



POLITICS AND CITIZENSHIP

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Introduction to **POLITICS**

WHAT IS POLITICS?



If you've lived through the past few years without realizing how fundamental politics is to the human condition, you have not been paying attention. Politics is not some mysterious process engaged in by faraway people we will never meet. It is not something that happens "out there" and then impacts us, as if we were so many oblivious ducks, paddling passively around in our pond, targets of hunters we neither recognize nor understand. It's not some cesspool of corruption and grift feeding off the gullibility of innocent citizens. At least, if it sinks to become any of those things, we have no one to blame but ourselves.

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

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

An essential element of power is having the ability to tell the controlling *political narrative* about who should have power, how it should be used, and to what end. Telling a political narrative, or a story about power, that other people buy into can give you enormous authority over them.

IN A NUTSHELL



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

WHERE WE GO IN THIS CHAPTER

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

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

1.1

COMING TO TERMS: POLITICS, GOVERNMENT, AND ECONOMICS

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

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

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

Politics and *government* are often used interchangeably because they are so closely related. The process of politics—fighting over rules and the

power to make rules—can shape the kind of government we end up with. And the kind of government we establish—the rules and the institutions (or arenas for the exercise of power)—can in turn shape the way politics unfolds.

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

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

TYPES OF GOVERNMENTS OR POLITICAL SYSTEMS



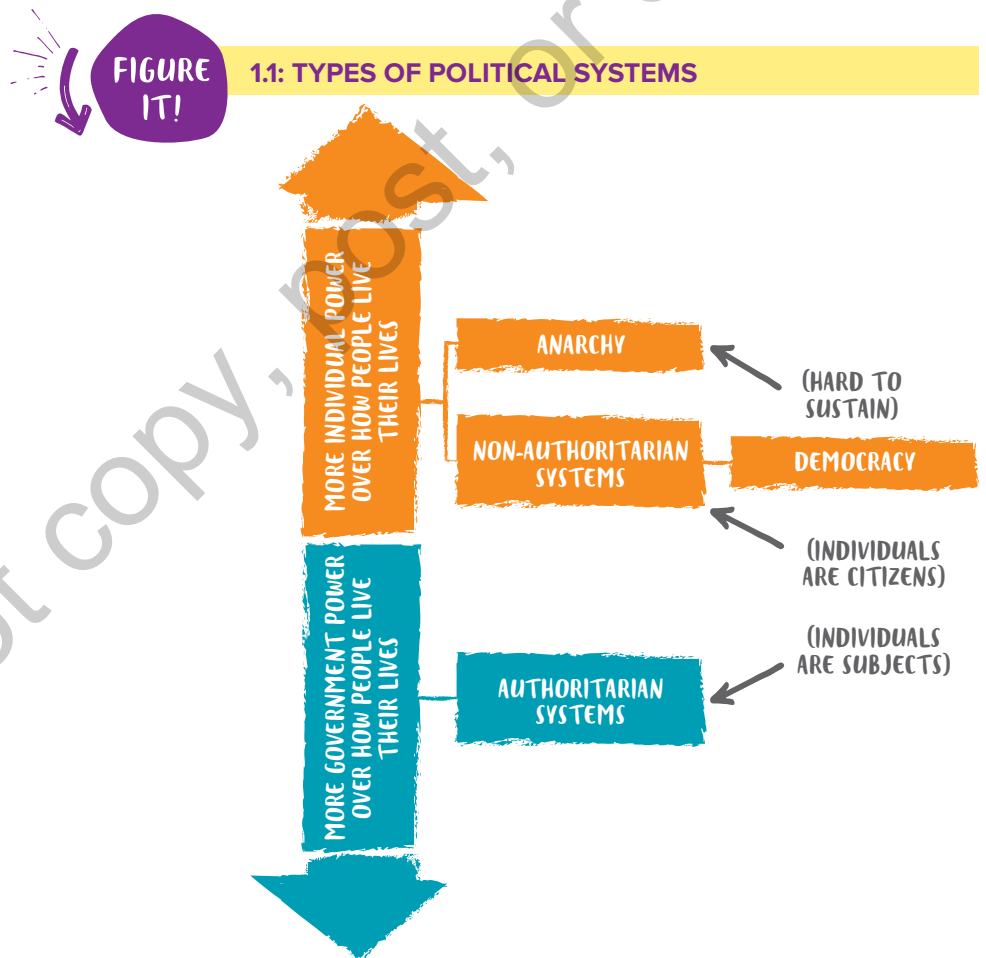
The types of governments or political systems range from most government power/least individual power to least government power/most individual power:

- # **Authoritarian governments** are governments where the rulers have all the power and the rules don't guarantee any power at all to the people who live under them. The people who live under authoritarian governments are called **subjects** because they are simply subject to the will of the rulers. They have no power of their own to fight back.
- # **Non-authoritarian governments** are governments generally based on a philosophy about politics called **classical liberalism** that emphasizes limited government and the rule of law. In non-authoritarian governments the rules regulate the people's behaviors in some respects (outlawing murder, theft, and running red lights, for instance) but allow them considerable freedom in others. The individuals who live under these governments are called **citizens** because government doesn't have all the power over them—they retain some power or rights that government cannot take away and that they can use to push back against an encroaching government. Non-authoritarian governments can be democracies or constitutional monarchies or other arrangements where the power of the leaders over the people is limited in some respect.
- # **Democracy** is a special case of non-authoritarian government in which the citizens have considerable power to make the rules that govern them (based on a theory, called **popular sovereignty**, that says that the

people are the ultimate source of power). The degree of that power may vary. In small democracies, citizens may make every decision that affects them. In large ones, they may only choose representatives who exercise power on their behalf. The point is that, in a democracy, collective decisions are made by counting individual preferences about what citizens believe to be best.

