answered*, page 24).

Political scientists who study the American electorate express a wide range of opinions on the low number of citizens who rely on reason and evidence to make sense of their political lives and choices. To some, American voters are so ignorant or irrational about politics that elections are simply meaningless expressions of the public will.⁴⁰ To others, the electorate is not ignorant but ill informed, and votes and elections are meaningful to the extent that they reflect decisions made on the basis of less-than-adequate knowledge. Samuel Popkin, an advocate of the

America's Report Card		
<i>In spring 2008, a random sample of Americans took a straightforward test designed to assess each respondent's "knowledge of America's founding principles and texts, core history, and enduring institutions"—ISI's definition of civic literacy. As detailed below, more than 70% of Americans failed this basic test of the kind of knowledge required for informed and responsible citizenship.</i>		
Grade	Number Surveyed	Percent Surveyed
A (90 to 100%)	21	0.8
B (80 to 89.9%)	66	2.6
C (70 to 79.9%)	185	7.4
D (60 to 69.9%)	445	17.8
F (59.9% and below)	1,791	71.4
Total	2,508	100.0

FIGURE 1.2 Civic Illiteracy?
 Source: Intercollegiate Studies Institute American Civic Literacy Program, “Our Fading Heritage: Americans Fail a Basic Test on Their History and Institutions.”

ASKED & ANSWERED

ASKED: How knowledgeable are U.S. students about their government?

ANSWERED: How much do American college students know about their government, its history, its values, or the U.S. economy? Do they score any higher on the civic literacy quiz than the general public (see Figure 1.2)? The answer is yes, but not by much. In the ISI study, those students who held a bachelor's degree had an average score of 57 percent correct on the quiz, a full 13 percentage points higher than those with high school degrees. Nevertheless, a majority still failed the test. Giving the same quiz to college freshmen and seniors in 2005 and 2006, the ISI found not only that most students failed, but also that the three years of college education made little difference in the scores—and that students in elite schools often did worse on the test. In a follow-up survey focused on whether college education led to greater levels of civic engagement, ISI concluded that “a college degree appears to have the same negligible participatory impact as frequently listening to music, watching prime-time television, utilizing social networking sites, and emailing.”

Are American students less civically literate than students in other countries? Do American students know less about political life and their political systems than students of the same age in Europe, Asia, or Latin America?

To find answers to those questions, we turn to the multinational 1999 Civic Education Study conducted

by the International Association for the Evaluation of Educational Achievement. The study involved nearly 90,000 fourteen-year-olds in twenty-eight countries, asking a range of questions designed to provide an assessment of how much these adolescents knew about politics, their views on civic engagement (what citizens are expected to do), and their attitudes on certain key issues. According to the study's findings, America's fourteen-year-old cohort (mostly ninth graders) scored well in the categories of civic knowledge and understanding of civic engagement. Among the twenty-eight countries included in the study, the U.S. students ranked sixth overall, and in questions related to an understanding of the civic skills of citizens, the United States topped the list, with a score of 114 (100 = sample average).

Based on these survey data, when compared with students in other countries, American students tend to be above average in their understanding of both civic knowledge and civic skills. What makes these findings even more interesting is that the group of ninth graders tested in 1999 were of the same demographic cohort as the college seniors who scored so poorly in the 2005–2006 ISI civic literacy tests.

Sources: For ISI, all material is found at <http://www.americancivilliteracy.org/index.html>. The findings for the 1999 International Association for the Evaluation of Educational Achievement study are found at <http://www.iea.nl/cived.html>. A follow-up study was conducted in 2009, but the United States did not participate.

latter view, argues that Americans use “heuristic shortcuts” in making sense of the choices they face in an election, and although such voters do not live up to the ideal model of a reasonable citizen, they do represent something more than an ignorant or indifferent voter.⁴¹

The use of reasoned analysis in American political life, however, is not always tied to the image of the ideal citizen or voter. Some argue that many of the institutions of American government operate in a way that applies the power of reason to resolve disputes and solve public problems. One of the major characteristics of the American judicial system (see Chapter 14, on the judiciary) is the use

of legal and constitutional reasoning in dealing with the many and varied issues that come before the courts.⁴² Others point to the increasing use of policy-analysis techniques by government agencies (see Chapter 13 on the bureaucracy) as another example of the growing power of reason in how we make sense of government. In fact, many of the efforts made to reform American government and politics over the past century can be regarded as attempts to enhance the use of reasoned analysis in the U.S. political system.

Beliefs and Ideologies

A third set of tools we use to make sense of our complex political world come from those beliefs and ideologies that we adopt during our lifetime.

