Chapter 1
Understanding American Politics
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In 2011, Republicans and Democrats faced a showdown over increasing the debt limit. A last minute compromise was reached between congressional Republicans, backed by Tea Party groups, and President Obama and his Democratic allies in Congress. The debt limit was raised, but not before the potential crisis caused jitters in the market and led to Standard & Poor’s lowering America’s bond rating. While on the surface this might have seemed to be merely about political posturing, it also spoke to deeper differences on the size and scale of government and its proper role in society.
What Does this Tell Us About American Politics?

- It briefly illustrates why most people dislike politics.
  - Too complicated
  - Too argumentative
  - Politicians are only in it for themselves.
Why Do We Have a Government?
Why Do We Have a Government?

- Two important government functions are to “provide for the common defence” and “insure domestic Tranquility.” The military and local police are two of the most commonly used forces the government maintains to fulfill those roles.
Provide Order: Military
Provide Order: Police
Public Good

- **Public goods** – services or actions that, once provided to one person, become available to everyone
Police protection, national defense, environmental regulation, and courts are classic public goods. But the exact number and identity of specific public goods is a topic of frequent dispute among political scientists and economists.
Government is typically needed to provide public goods because they are under-produced by the free market. Economists like to say that public goods are both “nonrival” and “nonexcludable.” Everyone benefits from the nation being secure from invasion.
• **Collective action problem** – a situation in which the members of a group would benefit by working together to produce some outcome, but each individual is better off refusing to cooperate and reaping benefits from those who do the work.
Public Good

- **Free rider problem** – the incentive to benefit from others’ work without contributing that leads individuals in a collective action situation to refuse to work together

- **Positive externalities** – benefits created by a public good that are shared by the primary consumer of the good and by society more generally
In summary, we can say government is necessary to overcome collective action problems and provide public goods.
What Is Politics?

• **Politics** – the process that determines what government does

• Three key concepts about politics:
  • It is conflictual.
  • Process matters.
  • It is everywhere.
Politics is conflictual – Many of our conflicts as a society are reflected in our politics and its familiar coalitions: liberal vs. conservative; Republican vs. Democrat. The controversy is unavoidable: politics determines our share of burdens vs. benefits (e.g., who pays how much in taxes and what that money is spent on), and it also regulates almost every aspect of our daily lives in ways that are visible and invisible.
What Is Politics?

- **Political process matters** – In American politics, power is derived from the people and governmental actions are the result of conscious decisions made by elected officials and bureaucrats. The interactions of institutional rules and procedures structures our mechanism for resolving conflicts and plays a big part in determining who wins and who loses.
What Is Politics?

- **Politics is everywhere** – From regulating food safety to air and water quality to performing road maintenance and traffic safety, stretching to more hot-button issues such as abortion, gun control, affirmative action, and decisions of war and peace, political decisions are omnipresent. Some decisions can be resolved by compromise (e.g., choosing a tax rate in between the highest and lowest proposals) but others (such as choosing whether to make English the official language) are not as well suited for compromise. Many decisions involve **trade-offs**: if you have one good, you can’t have another. For example, if you have a limited amount of money and decide to spend it on one thing (e.g., schools), you can’t spend it on something else (e.g., prisons).
What Is Politics?
Sources of Conflict in American Politics

Wake Up
- Wake up in dorm funded by federal program
- Get dressed in clothing subject to import tariffs and regulations

Morning
- Check e-mail using Internet developed with federal funding
- Drive to school in car whose design is shaped by federal regulations

Afternoon
- Attend lecture by professor whose research receives federal funding

Evening
- Call friend on cell phone whose operation is regulated by Federal Communications Commission
- Pay bursar bill using federally funded student loan

Ride home from school on federally subsidized mass transit

Read weather reports that use data from National Weather Service
Sources of Conflict in American Politics
Sources of Conflict in American Politics - Economy

- **ECONOMIC INEQUALITY HAS LONG been a source of political conflict, but in recent years an increasing gap between rich and poor has heightened disagreements about what—if anything—government should do about it. The Occupy movement drew attention to the issue starting in 2011.**
The American economy is large and complex and characterized by certain ideals and practices that sit uneasily with each other. Let’s look at certain definitions that characterize America’s “mixed economy.”

