

# INTRODUCING GOVERNMENT IN AMERICA

## CHAPTER OUTLINE AND LEARNING OBJECTIVES

### GOVERNMENT

**1.1** Identify the key functions of government and explain why they matter.

### POLITICS

**1.2** Define politics in the context of democratic government.

### THE POLICYMAKING SYSTEM

**1.3** Assess how citizens can have an impact on public policy and how policies can impact people.

### DEMOCRACY IN AMERICA

**1.4** Identify the key principles of democracy and outline theories regarding how it works in practice and the challenges democracy faces today.

### THE SCOPE OF GOVERNMENT IN AMERICA

**1.5** Outline the central arguments of the debate in America over the proper scope of government.

POLITICS AND GOVERNMENT MATTER—that is the single most important message of this book. Consider, for example, the following list of ways that government and politics may have already impacted your life:

- Chances are pretty good that you or someone in your family has recently been the recipient of one of the 80 million payments made to individuals by the federal government every month. In 2016, nearly 20 percent of the money that went into Americans' wallets was from government payments like jobless benefits, food stamps, Social Security payments, veterans' benefits, and so on.
- Any public schools you attended were prohibited by the federal government from discriminating against females and minorities and from holding prayer sessions led by school officials. Municipal school boards regulated your education, and the state certified and paid your teachers.
- The ages at which you could get your driver's license, drink alcohol, and vote were all determined by state and federal governments.

- Before you could get a job, the federal government had to issue you a Social Security number, and you have been paying Social Security taxes every month that you have been employed. If you worked at a low-paying job, your starting wages were likely determined by state and federal minimum-wage laws.
- As a college student, you may be drawing student loans financed by the government. The government even dictates certain school holidays.
- Even though gasoline prices have risen substantially in recent years, federal policy continues to make it possible for you to drive long distances relatively cheaply compared to citizens in most other countries. In many other advanced industrialized nations, such as England and Japan, gasoline is twice as expensive as in the United States because of the high taxes their governments impose on fuel.
- If you apply to rent an apartment, by federal law landlords cannot discriminate against you because of your race or religion.

This list could, of course, be greatly extended. And it helps explain the importance of politics and government. As Barack Obama said when he first ran for public office in 1993, "Politics does matter. It can make the difference in terms of a benefits check. It can make the difference in terms of school funding. Citizens can't just remove themselves from that process. They actually have to engage themselves and not just leave it to the professionals."<sup>1</sup>

More than any other recent presidential campaign, Obama's 2008 run for the White House was widely viewed as having turned many young Americans on to politics. *Time* magazine even labeled 2008 as the "Year of the Youth Vote," noting that Obama was "tapping into a broad audience of energized young voters hungry for change."<sup>2</sup> And young people did more than display enthusiasm at massive rallies for Obama. By supporting Obama by a two-to-one margin, they provided him with a key edge in the election. Many observers proclaimed that the stereotype of politically apathetic American youth should finally be put to rest.

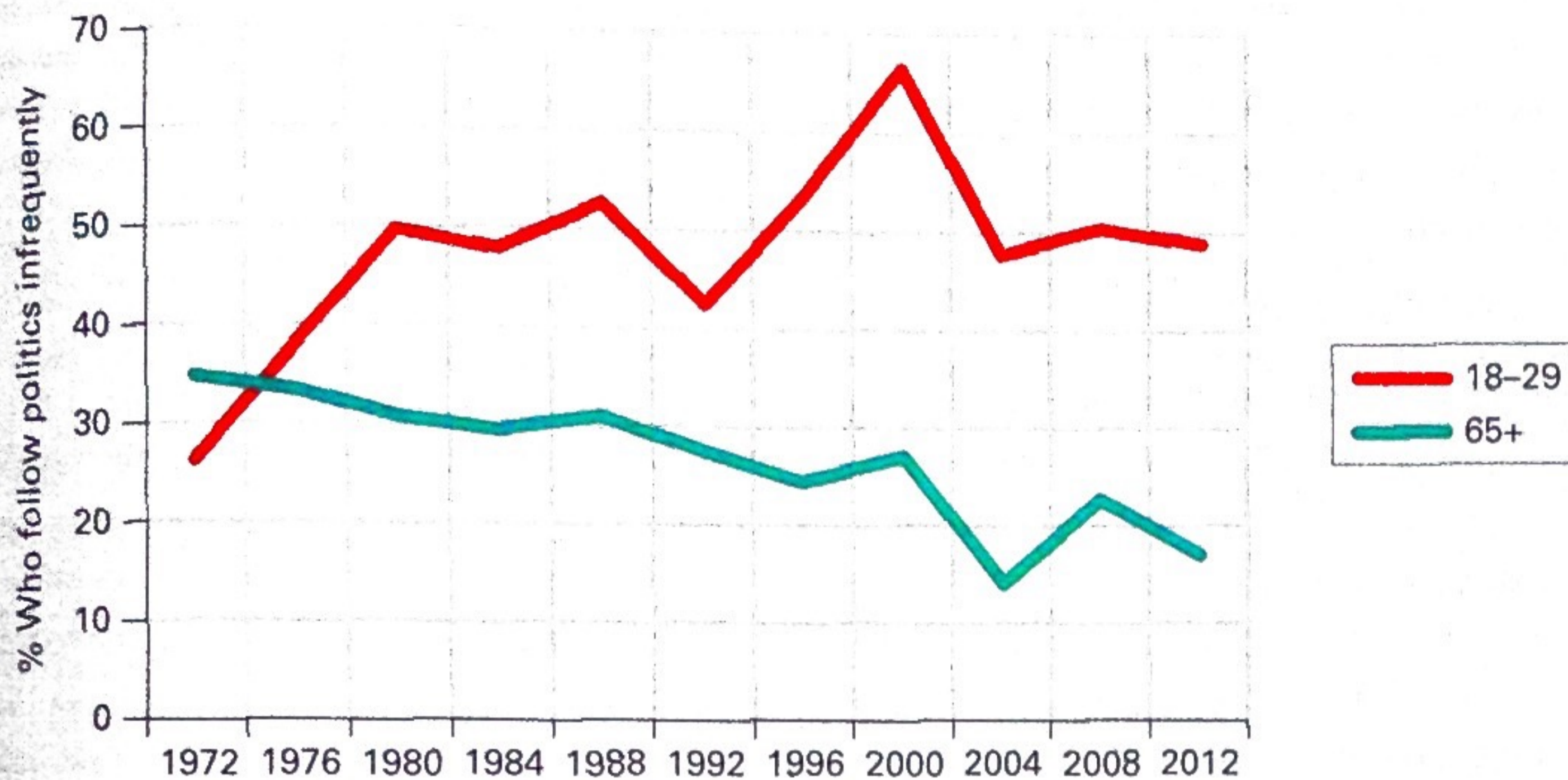
Stereotypes can be outdated or even off the mark; unfortunately, the perception that young Americans are less engaged in politics than older people has been and continues to be supported by solid evidence. Whether because they think that politicians don't listen to them, that they can't make a difference, that the political system is corrupt, or that they just don't care, many young Americans are clearly apathetic about public affairs. And while political apathy isn't restricted to young people, a tremendous gap has opened up between young adults and the elderly on measures of political interest, knowledge, and participation.

We will consider some data from American National Election Studies (ANES), which conducts a nationally representative survey in each presidential election year. In 2012, when ANES asked a nationwide sample of people about their general level of interest in politics, roughly half of Americans under the age of 30 said they paid infrequent attention to politics and elections compared to just 17 percent among those over the age of 65. One might think that this is a normal pattern, with young people always expressing less interest in politics than older people. But notice, in Figure 1.1, that there was no generation gap in political interest in the 1970s. Something has happened in the years since that has resulted in young adults being substantially less interested in politics than the elderly.

Lack of interest often leads to lack of information. The ANES always asks a substantial battery of questions about participants' knowledge of politics. As you can see in Figure 1.2, which shows the average percentage of correct answers for various age groups in 1972 and 2012, in 2012 young people were correct only 37 percent of the time, whereas people over 65 were correct 57 percent of the time. Whether the question concerned identifying partisan control of the House and Senate or accurately estimating the unemployment rate or identifying prominent politicians, the result was the same in 2012: young people were clearly less knowledgeable than the elderly. This pattern of age differences in political knowledge has been found time and time

**FIGURE 1.1** POLITICAL APATHY AMONG YOUNG AND OLD AMERICANS, 1972-2012

In every presidential election from 1972 to 2012, the American National Election Studies has asked a cross-section of the public how often they follow what's going on in government and public affairs. Below we have graphed the percentage who said they followed politics on an infrequent basis. Lack of political interest among young people hit a record high during the 2000 campaign between Bush and Gore, when over two-thirds said they rarely followed public affairs. Since then, political interest among young people has recovered somewhat; however, compared to senior citizens, they are still much more likely to report low political interest.