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

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



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

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

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

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

TYPES OF ECONOMIC SYSTEMS

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

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

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

Mixed economies. Mixed economies are based on modified forms of *capitalism*, an economic system that relies on the *market* to

make decisions about who should have what material goods. The market is based on the decisions of multiple individuals about what to buy or sell, creating different levels of demand and supply. When the demand for something increases, so does its cost until more of it is produced. If production keeps up until the good floods the market and demand is insufficient to buy all that's been produced, then the price decreases. As with democracy, in mixed economies, the fundamental decision-makers are individuals rather than the government. Also, as in a democracy, individuals may decide they want the government to step in and regulate behaviors that they think are not in the public interest. It is the type and degree of regulation that determines what kind of mixed economy it is.

Democratic socialism and **social democracy** are, as their names suggest, mixed economies that are a hybrid of democracy and socialism and that span the central divide in Figure 1.2. They are different from the pure socialist economy we just discussed because they combine socialist ideals that empower government with a commitment to the *political* principle of popular sovereignty and the economic principle of market capitalism that empowers individuals. The difference is that democratic socialists want to achieve socialism through the democratic process, and social democrats are happy to keep the capitalist economy as long as they use the democratic process to attain some of the goals a socialist economy is supposed to produce (like more equality).

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

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

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

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

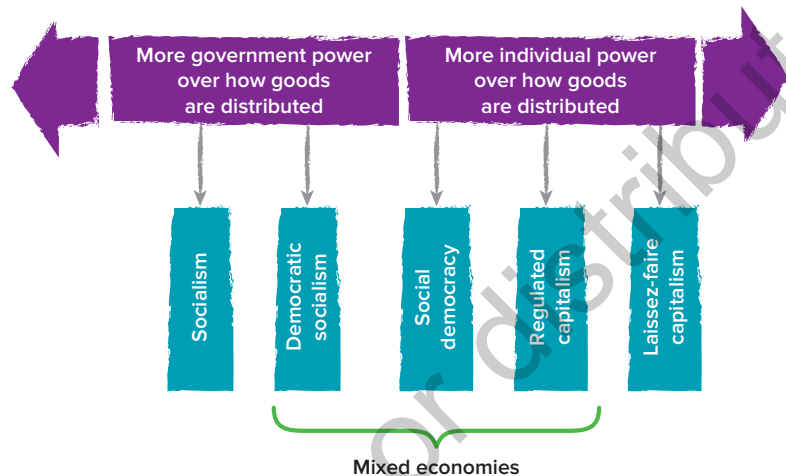
Laissez-faire capitalism. Laissez-faire capitalism (from a French expression meaning essentially “let it—that is, the market—alone”) is what you have when a commitment to capitalism is untempered by any political considerations at all. Laissez-faire capitalism can be subject to wild swings up and down.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

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

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



1.2: TYPES OF ECONOMIC SYSTEMS



1.2

POLITICAL-ECONOMIC SYSTEMS

THE GRAPHIC ADVANTAGE

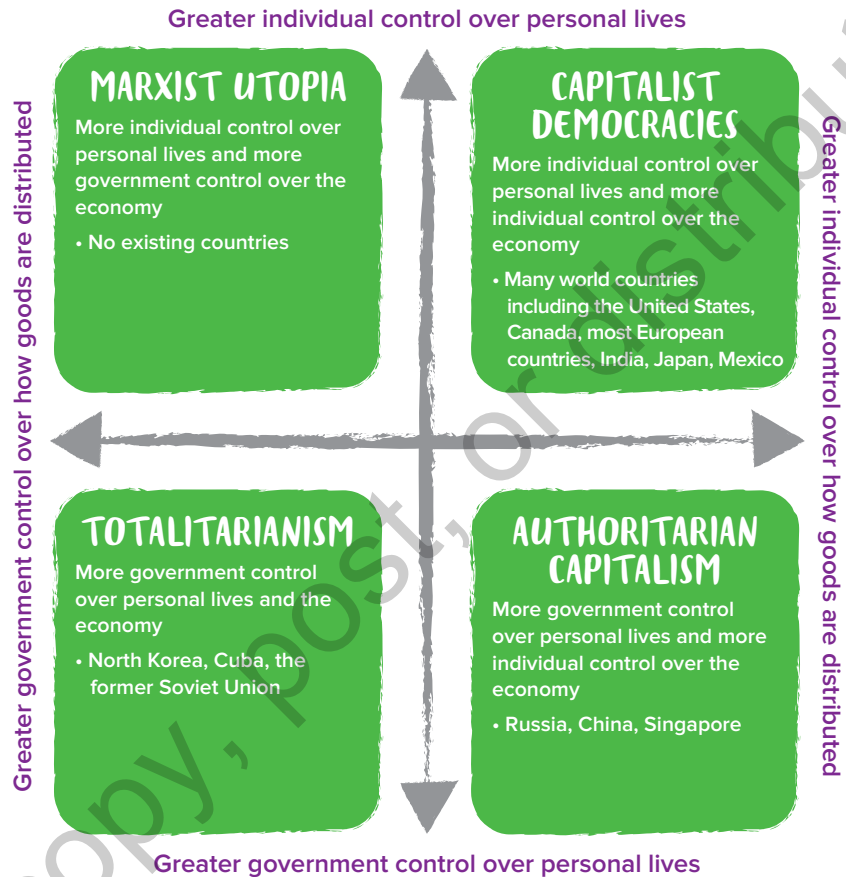
➤ The advantage of looking at political and economic systems the way we laid them out in the preceding section is that it allows us to understand just how they are different from and similar to each other. And because all nations have a way to manage the distribution of power and material goods, we can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

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

So, take a look at Figure 1.3. Here we have placed the vertical axis of politics (ranging from more individual control of how people live on the top to more government control toward the bottom) over the horizontal axis of economics (ranging from more individual control of how goods are distributed on the right to more government control on the left). This creates four quadrants where we can place almost any political economic system in the world (and some that have been dreamed of but have never been realized in the world at all).



