

Chapter 1

American Government and Civic Engagement

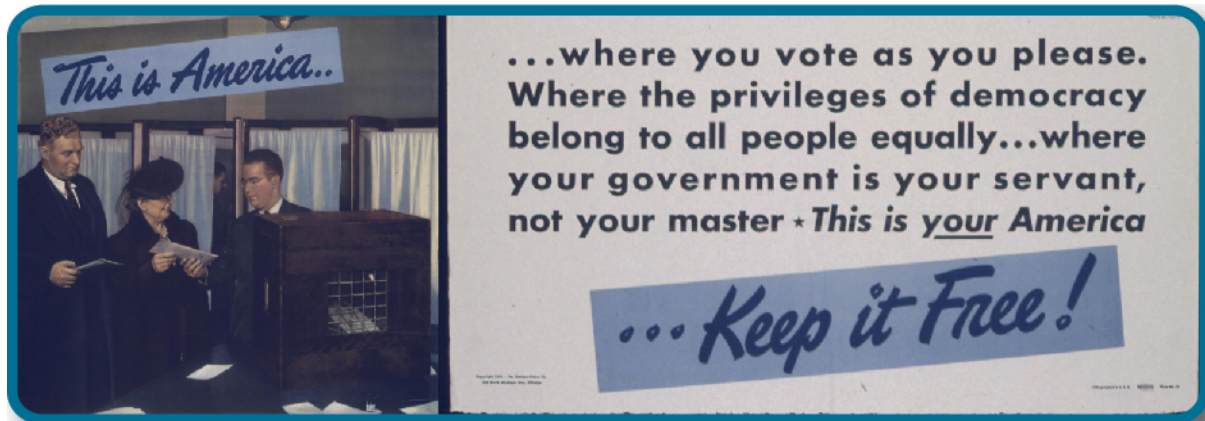


Figure 1.1 In the United States, the right to vote is an important feature of the nation's system of government, and over the years many people have fought and sacrificed to obtain it. Yet, today, many people ignore this important means of civic engagement. (credit: modification of work by the National Archives and Records Administration)

Chapter Outline

- 1.1 What is Government?
- 1.2 Who Governs? Elitism, Pluralism, and Tradeoffs
- 1.3 Engagement in a Democracy

Introduction

Since its founding, the United States has relied on citizen participation to govern at the local, state, and national levels. This civic engagement ensures that representative democracy will continue to flourish and that people will continue to influence government. The right of citizens to participate in government is an important feature of democracy, and over the centuries many have fought to acquire and defend this right. During the American Revolution (1775–1783), British colonists fought for the right to govern themselves. In the early nineteenth century, agitated citizens called for the removal of property requirements for voting so poor white men could participate in government just as wealthy men could. Throughout the late nineteenth and twentieth centuries, women, African Americans, Native Americans, and many other groups fought for the right to vote and hold office.

The poster shown above (**Figure 1.1**), created during World War II, depicts voting as an important part of the fight to keep the United States free. The purpose of voting and other forms of political engagement is to ensure that government serves the people, and not the other way around. But what does government do to serve the people? What different forms of government exist? How do they differ? How can citizens best engage with and participate in the crucial process of governing the nation? This chapter seeks to answer these questions.

1.1 What is Government?

Learning Objectives

By the end of this section, you will be able to:

- Explain what government is and what it does
 - Identify the type of government in the United States and compare it to other forms of government
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Government affects all aspects of people's lives. What we eat, where we go to school, what kind of education we receive, how our tax money is spent, and what we do in our free time are all affected by government. Americans are often unaware of the pervasiveness of government in their everyday lives, and many are unsure precisely what it does. Here we will look at what government is, what it does, and how the government of the United States differs from other kinds of governments.

DEFINING GOVERNMENT

The term **government** describes the means by which a society organizes itself and allocates authority in order to accomplish collective goals and provide benefits that the society as a whole needs. Among the goals that governments around the world seek to accomplish are economic prosperity for the nation, secure national borders, and the safety and well-being of citizens. Governments also provide benefits for their citizens. The type of benefits provided differ according to the country and their specific type of governmental system, but governments commonly provide such things as education, health care, and an infrastructure for transportation. The term **politics** refers to the process of gaining and exercising control within a government for the purpose of setting and achieving particular goals, especially those related to the division of resources within a nation.

Sometimes governmental systems are confused with economic systems. This is because certain types of political thought or governmental organization are closely related to or develop with certain types of economic systems. For example, the economic system of capitalism in Western Europe and North America developed at roughly the same time as ideas about democratic republics, self-government, and natural rights. At this time, the idea of liberty became an important concept. According to John Locke, an English political philosopher of the seventeenth century, all people have natural rights to life, liberty, and property. From this came the idea that people should be free to consent to being governed. In the eighteenth century, in Great Britain's North American colonies, and later in France, this developed into the idea that people should govern themselves through elected representatives and not a king; only those representatives chosen by the people had the right to make laws to govern them.

Similarly, Adam Smith, a Scottish philosopher who was born nineteen years after Locke's death, believed that all people should be free to acquire property in any way that they wished. Instead of being controlled by government, business, and industry, Smith argued, people should be allowed to operate as they wish and keep the proceeds of their work. Competition would ensure that prices remained low and faulty goods disappeared from the market. In this way, businesses would reap profits, consumers would have their needs satisfied, and society as a whole would prosper. Smith discussed these ideas, which formed the basis for industrial capitalism, in his book *The Wealth of Nations*, which was published in 1776, the same year that the Declaration of Independence was written.

Representative government and capitalism developed together in the United States, and many Americans tend to equate **democracy**, a political system in which people govern themselves, with capitalism. In theory, a democratic government promotes individualism and the freedom to act as one chooses instead of being controlled, for good or bad, by government. Capitalism, in turn, relies on individualism. At the same time, successful capitalists prefer political systems over which they can exert at least some influence in order to maintain their liberty.

Democracy and capitalism do not have to go hand in hand, however. Indeed, one might argue that a

capitalist economic system might be bad for democracy in some respects. Although Smith theorized that capitalism would lead to prosperity for all, this has not necessarily been the case. Great gaps in wealth between the owners of major businesses, industries, and financial institutions and those who work for others in exchange for wages exist in many capitalist nations. In turn, great wealth may give a very small minority great influence over the government—a greater influence than that held by the majority of the population, which will be discussed later.

Socialism is an alternative economic system. In socialist societies, the means of generating wealth, such as factories, large farms, and banks, are owned by the government and not by private individuals. The government accumulates wealth and then redistributes it to citizens, primarily in the form of social programs that provide such things as free or inexpensive health care, education, and childcare. In socialist countries, the government also usually owns and controls utilities such as electricity, transportation systems like airlines and railroads, and telecommunications systems. In many socialist countries the government is an **oligarchy**: only members of a certain political party or ruling elite can participate in government. For example, in China, the government is run by members of the Chinese Communist Party. However, socialist countries can have democratic forms of government as well, such as Sweden. Although many Americans associate socialism with tyranny and a loss of individual liberties, this does not have to be the case, as we see in Sweden.

In the United States, the democratic government works closely together with its capitalist economic system. The interconnectedness of the two affects the way in which goods and services are distributed. The market provides many goods and services needed by Americans. For example, food, clothing, and housing are provided in ample supply by private businesses that earn a profit in return. These goods and services are known as **private goods**.¹ People can purchase what they need in the quantity in which they need it. This, of course, is the ideal. In reality, those who live in poverty cannot always afford to buy ample food and clothing to meet their needs, or the food and clothing that they can afford to buy in abundance is of inferior quality. Also, it is often difficult to find adequate housing; housing in the most desirable neighborhoods—those that have low crime rates and good schools—is often too expensive for poor or working-class (and sometimes middle-class) people to buy or rent.

