INAUGURATION DAY, 2013. President XX stands in front of the U.S. Capitol and repeats the oath of office. The ceremony reflects an American legacy that stretches all the way back to President George Washington, who repeated the same words in 1791. It remains a highlight in the life of the world’s oldest democracy. It is a solemn moment: even Washington was visibly nervous when he spoke the oath.

Members of Congress surround the president on the inaugural stage. Congress looks a lot more like America than it did a decade ago: today it includes 93 women, 27 Hispanics, and 41 African Americans, together making up the largest-ever collection of non-white males. The United States still has a long way to go, however, before it really reflects America (see Figure 1.1).

Chief Justice John Roberts of the Supreme Court leads President XX through the oath of office. The Court serves as a check on Congress and the president, measuring their actions against the Constitution of the United States. The court is charged with protecting rights guaranteed by the Constitution. For example, the Court struck down racially segregated schools for violating the Constitution and ruled that every American accused of a serious crime has a right to a lawyer.

What you cannot see on Inauguration Day is the sheer depth of this democracy. Americans elect 500,000 public officials—from the governors of their states to the mayors of their cities, from soil and water commissioners in Iowa City to cemetery trustees in Lempster, New Hampshire. No other country in the world comes close to voting on so many offices.

Yet this proud democracy is full of paradoxes. On four occasions, Americans inaugurated presidential candidates who got fewer popular votes than their opponents; thus, nearly one in ten of the nation’s presidents were not the people’s choice. Congress reflects another peculiar twist to the democracy. Its approval rating, measured by a Gallup poll in December 2011, fell to 11 percent—the lowest number ever recorded. Yet more than 85 percent of House and Senate incumbents won reelection in 2012, and most of them by landslides. The public overwhelmingly disapproves of Congress, but voted to return their representatives to Capitol Hill for another term.

The Supreme Court’s nine members represent still another limit to American democracy. Justices are not elected; they are appointed for life. At times, the Court has looked more like a bastion of privilege than a protector of rights. Back in 1857, the Court ruled that, according to the Constitution, black people “were so far inferior” that they had “no rights which the white man was bound to respect.” More recently the Court has struck down legislation governing prayer in schools, abortion, limits on campaign finance, guns near schools, and many other controversial topics.

IN THIS CHAPTER YOU WILL
Learn the basics about four key questions:
- Who Governs?
- How does American politics work?
- What does government do?
- Who are we?
politics. We think there is nothing more interesting—not hip-hop or Modern Family or the Super Bowl. Well, actually, all those involve politics too. Our goal is not just to help you answer the big questions. We also aim to project the savor and excitement of politics and power and democracy. We will brief you on the basic facts, then ask you to ponder the key questions and join the big debates. And we will suggest many ways that you can get involved in the pageant of American politics.

Who Governs?

As Benjamin Franklin left the Constitutional Convention in 1787, a woman stopped him. “What kind of government have you given us?” she asked. According to legend, the wise old Franklin responded, “A republic, madam—if you can keep it.” The United States organized itself around a ringing declaration of popular rule: governments derive “their just power from the consent of the governed.” In a republic, the people are in charge. The Constitution drives home the point in its first three words: “We, the People.” Franklin knew, however, that popular governments are extremely difficult to “keep.” All past previous republics—like Athens, Rome, and Florence—had collapsed. His point was that the people have to be vigilant and active if they are to maintain control.

Popular rule in the U.S. was a bold breakthrough by 18th-century standards, but it certainly did not empower everyone. The Constitution protected slavery and gave slaveholders three-fifths of a vote for every person they kept in chains. Women could not vote, nor could most poor men. American Indians were considered foreigners in their native land. At the heart of American history lies the long, hard, struggle to actually live up to American founding ideals, to genuinely empower “We, the People.”

Now that most people over 18 finally have the right to vote (won in 1971), does the public really rule? Or do the rich and powerful get the most say? Americans have always worried that ordinary people will lose control. In 1961, for example, President Kennedy acknowledged how nervous he was that the average Joe wouldn’t be interested in politics. As he prepared to deliver the State of the Union address, he said, “It’s the most important speech I have to make, because if I fail to excite you, it’s over for me.”

As you can see, democracy is complicated. Yes, the United States is the world’s oldest democratic country. Yet the candidate who loses the popular vote can win the White House, a terribly unpopular Congress can be reelected in landslides, and unelected judges, appointed for life, can strike down the will of the people’s representatives.

We address four questions through this book to help make sense of American politics and government. By the time you finish reading, you will understand the debates each question has generated—and be able to participate knowledgeably yourself.

1. **Who governs?** Do the people rule? Some of us would answer ‘yes—and today more than ever.’ Others are not so sure. What if the people are not in charge—then who is?

2. **How does American politics work?** This may be the most complicated, messy, and fascinating government on Earth. We will guide you through the political maze, helping you understand what makes American politics and government tick.

3. **What does government do?** Many people view politics as unsavory and government as a problem. We will show you how politics can be useful and why government is sometimes—even often—important. By the time you finish this book, you will have the tools to make informed judgments about what public officials actually do, and whether government is a problem, a solution, or perhaps a bit of both.

4. **Who Are We?** In a rapidly changing, diverse, immigrant nation, this is the deepest question of all. If the people aspire to rule, we have to understand who the people are. American politics is essential to defining Who We Are—as a community, a people, and a nation.

Before we examine these four questions, we want to share our bias: we love Republic: System of government which rests ultimate governing power in its people, who may rule directly or via representatives.
Military-industrial complex: A network of influence and monetary flowing between defense contractors, military figures in the Pentagon, and defense policy officials in Congress and the White House.

Occupy Wall Street: A social movement, originating in New York, which protested the inequality of wealth and power, targeting the “top 1%” execution of influence and monetary flowing between defense contractors, military figures in the Pentagon, and defense policy officials in Congress and the White House.

Fifty years after President Eisenhower’s complaint, Occupy Wall Street demonstrators charged that the very wealthy—the top 1%—had stripped the people of money and influence. During the 2012 campaign, comedian and political commentator Stephen Colbert held rallies in which he mocked the Court for striking down laws that limited contributions to political campaigns. He offered a variation of the ‘Occupy’ protests by pretending to cheer the U.S. for continuing its tradition of expanding civil rights. “Finally,” Colbert shouted, his voice edged with sarcasm, “the Supreme Court had ended ‘the tragic lack of influence’ that ‘corporations and billionaires and unions (but mostly corporations)’ exercise in our government.

Like many voices across American history, each of these—Eisenhower, Occupy, and Colbert—warn that the people are losing control, that we have not “kept” the republic. Over the years, political-scientists have developed three theories to answer the question of where power really lies in American politics.

