DEMOCRACY UNDER PRESSURE

An Introduction to the American Political System
DEMOCRATS TAKE HOUSE

WHITE HOUSE CONCEDES DEFEAT; SENATE IS TIGHT; SPITZER IN ROUT; MENENDEZ AND LIEBERMAN WIN

WASHINGTON The White House conceded defeat in the House elections on Tuesday night and President George W. Bush conceded the political consequences of his policies, including what he called "a great defeat." He said it was time for the country to act together.

"The American people have spoken and the American people have spoken," Mr. Bush said Tuesday night in a speech to the nation. "We don't have a choice. We have a responsibility to move forward together."

Senator Robert Menendez of New Jersey, a Democrat, won re-election Tuesday night, completing his 3rd term in the Senate. Senator Frank Lautenberg of New Jersey, a Democrat, won re-election Tuesday night, completing his 1st term in the Senate.

For Democrats, Time to Savor Victory at Last

By JOSH POTER

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The elections were a major victory for Democrats, who won 52 seats in the House, increasing their majority to 232-202, and a majority in the Senate, with 51 seats to 49, after counting 400 races.

Clinton and Democrats Sweep Top Contests in New York State:

In results from all five contests, Clinton won every major race.

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THE MIDTERM CONGRESSIONAL elections of 2006 were enveloped in far more drama—and political importance—than usually occurs in a year when there is no presidential contest.

To many voters, the congressional elections were, in a sense, a referendum on the presidency of George W. Bush. Across America, as the leaves turned to the burnished colors of autumn, the candidates of both parties were intensely aware of the president’s record and his weak standing in the polls. Some Republican candidates distanced themselves from Bush. They did not welcome him to campaign alongside them in their districts, fearing that his low approval ratings might do them more harm than good.

Public opinion polls indicated that the war in Iraq was central to voters’ concerns. American casualties had passed the 2,700 mark a little more than a month before the election, and the roadside explosive devices, suicide car bombs, and carnage as Sunni and Shiite groups fought each other were a daily horror show on the evening news and the Internet. A scandal that broke in late September added to the Republicans’ woes when it was disclosed that Mark Foley, a Republican congressman from Florida, had sent sexually explicit e-mails to underage House pages.

On Election Day, the Democrats won control of both the House and the Senate for the first time in 12 years. Riding a nationwide tide—much of it driven by disillusion with the war in Iraq—the Democrats gained six seats in the Senate, to win control, 51– 49. Many races were extremely close, and the outcome in Virginia, which decided control of the Senate, was not known for two days. In the House, the Democrats appeared to have gained twenty-nine
House seats, for a new lineup of 230 Democrats to 195 Republicans, with ten seats still undecided a week after the election.

The results meant that in his last two years in office President Bush would face a Congress controlled by the opposition party—and able to investigate the administration and Republican scandals in the months leading up to the 2008 presidential election.

In the months before the 2006 elections, other factors appeared to work to the advantage of the Democrats. More than 1700 people had died and hundreds of thousands were made homeless by Hurricane Katrina, which struck New Orleans and the Gulf Coast in 2005; Bush had announced, “I am responsible” for the slow and inadequate reaction to the disaster by the federal government.1

And the public had a low opinion of the Republican-controlled Congress. A Gallup Poll in September 2006 reported that 63 percent of those questioned did not approve “of the way Congress is handling its job.”2 Nor was corruption in Congress confined to the Foley scandal; the activities of lobbyist Jack Abramoff cast a cloud over other members and led to a federal investigation.

Gasoline prices had topped $3 a gallon in August, dismaying motorists. Although the prices at the pump had dropped suddenly in the weeks before the election, gas remained more than $2 a gallon on average, still higher than when Bush was elected for a second term as president two years earlier.

That contest in 2004 also took place against a backdrop of war in Iraq and the continuing threat of terrorism at home. Bush, the Republican president, had successfully persuaded the voters that he was the best person to defend the nation against terrorists; in his campaign...
Excerpt of a letter from Army Pfc. Jesse A. Givens, 34, of Springfield, Missouri. Private Givens was killed May 1, 2003, when his tank fell into the Euphrates River after the bank on which he was parked gave way. This letter was written to be delivered to his family if he died. Melissa is his wife, Dakota his 6-year-old stepson, and Bean the name he used for his son, Carson, who was born May 29.

My family,
I never thought that I would be writing a letter like this. I really don’t know where to start. I’ve been getting bad feelings, though and, well, if you are reading this. . . .

The happiest moments in my life all deal with my little family. I will always have with me the small moments we all shared. The moments when you quit taking life so serious and smiled. The sounds of a beautiful boy’s laughter or the simple nudge of a baby unborn. You will never know how complete you have made me. You saved me from loneliness and taught me how to think beyond myself. You taught me how to live and to love. You opened my eyes to a world I never dreamed existed.

Dakota . . . you taught me how to care until it hurts, you taught me how to smile again. You taught me that life isn’t so serious and sometimes you just have to play. You have a big, beautiful heart. Through life you need to keep it open and follow it. Never be afraid to be yourself. I will always be there in our park

when you dream so we can play. I love you, and hope someday you will understand why I didn’t come home. Please be proud of me.

Bean, I never got to see you but I know in my heart you are beautiful. I know you will be strong and big-hearted like your mom and brother. I will always have with me the feel of the soft nudges on your mom’s belly, and the joy I felt when I found out you were on your way. I love you, Bean.

Melissa, I have never been as blessed as the day I met you. You are my angel, soulmate, wife, lover and best friend. I am sorry. I did not want to have to write this letter. There is so much more I need to say, so much more I need to share. A lifetime’s worth. I married you for a million lifetimes. That’s how long I will be with you. Please keep my babies safe. Please find it in your heart to forgive me for leaving you alone. . . . Teach our babies to live life to the fullest, tell yourself to do the same.

I will always be there with you, Melissa. I will always want you, need you and love you, in my heart, my mind and my soul. Do me a favor, after you tuck the children in. Give them hugs and kisses from me. Go outside and look at the stars and count them. Don’t forget to smile.

Love Always,
Your husband,
Jess


Both Bush and his national security adviser, Condoleezza Rice, invoked images of a “mushroom cloud,” a nuclear attack that might be unleashed at any moment on the United States. “The first time we may be completely certain he has a—nuclear weapons is when, God forbids, he uses one,” Bush told the United Nations the following month.

The president spelled out a new strategy of preemptive war, under which the United States, when faced with “imminent danger,” would, “if necessary, act preemptively.”

At first, the war seemed to be over quickly; in three weeks, American forces were in Baghdad, the Iraqi capital, pulling down the statue of Saddam Hussein. On May 1, 2003, President Bush in a flight suit famously landed on the aircraft carrier U.S.S. Abraham Lincoln off San Diego and announced—in front of a banner that read “Mission Accomplished”—that “major combat operations in Iraq have ended.”

But in the aftermath of the U.S. invasion, no weapons of mass destruction were found in Iraq. And American troops were being killed almost every day by roadside bombs and rocket-propelled grenades.

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In April 2004, for the first time, public support for the war dropped below 50 percent. Critics of the administration questioned whether Iraq had become a “quagmire” comparable to the Vietnam War of the 1960s.

