

Introducing Government in America

Chapter Outline

Government

Politics

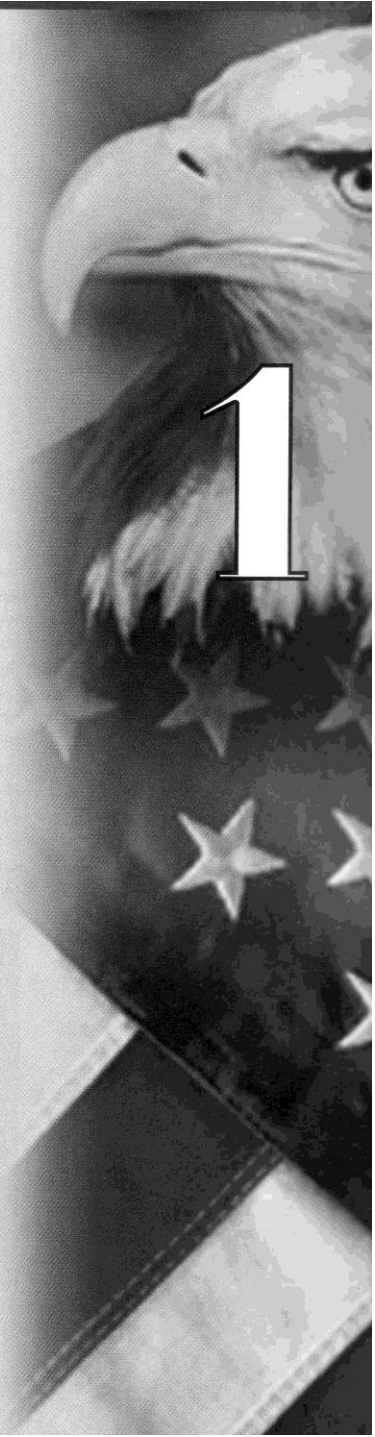
The Policymaking System

Democracy

The Scope of Government in America

Summary

1



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:

- 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 in which you have been employed. If you worked at a relatively low-paying job, your starting wages were determined by state and federal minimum wage laws.
- As a college student, you may be drawing student loans financed by the government. Government even dictates certain school holidays.
- Federal policy makes it possible for you to drive long distances relatively cheaply. This is because taxes on gasoline are relatively low compared to most other advanced industrialized nations.
- If you have ever rented an apartment, federal law prohibits landlords from discriminating against you because of your race or religion.

Yet, many Americans—especially young people—are apathetic about politics and government. For example, before his recent historic return to space, Senator John Glenn remarked that he worried “about the future when we have so many young people who feel apathetic and critical and cynical about anything having to do with politics. They don't want to touch it. And yet politics is literally the personnel system for democracy.”¹

Stereotypes can be found to be mistaken; unfortunately this is one case where widely held impressions are overwhelmingly supported by solid evidence, which will be reviewed briefly here. It is important to note that this is not to say that young people are inactive in American society. Nearly three of four college freshmen surveyed in 1999 reported volunteering for a community group during their senior year in high school. It is only when it comes to politics that young people seem to express indifference about getting involved. Whether because they feel they can't make a difference, the political system is corrupt, or they just don't care, young Americans are clearly apathetic about public affairs. And while political apathy isn't restricted to

College students, like all Americans, are impacted by governmental policies. Yet, today's generation of young people does not seem to think that politics matters. The political apathy of today's youth can be seen in low levels of voter turnout, interest in politics, and knowledge of political affairs. This lack of political participation does not mean that this is a generation of couch potatoes, however. In fact, their level of volunteerism in community affairs is very high.