1.3: A MODEL OF WORLD POLITICAL-ECONOMIC SYSTEMS



FOUR MAIN POLITICAL-ECONOMIC SYSTEMS

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

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

The United States is in this quadrant, as are the countries of western Europe (although many European countries that are willing to regulate the economy to achieve democratic socialist goals, such as less poverty or a narrower gap between rich and poor, are on the leftward edge of the quadrant). Japan is also in this quadrant, as are India,

Mexico, Canada, and many other nations that value individual choices over a heavy government hand.

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

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

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

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

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

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

Note, however, that the evolution can go both ways. Democratic capitalist countries can turn in an authoritarian direction, often through populist or socialist movements led by strong, charismatic figures. We see that today in Venezuela, the Philippines, Turkey, and Brazil. In recent years, movements that feed on a sense of grievance in the population are also picking up steam in Europe and the United States.

Marxist utopia. The upper left quadrant is tough to describe because there are no real-life examples of countries that have a non-authoritarian (democratic) government, where free citizens determine how they will live their lives, and an economy that rejects a capitalist market. The closest we can come to imagining this type of system is probably the society the German theorist Karl Marx thought would emerge after workers had overthrown capitalism in a revolution (an event he thought was inevitable but that so far has not happened).

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

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

1.3

THIS BOOK'S PROFOUND BIAS

THE MOST
IMPORTANT
POINT IN THIS
WHOLE BOOK!



This book has a profound bias. It is pro-democracy, and pro all the classical liberal ideas that go along with democracy. We will go to the mat on this one. Democracy is not something on which we want to be neutral. Democracy rocks! It's the best! Long live democracy! #democracynowand forever

Why did we say that? Well, Americans tend to think pretty highly of objectivity. We don't want our teachers (or our textbook authors), our journalists, or our advisers to go around putting their thumbs on the scale for their preferred viewpoints. In a political dispute or debates over more fundamental questions like which state's pizza is the *real* pizza, for instance, we don't

want the people whom we trust to supply us with objective information to be slipping a little opinion in on the side. (The correct answer, btw, is New York. New York pizza *is* the best.)

But, sometimes, the thing about which we are trying to remain impartial is something that does not have two or more legitimate sides. Yet, in an effort to make sure we *appear* to be fair, we end up giving credibility to points of view that are just wrong or, worse, that are wrong and dangerous. The illusion this creates is that everything has two sides; there is no way to know if one side is right; declaring that one side is right, even if one brings proof, is somehow pushing one's views unjustly; and, therefore, good teaching, good journalism, and good advice generally will be disinterested or impartial. The logical consequence of this illusion is a commitment to “both-sidesism”—the practice of never coming down on one side or the other for being wrong in a controversy, and the insistence on balancing all criticism of one side with the finding of equal fault on the other.

The trouble with this practice is that while it might have the virtue of never offending anyone or, conversely, always offending everyone, it is fundamentally dishonest. In some disputes, like the pizza question, there is no objectively true right answer, so to pretend that there is one is either tongue in cheek, misguided, or wrong. Even deeply serious issues, like how to interpret the Second Amendment, or whether our nation ought to protect its most vulnerable members from hunger or illness, or whether masks should be worn during a pandemic, are subject to multiple legitimate interpretations, and what we want from our information sources is facts and data and intel, not opinion.

But, and this is a huge but, there are some issues where there really is only *one* legit side, where to grant a second side is to challenge the very existence of the first. Truth is one such issue. The opposite of truth is falsehood. So, by giving equal time to truth and falsehood, one runs the risk of canceling out the truth, or at least of promoting confusion, which is often the primary goal of professional liars. So we need to work to stamp out disinformation even while we promote truth—or truth dies.

Related to this, but even more complicated, is democracy, and the classical liberal values that support it. To be biased *in favor* of those values—to be pro-science, pro-empirical testing of the truth, pro-critical thinking, pro-limited government, pro-individual freedom, pro-rule of law and process, pro-elections, and pro-markets—commands that you *not* practice both-sidesism. It demands that you take an affirmative stand, that you commit to choosing democracy and classical values when they are threatened, and that you forcibly reject the comfortable temptation to blame both sides. Because, put simply, classical liberalism is fragile, its openness and transparency renders it peculiarly vulnerable to threats from without. When

one side is open, tolerant of dissent, and encouraging of scrutiny, it invites criticism right in and welcomes the airing of the precise views that might challenge and eliminate it. The only way it can survive being drowned in the bathtub of its own tolerance and openness is for its fans to defend it, to go to the mat and say that classical liberal democracy is *better* than the alternative, that there simply are not two good sides to this one.

Why did we decide to die on this hill today? Well, today, to a degree not seen in more than fifty years, the value of the classical liberal model is being challenged around the world—from China, where Xi Jinping, the president for life, has been frank that he thinks American democracy is a weak system of governance; to Russia, where President Vladimir Putin, fearing the attractive pull of classical liberal ideas, has tried to bomb his democratic neighbors into oblivion; to Turkey and Hungary, where authoritarian leaders see the state coffers as their personal piggy banks; to some members of today's Republican Party in the United States, who for a variety of reasons are casting their lot with authoritarian ideas over democratic ones, raising doubt about the results of free and fair elections, rejecting science and the empirical standard of truth, and putting the will of one person over the interests of the citizens.

This challenge to democracy from authoritarianism is *the* chief defining political issue of our time—one that has to be settled before climate change, systemic racism, social justice, or any of the myriad other pressing questions of the moment can be addressed. And that is why we chose this hill today. Because without this, nothing else matters.