Thus, the market cannot provide everything (in enough quantity or at low enough costs) in order to meet everyone's needs. Therefore, some goods are provided by the government. Such goods or services that are available to all without charge are called **public goods**. Two such public goods are national security and education. It is difficult to see how a private business could protect the United States from attack. How could it build its own armies and create plans for defense and attack? Who would pay the men and women who served? Where would the intelligence come from? Due to its ability to tax, draw upon the resources of an entire nation, and compel citizen compliance, only government is capable of protecting the nation.

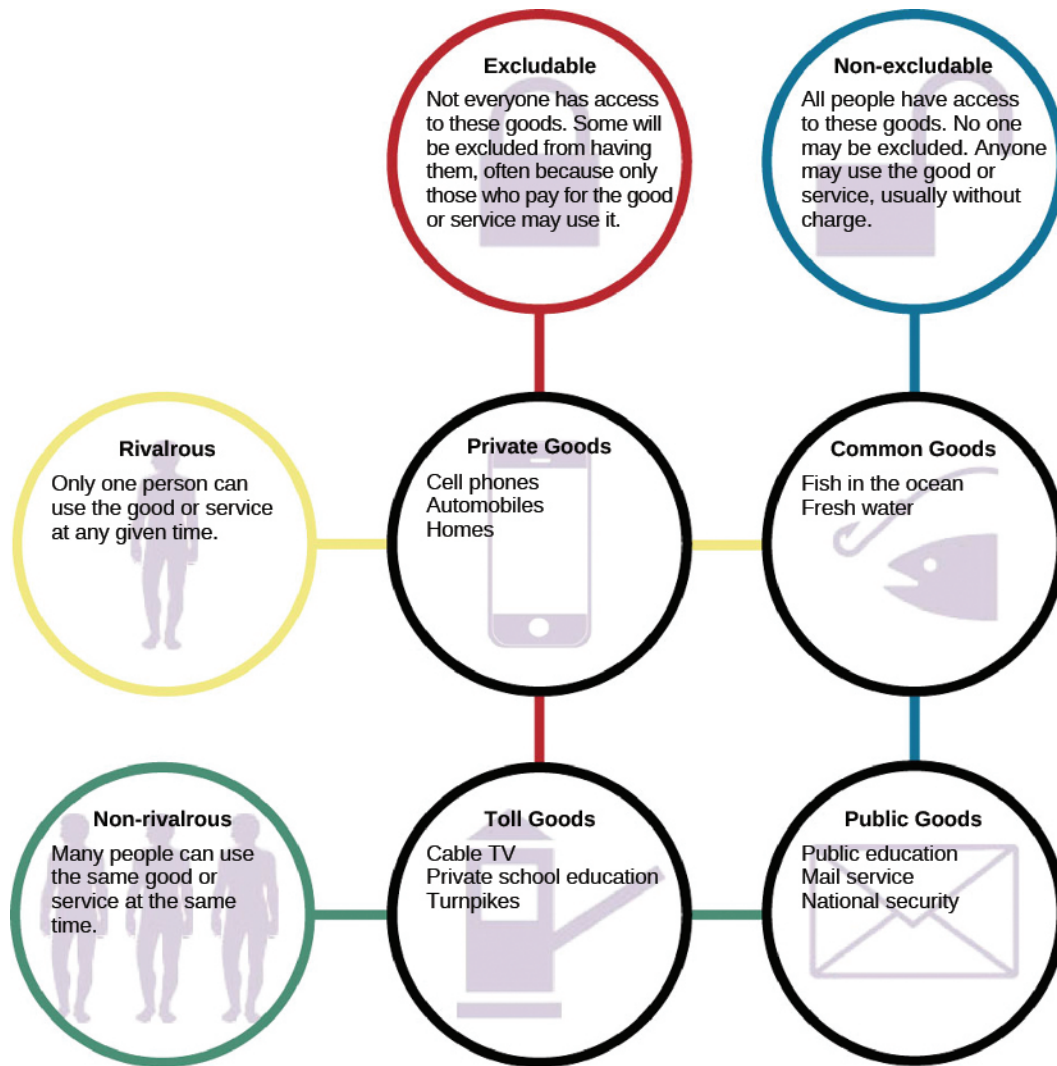
Similarly, public schools provide education for all children in the United States. Children of all religions, races and ethnicities, socioeconomic classes, and levels of academic ability can attend public schools free of charge from kindergarten through the twelfth grade. It would be impossible for private schools to provide an education for all of the nation's children. Private schools do provide some education in the United States; however, they charge tuition, and only those parents who can afford to pay their fees (or whose children gain a scholarship) can attend these institutions. Some schools charge very high tuition, the equivalent to the tuition at a private college. If private schools were the only educational institutions, most poor and working-class children and many middle-class children would be uneducated. Private schooling is a type of good called a **toll good**. Toll goods are available to many people, and many people can make use of them, but only if they can pay the price. They occupy a middle ground between public and private goods. All parents may send their children to public schools in the United States. They can choose to send their children to a private school, but the private school will charge them. On the other hand, public schools, which are operated by the government, provide free education so all children can attend school. Therefore, everyone in the nation benefits from the educated voters and workers produced by the public school system. Another distinction between public and private goods is that public goods are available to all, typically without additional charge.

What other public goods does government provide in the United States? At the federal, state, and local level, government provides stability and security, not only in the form of a military but also in the form of police and fire departments. Government provides other valuable goods and services such as public education, public transportation, mail service, and food, housing, and health care for the poor (**Figure 1.2**). If a house catches on fire, the fire department does not demand payment before they put the fire out. If someone breaks into a house and tries to harm the occupants, the police will try to protect them and arrest the intruder, but the police department will not request payment for services rendered. The provision of these goods and services is funded by citizens paying into the general tax base.



Figure 1.2 A fire department ambulance rushes to the rescue in Chicago. Emergency medical services, fire departments, and police departments are all paid for by government through the tax base, and they provide their services without an additional charge. (credit: Tony Webster)

Government also performs the important job of protecting **common goods**: goods that all people may use free of charge but that are of limited supply, such as fish in the sea or clean drinking water. Because everyone can use these goods, they must be protected so a few people do not take everything that is available and leave others with nothing. Some examples of common goods, private goods, public goods, and toll goods are listed below (**Figure 1.3**).



Source: John L. Mikesell. 2014. *Fiscal Administration: Analysis and Applications for the Public Sector*, 9th ed. Boston: Wadsworth.

Figure 1.3 One can distinguish between different types of goods by considering who has access to the goods (excludable/non-excludable) and how many people can access the good at the same time (rivalrous/non-rivalrous).²

Link to Learning



This **federal website** (<https://openstaxcollege.org//29usagovtopics>) shares information about the many services the government provides.

Finding a Middle Ground

Fishing Regulations

One of the many important things government does is regulate public access to common goods like natural resources. Unlike public goods, which all people may use without charge, common goods are in limited supply. If more public schools are needed, the government can build more. If more firefighters or mail carriers are needed, the government can hire them. Public lands and wildlife, however, are not goods the government can simply multiply if supply falls due to demand. Indeed, if some people take too freely from the supply of common goods, there will not be enough left for others to use.

