

## THE CLASSICAL LIBERAL ROOTS OF AMERICAN DEMOCRACY

### From divine right to social contract

Government in the United States is the product of particular decisions the founders made about the who, what, and how of American politics. But there was nothing inevitable about those decisions, and had the founders decided otherwise, our system would look very different indeed.

Given the world in which the founders lived, democracy was not an obvious choice for them, and many scholars argue that in some respects the system they created is not very democratic. We can see this more clearly if we understand the intellectual heritage of the early Americans, their historical experience, and the theories about government that informed them.

### European Sources of Democratic Thought and Practice

The heyday of democracy, of course, was ancient Athens, from about 500 to 300 BCE. Even Athenian democracy was a pretty selective business. To be sure, it was rule by “the people,” but “the people” was defined narrowly to exclude women, enslaved people, youth, and resident aliens. Athenian democracy was not built on values of equality, even of opportunity, except for the 10 percent of the population defined as citizens. We can see parallels here to early colonial American democracy, which restricted participation in political affairs to a relatively small number of white men with wealth and particular religious beliefs.

Limited as Athenian democracy was, it was positively wide open compared to most forms of government that existed during the Middle Ages, from roughly AD 600 to 1500. During this period, monarchs gradually consolidated their power over their subjects, and some even challenged the greatest political power of the time, the Catholic Church. Authoritarianism was a lot easier to pull off when few people could read; maintaining a single narrative about power that enforced authoritarian rule was relatively simple. For instance, as you will see in Chapter 3, the narrative of the divine right of kings kept monarchs in Europe on their thrones by insisting that those rulers were God’s representatives on earth and that to say otherwise was not just a crime but a sin.

Following the development of the printing press in 1439, more people gained literacy. Information could be mediated independently of those in power, and competing narratives could grab a foothold. Martin Luther promoted the narrative behind the Protestant Reformation (1517–1648) to weaken the power of the



Whose Hong Kong Is It, Anyway?

*Millions of Hongkongers took to the streets in June 2019, in opposition to a later-abandoned proposal to allow extraditions to mainland China. The protest movement morphed into demands for greater democratic freedoms and police accountability, resulting in a clash of culture with China’s authoritarian leadership. The COVID-19 pandemic and Beijing’s subsequent imposition of a sweeping National Security Law in 2020 suppressed the uprising, and many activists left the city or were arrested. Previously an English colony, Hong Kong was turned over to the Chinese in 1997, and China cannot afford to let the international financial hub call its own shots.*

Anthony Kwan/Getty Images

Catholic Church. Luther's ideas spread and were embraced by a number of European monarchs, leading to a split between Catholic and Protestant countries. Where the Catholic Church was seen as unnecessary, it lost political as well as religious clout, and its decline paved the way for new ideas about the world.

Those new ideas came with the Enlightenment period of the late 1600s and 1700s, when ideas about science and the possibilities of harnessing human knowledge to control the world around them began to blow away the shadows and cobwebs of medieval superstition. Enlightenment philosophy said that human beings were not at the mercy of a world they could not understand, but rather, as rational human beings, they could learn the secrets of nature and compel the world to do their bidding. The political narratives of **classical liberalism** that emerged from the Enlightenment emphasized science and rational thought, government limited by individual rights and democratic citizenship. We discussed classical liberalism earlier in this chapter. It provides a powerful theoretical foundation for the modern nonauthoritarian views of government we looked at earlier (see the upper right quadrant of Figure 1.3).

### The Social Contract and the American Founding Narrative

One of the key elements of classical liberal theory that justified limited government was the **social contract**, a story that said power is derived not from God but from the consent of the governed. Philosopher John Locke argued that *before* government comes into being, people have natural rights. They give up some of those rights in order to have the convenience of government but retain enough of them to rebel against that government if it fails to protect their rights. For it to work, the social contract requires that people have freedom to criticize the government (that is, to create counternarratives) and that information and narratives flow through channels that are protected from the influence of those in power. Key here is the idea that since rights predate government, governments cannot take away those rights. It will become evident in Chapter 3 that Thomas Jefferson was influenced by Locke's work in the writing of the Declaration of Independence. That document is itself a founding narrative of the rights of Americans: it tells a story about how the British violated those rights and was designed to combat the British narrative that America should remain part of its colonial empire.

While philosophers in Europe were beginning to explore the idea of individual rights and democratic governance, there had long been democratic stirrings on the founders' home continent. The Iroquois Confederacy was an alliance of five (and eventually six) East Coast Native American nations whose constitution, the "Great Law of Peace," impressed American leaders such as Benjamin Franklin with its suggestions of federalism, separation of powers, checks and balances, and consensus building. Although historians are not sure that these ideas had any direct influence on the founders' thinking about American governance, they were clearly part of the stew of ideas that the founders could dip into, and some scholars make the case that their influence was significant.<sup>7</sup>

But despite the prevalence of democratic theories of governance at the time of the founding, the average citizen was illiterate and dependent on political elites to mediate their information. New "channels" also began to play a part. Newspapers had limited direct readership, but pastors, who wove news into their sermons, and publicans, who read newspapers aloud and interpreted them for patrons in their drinking establishments, all began to shape narratives. For our purposes, the most important thing about these ideas about politics is that they were prevalent at the same time the American founders were thinking about how to build a new government. Locke particularly influenced the writings of James Madison, a major author of the U.S. Constitution. Like Locke, Madison thought government had a duty to protect property. At first he was hopeful that, with a fresh start in a new country, citizens would be driven by innate notions of "republican virtue" to put the interests of the public over their own self-interests.