Thus we join with liberals and conservatives from across the ideological spectrum, with Democrats and Republicans across our partisan divide, and with the majority of American voters of all parties, judging by our most recent elections, who are committed to the values of classical liberalism: open discourse, scientific method, critical thinking, limited government, individual and market freedom, the legitimacy of democracy as a decision-making method, the rule of law, and the peaceful transition of power when one side loses a fair election.

The opposite of classical liberal values, the threat to the survival of democracy as it is practiced around the globe today, is the illiberal system of authoritarianism—which brings with it the rule of one person or party regardless of what the people want, the repression of freedoms, and the rejection of the rule of law. Throughout this book we will call out illiberalism (the rejection of classical liberal democracy, upon which our democracy was founded) where we find it because if authoritarianism wins, everything we value as educators and democratic citizens will die. And that is our bias in this book. We are biased in favor of democracy, science, market systems, and the rule of law. Biased against the illiberal forces of modern authoritarianism. And, yeah, that's a hill we're ready to die on.

1.4 AMERICAN POLITICAL CULTURE

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

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

FOUR THINGS TO KNOW ABOUT POLITICAL CULTURE

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

- # Political culture is woven together from political narratives. It is not identical to political narratives, however; political narratives can both unite people and divide them.
- # Political culture is intangible and unspoken. It is hard to get your hands around it or to find the language with which to discuss it. It is especially difficult to be aware of your own political culture. Like the semi-facetious question of whether fish know they are in water, it is interesting to ask whether people recognize their own political cultures if they have never been exposed to another. People who have not traveled or met many people from other countries are more likely to think that the beliefs we share are objective reality, not just one optional set of narratives.
- # Political culture is easiest to see when you can step outside of it. Like those fish, it is hard for us to be aware of our environment when we are immersed in it and it's all we have ever known. Unlike fish, we have the ability to transport ourselves out of our environment to get perspective. That is one reason we created the world systems graphic we explored earlier (see Figure 1.3). It allows us to understand our system in relation to others as a first step to understanding the culture that holds the system together.
- # Political culture gives us as Americans (and people of other countries) a common set of assumptions about the world and a common political language within which we can disagree. And boy, do we disagree! Remember that to say that Americans share a political culture is not to say that we agree on everything.
- # Political cultures do not last forever, at least not if some care isn't taken to preserve them. If a group of people get so divided over their politics

that they are no longer in agreement on those basic values and beliefs, they really do not share a language within which they can disagree, and they are more likely to resort to nonverbal and sometimes violent methods to resolve their differences.

SO, WHAT DO AMERICANS BELIEVE?

- What does American political culture look like? Our political culture is found in the upper right quadrant of Figure 1.3—defined by a preference for more individual control (that is, less government regulation) of how people live their lives and how they distribute material goods. That means Americans are democratic capitalists whose values are the same Enlightenment values of classical liberalism (which we discuss in the next section). In many ways, American political culture is defined by the classical liberal values that were so widely popular during the American founding and that we have already said we see as fundamental to the survival of the democratic tradition.

Within that upper right quadrant there is a fair amount of variation. We said, for instance, that many industrialized cultures, especially democratic socialist ones, endorse more regulation to bring about valued social goods like a basic standard of living, guaranteed health care, or more equality. For instance, although universal access to health care is an accepted policy in almost all capitalist democracies, it is controversial in the United States. Here are the fundamentals on which Americans seem to have reached a national consensus:

FUNDAMENTALS OF AMERICAN POLITICAL CULTURE

- # **Limited government**: the idea that government cannot really be trusted to be too involved in our lives and that its functions should be restricted to the things individuals cannot do for themselves on their own. (Think national security and bridge building.) Despite the fact that we share no consensus on exactly what constitutes proper government regulation of individual behavior and what is gross and intrusive overreach, Americans tend to believe strongly that governments should not coerce individuals to behave in certain ways unless it is really necessary for their safety and well-being.
- # **Individualism**: an emphasis on individual rights—what is good for discrete and separate persons rather than what is best for the collective whole
- # **Freedom, equality, and representative democracy**: core values defined in a context of the American commitment to minimal government coercion of the individual, so that ...

- # **Freedom** becomes freedom *from* government. That is different, for instance, from some other democratic capitalist countries whose citizens view their freedom as flowing from a strong government that provides basics like medical care and a social safety net. This gives citizens a level of financial freedom that allows them to focus their time and money elsewhere.
- # **Equality** becomes equality before the law; one person, one vote; and equal opportunity—all forms of equality that require minimal government intervention. Americans tend to reject notions of equality like those realized by affirmative action, in which government steps in to create more actual equality of life chances.
- # **Representative democracy** is a decision-making process by which individuals determine and limit the power that is exercised over them by casting votes to register their preferences for their representatives and the policies they promise. Democratic capitalism cannot exist without a commitment to a form of democratic choice by individuals and without their guarantee that they will accept the results of that process as the legitimate “will of the people,” whether they win or not—that is, without a commitment to what we call **good loserism**.

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

WORTH REPEATING! The thing about political cultures is that they are foundational but not eternal. Consensus on the basic elements can weaken, and *without a common culture it is hard, if not impossible, to maintain national unity*. For instance, once a substantial number of colonial Americans had begun to see themselves as a separate people with a distinctly American political culture, union with the British was hard to maintain. Not all Americans shared the desire to break from England, but eventually the cultural, political, and economic forces prevailed and they severed their

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ties. And where this happened once, it can happen again. The divisions we are about to discuss in American ideologies can become so strained as to damage the underlying cultural foundations. What would it mean to the future of the United States if we no longer shared a united political culture?

THE UPSHOT



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

1.5 AMERICAN POLITICAL IDEOLOGIES

AH, YES. THOSE DIVISIONS.