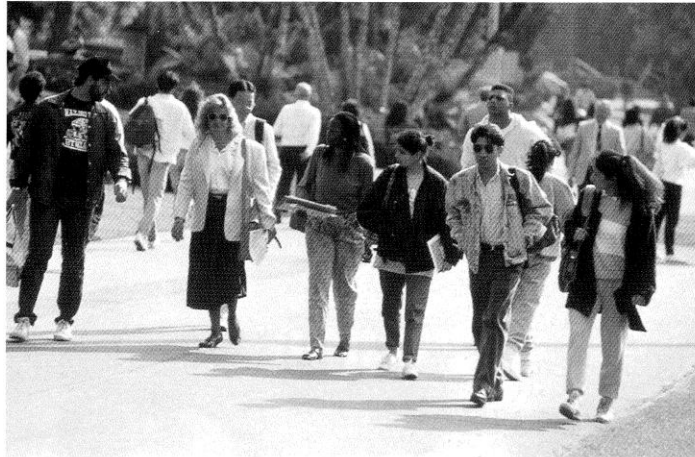
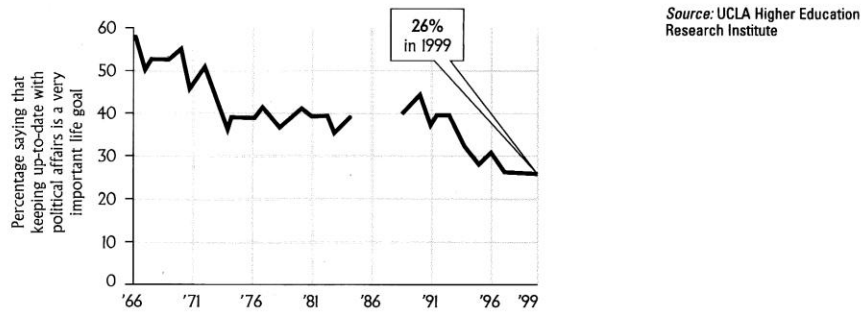


Figure 1.1 The Political Disengagement of College Students Today



young people, a tremendous gap has opened up between the young (defined as under age 25) and the elderly (defined as over 65) on measures of political interest, knowledge, and participation.

An annual nationwide study of college freshmen recently found that among the class of 2003 only 26 percent said that “keeping up with politics” was an important priority for them, compared to 58 percent among the class of 1970—their parents’ generation (see Figure 1.1). In addition, political interest among young people as a whole is quite low. In 2000, the National Election Study asked a nationwide sample about their general level of interest in politics. Only 26 percent of young people interviewed said they followed politics most or some of the time compared to 73 percent of senior citizens. Yet, there was no generation gap in terms of political interest when 18- to 20-year-olds first became eligible to vote in 1971. Back then, 69 percent of young people expressed at least some interest in politics compared to 65 percent of the elderly.

Because they pay so little attention to public affairs, American youth are less likely to be well informed about politics and government. Study after study in the 1990s has shown a substantial generation gap in terms of political knowledge. Perhaps the most comprehensive set of questions was asked in the 1994 National Election Study, and the results for young and elderly people can be seen in Table 1.1. Regardless of whether the question concerned identifying current leaders, basic civics, or current events, the result was the same: Young people were clearly less knowledgeable than the elderly. On average, respondents under 25 years old came up with the right answer only 35 percent of the time compared to 59 percent for senior citizens.



Table 1.1 Political Knowledge of the Young and Elderly (In Percents)

QUESTION	YOUNG (18-24)	ELDERLY (65+)
Identified the vice president	68	84
Identified the chief justice of the Supreme Court	2	5
Identified the president of Russia	35	49
Identified the Speaker of the House	8	49
Knew that the Supreme Court decides if a law is constitutional	40	64
Knew that the president nominates judges to the federal courts	39	62
Knew which party held the majority in the House prior to the election	47	81
Knew which party held the majority in the Senate prior to the election	41	74
Average correct	35	59

Source: 1994 National Election Study.