Although the critics contended that the conflict in Iraq was a diversion from the war on terrorism, President Bush argued that his decision to invade Iraq flowed directly from the 9/11 attacks on America.

The terrorists had struck on a perfect September day. The cloudless skies over New York and Washington were bright blue, the sun sparkling. Then, at 8:46 a.m. on September 11, 2001, a Boeing 767 jetliner slammed into the north tower of the World Trade Center in lower Manhattan.

It seemed like a terrible accident until 17 minutes later when a second jetliner, also heavily laden with fuel, struck the south tower. The world watched in horror on television as smoke billowed from the towers and a number of people, trapped by flames on the high floors, leaped to their deaths.

In Washington at 9:37 a.m. a third airliner crashed into the Pentagon. In New York at 9:58 a.m. the south tower of the Trade Center collapsed.

At 10:03 a.m. a fourth jetliner, apparently with the White House as its target, crashed in western Pennsylvania after courageous passengers struggled with the hijackers. Then at 10:28 a.m., the north tower of the Trade Center collapsed. Almost 3,000 people died, including office workers unable to escape from the two towers, hundreds of firefighters, dozens of police, all the passengers and crew members of the four airliners, and the terrorists who had seized control of the planes.

In 1 hour and 40 minutes, America was changed forever. Nineteen hijackers of Middle Eastern origin, 15 from Saudi Arabia, had carried out the suicide attack on America. Many observers compared it to the Japanese attack on Pearl Harbor on December 7, 1941, that led the United States to enter the Second World War.

The attack on 9/11 had an enormous and far-reaching effect on America’s government and politics, on its foreign and military policies, and on the economy. Few aspects of American life were untouched by the terrible events of those few minutes in September.
In big ways and small, America would never be the same. The change was felt all the way from airline passengers being asked to remove their shoes so screeners could check for hidden weapons or explosives, to the creation of a vast new cabinet agency, the Department of Homeland Security.

For the first time, ordinary Americans realized how vulnerable the nation and its infrastructure were to terrorist acts. Its cities, airports, bridges, tunnels, dams, power plants, communications, transportation, and computer networks—all were potential targets.

Osama bin Laden, a wealthy Saudi terrorist, and his al Qaeda network were quickly pinpointed by Washington as the leader and the organization responsible for the attacks of 9/11. Nine days later, President Bush stood before a joint session of Congress and launched the “war on terror.”

Any nation “that continues to harbor or support terrorism” would be regarded as a hostile regime, he warned. He denounced the Taliban rulers of Afghanistan, the country where bin Laden and his training camps were based. He was careful to target “Islamic extremism” as the enemy, not Muslims or Arabs in general. He demanded that Afghanistan surrender bin Laden. He also announced the appointment of Pennsylvania governor Tom Ridge to head a new White House Office of Homeland Security, which became a cabinet department in January 2003.

Only 10 months before the 9/11 attacks, Bush, a Republican, had won a disputed presidential election with fewer popular votes than his Democratic rival, Al Gore. When Bush was the governor of Texas, he had little experience in foreign policy, and as a candidate, and even later as president, he was lampooned by cartoonists and
on the television show *Saturday Night Live* as frivolous and less than brilliant. But that night after the attack on America, in his speech to Congress, he seemed to step into the mantle of the presidency for the first time. He spoke forcefully and well. His approval ratings soared, and it would be almost a year before Democrats dared to criticize his leadership. For a time, at least, the country, angry and reeling from the attacks, united behind the president and his war on terrorism.

Even as Bush spoke, U.S. forces were moving into the region around Afghanistan. By early October 2001, American bombers and cruise missiles were pounding that country. Later that month, American special forces, joined by the anti-Taliban Northern Alliance, were fighting inside Afghanistan. By mid-November Kabul, the capital, fell. In December, U.S. warplanes bombed a complex of caves near Tora Bora, in the mountains of eastern Afghanistan where bin Laden was thought to be hiding. By December 16, the war was largely over. Many of the Taliban leaders and al Qaeda fighters were reported to have fled over the border into Pakistan. Hundreds of al Qaeda prisoners were captured during the war, but Osama bin Laden was not among them.

President Bush and other senior officials warned, however, that the battle against terrorism would continue and might lead to the deployment of American forces to other countries where terrorists were active. And a little over a year later, U.S. troops invaded Iraq. A series of color-coded threat warnings by the Department of Homeland Security reminded Americans of the continuing risk of more attacks against targets in the United States. Some critics assailed the color-coded warnings as too general and too vague to be useful to the public.

By the 2006 midterm election, the political landscape had changed dramatically. Only six years earlier, the world had seemed a very different and less dangerous place.

In 2000, America began a new century as the strongest democracy on the planet. On November 7, its citizens went to the polls to choose a new president of the United States and a new Congress to lead the nation into the future.

But as the dawn broke the next morning, America was stunned to learn that the contest was not over. There was no clear winner because the crucial result in Florida hung in the balance. Nationwide, Vice President Al Gore was ahead of Texas Governor George W. Bush in the popular vote by a thin margin, but Bush was slightly ahead in Florida, where the state’s 25 electoral votes would determine who became the next president. Teams of lawyers descended on the Sunshine State, the Democrats demanding a hand recount in four largely Democratic counties.

Florida’s highest court ordered a partial vote recount. But the Bush campaign appealed to the U.S. Supreme Court, which halted the recount. Then in a historic decision on December 12, a bitterly divided U.S. Supreme Court ruled 5–4 for Bush, declaring that because the recount lacked uniform standards it was unconstitutional.

Finally, it was official: George W. Bush was the next president of the United States. Bush carried 30 states with 271 electoral votes; Gore won 20 states and the District of Columbia with 267 electoral votes. In the popular vote, however, Gore ran ahead of Bush, 51,003,894 to 50,459,211. Ralph Nader, the Green Party candidate, received 2,834,410 votes, but because he did not carry any state, he won no electoral votes. Pat Buchanan, the Reform Party candidate, won 446,743 votes and, like Nader, won no electoral votes.

The Republicans held on to their majority in the House, but the Senate was equally divided, with 50 Re-
publicans and 50 Democrats. Only seven months later, however, in May 2001, Senator James M. Jeffords of Vermont left the Republican Party and became an independent, giving the Democrats control of the Senate by one vote until the 2002 midterm election, when Republicans regained control of the Senate and maintained their majority in the House.

Before Bush’s election in 2000, the Democrats had captured the White House for eight years under Bill Clinton, who was elected in 1992 and again in 1996. Two years later, however, the House impeached the president, accusing him of lying to a federal grand jury about his affair with a young White House intern, Monica Lewinsky, and obstructing justice. Tried by the Senate early in 1999, Clinton was found not guilty by a vote that fell well short of the two-thirds needed to convict. But the many months of scandal had tarnished the president’s reputation.

Nevertheless, and despite his personal difficulties, Clinton’s approval rating as president remained remarkably high. Voters seemed willing to distinguish between his personal foibles and his performance in office. As a candidate for president in 1992, Clinton had promised to end the unpopular federal welfare program, and in 1996 he signed a Republican-sponsored bill to restructure the program. He had eliminated the federal budget deficit and transformed it into a huge surplus. And he had presided over an unprecedented period of economic expansion.