Sources of Conflict in American Politics - Economy
Sources of Conflict in American Politics - Economy

• **Free market** – an economic system based on competition among businesses without government interference
Sources of Conflict in American Politics - Economy

- **Economic individualism** – the autonomy of individuals to manage their own financial decisions without government interference
Sources of Conflict in American Politics - Economy

- **Redistributive tax policies** – policies, generally favored by Democratic politicians, that use taxation to create greater social equality (i.e., higher taxation of the rich to proved programs for the poor)

- *Although not used in the book, a “mixed economy” is a term for a system that combines elements of laissez-faire with certain economic regulations.*
Sources of Conflict in American Politics
CONFLICTS WITHIN THE GOVERNMENT—say, between the Democrats and Republicans in Congress—often reflect real divisions among American citizens about what government should do about certain issues. Groups on all sides of controversial issues pressure the government to enact their preferred policies.
Politics is Conflictual
Many issues in American politics today, such as abortion, the legal status of pornography, gambling, media obscenity, and marijuana are part of what is called the “culture wars.”

**Culture wars** – political conflict in the United States between “red-state” Americans, who tend to have strong religious beliefs, and “blue-state” Americans, who tend to be more secular
The authors of this book believe that economic issues can likely be resolved by compromise (e.g., by choosing a 2 percent tax increase instead of 4 percent or none at all) but culture war issues cannot—since one can either have or not have an abortion.
Politcs is Conflictual – Culture Wars

• But is this really true? Most people who characterize themselves as “pro-life” believe in exceptions for rape, incest, and to save the mother’s life. Meanwhile, some state regulations on abortion include bans on “late-term” abortions, requirements for a pregnant woman to inform the father, or for a pregnant teen to inform her parents, or for a doctor to advise a woman of adoption.
Does this mean that even issues about cultural values can be resolved by compromise? On the flip side, can you think of certain *economic ideas* that aren’t easily compromised?
Identity Politics

These census data show the racial diversity of the United States. Only about 75 percent of Americans describe themselves as white. Moreover, the proportion of Hispanics and Latinos in the population is 16.3 percent and rising, although this category contains many distinct subgroups.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>RACE</th>
<th>NUMBER</th>
<th>PERCENT</th>
</tr>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Total U.S. population</td>
<td>309,349,689</td>
<td>100.0</td>
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<tr>
<td>White</td>
<td>229,397,472</td>
<td>74.2</td>
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<tr>
<td>Hispanic or Latino (any race)</td>
<td>50,477,594</td>
<td>16.3</td>
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<tr>
<td>Mexican</td>
<td>31,798,258</td>
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<tr>
<td>Puerto Rican</td>
<td>4,623,716</td>
<td>1.5</td>
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<tr>
<td>Cuban</td>
<td>1,785,547</td>
<td>0.6</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Dominican</td>
<td>1,414,703</td>
<td>0.5</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Other, Hispanic or Latino</td>
<td>9,163,850</td>
<td>2.5</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Black or African American</td>
<td>38,874,625</td>
<td>12.6</td>
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<tr>
<td>Asian</td>
<td>14,728,302</td>
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</tr>
<tr>
<td>American Indian and Alaska Native</td>
<td>2,553,566</td>
<td>0.8</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Native Hawaiian and other Pacific Islander</td>
<td>507,916</td>
<td>0.1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Some other race</td>
<td>14,889,440</td>
<td>4.8</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Two or more races</td>
<td>8,398,368</td>
<td>2.7</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Source: U.S. Census Bureau, 2010 American Community Survey.
These census data show the racial diversity of the United States. Only 75 percent of Americans describe themselves as white. Moreover, the proportion of Hispanics and Latinos in the population is 15.1 percent and rising, although this category contains many distinct subgroups.
Identity Politics

• As this last sentence shows, voting patterns are idiosyncratic. The Republicans’ “Solid South” was actually a Democratic stronghold into the 1960s. Habits change.

