Chapter 01 - The Democratic Republic

Politics, for many people, is the "great game" - better than soccer, better than chess. Scores may be tallied only every two years, at elections, but the play continues at all time. The game, furthermore, is played for high stakes. Politics can effect what you spend. It can determine what you can legally do in your spare time. In worst-case circumstances, politics can even threaten your life.

Few topics are so entertaining as politics - and so important. How did the great game turn out in the elections held on November 6, 2012?

In our democratic republic, citizens play an important role by voting. Although voting is extremely important, it is only one of the ways that citizens can exercise their political influence. Americans can also join a political organization or interest group, stage a protest, or donate funds to a political campaign or cause. There are countless ways to become involved. Informed participation begins with knowledge, however.

**POLITICS AND GOVERNMENT**

What is politics? **Politics** can be understood as the process of resolving conflicts and deciding, as political scientist Harold Lasswell put it in his classic definition, "who gets what, when, and how." More specifically, politics is the struggle over power or influence within organizations or informal groups that can grant benefits or privileges.

We can identify many such organizations and groups. In families, all members may meet to decide on values, priorities, and actions. In every community that makes decisions through formal or informal rules, politics exists. For example, when a church group decides to construct a new building or hire a new minister, the decision is made politically. Politics can be found in schools, social groups, and any other organized collection of individuals. Of all the organizations that are controlled by political activity, however, the most important is government.

What is the government? Certainly, it is an **institution** - that is, an ongoing organization that performs certain functions for society and that has a life separate from the lives of individuals who are part of it at any given moment in time. The **government** can be defined as an institution within which decisions are made that resolve conflicts and allocate benefits and privileges. The government is also the preeminent institution within society because it has the ultimate authority for making these decisions.

**GOVERNMENT IS EVERYWHERE**

The government is even more important that politics. Many people largely ignore politics, but it is impossible to ignore government. It is everywhere, like the water you drink and the air you breathe. Both air and water, by the way, are subject to government pollution standards. The food you eat comes from an agricultural industry that is heavily regulated and subsidized by the government.
Step outside your residence, and almost immediately you will walk down a government-owned street or drive on a government-owned highway.

**From Your Birth**

The county government records your birth. Your toys, crib, and baby food must meet government safety standards. After a few years, you'll start school, and 86 percent of all children attend public - which is to say, government - schools. Some children attend private schools or are home schooled, but their education must also meet government standards. Public school students spend many hours in an environment designed and managed by teachers and other government employees. If you get into trouble, you'll meet government employees you'd rather not see: the police, court employees, or even jail staff.

**Throughout Your Life**

Most young people look forward eagerly to receiving their government-issued driver's license. Many join the military on graduating from high school, and for those who do, every minute of the next several years will be 100 percent government issue. (That's why we call soldiers "Gls." ) A majority of young adults attend college at some point. Many private colleges and universities exist, but 73 percent of all college students attend public institutions. Even most private universities are heavily dependent on government support.

In nearly all states, you began paying sales tax from the moment you had your own funds to spend. Some of those funds are made up of currency issued by the government. When you enter the workforce, you'll begin paying payroll and income taxes to the government. If, like most people, you are an employee, government regulations will set many of your working conditions. You might even work for the government itself - 17 percent of employees do. If you are unfortunate enough to lose a job or fall into poverty, government programs will lend you a hand.

**To Your Death**

Later in life, you may have health problems. One way or another, the government provides 50 percent of all health-care spending, and that is without President Barack Obama's health-care plan, which was approved in 2010. Much of that spending comes from the federal Medicare program, which funds health care for almost everyone over the age of sixty-five. At that point in your life, you'll probably receive Social Security, the national government's pension plan that covers most employees. Eventually, the county government will record your death, and a government judge will oversee the distribution of your assets to your heirs.

**WHY IS GOVERNMENT NECESSARY?**

Perhaps the best way to assess the need for government is to examine circumstances in which government, as we normally understand it, does not exist. What happens when multiple groups compete with one another for power within a society? There are places around the world where
such circumstances exist. A current example is the African nation of Somalia. Since 1991, Somalia has not had a central government capable of controlling the country. The regions of the country are divided among various warlords and factions, each controlling a block of territory. When Somali warlords compete for control of a particular locality, the result is war, generalized devastation, and famine. Normally, multiple armed forces compete by fighting, and the absence of a unified government is equivalent to ongoing civil war.

**The Need For Security**

As the example of Somalia shows, one of the original purposes of government is the maintenance of security, or order. By keeping the peace, a government dispenses justice and protects its people from violence at the hands of private or foreign armies and criminals. If order is not present, it is not possible for the government to provide any of the other benefits that people expect from it.

The Example of Afghanistan. Consider the situation in Afghanistan. The former rulers of that country, the Taliban were allied with the al Qaeda network, which organized the terrorist attacks of September 11, 2001, from bases in Afghanistan. Soon after the attacks, the United States, Britain, and other nations intervened to overthrow the Taliban regime by providing air support and special operations assistance to the Northern Alliance, an Afghan faction at war with the Taliban. The Northern Alliance soon occupied Kabul, the capital of the nation.