Dwight Eisenhower, a Republican concerned about limiting the size of government, warned that the military, its corporate suppliers, and their political friends were coming together to form a military-industrial complex. These insiders wielded too much power, he warned, creating a juggernaut of big government, big business, and big contracts. Eisenhower’s background gave him special credibility: he was a five-star general who had commanded American forces during World War II.

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Pluralism: Interest groups A group’s organization, resources, connections

Elite Theory: “Power elite” in government, corporations, and the military Status based on leading positions in society

Social Movement Theory: Popular uprisings/movements Strength of mass demands

We will return to this question in every chapter. Who rules? How well have we, the people, kept the republic? It is one of the most important questions in America today.

How Does American Politics Work?

Consider a classic definition of politics: who gets what, when, and how. Every society has scarce things like money, prestige, and power. Politics helps determine how those resources are distributed—to which people, in what amounts, under which rules. A second definition is even simpler: Politics is how a society makes its collective decisions. Every nation has its own way of deciding. This book explains how collective decisions are made in the United States. The key to understanding our political decision-making lies in four “Is”: ideas, institutions, interests, and individuals.

Ideas

Powerful ideas shape American politics. The nation began by declaring what at the time was a stunning idea, that “all [people] are created equal” and “are endowed by their creator with certain unalienable rights.” In Chapter 2, we explore seven essential ideas: liberty, democracy (or self-rule), individualism, limited government, the American dream, equality, and faith in God. At first glance, they may all sound simple; as you will quickly learn, each has at least two very different sides. Each idea provokes long, loud controversies about what values and policies Americans should pursue.
Political Machines. Compt that ran city and state governments in the 19th century.

Electoral College: established by the Constitution to elect the president; each state has a number of electors equal to the size of its Congressional delegation in House and Senate; the public in each state vote for electors who then vote for the president.

Checks and balances: the principle that each branch of government has the authority to block the other branches making it more difficult for any one to exercise too much power. It makes passing legislation far more difficult in the US than in most other democracies.

Take democracy as an example. It may sound simple—rule by the people—but defining and achieving democracy in America has been a constant struggle. The United States has seen political machines that enthusiastically stole votes, an electoral college designed to protect against too much public influence, and an elaborate system of governmental checks and balances that blunts the popular will. As one anxious delegate put it on the first day of the Constitutional Convention in 1787, “the people should have as little to do as may be about the government. They lack information and are constantly liable to be misled.”

Paraphrasing a delegate to the Constitutional Convention, “the people’s influence elevate popular rule; Americans still vigorously debate the issue. Instead of embracing popular sovereignty, generation after generation of American leaders has preferred the rule of a few—the elite founders of the nation, expert bureaucrats trying to solve technical problems, or presidential czars tasked to run policies like “the war on crime” or “the war on drugs.” All have aimed to protect government from the tumult of the masses.

The United States bursts with entrepreneurial energy. New ideas bubble up all the time. Many of these concern specific policy issues, but occasionally a major reform notion shakes the entire political system. Ideas alone do not drive government decisions, but it is impossible to make sense of American politics without understanding ideas, big and small.

Institutions

When most people talk about politics, they think about individuals: presidential candidates like Barack Obama and Mitt Romney, commentators such as Jon Stewart or Rush Limbaugh. Political scientists, on the other hand, stress institutions -- the organizations, norms, and rules that structure political action.

Congress, the president, the Supreme Court, and the Department of Homeland Security are all institutions. Why did the Obama Administration’s health care reform law of 2010 turn out the way it did? Study the rules that govern Congress and the presidency, and you will understand why some things went into the final mix and other things fell out. How and why did the Supreme Court reject parts of the law/hold the law in June 2012? Again, the answer lies in the institution’s rules.

The media represent another institution that shapes politics. Just think about how media outlets are organized. Did you “like” a candidate on Facebook? Did you check out the YouTube posting of another candidate making a fool of himself? Facebook, Twitter, and YouTube organize political discourse very differently from the way your grandparents’ morning newspaper did. They operate with a set of rules and procedures. Think of every institution as having the equivalent of “like” and “share” buttons that helps shape the way individuals participate in politics. By the time you finish this book, you will know to ask the same question every time you encounter a political issue. Which institutions are involved, and how do they influence politics?

History

As the four I’s reappear throughout this book, you will see that we pay special attention to the history of each. To really grasp why ideas have caught on or institutions look the way they do, you must understand how they developed over time. While we hope you share our passion for the drama and excitement of American history, we tell historical stories for a more important reason. You cannot understand where the nation is, or where it might be going, without knowing where it has been.
What Does Government Do?

Americans are suspicious of government, especially national government. Patrick Henry, a Virginia politician, is famous for declaring, “Give me liberty or give me death.” When he heard about the new Constitution, in 1787, he made another famous statement: “I smell a rat.” Henry spoke for many Americans, down through the years, when he charged that the new federal government would be too strong. And yet that government has grown—and continues to grow. To understand why, we need to understand what government is and what it actually does.

Context: Government in Society

There are three sectors of society. Private life, of course, involves individuals and their families, acting on their own. Civil society refers to people joining with others to achieve some goal. Examples might include a bowling club, a business association, a student government, a Bible study circle, or a group of recycling volunteers. Finally, government involves formal organizations that make decisions for the whole society. The lines among these different sectors are very blurry. Successful government requires a vibrant civic spirit. The more people join groups and interact with others—even if it is a rugby club or a knitting circle—the more they become skillful and involved citizens. People in groups get used to interacting with others, solving problems, and worrying about common challenges. They develop what Alexis de Tocqueville, a French visitor to America in 1831-1832, called the “habits of the heart” — the interchange and mutual problem solving that form the foundation of robust democracies. Interacting with others fosters the skills and attitudes that make people effective citizens. In addition, the different sectors come together to undertake projects. Public-private partnerships have improved many aspects of society by joining private actors like business firms with government officials to achieve public ends—like renovating parks, launching innovative schools, or constructing a sports arena.

We Hate Government!

Americans have a very active civil society. In the abstract, at least, they prefer voluntary groups to government action. Polls consistently reflect public disapproval for all aspects of formal government: bureaucrats, the mainstream media, lobbyists, and Congress. Today, only about 10 percent of Americans trust the national government "to do the right thing most of the time." If Americans dislike ‘Big Government,’ then how did we get such a thicket of federal agencies (over 1,300 at last count) and departments (there are now fifteen in the president’s Cabinet), populated by more than 2.2 million nondefense employees? Include another nearly 2.5 million members of the active and reserve armed forces, and you get a sprawling national government. Add state (4.4 million) and local (12.2 million) workers alongside the 500,000 elected officials and you will appreciate the sheer size of the U.S. government—almost twenty two million men and women who touch every aspect of our lives.