Clinton and his successor, George W. Bush, led the United States during a time of change. The Cold War that had held the world hostage since the end of the Second World War had ended in 1991 when the Soviet Union, the Communist superpower, collapsed. The threat
of nuclear war between the United States and Russia, which still possessed nuclear missiles, had diminished, but other nations had become nuclear powers, notably India, Pakistan, and North Korea. As a result, the world was not free of the danger of a nuclear conflict. And the risks faced during the years of the Cold War were replaced by the newer peril of terrorist attacks. Political leaders in the United States and other Western countries worried that terrorists might acquire nuclear, biological, or chemical weapons.

At home, millions of Americans, many more than in the past, had invested in the stock market, especially in mutual funds. But by the fall of 2000 a number of major Internet companies had suffered financial setbacks. The “dot-com” firms that had appeared so glamorous only months earlier suddenly seemed a mirage. In the wake of 9/11 the Dow Jones industrial average and the NASDAQ index dropped sharply, and in the months that followed many small investors lost some or all of the savings they had counted on for their retirement.

Investor confidence was shaken even further by a series of corporate and accounting scandals. First, Enron, a giant Texas-based energy trader, collapsed and the previously respected accounting firm, Arthur Andersen, Enron’s outside auditor, was convicted of obstruction of justice. Other major corporations were revealed to have engaged in questionable practices to inflate earnings, especially the giant telecommunications firm WorldCom, which had concealed more than $7 billion in expenses. By midsummer of 2002, the corporate scandals had contributed to a steep slide in the stock market. The market recovered somewhat in 2003, but remained volatile in 2004.

Even aside from the scandals, the American corporate culture had undergone vast changes. The traditional belief that workers or managers could toil loyally for one company for all of their careers, and be rewarded with a gold watch and a dependable pension, was proving to be no longer true. Many workers found that their 401(k) retirement plans, heavily invested in stocks, had shrunk disastrously.

Despite economic gains in some industries, there were continuing economic problems as well. In several areas of the country, smokestack industries had declined sharply, resulting in dislocation and hardship for the blue-collar workers who were laid off or dismissed in the steel, automobile, and other plants. Many white-collar employees found themselves out of work as well, sometimes as a result of corporate mergers and dot-com failures, but increasingly because jobs had migrated overseas, to China, South Asia, and Latin America, where American firms paid much lower wages to foreign workers.

Globalization—the increasingly interconnected worldwide economy—and trade competition from Asia and other industrialized nations meant that the United States was no longer assured of economic preeminence
in the world. Opponents of globalization protested that it led to the exploitation of cheap labor in poor countries and damaged the environment.

Racial divisions, despite outward progress, continued to exist in America. In several cities, for example, what appeared to be racially motivated shootings had cost innocent lives.

Even before September 11, 2001, terrorism, both homegrown and foreign, had come to America. In New York City, Islamic terrorists bombed the World Trade Center in 1993, killing six people and injuring more than 1,000. On April 19, 1995, the federal building in Oklahoma City was destroyed by a truck bomb, killing 168 people. Two Americans, Timothy McVeigh and Terry Nichols, who had served in the same Army unit, were convicted for that crime, and McVeigh was executed. Armed militia groups, although small in number, were deeply suspicious of government. Some of these groups were identified with white supremacist views and spouted hatred over the Internet.

America was grappling as well with a host of domestic challenges, including the rising costs of health care, the uncertain quality of public education, and the interlocking problems of crime, drugs, poverty, and homelessness—problems often particularly acute in the inner cities.

There were other changes in the shape of American politics. Congress in 2002 passed a new campaign finance law that sought to curb the hundreds of millions of dollars of unregulated “soft money” flowing into both major parties from corporations, unions, and wealthy donors. The new law banned contributions of soft money to national political parties and placed restrictions on the use of such funds to broadcast “issue ads” in federal elections. Predictably, however, political parties and candidates were scrambling to find new ways to use soft money.

Special interest groups, often well financed and supporting a single issue, had become powerful actors in the nation’s politics. Often such groups contributed to political candidates through political action committees (PACs), which had grown in number and influence even though a few candidates declined to accept PAC money. Other trends were visible: to some, the nation’s political parties appeared to be declining in importance, and public confidence in the institutions of government was relatively low.

Well before the wars in Afghanistan and Iraq, in the post–Cold War era, the United States found itself called upon to intervene in local or regional conflicts or for hu-
manitarian purposes. In the early 1990s, President Clinton sent American troops to Haiti and Bosnia. In 1999, through the NATO alliance, U.S. warplanes bombed Yugoslavia repeatedly for more than two months after that country’s armed forces had invaded Kosovo. As president, Clinton several times brokered attempts to achieve peace between Israel and the Palestinians in the volatile Middle East. President George W. Bush also found himself drawn into diplomatic efforts to bring peace in the region after Israel, responding to repeated suicide bombings of civilians, sent troops and tanks into Palestinian towns.

American influence and military power, while still enormous, did not always seem capable of achieving long-range goals. The first President Bush had dispatched half a million troops to the Persian Gulf; in the brief war fought early in 1991, the American military forced Iraq’s dictator, Saddam Hussein, to withdraw from Kuwait. But for 12 more years, Saddam remained in power in Iraq.

In 2003, President George W. Bush, the son of the 41st president, sent the American military into Iraq; U.S. forces toppled Saddam’s government, then hunted down and captured the brutal dictator. But Iraq, fragmented into rival ethnic and religious groups, remained in turmoil in 2006, with American and allied troops under steady attack by well-armed insurgents. It remained unclear whether America’s enormous military might could ultimately succeed in imposing democracy at the point of a gun. Iraqis may have disliked Saddam, who ruled by fear, but many were also resentful of an occupying power.

Since the 1960s, America had passed through a long
and extraordinarily turbulent period of assassination, civil unrest, war, abuse of presidential power, and economic hardship. The murder of President John F. Kennedy in 1963 had been followed by explosions of anger in the black areas of the nation’s cities, the assassination of Dr. Martin Luther King and Robert F. Kennedy, eight years of war in Vietnam, the Watergate scandal—when burglars working for the Republican president’s reelection campaign broke into Democratic Party headquarters—and the resulting resignation and pardon of Richard Nixon. Then came the seizure in Iran of American hostages, periodic inflation, high unemployment, economic recession, and the Iran-contra scandal—in which President Ronald Reagan’s administration sought to trade American arms for hostages in the Middle East. This was followed by the Persian Gulf War, the impeachment of President Clinton, and the September 11 terrorist attacks.

The swirling currents of these events brought change not only to America but to the way Americans perceived their government and their political system. Many voters professed to see little difference between the major parties, and expressed little faith in politicians.

Even before the Reagan years, many liberals and conservatives alike had questioned the effectiveness of government solutions to some social problems. Five decades earlier, President Franklin D. Roosevelt had ushered in an era of great social reform through federal government programs. John F. Kennedy and Lyndon B. Johnson had followed in his path. But many of the programs of Johnson’s “Great Society” had not worked as their architects had envisioned, and in 1980 Reagan successfully assailed the “bureaucracy” and the government in Washington.