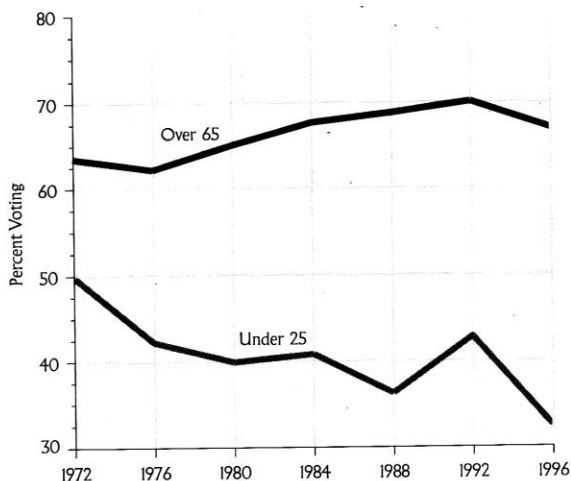
Thomas Jefferson once said that there has never been, nor ever will be, a people who are politically ignorant and free. If this is indeed the case, write Stephen Bennett and Eric Rademacher, then “we can legitimately wonder what the future holds if Xers remain as uninformed as they are about government and public affairs.”² While this may well be an overreaction, 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.³ If you’ve been reading about the debate on health care reform, for example, you’ll be able to understand proposed legislation on managed care and patient’s rights. This knowledge will then help you identify and vote for candidates whose views agree with yours.

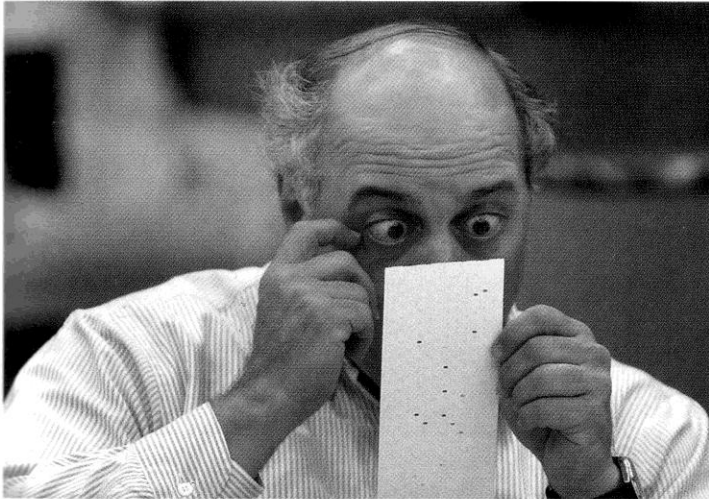
Lacking such information about political issues, however, fewer young Americans are heading to the polls compared to previous generations. This development has pulled the nationwide turnout rate down substantially in recent years. In 1996, presidential election turnout fell below the 50 percent mark for the first time since the early 1920s, when women had just received suffrage and not yet begun to use it as frequently as men. Young people have always had the lowest turnout rates, perhaps the reason why there was relatively little opposition in 1971 to lowering the voting age to 18. But even the most pessimistic analysts could not have foreseen the record low participation rates of young people in the recent years.

Why does voter turnout matter? 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 it clear why this is the case. As shown in Figure 1.2, the voter turnout rate for people under 25 has fallen from 50 percent in 1972 to just 32 percent in 1996. By contrast, turnout among people over 65 has actually gone up slightly over the same period. Political scientists used to write that the frailties of old age led to a

Figure 1.2 Presidential Election Turnout Rates by Age, 1972–1996

Source: U.S. Census Bureau Current Population Surveys. Data can be found at www.census.gov/population/www/socdemo/voting.html





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.

decline in turnout after age 60; now such a decline occurs only after 80 years of age. Greater access to medical care provided to today's elderly population 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?

