

Introduction to American Government

This is a pdf version of the text used in Dr. Shawna Brandle's Introduction to American Government class, which is available here: <https://cuny.manifoldapp.org/projects/brandlep0151>

The text is a condensed version of Krutz, Waskiewicz, et al. *American Government 3E*. Openstax, 2022, which is available for free at <https://openstax.org/details/books/american-government-3e?Book%20details>

Preamble

We the People of the United States, in Order to form a more perfect Union, establish Justice, insure domestic Tranquility, provide for the common defence, promote the general Welfare, and secure the Blessings of Liberty to ourselves and our Posterity, do ordain and establish this Constitution for the United States of America.

The Constitutional Convention

Article I

Section 1: Congress

All legislative Powers herein granted shall be vested in a Congress of the United States, which shall consist of a Senate and House of Representatives.

Section 2: The House of Representatives

The House of Representatives shall be composed of Members chosen every second Year by the People of the several States, and the Electors in each State shall have the Qualifications requisite for Electors of the most numerous Branch of the State Legislature.

No Person shall be a Representative who shall not have attained to the Age of twenty five Years, and been seven Years a Citizen of the

United States, and who shall not, when elected, be an Inhabitant of that State in which he shall be chosen.

Representatives and direct Taxes shall be apportioned among the several States which may be included within this Union, according to their respective Numbers, which shall be determined by adding to the whole Number of free Persons, including those bound to Service for a Term of Years, and excluding Indians not taxed, three fifths of all other Persons. The actual Enumeration shall be made within three Years after the first Meeting of the Congress of the United States, and within every subsequent Term of ten Years, in such Manner as they shall by Law direct. The number of Representatives shall not exceed one for every thirty Thousand, but each State shall have at Least one Representative; and until such enumeration shall be made, the State of New Hampshire shall be entitled to chuse three, Massachusetts eight, Rhode-Island and Providence Plantations one, Connecticut five, New-York six, New Jersey four, Pennsylvania eight, Delaware one, Maryland six, Virginia ten, North Carolina five, South Carolina five, and Georgia three.

When vacancies happen in the Representation from any State, the Executive Authority thereof shall issue Writs of Election to fill such Vacancies.

The House of Representatives shall chuse their Speaker and other Officers;and shall have the sole Power of Impeachment.

Section 3: The Senate

The Senate of the United States shall be composed of two Senators from each State, chosen by the Legislature thereof, for six Years; and each Senator shall have one Vote.

Immediately after they shall be assembled in Consequence of the first Election, they shall be divided as equally as may be into three Classes. The Seats of the Senators of the first Class shall be vacated at the Expiration of the second Year, of the second Class at the Expiration of the fourth Year, and of the third Class at the Expiration of the sixth Year, so that one third may be chosen every second Year; and if Vacancies happen by Resignation, or otherwise, during the Recess of the Legislature of any State, the Executive thereof may make temporary Appointments until the next Meeting of the Legislature, which shall then fill such Vacancies.

No Person shall be a Senator who shall not have attained to the Age of thirty Years, and been nine Years a Citizen of the United States, and who shall not, when elected, be an Inhabitant of that State for which he shall be chosen.

The Vice President of the United States shall be President of the Senate, but shall have no Vote, unless they be equally divided.

The Senate shall chuse their other Officers, and also a President pro tempore, in the Absence of the Vice President, or when he shall exercise the Office of President of the United States.

The Senate shall have the sole Power to try all Impeachments. When sitting for that Purpose, they shall be on Oath or Affirmation. When the President of the United States is tried, the Chief Justice shall preside: And no Person shall be convicted without the Concurrence of two thirds of the Members present.

Judgment in Cases of Impeachment shall not extend further than to removal from Office, and disqualification to hold and enjoy any Office of honor, Trust or Profit under the United States: but the Party convicted shall nevertheless be liable and subject to Indictment, Trial, Judgment and Punishment, according to Law.