Beliefs. Beliefs differ from reasoned analysis because they do not rely on empirical evidence or logic but instead are based on assumptions and attitudes we grow up with or develop over time. And although myths may play a role in generating and reinforcing beliefs, we can still regard them as a distinct sense-making tool. Many of our beliefs are implicit in the way we think about the world around us and are often reflected in the actions we take based on what we regard as common sense and stereotypes. Thus, if we are brought up to believe that all bureaucrats are incompetent or unresponsive (see Chapter 13, on the bureaucracy), we are likely to distrust all government officials, even in the face of evidence that they are people of integrity who are doing the best job they can under demanding circumstances and conditions of uncertainty.

Beliefs also differ from myths because they have an influence over us that is independent of stories and narratives about political and social life. Rather, our political beliefs emerge from an ongoing process we call political socialization (see Chapter 6 on public opinion and political participation). Thus, the widely shared belief among many Americans that all Democrats are liberals and all Republicans are conservatives may have its roots in the attitudes expressed by our parents, schoolmates, or friends. Such basic beliefs will play a role in the political myths we adopt, and they might even shape the reasoned analysis we engage in when deciding which candidate to vote for in an election. But at their core, these attitudes likely result from fundamental beliefs we develop early in life and tend to retain over time.

The relationship between beliefs and myths can be complicated. We all face situations in which our beliefs are challenged by the evidence before us or are in direct conflict with the strongly held beliefs of others. Social psychologists call this situation cognitive dissonance,⁴³ and they find that people who face such challenges will often filter out or ignore information that does not fit their beliefs. There are times, however, when those who hold strong beliefs will open themselves to alternative views and conflicting evidence—and this can have political consequences.

Consider what happens when a widely held belief that all Republicans are politically conservative is challenged by the candidacy of a liberal politician who is running as a Republican. This was the case in Rhode Island in both the 2000 and the 2006 elections, when Lincoln Chafee, the son of a popular Republican U.S. senator, ran to fill his father's seat. Rhode Island is regarded as a Democratic

Beliefs Those strongly held assumptions and attitudes about politics and government we grow up with or develop over time. In contrast to reasoned analysis or myths, beliefs do not rely on empirical evidence or narratives.



POLITICS & POPULAR

CULTURE: Visit the book's companion website at www.oup.com/us/gitelson to read the special feature *Mirrors and Shapers of Images*.

Ideologies Conceptually coherent beliefs used to help us think about whether government is doing what it should be doing.

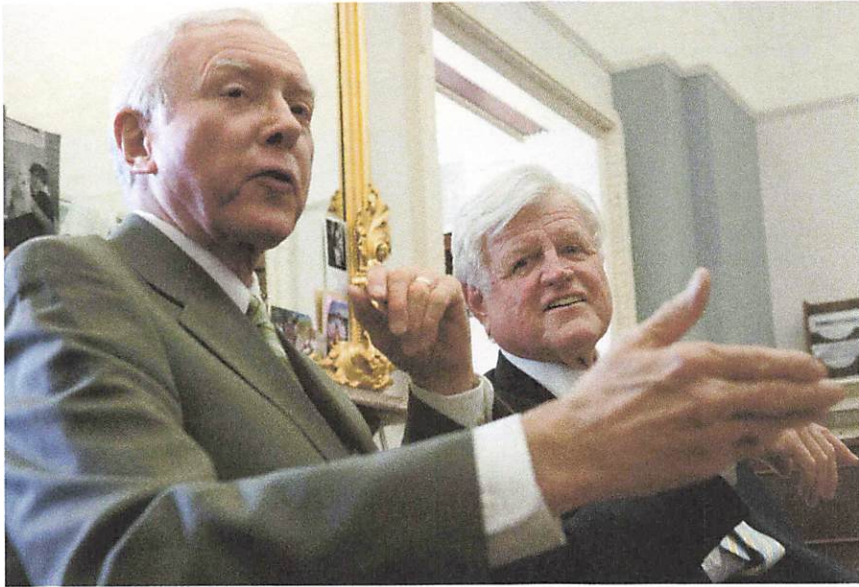
Party stronghold and one of the most “liberal” states in the country, and in preceding decades Republicans had not done well in statewide elections. In 2000, however, many liberal Democrats voted for the younger Chafee, giving him a 57 to 41 percent victory over his rival. But, although many liberal Democrats were willing to suspend their beliefs about Republicans in the 2000 election, Chafee was not as lucky in 2006. Despite having established himself as one of the most liberal members of the U.S. Senate during his six years in office, not enough Rhode Island liberal Democrats were willing to give up their negative views and beliefs about Republicans to reelect the otherwise popular Chafee. He lost the election by a 53 to 46 percent decision—and a year later quietly announced that he was no longer a Republican.