Americans have long told admiring stories about individual heroes who won greatness on their own—free of government meddling. But the details can be more complicated. Take those famous inventors, the Wright brothers. Working out of their bicycle shop, Orville and Wilbur created the first viable airplanes, opening the path to air travel. What you might not have heard is that the Wrights were able to develop their invention because of timely investments from their first client: the U.S. military. Yes, government funds were essential to launching the aviation industry—just as they were to exploring space and landing the first Americans on the moon.
Could we—and should we—shift some of the U.S. national government’s functions to civil society and let volunteers do the work? To answer such questions, you first have to know what government does and who all those bureaucrats are. This book is designed to help you do precisely that.

During the 2012 Republican primary campaign for president, Texas Governor Rick Perry stumbled. In the middle of a debate, he repeated his promise to cut three federal Cabinet departments—expressing his opposition to “Big Government” in America. But, in the middle of a candidate debate Perry forgot one of the departments he planned to axe. As the audience waited to hear the third agency the Governor shook his head and sheepishly said, “Oops.” Governor Perry’s problem may have been that he did not know very much about the agencies he wanted to cut. It is understandable that one simply slipped his mind. Our job is to make sure that this does not happen to you. We want you to know exactly what each part of the government does and why. Then you can decide to cheer its members—or try to reduce its workforce.

The Best of Government

Despite powerful anti-government sentiment—or perhaps inspired by it to promote change—millions of Americans cheer what is best in our national government and, like Marla Ruzicka, seek to improve it. The pages to come feature dozens of people taking actions to improve government. You will meet policy entrepreneurs who imagine and promote innovative new solutions to pressing problems, organizers who engage their neighbors and larger communities in collective action for change, inventive bureaucrats who conceive ways to deliver public services more effectively, and tech wizards who devise faster, better connections between national policymakers and the public.

Take one small example of how a good idea can make a difference. Back in 2006, a public-interest organization started a website called FedSpending.Org. They collected available budget and revenue data and put it on line, making it easy for anyone to discover how much the U.S. government was spending on various services. In less than two years, the site had logged its 10 millionth visitor. “Why don’t we go that?” asked some creative public officials. Congress passed a law requiring more transparency in government spending, and in 2009 the White House launched USAspending.Gov. It used the same innovative software developed by the creators of FedSpending.Org.

Although our government can appear impossibly large and remote, individuals can make a real impact on its operations. In this book we return repeatedly to ways you can get involved, have a say, and enhance the workings of American government. You can engage within our political system: join a Senate campaign, attend a town meeting, intern a federal agency, or run for office yourself. You can also get involved from outside: call media attention to a problem, serve in (or start) an advocacy group, or launch an online idea like tracking federal-government spending. In addition, you can get involved in the life of your community. You are already enough of a social scientist to call it “civil society” and to know civic engagement is a foundation of democracy.

Who Are We?

The United States is a nation of immigrants, a country where individuals come to reinvent themselves. The nation is always changing as well. American politics constantly addresses the most fundamental question about a people: Who are we?

This question goes back to the earliest European settlers. When the Puritans landed in Massachusetts in 1630, they suddenly had to define their community for themselves. Back in England, the authorities had answered the question by persecuting them. In the New World, the colonists came up with a remarkable response: We are a community of saints, a “city on a hill,” a model for the whole world to follow. That city on a hill immediately discovered threats: The Puritans defined or imagined enemies that included Indians, witches, and heretics. The Puritans learned to answer the question “who are we?” either by declaring who they were (“we”) or by defining who they were not (“them”). They could define themselves by celebrating their values or demonizing their foes—or by doing both at the same time, promoting their cohesion by opposing dangerous “Others.”

At the same time, different settlers were arriving chained in the terrible slave ships. The drivers and traders tried to strip Africans of their families, their heritage, their names, and their very identity. Together, American slaves would have
Getting engaged in politics – or not

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<td>Do you see a lack of political engagement around you? Do you agree that this a problem for American democracy? Or are you not convinced that more political activity would be good for the community or the nation? Do you want to argue against getting involved in politics altogether? Do you see more activity in private activities in civil society?</td>
<td>You may be new to the study of politics – or to the United States itself. If so, no worries. We are just beginning. By the end of the book, we think you’ll have strong opinions on this and many other matters.</td>
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No worries. We are just beginning. By the end of the book, we think you’ll have strong opinions on this and many other matters.

Getting engaged in politics – or not

In this section we note that public opinion data suggests the millennial generation is less involved and interested in politics. What is your experience? Do you agree or disagree with this assertion?

It is not necessary to forge a better society. We invite you to use what you learn about American politics and government to help build a good community all around you. Whatever your age, whatever your background—to join the great debate about how to remake their lives and redefine themselves. Through religion, close communities, great myths, secret gatherings, personal narratives, and an enduring struggle for freedom, this community too would face up to the great question, who are we?

We begin every chapter of this book by showing how its major topics help explain who we are. All the features of American politics—foundational ideas, the Constitution, presidents, justices, media personalities, bureaucrats, interest groups, and more—are part of the struggle to define and redefine the nation.

The United States has solved many problems in the last two generations. It has also failed in some dramatic ways. The torch is now passing to you. We do not encourage you to get involved naively. This book details the many problems and frustrations involved with political action. We also hope our book will inspire you—whatever your age, whatever your background—to join the great debate about how best to forge a better society. We invite you to use what you learn about American politics and government to help build a good community all around you.

The Bottom Line

- American politics constantly addresses the most fundamental question about a people: Who are we?
- Because the nation is so diverse—and so rapidly changing—the answer to this question is constantly being rewritten.
- Every feature of American politics influences this constant debate over defining the nation and its people.

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<td>1. Why do we describe American democracy as “paradoxical” at the opening of this chapter?</td>
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<td>2. Why did Franklin add “if you can keep it” to his description of the new American nation as a republic?</td>
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<td>3. What are some ways that ideas are influential in national government and politics?</td>
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<td>4. Think of a political issue you care about—cutting taxes, cleaner air, etc. Which government institutions are involved in determining how that issue is addressed and resolved?</td>
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5. What are the three types of “interests” that political scientists pay attention to in assessing whether political outcomes are interest-based?

6. How might an individual make an impact on the vast U.S. system of government and politics? How might you be meaningfully involved?

7. Think of the various groups (ethnic/racial, hobby or interest-based, age, geographic) that you belong to. How would you describe that group? And in what ways is each group part of larger American society?

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**What Do You Think?**

This is WT-BX-F. In this section we note that public opinion data suggests the millennial generation is less involved and interested in politics. Do you think there is more involvement than the polls are picking up? Perhaps there are new kinds of activities and engagement that more traditional observers have failed to appreciate?

- **Disagree.** Do you think there is more involvement than the polls are picking up? Perhaps there are new kinds of activities and engagement that more traditional observers have failed to appreciate?
- **Agree.** Do you see a lack of political engagement around you? Do you agree that this is a problem for American democracy? Or are you not convinced that more.
- **Unsure.** You may be new to the study of politics—or to the United States itself. If so, no worries. We are just beginning. By the end of the book.