There were continuing signs of change. In 1984, Geraldine Ferraro was the Democratic candidate for vice president, the first woman to be nominated for that office by a major political party. In 1996 many people, white and black, had hoped that former general Colin Powell, an African American, would run for president. In 2000, Joseph I. Lieberman became the first person of Jewish faith to be named to a major party presidential
By that year, more women, more African Americans, and more Hispanics had been elected to Congress and sat in the cabinet and on the Supreme Court. Beyond the policies of any particular president, broader questions were raised by the problems the nation had experienced over the past several decades.

A key question may be asked: After more than 200 years, was the American political system capable of meeting the social and economic needs of the people and preserving the national security?

There are many other questions to consider. How has the continuing threat of terrorism changed the quality of life in the post-9/11 United States? Were the nation’s institutions gridlocked and too slow to change with the times? Could America’s industries maintain a high level of employment and still remain competitive with other nations? At the same time, could Americans preserve the environment? In a multicultural society, with minority groups increasing in numbers, could Americans learn to overcome racial divisions and live in harmony? Was the American democracy still workable, even though it had been subjected to unusual pressures?

These and other questions will be explored in this book, but first it might be useful to examine the general relationship between people and government in a democratic system.

**The Reciprocal Nature of Democratic Power**

In July 1945 a small group of scientists stood atop a hill near Alamogordo, New Mexico, and watched the first atomic bomb explode in the desert. At that instant the traditional power of government to alter the lives of people took on a terrifying new dimension. With the onset of the nuclear age and the later development of intercontinental ballistic missiles (ICBMs), people lived less than 30 minutes away from possible destruction. That is all the time it would take for ICBMs to reach their targets, destroying whole cities and perhaps entire nations. As already noted, with the collapse of the Soviet Union in 1991 and the end of the Cold War, these concerns diminished considerably, but they have not disappeared. Many of the missiles were still in their silos in the United States, Russia, and China. Several other powers possessed nuclear weapons, and a number of smaller countries were trying to acquire them. By 2004, North Korea was reported to have perhaps as many as eight nuclear bombs. The threat of a nuclear war between India and Pakistan remained.

At the height of the Cold War, when America and...
the Soviet Union faced each other as hostile superpowers, the president of the United States was often described as a person with his finger “on the nuclear button.” The existence of such chilling terminology, and of nuclear weapons, reflects the increasingly complex, technological, computerized nature of the world in which Americans live. As the country has changed through the development of science, technology, and industrialization, government has changed along with it. Government has expanded and grown more complex; it is called on to perform more and more tasks.

The Impact of Government on People

Obviously, government can affect the lives of students or other citizens by sending them overseas to fight in a war in which they may be killed. Less obvious, perhaps, are the ways in which government pervades most aspects of daily life, sometimes down to minute details. For example, the federal government regulates the amount of windshield that the wipers on a car must cover and even the speed of the windshield wipers. (At the fast setting, wipers must go “at least 45 cycles per minute.”)

In the United States, “government” is extraordinarily complicated. There are federal, state, and local layers of government, metropolitan areas, commissions, authorities, boards and councils, and quasi-governmental bodies. Many of the units of government overlap. And all affect the lives of individuals.

The Impact of People on Government

Just as government affects people, people affect government. The American system of government is based on the concept that power flows from the people to the government. Thomas Jefferson expressed this eloquently when he wrote in the Declaration of Independence that “to secure these rights, Governments are instituted among men, deriving their just powers from the consent of the governed.” Abraham Lincoln expressed the same thought in his Gettysburg Address, speaking of “government of the people, by the people, for the people.”

These are ideals, statements embodying the principles of democracy. As we note at many points in this book, the principles do not always mesh with the practices. Yet, it remains true that if government in the United States has real and often awesome powers over people, at the same time people—both individuals and
the mass of citizens together—can have considerable power over the government.

The reciprocal nature of democratic power is a basic element of the American political system. As V. O. Key, Jr., the distinguished Harvard political scientist, put it: "The power relationship is reciprocal, and the subject may affect the ruler more profoundly than the ruler affects the subject." There are several ways that people influence government.

**Voting** The first and most important power of the people in America is the right to vote in free elections to choose those who govern. At regular intervals, the people may, in the classic phrase of Horace Greeley, the 19th-century journalist and politician, "turn the rascals out." The fact that a president, member of Congress, governor, mayor, or school board member may want to stand for reelection influences his or her performance in office. The knowledge of officials that they serve at the pleasure of the voters usually tends to make those officials sensitive to public opinion.

But isn’t one person’s vote insignificant when millions are cast? Not necessarily. That the individual’s vote does matter even in a nation as big as the United States has been illustrated many times in close presidential elections—including in 2000 when George W. Bush carried Florida by a mere 537 votes and was awarded the election.

Presidents are elected by electoral votes, but these are normally cast by the electors in each state for the candidate who wins the most popular votes in the state. Each state has a number of electors and electoral votes equal to its number of senators and representatives in Congress. (See the description of the electoral college in Chapter 11.) In 1960 a shift from John F. Kennedy to Richard M. Nixon of only 9,421 voters in Illinois and Missouri would have prevented either candidate from gaining a majority in the electoral college. In 1968 and 1976, shifts of relatively small numbers of voters in a few states would have changed the outcomes of the presidential elections in those years. In 2000, a shift in Florida of 269 votes from George W. Bush to Gore would have given that state, and the presidency, to the Democratic candidate.

**Party Activity** Political parties are basic to the American system of government because they provide a vehicle for competition and choice. Without that, “free elections” would be meaningless. For the most part the two-party system has predominated in the United States. Since candidates for public office, even at the presidential level, are usually selected by their parties, people can influence government, and the choice of who governs, by participating in party activities. Whether political campaigns offer meaningful alternatives on the issues depends in part on who is nominated. And that in turn may be influenced by how many people are politically active. Political participation can take many forms, from ringing doorbells to running for local party committees or for public office.

for more information about the two major political parties, see: http://www.democrats.org and http://www.gop.com
Public Opinion  Candidates and elected officials are sensitive to what the public is thinking. This has been particularly true since the Second World War, when sophisticated methods of political polling and statistical analysis were developed. But citizens do not have to wait around to be polled. They can make their opinions felt in a variety of ways: by voting and participating in political activities, talking to other people, writing or sending e-mails or faxes to their representatives in Congress, telephoning the members of their city council, writing to their newspapers, or testifying at public hearings. Even by reading the newspapers and watching television news broadcasts (or by not doing those things), people may indirectly influence government. A citizen who carefully follows public issues in the news media and magazines of opinion may help to influence government, since a government is less likely to attempt to mislead when it knows it is dealing with an informed public.

Interest Groups  When people belong to groups that share common attitudes and make these views felt, or when they organize such groups, they may be influencing government. These private associations, or interest groups, may be business and professional organizations, unions, racial and religious groups, or organizations of groups such as farmers or veterans. An interest group does not have to be an organized body. Students, for example, constitute a highly vocal interest group, even when they do not belong to a formal student organization.

Direct Action  At various times in American history, people have sought to influence government by civil disobedience and sometimes by militant or violent action. In the late 1960s and early 1970s, for example, some civil rights leaders and student activists practiced “the politics of confrontation.” The idea of direct and often disruptive action to achieve political ends appeared to have grown in part out of the civil rights movement (beginning with peaceful “sit-ins” to desegregate lunch counters in the South) and in part out of the organized opposition to the war in Vietnam. Demonstrations, marches, sit-ins, campus strikes, picketing, and protest characterized those years.