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

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

THE OLD LEFT-RIGHT SPLIT ON THE ECONOMY

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

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

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

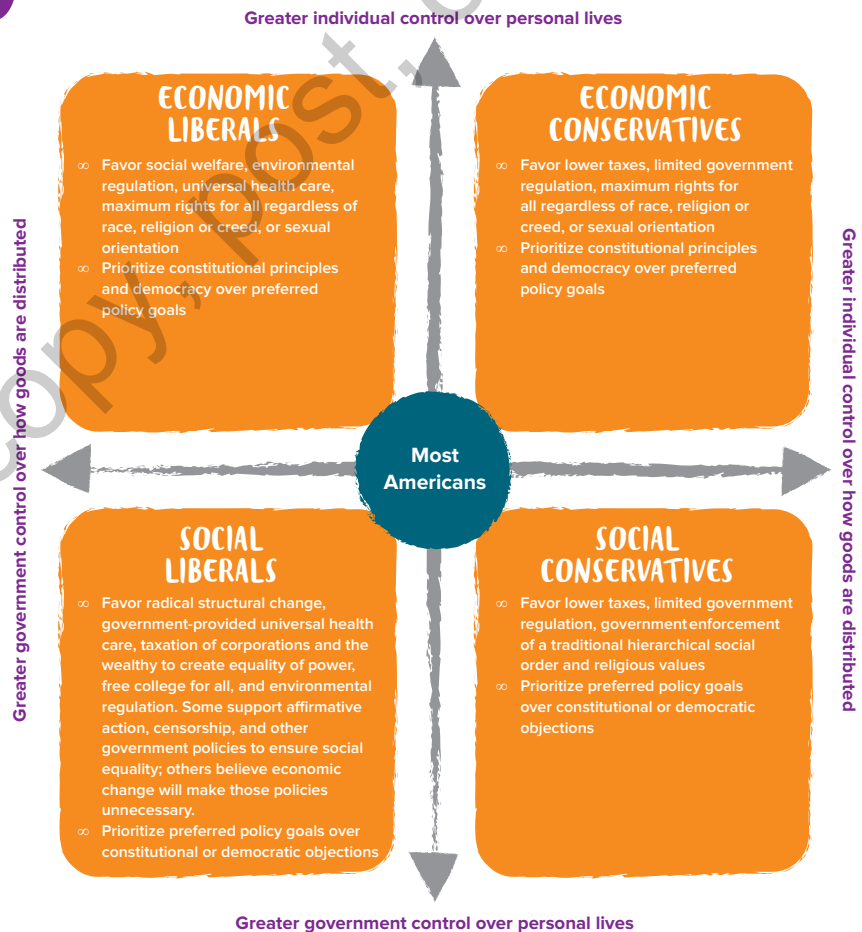
MAKING IT MORE COMPLICATED—THE POLITICAL DIMENSION

These issues split Americans along a political dimension much like the vertical line we considered earlier, with some Americans saying that government should allow the maximum freedom for all people, regardless of race, gender, religion, or sexual orientation, and others saying it is government’s job to enforce a proper social order defined by their beliefs.

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



FIGURE 1.4: AMERICAN IDEOLOGIES TODAY



A CLOSER LOOK AT AMERICAN IDEOLOGIES

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

Economic conservatives. These are the people who believe in the narrative that the government that governs best, governs least. They have a fundamental distrust in the government's ability to solve complex problems (President Ronald Reagan once said that the scariest words in the English language were "I am from the government and I'm here to help") and a deep faith in individual ingenuity to do so. They favor getting government out of the boardroom (economic decisions) and out of the bedroom (decisions of personal morality).

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

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

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

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

do. They see it as heavy machinery that can be used wisely or foolishly, to be operated with care, and not while under the influence of strong emotion.

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

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

Even though they embrace government action to further their goals, economic liberals, like economic conservatives, practice good loserism, prioritizing the Constitution and the democratic process over their policy preferences. That results in a “two-steps-forward, one-step-back” type of incremental policy change, as the founders had hoped, rather than revolutionary change that could be a shock to the system. Accepting that sometimes they will lose means that it may take economic liberals multiple runs through the electoral cycle to accomplish their policy goals and sometimes those goals are undone by their political opponents and have to be established anew. They don’t like that, but they know that halting, slow, and inefficient policy making is the price they pay to maintain democracy and the principle of limited government. A super-efficient and fast-acting government can make policy quickly, but it would also be powerful enough to stomp all over individual rights and demolish democracy.

Social conservatives. Social conservatives are usually economically conservative but are often not as far to the right on that continuum as

economic conservatives. Many support Social Security and Medicare and even the Affordable Care Act (sometimes called Obamacare), but they often see the proper allocation of those resources as having to do with “deservingness,” where they believe that some people have rightly earned those benefits and others have taken advantage of the system unfairly. What distinguishes these folks from most other Americans is that they subscribe to a vision of American society that puts a priority on the maintenance of a traditional social order that they believe is the true way people should live. They believe that those who disagree with them have failed to see the light, or mistakenly think the power structure should be different from the one social conservatives believe to be the natural order of things, and need to be shown the way or corrected. They also believe the appropriate role for government is to play a strong role in creating and enforcing laws that curtail social behaviors they view as “abnormal,” unnatural, or corrosive to society and in reinforcing the standing of those they consider to be righteous or deserving. They often see individuals or groups in all three of the other ideological quadrants of American culture as opponents who look down on them and their values. The sense of grievance that they are being looked down on is a powerful motivator.

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

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

So, for example, laws consistent with the goal of maintaining a social order that prioritizes the status and power of men might allow the state

to regulate birth control, health care, and the availability of abortion services in order to keep women dependent on their male partners. Such laws might promote a tax code that rewards marriage over single life; and they would likely not include subsidies for childcare that would free up women to work outside the home.