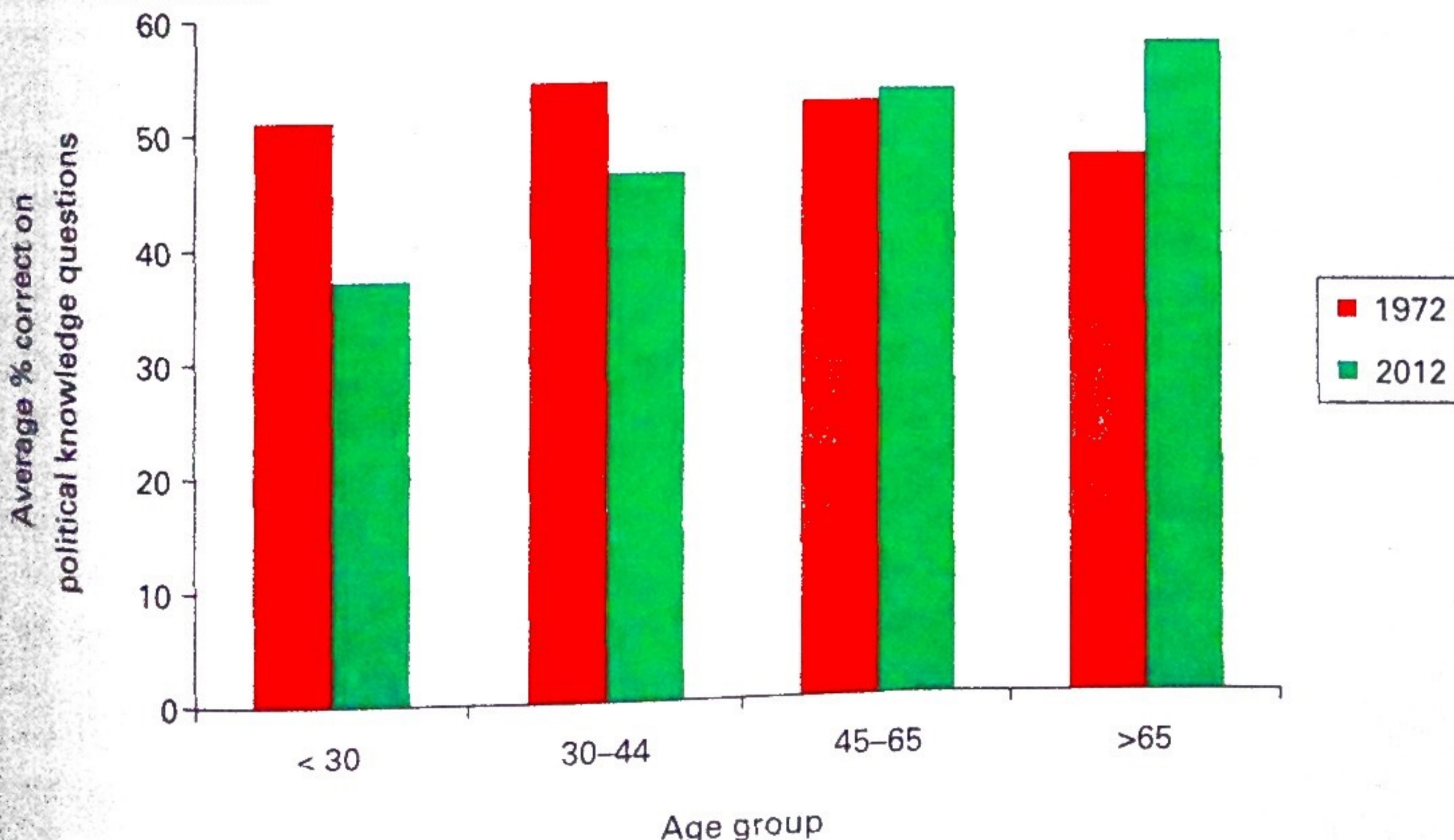


SOURCE: Authors' analysis of 1972-2012 American National Election Studies data.

again in surveys in recent years.<sup>3</sup> By contrast, Figure 1.2 shows that in 1972 there was virtually no pattern by age, with those under 30 actually scoring 4 percent higher than those over 65.<sup>4</sup>

**FIGURE 1.2** AGE AND POLITICAL KNOWLEDGE, 1972 AND 2012

This figure shows the percentage of correct answers to five questions in 1972 and twelve questions in 2012 by age group. In 1972, the relationship between age and political knowledge was basically flat: each age group displayed roughly the same level of information about basic political facts, such as which party currently had more seats in the House of Representatives. By 2012, the picture had changed quite dramatically, with young people being substantially less likely to know the answer to such questions than older people.



SOURCE: Authors' analysis of 1972 and 2012 National Election Studies data.

Thomas Jefferson once said that there has never been, nor ever will be, a people who are politically ignorant and free. If this is indeed the case, write Stephen Bennett and Eric Rademacher, then “we can legitimately wonder what the future holds” if young people “remain as uninformed as they are about government and public affairs.”<sup>5</sup> While Bennett and Rademacher may well be overreacting, there definitely are important consequences when citizens lack political information. In *What Americans Know About Politics and Why It Matters*, Michael Delli Carpini and Scott Keeter make a strong case for the importance of staying informed about public affairs. Political knowledge, they argue, (1) fosters civic virtues, such as political tolerance; (2) helps citizens to identify what policies would truly benefit them and then incorporate this information in their voting behavior; and (3) promotes active participation in politics.<sup>6</sup> If you’ve been reading about the debate on immigration reform, for example, you’ll be able to understand the proposed legislation, and that knowledge will then help you identify and vote for candidates whose views agree with yours.

As you will see throughout this book, those who participate in the political process are more likely to benefit from government programs and policies. Young people often complain that the elderly have far more political clout than they do—turnout statistics make clear why this is the case. As shown in Figure 1.3, in recent decades the voter turnout rate for people under 25 has consistently been much lower than that for senior citizens, particularly for midterm elections. Whereas turnout rates for the young have generally been going down, turnout among people over 65 years of age has actually gone up slightly since 1972. Political scientists used to write that the frailties of old age led to a decline in turnout after age 60; now such a decline occurs only after 80 years of age. Greater access to medical care because of the passage of Medicare in 1965 must surely be given some of the credit for this change. Who says politics doesn’t make a difference?

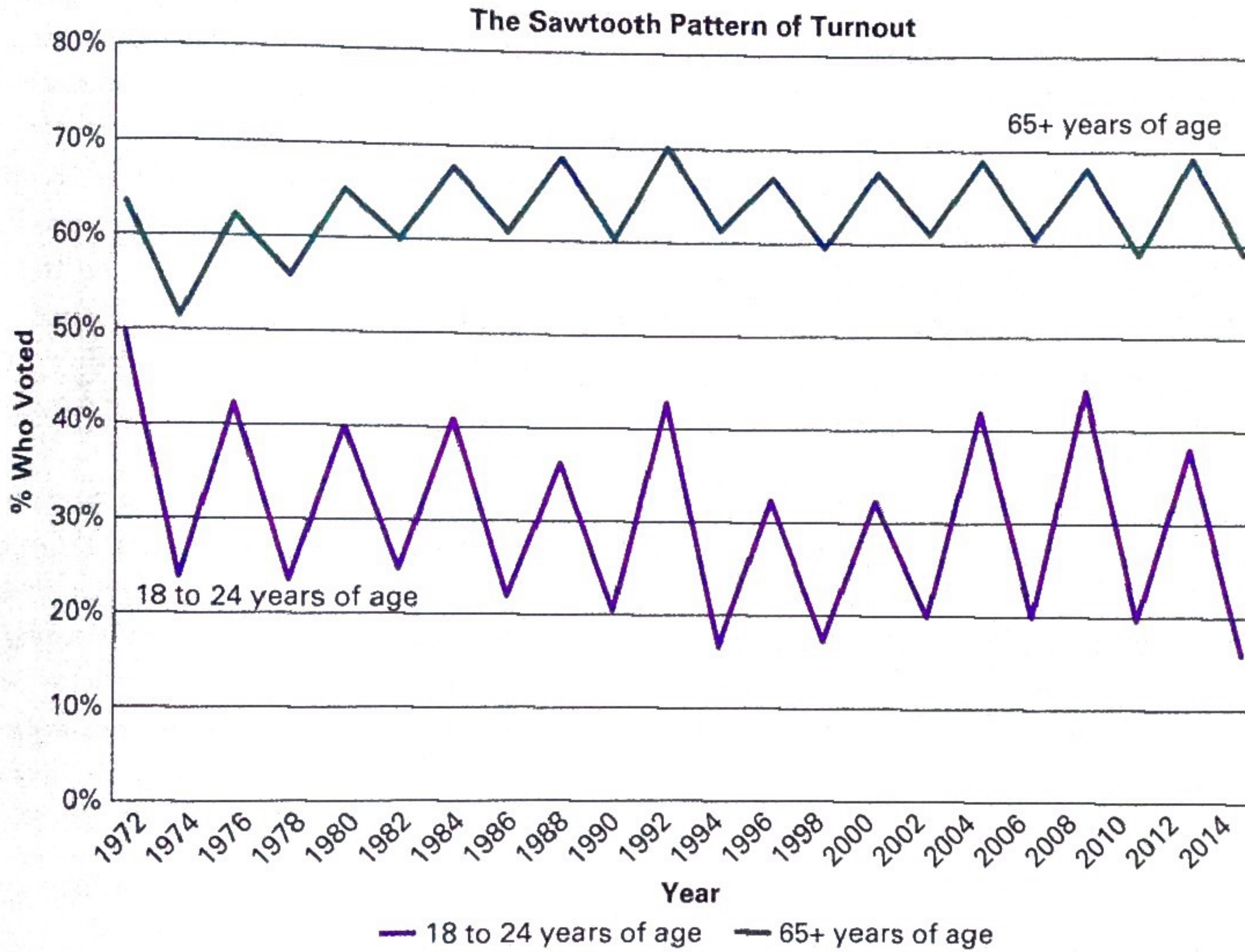
More than any other age group, the elderly know that they have much at stake in every election, with much of the federal budget now devoted to programs that help them, such as Medicare and Social Security. In recent decades these programs have consumed more and more of the federal domestic (non-military) budget as the population has aged and the costs of medical care have skyrocketed. Furthermore, they are projected to continue to grow as the baby boom generation retires. In contrast, the share of domestic federal spending that benefits children, though substantial, has generally declined. Julia Isaacs et al. estimate that in 2025 spending on Social Security benefits and health care for the elderly will make up 49 percent of domestic federal spending, as compared to just 8 percent for programs that benefit children.<sup>7</sup>

Of course, today’s youth have not been affected by any policy in the way that previous generations were affected by, say, the introduction of Medicare or the military draft and the Vietnam War. However, the causes of young people’s political apathy probably run deeper. Today’s young adults have grown up in an environment in which news about political events has been much easier to avoid than in the past. When CBS, NBC, and ABC dominated the airwaves, from the 1950s to the mid-1980s, their extensive coverage of presidential speeches, political conventions, and presidential debates frequently left little else to watch on TV. As channels proliferated over subsequent decades, it became much easier to avoid exposure to politics by switching the channel—and of course the Internet has exponentially broadened the choices. Major political events were once shared national experiences; now such shared national experiences are relatively rare, such as the events of September 11, 2001 or the killing of Osama Bin Laden ten years later.