With the end of the war in Vietnam, this type of direct political action diminished considerably, but it has by no means disappeared. In the early 1990s, pro-life groups sought to prevent women from having abortions by blocking access to clinics. (This tactic was prohibited by a federal law enacted in 1994.) Protesters in Seattle disrupted meetings of the World Trade Organization in 1999, to advocate greater protection for the environment and workers. In 2000, thousands of people participated in the Million Mom March in Washington to call for stronger gun control laws. In the spring of 2004, hundreds of thousands of people gathered on the mall in the capital for the March for Women’s Lives, a rally to support the right of women to choose to have an abortion.

Over the years, farmers have demonstrated in Washington for government assistance, and antiabortion groups, peace activists, gay men and women, and others have held rallies on the mall in the nation’s capital to focus attention on their goals.
What Is Government?

The words “government,” “politics,” “power,” and “democracy” ought to be clearly defined. The difficulty is that political scientists, philosophers, and kings have never been able to agree entirely on the meanings of these terms.

The ancient Greek philosopher Plato and his pupil Aristotle speculated on their meaning, and the process has continued up to the present day. Bearing in mind that no universal or perfect definitions exist, we can still discuss the words and arrive at a general concept of what they mean.

Government

Even in a primitive society, some form of government exists. A tribal chief emerges with authority over others and makes decisions, perhaps in consultation with the elders of the tribe. The tribal leader is governing.

Government, then, even in a modern industrial state, can be defined on a simple level as the individuals, institutions, and processes that make the rules for society and possess the power to enforce them. But rules for what? To take an example, if private developers wish to acquire a wildlife preserve for commercial use, and environmental groups protest, government may be called on to settle the dispute. In short, government makes rules to decide who gets what of valued things in a society.* It attempts to resolve conflicts among individuals and groups.

David Easton, a political scientist at the University of Chicago, has written:

Even in the smallest and simplest society someone must intervene in the name of society, with its authority behind him, to decide how differences over valued things are to be resolved. This authoritative allocation of values is a minimum prerequisite of any society. . . . Every society provides some mechanisms, however rudimentary they may be, for authoritatively resolving differences about the ends that are to be pursued, that is, for deciding who is to get what there is of the desirable things.  

Easton’s concept has come to be broadly accepted by many scholars today. In highly developed societies the principal mechanism for resolving differences is government. Government makes binding rules for society that determine the distribution of valued things.

Politics

Benjamin Disraeli, the 19th-century British prime minister and novelist, wrote in Endymion that “politics are the possession and distribution of power.”

Disraeli’s definition of politics comes very close to our definition of government. Disraeli was ahead of his time, for many political scientists today would agree in general with his definition, and they would add that there is little difference between politics and government.

For example, V. O. Key, Jr., equated politics with “the process and practice of ruling” and the “workings of governments generally, their impact on the governed, their manner of operation, the means by which governors attain and retain authority.” In other words, politics may be defined as the pursuit and exercise of power.

Such a definition might be confusing to those Americans who tend to look at politics as the pursuit of power, and government as the exercise of power. The conventional notion is that people engage in politics to get elected. But, in fact, those who govern are constantly making political decisions. It is very difficult to say where government ends and politics begins. The two terms overlap and intertwine, even if their meanings are not precisely the same.*

Power

Power is the possession of control over others. People have sought for centuries to understand the basis of power, why it exists, and how it is maintained. Authority over others is a tenuous business, as many a deposed South American dictator can attest.

A century ago, Boss Tweed, the leader of Tammany Hall, the Democratic Party machine in New York City, reportedly expressed a simple, cynical philosophy: “The way to have power is to take it.” But once acquired, power must be defended against others who desire it. For seven years Nikita Khushchev appeared to be the unquestioned ruler of the Soviet Union. One day in October 1964, he was summoned back to Moscow from his Black Sea vacation retreat and informed by his colleagues in the Presidium of the Communist Party that he was no longer premier of the Soviet Union. It was reported that those who deposed him changed all the confidential government and party telephone numbers in Moscow so that Khushchev could not attempt to rally support among elements still loyal to him. Khushchev was

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* Of course, the word “politics” can also refer to a process that occurs in a wide variety of nongovernmental settings—in fact, in every form of social organization where different people, with competing goals and differing objectives, interact. Thus, one sometimes speaks of politics in the local PTA, the politics of a garden club, or the politics in the newsroom of a campus newspaper. In this book, however, we are talking about politics as it is more commonly understood, in its governmental setting.

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helpless, cut off from the tremendous power that was his only 24 hours before.

The coup against Khrushchev had its echo more than 25 years later when a group of hard-liners in the Kremlin tried to overthrow Mikhail Gorbachev in August 1991 while the Soviet leader was vacationing—again at a dacha on the Black Sea. The coup failed, thanks to the intervention of Russia’s president, Boris Yeltsin, who mounted a tank to defy the coup plotters. But four months later, Gorbachev resigned, the Soviet Union broke up, and Yeltsin emerged as the most influential leader of the former Soviet republics.

It is a truism that power often destroys those who hold it. Lord Acton, the 19th-century British peer and historian, said that “power tends to corrupt and absolute power corrupts absolutely.” The 18th-century French philosopher Montesquieu expressed a similar idea in The Spirit of the Laws: “Every man who has power is impelled to abuse it.”

As Key has observed, power is not something that can be “poured into a keg, stored, and drawn upon as the need arises.” Power, Key notes, is relational—that is, it involves the interactions between the person who exercises power and those affected by that exercise of power.

If people, even in a primitive state, find it necessary to accept rulers who can authoritatively decide who gets what, then it follows that those who govern possess and exercise power in part because of their position. In other words, power follows office. To some extent, we accept the power exercised over us by others because we recognize the need to be governed.

**Democracy**

Democracy is a word that comes from two Greek roots, *demos*, “the populace,” and *kratia*, “rule”—taken together, “rule by the people.”

The Greeks used the term to describe the government of Athens and other Greek city-states that flourished in the 5th century B.C. In his famous *Funeral Oration*, Pericles, the Athenian statesman, declared: “Our constitution is named a democracy, because it is in the hands not of the few, but of the many.” To the ancient
Greeks, therefore, democracy meant government by the mass of people, as distinguished from rule by those with special rank or status.

All governments make decisions about the distribution of valued things. As was noted earlier, in a democratic government, power, in theory, flows from the people as a whole. This is one of the ideals on which the American democracy was founded. But the United States is too big for every citizen to take part in the deliberations of government, as in ancient Athens, so the distinction is sometimes made that America is a representative democracy, rather than a direct one. Leaders are elected to speak for and represent the people. Thus, the United States can also be described as a republic, a form of government in which the people are sovereign but their power is exercised by their elected representatives.

Government by the people also carries with it the notion of majority rule, a concept of government by the people in which everyone is free to vote, but normally whoever gets the most votes wins the election and represents all the people, including those who voted for the losing candidate. But in a system that is truly democratic, minority rights and views are also recognized and protected.