Section 4: Elections

The Times, Places and Manner of holding Elections for Senators and Representatives, shall be prescribed in each State by the Legislature thereof; but the Congress may at any time by Law make or alter such Regulations, except as to the Places of chusing Senators.

The Congress shall assemble at least once in every Year, and such Meeting shall be on the first Monday in December, unless they shall by Law appoint a different Day.

Section 5: Powers and Duties of Congress

Each House shall be the Judge of the Elections, Returns and Qualifications of its own Members, and a Majority of each shall constitute a Quorum to do Business; but a smaller Number may adjourn from day to day, and may be authorized to compel the Attendance of absent Members, in such Manner, and under such Penalties as each House may provide.

Each House may determine the Rules of its Proceedings, punish its Members for disorderly Behaviour, and, with the Concurrence of two thirds, expel a Member.

Each House shall keep a Journal of its Proceedings, and from time to time publish the same, excepting such Parts as may in their Judgment require Secrecy; and the Yeas and Nays of the Members of either House on any question shall, at the Desire of one fifth of those Present, be entered on the Journal.

Neither House, during the Session of Congress, shall, without the Consent of the other, adjourn for more than three days, nor to any other Place than that in which the two Houses shall be sitting.

Section 6: Rights and Disabilities of Members

The Senators and Representatives shall receive a Compensation for their Services, to be ascertained by Law, and paid out of the Treasury of the United States. They shall in all Cases, except Treason, Felony and Breach of the Peace, be privileged from Arrest during their Attendance at the Session of their respective Houses, and in going to and returning from the same; and for any Speech or Debate in either House, they shall not be questioned in any other Place.

No Senator or Representative shall, during the Time for which he was elected, be appointed to any civil Office under the Authority of the United States, which shall have been created, or the Emoluments whereof shall have been increased during such time; and no Person holding any Office under the United States, shall be a Member of either House during his Continuance in Office.

Section 7: Legislative Process

All Bills for raising Revenue shall originate in the House of Representatives; but the Senate may propose or concur with Amendments as on other Bills.

Every Bill which shall have passed the House of Representatives and the Senate, shall, before it become a Law, be presented to the President of the United States; If he approve he shall sign it, but if not he shall return it, with his Objections to that House in which it shall have originated, who shall enter the Objections at large on their Journal, and proceed to reconsider it. If after such Reconsideration two thirds of that House shall agree to pass the Bill, it shall be sent, together with the Objections, to the other House, by which it shall likewise be reconsidered, and if approved by two thirds of that House, it shall become a Law. But in all such Cases the Votes of both Houses shall be determined by Yeas and Nays, and the Names of the Persons voting for and against the Bill shall be entered on the Journal of each House respectively. If any Bill shall not be returned by the President within ten Days (Sundays excepted) after it shall have been presented to him, the Same shall be a Law, in like Manner as if he had signed it, unless the Congress by their Adjournment prevent its Return, in which Case it shall not be a Law.

Every Order, Resolution, or Vote to which the Concurrence of the Senate and House of Representatives may be necessary (except on a question of Adjournment) shall be presented to the President of the United States; and before the Same shall take Effect, shall be approved by him, or being disapproved by him, shall be repassed by

two thirds of the Senate and House of Representatives, according to the Rules and Limitations prescribed in the Case of a Bill.

Section 8: Powers of Congress

The Congress shall have Power To lay and collect Taxes, Duties, Imposts and Excises, to pay the Debts and provide for the common Defence and general Welfare of the United States; but all Duties, Imposts and Excises shall be uniform throughout the United States;

To borrow Money on the credit of the United States;

To regulate Commerce with foreign Nations, and among the several States, and with the Indian Tribes;

To establish a uniform Rule of Naturalization, and uniform Laws on the subject of Bankruptcies throughout the United States;

To coin Money, regulate the Value thereof, and of foreign Coin, and fix the Standard of Weights and Measures;

To provide for the Punishment of counterfeiting the Securities and current Coin of the United States;