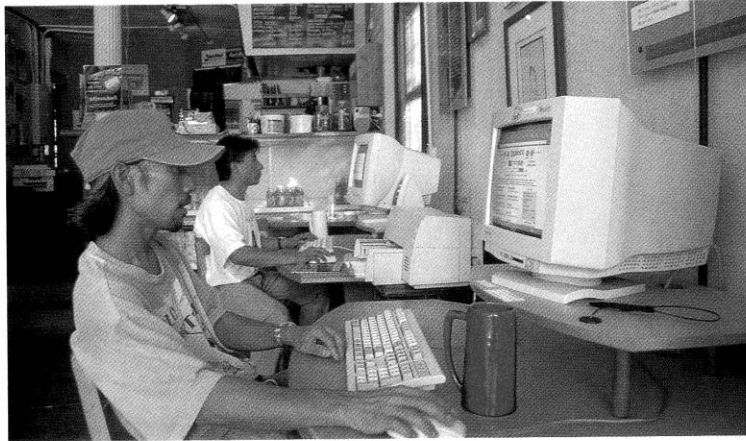
Of course, today's youth has not had any policy impact them the way that Medicare has benefited their grandparents or that the draft and the Vietnam War affected their parents. However, the cause of young people's political apathy probably runs deeper. A broader reason is that today's youth have grown up in an environment in which public affairs news has not been as readily visible as it has been in the past. It has become particularly difficult to convince a generation that has channel surfed all their lives that politics really does matter.

Major political events were once shared national experiences. However, the current generation of young people has been the first to grow up in a media environment in which there are few such shared experiences. When CBS, NBC, and ABC dominated the airwaves, their blanket coverage of presidential speeches, political conventions, and presidential debates sometimes left little else to watch on TV. As channels have proliferated over the last two decades, though, it has become much easier to avoid exposure to politics altogether by simply grabbing the remote control. Whereas President Nixon got an average rating of 50 for his televised addresses to the nation (meaning that half the population was watching), President Clinton averaged only about 30 in his first term.⁴ 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 2000 presidential debates drew a respectable average rating of 28, but this was only half the typical level of viewers drawn by debates held between 1960 and 1980. In sum, young people 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.

The revolutionary expansion of channels and websites presents both opportunities and challenges for political involvement in the future, especially for today's youth. Some optimistic observers see these developments as offering "the prospect of a revitalized democracy characterized by a more active and informed citizenry."⁵ Political



The Internet has opened up a new world of opportunities for computer-savvy young people to learn about politics. But with so many websites for so many specific interests, it remains to be seen whether many people will take advantage of the wide range of political information that is now available.



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 websites for so many specific interests, it will also be extraordinarily easy to avoid the subject of public affairs. Why read and discuss the president's latest speech when you can personalize your browser to display only the news you care most about, go into a chat room about movies, or download a new game?

It is our hope that after reading this book, you will be persuaded that paying attention to politics and government is important. As noted at the beginning of this chapter, 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. In each chapter, we will present an example of someone whose involvement in politics has made a difference. We hope that their examples will spark some ideas of your own. Concerned about the environment? Participate in a group that lobbies for environmental protection, as Danny Seo has done (Chapter 11). Think the tax system is unfair? Take part in a state campaign to change it, as Barbara Anderson did (Chapter 10). Worried about your city's programs for affordable housing and public transportation? Consider running for a local elected office, as Charlene Marshall did (Chapter 21). Whether in positions of power, like Governor Jesse Ventura (Chapter 8), or simply as a private citizen making a statement about campaign finance, like Granny D (Chapter 6), Americans have countless opportunities to influence their government.

Government

The institutions that make authoritative decisions for any given society are collectively known as **government**. In 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 make policies that influence our lives. There are roughly 500,000 elected officials in the United States; that means that 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 will serve as themes throughout this book:

government

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



In the United States, the transfer of power is achieved through peaceful means. Though the 2000 election was heavily disputed, as evidenced by these protests on inauguration day, the transition from Bill Clinton to George W. Bush took place smoothly and without incident on January 20, 2001.

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 text explores the relationship between *how* American government works and *what* it does. In other words, “Does our government do what we want it to do?” Debates over this question concerning the scope of government 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 and that America needs to promote individual responsibility instead.

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 spends at least \$275 billion a year on national defense.

Provide public services. Governments in this country spend billions of dollars on schools, libraries, weather forecasting, halfway houses, and dozens of other public policies. Some of these services, like highways and public parks, can be shared by everyone and cannot be denied to anyone. These kinds of services are called **public goods**. Other services, such as a college education or medical care, can be restricted to individuals who meet certain criteria, but may be provided by the private sector as well. Governments typically provide these services to make them accessible to people who may not be able to afford privately available services.