The Loss of Security in Afghanistan. Unfortunately, the new Afghan government never gained full control of its territory. The Taliban regrouped, and its units killed humanitarian workers, blew up newly constructed wells, and burned schools. The government, afflicted by massive corruption, survived only because the United States and its allies moved substantial ground forces into the country.

Today, millions of Afghans do not enjoy the benefits of personal security, pinned as they are between the Taliban and the government's international allies. Afghanistan has the highest infant mortality rate in the world. It has been rated as having the world's second most serious corruption problem (after Somalia). A third of the economy is based on the production of illegal drugs. Clearly, Afghanistan has a considerable distance to go before order is restored. Order is a political value which will be examined later.

**Limiting Government Power**

A complete collapse of order and security, as seen in Somalia and parts of Afghanistan, is actually an uncommon event. Much more common is the reverse - too much government control. In 2012, the human rights organization Freedom House judged that 48 of the world's countries were "not free." These nations contain 35 percent of the world's population. Such countries may be controlled by individual dictators. Libya's Muammar Qaddafi and Hosni Mubarak of Egypt were obvious examples. Alternatively, a political party, such as the Communist Party of China, may monopolize all the levels of power. The military may rule, as in Myanmar (also called Burma).
In all of these examples, the individual or group running the country cannot be removed by legal means. Freedom of speech and the right to a fair trial are typically absent. Dictatorial governments often torture or execute their opponents. Such regimes may also suppress freedom of religion. Revolution, whether violent or nonviolent, is often the only way to change the government.

In short, protection from the violence of domestic criminals or foreign armies is not enough. Citizens also need protection from abuses of power by their own government. To protect the liberties of the people, it is necessary to limit the powers of the government.

**Liberty** - the greatest freedom of the individual consistent with the freedom of other individuals - is a second major political value, along with order.

**Authority and Legitimacy**

Every government must have **authority** - that is, the right and power to enforce its decisions. Ultimately, the government's authority rests on its control of the armed forces and the police. Few people in the United States, however, base their day-to-day activities on fear of the government's enforcement powers. Most people, most of the time, obey the law because this is what they have always done. Also, if they did not obey the law, they would face the disapproval of friends and family. Consider an example: Do you avoid injuring your friends or stealing their possessions because you are afraid of the police - or because if you undertook these actions, you no longer would have friends?

Under normal circumstances, the government's authority has broad popular support. People accept the government's right to establish rules and laws. When authority is broadly accepted, we say that it has **legitimacy**. Authority without legitimacy is a recipe for trouble.

Events in several Arab nations in 2011 serve as an example. The dictators who ruled Egypt, Libya, and Tunisia had been in power for decades. All three dictators had some popular support when they first gained power. None of these nations had a tradition of democracy, and so it was possible for dictatorial rulers to enjoy a degree of legitimacy. After years of oppressive behavior, however, these regimes slowly lost that legitimacy. The rulers survived only because they were willing to employ violence against any opposition. In Egypt and Tunisia, the end came when soldiers refused to use force against large numbers of demonstrators. Having lost all legitimacy, the rulers of these two countries now lost their authority as well. Unfortunately, the downfall and death of Qaddafi in Libya came only after a seven-month civil war.

**DEMOCRACY AND OTHER FORMS OF GOVERNMENT**

The different types of government can be classified according to which person or group of people controls society through the government.

**Types of Government**
At one extreme is a society governed by a **totalitarian regime**. In such a political system, a small group of leaders or a single individual - a dictator - makes all decisions for the society. Every aspect of political, social, and economic life is controlled by the government. The power of the ruler is total (thus, the term *totalitarianism*).

A second type of system is authoritarian government. **Authoritarianism** differs from totalitarianism in that only the government itself is fully controlled by the ruler. Social and economic institutions, such as churches, businesses, and labor unions, exist that are not under the government's control.

Many of our terms for describing the distribution of political power are derived from the ancient Greeks, who were the first Western people to study politics systematically. One form of rule was known as **aristocracy**, literally meaning "rule by the best." In practice, this meant rule by wealthy members of ancient families. Another term from the Greeks is **theocracy**, which literally means "rule by God" (or the gods). In practice, theocracy means rule by religious leaders, who are typically self-appointed. Iran is a rare example of a country in which supreme power is in the hands of a religious leader, the grand ayatollah Ali Khamenei. One of the most straightforward Greek terms is **oligarchy**, which simply means "rule by a few."

**Anarchy** is a term derived from a Greek word meaning the absence of government. Advocates of anarchy envision a world in which each individual makes his or her own rules for behavior. In reality, the absence of government typically results in rule by competing armed factions, many of which are indistinguishable from gangsters. This is the state of affairs in Somalia, which was described earlier.