Every schoolchild knows the phrase from the Declaration of Independence: “We hold these truths to be self-evident, that all men are created equal.” The concept of equality—that all people are of equal worth, even if not of equal ability—is also basic to American democracy. So are basic rights such as freedom of speech, press, religion, and assembly; the right to vote; and the right to dissent from majority opinion. The idea of individual dignity and the importance of each individual is another concept basic to American democracy. And, American government is constitutional—the power of government is limited by a framework of fundamental written law. Under such a government—in theory—the police power of the state should not be used illegally to punish individuals or to repress dissent.

These are the ideals, noble, even beautiful, in their conception. But, this is not always what really happens. African Americans and other minorities are still struggling for full equality; the police sometimes have their own views on freedom of assembly; and the government has sometimes committed abuses in the name of national security. In the mid-1970s, for example, congressional investigations disclosed widespread violations of the constitutional rights of individuals by federal intelligence agencies. In the 1980s, the Iran–contra scandal revealed that officials in the White House had acted outside the law in the pursuit of foreign policy objectives. In 2004, shocking photographs were published that revealed how the American military had abused prisoners in Iraq, a nation to which the United States had promised to bring freedom, justice, and human rights.

American democracy is far from perfect. “This is a great country,” President John F. Kennedy once declared, “but it must be greater.” All citizens have to judge for themselves how far America falls short of fulfilling the principles on which it was founded. Nevertheless, the ideals endure; the goals are there if not always the reality.

THE CONCEPT OF A POLITICAL SYSTEM

In today’s electronic world, most people have listened to a stereo. Suppose for a moment that a visitor from outer space dropped in and asked you to describe a stereo system. You might say, “This is a compact disc player. I’m putting this CD in the little drawer that slides back in. This thing with all the knobs and buttons is an amplifier, and these big boxes over here are what we call speakers.” Perhaps you might take the trouble to describe the details of each component at some length. At the end of your elaborate explanation, the visitor from space would still not know what a stereo was.

A better way to describe the compact disc player and the other components would be to explain that it is a system for the reproduction of sound, consisting of several parts, each of which performs a separate function and relates to the others. Having said that, you might turn on the power and play some music. Now the visitor would understand.

A Dynamic Approach

In the same way, it is possible either to describe people, government, politics, and power as isolated, static ele-
ments, or to look at them as interacting elements in a political system. The concept of a political system may provide a useful framework, or approach, for understanding the total subject matter of this book. Just as in the case of the stereo system, a political system consists of several parts that relate to one another, each of which performs a separate, vital function. If we think in terms of a system, we visualize all the pieces in motion, acting and interacting, dynamic rather than static. In other words, something is happening—just as when the compact disc is playing.

As David Easton says, “We can try to understand political life by viewing each of its aspects piecemeal,” or we can “view political life as a system of interrelated activities.” One of the problems of trying to look at a political system is that government and politics do not exist in a vacuum—they are embedded in, and closely related to, many other activities in a society. But it is possible to separate political activity from other kinds of activity, at least for purposes of study.

Just as the CD player is part of a stereo system for the reproduction of sound, a political system also operates for a purpose: It makes the binding, authoritative decisions for society about who gets what.

Inputs, Outputs, and Feedback
We may carry the analogy of a stereo system and a political system even further. A sound system has inputs, outputs, and sometimes a loud whistling noise called feedback. Those are precisely the same terms...
political scientists use when talking about a political system.

The **inputs** of a political system are of two kinds: the demands upon, and supports for, the system. **Demands**, as the word indicates, are what people and groups want from the political system, whether it be health care for the aged, loans for college students, equal opportunity for minorities, or higher subsidies for farmers. **Supports** are the attitudes and actions of people that sustain and buttress the system at all levels and allow it to continue to work. They include everything from the patriotism drilled into schoolchildren to public backing for specific government policies.

The **outputs** of a political system are chiefly the binding decisions it makes, whether in the form of laws, regulations, or judicial decisions. Often such decisions reward one segment of society at the expense of another. The millionaire on New York’s Park Avenue may be heavily taxed to clothe inner-city children on the South Side of Chicago. Or he or she may benefit from a tax loophole enacted by Congress. The freeway that runs through a poor urban neighborhood may speed white commuters from the suburbs but dislocate black residents of the inner city. These decisions are “redistributive” measures in that something of value is reallocated by the political system. Sometimes even a decision not to act is an output of a political system. By preserving an existing policy, one group may be rewarded while another group is not.

**Feedback** in a political system describes the response of the rest of society to the decisions made by the authorities. When those reactions are communicated back to the authorities, they may lead to a fresh round of decisions and new public responses.

The concept of a political system is simply a way of looking at political activity. It is an approach, an analytical tool, rather than a general theory of the type developed to explain the workings of scientific phenomena. It enables us to examine not only the formal structure of political and governmental institutions, but also how these institutions actually work.

**Public Policy Making**

There is a tendency in the study of American politics and government to concentrate on the institutions of government, such as the presidency, Congress, and the courts, and on the role of political parties, campaigns, and voters.

The analysis of public policy is another way of looking at government and politics. Instead of examining only institutions, policy analysis looks at what the institutions do.

**A policy** is a course of action decided upon by a government—or by any organization, group, or individual—that usually involves a choice among competing alternatives. When policies are shaped by government officials, the result is called **public policy**.

The analysis of public policy, therefore, focuses on how choices are arrived at and how public policy is made. It also focuses on what happens afterward. How well or badly is a policy carried out? What is its impact in its own policy area? And what effect does it have in other policy areas?

As Robert L. Lineberry has put it, policy analysts “focus, in systems language, on the outputs of the political system and their impact on the political, social, and economic environment.”

As Lineberry and other scholars have pointed out, if a problem does not get on the public agenda—the subjects that government policymakers try to deal with—no policy or output will be framed to deal with the problem. For example, some people feel marijuana should be legalized, but unless a federal or state government acts, its possession and sale remain illegal.

But what happens when an issue does get on the public agenda and results in the creation of a public policy? Sometimes nothing. In 1964 President Lyndon Johnson declared his “war on poverty.” A major federal program was launched to try to deal with the problem. But more than three decades later, poverty in America had not been eradicated.

In other words, programs do not always work as intended. “Bills are passed, White House Rose Garden ceremonies held, and gift pens passed around by the presi-
dent. At that point, when attention has waned, when the television cameras are gone and the reporters no longer present, the other face of policy emerges.” This second face of policy analysis, as Lineberry has suggested, is concerned with implementation, impact, and distribution.

Implementation is the action, or actions, taken by government to carry out a policy. “When policy is pronounced, the implementation process begins. What happens in it may, over the long run, have far more impact than the intentions of the policy’s framers.”

The impact of a policy can be measured in terms of its consequences, both in its immediate policy area and in other areas. For example, a government decision to combat inflation by tightening credit and raising interest rates may adversely affect the stock market if investors fear that companies will not be able to borrow enough money to invest in and expand their businesses.

Distribution is what occurs when government adopts a public policy that provides, or distributes, benefits to people or groups. Sometimes distribution involves who wins and who loses from a given public policy. When the government builds post offices or maintains national parks, its policies are distributive, and people assume that everyone benefits. But a redistributive policy takes something away from one person and gives it to someone else. A Medicaid program that uses taxes collected from more affluent members of society to assist the poor would be an example of such a policy. It is here in the area of redistributive policies that many of the major political battles are fought.