To establish Post Offices and post Roads;

To promote the Progress of Science and useful Arts, by securing for limited Times to Authors and Inventors the exclusive Right to their respective Writings and Discoveries;

To constitute Tribunals inferior to the supreme Court;

To define and punish Piracies and Felonies committed on the high Seas, and Offenses against the Law of Nations;

To declare War, grant Letters of Marque and Reprisal, and make Rules concerning Captures on Land and Water;

To raise and support Armies, but no Appropriation of Money to that Use shall be for a longer Term than two Years;

To provide and maintain a Navy;

To make Rules for the Government and Regulation of the land and naval Forces;

To provide for calling forth the Militia to execute the Laws of the Union, suppress Insurrections and repel Invasions;

To provide for organizing, arming, and disciplining, the Militia, and for governing such Part of them as may be employed in the Service of the United States, reserving to the States respectively, the

Appointment of the Officers, and the Authority of training the Militia according to the discipline prescribed by Congress;

To exercise exclusive Legislation in all Cases whatsoever, over such District (not exceeding ten Miles square) as may, by Cession of particular States, and the Acceptance of Congress, become the Seat of the Government of the United States, and to exercise like Authority over all Places purchased by the Consent of the Legislature of the State in which the Same shall be, for the Erection of Forts, Magazines, Arsenals, dock-Yards and other needful Buildings;-And

To make all Laws which shall be necessary and proper for carrying into Execution the foregoing Powers, and all other Powers vested by this Constitution in the Government of the United States, or in any Department or Officer thereof.

Section 9: Powers Denied Congress

The Migration or Importation of such Persons as any of the States now existing shall think proper to admit, shall not be prohibited by the Congress prior to the Year one thousand eight hundred and eight, but a Tax or duty may be imposed on such Importation, not exceeding ten dollars for each Person.

The Privilege of the Writ of Habeas Corpus shall not be suspended, unless when in Cases of Rebellion or Invasion the public Safety may require it.

No Bill of Attainder or ex post facto Law shall be passed.

No Capitation, or other direct, Tax shall be laid, unless in Proportion to the Census or Enumeration herein before directed to be taken.

No Tax or Duty shall be laid on Articles exported from any State.

No Preference shall be given by any Regulation of Commerce or Revenue to the Ports of one State over those of another: nor shall Vessels bound to, or from, one State, be obliged to enter, clear, or pay Duties in another.

No Money shall be drawn from the Treasury, but in Consequence of Appropriations made by Law; and a regular Statement and Account of the Receipts and Expenditures of all public Money shall be published from time to time.

No Title of Nobility shall be granted by the United States: And no Person holding any Office of Profit or Trust under them, shall, without the Consent of the Congress, accept of any present, Emolument,

Office, or Title, of any kind whatever, from any King, Prince, or foreign State.

Section 10: Powers Denied to the States

No State shall enter into any Treaty, Alliance, or Confederation; grant Letters of Marque and Reprisal; coin Money; emit Bills of Credit; make any Thing but gold and silver Coin a Tender in Payment of Debts; pass any Bill of Attainder, ex post facto Law, or Law impairing the Obligation of Contracts, or grant any Title of Nobility.

No State shall, without the Consent of the Congress, lay any Imposts or Duties on Imports or Exports, except what may be absolutely necessary for executing it's inspection Laws: and the net Produce of all Duties and Imposts, laid by any State on Imports or Exports, shall be for the Use of the Treasury of the United States; and all such Laws shall be subject to the Revision and Controul of the Congress.

No State shall, without the Consent of Congress, lay any Duty of Tonnage, keep Troops, or Ships of War in time of Peace, enter into any Agreement or Compact with another State, or with a foreign Power, or engage in War, unless actually invaded, or in such imminent Danger as will not admit of delay.

Article II

Section 1

The executive Power shall be vested in a President of the United States of America.