Public behavior after the Revolution disillusioned him, however, and Madison ended up rejecting notions of "pure democracy," in which all citizens would have direct power to control government, opting instead for what he called a "republic." A **republic**, according to Madison, would differ from a democracy by relying on representation and would be more appropriate in a large polity where there would be a lot of citizens to be heard. It also limited the involvement of those citizens to choosing their representatives, not doing any actual governing.

## IN YOUR OWN WORDS

Explain the historical origins of American democracy and the ways that the available media controlled the political narrative.

## THE EVOLUTION OF AMERICAN CITIZENSHIP

### From the founding era to the digital age

Unlike the founders, certainly, but even unlike most of the people currently running this country (who are, let's face it, kind of old), people born in this century are almost all digital natives. They have been born in an era in which not only are most people hooked up to electronic media, but they also live their lives partly in cyberspace as well as in "real space." For many of us, the lives we live are often mediated—that is, with much, if not most, of our relationships, our education, our news, our travel, our sustenance, our purchases, our daily activities, our job seeking, and our very sense of ourselves being influenced by, experienced through, or shared via electronic media. That reality was brought home thanks to the COVID-19 pandemic, which *required* our classes, relationships, worship, work, medical consultations, commerce, and even social gatherings to take place in a mediated form. When direct, one-on-one connections become impossible or dangerous, some form of mediation is the only way to carry them out. COVID-19 taught us how valuable and yet dispensable face-to-face communication can be in a digital age.

Essentially, in a digital age we conduct our lives through channels that, like that water pipe we talked about earlier, may be made of lead, may be rusty, or may be full of holes. When we search online, certain links are offered first according to the calculations made by the search engine we use. When we shop online, we are urged to buy certain products that an algorithm thinks we will like or that people like us have purchased. When we travel, certain flights and hotels are flagged, and when we use social media, certain posts appear while others don't. Most of us don't check very hard to ensure that the information on which we base our choices isn't emerging from the cyberequivalent of lead or leaky pipes.

A mediated world has all kinds of implications for everyday living and loving and working. The implications we care about here are the political implications for our roles as citizens—the ones to do with how we exercise power and are impacted by. We will turn to these implications again and again throughout this book.



Citizens Stepping Up

*Americans may be individualists, but that doesn't mean they don't pitch in to help others in need—at least some of the time. When Hurricane Maria struck Puerto Rico in 2017, Washington, D.C.-based chef José Andrés jumped into action via his organization World Central Kitchen to provide meals to people across the islands who had lost power, or even their homes.*

World Central Kitchen

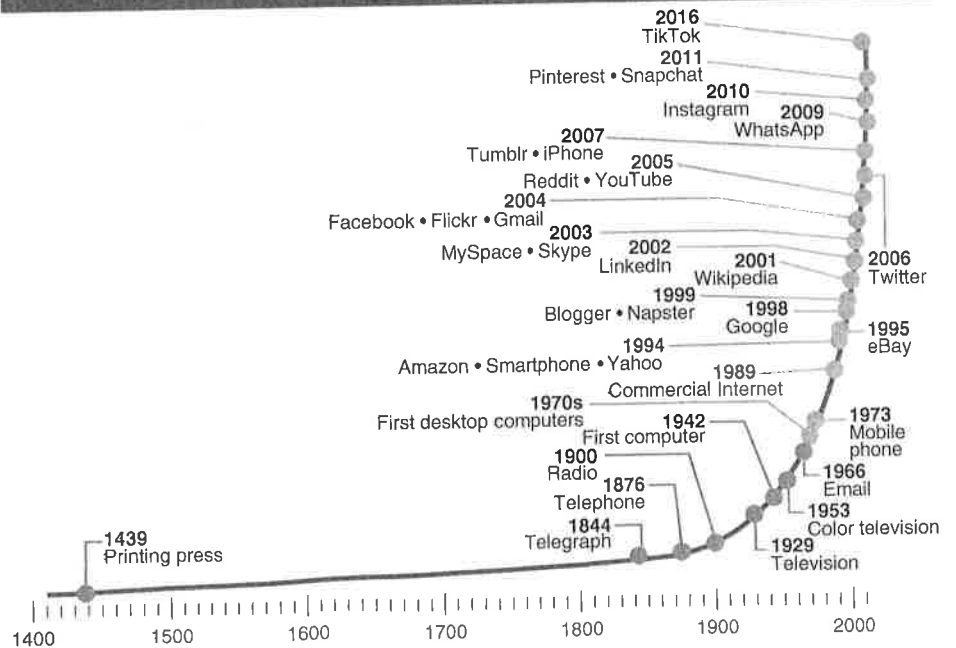
Even though Americans today still largely adhere to the basic governing narrative the founders promoted, the country is now light years removed from the founding era, when communication was limited by illiteracy and the scarcity of channels through which it could pass. Consider the timeline in Figure 1.4. It follows the development of the media through which we get information, receive narratives, and send out our own information (see also *Snapshot of America: How Do We Engage Politically Online?*). Being a citizen in a mediated world is just night-and-day different from being one in the world in which James Madison helped write the Constitution. It's the genius of the Constitution that it has been able to navigate the transition successfully, so far. The mediated world we live in gives us myriad new ways to keep the republic and some pretty high-tech ways to lose it. That puts a huge burden on us as mediated citizens, and it also opens up a world of opportunity.

Among the things we disagree on in this country is what it means to be a citizen. James Madison obviously had some thoughts on that subject. As we mentioned earlier, he hoped people would be so filled with what he called republican virtue that they would readily sacrifice their self-interest to advance the public interest. As we will see in Chapter 3, this public-interested citizenship proved not to be the rule, much to Madison's disappointment. Instead, early Americans demonstrated self-interested citizenship, trying to use the system to get the most they could for themselves. This was a dilemma for Madison because he was designing a constitution that depended on the nature of the people being governed. He believed he had solved that dilemma by creating a political system that would check our self-interested nature and produce laws that would support the public interest.