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Americans have a very active civil society. In the abstract, at least, they prefer voluntary groups to government action. Polls consistently reflect public disapproval for all aspects of formal government: bureaucrats, the mainstream media, lobbyists, and Congress. Today, only about 10 percent of Americans trust the national government “to do the right thing most of the time.”

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Lieutenant Russell Burgos hunkered down in his bunker as mortars ripped through the night. A year ago he had a political science professor; now he was fighting in Iraq. Burgos’s unit was operating in the Sunni Triangle, where the fighting was fiercest. “A mortar attack in the middle of the night,” he mused, “is an odd place to reconsider a course syllabus.” But that is exactly what he found himself doing. Experiencing war made him see politics and societies in new ways.

As shells fell on the American base, Burgos thought about something that his classes had been missing: the study of ideas. The United States entered the war because of what key decision makers believed. American leaders spent enormous energy insisting that the United States was in Iraq as liberators rather than as conquerors or occupiers; explaining American ideas seemed crucial to both civilian and military leaders. In the war zone, Burgos saw the same thing. All around him, men and women were fighting and dying over ideas – ideas like freedom, democracy, equality, power, and faith in God.

Strangely enough, Burgos wrote later, ideas—and especially how ideas affect politics—had barely come up in his own political science classes. Yet ideas helped explain why the United States launched the war, how it fought the war, and why everyone up and down the chain of command acted as they did. Burgos ended up rethinking his approach to politics.

Who are we? Our ideas tell us – and they tell the world. The United States is a nation built on ideas. You will see ideas at work in every chapter of this book, for...
they touch every feature of government and politics. They affect the way American define their national ideals, their political goals, and their nation itself. As you read about these ideas – and as you continue through this book – think about other important ideas that should be added to the list alongside the seven we discuss in this chapter. If you come up with a compelling example, we may quote you in the next edition.

A Nation of Ideas
As the colonies broke away from England, on July 4, 1776, American leaders issued a Declaration of Independence explaining their revolutionary actions. Its second paragraph describes the animating idea that inspired them:

*We hold these truths to be self-evident, that all men are created equal, that they are endowed by their Creator with certain unalienable rights, that among these are life, liberty and the pursuit of happiness.*

Most people have heard that line so often that it has lost its force, but it is one of the most powerful ideas in history. It explains the role of government – securing each individual’s rights to life, liberty, and the pursuit of happiness. The Declaration states that that is why people form governments – “to secure those rights.” And, although the men and women who fought the revolution would fall far short of this ideal, they left the nation an inspiring goal. Every American generation argues about how it can best achieve the Declaration’s shimmering ideal and “secure the rights of every citizen.

Political scientists often describe the United States as a unique nation, different from every other. That view is known as American exceptionalism. Of course, every nation is distinctive in some way. The United States is exceptional, in large part, because of seven key ideas that guide our politics. Most of them can be traced back to the Declaration of Independence.

What are the seven big ideas? Liberty, self-rule, individualism, limited government, the American dream, equality, and faith in God. These ideas touch almost everything we do as a nation. They are the foundation of U.S. national government and lie at the core of what makes America unique.

There is an unusual twist to these ideas. Americans rarely agree on what they mean. Instead, we constantly argue about them. The Declaration of Independence declares that all men are created equal, but many of the men who signed it owned slaves. Our stamps and coins say “in God we trust,” but Americans passionately disagree about whether the Constitution permits prayer in schools or menorahs in public parks. All our foundational ideas have (at least) two sides and spark ardent disputes. To reveal the real truth about American politics, we should post signs at all the airports that say: “Welcome to the great argument that is the USA.”

Now let’s consider the first key idea.

**BY THE NUMBERS**

**American Ideas**

The declaration of independence talks about protecting life, liberty and the pursuit of happiness. Rank order of American citizens in self-reported happiness compared to citizens of other nations, according to three recent studies: 15, 19, 23

| Number of times the word “rights” appears in the Declaration of Independence: | 10 |
| Number of times the word “rights” appears in the original Constitution: | 0 |
| Number of times the word “rights” appears in amendments to the Constitution: | 15 |

| Increase in inequality in US since 1970: | 30% |
| Increase in inequality in Canada since 1970: | 5% |
| Decrease in inequality in Germany since 1970: | 10% |

| Proportion of Americans who say it is more important to be free to pursue my own goals rather than making sure that no one is in need: | 58% |
| Proportion of Spaniards and French people, respectively, who say this: | 30%, 36% |

| Proportion of Italians, Poles, and Americans, respectively, who agree that “it is the role of the government to take care of people who cannot care for themselves: | 66, 56, 23 |

| Percent of Americans who belong to a church or religious organization: | 57% |
| Percent of British, Swedes and French who belong to a church: | 22%, 9%, 4% |

| Percentage of Americans who agree that “everyone who works hard will get ahead,” 2005: | 86% |
| Percentage agreeing in 2011: | 61% |

| Percent of young people who say it is very important for them to achieve the American dream: | 55% |
| Percent of baby boomers who say this: | 33% |

**Liberty**
As the Revolutionary War broke out, the royal governor of Virginia promised freedom to any slave who joined the British. Eighty thousand slaves ran for the British lines. Some of them fought in black units with their motto – “liberty for the slaves” – sewn onto their uniforms.
The slave men and women who fought for the British saw their hopes vanish when their side surrendered at the battle of Yorktown in 1781 – effectively the end of the Revolutionary War. After the battle the Redcoats, as the English soldiers were known, began to withdraw, rowing out to the warships bobbing in the harbor for their long retreat. One desperate group of slaves dashed past the sentries on the wharf, dove into the sea, and swam toward the long rowboats that were ferrying the defeated British troops out to the naval vessels.

As the desperate black men tried to clamber aboard the small boats, British troops pushed them away. Fearful that the swimmers would swamp the craft, the troops pulled out axes and hacked off the slaves’ hands and fingers. And still they kept coming, trying to surge aboard, thrashing after their fading dream of liberty. The image is unforgettable: these men were so desperate for freedom that, even as the Redcoats swung their bloody hatchets, they kept clutching for the boats that might carry them to freedom.

“The Land of the Free”

No idea comes up more often in American history than freedom or liberty (we use the words interchangeably in this book). Three central symbols of the American Revolution were the Liberty Tree, the Liberty Pole, and the Liberty Bell. The national anthem declares America “the land of the free.” During the civil rights movement of the 1950s and 1960s, young high school students spilled out of Baptist churches and marched toward dogs and high-pressure fire hoses, singing “everyone shout freedom, freedom, freedom!” The Statue of Liberty is inscribed, "Give me your huddled masses... yearning to breathe free.” Americans have tried to spread their faith in freedom to countries across the globe; as President George W. Bush put it, “The best hope for peace in our world is the expansion of freedom in all the world.”