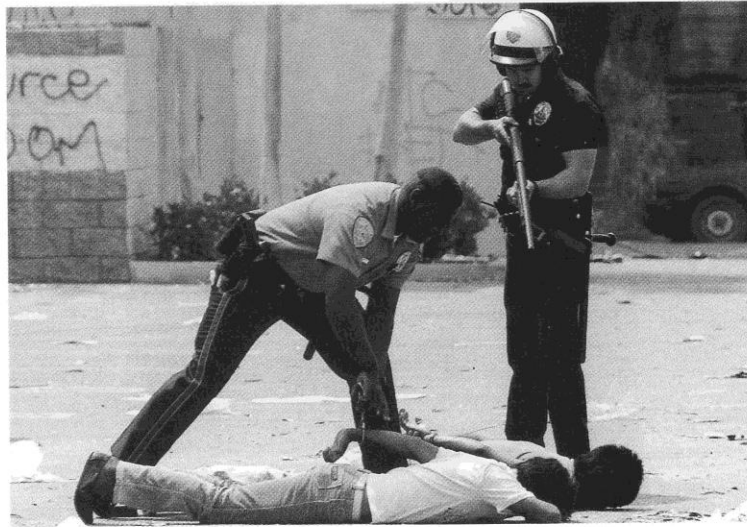
Preserve order. Every government has some means of maintaining order. When people protest in large numbers, governments may resort to extreme measures to restore order. For example, the National Guard was called in to stop the looting and arson after rioting broke out in Los Angeles after the 1992 Rodney King verdict.

Socialize the young. Most modern governments pay for education and use it to instill national values among the young. School curricula typically offer a course on the philosophy and practice of the country’s government. Rituals like the daily Pledge of Allegiance seek to foster patriotism and love of country.

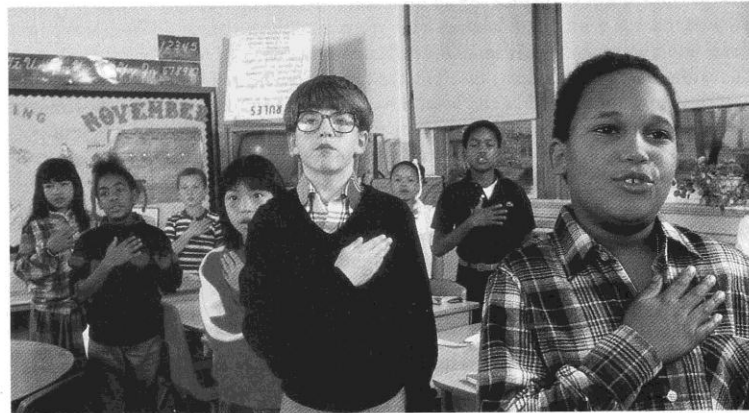
public goods

Goods, such as clean air and clean water, that everyone must share.

Governments are responsible for preserving order in society. The worst riots in modern U.S. history began when outnumbered police were faced down by crowds angered by the acquittals of four white police officers accused in the videotaped beating of Rodney King. Here, an L.A. police officer holds a shotgun on two looting suspects as a California state trooper puts handcuffs on them.



Many American public schools begin each day by reciting the Pledge of Allegiance. Like most governments around the world, the U.S. government uses the public schools to socialize its children. Required civics courses help ensure that the young understand and support the American system of government.



Collect taxes. Approximately one out of every three dollars earned by an American citizen was used to pay national, state, and local taxes—money that was used to pay for the public goods and services provided by the government.

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

Politics

politics

The process by which we select our governmental leaders and what policies these leaders pursue. Politics produces authoritative decisions about public issues.

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."⁶ 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



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.

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* people participate in politics is important, too. They get what they want through voting, supporting, compromising, lobbying, and so forth. In this sense, government and politics involve winners and losers.