Ideologies. When our beliefs become more explicit and coherent, they take the form of **ideologies**. In politics, ideologies are the conceptually coherent beliefs we use to think about whether government is doing what it ought to be doing. They offer us general priorities and principles about what government could or should do and suggest the means for doing it.⁴⁴ Whereas myths help us to understand and deal with the world, ideologies tend to reflect our beliefs about the way we think the political world does or should operate. For example, those who adhere to a Marxist ideology view politics and the political system as the means by which the capitalist class maintains its power over the working class. For Marx and others, government should—and eventually will—be in the hands of the workers. At the other extreme, the American author and philosopher Ayn Rand used her writings to promote an ideology called objectivism that stressed the values of individualism and called for minimal government intervention in the economy.

But not all ideologies reflect extreme positions on issues. Consider, for example, the question of what the scope of governmental activity should be. When addressed explicitly as ideologies, this question's answers vary from society to society and from era to era. Although some governments have attempted to establish an official ideology, in most democratic nations there is competition among two or more dominant ideologies. Until the middle 1980s, the leaders of the Soviet Union endorsed and enforced a Marxist-Leninist ideology that made opposition to the government a crime.⁴⁵ More common, however, is the situation in many Western European democracies, where competition among followers of different ideologies is at the heart of the representative system. In France, Italy, Belgium, Denmark, and even Great Britain, differences in ideology are often reflected in differences among the political parties.⁴⁶

Although no “official” or dominant political ideology exists in the United States, most of us would likely support one of four major types of popular ideologies based on how we would respond to two central questions regarding how much government should do:

1. To what extent should government intervene in economic affairs?
2. To what extent should government interfere in the private affairs of Americans?



When the conservative Orrin Hatch (R-UT) ran for the U.S. Senate in 1976, he explicitly promised to work against the “liberal” agenda of the late senator Ted Kennedy (D-MA). Over the years, however, Hatch and Kennedy (who died in 2009) developed a close relationship, resulting in the passage of major health and social legislation.

With regard to the first question, some Americans believe that government should not interfere in the marketplace unless absolutely necessary, whereas others believe that government regulation and management of the economy are crucial for the nation’s health. In response to the second question, at one extreme are those who believe that government has no right to intrude in their personal choices and that the areas of personal freedom must be extended as much as possible. At the other end of the spectrum are those who believe that government sometimes has a moral obligation to intercede in the private lives of people who might otherwise make unwise decisions. From that perspective, governments should be permitted to make and enforce laws related to smoking, abortion rights, same-sex marriage, and so on.

Taken together, the intersection of American beliefs on these two issues has generated four ideologies that seem to represent four general answers to the question of the extent to which the government should intervene in the economic life of the country and the activities of private citizens (see Figure 1.3).⁴⁷ **Liberalism** is the label typically applied to the position of those who favor increased government intervention in the economy but oppose increased limits on personal freedom. **Conservatism** is the label usually given to the position of those who favor increased regulation of private lives for moral purposes but oppose government interference in the economy.

Traditionally, liberalism and conservatism have constituted the mainstream ideological positions of most Americans. But in recent years many Americans have found that their views do not fit neatly into either perspective: They are liberal on certain issues and conservative on others. As a result, two other

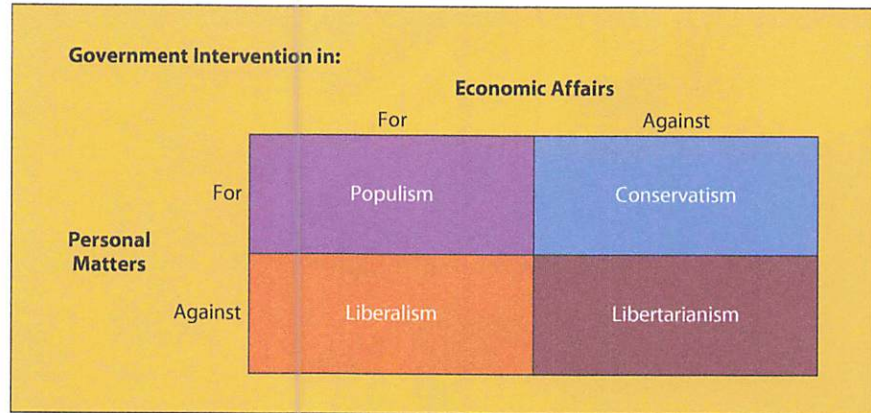
Liberalism A set of ideological beliefs that usually favor government intervention in the economy but oppose government interference in the private lives of individuals.