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

Social liberals. Social liberals or *progressives* (the use of this term can be confusing as some economic liberals also refer to themselves as progressive) also have a tendency to believe they have a fundamental truth on their side—that human beings are entitled to live a decent life and that it is government’s job to sweep aside any barriers that might prevent them from doing so. They want climate change addressed immediately, regardless of the cost. They want to see the entire private health care system, including private health insurance, eliminated and replaced with a government-run system that holds costs down and prevents what they see as unacceptable profiteering off human misfortune. They want taxes on wealth and structural changes in the capitalist economic system that produces huge disparities in income. They want college tuition to be free for all Americans, regardless of income, which requires drastic reform of the higher education system. All told, social liberals want a stronger role for government not only to create social change but also to restructure the economic system so that there is no undue inequality of wealth to privilege some people over others.

Perhaps not surprisingly, social liberals, like their social conservative counterparts, often see people in all three of the other ideological quadrants we have discussed as their political enemies, in this case enemies who stand in the way of progress because they profit from a corrupt or unequal society. And even people who would be their

political allies, who encourage them to accept something less than their ideal outcome in order to move forward, are seen as obstacles to the realization of their fundamental values.

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

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

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

TRUTH VS. DEMOCRACY? Remember that both social conservatives and social liberals fall in the lower two quadrants of our ideology graphic—that is, in less democratic, less classically liberal, more authoritarian ideological categories where individuals exercise less control over their life choices. Individual choice through the democratic process and the framework of the Constitution is less important to people whose beliefs fall in this quadrant than is following a leader who promises to promote their views on the



social order. Especially because they feel they have truth on their side, they may feel obligated to refuse to compromise with their opponents, and are less likely to be good losers, two trends that do not strengthen democracy. Another reason that social conservatives, in particular, may be less committed to democratic processes over their policy goals is that they are a shrinking demographic in this country. As their numbers decline, they face the real possibility that they will lose in a majority-rule decision. As such, good loserism may be costly for them because they are not at all sure that a loss today will be followed by a win tomorrow. Both groups are quick to declare that the system is rigged or that the process is corrupt if it doesn't seem to produce the result they favor, and both have favored redesigning electoral laws to give them political wins when they command less than majority support.

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

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

Today the Republican Party is an uneasy alliance of economic conservatives and the social conservatives who were initially invited in by economic conservatives to shore up their numbers but who ultimately came to shape the party in their own image, culminating with the election of Donald Trump, who is not particularly conservative or liberal (although he has identified as both in his time), as president in 2016. With Trump's unrelenting insistence (even two years after the election) that Republicans

accept his lie that he was the real winner of the 2020 election, the party has been further divided between stalwart long-time serious conservative Republicans like Liz Cheney, the former Republican congresswoman from Wyoming, and party extremists like Reps. Marjorie Taylor Greene and Matt Gaetz, who in some cases seem to have only the vaguest idea of how American government actually works but who may be far more in tune with the future of their party. The Democrats are having an identity crisis of their own as the economic liberals, who have traditionally defined the ideological parameters of the party, fight off what seems like an effort by social liberals who want to redefine the party in *their* image. But at least for the first couple years of the Biden administration, the two managed to suppress their biggest differences in the interests of getting their common agenda passed, and no officials in the Democratic Party have overtly challenged the fundamentals of classical liberalism. Fun times in American politics!



GEN GAP!

HOW OUR BIRTH YEAR AFFECTS OUR POLITICS

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

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

There is no universal agreement on what the political generations are—the exact years they start and end. Members of the Greatest Generation

fought in World War II, the Silent Generation built the country to postwar prosperity, the Baby Boomers were the hippies and the people who hated the hippies, Gen Xers were the ones without a name who came after the Boomers, and the Millennials (most of you probably fit here or in the next group) were the ones born from about 1980 to the mid-1990s. Gen Zers are those of you just picking up where the Millennials left off without a clear identity, except, perhaps, for the distinction that you are the first generation to have lived your whole life with a screen in your hand. The generations as broken down by the Pew Research Center are shown in Table 1.1, and their diversity is illustrated in Figure 1.5.

**TABLE
IT!**

**1.1: HOW THE PEW RESEARCH CENTER
DEFINES EACH GENERATION**

GENERATION	BORN	AGE IN 2022	PERCENTAGE OF POPULATION
Gen Z	1997–2012	18–25*	23.2%
Millennials	1981–1996	26–41	24.4%
Gen X	1965–1980	42–57	22.2%
Baby Boomers	1946–1964	58–76	23.7%
Silent Generation and Greatest Generation	1901–1945	77 and older	6.7%

*Refers only to the portion in the adult population.