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, with one of the lowest rates of voter participation 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 such as the elderly benefit by having a high turnout rate, whereas others such as young people lack political clout because of their low likelihood of voting.

Voting is only one form of political participation. (See Chapter 6 for a discussion of other forms of participation). For a few Americans politics is a vocation rather than an avocation. They run for office, and some even earn their livelihood from holding political office. In addition, there are also many Americans who 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 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.

When the Supreme Court handed down its decision in the case of *Webster v. Reproductive Health Services* in 1989, it narrowed abortion rights by allowing states to decide whether to provide funds to women who want abortions but cannot afford them. People on the pro-choice and the pro-life sides (note the loaded label each uses for itself) have turned to state politics to achieve their goals. Pro-lifers attempted to convince their legislators to restrict abortion funding by picketing abortion clinics and lobbying legislatures in many states. Pro-choicers have encouraged legislators to keep the

political participation

All the activities used by citizens to influence the selection of political leaders or the policies they pursue. The most common, but not the only, means of political participation in a **democracy** is voting. Other means include **protest** and **civil disobedience**.

single-issue groups

Groups that have a narrow interest, tend to dislike compromise, and often draw membership from people new to politics. These features distinguish them from traditional **interest groups**.



right to abortion as broad as possible. Neither group considers a middle course. For this reason, many politicians feel that such single-issue groups get in the way of effective policymaking. Single-issue groups have little taste for compromise, an approach that most politicians view as essential to their job. The influence of single-issue groups on voters and elected officials complicates efforts to seek the middle ground on various issues.

Individual citizens and organized groups get involved in politics because they understand that the 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.

policymaking system

The process by which policy comes into being and evolves over time. 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.

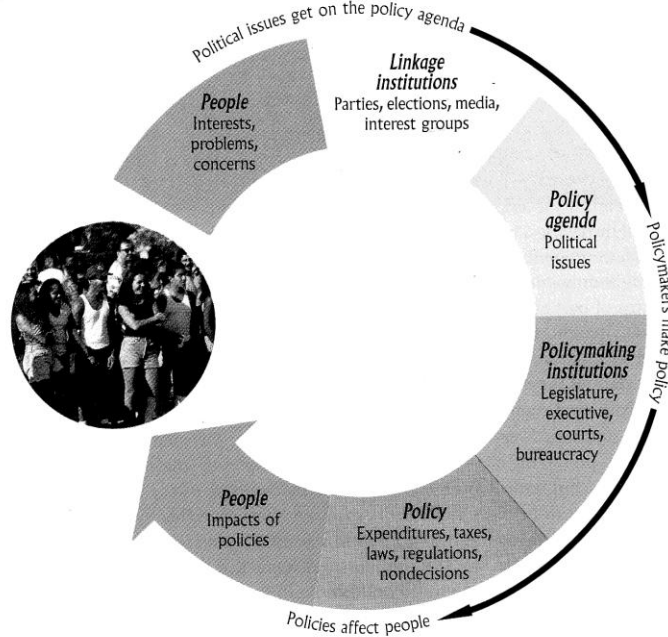
The Policymaking System

Americans frequently expect 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. The **policymaking system** reveals the way our government responds to the priorities of its people. Figure 1.3 shows a skeletal model of this system. 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.

People Shape Policy

The policymaking system begins with people. All Americans have interests, problems, and concerns that are touched upon by public policy. Some people may think the government should help train people for jobs in today's new technological environment;

Figure 1.3 The Policymaking System



others may think that their taxes are too high and that the country would be best served by a large tax cut. Some people may expect government to do something to curb domestic violence; others may be 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? There are numerous avenues for action, such as voting for candidates who represent their opinions, joining political parties, posting messages to Internet chat groups, and forming interest groups. In this way, people's concerns enter the **linkage institutions** of the policymaking system. Linkage institutions transmit the preferences of Americans to the policymakers in government. Parties and interest groups strive to ensure that their members' concerns receive appropriate political attention. The media investigates social problems and informs people about them. Elections allow citizens the chance to make their opinions heard by choosing their public officials.