Conservatism A set of ideological beliefs that tend to resist government interference in economic matters but favor government action to regulate private affairs for moral purposes.

FIGURE 1.3 Issues and Ideologies

The four major ideologies of American politics have been shaped by debates over government's role in economic and personal matters.

Source: Adapted from Maddox, William S., and Stuart A. Lillie. Beyond Liberal and Conservative: Reassessing the Political Spectrum. Washington, DC: CATO Institute, 1984. Reprinted by permission.



Populism A set of ideological beliefs that favor government intervention in both economic and personal affairs.

Libertarianism The ideological belief that government should do no more than what is minimally necessary in the areas of both economic affairs and personal freedom.

popular ideological perspectives have emerged: Modern-day **populists** are inclined to favor government intervention in both economic and personal matters, whereas **libertarians** take a strong stand against intervention in both.

Culture Wars and Voter Anger

The growing popularity of the populist and libertarian ideologies reflects some fundamental problems and potential shifts in the American ideological landscape. Initially, the changes were subtle. During the 1990s some observers of American government and politics suggested that our dominant ideological perspectives—liberalism and conservatism—seem increasingly inconsequential to Americans. Some argued that there is a growing gap between the dominant ideologies and the realities of American political life. “The categories that have dominated our thinking for so long are irrelevant to the new world we face,” contends E. J. Dionne Jr.⁴⁸ Others remarked on the widening “discrepancy” and tension between our dominant ideologies and the myths of American government that help define our expectations of how our political system should operate.⁴⁹

By 2010, the ideological landscape of American politics had radically changed. Political divisions began to erupt in the form of what the popular press characterized as “culture wars.” Antigovernment movements such as the Tea Party movement emerged to challenge elected officials they regarded as too moderate, and a significant change in the tone of political debate led many to worry about the “civility” of American political discourse.⁵⁰ Political scientists such as Morris P. Fiorina argue that these recent changes are limited and reflect a sharpening ideological divide only at the extremes of partisan politics. To Fiorina and his colleagues, the majority of Americans remain uncommitted to any strong ideological position.⁵¹ Others, like Alan I. Abramowitz, think that there is something more significant taking place and that ideologies are playing an increasing role in shaping the views and behavior of the general citizenry. His view is that the increasing prominence of ideologies in American political life is a reflection of growing demographic, geographic, cultural, and socioeconomic divisions.⁵²

Which view is correct? The emergence of Donald Trump and Bernie Sanders as serious contenders for the presidency in 2016 tended to favor the Abramowitz argument, because the relative success of both seemed to be rooted in a

willingness to vote for candidates who reflected a populist ideology. But a growing number of analysts questioned whether it was ideology that was driving the political sea change that took place in 2016. Rather, they began to focus on the role of emotions and prejudices as important factors to consider when trying to make sense of American politics today.

For some, the key to understanding American politics in 2016 is found in the racist and nativist tendencies that have played an important role in U.S. political history. For commentator Jamelle Bouie, the election of the first African American president in 2008 triggered a racism that finally came to the surface in 2016 and the candidacy of Donald Trump. “Throughout our history,” he argued, “a substantial minority of whites has responded to America’s always-shifting racial and economic terrain with a primal fear of being dominated, of finding themselves at the bottom of the hierarchy. It’s one of the strongest forces in American life, and politicians and demagogues of many partisan stripes channeled long before . . . Trump.”⁵³ In a similar vein, others point to America’s historical animosity toward immigrant populations and the anti-Muslim feelings generated after the attacks of September 11, 2001, as the key to understanding the rise of Donald Trump.

Alternatively, political analysts such as Thomas Frank argued the tumult of the 2016 election is a product of a growing sense of anger and resentment among working- and middle-class Americans who feel abandoned by both political parties.⁵⁴ According to this view, given the opportunity to express their frustrations through primary elections, the voters are supporting candidates who challenge the political establishment in both parties. Although the potential for racism and xenophobia is evident in the electorate, they are being brought to the forefront of American politics by the pervasive anger felt by voters.

Conclusion

We live in an increasingly complex and rapidly changing world, and many of us are barely able to keep up with the uncertainties and ambiguities of everyday life. Coming to terms with these turbulent conditions requires that we try to make sense of our everyday lives. We engage in sense making all the time. When you made the transition to college, for example, it probably took a while for you to make sense of where you were physically and what was expected of you socially and academically. When you change your residence or start a new job or make your first visit abroad, you engage in sense making as you become oriented to the new places and people that surround you. The same is true as you start to engage in the civic and political life of your community, state, or country. The first steps involve making sense of things.