Consider some contrasting statistics about audiences for presidential speeches. Presidents Nixon, Ford, and Carter all got an average Nielsen rating of 50 for their

**FIGURE 1.3** ELECTION TURNOUT RATES OF YOUNG AND OLD AMERICANS, 1972–2014

This graph shows the turnout gap between young and old Americans in all presidential and midterm elections from 1972 through 2014. The sawtooth pattern of both lines illustrates how turnout always drops off between a presidential election and a midterm congressional election (e.g., from 2012 to 2014). The ups and downs in the graph are much more evident among young people because they are less interested in politics and hence less likely to be regular voters. In 2008, turnout among young people rose to the highest level since 1972, spurred by a surge of participation by minority youth. Record rates of turnout were set by young African Americans, who for the first time had a higher turnout rate than young whites, and by young Hispanics and Asian Americans. The 2010 election, however, saw a sharp drop-off in youth turnout. Some of these young voters came back to the polls in 2012, but by 2014 the turnout rate of young people fell to a new low of just 16 percent.



SOURCE: U.S. Census Bureau Current Population Surveys.

televised addresses, meaning that half the population was watching. In contrast, President Obama averaged only about 23 for his nationally televised appearances from 2009 to 2015 despite the public’s anxiety about the economy.<sup>8</sup> Political conventions, which once received more TV coverage than the Summer Olympics, have been relegated to an hour per night and draw abysmal ratings. The Clinton-Trump presidential debates drew the biggest debate audiences of the twenty-first century, but they were still far below the normal audiences for when there were just three television networks.

In sum, young people today have never known a time when most citizens paid attention to major political events. As a result, most of them have yet to get into the habit of following and participating in politics. In a 2012 Pew Research Center survey, 24 percent of young adults said they enjoyed keeping up with the news, compared to 58 percent of senior citizens. Young people have grown up in an environment in which hundreds of TV channels and millions of Internet sites have, on the one hand, provided them with a rich and varied socialization experience; on the other hand, those channels and sites have also enabled young people to easily avoid political events. It has become particularly difficult to convince a generation that has channel- and Internet-surfed all their lives that politics really does matter.

How will further expansion of channels and, especially, blogs and other Web sites affect youth interest in and knowledge of politics? Political scientists see both opportunities and challenges. Some optimistic observers see these developments as offering “the prospect of a revitalized democracy characterized by a more active and informed citizenry.”<sup>9</sup> Political junkies will certainly find more political information available than ever before, and electronic communications will make it easier for people to express their political views in various forums and directly to public officials. However, with so many media choices for so many specific interests, it will also be easy to avoid the subject of public affairs. It may also be easier to avoid a range of opinions. Political scientist Jeremy Mayer argues that “if we all get to select exactly how much campaign news we will receive, and the depth of that coverage, it may be that too many Americans will choose shallow, biased sources of news on the Internet.”<sup>10</sup>

Groups that are concerned about low youth turnout are focusing on innovative ways of reaching out to young people via newer technologies, such as social networking sites like Facebook, to make them more aware of politics. In doing so, they are encouraged and spurred by the fact that young people are far from inactive in American society and in recent years have been doing volunteer community service at record rates. As Harvard students Ganesh Sitaraman and Previn Warren have written, “Young people are some of the most active members of their communities and are devoting increasing amounts of their time to direct service work and volunteerism.”<sup>11</sup> It is only when it comes to politics that young people seem to express indifference about getting involved.

It is our hope that after reading this book, you will be persuaded that paying attention to politics and government is important. Government has a substantial impact on all our lives. But it is also true that we have the opportunity to have a substantial impact on government. Involvement in public affairs can take many forms, ranging from simply becoming better informed by browsing through political Web sites to running for elected office. In between are countless opportunities for *everyone* to make a difference.

The narrow 537-vote margin by which George W. Bush carried the state of Florida in 2000 proved the old adage that “every vote counts.” Here, an election official strains to figure out how to interpret a voter’s punch in the tedious process of recounting ballots by hand.



# GOVERNMENT

## 1.1 Identify the key functions of government and explain why they matter.

The institutions that make public policy decisions for a society are collectively known as **government**. In the case of our own national government, these institutions are Congress, the president, the courts, and federal administrative agencies (“the bureaucracy”). Thousands of state and local governments also decide on policies that influence our lives. There are about 500,000 elected officials in the United States. Thus, policies that affect you are being made almost constantly.

Because government shapes how we live, it is important to understand the process by which decisions are made as well as what is actually decided. Two fundamental questions about governing serve as themes throughout this book:

- *How should we govern?* Americans take great pride in calling their government democratic. This chapter examines the workings of democratic government; the chapters that follow will evaluate the way American government actually works compared to the standards of an “ideal” democracy. We will continually ask, “Who holds power and who influences the policies adopted by government?”
- *What should government do?* This book explores the relationship between *how* American government works and *what* it does. It addresses the question, “Does our government do what we want it to do?” Debates over the scope of governmental power are among the most important in American political life today. Some people would like to see the government take on more responsibilities; others believe it already takes on too much.

While citizens often disagree about what their government should do for them, all governments have certain functions in common. National governments throughout the world perform the following functions:

- *Maintain a national defense.* A government protects its national sovereignty, usually by maintaining armed forces. In the nuclear age, some governments possess awesome power to make war through highly sophisticated weapons. The United States currently spends over \$600 billion a year on national defense. Since September 11, 2001, the defense budget has been substantially increased in order to cope with the threat of terrorism on U.S. soil.
- *Provide public goods and services.* Governments in this country spend billions of dollars on schools, libraries, hospitals, highways, and many other public goods and services. These goods and services are of two types. Some are what is called **collective goods**; if they exist, by their very nature they cannot be denied to anyone and therefore must be shared by everyone. Clean air or clean water or access to highways, for example, cannot be denied to anyone. Since the private sector has no incentive to provide goods and services that everyone automatically has access to, these can be provided only by government. Other public goods and services, such as college or medical care, can be provided to some individuals without being provided to all; these are widely provided by the private sector as well as by government.

### government

The institutions through which public policies are made for a society.

### collective goods

Goods and services, such as clean air and clean water, that by their nature cannot be denied to anyone.

Power is transferred peacefully in the United States via elections, with the losing side gracefully accepting the legitimacy of the result. In October 2015, incoming Speaker of the House Paul Ryan (R-WI) accepted the gavel and a handshake from House Minority Leader Nancy Pelosi (D-CA), who would have been elected Speaker had her party been in the majority.





One of the basic functions of any government is maintaining order. In 2015, after rioting broke out in Baltimore, Maryland, after the tragic death of Freddie Gray, the National Guard had to be called in to restore peace in the city. Once order was restored, it was then possible for peaceful protests to resume, as portrayed in this photo.

### politics

The process of determining the leaders we select and the policies they pursue. Politics produces authoritative decisions about public issues.

### political participation

All the activities by which citizens attempt to influence the selection of political leaders and the policies they pursue. Voting is the most common means of political participation in a democracy. Other means include contacting public officials, protest, and civil disobedience.

- *Preserve order.* Every government has some means of maintaining order. When people protest in large numbers, governments may resort to extreme measures to restore order. For example, the National Guard was called in to stop the looting and arson after rioting broke out in Baltimore in 2015 following the death of Freddie Gray under police custody.
- *Socialize the young.* Governments politically socialize the young—that is, instill in children knowledge of and pride in the nation and its political system and values. Most modern governments pay for education, and school curricula typically include a course on the theory and practice of the country's government. Rituals like the daily Pledge of Allegiance seek to foster patriotism and love of country.
- *Collect taxes.* Approximately one out of every three dollars earned by American citizens goes to national, state, and local taxes—money that pays for the public goods and services the government provides.

All these governmental tasks add up to weighty decisions that our political leaders must make. For example, how much should we spend on national defense as opposed to education? How high should taxes for Medicare and Social Security be? We answer such questions through politics.

## POLITICS

### 1.2 Define politics in the context of democratic government.

**Politics** determines whom we select as our governmental leaders and what policies these leaders pursue. Political scientists often cite Harold D. Lasswell's famous definition of politics: "Who gets what, when, and how."<sup>12</sup> It is one of the briefest and most useful definitions of politics ever penned. Admittedly, this broad definition covers a lot of ground (office politics, sorority politics, and so on) in which political scientists are generally not interested. They are interested primarily in politics related to governmental decision making.

The media usually focus on the *who* of politics. At a minimum, this includes voters, candidates, groups, and parties. *What* refers to the substance of politics and government—benefits, such as medical care for the elderly, and burdens, such as new taxes. *How* refers to the ways in which people participate in politics. People get what they want through voting, supporting, compromising, lobbying, and so forth. In this sense, government and politics involve winners and losers. Behind every arcane tax provision or item in an appropriations bill, there are real people getting something or getting something taken away.

The ways in which people get involved in politics make up their **political participation**. Many people judge the health of a government by how widespread political participation is. America does quite poorly when judged by its voter turnout, which is one of the lowest in the world. Low voter turnout has an effect on who holds political power. Because so many people do not show up at the polls, voters are a distorted sample of the public as a whole. Groups with a high turnout rate





Pro-life and pro-choice groups are single-minded and usually uncompromising. Few issues stir up as much passion as whether abortion should be permitted and, if so, under what conditions.

such as the elderly, benefit, whereas those with a low turnout rate, such as young people, lack political clout.