Fish are one of the many common goods in which the government currently regulates access. It does so to ensure that certain species are not fished into extinction, thus depriving future generations of an important food source and a means to make a living. This idea is known as sustainability. Environmentalists want to set strict fishing limits on a variety of species. Commercial fishers resist these limits, claiming they are unnecessary and, if enforced, would drive them out of business (**Figure 1.4**). Currently, fishing limits are set by a combination of scientists, politicians, local resource managers, and groups representing the interests of fishers.³



Figure 1.4 Fishing provides income, as well as food, for many Americans. However, without government restrictions on the kinds and number of fish that can be caught, the fish population would decline and certain species could become extinct. This would ultimately lead to the loss of jobs and income as well as a valuable source of nourishment. (credit: Michael L. Baird)

Should the government regulate fishing? Is it right to interfere with people's ability to earn money today in order to protect the access of future generations to the nation's common goods?

Besides providing stability and goods and services for all, government also creates a structure by which goods and services can be made available to the people. In the United States, people elect representatives to city councils, state legislatures, and Congress. These bodies make laws to govern their respective jurisdictions. They also pass measures to raise money, through the imposition of taxes on such things as income, property, and sales. Local, state, and national governments also draft budgets to determine how the revenue taken in will be spent for services. On the local level, funds are allotted for education, police and fire departments, and maintenance of public parks. State governments allocate money for state colleges and universities, maintenance of state roads and bridges, and wildlife management, among other priorities. On the national level, money goes to such things as defense, Social Security, pensions for veterans, maintenance of federal courts and prisons, and management of national parks. At each level, representatives elected by the people try to secure funding for things that will benefit those who live in the areas they represent. Once money has been allocated, government agencies at each level then receive funds for the purposes mentioned above and use them to provide services to the public.

Local, state, and national governments also make laws to maintain order and to ensure the efficient functioning of society, including the fair operation of the business marketplace. In the United States, for example, Congress passes laws regulating banking, and government agencies regulate such things as the amount of toxic gases that can be emitted by factories, the purity of food offered for sale, and the safety of toys and automobiles. In this way, government checks the actions of business, something that it would not do if capitalism in the United States functioned strictly in the manner that Adam Smith believed it should...almost entirely unregulated.

Besides providing goods to citizens and maintaining public safety, most governments also provide a means for citizens to participate in government and to make their opinions known to those in power. Western democracies like the United States, Britain, France, and others protect citizens' freedom of speech and the press. These nations, and others in the world, also allow citizens to vote.

As noted earlier, politics is the process by which choices are made regarding how resources will be allocated and which economic and social policies government will pursue. Put more simply, politics is the process of who gets what and how. Politics involves choosing which values government will support and which it will not. If government chooses to support an ideal such as individualism, it may choose to loosen regulations on business and industry or to cut taxes so that people have more money to invest in business. If it chooses to support an ideal such as egalitarianism, which calls for equal treatment for all and the destruction of socioeconomic inequalities, it may raise taxes in order to be able to spend more on public education, public transportation, housing for the poor, and care for the elderly. If, for example, the government is more concerned with national security than with individual liberty, it may authorize the tapping of people's phones and restrict what newspapers may publish. If liberty is more important, then government will place greater restrictions on the extent that law enforcement agencies can intrude upon citizens' private communications. The political process and the input of citizens help determine the answer.

Civic engagement, or the participation that connects citizens to government, is a vital ingredient of politics. In the United States, citizens play an important role in influencing what policies are pursued, what values the government chooses to support, what initiatives are granted funding, and who gets to make the final decisions. Political engagement can take many forms: reading about politics, listening to news reports, discussing politics, attending (or watching televised) political debates, donating money to political campaigns, handing out flyers promoting a candidate, voting, joining protest marches, and writing letters to their elected representatives.

DIFFERENT TYPES OF GOVERNMENT

The government of the United States can best be described as a republic, or representative democracy. A democracy is a government in which **political power**—influence over institutions, leaders, and policies—rests in the hands of the people. In a **representative democracy**, however, the citizens do not govern directly. Instead, they elect representatives to make decisions and pass laws on behalf of all the people. Thus, U.S. citizens vote for members of Congress, the president and vice president, members of state legislatures, governors, mayors, and members of town councils and school boards to act on their behalf. Most representative governments favor **majority rule**: the opinions of the majority of the people have more influence with government than those of the minority. If the number of elected representatives who favor a proposed law is greater than those who oppose it, the law will be enacted.

However, in representative governments like the United States, **minority rights** are protected: people cannot be deprived of certain rights even if an overwhelming number of people think that they should be. For example, let's say American society decided that atheists, people who do not believe that God exists, were evil and should be imprisoned or expelled from the country. Even though atheists only account for about 7 percent of the population, they would be protected due to minority rights.⁴ Even though the number of Americans who believe in God far outweighs the number who do not, the minority is still protected. Because decisions are made through majority rule, making your opinions known and voting for

those men and women who make decisions that affect all of us are critical and influential forms of civic engagement in a representative democracy such as the United States.

In a **direct democracy**, unlike representative democracy, people participate directly in making government decisions. For example, in ancient Athens, the most famous example of a direct democracy, all male citizens were allowed to attend meetings of the Assembly. Here they debated and voted for or against all proposed laws. Although neither the federal government nor any of the state governments function as a direct democracy—the Constitution requires the national and state governments to be representative forms of government—some elements of direct democracy do exist in the United States. While residents of the different states vote for people to represent them and to make laws in their behalf in the state legislatures and in Congress, people may still directly vote on certain issues. For example, a referendum or proposed law might be placed on the ballot for citizens to vote on directly during state or local elections instead of leaving the matter in the hands of the state legislature. At New England town meetings, all residents are allowed to debate decisions affecting the town (**Figure 1.5**). Such occasions provide additional opportunities for civic engagement.



Figure 1.5 Residents of Boxborough, Massachusetts, gather in a local hotel to discuss issues affecting their town. New England town meetings provide an opportunity for people to experience direct democracy. This tradition has lasted for hundreds of years. (credit: modification of work by Liz West)

Most countries now have some form of representative government (**Figure 1.6**). At the other end of the political spectrum are elite-driven forms of government. In a **monarchy**, one ruler, usually a hereditary ruler, holds political power. Although the power of some monarchs is limited by law, and such kings and queens often rule along with an elected legislature that makes laws for the country, this is not always the case. Many southwest Asian kingdoms, such as Saudi Arabia, Qatar, and the United Arab Emirates, have absolute monarchs whose power is unrestricted. As discussed earlier, another nondemocratic form of government is oligarchy, in which a handful of elite members of society, often those who belong to a particular political party, hold all political power. For example, in Cuba, as in China, only members of the Communist Party are allowed to vote or hold public office, and the party's most important members make all government decisions. Some nondemocratic societies are totalitarian in nature. Under **totalitarianism**, the government is more important than the citizens, and it controls all aspects of citizens' lives. Citizens' rights are limited, and the government does not allow political criticism or opposition. These forms of government are fairly rare. North Korea is an example of a totalitarian government.