He shall hold his Office during the Term of four Years, and, together with the Vice President, chosen for the same Term, be elected, as follows:

Each State shall appoint, in such Manner as the Legislature thereof may direct, a Number of Electors, equal to the whole Number of Senators and Representatives to which the State may be entitled in the Congress: but no Senator or Representative, or Person holding an Office of Trust or Profit under the United States, shall be appointed an Elector.

The Electors shall meet in their respective States, and vote by Ballot for two Persons, of whom one at least shall not be an Inhabitant of the same State with themselves. And they shall make a List of all the Persons voted for, and of the Number of Votes for each; which List they shall sign and certify, and transmit sealed to the Seat of the Government of the United States, directed to the President of the Senate. The President of the Senate shall, in the Presence of the Senate and House of Representatives, open all the Certificates, and the Votes

shall then be counted. The Person having the greatest Number of Votes shall be the President, if such Number be a Majority of the whole Number of Electors appointed; and if there be more than one who have such Majority, and have an equal Number of Votes, then the House of Representatives shall immediately chuse by Ballot one of them for President; and if no Person have a Majority, then from the five highest on the List the said House shall in like Manner chuse the President. But in chusing the President, the Votes shall be taken by States, the Representation from each State having one Vote; A quorum for this Purpose shall consist of a Member or Members from two thirds of the States, and a Majority of all the States shall be necessary to a Choice. In every Case, after the Choice of the President, the Person having the greatest Number of Votes of the Electors shall be the Vice President. But if there should remain two or more who have equal Votes, the Senate shall chuse from them by Ballot the Vice President.

The Congress may determine the Time of chusing the Electors, and the Day on which they shall give their Votes; which Day shall be the same throughout the United States.

No Person except a natural born Citizen, or a Citizen of the United States, at the time of the Adoption of this Constitution, shall be

eligible to the Office of President; neither shall any person be eligible to that Office who shall not have attained to the Age of thirty five Years, and been fourteen Years a Resident within the United States.

In Case of the Removal of the President from Office, or of his Death, Resignation, or Inability to discharge the Powers and Duties of the said Office, the Same shall devolve on the Vice President, and the Congress may by Law provide for the Case of Removal, Death, Resignation or Inability, both of the President and Vice President, declaring what Officer shall then act as President, and such Officer shall act accordingly, until the Disability be removed, or a President shall be elected.

The President shall, at stated Times, receive for his Services, a Compensation, which shall neither be increased nor diminished during the Period for which he shall have been elected, and he shall not receive within that Period any other Emolument from the United States, or any of them.

Before he enter on the Execution of his Office, he shall take the following Oath or Affirmation:--"I do solemnly swear (or affirm) that I will faithfully execute the Office of President of the United States, and will to the best of my Ability, preserve, protect and defend the Constitution of the United States."

Section 2

The President shall be Commander in Chief of the Army and Navy of the United States, and of the Militia of the several States, when called into the actual Service of the United States; he may require the Opinion, in writing, of the principal Officer in each of the executive Departments, upon any Subject relating to the Duties of their respective Offices, and he shall have Power to grant Reprieves and Pardons for Offenses against the United States, except in Cases of Impeachment.

He shall have Power, by and with the Advice and Consent of the Senate, to make Treaties, provided two thirds of the Senators present concur; and he shall nominate, and by and with the Advice and Consent of the Senate, shall appoint Ambassadors, other public Ministers and Consuls, Judges of the supreme Court, and all other Officers of the United States, whose Appointments are not herein otherwise provided for, and which shall be established by Law: but the Congress may by Law vest the Appointment of such inferior Officers, as they think proper, in the President alone, in the Courts of Law, or in the Heads of Departments.

The President shall have Power to fill up all Vacancies that may happen during the Recess of the Senate, by granting Commissions which shall expire at the End of their next Session.