Finally, the Greek term for rule by the people was **democracy**. Within the limits of their culture, some of the Greek city-states operated as democracies. Today, in much of the world, the people will not grant legitimacy to a government unless it is based on democracy.

**Direct Democracy as a Model**

The Athenian system of government in ancient Greece is usually considered the purest model for direct democracy because the citizens of that community debated and voted directly on all laws, even those put forward by the ruling council of the city. The most important feature of Athenian democracy was that the **legislature** was composed of all of the citizens. (Women, resident foreigners, and slaves, however, were excluded because they were not citizens.) This form of government required a high level of participation from every citizen. That participation was seen as benefiting the individual and the city-state. The Athenians believed that although a high level of participation might lead to instability in government, citizens, if informed about the issues, could be trusted to make wise decisions.

Direct democracy also has been practiced at the local level in Switzerland and, in the United States, in New England town meetings. In these town meetings, which may include all of the voters
who live in the town, important decisions - such as levying taxes, hiring city officials, and deciding local ordinances - are made by majority vote. Some states provide a modern adaptation of direct democracy for their citizens. In these states, representative democracy is supplemented by the initiative or the referendum. Both processes enable the people to vote directly on laws or constitutional amendments. The recall process, which is available in many states, allows the people to vote to remove an official from state office.

The Dangers of Direct Democracy

Although they were aware of the Athenian model, the framers of the U.S. Constitution were opposed to such a system. Democracy was considered to be dangerous and a source of instability. But in the 1700s and 1800s, the idea of government based on the consent of the people gained increasing popularity. Such a government was the main aspiration of the American Revolution in 1775, the French Revolution in 1789, and many subsequent revolutions. At the time of the American Revolution, however, the masses were still considered to be too uneducated to govern themselves, too prone to the influence of demagogues (political leaders who manipulate popular prejudices), and too likely to subordinate minority rights to the tyranny of the majority.

James Madison, while defending the new scheme of government set forth in the U.S. Constitution, warned of the problems inherent in a "pure democracy":

"A common passion or interest will, in almost every case, be felt by a majority of the whole... and there is nothing to check the inducements to sacrifice the weaker party or an obnoxious individual. Hence it is that such democracies have ever been spectacles of turbulence and contention, and have ever been found incompatible with personal security or the rights of property; and have in general been as short in their lives as they have been violent in their deaths."

Like other politicians of his time, Madison feared that pure, or direct, democracy would deteriorate into mob rule. What would keep the majority of the people, if given direct decision-making power, from abusing the rights of those in the minority?

A Democratic Republic

The framers of the U.S. Constitution chose to craft a republic, meaning a government in which sovereign power rests with the people, rather than with a king or a monarch. A republic is based on popular sovereignty. To Americans of the 1700s, the idea of a republic also meant a government based on common beliefs and virtues that would be fostered within small communities. The rulers were to be amateurs - good citizens who would take turns representing their fellow citizens.

The U.S. Constitution created a form of republican government that we now call a democratic republic. The people hold the ultimate power over the government through the election process, but all national policy decisions are made by elected officials. For the founders, even this distance between the people and the government was not sufficient. The Constitution made sure that the
Senate and the president would not be elected by a direct vote of the people, although later changes to the Constitution allowed the voters to elect members of the Senate directly.

Despite these limits, the new American system was unique in the amount of power it granted to the ordinary citizen. Over the course of the following two centuries, democratic values became more and more popular, at first in Western nations and then throughout the rest of the world. The spread of democratic principles gave rise to another name for our system of government - representative democracy. The term representative democracy has almost the same meaning as democratic republic, with one exception. Recall that in a republic, not only are the people sovereign, but there is no king. What if a nation develops into a democracy but preserves the monarchy as a largely ceremonial institution? That is exactly what happened in Britain. Not surprisingly, the British found the term democratic republic to be unacceptable, and they described their system as a representative democracy instead.

Principles of Democratic Government. All representative democracies rest on the rule of the people as expressed through the election of government officials. In the 1790s in the United States, only free white males were able to vote, and in some states they had to be property owners as well. Women in many states did not receive the right to vote in national elections until 1920, and the right to vote was not secured in all states by African Americans until the 1960s. Today, universal suffrage is the rule.

Because everyone's vote counts equally, the only way to make fair decisions is by some form of majority will. But to ensure that majority rule does not become oppressive, modern democracies also provide guarantees of minority rights. If political minorities were not protected, the majority might violate the fundamental rights of members of certain people - especially groups that are unpopular or dissimilar to the majority population, such as racial minorities.

To guarantee the continued existence of a representative democracy, there must be free, competitive elections. Thus, the opposition always has the opportunity to win elective office. For such elections to be totally open, freedom of the press and speech must be preserved so that opposition candidates can present their criticisms of the government to the people.

Constitutional Democracy. Another key feature of Western representative democracy is that it is based on the principle of limited government. Not only is the government dependent on popular sovereignty, but the powers of the government are also clearly limited, either through a written document or through widely shared beliefs. The U.S. Constitution sets down the fundamental structure of the government and the limits to its activities. Such limits are intended to prevent political decisions based on the whims or ambitions of individuals in government rather than on constitutional principles.