• Finally, there is a persistent “gender gap” between the sexes: Democrats tend to do better among women and Republicans among men.
Identity Politics

- Racial, ethnic, and gender differences tend to contribute to groups’ political voting behavior. African Americans tend to vote Democratic by a 9–1 margin and President Obama did even better than that—95 percent. White Americans are more likely than others to vote Republican. Asians have been trending toward voting Democratic. Latinos tend to vote for Democrats, except for Cubans who are heavily Republican.
Identity Politics
CIVIL AND VOTING RIGHTS POLICIES contributed to the realignment of the South in the second half of the twentieth century, as more whites began supporting the Republican Party, and the Democratic Party came to be seen as the champion of minority rights. Here, blacks and whites in Alabama wait in line together to vote at a city hall after enactment of the 1965 Voting Rights Act.
Debate continues between the advocates of the American cultural “melting pot” and those favoring a multicultural perspective on ethnic heritage. Should our diverse cultures be assimilated into a single, uniquely American identity? Does our diversity make us stronger, or do our differences push us apart?
• **The melting pot** – the idea that as different races and ethnic groups come to America they should assimilate into American culture, leaving behind their native languages, customs, and traditions
In recent decades, the idea of “multiculturalism” began to challenge the “melting pot” metaphor with alternative images like “the salad bowl” or (to leave the food references behind) the “gorgeous mosaic.” As a matter of description, which of these metaphors works best?
Ideology

• Ideology
  • A cohesive set of ideals and beliefs used to organize and evaluate the political world

• Conservative

• Liberal

• Libertarian
THREE KEY IDEAS FOR UNDERSTANDING POLITICS

POLITICS IS CONFLICTUAL
Conflict and compromise are natural parts of politics.

POLITICS IS EVERYWHERE
What happens in government affects our lives in countless ways.

POLITICAL PROCESS MATTERS
How political conflicts are resolved is important.

How It Works
THREE KEY IDEAS FOR UNDERSTANDING POLITICS: POP QUIZ!

1. The rule that the president must receive a majority of votes in the electoral college (not just the most votes from citizens) illustrates the idea that

   a. politics is conflictual.
   b. political process matters.
   c. politics is everywhere.
   d. the government has police powers.
   e. the government promotes the general welfare
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2. The fact that virtually no one got exactly what they wanted in the recent health care law (the Affordable Care Act) illustrates the idea that

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d. the government has police powers.
e. the government promotes the general welfare.
How much would you say the work and decisions of the federal government affect what happens in your life?

a) Not at all
b) A little
c) A moderate amount
d) A lot
e) A great deal
Public Opinion Poll

How much of the time do you think you can trust the federal government to do what is right and fair?

a) Just about always
b) Most of the time
c) Only some of the time
d) Never
Public Opinion Poll

Do you believe our government should do more, the same, or less for the citizens of our country?

a) More
b) About the same
c) Less
d) No opinion
Public Opinion Poll

How often do you pay attention to what’s going on in government and politics?

a) Never  
b) Once in a while  
c) About half the time  
d) Most of the time  
e) All the time
How much do you feel public officials care what people like you think?

a) A great deal
b) A lot
c) A moderate amount
d) A little
e) Not at all
Public Opinion Poll

How much do you feel people like you can affect what the government does?

a) A great deal
b) A lot
c) A moderate amount
d) A little
e) Not at all
Public Opinion Poll

How interested are you in information about what’s going on in government and politics?

a) Extremely interested
b) Very interested
c) Moderately interested
d) Slightly interested
e) Not interested at all
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- Practice quizzes
- Flashcards
- Outlines

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