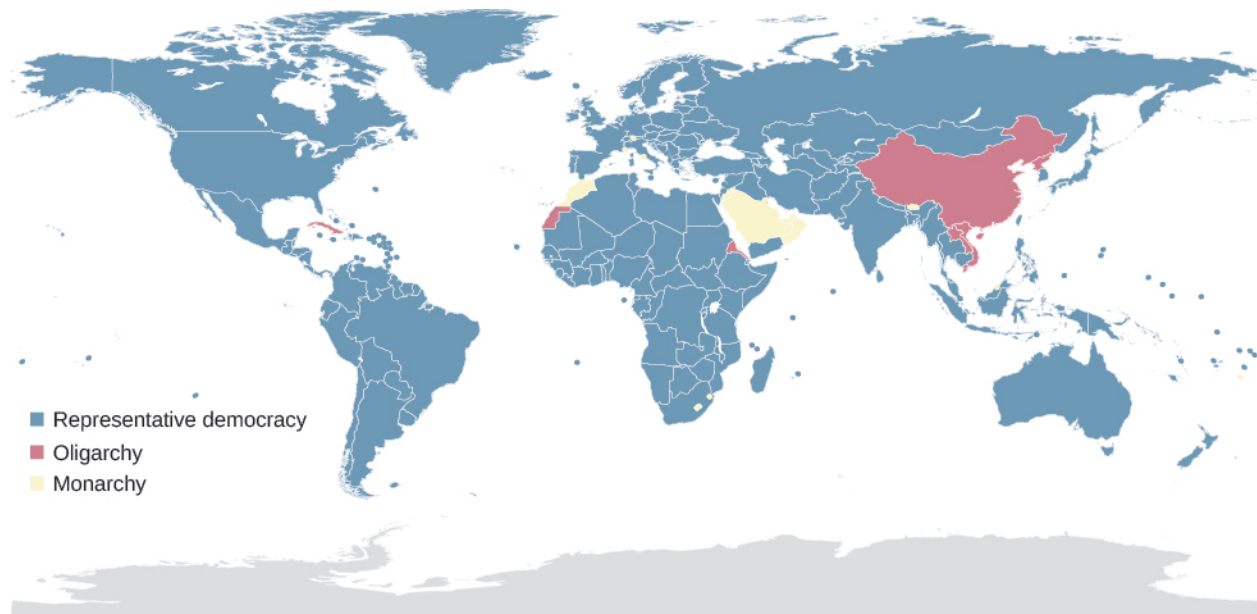


Figure 1.6 The map of the world shows the different forms of government that currently exist. Countries that are colored blue have some form of representative democracy, although the people may not have as much political power as they do in the United States. Countries that are colored red, like China, Vietnam, and Cuba, have an oligarchic form of government. Countries that are colored yellow are monarchies where the people play little part in governing.

Link to Learning



The **CIA website** (<https://openstaxcollege.org//29ciaworgovtyp>) provides information about the types of government across the world.

1.2 Who Governs? Elitism, Pluralism, and Tradeoffs

Learning Objectives

By the end of this section, you will be able to:

- Describe the pluralism-elitism debate
- Explain the tradeoffs perspective on government

The United States allows its citizens to participate in government in many ways. The United States also has many different levels and branches of government that any citizen or group might approach. Many people take this as evidence that U.S. citizens, especially as represented by competing groups, are able to influence government actions. Some political theorists, however, argue that this is not the case. They claim that only a handful of economic and political elites have any influence over government.

ELITISM VS. PLURALISM

Many Americans fear that a set of elite citizens is really in charge of government in the United States

and that others have no influence. This belief is called the **elite theory** of government. In contrast to that perspective is the **pluralist theory** of government, which says that political power rests with competing interest groups who share influence in government. Pluralist theorists assume that citizens who want to get involved in the system do so because of the great number of access points to government. That is, the U.S. system, with several levels and branches, has many places where people and groups can engage the government.

The foremost supporter of elite theory was C. Wright Mills. In his book, *The Power Elite*, Mills argued that government was controlled by a combination of business, military, and political elites.⁵ Most are highly educated, often graduating from prestigious universities (**Figure 1.7**). According to elite theory, the wealthy use their power to control the nation's economy in such a way that those below them cannot advance economically. Their wealth allows the elite to secure for themselves important positions in politics. They then use this power to make decisions and allocate resources in ways that benefit them. Politicians do the bidding of the wealthy instead of attending to the needs of ordinary people, and order is maintained by force. Indeed, those who favor government by the elite believe the elite are better fit to govern and that average citizens are content to allow them to do so.⁶

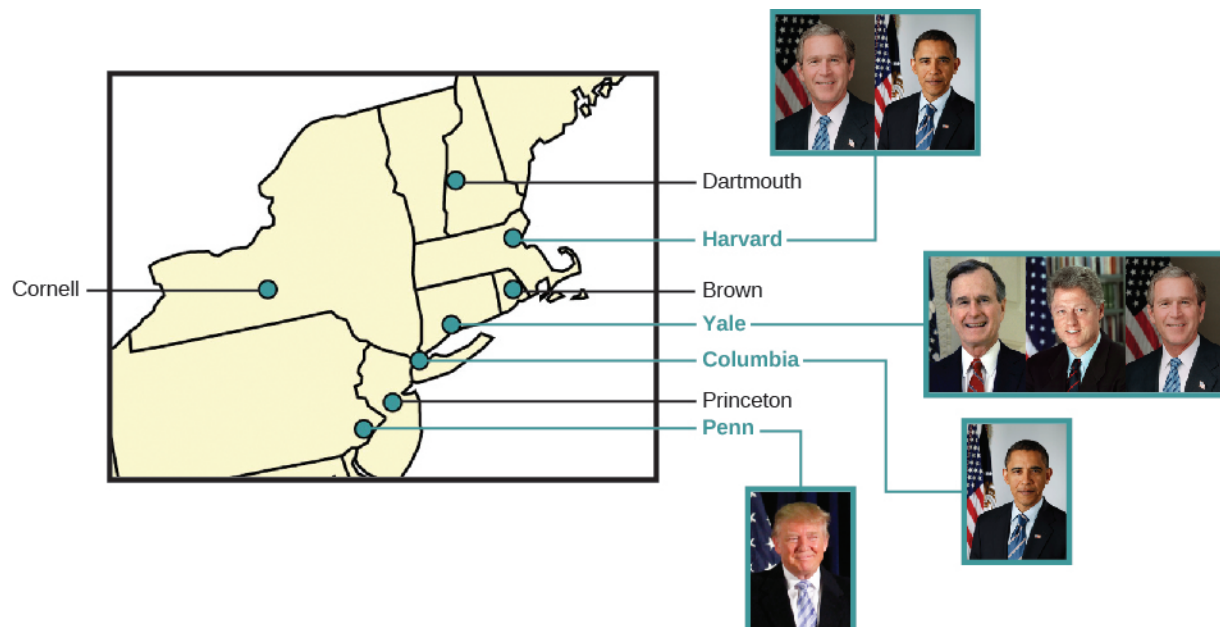


Figure 1.7 The five most recent U.S. presidents have all graduated from an Ivy League university.

In apparent support of the elite perspective, one-third of U.S. presidents have attended Ivy League schools, a much higher percentage than the rest of the U.S. population.⁷ All five of the most recent U.S. presidents attended Ivy League schools such as Harvard, Yale, or Columbia. Among members of the House of Representatives, 93 percent have a bachelor's degree, as do 99 percent of members of the Senate.⁸ Fewer than 40 percent of U.S. adults have even an associate's degree.⁹ The majority of the men and women in Congress also engaged in either state or local politics, were business people, or practiced law before being elected to Congress.¹⁰ Approximately 80 percent of both the Senate and the House of Representatives are male, and about 21 percent of members of Congress are people of color (**Figure 1.8**). The nation's laws are made primarily by well-educated white male professionals and businessmen.



Figure 1.8 This official photograph of the the 114th Congress depicts the fairly uniform nature of congressional representation. Most are men, and nearly all are white. Members of Congress also tend to resemble one another in terms of income and level of education.