**WHAT KIND OF DEMOCRACY DO WE HAVE?**
Political scientists have developed a number of theories about American democracy, including majoritarianism, elite theory, and pluralism. Advocates of these theories use them to describe American democracy either as it actually is or as they believe it should be.

Some scholars argue that none of these three theories fully describes the workings of American democracy. These experts say that each theory captures a part of the true reality but that we need all three theories to gain a full understanding of American politics.

**Democracy For Everyone**

Many people believe that, in a democracy, the government ought to do what the majority of the people want. This simple proposition is the heart of majoritarian theory. As a theory of what democracy should be like, majoritarianism is popular among both political scientists and ordinary citizens. Many scholars, however, consider majoritarianism to provide a surprisingly poor description of how U.S. democracy actually works. They point to the low level of turnout for elections. Polling data have shown that many Americans are neither particularly interested in politics nor well informed. Few are able to name the persons running for Congress in their districts, and even fewer can discuss the candidates’ positions.

**Democracy For the Few**

If ordinary citizens are not really making policy decisions with their votes, who is? One theory suggests that elites really govern the United States. Elite theory holds that society is ruled by a small number of people who exercise power to further their self-interests. American democracy, in other words, is a sham democracy. Few people today believe it is a good idea for the country to be run by a privileged minority. In the past, however, many people believed that it was appropriate for the country to be governed by an elite group. Consider the words of Alexander Hamilton, one of the framers of the Constitution:

"All communities divide themselves into the few and the many. The first are the rich and the wellborn, the other the mass of people... The people are turbulent and changing; they seldom judge or determine right. Give therefore to the first class a distinct, permanent share in the government. They will check the unsteadiness of the second, and as they cannot receive any advantage by a change, they therefore will ever maintain good government."

Some versions of elite theory posit a small, cohesive elite class that makes almost all the important decisions for the nation, whereas others suggest that voters choose among competing elites. Popular movements, such as the Tea Party movement and Occupy Wall Street, often advocate simple versions of elite theory. Members of the Occupy movement believe that the top 1 percent of income earners - especially those who work in the finance industry - have too much power. For Tea Party supporters, the elite is the federal government itself.

**Democracy For Groups**
A different school of thought holds that our form of democracy is based on group interests. Even if the average citizen cannot keep up with political issues or cast a deciding vote in any election, the individual's interests will be protected by groups that represent her or him.

Theorists who subscribe to pluralism see politics as a struggle among groups to gain benefits for their members. Given the structure of the American political system, group conflicts tend to be settled by compromise and accommodation. Because there are a multitude of interests, no one group can dominate the political process. Furthermore, because most individuals have more than one interest, conflict among groups need not divide the nation into hostile camps.

Many political scientists believe that pluralism works very well as a descriptive theory. As a theory of how democracy should function, however, pluralism has problems. Poor citizens are rarely represented by interest groups. At the same time, rich citizens are often overrepresented. As political scientist E. E. Schattschneider once observed, "The flaw in the pluralist heaven is that the heavenly chorus sings with a strong upper-class accent." There are also serious doubts as to whether group decision making always reflects the best interests of the nation.

Indeed, critics see a danger that groups may grow so powerful that all policies become compromises crafted to satisfy the interests of the largest groups. The interests of the public as a whole, then, are not considered. Critics of pluralism have suggested that a democratic system can be almost paralyzed by the struggle among interest groups.

**FUNDAMENTAL VALUES**

The writers of the U.S. Constitution believed that the structures they had created would provide for both popular sovereignty and a stable political system. They also believed that the nation would be sustained by its political culture - the patterned set of ideas, values, and ways of thinking about government and politics that characterized its people.

Even today, there is considerable consensus among American citizens about certain concepts - including the rights to liberty, equality, and property - that are deemed to be basic to the U.S. political system. Given that the vast majority of Americans are descendant of immigrants having diverse cultural and political backgrounds, how can we account for this consensus? Primarily, it is the result of political socialization - the process by which political beliefs and values are transmitted to new immigrants and to our children. The two most important sources of political socialization are the family and the educational system.

The most fundamental concepts of the American political culture are those of the dominant culture. The term dominant culture refers to the values, customs, and language established by the groups that traditionally have controlled politics and government in a society. The dominant culture in the United States has its roots in Western European civilization. From that civilization, American politics inherited a bias toward individualism, private property, and Judeo-Christian ethics.

**Liberty versus Order**
In the United States, our civil liberties include religious freedom - both the right to practice whatever religion we choose and the right to be free from any state-imposed religion. Our civil liberties also include freedom of speech - the right to express our opinions freely on all matters, including government actions. Freedom of speech is perhaps one of our most prized liberties, because a democracy could not endure without it. These and many other basic guarantees of liberty are found in the Bill of Rights, the first ten amendments to the Constitution. Americans are often more protective of their civil liberties than are citizens of other democratic countries.