What is freedom? It means that the government will protect your life, your liberty, and your property from the coercion of others (including government) in order to permit you to pursue the goals you define for yourself.

The Two Sides of Liberty

Everyone agrees that freedom is a basic American value. But, in practice, Americans disagree about what it means – and what governments should do to ensure it. There are two different views: negative liberty and positive liberty. 10

The more familiar view is negative liberty: Freedom is the absence of constraints. Society’s responsibility, from this perspective, is to make sure that others (especially government officials) do not interfere with individuals pursuing their own goals. The government protects your right to believe what you wish, to say what you like, to profess any faith, and to go into whatever business you care too – all without constraints or fear of punishment. Negative liberty firmly limits government action. Public officials violate your freedom when they collect taxes from you to feed the hungry or punish you for smoking marijuana – or tobacco. Negative Freedom is the right to act as you want.

The alternative is positive liberty: the freedom to pursue one’s goals. From this perspective, individuals cannot really be free—they cannot pursue their desires—if they lack the basic necessities of life. Protecting liberty means insuring that every citizen has education, food, shelter, and health care. After all, how can people truly be free if they are hungry or homeless? This view justifies government action as a way to give all people an honest chance to achieve their desires.

President Franklin D. Roosevelt forcefully expressed this view in 1941. As the United States prepared for World War II, he proclaimed that the nation was fighting for four freedoms: freedom of speech, freedom of worship, freedom from want, and freedom from fear.

The first two — freedom of speech and religion — were traditional, negative liberties: No one could infringe these individual rights. However, “freedom from want” was something new, a positive update of the original American idea of freedom. Freedom from want means helping needy people who have fallen on hard times. Roosevelt was suggesting that social welfare policies like unemployment insurance and Social Security were part of the all-American idea of freedom. A morally upstanding nation helps all its citizens achieve a minimal level of well-being – so that all of its citizens can be truly free. Contemporary ideas of positive freedom include efforts to insure that all people are well educated or to stop them from smoking. The theory: A lack of education or addiction or disease will make it difficult for them to pursue their goals.
Do you believe in negative liberty? Government should not interfere with individuals. Freedom means leaving every person alone to do what she wishes – without interference.

Or do you believe in positive liberty? Freedom simply is not a meaningful concept if you or your family are chronically hungry. A decent society has to lift everyone to a basic minimum. That’s what living in a democracy should be about.

Or do your beliefs fall somewhere in between? The truth is that very few people would build a society around a pure form of negative or positive liberty. Think about how you might combine these two concepts. You might find it easier to answer this question after reading about the other major ideas. If you are not ready to choose, you might want to read on – and then return to this question.

Which side is correct? That depends on your values. Beneath these two visions of liberty lie different approaches to the good society. The negative view emphasizes personal autonomy: a free society taxing me so that needy people can get food or decent health care violates my freedom of property. Strong proponents of negative liberty are known as libertarians and oppose most forms of government action. The positive account follows Roosevelt; membership in a free society means sharing enough wealth so that everyone enjoys freedom from want. The two views reflect different values, different visions of society, and different definitions of liberty.

The Idea of Freedom Is Always Changing

Once upon a time, Americans permitted slavery. And racial segregation. Women lost all their legal rights the day they were married; their possessions – even their very bodies – passed into the custody of their husbands. Chinese immigrants were denied any hope of becoming Americans no matter how long they lived in the country. Gay couples could be prosecuted as sexual criminals. The ideal of freedom moved Americans to reverse each of these prejudices.

Scholars disagree about how to interpret the results. Some see American history as a steady march toward greater liberty. Yes, they admit, American history is full of oppression. However, our faith in freedom leads oppressed groups to fight for their rights. The American promise, writes Samuel Huntington, is the “promise of harmony” as a steady parade of groups – African Americans, women, immigrants, and many others – successfully challenge the nation to live up to its ideals.

Other political thinkers, like Rogers Smith, warn against seeing anything like a steady rise of freedom. The outcome in the fight is never inevitable. Instead, freedom is won and lost...and won and lost again. Americans fought their bloody civil war to end slavery -- only to watch new forms of racial segregation and oppression take hold and last almost for another century. Native Americans have never fully been restored to their place on the land or in society. Gay rights, immigrant rights, the rights of people with disabilities, and many others are still part of an ongoing battle for freedom; no one can say how those conflicts will end. Nor should we ever take liberty for granted.

Liberty – or the freedom to pursue your goals – is perhaps the greatest American value.

There are two different views of what liberty means. Negative liberty emphasizes a lack of constraints on individuals, even if it is to help others. Positive liberty requires the community to help everyone satisfy their basic needs.

Liberty has grown with time. Some scholars see it as an inevitable growth that reflects the American ideal; others, as a constant battle that can always go either way.

Limited Government

Back in 1691, while America was still a British colony, the king appointed Benjamin Fletcher to be governor of New York and all of New England. The Connecticut legislature did not want to cede its power to Governor Fletcher and immediately selected a new commander for the local militia – a direct challenge to the new governor’s authority. Fletcher could not ignore this insurrection, so on a beautiful October day he sailed to Hartford, the capital of Connecticut, with a small detachment of troops. He assembled the Connecticut militia and had an officer read the royal proclamation declaring his authority over the state. As the officer read the order, the Connecticut militiamen began to beat their drums in defiance. Fletcher tried to restore order by ordering his soldiers to fire their muskets in the air; in the ensuing quiet he threatened to punish them for their insubordination. In response, the commander of the Connecticut militia stepped forward, put his hand on the hilt of his sword, and issued his own warning: “If my drummers are again interrupted, I’ll make sunlight shine through you. We deny and defy your authority.” Outnumbered and in no mood for bloodshed, Fletcher beat a quick retreat to his vessel and sailed ignominiously back to New York City. Since the king and his ministers were more than 3,000 miles away, they never even heard about this little rebellion against their authority.

The Origins of Limited Government

The tale of Governor Fletcher illustrates an enduring idea: Americans distrust their national government and have consistently sought to limit its power. Even 80 years before the revolution, Connecticut had grown used to electing its own leaders and going its own way. The people saw the king as a distant figure with no right to interfere in their affairs. That image runs through American history: central government as a remote, unfeeling, untrustworthy authority that threatens our freedoms.

When Ideas Clash: Self-Rule and Limited Government

When Barack Obama ran for president in 2008, he promised to do something about global warming. Obama and his opponent that year, Senator John McCain (R-Arizona), focused on this issue during their three election debates and gave voters a clear choice. Democrats proposed “cap and trade,” a plan that uses market strategies to address the problem of carbon emissions. Republicans rejected fears about climate change. They promised instead to reduce our dependence on...
foreign oil by stimulating domestic production. As vice-presidential candidate Sarah Palin put it, "Drill, baby, drill!" The cry echoed loudly across the Republican convention hall in St. Paul, Minnesota.