Voting is only one form of political participation. For a few Americans, politics is a vocation: they run for office, and some even earn their livelihood from holding political office. In addition, many Americans treat politics as critical to their interests. Many of these people are members of **single-issue groups**—groups so concerned with one issue that members often cast their votes on the basis of that issue only, ignoring a politician's stand on everything else. Groups of activists dedicated either to outlawing abortion or to preserving abortion rights are good examples of single-issue groups.

Individual citizens and organized groups get involved in politics because they understand that public policy choices made by governments affect them in significant ways. Will all those who need student loans receive them? Will everyone have access to medical care? Will people be taken care of in their old age? Is the water safe to drink? These and other questions tie politics to policymaking.

### **single-issue groups**

Groups that have a narrow interest on which their members tend to take an uncompromising stance.

## **THE POLICYMAKING SYSTEM**

**1.3** Assess how citizens can have an impact on public policy and how policies can impact people.

Americans frequently expect the government to do something about their problems. For example, the president and members of Congress are expected to keep the economy humming along; voters will penalize them at the polls if they do not. It is through the **policymaking system** that our government responds to the priorities of its people. Figure 1.4 shows a skeletal model of this system, in which people shape policies and in turn are affected by them. The rest of this book will flesh out this model, but for now it will help you understand how government policy comes into being and evolves over time.

### **policymaking system**

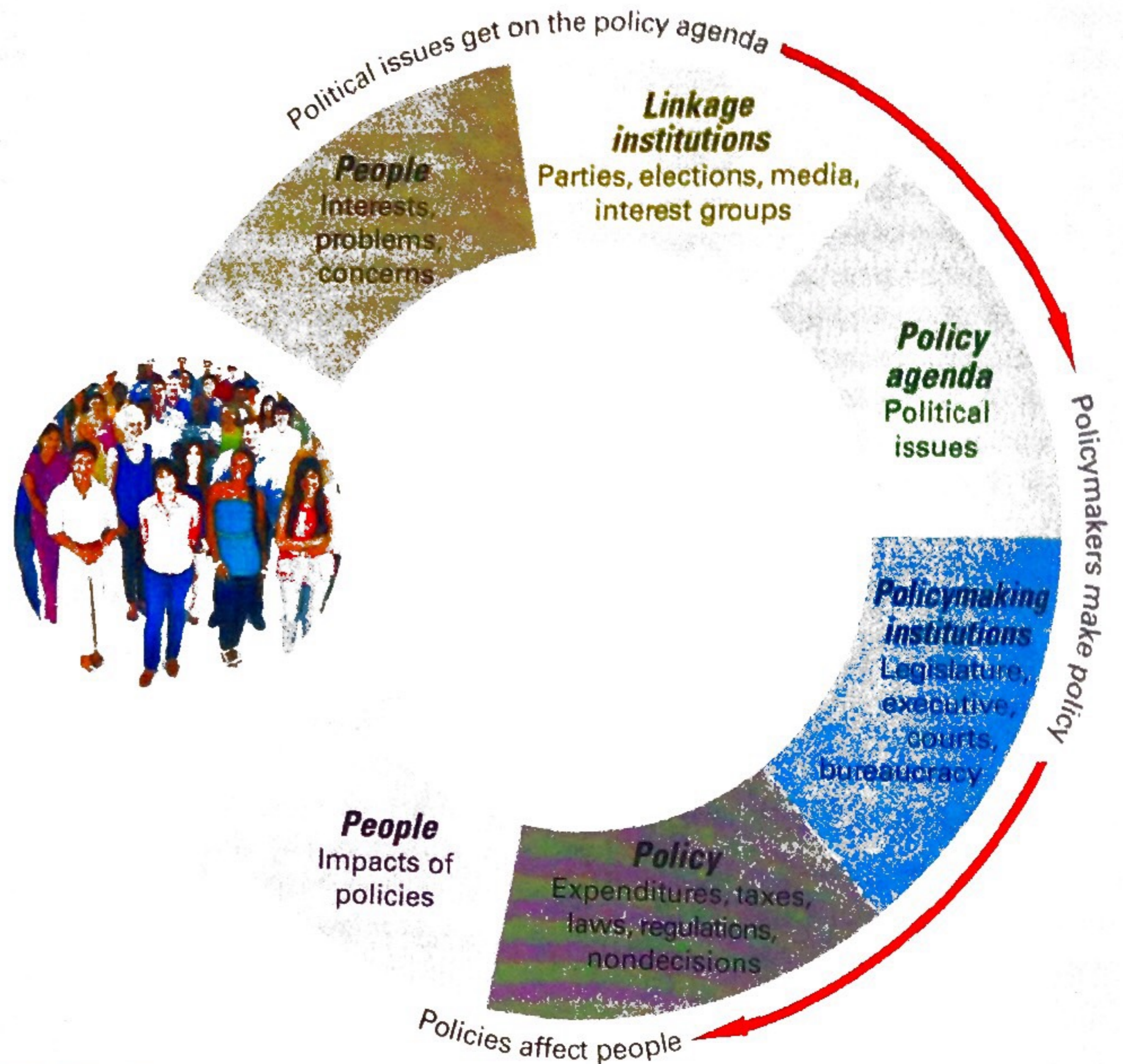
The process by which policy comes into being and evolves. People's interests, problems, and concerns create political issues for government policymakers. These issues shape policy, which in turn impacts people, generating more interests, problems, and concerns.

### **People Shape Policy**

The policymaking system begins with people. All Americans have interests, problems, and concerns that are touched on by public policy. Some people think the government should spend more to train people for jobs in today's increasingly technology-oriented

**FIGURE 1.4 THE POLICYMAKING SYSTEM**

In the policymaking system, people's concerns get transmitted to linkage institutions. The issues that they choose to address form the policy agenda. Political institutions then make decisions in the form of policies. Policies, in turn, affect people.



economy; others think that the government is already spending too much, resulting in high taxes that discourage business investments. Some citizens expect government to do something to curb domestic violence; others are concerned about prospects that the government may make it much harder to buy a handgun.

What do people do to express their opinions in a democracy? As previously mentioned, people have numerous avenues for participation; for example, they may vote for candidates who represent their opinions, join political parties, post messages to Internet chat groups, and form *interest groups*—organized groups of people with a common interest. In this way, people's concerns enter the linkage institutions of the policymaking system. **Linkage institutions**—political parties, elections, interest groups, and the media—transmit Americans' preferences to the policymakers in government. Parties and interest groups strive to ensure that their members' concerns receive appropriate political attention. The media investigate social problems and inform people about them. Elections provide citizens with the chance to make their opinions heard by choosing their public officials.

All these institutions help to shape the government's **policy agenda**, the issues that attract the serious attention of public officials and other people actively involved in politics at a given time. Some issues will be considered, and others will not. If politicians want to get elected, they must pay attention to the problems that concern voters. When you vote, you are partly looking at whether a candidate shares your agenda. If you are most worried about rising economic inequality and a certain candidate talks mostly about protecting U.S. borders and stopping illegal immigration, you will probably support another candidate.

A government's policy agenda changes regularly. When jobs are scarce and business productivity is falling, economic problems occupy a high position on the government's agenda. If the economy is doing well and trouble spots around the world occupy

**linkage institutions**

The political channels through which people's concerns become political issues on the policy agenda. In the United States, linkage institutions include elections, political parties, interest groups, and the media.

**policy agenda**

The issues that attract the serious attention of public officials and other people involved in politics at a point in time.

the headlines, foreign policy questions are bound to dominate the agenda. In general, bad news—particularly about a crisis situation—is more likely than good news to draw sufficient media attention to put a subject on the policy agenda. As the old saying goes, “Good news is no news.” When unemployment rises sharply, it leads the news; when jobs are plentiful, the latest unemployment report is much less of a news story. Thus, the policy agenda responds more to societal failures than successes. People, of course, do not always agree on what government should do. Indeed, one group’s positions and interests are often at odds with those of another group. A **political issue** emerges when people disagree about a problem or about the public policy needed to fix it. There is never a shortage of political issues; government, however, will not act on any issue until it is high on the policy agenda.

Policymakers stand at the core of the system, working within the three **policymaking institutions** established by the U.S. Constitution: Congress, the presidency, and the courts. Policymakers scan the issues on the policy agenda, select those they consider important, and make policies to address them. Today, the power of the bureaucracy is so great that most political scientists consider it a fourth policymaking institution.

Very few policies are made by a single policymaking institution. Environmental policy is a good example. Some presidents have used their influence with Congress to urge clean-air and clean-water policies. When Congress responds by passing legislation to clean up the environment, bureaucracies have to implement the new policies. The bureaucracies, in turn, create extensive volumes of rules and regulations that define how policies are to be implemented. In addition, every law passed and every rule made can be challenged in the courts. Courts make decisions about what policies mean and whether they conflict with the Constitution.

## Policies Impact People

Every decision that government makes—every law it passes, budget it establishes, and ruling it hands down—is **public policy**. Public policies are of various types, depending in part on which policymaking institution they originated with, as you can see in Table 1.1. Statutes are laws that are passed by the Congress, such as the \$787 billion American Recovery and Reinvestment Act of 2009. Presidential actions, including executive orders, such as President Obama’s action to allow gays to serve openly in the armed forces, are the result of decisions made by the president. Court decisions are legal opinions by the Supreme Court or a lower court; one example is the Supreme Court’s 2010 ruling that individuals have a constitutional right to own a gun. Budgetary choices involve the legislative enactment of taxes and expenditures. And regulation occurs when a federal agency issues guidelines regarding the implementation of laws, such as when the Department of Education specifies the requirements for qualifying for the federal student loan forgiveness program.

### political issue

An issue that arises when people disagree about a problem and how to fix it.

### policymaking institutions

The branches of government charged with taking action on political issues. The U.S. Constitution established three policymaking institutions—Congress, the presidency, and the courts. Today, the power of the bureaucracy is so great that most political scientists consider it a fourth policymaking institution.

### public policy

A choice that government makes in response to a political issue. A policy is a course of action taken with regard to some problem.