*When, if ever, should individuals be asked to sacrifice their own good for that of their country?*

Still, the Constitution has not put that conflict to rest. Today there are plenty of people who put country first—who enlist in the armed services, sometimes giving their lives for their nation, or who go into law enforcement or teaching or other lower paying careers because they want to serve. There are people who cheerfully pay their taxes because it's a privilege to live in a free democracy where you

FIGURE 1.4 ■ Media Timeline

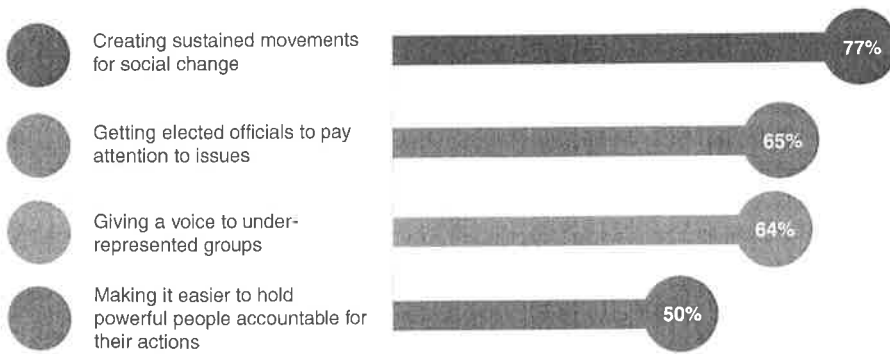


*It is notable that over the long history of humankind's relationship with the printed word, a majority of the most significant technological developments, other than the 1439 invention of the printing press, have taken place over the past hundred years.*

### Snapshot of America: How Do We Engage Politically Online?



#### Believe Social Media Are Important for



#### Behind the Numbers

Social media enable citizens to engage with their government, the news media, and each other much more efficiently than in previous decades. But widespread and easy access to political information comes to us with few quality checks. Did you engage politically during the 2020 presidential election in any of the ways listed above? In what ways might social media affect political outcomes?

Sources: Pew Research Center, "Activism on Social Media Varies by Race and Ethnicity, Age, Political Party," July 13, 2020, <https://www.pewresearch.org/fact-tank/2020/07/13/activism-on-social-media-varies-by-race-and-ethnicity-age-political-party/>; and Pew Research Center, "Americans Think Social Media Can Help Build Movements, but Can Also Be a Distraction," September 9, 2020, <https://www.pewresearch.org/fact-tank/2020/09/09/americans-think-social-media-can-help-build-movements-but-can-also-be-a-distraction/>.

can climb the ladder of opportunity. Especially in moments of national trouble—after the terrorist attacks on the World Trade Center and the Pentagon in September 2001, for instance, or during the COVID-19 pandemic—Americans willingly rush to help their fellow citizens.

At the same time, the day-to-day business of life turns most people inward. Many people care about self and family and friends, but most don't have the energy or inclination to get beyond that. President John Kennedy challenged his "fellow Americans" in 1961 to "ask not what your country can do for you—ask what you can do for your country," but only a rare few have the time or motivation to take up that challenge.

Unlike the citizens Madison and his colleagues designed a constitution for, mediated citizens experience the world through multiple channels of information and interaction. That doesn't change whether citizens are self-interested or public-interested, but it does give them more opportunities and raise more potential hazards for being both.

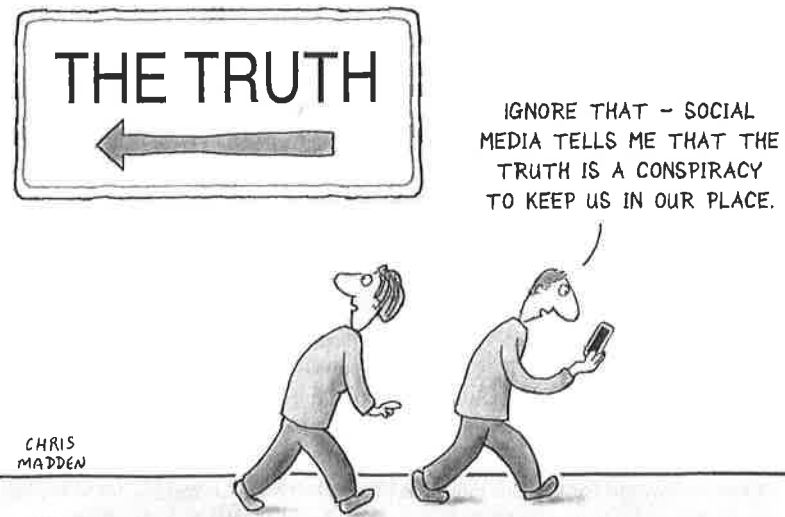
Many older Americans who are not digital natives nonetheless experience political life through television or through web surfing and commenting, usually anonymously and often rudely. This is not always a positive addition to our civil discourse, but they are trying to adapt. You may have grandparents who fit this description. They probably want to know why you are not on Facebook.

But more media-savvy millennials, Gen Xers, and even some tech-savvy Baby Boomers not only have access to traditional media if they choose but also are accustomed to interacting, conducting friendships and family relationships, and generally attending to the details of their lives through electronic channels. Their digital selves exist in networks of friends and acquaintances who take for granted that they can communicate in seconds. They certainly get their news digitally and increasingly organize, register to vote, enlist in campaigns, and call each other to action that way.