Public policies and policymaking are discussed throughout this book and are the subject, in particular, of Part Four, “Government in Operation.”

**Democratic Government and a Changing Society**

A political system relates to people, and the size of the population affects the outputs of the system. Of equal importance is the qualitative nature of the population: who they are, where they live, how they work, how they spend, how they move about. How the political system works, in other words, is affected to some extent by the surrounding social, economic, and cultural framework. As society changes, the responses of government are likely to change. Government reacts to basic alterations in the nature of a society; it tries to tailor programs and decision making to meet changing needs and demands. Population changes are also important politically; for example, the 2000 census data confirmed that the American population balance had continued to shift from the Northeast to the South and West. As a result, some southern and western states gained more seats in Congress in 2002.

**300 Million Americans**

In 2000 federal census-takers fanned out across America, counting the population as the Constitution requires every 10 years. When they were done more than 281 million people had been counted—a total that had increased to more than 300 million by October 2006. The Census Bureau predicted that by 2010 the total population may reach 308 million and could rise to about 420 million by 2050.

According to one study of population patterns in the United States, if the projections of some experts were realized, “we would have close to one billion people in the United States one hundred years from now.” Although the authors of the study added that birth control and other factors made it unlikely that such a staggering total will be reached by that time, they estimated that the United States could not support a population of a billion without people pushing one another into the oceans.

How the nation has expanded from a population of about 4 million in 1790, and what the future may hold, can be charted with Census Bureau statistics and pro-

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**America in the 21st Century**

WASHINGTON, Mar. 13 — Fueled by immigration and higher birth rates among Hispanic women, the United States is undergoing a profound demographic shift, and by the middle of the [21st] century only about half of the population will be non-Hispanic whites, the Census Bureau predicted today.

By 2050, the bureau said, immigration patterns and differences in birth rates, combined with an overall slowdown in growth of the country’s population, will produce a United States in which 53 percent of the people will be non-Hispanic whites, down from 74 percent today.

In contrast, Hispanic people will make up 24.5 percent of the population, up from the current 10.2 percent, and Asians will make up 8.2 percent, an increase from the current 3.3 percent. The percentage of the black population will remain relatively stable, rising to about 13.6 percent by the year 2050 from the current 12 percent.

The population as a whole will rise to about 394 million from 262 million, an increase of 50 percent, the bureau said.

### Table 1-1

**Profile of the U.S. Population, 1790–2050**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Population (in millions)</th>
<th>Actual</th>
<th>Projected</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Total population</td>
<td>4</td>
<td>39</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Urban</td>
<td>—*</td>
<td>10</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Rural</td>
<td>4</td>
<td>29</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Nonwhite</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>5</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>White</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>34</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Median age (years)</td>
<td>NA</td>
<td>20</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Primary and secondary</td>
<td>NA</td>
<td>—*</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>school enrollment</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>College enrollment</td>
<td>NA</td>
<td>7</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

*Less than 200,000.
† Projection for 2013.
NA: Not available.

**Sources:** U.S. Bureau of the Census, and National Center for Education Statistics, Department of Education. Population figures rounded.

Projections to 2050, as shown in Table 1-1. This dramatic increase in numbers of people—the “population explosion”—is taking place around the world. It raises questions that governments must ponder. Will there be enough food to eat? Enough room to live? Enough oil and water and other natural resources to meet humanity’s future needs? Will the environment be destroyed?

For more information about Census Bureau statistics, see: [http://www.census.gov](http://www.census.gov)

An interesting profile of the American public can be sketched with statistics, as presented in Table 1-2, that

### Table 1-2

**Who Are We?**

- 149.1 million females
- 144.5 million males
- 20 million under 5 years
- 36.3 million 65 and over
- 236 million white
- 57.5 million nonwhite
- 125.9 million married
- 35.6 million divorced or widowed
- 215.7 million old enough to vote
- 17.6 million in college
- 54.9 million in primary and secondary schools
- 139.2 million employed
- 69 million homeowners

*Data for 2004.

answer the question “Who are we?” A portrait of national origins can also be drawn. The great successive waves of immigration placed a stamp of diversity on America; even third- and fourth-generation Americans may think of themselves as “Irish” or “Italian.”

The 2000 census indicated that the ancestry groups of Americans included the following: German, 15.2 percent; Irish, 10.8 percent; English, 8.7 percent; African American, 12.9 percent; Hispanic, 12.5 percent; Italian, 5.6 percent; French, 3.0 percent; Polish, 3.2 percent; Asian American, 4.2 percent; Dutch, 1.6 percent; Scottish, 1.7 percent; and Native American, 0.3 percent.

America is also a nation of 64.6 million Protestants, 58 million Catholics, 4.1 million Muslims, 5.6 million Jews, and 1 million Hindus.

Sometimes, prevailing notions about America’s population are incorrect. For example, America is often thought to be a nation of white Anglo-Saxon Protestants. That group is influential in many areas of American national life. But as the national origin figures indicate, a majority of Americans stem from other than Anglo-Saxon stock. By midcentury, according to Census Bureau projections, the combined Hispanic, black, Asian American, and American Indian population will outnumber the white population.

Although the accent in America is on youth, the median age of Americans is not 18 or 21 but about 37 and likely to go up because people are living longer.

The Mobile Society

A political system reacts not only to shifts in population totals but also to the movement of people geographically, socially, and economically. For example, farm population declined from 30.5 million in 1930 to 3.0 million in 2000. As the nation changed from a predominantly rural to an urban society (see Table 1-1), the political importance of the “farm bloc” decreased.

Americans move about a great deal. According to the Census Bureau, about 14 percent of Americans change their residence each year. In 1964 California surpassed New York as the most populous state in the Union. As a result, presidential candidates in some years spend more time than they used to campaigning in California. And in four of the past 10 presidential election years (1968, 1972, 1980, and 1984), two Californians, Richard Nixon and Ronald Reagan, were elected or reelected president.

During and after the Second World War, as blacks migrated to northern cities, many whites in the central cities moved to the suburbs. All these shifts and changing population patterns affect the American political system. The migration of millions of African American citizens to northern cities resulted in the election of black mayors in several large cities by the mid-1970s and in the election of more African American members of Congress. And the population shift from the cities to the suburbs increased the political power of suburbia. More members of Congress and state legislators now represent suburban areas than in the past, because lawmakers’ districts are apportioned according to population.

Technological, Economic, and Social Change

In addition to the population explosion, America has experienced a knowledge explosion. Science and technology, the astonishing growth of the Internet, computers, cell phones, and high-speed communications are reshaping...
ing society. Americans have split the atom and traveled to the moon and back. We listen for signals from other galaxies in outer space and explore the inner space of the human brain. There appear to be no limits to technological potential—except the inability of human beings to control their own nature.

Technological change is soon reflected within the political system. Consider for a moment a single innovation of the electronic age: television. Prior to the Second World War, television did not exist for the mass of Americans. Today, political candidates spend hundreds of millions of dollars to purchase television time. Presidential nominees may deplore the “packaging” of political candidates by Madison Avenue, but they hire

Sony’s pet robot dog
advertising agencies to do just that. Commercials are produced and presidents and candidates sold in the manner of detergents.