**TABLE 1.1** TYPES OF PUBLIC POLICIES

Type	Definition	Example
Congressional statute	Law passed by Congress	The Affordable Care Act is passed, requiring everyone to either obtain health care coverage or pay a fine.
Presidential action	Decision by president	American jets bomb ISIS targets in Syria.
Court decision	Opinion by Supreme Court or other court	Supreme Court rules that same sex couples have a constitutional right to marry.
Budgetary choices	Legislative enactment of taxes and expenditures	The federal budget resolution is enacted.
Regulation	Agency adoption of regulation	The Environmental Protection Agency issues new emission control guidelines for automobiles.

**policy impacts**

The effects a policy has on people and problems. Impacts are analyzed to see how well a policy has met its goal and at what cost.

**democracy**

A system of selecting policymakers and of organizing government so that policy represents and responds to the public's preferences.

Having a policy implies having a goal. Whether we want to reduce poverty, cut crime, clean the water, or hold down inflation, we have a goal in mind. Policy impact analysts ask how well a policy achieves its goal—and at what cost. The analysis of **policy impacts** carries the policymaking system back to its point of origin: the interests, problems, and concerns of the people. Translating people's desires into effective public policy is crucial to the workings of democracy.

## DEMOCRACY IN AMERICA

### 1.4 Identify the key principles of democracy and outline theories regarding how it works in practice and the challenges democracy faces today.

**Democracy** is a system of selecting policymakers and of organizing government so that policy reflects citizens' preferences. Today, the term *democracy* takes its place among terms like *freedom*, *justice*, and *peace* as a word that seemingly has only positive connotations; surveys around the world routinely show that most people in most democracies believe that democracy is the best form of government. Yet the writers of the U.S. Constitution had no fondness for democracy, as many of them doubted the ability of ordinary Americans to make informed judgments about what government should do. Roger Sherman, a delegate to the Constitutional Convention, said, "The people should have as little to do as may be about the government. They lack information and are constantly liable to be misled."<sup>13</sup> Only much later did Americans come to cherish democracy and believe that all citizens should actively participate in choosing their leaders.

Most Americans would probably say that democracy is "government by the people." These words are, of course, part of the famous phrase by which Abraham Lincoln defined democracy in his Gettysburg Address: "government of the people, by the people, and for the people." Certainly, our government has always been "of the people," for in the United States there have only ever been (common) people: the Constitution forbids the granting of titles of nobility, which typically establish, for those who hold those titles, hereditary positions of power and privilege. On the other hand, in a nation of over 300 million people, it is a practical impossibility for government to be "by the people"; not by *all* the people, anyway. Our democracy involves choosing representatives of the people to govern. Where the serious debate begins is with the question of whether political leaders do, in fact, govern "for the people," since there always are significant biases in how our political system works. Democratic theorists have elaborated a set of standards to use in evaluating this crucial question.

### Traditional Democratic Theory

Traditional democratic theory rests on a number of key principles that specify how governmental decisions are made in a democracy. Robert Dahl, one of America's leading theorists, suggests that an ideal democratic process should satisfy the following five criteria:

- *Equality in voting.* The principle of "one person, one vote" is basic to democracy. No one's vote should count more than anyone else's.
- *Effective participation.* Citizens must have adequate and equal opportunities to express their preferences throughout the decision-making process.
- *Enlightened understanding.* A democratic society must be a marketplace of ideas. A free press and free speech are essential to civic understanding. If one group monopolizes and distorts information, citizens cannot truly understand issues.
- *Citizen control of the agenda.* Citizens should have the collective right to control the government's policy agenda. If particular groups, such as the wealthy, have influence far exceeding what would be expected based on their numbers, then the agenda will be distorted—the government will not be addressing the issues that the public as a whole feels are most important.

- *Inclusion.* The government must include, and extend rights to, all those subject to its laws. Citizenship must be open to all within a nation if the nation is to call itself democratic.<sup>14</sup>

Ideally, only if it satisfies these criteria can a political system be called democratic. Furthermore, democracies must practice **majority rule**, meaning that policies should reflect the will of over half the voters. At the same time, most Americans would not want to give the majority free rein to do anything they can agree on. Restraints on the majority are built into the American system of government in order to protect the minority, or minorities. Thus the majority cannot infringe on **minority rights**. Freedom of assembly, freedom of speech, and so on, are freedoms for those in a minority as well as the majority.

In a society too large for all citizens to participate directly in the process of governing, a few must look after the concerns of the many. The relationship between elected leaders and citizens is one of **representation**. The literal meaning of *representation* is to "make present once again." In politics, representation means that the desires of the people should be replicated in government through the choices of elected officials. The closer the correspondence between the decisions representatives make and the wishes of their constituents, the closer the approximation to an ideal democracy. As might be expected for such a crucial question, theorists disagree widely about the extent to which this ideal is actually realized in the United States.

### Three Contemporary Theories of American Democracy

Theories of American democracy are essentially theories about who has power and influence. All, in one way or another, ask the question, "Who really governs in our nation?" Each focuses on a key aspect of politics and government, and each reaches a somewhat different conclusion about the state of American democracy.

**PLURALISM** One important theory of American democracy, **pluralism**, states that groups with shared interests influence public policy by pressing their concerns through organized efforts. The National Rifle Association (NRA), the National Organization for Women (NOW), and the American Council on Education (ACE) are contemporary examples of such interest groups.

According to pluralist theory, because of open access to various institutions of government and public officials, organized groups can compete with one another for control over policy and no one group or set of groups dominates. Given that power is dispersed in the American form of government, groups that lose in one arena can take their case to another. For example, civil rights groups faced congressional roadblocks in the 1950s but were able to win the action they were seeking from the courts.

Pluralists are generally optimistic that the public interest will eventually prevail in the making of public policy through a complex process of bargaining and compromise. They believe that, rather than speaking of majority rule, we should speak of groups of minorities working together. Robert Dahl expresses this view well when he writes that in America "all active and legitimate groups in the population can make themselves heard at some crucial stage in the process."<sup>15</sup>

Group politics is certainly as American as apple pie. Writing in the 1830s, Alexis de Tocqueville called us a "nation of joiners" and pointed to the high level of associational activities as one of the crucial reasons for the success of American democracy. The recent explosion of interest group activity can therefore be seen as a very positive development from the perspective of pluralist theory. Interest groups and their lobbyists—the groups' representatives in Washington—have become masters of the technology of politics. Computers, mass mailing lists, sophisticated media advertising, and hard-sell techniques are their stock-in-trade. As a result, some observers believe that Dahl's pluralist vision—his argument that all groups may be heard through the American political process—is true, more now than ever before.

#### majority rule

A fundamental principle of traditional democratic theory. In a democracy, choosing among alternatives requires that the majority's desire be respected.

#### minority rights

A principle of traditional democratic theory that guarantees rights to those who do not belong to majorities.

#### representation

A basic principle of traditional democratic theory that describes the relationship between the few leaders and the many followers.

#### pluralism

A theory of American democracy emphasizing that the policymaking process is very open to the participation of all groups with shared interests, with no single group usually dominating. Pluralists tend to believe that as a result, public interest generally prevails.

Robert Putnam, on the other hand, argues that many of the problems of American democracy today stem from a decline in group-based participation.<sup>16</sup> Putnam theorizes that advanced technology, particularly television, has served to increasingly isolate Americans from one another. He shows that membership in a variety of civic associations, such as parent-teacher associations, the League of Women Voters, and the Elks, Shriners, and Jaycees, has been declining for decades. Interestingly, Putnam does not interpret the decline of participation in civic groups as meaning that people have become “couch potatoes.” Rather, he argues that Americans’ activities are becoming more self-defined and less tied to institutions. The most famous example he gives to illustrate this trend is the fact that membership in bowling leagues has dropped sharply at the same time that more people are bowling—indicating that more and more people must be bowling alone. Putnam believes that participation in interest groups today is often like bowling alone. Groups that have mushroomed lately, such as the AARP, typically just ask their members to participate by writing a check from the comfort of their own home. If people are indeed participating in politics alone rather than in groups, then pluralist theory is becoming less descriptive of American politics today.

**ELITISM** Critics of pluralism believe that it paints too rosy a picture of American political life. By arguing that almost every group can get a piece of the pie, they say, pluralists miss the larger question of how the pie is distributed. The poor may get their food stamps, but businesses get massive tax deductions worth far more. Some governmental programs may help minorities, but the income gap between whites and blacks remains wide.

### elitism

A theory of American democracy contending that an upper-class elite holds the power and makes policy, regardless of the formal governmental organization.

**Elitism** contends that our society, like all societies, is divided along class lines and that an upper-class elite pulls the strings of government. Wealth—the holding of assets such as property, stocks, and bonds—is the basis of this power. Over a third of the nation’s wealth is currently held by just 1 percent of the population. Elite theorists believe that this 1 percent of Americans controls most policy decisions because they can afford to finance election campaigns and control key institutions, such as large corporations. According to elite theory, a few powerful Americans do not merely influence policymakers—they *are*, in effect, the policymakers, even when they are not elected to public office.

At the center of all theories of elite dominance is big business, whose dominance many believe has increased in recent decades. Recently, the “Occupy Wall Street” movement emerged to visibly protest the rising disparities. Its slogan “We are the 99 percent” referred to the vast concentration of wealth among the top 1 percent of income earners, among them Wall Street executives. Political Scientists Martin Gilens and Benjamin Page find that when the policy stands of the rich differ from those of middle-class citizens, the rich get their way far more often.<sup>17</sup> And with the loopholes that have opened up in the campaign finance system since the Supreme Court’s ruling in *Citizens United v. FEC* (2010), the wealthy are now contributing a larger percentage of campaign spending than ever since federal campaigns were first regulated by law in the early 1970s.