Our approach and goal in this textbook is to get you started on the road to making sense of American government and politics. As we have highlighted in this chapter, the major ways to do this are with reasoning, beliefs, and myths. Although you may not realize it, unless you have been completely isolated from the outside world, you have already begun to make sense of our political and constitutional system, mostly through the adoption of the myths you learned in school or through the media. You may also hold some very strong beliefs about political life that you have picked up along the way. And it is likely that you have engaged in political reasoning at some point when discussing current issues and events with friends and family.

In the chapters that follow, we hope to raise your awareness of how you and other Americans make sense of our complicated political system. In the process, we highlight a few myths and strongly held beliefs related to specific topics—and explore some of the evidence and reasoning behind the “reality” of our subject matter. The main purpose of this book is to enhance your knowledge of American government and politics, but it is just as important that you increase your capacity to make better sense of it all.

Key Terms

Authority p. 14

Beliefs p. 25

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Focus Questions Review

1. How do we define government and politics? >>>

Government consists of those institutions and officials whose purpose it is to write and enact laws and to execute and enforce public policies that are expected to (1) maintain order through the rule of law, (2) provide goods and services that benefit the lives of all citizens, and (3) promote equality among members of society.

Politics refers to the activities aimed at influencing or controlling government for the purpose of formulating or guiding public policy.

2. What has been the role of government in American history? >>>

Governments at the national, state, and local levels have played active roles in the nation’s development from colonial times to the present.

Traditionally, government has been active in economic and social policy areas, and the national government has been especially active since the days of the New Deal in the 1930s.

Government has been increasingly involved in efforts to deal with environmental issues and the country’s growing energy dependence.

In recent years there has been greater concern about the size of government and the need to consider changing public priorities.

3. How does the U.S. political system deal with the issues of who should govern and where authority should be vested? >>>

From the perspective of governmental institutions, Americans are committed to the values of democracy, but the form of government is closer to that of a republic or representative democracy.

From the perspective of politics and the wielding of power, the U.S. political system reflects a mixture of three major approaches:

- A **majoritarian model**, in which power is distributed as equally as possible in a political system to facilitate meaningful majority rule.
- An **elitist model** based on the idea that, at times, the general public is best served when a basic consensus exists among a country’s top leaders regarding fundamental issues.
- A **pluralist model** that accepts the role of power elites as long as membership in the elite is open to all in society and the members of this open elite

serve the public good by competing among themselves for the attention of government, as well as for control of public offices.

Americans operate under a system that distributes authority over public policies among different levels of government—a system termed **federalism**.

4. **How do we understand and make sense of our political system and government? What are the roles of myths, reason, beliefs, and ideologies in that effort? >>>**

We make sense of our political system through three means:

Political myths, which help us understand the political world around us through historical narratives, proverbial sayings, and other popular storylines that allow us to make sense of the complex settings and problems we face. These myths and stories, in short, help us by giving us a framework within which we can comprehend and navigate complicated governmental structures and procedures, as well as many of the baffling issues that challenge our political system. They do this by

1. Simplifying our complex world;
2. Defining our place in the world and providing us with a shared identity;
3. Guiding and rationalizing our behavior;
4. Making sense of the behavior of others; and
5. Orienting our views of the past, present, and future.

Reasoned analysis, which relies on a citizen's basic knowledge about the political systems and the issues that confront it. Those citizens using this

approach would develop and apply their knowledge and analytic skills when faced with a choice of candidates or when engaged in discussions about policy issues.

Beliefs and ideologies, which we adopt and develop over time and which provide us with our basic assumptions about the operations and role of government, the political system, and the various actors involved in both.

Beliefs are typically derived from our socialization into the political system and help shape the content and role of reason and myths in our political lives.

Ideologies reflect basic beliefs and attitudes toward government and its role in society. In the United States, four major ideological views tend to dominate:

1. Liberalism, which takes a positive view of the government's efforts to deal with economic issues but a more cautious view of the government's incursions into the private lives of Americans.
2. Conservatism, which believes government involvement in the economy is not desirable but is willing to see government take action to restrict private behavior that is deemed socially questionable.
3. Populism, which is open to government involvement in both the economic and the social lives of Americans for the greater good.
4. Libertarianism, which takes a dim view of government involvement in either sphere if it restricts individual freedom and choice.

Review Questions

1. What are the three major goals of American government?
2. In what ways do myths, beliefs, and ideologies help us make sense of politics and government?



For more information and access to study materials, visit the book's companion website at www.oup.com/us/gitelson.