In fact, a phenomenon called hashtag activism, the forming of social movements through viral calls to act politically—whether to march, to boycott, to contact politicians, or to vote—has become common enough that organizers warn that action has to go beyond cyberspace to reach the real world or it will have limited impact. #BlackLivesMatter, #ItGetsBetter, and #NeverAgain are just three very different, very viral, very successful ways of using all the channels available to us to call attention to a problem and propose solutions.

Although living an intensely mediated life has the potential to broaden our horizons and expose us to multiple views and cultures, it does not automatically produce public-interested citizens. People can easily remain self-interested in this digital world. We can customize our social media to give us only news and information that confirms what we already think. We can live in an information bubble where everything we see and hear reinforces our preferred narratives. That makes us more or less sitting ducks for whoever's political agenda is injected into our bubble, whether from inside an online media source or from a foreign power that weaponizes social media to influence an election, as the Russians did in both 2016 and 2020. Without opening ourselves up to multiple information and action channels, we can live an unexamined mediated life.

But mediated citizenship also creates enormous opportunities that the founders never dreamed of. Truth to tell, Madison wouldn't have been all that thrilled about the multiple ways to be political that the mediated citizen possesses. He thought citizens should be seen on Election Day, but not heard most of the time,



precisely because he thought we would push our own interests and destabilize the system. He was reassured by the fact that it would take days for an express letter trying to create a dissenting political organization to reach Georgia from Maine. Our mediated world has blown that reassuring prospect to smithereens.

Mediated citizens are not only the receivers and distributors of narratives from powerful people; we can also be the creators and disseminators of our own narratives, a prospect that would have terrified the old monarchs comfortably ensconced in their divine right narrative. Even the founders would have been extremely nervous about what the masses might get up to.

As mediated citizens, we have unprecedented access to power, but we are also targets of the use of unprecedented power—attempts to shape our views and control our experiences. That means it is up to us to pay critical attention to what is happening in the world around us.

#### IN YOUR OWN WORDS

Describe the enduring tension in the United States between self-interested human nature and public-spirited government and the way that has been shaped in a mediated world.

### THINKING CRITICALLY ABOUT AMERICAN POLITICS

#### How to use the themes and features in this book

Our primary goal in this book is to get you thinking critically about American politics, especially about the political narratives that you encounter every day. Critical thinking is the analysis and evaluation of ideas and arguments based on reason and evidence—it means digging deep into what you read and what you hear and asking tough questions. Critical thinking is what all good scholars do, and it is also what savvy citizens do.

Our analytic and evaluative tasks in this book focus on the twin themes of power and citizenship. We have adopted the classic definition of politics proposed by the late political scientist Harold Lasswell that politics is “who gets what when and how.” We simplify his understanding by dropping the “when” and focusing on politics as the struggle by citizens over who gets power and resources in society and how they get them, but we also consider how the struggle for power and resources can change dramatically over time.

#### Analysis

Lasswell’s definition of politics gives us a framework of analysis for this book; that is, it outlines how we break down politics into its component parts in order to understand it. Analysis helps us understand how something works, much like taking apart a car and putting it back together again helps us understand how it runs. Lasswell’s definition provides a strong analytic framework because it focuses our attention on questions we can ask to figure out what is going on in politics.

#### THINKING LIKE A POLITICAL SCIENTIST: THE CRITICAL IMPORTANCE OF CRITICAL THINKING

This book is an introduction to American politics, and in a way it is also an introduction to political science. Political science is not exactly the same kind of science as biology or geology. Not only is it difficult to put our subjects (people and political systems) under a microscope to observe their behavior, but we are also somewhat limited in our ability to test our theories. We cannot replay World War II to test our ideas about what caused it, for example. A further problem is our subjectivity; we are the phenomena under investigation, and so we may have stronger feelings about our research and our findings than we would about, say, cells and rocks.

These difficulties do not make a science of politics impossible, but they do mean we must proceed with caution. Even among political scientists, disagreement exists about whether a rigorous science of the political world is a reasonable goal. We can agree, however, that it is possible to advance our understanding of politics beyond mere guessing or debates about political preferences.

Although we use many methods in our work (statistical analysis, mathematical modeling, case studies, and philosophical reasoning, to name only a few), what political scientists have in common is an emphasis on critical thinking about politics. And in that sense, it is based on the same Enlightenment-era values that make all science possible: open inquiry, fearless debate, empirical testing, and academic freedom.

Critical thinking means challenging the conclusions of others, asking why or why not, and exploring alternative interpretations. It means considering the sources of information—not accepting an explanation just because someone in authority offers it, or because you have always been told that it is the true explanation, but because you have discovered independently that there are good reasons for accepting it. You may emerge from reading this textbook with the same ideas about politics that you have always had; it is not our goal to change your mind. But as a critical thinker, you will be able to back up your old ideas with new and persuasive arguments of your own, or to move beyond your current ideas to see politics in a new light.

Becoming adept at critical thinking has a number of benefits:

- We learn to be good democratic citizens and defenders of the democratic process. Critical thinking helps us sort through the barrage of information that regularly assails us, and it teaches us to process this information thoughtfully. Critical awareness of what our leaders are doing and the ability to understand and evaluate what they tell us is the lifeblood of democratic government. We are far less likely to believe in conspiracies or to be manipulated by disinformation.
- We are better able to hold our own in political (or other) arguments. We think more logically and clearly, we are more persuasive, and we impress people with our grasp of reason and fact. There is not a career in the world that is not enhanced by critical thinking skills.
- We become much better students. The skills of the critical thinker are the skills of the scholar. When we read critically, we figure out what is important quickly and easily, we know what questions to ask to tease out more meaning, we can decide whether what we are reading is worth our time, and we know what to take with us and what to discard.