Liberty, however, is not the only value widely held by Americans. A substantial portion of the American electorate believes that certain kinds of liberty threaten the traditional social order. The right to privacy is a particularly controversial liberty. The United States Supreme Court has held that the right to privacy can be derived from other rights that are explicitly stated in the Bill of Rights. The Supreme Court has also held that under the right to privacy, the government cannot ban either abortion or private homosexual behavior by consenting adults. Some Americans believe that such rights threaten the sanctity of the family and the general cultural commitment to moral behavior. Of course, others disagree with this point of view.

Security is another issue that follows from the principle of order. When Americans have felt particularly fearful or vulnerable, the government has emphasized national security over civil liberties. Such was the case after the Japanese attack on Pearl Harbor in 1941, which plunged the United States into World War II. Thousands of Japanese Americans were arrested and held in internment camps, based on the assumption that their loyalty to this country was in question. More recently, the terrorist attacks on the World Trade Center and the Pentagon on September 11, 2001, renewed calls for greater security at the expense of some civil liberties.

Equality versus Liberty

The Declaration of Independence states, "All men are created equal." The proper meaning of equality, however, has been disputed by Americans since the Revolution. Much of American history - and, indeed, world history - is the story of how the value of equality - the idea that all people are of equal worth - has been extended and elaborated.

First, the right to vote was granted to all adult white males, regardless of whether they owned property. The Civil War (1861-1865) resulted in the end of slavery and established that, in principle at least, all citizens were equal before the law. The civil rights movement of the 1950s and 1960s sought to make that promise of equality a reality for African Americans. Other movements have sought equality for additional racial and ethnic groups, for women, for persons with disabilities, and for gay men and lesbians.

Although many people believe that we have a way yet to go in obtaining full equality for all of these groups, we clearly have come a long way already. No American in the nineteenth century could have imagined that the 2008 Democratic presidential primary elections would be closely fought contests between an African American man (Illinois senator Barack Obama) and a white woman.
(New York senator Hillary Rodham Clinton). The idea that same-sex marriage could even be open to debate would have been mind-boggling as well.

Promoting equality often requires placing limits on the right to treat people unequally. In this sense, equality and liberty are conflicting values. Today, the right to deny equal treatment to members of a particular race has very few defenders. Yet as recently as fifty years ago, this right was a cultural norm.

Economic Equality. Equal treatment regardless of race, religion, gender, or other characteristics is a popular value today. Equal opportunity for individuals to develop their talents and skills is also a value with substantial support. Equality of economic status, however, is a controversial value.

For much of history, the idea that government could do anything about the division of society between rich and poor was not something about which people even thought. Most people assumed that such an effort was either impossible or undesirable. This assumption began to lose its force in the 1800s. As a result of the growing wealth of the Western world and the visible increase in the ability of government to take on large projects, some people began to advocate the value of universal equality, or egalitarianism. Some radicals dreamed of a revolutionary transformation of society that would establish an egalitarian system - that is, a system in which wealth and power were redistributed more equally.

Many others rejected this vision but still came to endorse the values of eliminating poverty and at least reducing the degree of economic inequality in society. Antipoverty advocates believed then and believe now that such a program could prevent much suffering. In addition, they believed that reducing economic inequality would promote fairness and enhance the moral tone of society generally.

Property Rights and Capitalism. The value of reducing economic inequality is in conflict with the right to property. This is because reducing economic equality typically involves the transfer of property (usually in the form of tax dollars) from some people to others. For many people, liberty and property are closely entwined. Our capitalist system is based on private property rights. Under capitalism, property consists not only of personal possessions but also of wealth-creating assets such as farms and factories. The investor-owned corporation is in many ways the preeminent capitalist institution. The funds invested by the owners of a corporation are known as capital - hence, the very name of the system. Capitalism is also typically characterized by considerable freedom to make bidding contracts and by relatively unconstrained markets for goods, services, and investments.

Property - especially wealth-creating property - can be seen as giving its owner political power and the liberty to do whatever he or she wants. At the same time, the ownership of property immediately creates inequality in society. The desire to own property, however, is so widespread among all classes of Americans that radical egalitarian movements have had a difficult time securing a wide following in this country.
The Proper Size of Government

Opposition to "big government" has been a constant theme in American politics. Indeed, the belief that government is overreaching dates back to the years before the American Revolution. Tensions over the size and scope of government have plagued Americans ever since. Citizens often express contradictory opinions on the size of government and the role that it should play in their lives. Those who complain about the amount of taxes that they pay each year may also worry about the lack of funds for teachers in the local schools. Individuals who believe that the government must act to create jobs may rebel against government spending programs that are intended to do exactly that. In general, Americans are most likely to call for the benefits of big government when they are reacting to a crisis.