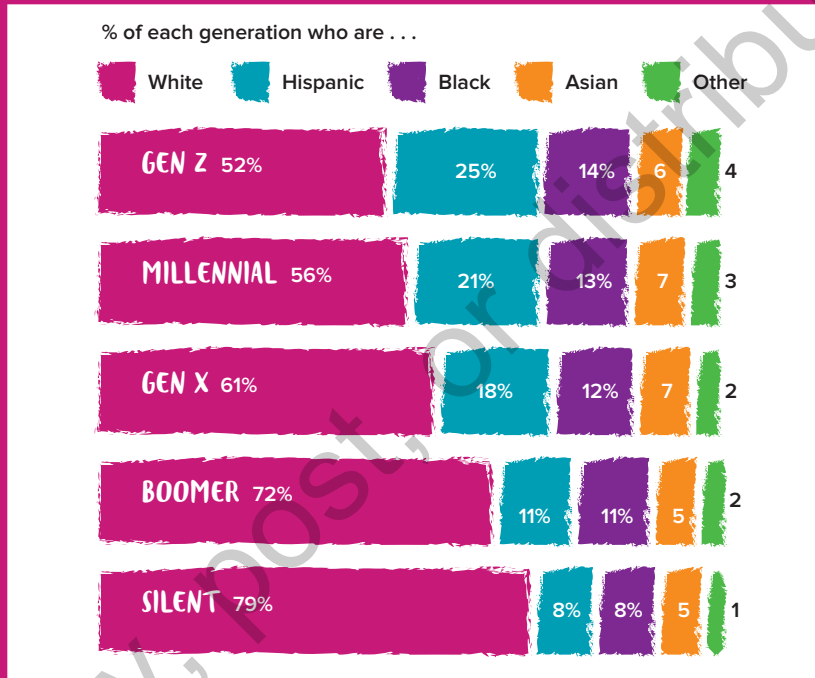
Sources: Michael Dimock, "Defining Generations: Where Millennials End and Generation Z Begins," Pew Research Center, January 17, 2019, <https://www.pewresearch.org/fact-tank/2019/01/17/where-millennials-end-and-generation-z-begins/>; Kim Parker and Ruth Igielnik, "On the Cusp of Adulthood and Facing an Uncertain Future: What We Know About Gen Z So Far," Pew Research Center, May 14, 2020, <https://www.pewresearch.org/social-trends/2020/05/14/on-the-cusp-of-adulthood-and-facing-an-uncertain-future-what-we-know-about-gen-z-so-far-2>. Percentage shares calculated with data from Statista, <https://www.statista.com/statistics/797321/us-population-by-generation/>.

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**FIGURE
IT!**

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



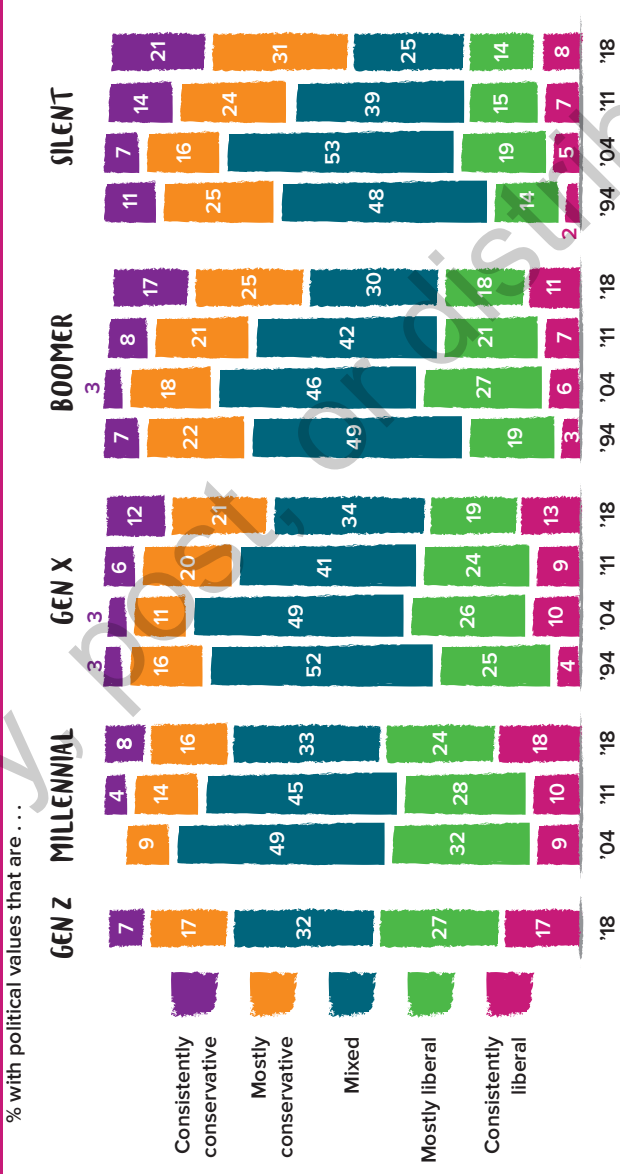
Sources: "The Generation Gap in American Politics," Pew Research Center, March 1, 2018, <http://www.people-press.org/wp-content/uploads/sites/4/2018/03/03-01-18-Generations-release.pdf>; Michael Dimock, "Defining Generations: Where Millennials End and Generation Z Begins," Pew Research Center, January 17, 2019, <https://www.pewresearch.org/fact-tank/2019/01/17/where-millennials-end-and-generation-z-begins/>.

Note: White, Black, Asian, and "other" people and people of multiple races including only non-Hispanics. Hispanics can be of any race. Asian people include Pacific Islanders.

WHO YOU ARE: GENERATIONS DEFINED (BY THE PEW RESEARCH CENTER)

Take a minute to study Figure 1.6 and think about the differences in political ideology among the various generations over time. One of the reasons the generations have such different opinions is that they live in different worlds. The members of a generation are affected by world events and shifts in society, technology, and the economy that occur during their lives, especially during childhood. These formative

FIGURE 1.6: POLITICAL IDEOLOGY VARIES ACROSS THE GENERATIONS AND OVER TIME



Sources: "The Generation Gap in American Politics," Pew Research Center, March 1, 2018, http://www.people-press.org/2018/03/01/the-generation-gap-in-american-politics/030118_o_6/ and http://www.people-press.org/2018/03/01/the-generation-gap-in-american-politics/030118_o_5/.
 Notes: Figures may not add to 100 due to rounding. In these graphs, Silent and Greatest Generation are grouped together.

(Continued)

(Continued)

events contribute to a generation's world view, along with their attitudes, behavior, and lifestyle.