It may sound a little dull and dusty, but critical thinking can be a vital and enjoyable activity. When we are good at it, it empowers and liberates us. We are not at the mercy of others' conclusions and decisions. We can evaluate facts and arguments for ourselves, turning conventional wisdom upside down and exploring the world of ideas with confidence.

### How Does One Learn to Think Critically?

The trick to learning how to think critically is to do it. It helps to have a model to follow, however, and we provide one in *The Big Picture*, which traces this process. The focus of critical thinking here is on understanding political argument. Argument in this case refers not to a confrontation or a fight, but rather to a contention, based on a set of assumptions, supported by evidence, and leading to a clear, well-developed conclusion with consequences for how we understand the world.

Critical thinking involves constantly asking questions about the arguments we read: Who has created it, what is the basic case and what values underlie it, what evidence is used to back it up, what conclusions are drawn, and what difference does the whole thing make? To help you remember the questions to ask, we have used a mnemonic device that creates an acronym from the five major steps of critical thinking. Until asking these questions becomes second nature, thinking of them as CLUES to critical thinking about American politics will help you keep them in mind. To help you develop the critical thinking habit, readings featured in each chapter of this book will provide a CLUES model for you to follow.

This is what CLUES stands for:

- Consider the source and the audience
- Lay out the argument and the underlying values and assumptions
- Uncover the evidence
- Evaluate the conclusion
- Sort out the political significance

When you read each of the *CLUES to Critical Thinking* features in the book, keep in mind *The Big Picture*.

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Source: Adapted from the authors' "Preface to the Student," in Christine Barbour and Matthew J. Streb, eds., *Clued in to Politics: A Critical Thinking Reader in American Government*, 3rd ed. (Washington, DC: CQ Press, 2010).

Accordingly, in this book, we analyze American politics in terms of three sets of questions:

- Who are the parties involved? What resources, powers, and rights do they bring to the struggle? Do they support or restrict the extension of rights and the democratic process?
- What do they have at stake? What do they stand to win or lose? Is it power, influence, position, policy, or values?
- How do the rules shape the outcome? Where do the rules come from? What strategies or tactics do the political actors employ to use the rules to get what they want? Do the rules promote a political resolution of differences or do they seek to impose a resolution contrary to majority will?

If you know who is involved in a political situation, what is at stake, and how (under what rules) the conflict over resources will eventually be resolved, you will have a pretty good grasp of what is going on, and you will probably be able to figure out new situations, even when your days of taking a course in American government are far behind you. To get you in the habit of asking those questions, we have designed several features in this text explicitly to reinforce them.

As you found at the start of your reading, each chapter opens with key tasks that we expect you to be able to perform, *In Your Own Words*, which will help you to set goals for your reading and evaluate whether or not you've accomplished them. They appear again, individually, after each main section of each chapter. Starting with Chapter 2, each chapter begins with a *What's at Stake . . . ?* feature that analyzes a political situation in terms of what various groups of citizens stand to win or lose and ends with a *Let's Revisit: What's at Stake . . . ?* feature . . . in which we reconsider those issues once you have the substantive material of the chapter under your belt. We also focus our analysis along the way by closing each major chapter section, beginning in Chapter 2, with a *Pause and Review* feature that explicitly addresses the questions of who gets what, and how they get it. This feature concisely summarizes what you have learned; and asks you to put your understanding in your own words.

We reinforce the task of analysis with a *CLUES to Critical Thinking* feature in each chapter that provides a text that is central to the material you are learning. CLUES questions at the end of the reading give you some practice in using the critical thinking model we described in *The Big Picture*.

In addition to focusing on analysis of what you read, we offer graphics that will help you visualize processes and data that affect and are affected by politics. *The Big Picture* infographics relate the book's themes to the big concepts, big processes, and big data that will help you make sense of American politics. *Snapshots of America* provide you with a lot more data to help you understand who the American people are and to help you dig into the question of what challenges our diversity poses for the task of governance. Finally, we highlight key questions throughout each chapter, challenging you to take the analysis one step further: What if the rules or the actors or the stakes were different? What would be the impact on American politics? How would it work differently?

## Evaluation

As political scientists, however, we want not only to understand how the system works but also to assess how well it works. A second task of critical thinking is evaluation, or seeing how well something measures up according to a standard or principle. We could choose any number of standards by which to evaluate American politics, but the most relevant, in this political moment, are the preservation of the democratic system, freedom of speech, and the role of citizens.

We can draw on the traditions of self-interested and public-interested citizenship and the opportunities offered by digital citizenship to evaluate the powers, opportunities, and challenges presented to American citizens by the system of government under which they live. In addition to the two competing threads of citizenship in America, we can also look at the kinds of action that citizens engage in and whether they take advantage of the options available to them. For instance, citizen action might be restricted by the rules, or by popular interest, to merely choosing between competing candidates for office, as in the model of elite democracy described earlier.

# THE BIG PICTURE:

How to Think Critically

Follow the **CLUES**  
to Critical Thinking



**START**  
Your Comfort Zone

## CONSIDER THE SOURCE

### ASK YOURSELF

- Where does this information come from?
- Who is the author?
- Who are they talking to?
- How do the source and the audience shape the author's perspective?

*I read it on the Internet.  
It must be true.*

*My parents always  
watch this TV  
station. Of course  
it's reliable.*

## LAY OUT THE ARGUMENT

### ASK YOURSELF

- What argument is the author asking you to accept?
- If you accept the argument, what values are you also buying?
- Does the argument hold together logically?

*Arguments sound  
like conflict.  
I hate conflict.*

## OCEAN OF EXCUSES

*Values are private.  
It's rude to pry.*

*Logic gives  
me hives!*

*Data mean numbers.  
Numbers freak me out.*

## UNCOVER THE EVIDENCE

### ASK YOURSELF

- Did the author do research to back up the conclusions?
- Is there any evidence or data that is not provided that should be there?
- If there is no evidence provided, does there need to be?