Big Government: The Response to Terrorism. American politics in the twenty-first century can be described largely in terms of ambivalence about big government. In two subsequent administrations, apparent overreach by the national government provoked a popular reaction. In 2000, the Republican and Democratic parties were almost tied in terms of support. The Republicans won the presidency and control of both chambers of Congress in the 2000 elections, but they did so with some of the narrowest victory margins in history.

The terrorist attacks of September 11, 2001, popularly known as 9/11, appeared to require a major response. Many of the subsequent actions taken by President George W. Bush were popular. Others were not. In March 2003, U.S. forces occupied Iraq and overthrew Saddam Hussein, that nation's dictator. Grounds for the attack included the beliefs, later proved incorrect, that Hussein was associated with the 9/11 terrorists and was attempting to develop nuclear weapons. Members of the administration also believed that a democratic Iraq would have a strong positive influence on the entire Middle East. Instead of a quick victory and an early withdrawal, however, U.S. forces in Iraq faced an apparently endless insurrection. The war became a symbol of an over-ambitious government gone astray, and in 2006 the Republicans lost control of the U.S. House and Senate to the Democrats.

Big Government: The Great Recession. The recession that began in December 2007 proved to be a much more severe crisis than the war in Iraq. In September 2008, a financial meltdown threatened the entire world economy with collapse. Americans demanded government action to save the economy, yet almost every program aimed at accomplishing that goal turned out to be unpopular. The first of these, undertaken in the last days of the Bush administration, was a $700 billion bipartisan bailout of banks and other financial institutions. Even though most of these funds were eventually repaid, the bailout angered Republicans and Democrats alike.

As they usually do, a majority of Americans held the incumbent president responsible for the state of the economy. The retiring incumbent was President Bush, a Republican, and in November 2008, the voters handed Democrat Barack Obama a solid victory in the presidential elections. Democrats increased their margins in the House and Senate. The new administration took major actions in an
attempt to combat the recession, including an $800 billion stimulus package in February 2009, the rescue of the automobile companies General Motors and Chrysler, and large increases to the federal budget. Each of these steps proved to be unpopular in the end.

In March 2010, Congress and President Obama approved a major health-care initiative that included the Patient Protection and Affordable Care Act. Also known as Obamacare, the health-care package had no direct connection to fighting the recession, and it completed the picture of big government out of control. In November 2010, voters swung heavily to the Republicans, granting them control of the House. Political scientists had expected voters to turn to the Republicans, given the continued poor state of the economy, but the 2010 swing was substantially greater than what was predictable based on the economy alone.

**POLITICAL IDEOLOGIES**

A political ideology is a closely linked set of beliefs about politics. The concept of ideology is often misunderstood. Many people think that only individuals whose beliefs lie well out on one or the other end of the political spectrum have an ideology - in other words, people with moderate positions are not ideological. Actually, almost everyone who has political opinions can be said to have an ideology. Some people may have difficulty in explaining the principles that underlie their opinions, but the principles are there nonetheless. To give one example: a belief in moderation is itself an ideological principle.

Political ideologies offer people well-organized theories that propose goals for society and the means by which those goals can be achieved. At the core of every political ideology is a set of guiding values. The two ideologies most commonly referred to in discussions of American politics are conservatism and liberalism. In addition to their importance for electoral politics, ideologies such as liberalism and conservatism have helped inspire popular movements.

**Conservatism**

Traditionally, those who favored the ideology of conservatism sought to conserve traditional practices and institutions. In that sense, conservatism is as old as politics itself. In America, limited government is a key tradition. For much of our history, limited government included major restrictions on government's ability to interfere with business. In the past, enterprises were largely free to act as they pleased in the marketplace and in managing their employees. Government regulation of business increased greatly in the 1930s, as Democratic president Franklin D. Roosevelt (1933-1945) initiated a series of massive interventions in the economy in an attempt to counter the effects of the Great Depression. Many conservatives look back at the Roosevelt administration as a time when America took a wrong turn.

Modern Conservatism. It was in the 1950s, however, that American conservatism took its modern shape. The conservative movement that arose in that decade provided the age-old conservative impulse with a comprehensive ideological framework. The new movement first demonstrated its
strength in 1964, when Senator Barry Goldwater of Arizona was nominated as the Republican presidential candidate. Goldwater lost badly to Democrat Lyndon Johnson, but from that time forward movement conservatives occupied a crucial position in the Republican Party.

Conservative Values. American conservatives generally place a high value on the principle of order. This includes support for patriotism and traditional ideals. As a result, conservatives typically oppose such social innovations as same-sex marriage. Conservatives strongly endorse liberty, but they generally define it as freedom from government support of nontraditional ideals or as freedom from government interference in business. Conservatives believe that the private sector probably can outperform the government in almost any activity. Therefore, they usually oppose initiatives that would increase the role of the government in the economy, such as Obama's health-care reform. Conservatives place a relatively low value on equality. Believing that individuals and families are primarily responsible for their own well-being, conservatives typically oppose high levels of antipoverty spending and government expenditures to stimulate the economy. They usually favor tax-rate cuts instead.