A considerable amount of electronic-age technology is the by-product of defense research and development. In his farewell address to the nation in 1961, President Dwight D. Eisenhower, although himself a career soldier, warned of the dangers to liberty and democracy of the military-industrial complex, a term now often used to describe the economic and political ties between the military establishment and the defense-aerospace industry. What Eisenhower feared was that the Pentagon and the defense contractors who produce weapons for the military would gain “unwarranted influence” in the political system.

A few years later, economist John Kenneth Galbraith argued that there already existed a “close fusion of the industrial system with the state,” and in time “the line between the two will disappear.” As a result of the technological revolution, Galbraith contended, a few hundred huge corporations were shaping the goals of society as a whole.26

But government, too, exercises great power in the modern industrial state. Government is expected to help
prevent either periodic economic recession or depression. Although economists argue over the best methods of managing the economy, they generally agree that the government has the major responsibility in promoting prosperity and full employment.

The past four decades also have been a time of rapid social change in America. At almost every level, wherever one looks, the change is visible—in manners and morals, in civil rights, in the theater, in literature, and in the arts. The change could be seen as well in the continuing emphasis on a youth-oriented culture, and at the same time, the growing concern over problems of the elderly, whose ranks are increasing in numbers. As a result, the political system was paying more attention to health care and retirement security for senior citizens.

These social changes have been accompanied by new political concerns. Today, large numbers of people are disturbed about the pollution of the natural environment that has resulted from technological advance. Many American cities are blanketed in smog despite new laws. Some rivers are cleaner as a result of environmental legislation, but many are polluted by industrial and human waste. Across the land, toxic wastes have endangered communities, even forcing the relocation of an entire town, Times Beach, Missouri, in 1983. Pesticides are killing the wildlife in America. Oil spills, from tankers and offshore drilling, and medical waste have fouled beaches. The gasoline engine and power plants and other industries pour smoke and chemicals into the atmosphere. Problems such as acid rain and global warming transcend national boundaries.

Concern about the environment is not only a matter of aesthetics, of preserving the natural beauty of the land. Air and water pollution damage health and upset the delicate balance of nature, the total relationship between human beings and their environment. They raise serious questions about whether humanity will be able to survive the damage it is inflicting on the earth that sustains all life. (We examine the problem of environmental pollution in more detail in Chapter 18.)

The long-range problem of energy resources for the future and the potential threat to the world’s oil supply posed by conflict in the Middle East underscore the fact that environmental problems are, in the end, also political problems. They pose for America questions of priorities and values. For example, will people ever be willing to use their cars less or buy smaller cars to conserve energy and reduce pollution? For years, the enormous popularity of gas-guzzling sport utility vehicles (SUVs) suggested otherwise. Only in the spring and summer of 2004, after gasoline prices soared—and again in the summer of 2006, when gas exceeded $3 a gallon—were some consumers attracted to vehicles with better fuel economy. Do voters favor relaxation of environmental standards to increase the supply of oil and other energy sources? Or to preserve jobs at the expense of endangered species? The environment and energy needs have created conflicting choices for individual citizens, for political leaders, and for society as a whole.

There were many other areas of conflict and change. Back in the 1960s, for example, to any white American who cared to listen, the message of the times was clear: Black Americans would wait no longer to obtain the equality and freedom that are the rights of everyone under the American political system. This was the message preached peacefully by Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr., and expressed violently in the burning black neighborhoods of the nation’s cities.
Yet the biggest test of the political system may still lie ahead, in how America adjusts to a population that is becoming increasingly more racially and ethnically diverse. America is no longer just a white society; it is brown and black and other hues. But what, it may be asked, lies at the end of the rainbow? Harmony and understanding, or conflict?

It is not possible to discuss or even list in a few pages all the social, economic, and cultural factors that are influencing the American political system today. Suggested here are simply some of the major changes, currents, and conflicts that have placed enormous pressures on American democracy. In later chapters, these will be taken up in more detail.

The Consent of the Governed
One of the characteristics of a viable political system is that it adapts to change. More than 200 years after its creation, the ability of the American political system to adapt to relentless change, and to cope with recurring political crises, was being tested.

The Vietnam War and the Watergate scandal were followed by a new atmosphere of questioning of presidential power by the public and by Congress. That kind of questioning is appropriate in a democracy. President Kennedy declared, in a speech at Amherst College less than a month before his death in 1963, that “men who create power make an indispensable contribution to the Nation’s greatness, but the men who question power make a contribution just as indispensable.”

The divisions in American society that had been caused by the war in Vietnam, and the strains placed upon the political system by the trauma of Watergate, the Iran-contra scandal, the impeachment of President Clinton, the 2001 terrorist attacks, and the war in Iraq, under-
scored and renewed a basic truth. The American political system rests on the consent of the governed, but that consent, to be freely given, required that the nation's political leaders earn and merit the trust of the people. In the 21st century, such a bond of trust appeared to offer the best hope for the survival in America of democracy, a system that Winston S. Churchill once described as “the worst form of government except all those other forms that have been tried from time to time.”

KEY TERMS
- government, p. 18
- politics, p. 18
- power, p. 18
- democracy, p. 19
- republic, p. 20
- majority rule, p. 20
- equality, p. 20
- inputs, p. 21
- demands, p. 21
- supports, p. 21
- outputs, p. 22
- feedback, p. 22
- policy, p. 22
- public policy, p. 22
- implementation, p. 22
- distribution, p. 23
- redistributive policy, p. 23
- military-industrial complex, p. 26

SUGGESTED WEBSITES
- http://www.census.gov
  The Census Bureau's website offers users the decennial censuses of the U.S. population, five-year censuses of state and local governments, and current demographic reports about how Americans live and work.

- http://www.fedstats.gov
  FedStats
  The Federal Interagency Council on Statistical Policy maintains this website, which allows users to look up any topic and then be linked to the relevant government agencies. Provides contact information for the agencies and links to statistical data by subject.

  FirstGov
  Serves as a single point of entry to every service and department of the federal government. FirstGov is maintained by the U.S. General Services Administration.

- http://www.whitehouse.gov
  The White House
  The official website of the White House. Offers presidential speeches, press conferences, interviews, and other documents. Provides links to the personal home pages of the president, the First Lady, and the vice president. Also contains links to the websites of departments that make up the cabinet, independent agencies that report to the president, and special presidential commissions.

SUGGESTED READING


- Finer, S. E. *The History of Government from the Earliest Times* (Oxford University Press, 1999). A remarkably comprehensive survey of the varying forms of government that have been established throughout human history, and the efforts that societies have made to control their political institutions. Covers forms of government from ancient Sumeria to the time of the French Revolution.


- Grossman, Lawrence K. *The Electronic Republic: Reshaping Democracy in the Information Age* (Penguin, 1996). A useful examination of the growing impact of communications technology on the political process in the United States. The author explores the potential benefits and hazards that emerging media, such as the Internet, hold for American democracy.

- Key, V. O., Jr. *Public Opinion and American Democracy* (Philadelphia Book Company, 1961). An important work in which findings about public opinion and mass attitudes toward politics are analyzed in terms of their consequences for the actual workings of government.

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