Democrats and Republicans offered very different policies. And in the 2008 election, the people made a clear choice: Obama and Biden over McCain and Palin. Does that mean that the winners could act on their signature issues? No! There were too many barriers in Congress.

Note the clash between two ideas that we have discussed: self-rule and limited government. Self-rule says: Since the Democrats won the election they should put their policies into place. Jefferson put this point plainly: "The will of the majority," is a "sacred principle" and "the only sure guardian of the rights of man." So President Obama should be able to do what he promised. Most democratic nations more faithfully follow this path to government by the people.

But another value, limited government, says: Not so fast. We don't like government doing lots of things, so we make it very difficult for elected officials to follow through on their promises and actually get things done. Even a president who wins a national election by a large margin must still convince the majority in the House of Representatives and 60% of the Senate to vote his way – or, in this case, no cap and trade. Ultimately the main Democratic plan to combat global warming won over a majority in both chambers, but it never got near 60% needed for the Senate. (You'll learn the details of this example in Chapter 13, when we examine Congress.)

Even when Congress does pass a law –which, as you can see, is no easy thing-- the program may still face challenges in the courts for violating constitutional limits on government power.

The result is an important question for political scientists -- and for all Americans: How should we balance self-rule and limits on government? Erecting too many boundaries means that we undermine self-government. But if voters get everything the winning candidates promise them, the result could be a host of new programs and policies – meaning a more active government and higher taxes.

Opinion polls confirm what political theorists have long suspected: Americans tend to lean more to individualism than to social democracy – much more so than most other nations. In one prominent cross-national study, for example, people in many nations were asked whether “it is the responsibility of the government to take care of very poor people who cannot take care of themselves.” Over 60% of the public strongly agreed in England, France, and Italy; 70% agreed in Spain. In contrast, only 23% of Americans agreed. In another survey, people were asked which is more important: being free to pursue life's goals (individualism), or making sure that nobody in society is in need (community). Once again the American majority (58%) chose freedom, whereas nations like Germany and Spain chose taking care of those in need. Western European nations prefer community-oriented social democracies by roughly 2 to 1; Americans lean more heavily toward individualism by the same margin, 2 to 1.
The Roots of American Individualism: Opportunity and Discord

Americans lean toward individualism and away from social democracy. Why?
Two famous explanations look to the past. One finds the answer in golden opportunities. A second emphasizes social and racial discord.

Golden Opportunity. For centuries, most Europeans and Asians lived as serfs or peasants working small plots of land. Powerful rulers kept them firmly in their place—there was no chance for individuals to get ahead by working hard. Peasants, all in the same dismal situation, would have to revolt as a group. Their shared conditions fostered a sense of solidarity. In early America, by contrast, there appeared to be endless land. With hard work and a little luck, anyone (at least any white male) could gain a decent living and perhaps even a fortune. Stories about early settlers clearing their own land were later reinforced by images of rugged individuals on the Western frontier. Hard workers relied on themselves—not the government.

There is a lot of myth in these stories. Frontier life was less about brave individualism and more about people helping one another out. Settlers couldn’t build a barn, a church, or a meetinghouse without their neighbors’ help. But the image of hardy individuals on the frontier remains a powerful ideal in American politics. And there was an important truth at its core: Few societies have ever offered so many individuals as much opportunity to rise and prosper as early America did.13

Social Conflict. An entirely different explanation for American individualism emphasizes the enormous differences within the society: The country is too big and the population too diverse to develop a sense of solidarity. What, after all, did Calvinist Yankees in New England have in common with Roman Catholics in Baltimore or Anglican planters in Virginia—much less Spanish speakers in Florida or Texas? Moreover, a nation that included four million black slaves by 1860 had a terrible divide running through its heart. Amid the misery and guilt over slavery, it was difficult for black and white people to feel solidarity with one another.

By the 1830s there was another still another source of division. Immigrants were arriving by the tens (and later hundreds) of thousands—people with different languages and what seemed like strange customs. Each generation of immigrants added to the American cacophony. For example, Irish Catholics (who arrived in the 1830s and 40s) seemed strange and threatening to the old English Protestants who had immigrated a century earlier. Could Catholics, with their allegiance to a foreign pope, really understand or uphold American values? Fifty years later, newly-arriving Italians, Poles, and Chinese seemed just as peculiar to the Irish, who by then had settled in. All these divisions made solidarity far more difficult to feel than in more stable, homogeneous populations.

Both explanations are on target. Unprecedented economic opportunity and vast social divisions each make the United States different from other nations. Together they can limit feelings of solidarity and lead to a philosophy of individualism.

Who We Are: Individualism and Solidarity?

It is not correct to conclude that Americans are individualists alone. Rather, the two themes always compete in American politics. Individualism is more robust and more often in evidence. But a sense of solidarity also unites the American population. We often pull together as a nation. We often take care of our neighbors and pass government programs to improve the lives of people we do not know. The United States may have deep divisions, but it is remarkable how quickly the can disappear. A substantial majority of Americans today are children, grandchildren, or great-grandchildren of immigrants—many of who were once regarded as strange and different.

All this raises another question to ponder: Where would you draw the line between solidarity and individualism? The answer directly relates to one of this book’s central questions: who are we? Take the test just below to learn where you stand on the continuum between rugged individualist and strong solidarity.
THE BOTTOM LINE
- American politics includes both individualism and solidarity.
- Different leaders, parties, groups, and individuals weigh the two values in different ways. However, compared to other nations, the United States is very much at the individualist end of the spectrum.<n>

Individualism vs. Solidarity
Please score yourself on the following ten statements:

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Statement</th>
<th>Scoring</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1. It is the responsibility of the government to take care of poor people who cannot take care of themselves.</td>
<td>0 1 2 3</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2. Everyone should have health insurance in case they become ill.</td>
<td>0 1 2 3</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>3. In fact, everyone should have the same health insurance. It doesn't make sense for some people to get better care than others just because they can afford it.</td>
<td>0 1 2 3</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>4. I'd be willing to pay a little more in taxes so no person in America goes hungry or homeless.</td>
<td>0 1 2 3</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>5. I'd be willing to pay a lot more in taxes so that everyone in America has a pretty decent life.</td>
<td>0 1 2 3</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>6. I agree with Dr. Martin Luther King: “I am inevitably my brother’s keeper because I am my brother's brother [and sister's sister]...the betterment of the poor enriches the rich.”</td>
<td>0 1 2 3</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>7. I don't believe big companies should be permitted to fire people without providing two months' salary and some retraining.</td>
<td>0 1 2 3</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>8. Most Americans want the same things out of life.</td>
<td>0 1 2 3</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>9. We should think about others as much as we think about ourselves.</td>
<td>0 1 2 3</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>10. It is wrong to step over others to get ahead in life.</td>
<td>0 1 2 3</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Scoring
0 – 5 You are truly a rugged individualist!
5 – 14 You are largely an individualist.
15-20 You are a moderate who sees both sides of the issue.
20 – 24 You are a social democrat.
25-30 You are a true blue believer in solidarity!