Liberalism

The term liberalism stems from the word liberty and originally meant "free from prejudice in favor of traditional opinions and established institutions." Liberals have always been skeptical of the influence of religion in politics, but in the nineteenth century they were skeptical of government as well. From the time of Democratic presidents Woodrow Wilson (1913-1921) and Franklin D. Roosevelt, however, American liberals increasingly sought to use the power of government for nontraditional ends. These goals included support for organized labor and for the poor. New programs instituted by the Roosevelt administration included Social Security and unemployment insurance.

Modern Liberalism. American liberalism took its modern form in the 1960s. Liberals rallied to the Civil Rights movement, which sought to obtain equal rights for African Americans. As the feminist movement grew in importance, liberals supported it as well. Liberals won new federal health-care programs such as Medicare and Medicaid, and the promotion of such programs became a key component of liberal politics. Finally, liberals reacted more negatively to U.S. participation in the Vietnam War (1965-1975) than did other Americans, and for years thereafter liberalism was associated with skepticism about the use of U.S. military forces abroad.

Liberal Values. Those who favor liberalism place a high value on social and economic equality. As we have seen, liberals champion the rights of minority group members and favor substantial antipoverty spending. In the recent health-care policy debates, liberals strongly endorsed the principle that all citizens should have access to affordable insurance. In contrast to conservatives, liberals often support government intervention in the economy. They believe that capitalism works best when the government curbs its excesses through regulation. Like conservatives, liberals place a high value on liberty, but they tend to view it as the freedom to live one's life according to one's
own values. Liberals, therefore, usually support gay rights, often including the right to marry. Liberals are an influential force within the Democratic Party.

The Traditional Political Spectrum

A traditional method of comparing political ideologies is to arrange them on a continuum from left to right, based primarily on how much power the government should exercise to promote economic equality. The four realms include conservatism, liberalism, socialism, and libertarianism.

Socialism falls on the left side of the spectrum. Socialists play a minor role in the American political arena, although socialist parties and movements have been important in other countries around the world. In the past, socialists typically advocated replacing investor ownership of major businesses with either government ownership or ownership by employee cooperatives. Socialists believed that such steps would break the power of the very rich and lead to an egalitarian society. In more recent times, socialists in Western Europe have advocated more limited programs that redistribute income.

On the right side of the spectrum is libertarianism, a philosophy of skepticism toward most government activities. Libertarians strongly support property rights and typically oppose regulation of the economy and redistribution of income. Libertarians support laissez-faire capitalism. (Laissez-faire is French for "let it be"). Libertarians also tend to oppose government attempts to regulate personal behavior and promote moral values.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>How much power should the government have over the economy?</th>
<th>Socialism</th>
<th>Liberalism</th>
<th>Conservatism</th>
<th>Libertarianism</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Active government control over major economic sectors.</td>
<td>Positive government action in the economy.</td>
<td>Positive government action to support capitalism.</td>
<td>Almost no regulation over the economy.</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Economic equality, community.</td>
<td>Economic security, equal opportunity, social liberty.</td>
<td>Economic liberty, morality, social order.</td>
<td>Total economic and social liberty.</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Problems with the Traditional Political Spectrum

Many political scientists believe that the traditional left-to-right spectrum is not sufficiently complete. Take the example of libertarians, who are typically placed to the right of conservatives. If the only question is how much power should the government have over the economy, this is where they belong. Libertarians, however, advocate the most complete freedom possible in social matters. They oppose government action to promote traditional moral values, although such action is often favored by other groups on the political right. Their strong support for cultural freedoms seems to align them more closely with modern liberals than with conservatives.

Liberalism is often described as an ideology that supports "big government." If the objective is to promote equality, the description has some validity. In the moral sphere, however, conservatives tend to support more government regulation of social values and moral decisions than do liberals.
Thus, conservatives tend to oppose gay rights legislation and propose stronger curbs on pornography. Liberals usually show greater tolerance for alternative life choices and oppose government attempts to regulate personal behavior and morals.

**A Four-Cornered Ideological Grid**

For a more sophisticated breakdown of recent American popular ideologies, many scholars use a four-cornered grid. The grid includes four possible ideologies. Each quadrant contains a substantial portion of the American electorate. Individual voters may fall anywhere on the grid, depending on the strength of their beliefs about economic and cultural issues.

Economic Liberals, Cultural Conservatives. Note that there is no generally accepted term for persons in the lower-left position. Some scholars have used terms such as populist to describe this point of view, but these terms can be misleading. Populism more accurately refers to a hostility toward political, economic, or cultural elites, and it can be combined with a variety of political positions.

Individuals who are economic liberals and cultural conservatives tend to support government action both to promote the values of economic equality and fairness and to defend traditional values, such as the family and marriage. These individuals may describe themselves as conservative or moderate. They may vote for a Republican candidate, based on their conservative values. Alternatively, they may be Democrats based on their support for economic liberalism. Many of these Democrats are African Americans or members of other minority groups.