## BRIDGE TO ENLIGHTENMENT

*What, do I look like some  
kind of detective?*

Who cares? What do I need to know for the test?

## SEA OF CONFUSION

There is no way to know what conclusions are right.

Ouch! Thinking is hard work. Wake me up when it's over.

How would I know?

These ideas make me really uncomfortable. They don't click with anything I think I know. Time for a beer!

I don't like this person's values. Why should I care about their conclusions?

### ASK YOURSELF

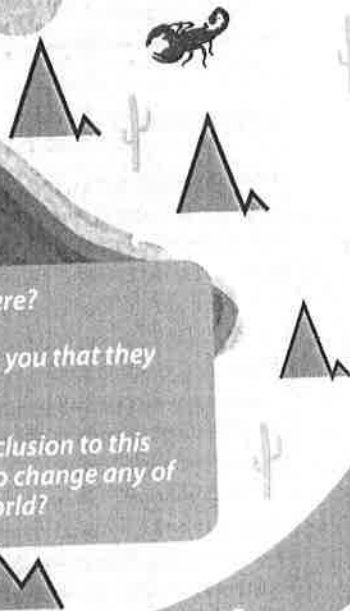
- What difference does this argument make to your understanding of the political world?
- How does it affect who gets what and how they get it?
- Was getting this information valuable to you or did it waste your time?

## SORT OUT THE POLITICAL SIGNIFICANCE

### ASK YOURSELF

- What's the punch line here?
- Did the author convince you that they are correct?
- Does accepting the conclusion to this argument require you to change any of your ideas about the world?

## EVALUATE THE CONCLUSIONS



Alternatively, the rules of the system might encourage citizens to band together in groups to get what they want, as they do in pluralist democracy. Or the system might be open and offer highly motivated citizens a variety of opportunities to get involved, as they do in participatory democracy. American democracy has elements of all three of these models, and one way to evaluate citizenship in America is to look at what opportunities for each type of participation exist and whether citizens take advantage of them.

*Why does critical thinking feel like so much more work than “regular thinking”?*

To evaluate how democratic the United States is, we include in most chapters a section called *The Citizens and . . .*, which looks at the changing concept and practice of citizenship in this country with respect to the chapter’s subject matter. That feature looks at citizenship from many angles, considering the following types of questions: What role do “the people” have in American politics? How has that role expanded or diminished over time? What kinds of political participation do the rules of American politics (formal and informal) allow, encourage, or require citizens to take? What kinds of political participation are discouraged, limited, or forbidden? Do citizens take advantage of the opportunities for political action that the rules provide them? How do they react to the rules that limit their participation? How have citizens in different times exercised their rights and responsibilities? What do citizens need to do to keep the republic? How democratic is the United States?

We have outlined several features that recur throughout this book. Remember that each is designed to help you to think critically about American politics, either by analyzing power in terms of who gets what, and how, or by evaluating citizenship to determine how well we are following Benjamin Franklin’s mandate to keep the republic.

**IN YOUR OWN WORDS**

Apply the five steps of critical thinking to this book’s themes of power and citizenship in American politics.

**WRAPPING IT UP**

As we explained earlier, the chapters in this book will typically conclude with “*Let’s Revisit: What’s at Stake . . . ?*” features where we return to the power conundrum we introduced at the beginning and look at that issue in the light of what we learned in the chapter. This chapter, however didn’t begin with a *What’s at Stake . . . ?* conundrum because we wanted to have a direct word with you about what we believe are the challenges and pitfalls of trying to be a responsible, data-driven, classical liberal defender of the concept of democratic governance. We argued in the introduction that taking a neutral, “both-sides” position on this topic—which, as textbook authors, we feel honor-bound to do on controversial issues—is not really an option for us today because there don’t exist two good sides to the truth, to free inquiry, to science, to self-governance that still allows us the freedom to be good teachers and good democratic citizens.

We cannot say, “Oh, sure, the Enlightenment legacy—a worldview founded on fact-based empirical inquiry and a political system based on democratic process, limited government and the freedom to challenge anything, even the value of that democratic process—has its strong points. But so does its opposite—a Russian-style authoritarian government run by oligarchs out to line their own pockets at their subjects’ expense, who stay in power by eliminating a free media and freedom of speech and

assembly.” If we did that, we would be failing the obligations of that very worldview that has made human progress so possible since the 1600s.

Another way to look at it is, how can we depend on and enjoy the benefits of free speech and empirical inquiry if we refuse to defend those hallmarks of a democratic system when they are being challenged or undermined?

We don’t propose censoring those who circulate disinformation under the guise of free speech, or silencing those who argue that the democratic process should be restricted to certain people, but we won’t both-sides the issue, either. If we, whose life advantages and livelihoods have depended on the Enlightenment legacy of classical liberalism do not take a stand in favor of it, we will have again failed all the generations who come after us, just as surely as we have failed them by not addressing the climate crisis or the unmanageable cost of higher education.

### CLUES TO CRITICAL THINKING: EXCERPTS FROM PRESIDENT BARACK OBAMA’S HOWARD UNIVERSITY COMMENCEMENT ADDRESS

May 7, 2016

*President Obama gave a moving address at Howard University his final spring in office, calling for the class of 2016 to be aware of how much the world had changed, how “if you had to choose one moment in history in which you could be born, and you didn’t know ahead of time who you were going to be—what nationality, what gender, what race, whether you’d be rich or poor, gay or straight, what faith you’d be born into—you wouldn’t choose 100 years ago. You wouldn’t choose the fifties, or the sixties, or the seventies. You’d choose right now. If you had to choose a time to be, in the words of Lorraine Hansberry, ‘young, gifted, and Black’ in America, you would choose right now.” He offered graduates three pieces of advice: to be confident in the many ways there were to be Black today, to be aware of the struggle that came before them and the structural racism that still pervades the system, and finally, this call for action.*

You have to go through life with more than just passion for change; you need a strategy. I’ll repeat that. I want you to have passion, but you have to have a strategy. Not just awareness, but action. Not just hashtags, but votes.