The most extreme proponents of elite theory maintain that who holds office in Washington is of marginal consequence; the corporate giants always have the power. Clearly, most people in politics would disagree with this view, noting that, for example, the tax plans offered by Donald Trump and Hillary Clinton in 2016 were starkly different. Whereas Donald Trump called for a cut in income tax rates for everyone, including people making over a million dollars a year, Hillary Clinton called for a substantial tax increase on wealthy Americans.

### hyperpluralism

A theory of American democracy contending that groups are so strong that government, which gives in to the many different groups, is thereby weakened.

**HYPERPLURALISM** A third theory, **hyperpluralism**, offers a different critique of pluralism. Hyperpluralism is pluralism gone sour. In this view, the many competing groups are so strong that government is weakened, as the influence of so many groups cripples government’s ability to make policy. The problem is not that a few groups excessively influence government action but that many groups together render government unable to act.



The influence of the wealthy on politics has drawn increasing public attention in recent years, as billionaires like Sheldon and Miriam Adelson (shown here) have made multimillion-dollar contributions to Super PACs that supported particular presidential candidates. With their net worth of over \$31 billion, a \$10 million contribution from the Adelsons was equivalent to the average family with a net worth of \$171,000 spending \$55.

Whereas pluralism maintains that input from groups is a good thing for the political decision-making process, hyperpluralist theory asserts that there are *too* many ways for groups to control policy. Our fragmented political system made up of governments with overlapping jurisdictions is one major factor that contributes to hyperpluralism. This fragmentation of policymaking can make it hard to coordinate policy implementation. Any policy requiring the cooperation of the national, state, and local levels of government can be hampered by the reluctance of any one of them. Furthermore, groups use the fragmented system to their advantage. Groups that have lost policymaking battles in Congress increasingly have carried their battles to the courts: the number of policy-related cases brought to state and federal courts has soared. Ecologists have used legal procedures to delay construction projects they feel will damage the environment, businesses have taken federal agencies to court to fight the implementation of regulations that will cost them money, labor unions have gone to court to secure injunctions against policies they fear will cost their members jobs, and civil liberties groups have gone to court to defend the rights of people who are under investigation for possible terrorist activities. The courts have become one more battleground in which governmental policies can sometimes be opposed quite effectively.

Hyperpluralist theory holds that government gives in to every conceivable interest and single-issue group. Groups have become sovereign, and government is merely their servant. When politicians try to placate every group, the result is confusing, contradictory, and muddled policy—if the politicians manage to make policy at all. Like elite theorists, hyperpluralist theorists suggest that the public interest is rarely translated into public policy.

## Challenges to Democracy

Regardless of which theory is most convincing to you, there are a number of continuing challenges to democracy. Many of these challenges apply to American democracy as well as to other democracies around the world.

**INCREASED COMPLEXITY OF ISSUES** Traditional democratic theory holds that ordinary citizens have the good sense to reach political judgments and that government has the capacity to act on those judgments. Today, however, we live in a society

with complex issues and experts whose technical knowledge of those issues vastly exceeds the knowledge of the general public. What, after all, does the average citizen—however conscientious—know about eligibility criteria for welfare, agricultural price supports, foreign competition, and the hundreds of other issues that confront government each year? Even the most rigorous democratic theory does not demand that citizens be experts on everything, but as human knowledge has expanded, it has become increasingly difficult for individual citizens to make well-informed decisions. And, as James Curry argues in *Legislating in the Dark*, the problem of information is often acute for policymakers as well, what with major bills in Congress often exceeding 1,000 pages of complex details.<sup>18</sup>

**LIMITED PARTICIPATION IN GOVERNMENT** When citizens do not seem to take their citizenship seriously, democracy's defenders worry. Plenty of evidence suggests that Americans know relatively little about who their leaders are, much less about their policy decisions. Furthermore, Americans do not take full advantage of their opportunities to shape government or select its leaders. Limited participation in government challenges the foundation of democracy. In particular, because young people represent the country's future, their low voting turnout rates point to an even more serious challenge to democracy on the horizon.

**ESCALATING CAMPAIGN COSTS** Many political observers worry about the close connection between money and politics, especially in congressional elections. Winning a House seat these days usually requires a campaign war chest of *at least* a million dollars, and Senate races are even more costly. Congressional candidates have become increasingly dependent on political action committees (PACs) to fund their campaigns because of the escalation of campaign costs. These PACs often represent specific economic interests, and they care little about how members of Congress vote on most issues—just the issues that particularly affect them. Critics charge that when it comes to the issues PACs care about, the members of Congress listen, lest they be denied the money they need for their reelection. When democracy confronts the might of money, the gap between democratic theory and reality widens further.

**DIVERSE POLITICAL INTERESTS** The diversity of the American people is reflected in the diversity of interests represented in the political system. As you will see, this system is so open that interests find it easy to gain access to policymakers. When interests conflict, which they often do, no coalition may be strong enough to form a majority and establish policy. But each interest may use its influence to thwart those whose policy proposals they oppose. In effect, they have a veto over policy, creating what is often referred to as **policy gridlock**. In a big city, gridlock occurs when there are so many cars on the road that no one can move; in politics, it occurs when each policy coalition finds its way blocked by others. Marc Hetherington and Thomas Rudolph argue that policy gridlock has become more common due to the rising distrust that Democrats and Republicans express for each other.<sup>19</sup> As few major policy changes can be accomplished without some bipartisan cooperation, government often takes no action, leaving the status quo intact.

## American Political Culture and Democracy

The key factor that holds American democracy together, in the view of many scholars, is its **political culture**—the overall set of values widely shared within American society. As Ronald Inglehart and Christian Welzel argue in their book on cultural change and democracy, "Democracy is not simply the result of clever elite bargaining and constitutional engineering. It depends on deep-rooted orientations among the people themselves. These orientations motivate them to demand freedom and responsive government.... Genuine democracy is not simply a machine that, once set up, functions by itself. It depends on the people."<sup>20</sup>

### policy gridlock

A condition that occurs when interests conflict and no coalition is strong enough to form a majority and establish policy, so nothing gets done.

### political culture

An overall set of values widely shared within a society.



with complex issues and experts whose technical knowledge of those issues vastly exceeds the knowledge of the general public. What, after all, does the average citizen—however conscientious—know about eligibility criteria for welfare, agricultural price supports, foreign competition, and the hundreds of other issues that confront government each year? Even the most rigorous democratic theory does not demand that citizens be experts on everything, but as human knowledge has expanded, it has become increasingly difficult for individual citizens to make well-informed decisions. And, as James Curry argues in *Legislating in the Dark*, the problem of information is often acute for policymakers as well, what with major bills in Congress often exceeding 1,000 pages of complex details.<sup>18</sup>

**LIMITED PARTICIPATION IN GOVERNMENT** When citizens do not seem to take their citizenship seriously, democracy's defenders worry. Plenty of evidence suggests that Americans know relatively little about who their leaders are, much less about their policy decisions. Furthermore, Americans do not take full advantage of their opportunities to shape government or select its leaders. Limited participation in government challenges the foundation of democracy. In particular, because young people represent the country's future, their low voting turnout rates point to an even more serious challenge to democracy on the horizon.

**ESCALATING CAMPAIGN COSTS** Many political observers worry about the close connection between money and politics, especially in congressional elections. Winning a House seat these days usually requires a campaign war chest of *at least* a million dollars, and Senate races are even more costly. Congressional candidates have become increasingly dependent on political action committees (PACs) to fund their campaigns because of the escalation of campaign costs. These PACs often represent specific economic interests, and they care little about how members of Congress vote on most issues—just the issues that particularly affect them. Critics charge that when it comes to the issues PACs care about, the members of Congress listen, lest they be denied the money they need for their reelection. When democracy confronts the might of money, the gap between democratic theory and reality widens further.

**DIVERSE POLITICAL INTERESTS** The diversity of the American people is reflected in the diversity of interests represented in the political system. As you will see, this system is so open that interests find it easy to gain access to policymakers. When interests conflict, which they often do, no coalition may be strong enough to form a majority and establish policy. But each interest may use its influence to thwart those whose policy proposals they oppose. In effect, they have a veto over policy, creating what is often referred to as **policy gridlock**. In a big city, gridlock occurs when there are so many cars on the road that no one can move; in politics, it occurs when each policy coalition finds its way blocked by others. Marc Hetherington and Thomas Rudolph argue that policy gridlock has become more common due to the rising distrust that Democrats and Republicans express for each other.<sup>19</sup> As few major policy changes can be accomplished without some bipartisan cooperation, government often takes no action, leaving the status quo intact.

## American Political Culture and Democracy

The key factor that holds American democracy together, in the view of many scholars, is its **political culture**—the overall set of values widely shared within American society. As Ronald Inglehart and Christian Welzel argue in their book on cultural change and democracy, "Democracy is not simply the result of clever elite bargaining and constitutional engineering. It depends on deep-rooted orientations among the people themselves. These orientations motivate them to demand freedom and responsive government.... Genuine democracy is not simply a machine that, once set up, functions by itself. It depends on the people."<sup>20</sup>

### policy gridlock

A condition that occurs when interests conflict and no coalition is strong enough to form a majority and establish policy, so nothing gets done.

### political culture

An overall set of values widely shared within a society.

Because Americans are so diverse in terms of ancestry, religion, and heritage, the political culture of the United States is crucial: what unites Americans more than anything else is a set of shared political beliefs and values. As G. K. Chesterton, the noted British observer of American politics, wrote in 1922, "America is the only nation in the world that is founded on a creed. That creed is set forth with dogmatic and even theological lucidity in the Declaration of Independence."<sup>21</sup> Arguing along the same lines, Seymour Martin Lipset writes that "the United States is a country organized around an ideology which includes a set of dogmas about the nature of good society."<sup>22</sup> Lipset argues that the American creed can be summarized by five elements: liberty, individualism, laissez-faire, populism, and egalitarianism.<sup>23</sup>

**LIBERTY** One of the most famous statements of the American Revolution is Patrick Henry's "Give me liberty or give me death." During the Cold War, a popular bumper sticker read "Better Dead Than Red"; it reflected many Americans' preference for fighting to the bitter end rather than submitting to the oppression of communist rule. To this day, New Hampshire's official state motto is "Live Free or Die." When immigrants are asked why they came to America, by far the most common response is to live in freedom.