The makeup of Congress is important because race, sex, profession, education, and socioeconomic class have an important effect on people’s political interests. For example, changes in the way taxes are levied and spent do not affect all citizens equally. A flat tax, which generally requires that everyone pay the same percentage rate, hurts the poor more than it does the rich. If the income tax rate was flat at 10 percent, all Americans would have to pay 10 percent of their income to the federal government. Someone who made \$40,000 a year would have to pay \$4,000 and be left with only \$36,000 to live on. Someone who made \$1,000,000 would have to pay \$100,000, a greater sum, but he or she would still be left with \$900,000. People who were not wealthy would probably pay more than they could comfortably afford, while the wealthy, who could afford to pay more and still live well, would not see a real impact on their daily lives. Similarly, the allocation of revenue affects the rich and the poor differently. Giving more money to public education does not benefit the wealthy as much as it does the poor, because the wealthy are more likely than the poor to send their children to private schools or to at least have the option of doing so. However, better funded public schools have the potential to greatly improve the upward mobility of members of other socioeconomic classes who have no other option than to send their children to public schools.

Currently, more than half of the members of Congress are millionaires; their median net worth is just over \$1 million, and some have much more.¹¹ As of 2003, more than 40 percent of Congress sent their children to private schools. Overall, only 10 percent of the American population does so.¹² Therefore, a Congress dominated by millionaires who send their children to private schools is more likely to believe that flat taxes are fair and that increased funding for public education is not a necessity. Their experience, however, does not reflect the experience of average Americans.

Pluralist theory rejects this approach, arguing that although there are elite members of society they do not control government. Instead, pluralists argue, political power is distributed throughout society. Rather than resting in the hands of individuals, a variety of organized groups hold power, with some groups having more influence on certain issues than others. Thousands of interest groups exist in the United States.¹³ Approximately 70–90 percent of Americans report belonging to at least one group.¹⁴

According to pluralist theory, people with shared interests will form groups in order to make their desires known to politicians. These groups include such entities as environmental advocates, unions, and organizations that represent the interests of various businesses. Because most people lack the inclination, time, or expertise necessary to decide political issues, these groups will speak for them. As groups compete with one another and find themselves in conflict regarding important issues, government policy begins to take shape. In this way, government policy is shaped from the bottom up and not from the top down, as we see in elitist theory. Robert Dahl, author of *Who Governs?*, was one of the first to advance the pluralist theory, and argued that politicians seeking an “electoral payoff” are attentive to the concerns of politically active citizens and, through them, become acquainted with the needs of ordinary people. They will attempt to give people what they want in exchange for their votes.¹⁵

Link to Learning



The Center for Responsive Politics is a non-partisan research group that provides data on who gives to whom in elections. Visit [OpenSecrets.org: Center for Responsive Politics \(https://openstaxcollege.org//29opensecrets\)](https://openstaxcollege.org//29opensecrets) to track campaign contributions, congressional bills and committees, and interest groups and lobbyists.

THE TRADEOFFS PERSPECTIVE

Although elitists and pluralists present political influence as a tug-of-war with people at opposite ends of a rope trying to gain control of government, in reality government action and public policy are influenced by an ongoing series of tradeoffs or compromises. For instance, an action that will meet the needs of large numbers of people may not be favored by the elite members of society. Giving the elite what they want may interfere with plans to help the poor. As pluralists argue, public policy is created as a result of competition among groups. In the end, the interests of both the elite and the people likely influence government action, and compromises will often attempt to please them both.

Since the framing of the U.S. Constitution, tradeoffs have been made between those who favor the supremacy of the central government and those who believe that state governments should be more powerful. Should state governments be able to respond to the desires of citizen groups by legalizing the use of marijuana? Should the national government be able to close businesses that sell marijuana even in states where it is legal? Should those who control the Federal Bureau of Investigation (FBI) and the National Security Agency (NSA) be allowed to eavesdrop on phone conversations of Americans and read their email? Should groups like the American Civil Liberties Union (ACLU), which protect all citizens' rights to freedom of speech, be able to prevent this?

Many of the tradeoffs made by government are about freedom of speech. The First Amendment of the Constitution gives Americans the right to express their opinions on matters of concern to them; the federal government cannot interfere with this right. Because of the Fourteenth Amendment, state governments must protect this right also. At the same time, neither the federal government nor state governments can allow someone's right to free expression to interfere with someone else's ability to exercise his or her own rights. For example, in the United States, it is legal for women to have abortions. Many people oppose this right, primarily for religious reasons, and often protest outside facilities that provide abortions. In 2007, the state of Massachusetts enacted a law that required protestors to stand thirty-five feet away from clinic entrances. The intention was to prevent women seeking abortions from being harassed or threatened with violence. Groups favoring the protection of women's reproductive rights supported the law. Groups opposed to abortion argued that the buffer zone prevented them from speaking to women to try to persuade them not to have the procedure done. In 2014, in the case of *McCullen v. Coakley*, the U.S.

Supreme Court struck down the law that created a buffer zone between protestors and clinic entrances.¹⁶ The federal government does not always side with those who oppose abortion, however. Several states have attempted to pass laws requiring women to notify their husbands, and often obtain their consent, before having an abortion. All such laws have been found unconstitutional by the courts.

Tradeoffs also occur as a result of conflict between groups representing the competing interests of citizens. Many Americans believe that the U.S. must become less dependent on foreign sources of energy. Many also would like people to have access to inexpensive sources of energy. Such people are likely to support fracking: the process of hydraulic fracturing that gives drilling companies access to natural gas trapped between layers of shale underground. Fracking produces abundant, inexpensive natural gas, a great benefit to people who live in parts of the country where it is expensive to heat homes during the winter. Fracking also creates jobs. At the same time, many scholars argue that fracking can result in the contamination of drinking water, air pollution, and increased risk of earthquakes. One study has even linked fracking to cancer. Thus, those who want to provide jobs and inexpensive natural gas are in conflict with those who wish to protect the natural environment and human health (**Figure 1.9**). Both sides are well intentioned, but they disagree over what is best for people.¹⁷



Figure 1.9 A person in Ohio protests fracking (a). An announcement of a public meeting regarding fracking illustrates what some of the tradeoffs involved with the practice might be (b). (credit a: modification of work by “ProgressOhio/Flickr”; credit b: modification of work by Martin Thomas)

Tradeoffs are especially common in the United States Congress. Members of the Senate and the House of Representatives usually vote according to the concerns of people who live in their districts. Not only does this often pit the interests of people in different parts of the country against one another, but it also frequently favors the interests of certain groups of people over the interests of others within the same state. For example, allowing oil companies to drill off the state’s coast may please those who need the jobs that will be created, but it will anger those who wish to preserve coastal lands as a refuge for wildlife and, in the event of an accident, may harm the interests of people who depend on fishing and tourism for their living. At times, House members and senators in Congress may ignore the voters in their home states and the groups that represent them in order to follow the dictates of the leaders of the political party to which they belong. For example, a member of Congress from a state with a large elderly population may be inclined to vote in favor of legislation to increase benefits for retired people; however, his or her political party leaders, who disapprove of government spending on social programs, may ask for a vote against it. The opposite can occur as well, especially in the case of a legislator soon facing re-election. With two-year terms of office, we are more likely to see House members buck their party in favor of their constituents.