You see, change requires more than righteous anger. . . . And I’m so proud of the new guard of Black civil rights leaders who understand this. It’s thanks in large part to the activism of young people like many of you, from Black Twitter to Black Lives Matter, that America’s eyes have been opened—white, Black, Democrat, Republican—to the real problems, for example, in our criminal justice system.

But to bring about structural change, lasting change, awareness is not enough. It requires changes in law, changes in custom. If you care about mass incarceration, let me ask you: How are you pressuring members of Congress to pass the criminal justice reform bill now pending before them? If you care about better policing, do you know who your district attorney is? Do you know who your state’s attorney general is? Do you know the difference? Do you know who appoints the police chief and who writes the police training manual? Find out who they are, what their responsibilities are. Mobilize the community, present them with a plan, work with them to bring about change, hold them accountable if they do not deliver. Passion is vital, but you’ve got to have a strategy.

And your plan better include voting—not just some of the time, but all the time. It is absolutely true that 50 years after the Voting Rights Act, there are still too many barriers in this country to vote. There are too many people trying to erect new barriers to voting. This is the only advanced democracy on Earth that goes out of its way to make it difficult for people to vote. And there’s a reason for that. There’s a legacy to that.

But let me say this: Even if we dismantled every barrier to voting, that alone would not change the fact that America has some of the lowest voting rates in the free world. In 2014, only 36 percent of Americans turned out to vote in the midterms—the second lowest participation rate on record. Youth turnout—that would be you—was less than 20 percent. Less than 20 percent. Four out of five

did not vote. In 2012, nearly two in three African Americans turned out. And then, in 2014, only two in five turned out. You don't think that made a difference in terms of the Congress I've got to deal with? And then people are wondering, well, how come Obama hasn't gotten this done? How come he didn't get that done? You don't think that made a difference? What would have happened if you had turned out at 50, 60, 70 percent, all across this country? People try to make this political thing really complicated. Like, what kind of reforms do we need? And how do we need to do that? You know what, just vote. It's math. If you have more votes than the other guy, you get to do what you want. It's not that complicated.

And you don't have excuses. You don't have to guess the number of jellybeans in a jar or bubbles on a bar of soap to register to vote. You don't have to risk your life to cast a ballot. Other people already did that for you. Your grandparents, your great grandparents might be here today if they were working on it. What's your excuse? When we don't vote, we give away our power, disenfranchise ourselves—right when we need to use the power that we have; right when we need your power to stop others from taking away the vote and rights of those more vulnerable than you are—the elderly and the poor, the formerly incarcerated trying to earn their second chance.

So you've got to vote all the time, not just when it's cool, not just when it's time to elect a President, not just when you're inspired. It's your duty. When it's time to elect a member of Congress or a city councilman, or a school board member, or a sheriff. That's how we change our politics—by electing people at every level who are representative of and accountable to us. It is not that complicated. Don't make it complicated.

And, finally, change requires more than just speaking out—it requires listening, as well. In particular, it requires listening to those with whom you disagree, and being prepared to compromise. When I was a state senator, I helped pass Illinois's first racial profiling law, and one of the first laws in the nation requiring the videotaping of confessions in capital cases. And we were successful because, early on, I engaged law enforcement. I didn't say to them, oh, you guys are so racist, you need to do something. I understood, as many of you do, that the overwhelming majority of police officers are good, and honest, and courageous, and fair, and love the communities they serve. . . .

And I can say this unequivocally: Without at least the acceptance of the police organizations in Illinois, I could never have gotten those bills passed. Very simple. They would have blocked them.

The point is, you need allies in a democracy . . . —democracy requires compromise, even when you are 100 percent right. This is hard to explain sometimes. You can be completely right, and you still are going to have to engage folks who disagree with you. If you think that the only way forward is to be as uncompromising as possible, you will feel good about yourself, you will enjoy a certain moral purity, but you're not going to get what you want. And if you don't get what you want long enough, you will eventually think the whole system is rigged. And that will lead to more cynicism, and less participation, and a downward spiral of more injustice and more anger and more despair. And that's never been the source of our progress. That's how we cheat ourselves of progress. . . .

So don't try to shut folks out, don't try to shut them down, no matter how much you might disagree with them. There's been a trend around the country of trying to get colleges to disinvite speakers with a different point of view, or disrupt a politician's rally. Don't do that—no matter how ridiculous or offensive you might find the things that come out of their mouths. Because as my grandmother used to tell me, every time a fool speaks, they are just advertising their own ignorance. Let them talk. Let them talk. If you don't, you just make them a victim, and then they can avoid accountability.

That doesn't mean you shouldn't challenge them. Have the confidence to challenge them, the confidence in the rightness of your position. There will be times when you shouldn't compromise your core values, your integrity, and you will have the responsibility to speak up in the face of injustice. But listen. Engage. If the other side has a point, learn from them. If they're wrong, rebut them. Teach them. Beat them on the battlefield of ideas. And you might as well start practicing now, because one thing I can guarantee you—you will have to deal with ignorance, hatred, racism, foolishness, trifling folks. I promise you, you will have to deal with all that at every stage of your life. That may not seem fair, but life has never been completely fair. Nobody promised you a crystal stair. And if you want to make life fair, then you've got to start with the world as it is.