TAKEAWAYS

- **America is becoming more diverse.** Whites have gone from making up 79 percent of the Silent Generation to only 52 percent of Gen Z, on track to be the most diverse generation yet. The Pew Research Center projects that by 2065 there will be no single racial or ethnic majority in the United States. How is that likely to change power politics in the United States?
- **Younger generations are increasingly diverse, but less well off financially,** less likely to be married, and less likely to own a home. What does that mean for them down the line?
- **The Millennial generation continues to grow, with young immigrants adding to its numbers.** According to the Pew data, in 2019, Millennials overtook Boomers as the nation's largest living adult generation. How will a country dominated by them differ from one led by Boomers?
- While older generations tend to be more conservative and have shown little ideological change over time, **Gen Xers, Millennials, and Gen Z especially have gotten increasingly more liberal in the past few years.** In what ways might being liberal, an ideology that sees a role for government in improving people's standards of living, be tied to the diversity and socioeconomic plight of younger Americans? How might it reflect their diversity?

1.6

POLITICAL NARRATIVES AND THE MEDIA

THE INTERSECTION OF POLITICAL NARRATIVES AND MEDIATION

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

WHAT DO YOU MEAN BY MEDIATION?

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

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

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

CONTROLLING THE NARRATIVE = POWER

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

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

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

Political narratives were much easier to control before the print media. Authoritarianism used to be a lot easier to pull off in the Middle Ages and earlier, when few people could read, and maintaining a single narrative about power that enforced a dictator's rule was relatively simple. For instance, as we see in Chapter 2, the narrative of the divine

right of kings kept monarchs in Europe on their thrones by declaring that those rulers were God's representatives on earth.

Because most people then were illiterate, that narrative was passed to people through select and powerful channels that could shape and influence it. It was mediated by the human equivalent of the pipes we mentioned earlier. Information flowed mostly through medieval clergy and monarchs, the very people who had a vested interest in getting people to believe it.

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

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

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

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

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

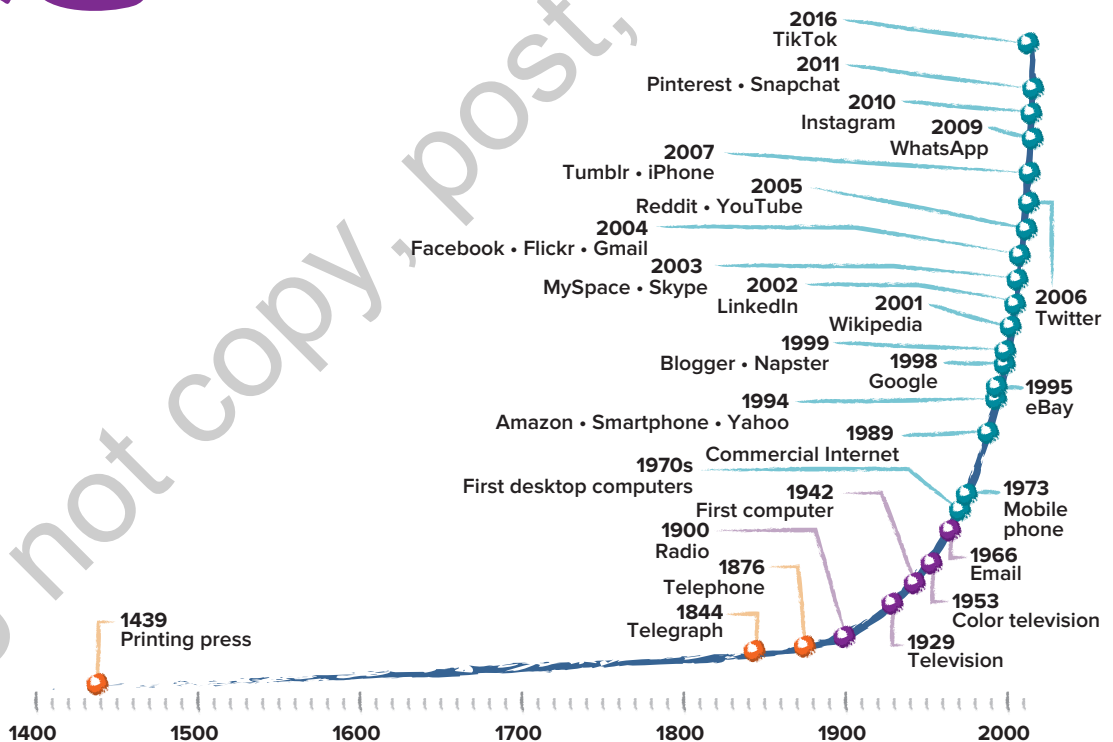
Though Americans today still largely adhere to the basic governing narrative the founders promoted, the country is now light years removed from their era, when communication was limited by illiteracy and the scarcity of channels through which it could pass.

AND TODAY?

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



1.7: MEDIA TIMELINE



KEY POINT! A revolution like the one fought by the Americans against the British would look entirely different in today's highly mediated culture. *But remember, it is because of the revolution they fought and the*

narrative of a free press that followed (and of course enormous technological development) that the mediated world we live in today is even possible. It is not possible in places like North Korea that isolate their subjects from information, or places like Russia that weaponize social media and kill journalists who are critical of the government.

LIVING IN OUR MEDIATED WORLD

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

THE UPSHOT



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

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

1.7

MEDIATED CITIZENSHIP

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

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

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

The mediated world we live in gives us myriad new ways to keep the republic and also some pretty high-tech ways to lose it. That puts a huge burden on us as *mediated citizens*—as people who are constantly receiving information through channels that can and do shape our political views—and also opens up a world of opportunity.

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

MULTIPLE MEANINGS OF CITIZENSHIP

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

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

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



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

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

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

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

THE HAZARDS OF DIGITAL PARTICIPATION ...



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

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

... AND THE OPPORTUNITIES

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

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

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

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

THE UPSHOT



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

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

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

Big Think

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

Key Terms

CONCEPTS

anarchy, 5
 authoritarian capitalism, 11
 authoritarian governments, 4
 authority, 3
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 capitalist democracy, 10
 classical liberalism, 4
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