Finally, the government may attempt to resolve conflicting concerns within the nation as a whole through tradeoffs. After repeated incidents of mass shootings at schools, theaters, churches, and shopping malls,

many are concerned with protecting themselves and their families from firearm violence. Some groups would like to ban the sale of automatic weapons completely. Some do not want to ban gun ownership; they merely want greater restrictions to be put in place on who can buy guns or how long people must wait between the time they enter the store to make a purchase and the time when they are actually given possession of the weapon. Others represent the interests of those who oppose any restrictions on the number or type of weapons Americans may own. So far, state governments have attempted to balance the interests of both groups by placing restrictions on such things as who can sell guns, where gun sales may take place, or requirements for background checks, but they have not attempted to ban gun sales altogether. For example, although federal law does not require private gun dealers (people who sell guns but do not derive most of their income from doing so) to conduct background checks before selling firearms to people at gun shows, some states have passed laws requiring this.¹⁸

1.3 Engagement in a Democracy

Learning Objectives

By the end of this section, you will be able to:

- Explain the importance of citizen engagement in a democracy
 - Describe the main ways Americans can influence and become engaged in government
 - Discuss factors that may affect people’s willingness to become engaged in government
-

Participation in government matters. Although people may not get all that they want, they can achieve many goals and improve their lives through civic engagement. According to the pluralist theory, government cannot function without active participation by at least some citizens. Even if we believe the elite make political decisions, participation in government through the act of voting can change who the members of the elite are.

WHY GET INVOLVED?

Are fewer people today active in politics than in the past? Political scientist Robert Putnam has argued that civic engagement is declining; although many Americans may report belonging to groups, these groups are usually large, impersonal ones with thousands of members. People who join groups such as Amnesty International or Greenpeace may share certain values and ideals with other members of the group, but they do not actually interact with these other members. These organizations are different from the types of groups Americans used to belong to, like church groups or bowling leagues. Although people are still interested in volunteering and working for the public good, they are more interested in either working individually or joining large organizations where they have little opportunity to interact with others. Putnam considers a number of explanations for this decline in small group membership, including increased participation by women in the workforce, a decrease in the number of marriages and an increase in divorces, and the effect of technological developments, such as the internet, that separate people by allowing them to feel connected to others without having to spend time in their presence.¹⁹

Putnam argues that a decline in **social capital**—“the collective value of all ‘social networks’ [those whom people know] and the inclinations that arise from these networks to do things for each other”—accompanies this decline in membership in small, interactive groups.²⁰ Included in social capital are such things as networks of individuals, a sense that one is part of an entity larger than oneself, concern for the collective good and a willingness to help others, and the ability to trust others and to work with them to find solutions to problems. This, in turn, has hurt people’s willingness and ability to engage in representative government. If Putnam is correct, this trend is unfortunate, because becoming active in government and community organizations is important for many reasons.

Link to Learning



To learn more about political engagement in the United States, read **“The Current State of Civic Engagement in America”** (<https://openstaxcollege.org//29pewrescenrep>) by the Pew Research Center.

Civic engagement can increase the power of ordinary people to influence government actions. Even those without money or connections to important people can influence the policies that affect their lives and change the direction taken by government. U.S. history is filled with examples of people actively challenging the power of elites, gaining rights for themselves, and protecting their interests. For example, slavery was once legal in the United States and large sectors of the U.S. economy were dependent on this forced labor. Slavery was outlawed and blacks were granted citizenship because of the actions of abolitionists. Although some abolitionists were wealthy white men, most were ordinary people, including men and women of both races. White women and blacks were able to actively assist in the campaign to end slavery despite the fact that, with few exceptions, they were unable to vote. Similarly, the right to vote once belonged solely to white men until the Fifteenth Amendment gave the vote to African American men. The Nineteenth Amendment extended the vote to include women, and the Voting Rights Act of 1965 made exercising the right to vote a reality for African American men and women in the South. None of this would have happened, however, without the efforts of people who marched in protest, participated in boycotts, delivered speeches, wrote letters to politicians, and sometimes risked arrest in order to be heard (**Figure 1.10**). The tactics used to influence the government and effect change by abolitionists and members of the women’s rights and African American civil rights movements are still used by many activists today.

PATHWAYS TO ENGAGEMENT

People can become civically engaged in many ways, either as individuals or as members of groups. Some forms of individual engagement require very little effort. One of the simplest ways is to stay informed about debates and events in the community, in the state, and in the nation. Awareness is the first step toward engagement. News is available from a variety of reputable sources, such as newspapers like the *New York Times*; national news shows, including those offered by the Public Broadcasting Service and National Public Radio; and reputable internet sites.

Link to Learning



Visit **Avaaz** (<https://openstaxcollege.org//29avaazorg>) and **Change.org** (<https://openstaxcollege.org//29changeorg>) for more information on current political issues.

Another form of individual engagement is to write or email political representatives. Filing a complaint with the city council is another avenue of engagement. City officials cannot fix problems if they do not know anything is wrong to begin with. Responding to public opinion polls, actively contributing to a political blog, or starting a new blog are all examples of different ways to be involved.

One of the most basic ways to engage with government as an individual is to vote (**Figure 1.11**). Individual votes do matter. City council members, mayors, state legislators, governors, and members of Congress are all chosen by popular vote. Although the president of the United States is not chosen directly by popular vote but by a group called the Electoral College, the votes of individuals in their home states determine how the Electoral College ultimately votes. Registering to vote beforehand is necessary in most states, but it is usually a simple process, and many states allow registration online. (We discuss voter registration and voter turnout in more depth in a later chapter.)



Figure 1.11 Voters line up to vote early outside an Ohio polling station in 2008. Many who had never voted before did so because of the presidential candidacy of then-senator Barack Obama. (credit: Dean Beeler)

Voting, however, is not the only form of political engagement in which people may participate. Individuals can engage by attending political rallies, donating money to campaigns, and signing petitions. Starting a petition of one's own is relatively easy, and some websites that encourage people to become involved in political activism provide petitions that can be circulated through email. Taking part in a poll or survey is

another simple way to make your voice heard.

Milestone

Votes for Eighteen-Year-Olds

Young Americans are often reluctant to become involved in traditional forms of political activity. They may believe politicians are not interested in what they have to say, or they may feel their votes do not matter. However, this attitude has not always prevailed. Indeed, today's college students can vote because of the activism of college students in the 1960s. Most states at that time required citizens to be twenty-one years of age before they could vote in national elections. This angered many young people, especially young men who could be drafted to fight the war in Vietnam. They argued that it was unfair to deny eighteen-year-olds the right to vote for the people who had the power to send them to war. As a result, the Twenty-Sixth Amendment, which lowered the voting age in national elections to eighteen, was ratified by the states and went into effect in 1971.

Are you engaged in or at least informed about actions of the federal or local government? Are you registered to vote? How would you feel if you were not allowed to vote until age twenty-one?

Some people prefer to work with groups when participating in political activities or performing service to the community. Group activities can be as simple as hosting a book club or discussion group to talk about politics. Coffee Party USA provides an online forum for people from a variety of political perspectives to discuss issues that are of concern to them. People who wish to be more active often work for political campaigns. Engaging in fundraising efforts, handing out bumper stickers and campaign buttons, helping people register to vote, and driving voters to the polls on Election Day are all important activities that anyone can engage in. Individual citizens can also join interest groups that promote the causes they favor.

Get Connected!

Getting Involved

In many ways, the pluralists were right. There is plenty of room for average citizens to become active in government, whether it is through a city council subcommittee or another type of local organization. Civic organizations always need volunteers, sometimes for only a short while and sometimes for much longer.