All these institutions help to shape the government's **policy agenda**, which consists of the issues that attract the serious attention of public officials and other people actively involved in politics at any 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 the voters. When you vote, you are partly looking at whether a candidate shares your agenda. If you are worried about rising health care costs and unemployment, and a certain candidate talks only about America's moral decay and ending legalized abortions, 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 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 they say in journalism schools, “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. The question politicians constantly ask is “How can we as a people do better?”

People, of course, do not always agree on what government should do. Indeed, one group's concerns and interests are often at odds with those of another group. A **political issue** is the result of people disagreeing 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 political system, working within the three **policy-making institutions** established by the U.S. Constitution: the Congress, the presidency, and the courts. Policymakers scan the issues on the policy agenda, select those that 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 the 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**. There are many types of public policies. Table 1.2 lists some of the most important types.

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 actually involved in politics at any given point in time.

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—the 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.

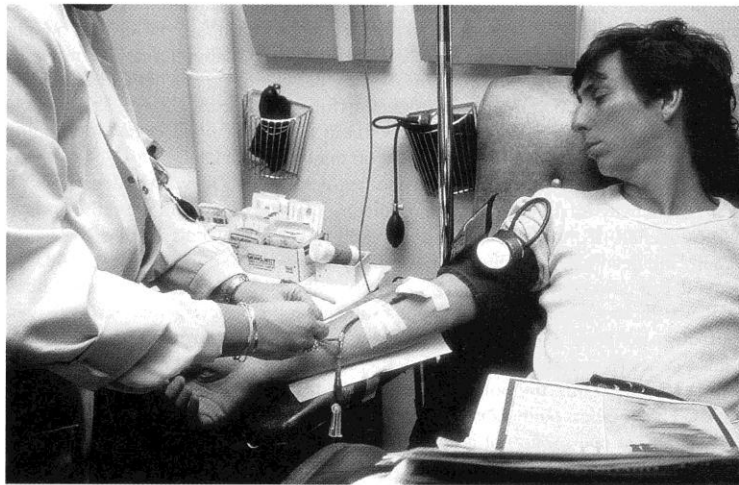
public policy

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 1.2 Types of Public Policies

TYPE	DEFINITION	EXAMPLE
Congressional statute	Law passed by Congress	Social Security Act
Presidential action	Decision by president	American war planes sent to Kosovo
Court decision	Opinion by Supreme Court or other court	Supreme Court ruling that school segregation is unconstitutional
Budgetary choices	Legislative enactment of taxes and expenditures	The federal budget
Regulation	Agency adoption of regulation	Food and Drug Administration approval of a new drug

AIDS was relatively low on the political agenda until well-known celebrities started to die from the disease. AIDS activists have found, however, that getting the problem on the agenda is only half the political battle. Getting the government to take aggressive action to find and approve new treatments has proved to be at least as difficult.



Policies can also be established through inaction as well as action. Doing nothing—or nothing different—can prove to be a very consequential governmental decision. Reporter Randy Shilts' book traces the staggering growth in the number of people with AIDS and reveals how governments in Washington and elsewhere did little or debated quietly about what to do.⁷ Shilts claims that, because politicians viewed AIDS as a gay person's disease, they were reluctant to support measures to deal with it, fearful of losing the votes of antigay constituents. The issue thus remained a low priority on the government's policy agenda until infections started to spread to the general population, including celebrities like basketball star Magic Johnson.

Once policies are made and implemented, they affect people. Policy impacts are the effects that a policy has on people and on society's problems. People want policy that addresses their interests, problems, and concerns. A new law, executive order, bureaucratic regulation, or court judgment doesn't mean much if it doesn't work. Environmentalists want an industrial emissions policy that not only claims to prevent air pollution but also does so. Minority groups want a civil rights policy that not only promises them equal treatment but also ensures it.

Having a policy implies 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 political system back to its point of origin: the concerns of the peo-