Now, speak with someone who scored very differently from you. Try to explain how and why you came to hold your views.

The American Dream
Benjamin Franklin perfected a classic American literary form -- tips for getting rich. Anyone, he assured his readers, could be successful by following a formula: Be frugal (“a penny saved is a penny earned”), hard working (“no gains without pains”), steady (“little strokes fell great oaks”), bold (“God helps those who help themselves”), and—most important—morally upright (“leave your vices, though ever so dear.”134

Franklin was summarizing what later became known as the American dream: if you are talented and work hard, you can achieve financial success. A popular historian, James Trusloe Adams, was the first to actually call it an American dream: “a land in which life should be better and richer and fuller for everyone, with opportunity for each according to ability or achievement.”15 The idea scarcely changes across generations. “The American dream that we were all raised on is a simple but powerful one,” averred President Bill Clinton, more than two centuries after Ben Franklin. “If you work hard and play by the rules, you should be given a chance to go as far as your God-given abilities will take you.” President Ronald Reagan put it even more plainly: “What I want to see above all is that this country remains a country where someone can always get rich.16

Spreading the Dream
The legacy of the Revolutionary War, according to historian Gordon Wood, was the spread of the American dream to all classes. National leaders originally imagined that they were establishing a classical republic, like Athens, in which a few outstanding men would govern the people. But the American Revolution geared society to ordinary, obscure people. What did the common people care about? “Making money and getting ahead,” writes Wood. Yes, it was vulgar, material, crass, and even anti-intellectual. But the Revolution made the common people the basis of government and gave them an unprecedented chance to make their fortunes. That had never happened on such a scale before.17

By the 19th century, the race to get ahead had turned fast and reckless. “Go ahead is our maxim and our password,” wrote New York politician Phillip Hone in 1837. “We go ahead with a vengeance, regardless of consequences.” Toqueville was struck by the same thing. “The great mass of citizens do not want to talk about anything but private business .... The love of money [and] even base greed,” he continued, had made the United States a commercial nation through and through. “That is the characteristic trait which now distinguishes the Americans...from all other nations.”18

Enabling the dream of success remains an important part of any policy debate. Will a proposal help small business? Will it create jobs? Will it stifle entrepreneurs? Immigrants come in large numbers – far more than to any other country, as we saw in the last chapter—partially to pursue the dreams of success. Politicians from both parties eagerly try to spread the idea to other nations (which are not always enthusiastic about receiving it – as we saw in our discussion of solidarity).

Challenging the Dream
Like every important idea, the American dream generates conflict. Critics raise two questions: Has the system become rigged to favor some (usually the wealthy) over others? And is the pursuit of wealth an undesirable value or one that crowds out other important values?
Is the system tilted toward the wealthy? Some critics question whether the dream is still open to everyone or whether it has grown biased toward the rich and powerful. When Tocqueville was writing, in the 1830s, the United States offered more opportunities to get ahead than perhaps any nation in history. Vast open lands (open, that is, once Native Americans had been forced off) offered a fresh start for the ambitious and resourceful. Most workers relied on themselves; at the start of the 19th century only one in ten white men worked for someone else. That era passed a long time ago but there have been many eras of golden opportunity to rise up.

In the years after World War II, middle-class incomes rose faster than incomes at the top. Then, starting around 1979, this trend changed. Money began to flow to the wealthiest more than to the other classes. Figures 2.1 and 2.2 compare the two periods.

Today, the top 1% of Americans own more than the bottom 90%. Three million people enjoy more wealth than 270 million others. Sixty million Americans at the bottom of the income charts own almost nothing – 1/10^10 of one percent of the national wealth. Many social scientists now argue that the chance of moving up—from poverty to wealth—is fading in the United States. Studies suggest that someone in the bottom fifth of the income distribution is twice as likely to move up at least one category (or quintile) in Canada, Denmark, or France than in the United States (See Box 2.3). Critics—both liberal and conservative—increasingly challenge the system for not offering real equality of opportunity.

Does the American dream promote the wrong values? A second critique questions the chase for wealth as a human value. Environmentalists criticize the damage caused by big houses, sprawling suburbs, gas-guzzling cars, and opulent lifestyles. Others cite the harm to old-fashioned communal ideals. “These dark days will be worth all they cost us,” said President Franklin Roosevelt during the depths of the Great Depression, “if they teach us that our true destiny is…to minister…to our fellow man.” Repeatedly, he urged Americans to rethink their basic values before an upturn in the stock market “dulled their moral sense.”
public officials. (usually businesses) and through joint efforts of program or service provided partnership:

benefits. The agency has built a of milk’s newly discovered health

producer hoping to boost purchases of milk—a familiar, healthy product. Your advertising rep shows up with a new, attention-getting ad for one of milk’s newly discovered health benefits. The agency has built a microsite called everythingiswrong.org. To attract an audience, they’ve opted for crude, sarcastic comedy.

Do you green-light this, um, unconventional approach? The California Milk Processor Board faced exactly this decision—and decided to give the ad campaign a try. Site visitors were not amused, and they let the Milk Processor Board know it. “Wrong,” texted one visitor to the web page. “Milk ad campaign blames PMS, insults women.” The Board, stung by the backlash, shut down the site and replaced it with an apology. The mainstream media picked up the story and spread it, further embarrassing the campaign’s sponsor.

Moral: The crowded new media environment leads to strange antics designed to attract attention. But here’s the positive side. The eyeballs can talk back. After just one day, the web site disappeared because visitors told the milk people their idea of humor was offensive.20

Every president comes to Washington with fresh hope and promise. Political historians look back and see that they operate within a cycle. Some (Lincoln, Roosevelt, Reagan) take office as the head of a new coalition with fresh ideas. Others come to Washington at the end of an era (Herbert Hoover, Jimmy Carter). They face a far more difficult governing challenge. To some extent, the rankings we saw above reflect each president’s place in political time.

The Heart of Power. The White House Office (WHO) Our tour ends at the heart of power. The White House Office is part of the Executive Office of the President, but it also stands apart. This group of 400 or so advisors, aides, and associates work directly for the president, most of them in the West Wing. At the center is the Chief of Staff, the President’s gatekeeper, traffic cop and coordinator. Other important offices include speechwriters, White House Counsel (the president’s official lawyer) and the legislative affairs team.

Until President Obama, the two parties organized their White House Offices very differently. Franklin Roosevelt set a mixed example for future Democrats: creative chaos. Roosevelt surrounded himself with gifted intellectuals, gave them overlapping tasks, and let them freelance from issue to issue. In theory, bold ideas would flow from an office full of talented, loosely-organized thinkers. Many Democratic administrations tried to mimic Roosevelt. John Kennedy valued broad-minded intellectuals and encouraged them to weigh in on any subject. So did Bill Clinton; early in his administration, staffers would jump in and out of meetings and conversations regardless of their assigned tasks. The bull sessions went on deep into the night. People would wander into any meeting and throw in their two cents worth.