For example, **Common Cause** (<https://openstaxcollege.org//29comcause>) is a non-partisan organization that seeks to hold government accountable for its actions. It calls for campaign finance reform and paper verification of votes registered on electronic voting machines. Voters would then receive proof that the machine recorded their actual vote. This would help to detect faulty machines that were inaccurately tabulating votes or election fraud. Therefore, one could be sure that election results were reliable and that the winning candidate had in fact received the votes counted in their favor. Common Cause has also advocated that the Electoral College be done away with and that presidential elections be decided solely on the basis of the popular vote.

Follow-up activity: Choose one of the following websites to connect with organizations and interest groups in need of help:

- **Common Cause** (<https://openstaxcollege.org//29comcause>) ;
- **Friends of the Earth** (<https://openstaxcollege.org//29takeactcen>) which mobilizes people to protect the natural environment;
- **Grassroots International** (<https://openstaxcollege.org//29grassrootsint>) which works for global justice;
- **The Family Research Council** (<https://openstaxcollege.org//29famrescouncil>) which promotes traditional marriage and Judeo-Christian values; or
- **Eagle Forum** (<https://openstaxcollege.org//29eagleforum>) which supports greater restrictions on immigration and fewer restrictions on home schooling.

Political activity is not the only form of engagement, and many people today seek other opportunities to become involved. This is particularly true of young Americans. Although young people today often shy away from participating in traditional political activities, they do express deep concern for their communities and seek out volunteer opportunities.²¹ Although they may not realize it, becoming active in the community and engaging in a wide variety of community-based volunteer efforts are important forms of civic engagement and help government do its job. The demands on government are great, and funds do not always exist to enable it to undertake all the projects it may deem necessary. Even when there are sufficient funds, politicians have differing ideas regarding how much government should do and what areas it should be active in. Volunteers and community organizations help fill the gaps. Examples of community action include tending a community garden, building a house for Habitat for Humanity, cleaning up trash in a vacant lot, volunteering to deliver meals to the elderly, and tutoring children in after-school programs (**Figure 1.12**).



Figure 1.12 After the Southern California wildfires in 2003, sailors from the USS *Ronald Reagan* helped volunteers rebuild houses in San Pasqual as part of Habitat for Humanity. Habitat for Humanity builds homes for low-income people. (credit: Johansen Laurel, U. S. Navy)

Some people prefer even more active and direct forms of engagement such as protest marches and demonstrations, including civil disobedience. Such tactics were used successfully in the African American civil rights movement of the 1950s and 1960s and remain effective today. Likewise, the sit-ins (and sleep-ins and pray-ins) staged by African American civil rights activists, which they employed successfully to desegregate lunch counters, motels, and churches, have been adopted today by movements such as Black Lives Matter and Occupy Wall Street (**Figure 1.13**). Other tactics, such as boycotting businesses of whose policies the activists disapproved, are also still common. Along with boycotts, there are now “buycotts,” in which consumers purchase goods and services from companies that give extensively to charity, help the communities in which they are located, or take steps to protect the environment.



Figure 1.13 Volunteers fed people at New York’s Zuccotti Park during the Occupy Wall Street protest in September 2011. (credit: David Shankbone)

Link to Learning

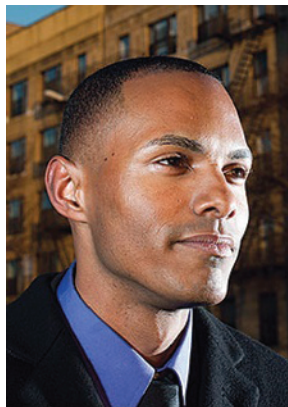


Many ordinary people have become political activists. Read “**19 Young Activists Changing America**” (<https://openstaxcollege.org//29billmoyersact>) to learn about people who are working to make people’s lives better.

Insider Perspective

Ritchie Torres

In 2013, at the age of twenty-five, Ritchie Torres became the youngest member of the New York City Council and the first gay council member to represent the Bronx (**Figure 1.14**). Torres became interested in social justice early in his life. He was raised in poverty in the Bronx by his mother and a stepfather who left the family when Torres was twelve. The mold in his family’s public housing apartment caused him to suffer from asthma as a child, and he spent time in the hospital on more than one occasion because of it. His mother’s complaints to the New York City Housing Authority were largely ignored. In high school, Torres decided to become a lawyer, participated in mock trials, and met a young and aspiring local politician named James Vacca. After graduation, he volunteered to campaign for Vacca in his run for a seat on the City Council. After Vacca was elected, he hired Torres to serve as his housing director to reach out to the community on Vacca’s behalf. While doing so, Torres took pictures of the poor conditions in public housing and collected complaints from residents. In 2013, Torres ran for a seat on the City Council himself and won. He remains committed to improving housing for the poor.²²



(a)



(b)

Figure 1.14 Ritchie Torres (a) currently serves alongside his mentor, James Vacca (b), on the New York City Council. Both men represent the Bronx.

Why don’t more young people run for local office as Torres did? What changes might they effect in their communities if they were elected to a government position?

FACTORS OF ENGAGEMENT

Many Americans engage in political activity on a regular basis. A survey conducted in 2008 revealed that approximately two-thirds of American adults had participated in some type of political action in the past year. These activities included largely non-personal activities that did not require a great deal of interaction with others, such as signing petitions, contacting elected representatives, or contributing

money to campaigns.²³

Americans aged 18–29 were less likely to become involved in traditional forms of political activity than older Americans. A 2015 poll of more than three thousand young adults by Harvard University’s Institute of Politics revealed that only 22 percent claimed to be politically engaged, and fewer than 10 percent said that they belonged to any type of political organization or had volunteered for a political campaign. Only slightly more said that they had gone to political rallies.²⁴ However, although Americans under age thirty are less likely than older Americans to engage in traditional types of political participation, many remain engaged in activities on behalf of their communities. One-third reported that they had voluntarily engaged in some form of community service in the past year.²⁵

Why are younger Americans less likely to become involved in traditional political organizations? One answer may be that as American politics become more partisan in nature, young people turn away. Committed **partisanship**, which is the tendency to identify with and to support (often blindly) a particular political party, alienates some Americans who feel that elected representatives should vote in support of the nation’s best interests instead of voting in the way their party wishes them to. When elected officials ignore all factors other than their party’s position on a particular issue, some voters become disheartened while others may become polarized. However, a recent study reveals that it is a distrust of the opposing party and not an ideological commitment to their own party that is at the heart of most partisanship among voters.²⁶

Young Americans are particularly likely to be put off by partisan politics. More Americans under the age of thirty now identify themselves as Independents instead of Democrats or Republicans (**Figure 1.15**). Instead of identifying with a particular political party, young Americans are increasingly concerned about specific issues, such as same-sex marriage.²⁷ People whose votes are determined based on single issues are unlikely to vote according to party affiliation.