Freedom of speech and religion are fundamental to the American way of life. In the Declaration of Independence, Thomas Jefferson placed liberty right along with life and the pursuit of happiness as an "unalienable right"; that is, a right not awarded by human power, not transferable to another power, and not revocable.

**INDIVIDUALISM** One of the aspects of American political culture that has shaped the development of American democracy has been individualism—the belief that people can and should get ahead on their own. The immigrants who founded American society may have been diverse, but many shared a common dream of America as a place where one could make it on one's own without interference from government. Louis Hartz's *The Liberal Tradition in America* is a classic analysis of the dominant political beliefs during America's formative years. Hartz argues that the major force behind limited government in America is that it was settled by people who fled from the feudal and clerical oppressions of the Old World. Once in the New World, they wanted little from government other than for it to leave them alone.<sup>24</sup>



One of the fundamental values that most Americans cherish is that of liberty. The state of New Hampshire has even gone so far to place a slogan to this effect on all the automobile license plates in the state.

Another explanation for American individualism is the existence of a bountiful frontier, at least up until the start of the twentieth century. Not only did many people come to America to escape from governmental interference, but the frontier allowed them to get away from government almost entirely once they arrived. Frederick Jackson Turner's famous work on the significance of the frontier in American history argues that "the frontier is productive of individualism."<sup>25</sup> According to Turner, being in the wilderness and having to survive on one's own left settlers with an aversion to any control from the outside world—particularly from the government.

**LAISSEZ-FAIRE** An important result of American individualism has been a clear tendency to prefer laissez-faire economic policies, which promote free markets and limited government. As John Kingdon writes in his book *America the Unusual*, "Government in the United States is much more limited and much smaller than government in virtually every other advanced industrialized country on earth."<sup>26</sup> Compared to most other economically developed nations, the United States devotes a smaller percentage of its resources to government. Americans have a lighter tax burden than citizens of other democratic nations.

All of the other advanced industrial democracies have long had a system of national health insurance that guarantees care to all their citizens. During the Obama presidency, the Affordable Care Act took a substantial step towards guaranteeing most Americans health care; but Republicans pledged to repeal Obamacare in 2016, when they won the presidency and maintained control of Congress. In many countries, national governments have started up airline, telephone, and communications companies; not in the United States. Most Western governments have built a substantial percentage of the housing in their nations; by contrast, only a small fraction of the housing in America has been built by government. In sum, in terms of its impact on citizens' everyday lives, government in the United States actually does much less than the governments of these other democracies.

**POPULISM** Abraham Lincoln summarized American democracy as "government of the people, by the people, and for the people." Such an emphasis on *the people* is at the heart of populism, which can best be defined as a political philosophy supporting the rights of average citizens in their struggle against privileged elites. As Lipset writes, American populist thought holds that the people at large "are possessed of some kind of sacred mystique, and proximity to them endows the politician with esteem—and with legitimacy."<sup>27</sup>

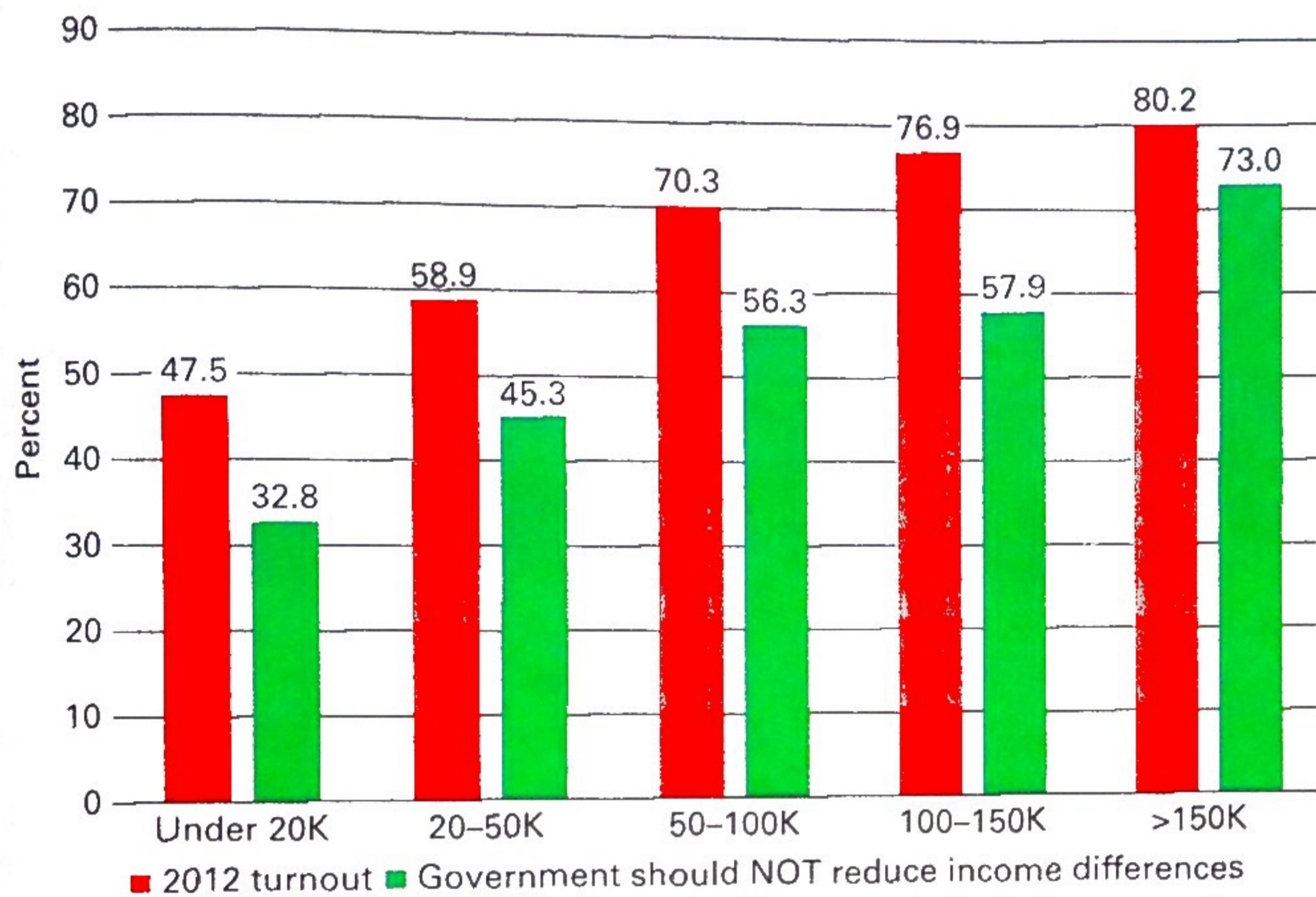
In America, being on the side of the ordinary people against big interests is so valued that liberal and conservative politicians alike frequently claim this mantle. Liberals are inclined to argue that they will stand up to big multinational corporations and protect the interests of ordinary Americans. Conservatives, on the other hand, are likely to repeat Ronald Reagan's famous promise to get big government off the backs of the American people. A populist pledge to "put the people first" is always a safe strategy in the American political culture.

**EGALITARIANISM** The most famous phrase in the history of democracy is the Declaration of Independence's statement "We hold these truths to be self-evident, that all men are created equal." As the French observer Alexis de Tocqueville noted long ago, egalitarianism in the United States involves equality of opportunity and respect in the absence of a monarchy and aristocracy. Americans have never been equal in terms of condition. What is most critical to this part of the American creed is that everyone have a chance to succeed in life.

Today, there is much concern that equality of opportunity is being eroded in America, since economic data have shown that those with the highest income levels are obtaining an increasing share of the nation's wealth. In a highly publicized speech delivered in December of 2013, President Obama called the rising level of economic inequality in America "the defining challenge of our time."

**FIGURE 1.5** HOW POLICYMAKING ON ECONOMIC INEQUALITY IS SHAPED BY PATTERNS OF POLITICAL PARTICIPATION

The green bars in the graph below show that as family income rises, people are much more likely to think that the government should NOT reduce income differences. The red bars show that turnout in presidential elections also rises along with family income. Thus, policymakers are bound to pay more attention to the views of people who oppose taking government action to reduce income differences. This pattern is probably further reinforced by the fact that a disproportionate percentage of campaign contributions come from high-income Americans.



**SOURCES:** U.S. Census Bureau Data on voter turnout and author's analysis of the 2012 American National Election Study.

Left unmentioned in his speech on income inequality was that economic inequality is paralleled by inequality in political participation. As can be seen in Figure 1.5, high-income Americans take part in politics much more often than those with low incomes, and therefore have more clout at the ballot box.