So that's my advice. That's how you change things. Change isn't something that happens every four years or eight years; change is not placing your faith in any particular politician and then just putting your feet up and saying, okay, go. Change is the effort of committed citizens who hitch their wagons to something bigger than themselves and fight for it every single day.

**Consider the source and the audience:** In the last year of his presidency, Obama is speaking to an audience at a historically Black university that has graduated some notable political figures. He is tailoring his remarks to an African American audience. Is that the only audience he is speaking to? Who else might he expect to be listening?

**Lay out the argument and the underlying values and assumptions:** The part of the speech we focus on here is about the importance of taking action, going beyond the kind of hashtag activism we talked about early in this chapter. "Not just hashtags, but votes," says Obama. What kind of democracy is he advocating here? What are the values that support democracy?

**Uncover the evidence:** In parts of the speech we had to cut for length, Obama gives many examples of people, primarily Howard grads, who were able to change the world they lived in by practicing the principles he calls for. Would that kind of anecdotal evidence be sufficient to persuade you that he is right? He also draws on his own personal experience. Is that persuasive?

**Evaluate the conclusion:** Obama wants the class of 2016 to understand that they won't get the change they seek in the world without taking action, especially voting and working with others. Are you persuaded? What alternatives might there be to effecting political change?

**Sort out the political significance:** What is the historical context in which Obama is writing? Did the Republicans he had to deal with in Congress practice democracy as he defines it? What would have been the political results if they had? What fate does he worry will befall movements like Black Lives Matter if they are not backed by action, hard work, and votes?

## REVIEW

### Introduction

A book called *Keeping the Republic* has an obvious, pro-republic bias. This book, like much of modern education, grows out of the free-thinking, free-speaking, empirically grounded, scientifically based, limited government, classical liberal tradition that began with the European Enlightenment, and from which both modern liberalism and modern conservatism have grown. Our bias means we don't treat every issue as if it has two equally good sides. Issues may have classically liberal, empirically verified, democratic sides, and classically illiberal, factually inaccurate, authoritarian sides. And from the standpoint of keeping the republic and reinforcing the values of education and free speech, we can't afford not to be clear about which is which.

### What Is Politics?

Politics may appear to be a grubby, greedy pursuit, filled with scandal and backroom dealing. In fact, despite its shortcomings and sometimes shabby reputation, politics is an essential means for resolving differences and determining how power and resources, including control of information through the creation of political narratives, are distributed in society. Politics is about who gets power and resources in society—and how they get them. Increasingly we get them through channels that are mediated, or controlled, by forces external to us.

Government, by contrast, is the system established for exercising authority over a group of people. In the United States, the government is embodied in the Constitution and the institutions set up by the Constitution. Government is shaped not only by politics but also by economics, which is concerned specifically with the distribution of wealth and society's resources.

politics (p. 9)	disinformation (p. 13)
power (p. 9)	economics (p. 13)
media (p. 9)	socialist economy (p. 13)
social order (p. 9)	substantive guarantees (p. 13)
government (p. 10)	procedural guarantees (p. 13)
authority (p. 10)	capitalist economy (p. 14)
legitimate (p. 10)	laissez-faire capitalism (p. 14)
rules (p. 11)	mixed economies (p. 14)
norms (p. 11)	democratic socialism (p. 14)
institutions (p. 11)	social democracy (p. 14)
political narrative (p. 12)	regulated capitalism (p. 15)
gatekeepers (p. 12)	

### Political Systems and the Concept of Citizenship

Political systems dictate how power is distributed among leaders and citizens, and these systems take many forms. Authoritarian governments give ultimate power to the state. Nonauthoritarian systems, like democracy, place power largely in the hands of the people. Democracy is based on the principle of popular sovereignty, giving the people the ultimate power to govern. The meaning of citizenship is key to the definition of democracy. Citizens are believed to have rights protecting them from government as well as responsibilities to the public realm.

authoritarian governments (p. 16)	advanced industrial democracy (p. 19)
totalitarian (p. 17)	communist democracy (p. 19)
authoritarian capitalism (p. 17)	populism (p. 20)
anarchy (p. 18)	subjects (p. 20)
democracy (p. 18)	citizens (p. 20)
popular sovereignty (p. 19)	

### The Classical Liberal Roots of American Democracy

Democracy was not an obvious choice for the founders—their decisions were based on their own intellectual heritage, their historical experience, and the theories about government that informed them.

divine right of kings (p. 21)	social contract (p. 22)
classical liberalism (p. 22)	republic (p. 22)

### The Evolution of American Citizenship

At the time of our nation's founding, two competing views of citizenship emerged. The first view, articulated by James Madison, sees the citizen as fundamentally self-interested; this view led the founders to fear too much citizen participation in government. The second view puts faith in citizens' ability to act for the common good, to put their obligation to the public ahead of their own self-interest. Both views are still alive and well today, and we can see evidence of both sentiments at work in the mediated era, where citizenship is experienced not so much directly as through channels controlled by others. Ironically, this both limits our freedom and enhances our opportunities to take control.

digital natives (p. 23)	self-interested citizenship (p. 24)
mediated citizens (p. 24)	hashtag activism (p. 26)
public-interested citizenship (p. 24)	information bubble (p. 26)

### Thinking Critically About American Politics

In this textbook, we rely on two underlying themes to analyze how our American political system works, and to evaluate how well it works. The first theme is power, and how it functions in our system: we look at political events in terms of who the actors are, what they have to win or lose, and how the rules shape the way these actors engage in their struggle. The second theme is citizenship, specifically, how diverse citizens participate in political life to improve their own individual situations and to promote the interests of the community at large. Throughout this book, we will evaluate citizenship carefully as a means to determine how well the American system is working.