Despite critics and challenges, Americans usually celebrate the gospel of success. The nation’s politics, economics, and culture accommodate the dreams of wealth. In comparison with other wealthy nations, our taxes are relatively low, we regulate business less, we take fewer vacations, and we place more stress on getting ahead. As Figure 2.3 shows, younger people are far more likely than their parents or grandparents to believe they can achieve the American dream in their lifetime. They also believe they work harder than their parents did.

Seven important ideas influence American politics.

Each idea has at least two different sides—differences that spur intense political debates.

The seven key American ideas are freedom, self rule, limited government, individualism, the American dream, equality, and religion.

Freedom means that the government will protect your life, liberty, and property from the coercion of others (including government) so that you can pursue the goals you define for yourself. In one view, freedom requires positive government action to make sure that everyone has the basics to permit them to pursue their goals. In another view, the government guarantees only negative freedom—the freedom to pursue your goals. You are free to succeed or to fail on your own, but there are no guarantees about food, or homes, or health care.

Self rule means that people govern themselves through clearly defined procedures like elections. In a democracy, citizens participate directly in making government decisions. In a republic, the people rule indirectly through their elected representatives. The American system is a combination of the two, a democratic republic.

Americans value limited government: they distrust government and place limits on the authority it can exercise.

Individualism means that individuals—not society or the community or government—are responsible for their own well-being. For those who favor community or social democracy, the public interest is best served when members of a society use government to take care of one another.

The American dream holds that if you are talented and work hard, you will succeed and grow wealthy. Critics argue that the system is rigged or that the dream promotes the wrong values. However, the dream remains a powerful force in American politics.

Equality allows each citizen to enjoy the same privileges, status, and rights before the law. Some define equality as a matter of opportunity—the idea that every American has an equal chance. Others promote equal outcome—a guarantee of results. There are three kinds of equality to consider: Social equality means that all individuals enjoy the same status in society. Political equality guarantees every citizen the same rights and opportunities to participate in politics. Economic equality minimizes the gap between citizens’ wealth and earnings.

Religion plays an enduring role in American politics and society. The great question is how we limit government interference without limiting religion itself.

These seven ideas mark Americans’ beliefs as a people. They can shape politics through national culture, through political institutions, and through their own influence on Americans themselves.
CHAPTER 1

KEY TERMS

- American Exceptionalism  p. xx
- Conservatives  p. xx
- Democracy  p. xx
- Economic equality  p. xx
- Equal opportunity  p. xx
- Equality  p. xx
- Freedom  p. xx
- Individualism  p. xx
- Initiative  p. xx
- Liberals  p. xx
- Libertarians  p. xx
- Median  p. xx
- Negative liberty  p. xx
- Political culture  p. xx
- Political equality  p. xx
- Positive liberty  p. xx
- Referendum  p. xx
- Republic  p. xx
- Self rule  p. xx
- Social democracy  p. xx
- Social equality  p. xx
- Sunshine laws  p. xx

STUDY QUESTION

1. The second paragraph of the Declaration of Independence boldly explains exactly why "governments are instituted among men." Why? Why are governments formed? Do you agree with that assertion about government's most basic function?
2. Liberty is often described as the most important American idea. Define it. Describe the two different views of liberty. Which do you think is more accurate?
3. Review the seven principal "American ideas" we have identified in this chapter. Are there new foundational ideas bubbling up in American politics today? If so, what are they?
4. The Declaration of Independence asserts that all men are endowed by their creator with the inalienable rights to life, liberty and the pursuit of happiness. Over time, Americans have extended that idea to more and more people, such as former slaves and women. Are there groups in our society who are not getting the full benefits of this ideal?
5. What is the difference between a democracy and a republic? Which principle does contemporary American government reflect, or does it reflect both? If you were a Founder, which of these principles would you emphasize?
6. George Washington declared “national days of prayer” during his presidency. Thomas Jefferson rejected this practice, saying that it violated the First Amendment. Who was right, in your view—and what does the First Amendment say about this?
7. There are three forms of equality—social, political, and economic. Define each.
8. There are two approaches to economic equality: opportunity and outcome. Describe each.
9. When it comes to religion, the United States is different from most wealthy societies. How? What do we mean by the rise of the “nones”?
10. Ideas operate through both culture and institutions. Explain. Bonus: You've studied seven key ideas. Chose and describe another that you would add to the list of important American ideas.

FURTHER READINGS

[please use dummy text. REF TO COME]
This IS DUMMY COPY HERE. President XX stands in front of the U.S. Capitol and repeats the oath of office. The ceremony reflects an American legacy that stretches all the way back to President George Washington, who repeated the same words in 1791. It remains a highlight in the life of the world’s oldest democracy. It is a solemn moment: even Washington was visibly nervous when he spoke the oath.

Members of Congress surround the president on the inaugural stage. Congress looks a lot more like America than it did a decade ago: today it includes 93 women, 27 Hispanics, and 41 African Americans, together making up the largest-ever collection of non-white males. The United States still has a long way to go, however, before it really reflects America (see Figure 1.1).

Chief Justice John Roberts of the Supreme Court leads President XX through the oath of office. The Court serves as a check on Congress and the president, measuring their actions against the Constitution of the United States. The court is charged with protecting rights guaranteed by the Constitution. For example, the Court struck down racially segregated schools for violating the Constitution and ruled that every American accused of a serious crime has a right to a lawyer.

What you cannot see on Inauguration Day is the sheer depth of this democracy. Americans elect 500,000 public officials—from the governors of their states to the mayors of their cities, from soil and water commissioners in Iowa City to cemetery trustees in Lempster, New Hampshire. No other country in the world comes close to voting on so many offices.

Yet this proud democracy is full of paradoxes. On four occasions, Americans inaugurated presidential candidates who got fewer popular votes than their opponents; thus, nearly one in ten of the nation’s presidents were not the people’s choice. Congress reflects another peculiar twist to the democracy. Its approval rating, measured by a Gallup poll in December 2011, fell to 11 percent—the lowest number ever recorded. Yet more than 85 percent of House and Senate incumbents won reelection in 2012, and most of them by landslides. The public overwhelmingly disapproves of Congress, but voted to return their representatives to Capitol Hill for another term.

The Supreme Court’s nine members represent still another limit to American democracy. Justices are not elected; they are appointed for life. At times, the Court has looked more like a bastion of privilege than a protector of rights. Back in 1857, the Court ruled that, according to the Constitution, black people “were so far inferior” that they had “no rights which the white man was bound to respect.” More recently the Court has struck down legislation governing prayer in schools, abortion, limits on campaign finance, guns near schools, and many other controversial topics.