The other factor involved in low youth voter turnout in the past was that younger Americans did not feel that candidates generally tackle issues relevant to their lives. When younger voters cannot relate to the issues put forth in a campaign, such as entitlements for seniors, they lose interest. This dynamic changed somewhat in 2016 as Democratic candidate Bernie Sanders made college costs an issue, even promising free college tuition for undergraduates at public institutions. Senator Sanders enjoyed intense support on college campuses across the United States. After his nomination campaign failed, this young voter enthusiasm faded. Despite the fact that Democratic nominee Hillary Clinton eventually took up the free tuition issue, young people did not flock to her as well as they had to Sanders. In the general election, won by Republican nominee Donald Trump, turnout was down and Clinton received a smaller proportion of the youth vote than President Obama had in 2012.²⁸

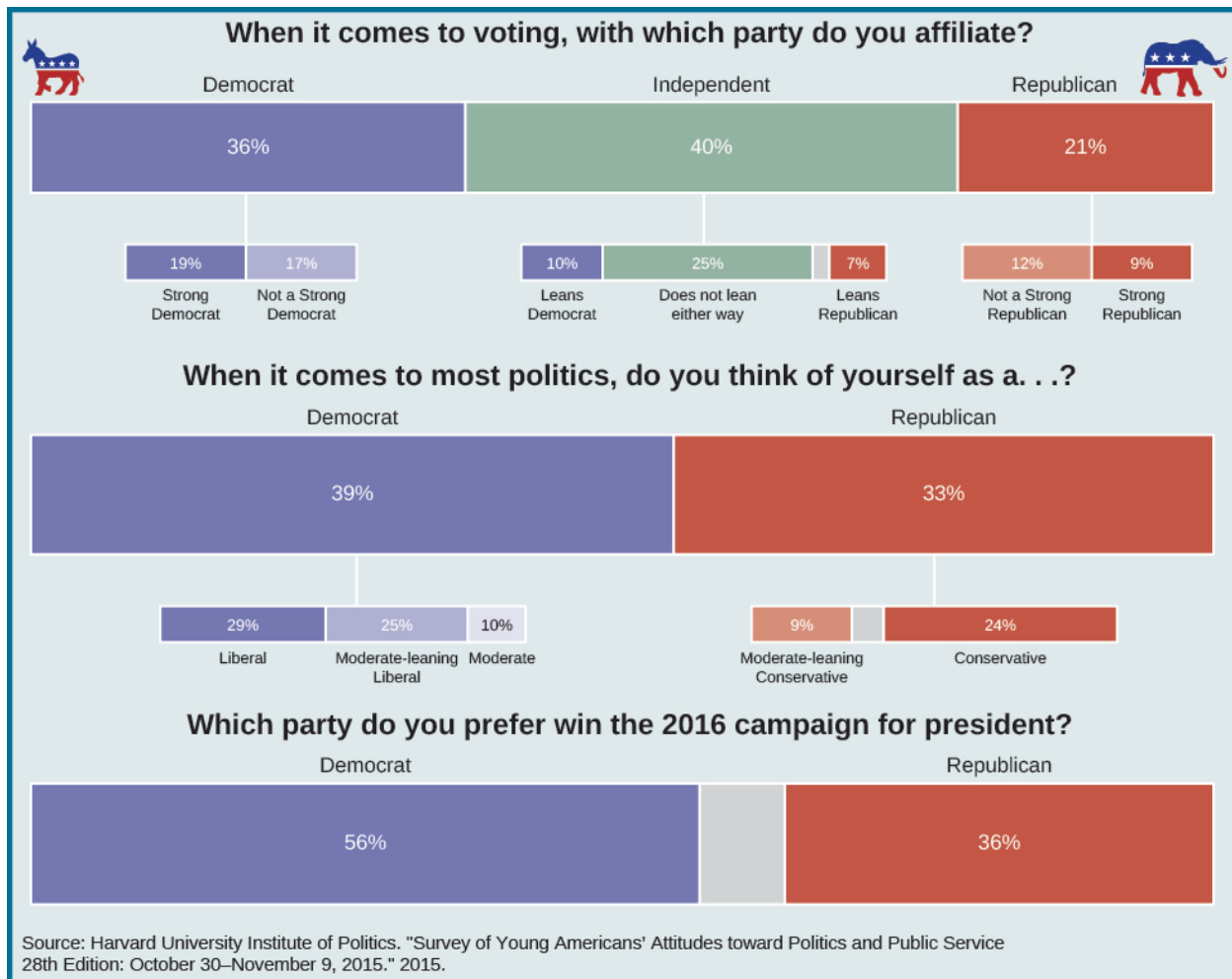


Figure 1.15 Young Americans are likely to identify as an Independent rather than a Democrat or a Republican. However, younger voters are more likely to lean in a liberal direction on issues and therefore favor the Democratic Party at the ballot box.

While some Americans disapprove of partisanship in general, others are put off by the **ideology**—established beliefs and ideals that help shape political policy—of one of the major parties. This is especially true among the young. As some members of the Republican Party have become more ideologically conservative (e.g., opposing same-sex marriage, legalization of certain drugs, immigration reform, gun control, separation of church and state, and access to abortion), those young people who do identify with one of the major parties have in recent years tended to favor the Democratic Party.²⁹ Of the Americans under age thirty who were surveyed by Harvard in 2015, more tended to hold a favorable opinion of Democrats in Congress than of Republicans, and 56 percent reported that they wanted the Democrats to win the presidency in 2016 (**Figure 1.15**). Even those young Americans who identify themselves as Republicans are more liberal on certain issues, such as being supportive of same-sex marriage and immigration reform, than are older Republicans. The young Republicans also may be more willing to see similarities between themselves and Democrats.³⁰ Once again, support for the views of a particular party does not necessarily mean that someone will vote for members of that party.

Other factors may keep even those college students who do wish to vote away from the polls. Because many young Americans attend colleges and universities outside of their home states, they may find it difficult to register to vote. In places where a state-issued ID is required, students may not have one or may be denied one if they cannot prove that they paid in-state tuition rates.³¹

The likelihood that people will become active in politics also depends not only on age but on such factors

as wealth and education. In a 2006 poll, the percentage of people who reported that they were regular voters grew as levels of income and education increased.³² Political involvement also depends on how strongly people feel about current political issues. Unfortunately, public opinion polls, which politicians may rely on when formulating policy or deciding how to vote on issues, capture only people's **latent preferences** or beliefs. Latent preferences are not deeply held and do not remain the same over time. They may not even represent a person's true feelings, since they may be formed on the spot when someone is asked a question about which he or she has no real opinion. Indeed, voting itself may reflect merely a latent preference because even people who do not feel strongly about a particular political candidate or issue vote. On the other hand, **intense preferences** are based on strong feelings regarding an issue that someone adheres to over time. People with intense preferences tend to become more engaged in politics; they are more likely to donate time and money to campaigns or to attend political rallies. The more money that one has and the more highly educated one is, the more likely that he or she will form intense preferences and take political action.³³

Key Terms

common goods goods that all people may use but that are of limited supply

democracy a form of government where political power rests in the hands of the people

direct democracy a form of government where people participate directly in making government decisions instead of choosing representatives to do this for them

elite theory claims political power rests in the hands of a small, elite group of people

government the means by which a society organizes itself and allocates authority in order to accomplish collective goals

ideology the beliefs and ideals that help to shape political opinion and eventually policy

intense preferences beliefs and preferences based on strong feelings regarding an issue that someone adheres to over time

latent preferences beliefs and preferences people are not deeply committed to and that change over time

majority rule a fundamental principle of democracy; the majority should have the power to make decisions binding upon the whole

minority rights protections for those who are not part of the majority

monarchy a form of government where one ruler, usually a hereditary one, holds political power

oligarchy a form of government where a handful of elite society members hold political power

partisanship strong support, or even blind allegiance, for a particular political party

pluralist theory claims political power rests in the hands of groups of people

political power influence over a government's institutions, leadership, or policies

politics the process by which we decide how resources will be allocated and which policies government will pursue

private goods goods provided by private businesses that can be used only by those who pay for them

public goods goods provided by government that anyone can use and that are available to all without charge

representative democracy a form of government where voters elect representatives to make decisions and pass laws on behalf of all the people instead of allowing people to vote directly on laws

social capital connections with others and the willingness to interact and aid them

toll good a good that is available to many people but is used only by those who can pay the price to do so

totalitarianism a form of government where government is all-powerful and citizens have no rights