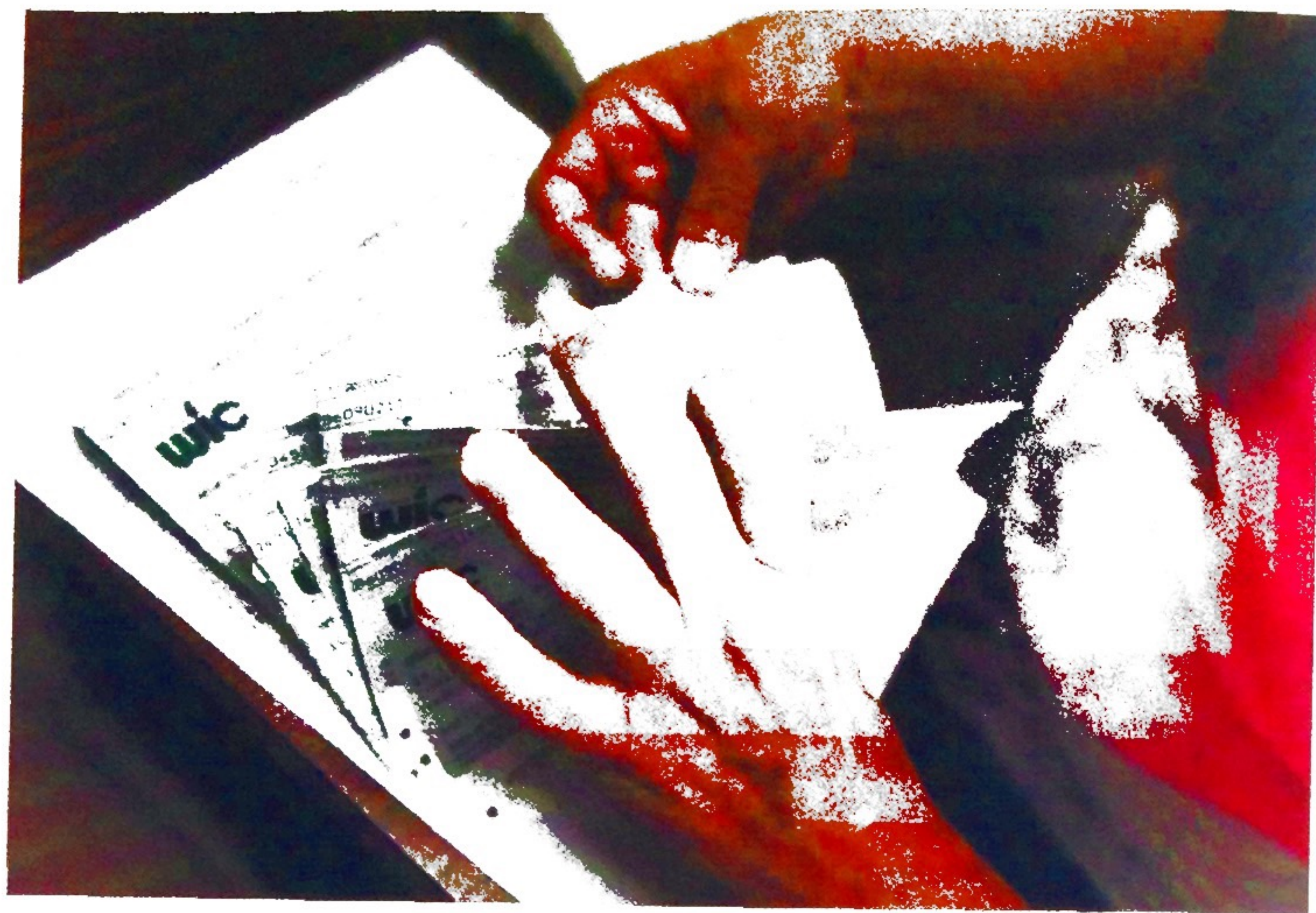
## THE SCOPE OF GOVERNMENT IN AMERICA

**1.5** Outline the central arguments of the debate in America over the proper scope of government.

In 2009, when he proposed a massive \$787 billion economic stimulus package to deal with the nation's economic woes, President Obama stated, "It is true that we cannot depend on government alone to create jobs or long-term growth, but at this particular moment, only government can provide the short-term boost necessary to lift us from a recession this deep and severe." In response, Republican House Leader John Boehner countered, "This bill makes clear that the era of Big Government is back, and the Democrats expect you to pay for it." He and other conservatives opposed the stimulus bill, arguing that such increases in the scope of the federal government would result in less freedom and prosperity. Had they been in the majority in 2009, they would have focused instead on tax cuts that would have had the effect of reducing the scope of government.

Those who are inclined to support an active role for government argue that its intervention is sometimes the only means of achieving important goals in American society. How else, they ask, can we ensure that people have enough to eat, clean air and water, and affordable health care? How else can we ensure that the disadvantaged are given opportunities for education and jobs and are not discriminated against?

The Women, Infants, and Children (WIC) program is just one of many federal programs that provides support for individuals with low income. Here, a worker in Los Angeles organizes WIC vouchers, which currently go to about 8 million women, infants, and children under the age of 5. Supporters of such programs argue that they provide a much-needed safety net, enabling people to get by during hard times. Critics see these programs as expanding the scope of government too much and as often encouraging a dependency that actually perpetuates poverty.



Opponents of widening the scope of government agree that these are worthwhile goals but challenge whether involving the federal government is an effective way to pursue them. Dick Armey, who was one of the key figures in the establishment of the conservative Tea Party movement, expressed this view well when he wrote, "There is more wisdom in millions of individuals making decisions in their own self-interest than there is in even the most enlightened bureaucrat (or congressman) making decisions on their behalf."<sup>28</sup> Or, as Ronald Reagan argued in his farewell presidential address, "As government expands, liberty contracts."

To understand the dimensions of this debate, it is important first to get some sense of the current scope of the federal government's activities.

### How Active Is American Government?

In terms of dollars spent, government in America is vast. Altogether, our governments—national, state, and local—spend about a third of our **gross domestic product (GDP)**, the total value of all goods and services produced annually by the United States. Government not only spends large sums of money but also employs large numbers of people. About 24 million Americans work for our government, mostly at the state and local level as teachers, police officers, university professors, and so on. Consider some facts about the size of our national government:

- It spends about \$3.8 trillion annually (printed as a number, that's \$3,800,000,000,000 a year).
- It employs about 2.7 million civilians, as well as 1.4 million in the military.
- It owns about one-third of the land in the United States.
- It occupies over 3.2 billion square feet of office space.

How does the American national government spend \$3.8 trillion a year? Social Security consumes more than one-fifth of the budget, slightly more than does national defense. Medicare is another big-ticket item, requiring over one-tenth of the budget. State and local governments also get important parts of the federal government's budget, totaling over \$600 billion in recent years. The federal government helps fund highway construction, police departments, school districts, and other state and local functions.

#### gross domestic product (GDP)

The sum total of the value of all the goods and services produced in a year in a nation.

When expenditures grow, tax revenues must grow to pay the additional costs. When taxes do not grow as fast as spending, a budget deficit results. The federal government ran a budget deficit every year from 1969 through 1997. The last few budgets submitted by Bill Clinton showed surpluses, but soon after George W. Bush took over, the government was running a deficit once again. The reason? The combination of reduced taxes and increased expenditures on national security, the latter a response to the events of September 11, 2001. The severe economic recession that took hold at the end of Bush's presidency led to his running up further red ink in 2008 to bail out the financial system. Obama did the same in 2009 with an economic stimulus package designed to combat unemployment. The net result of these budgetary decisions was that in each fiscal year from 2009 through 2012 the annual federal deficit exceeded one trillion dollars. Although the annual deficit has declined since 2012, all this deficit spending has left the country with a national debt of over \$19 trillion, which will pose a problem for policymakers for decades to come.

The sheer size of federal government expenditures should hardly be surprising in light of the many issues that Americans have come to expect their government to deal with. Whatever the national problem—unemployment, terrorism, illegal immigration, energy, education, lack of access to health care—many people expect Congress and the president to work to solve it through legislation. In short, the American government is vast on any measure—including dollars spent, persons employed, or laws and regulations enacted. Our concern, however, is not so much about the absolute size of government as about whether the level of government activity is what we want it to be.

## REVIEW THE CHAPTER

### GOVERNMENT

- 1.1** Identify the key functions of government and explain why they matter.

The functions that all governments perform include maintaining a national defense, providing public services, preserving order, socializing the young, and collecting taxes. By performing these functions, governments regularly shape the way in which we live.

### POLITICS

- 1.2** Define politics in the context of democratic government.

Politics determines what leaders we select and what policies they pursue. The *who* of politics is the voters, candidates, parties, and groups; the *what* is the benefits and burdens of government; the *how* is the various ways in which people participate in politics.

### THE POLICYMAKING SYSTEM

- 1.3** Assess how citizens can have an impact on public policy and how policies can impact people.

The policymaking system is in effect a cycle. Citizens' interests and concerns are transmitted through linkage institutions (parties and elections, interest groups, the media). These concerns shape the government's policy agenda, from which those in policymaking institutions (Congress, the presidency, the courts) choose issues to address. The policies that are made (laws, executive orders, regulations, and court judgments) then influence people's lives.

### DEMOCRACY IN AMERICA

- 1.4** Identify the key principles of democracy and outline theories regarding how it works in practice and the challenges democracy faces today.

According to traditional democratic theory, the ideal democracy is characterized by "one person, one vote," equal opportunities to participate, freedom of speech and the press, citizen control of the policy agenda, and inclusion. Pluralist theory holds that American democracy works well, as competition among many organized groups means that the public interest becomes public policy. This view is disputed by elitist theory, which claims that the powerful few dominate, and by hyperpluralist theory, which sees the excessive influence of many competing groups as leading to muddled policy or inaction. Contemporary challenges to American and other democracies include the complexity of issues today, citizens' limited participation, escalating campaign costs, and the policy gridlock resulting from diverse political interests.

### THE SCOPE OF GOVERNMENT IN AMERICA

- 1.5** Outline the central arguments of the debate in America over the proper scope of government.

One of the most important issues facing modern American democracy is the proper scope of government. Politicians constantly debate whether the scope of government responsibilities is too vast, just about right, or not comprehensive enough. This debate concerns whether the goals that are agreed to be important are best achieved through government action or rather through means other than government.

## LEARN THE TERMS

government, p. 7  
collective goods, p. 7  
politics, p. 8  
political participation, p. 8  
single-issue groups, p. 9  
policymaking system, p. 9  
linkage institutions, p. 10  
policy agenda, p. 10

political issue, p. 11  
policymaking institutions,  
p. 11  
public policy, p. 11  
policy impacts, p. 12  
democracy, p. 12  
majority rule, p. 13  
minority rights, p. 13

representation, p. 13  
pluralism, p. 13  
elitism, p. 14  
hyperpluralism, p. 14  
policy gridlock, p. 16  
political culture, p. 16  
gross domestic product,  
p. 20