Libertarians. On the four-way grid, the term libertarians does not represent the small Libertarian Party, which has only a minor role in the American political arena. Rather, libertarians more typically support the Republican Party. Economically successful individuals are more likely than members of other groups to hold libertarian opinions.

Conservatives and Progressives. Even though all four ideologies are popular, the various labels we have used in the four-cornered grid are not equally favored. Voters are much more likely to describe themselves as conservative than as liberal. There are a variety of reasons for this, but one is that liberal has come to imply "radical" to many people, whereas conservative often implies "moderate." Because most Americans value moderation, the conservative label has an advantage. One consequence of the unpopularity of the word liberal is that few politicians are willing to accept it, even when they clearly support liberal policies. Instead, left-of-center Democrats typically say that they are progressives. This term dates back to the years before World War I (1914-1918), when it referred to advocates of reform in both of the major political parties. Public opinion polls reveal that the label progressive is relatively popular.

**ONE NATION, DIVIDED**

In the past, the ideology of conservatism did not dominate the Republican Party in the way that it does today. Likewise, liberalism was much less tightly linked to the Democrats. Forty years ago,
the Republican Party contained a liberal faction that was especially numerous in the northeastern states. Thirty years ago, some of the most ardent conservatives in Congress were Democrats, many of them from the South. Much history lay between these factions - they represented allegiances dating back to the U.S. Civil War.

In recent decades, however, liberal Republicans have all but vanished. A number of Americans continue to describe themselves as conservative Democrats, but almost none of them serve in Washington, D.C. By 2008, the most conservative Democrats in Congress had voting records that were more liberal than the records of the most moderate Republicans. The major parties no longer exhibited any ideological overlap - progressives and conservatives had sorted themselves completely into opposing political parties.

The result has been political polarization. In Congress, the two major political parties have never been more disciplined. Republicans, and to a lesser extent Democrats, have become used to voting as a monolithic block. Neither progressives nor conservatives trust the intentions of the other camp. In bookstores, among political bloggers on the Web, and on radio and television, political rhetoric is more intense and furious than it has been in a long time. The other side is not just wrong. It is evil.

Political Gridlock

One consequence of political polarization is that most of the major Democratic initiatives in 2009 and 2010 passed with no Republican votes whatsoever. These strict party-line votes were a relatively new development in American politics.

A second consequence followed from the Republican takeover of the U.S. House after the 2010 elections. In 2010, the Democrats enjoyed a 255 to 180 majority in the House. After the elections, the Republican majority was 243 to 192. Many of the new Republican members identified with the Tea Party movement, and these legislators were sworn to reject any compromise with the Democrats. Yet the Democrats still controlled the presidency and the U.S. Senate. Observers questioned whether Congress would be able to accomplish anything at all.

In fact, the 112th Congress passed less legislation than any congress in the sixty-five years since such records were first kept. In two years, Congress did not pass a single budget resolution. To the disgust of farmers, it failed to adopt even a temporary new farm bill. The low point came in the summer of 2011. House Republicans decided to use a periodically scheduled vote to raise the federal government's debt ceiling as a lever to force the administration to cut spending.

A compromise was reached at the last minute, and the federal government was able to meet all of its obligations. The crisis damaged public confidence in the economy, however, and led one credit rating company to strip the federal government of its AAA rating for the first time in history. A team of political scientists has calculated that the 112th Congress was more polarized politically than any congress since the Reconstruction Era that followed the American Civil War.

The Republicans Lose Their Advantage
House Republicans nailed their colors to the mast in 2011 and 2012 by adopting budget proposals in almost complete party-line votes. The plans were authorized by Paul Ryan, chair of the House Budget Committee and later the Republican candidate for vice president. In addition to major tax rate cuts, the proposed budgets would greatly restrict future funding for Medicaid and would privatize Medicare for anyone currently under the age of fifty-five.

As we noted earlier, Americans tend to oppose "big government" in principle even as they endorse its benefits. By 2012, for many independents, concern over Democratic affection for the government was counterbalanced by fears that the Republicans might cut valued social programs. These concerns were enough to cost the Republicans their 2010 edge.

These concerns were not strong enough, however, to give the Democrats an advantage. The result in the 2012 elections was a closely - even bitterly - divided electorate. The outcome was also a function of underlying economic conditions, which seemed to predict a very close election.

**DID YOU KNOW?**

- The Greek philosopher Aristotle favored enlightened authoritarianism over democracy, which to him meant mob rule.

- There are more than 500,000 elected officials in the United States, which is more than all the bank tellers in the country.

- The phrase "In God We Trust" was made the national motto on July 30, 1956, but had appeared on U.S. coins as early as 1864.

- About 14 percent of all legal immigrants to the United States plan to live in the Los Angeles/Long Beach, California area.

- A poll of New York University students revealed that one-fifth of them would give up their vote in the next election for an iPhone and that half of them would renounce their vote permanently for $1 million.