Section 3

He shall from time to time give to the Congress Information of the State of the Union, and recommend to their Consideration such Measures as he shall judge necessary and expedient; he may, on extraordinary Occasions, convene both Houses, or either of them, and in Case of Disagreement between them, with Respect to the Time of Adjournment, he may adjourn them to such Time as he shall think proper; he shall receive Ambassadors and other public Ministers; he shall take Care that the Laws be faithfully executed, and shall Commission all the Officers of the United States.

Section 4

The President, Vice President and all civil Officers of the United States, shall be removed from Office on Impeachment for, and Conviction of, Treason, Bribery, or other high Crimes and Misdemeanors.

Article III

Section 1

The judicial Power of the United States, shall be vested in one supreme Court, and in such inferior Courts as the Congress may from time to time ordain and establish. The Judges, both of the supreme and inferior Courts, shall hold their Offices during good Behaviour, and shall, at stated Times, receive for their Services, a Compensation, which shall not be diminished during their Continuance in Office.

Section 2

The judicial Power shall extend to all Cases, in Law and Equity, arising under this Constitution, the Laws of the United States, and Treaties made, or which shall be made, under their Authority;--to all Cases affecting Ambassadors, other public Ministers and Consuls;--to all Cases of admiralty and maritime Jurisdiction;--to Controversies to which the United States shall be a Party;--to Controversies between two or more States;--between a State and Citizens of another State;--between Citizens of different States;--between Citizens of the same State claiming Lands under Grants of different States, and between a State, or the Citizens thereof, and foreign States, Citizens or Subjects.

In all Cases affecting Ambassadors, other public Ministers and Consuls, and those in which a State shall be Party, the supreme Court

shall have original Jurisdiction. In all the other Cases before mentioned, the supreme Court shall have appellate Jurisdiction, both as to Law and Fact, with such Exceptions, and under such Regulations as the Congress shall make.

The Trial of all Crimes, except in Cases of Impeachment; shall be by Jury; and such Trial shall be held in the State where the said Crimes shall have been committed; but when not committed within any State, the Trial shall be at such Place or Places as the Congress may by Law have directed.

Section 3

Treason against the United States, shall consist only in levying War against them, or in adhering to their Enemies, giving them Aid and Comfort. No Person shall be convicted of Treason unless on the Testimony of two Witnesses to the same overt Act, or on Confession in open Court.

The Congress shall have Power to declare the Punishment of Treason, but no Attainder of Treason shall work Corruption of Blood, or Forfeiture except during the Life of the Person attainted.

Article IV

Section 1

Full Faith and Credit shall be given in each State to the public Acts, Records, and judicial Proceedings of every other State. And the Congress may by general Laws prescribe the Manner in which such Acts, Records and Proceedings shall be proved, and the Effect thereof.

Section 2

The Citizens of each State shall be entitled to all Privileges and Immunities of Citizens in the several States.

A Person charged in any State with Treason, Felony, or other Crime, who shall flee from Justice, and be found in another State, shall on Demand of the executive Authority of the State from which he fled, be delivered up, to be removed to the State having Jurisdiction of the Crime.

No Person held to Service or Labour in one State, under the Laws thereof, escaping into another, shall, in Consequence of any Law or Regulation therein, be discharged from such Service or Labour, but shall be delivered up on Claim of the Party to whom such Service or Labour may be due.

Section 3

New States may be admitted by the Congress into this Union; but no new State shall be formed or erected within the Jurisdiction of any other State; nor any State be formed by the Junction of two or more States, or Parts of States, without the Consent of the Legislatures of the States concerned as well as of the Congress.

The Congress shall have Power to dispose of and make all needful Rules and Regulations respecting the Territory or other Property belonging to the United States; and nothing in this Constitution shall be so construed as to Prejudice any Claims of the United States, or of any particular State.

Section 4

The United States shall guarantee to every State in this Union a Republican Form of Government, and shall protect each of them against Invasion; and on Application of the Legislature, or of the Executive (when the Legislature cannot be convened) against domestic Violence.

Article V

The Congress, whenever two thirds of both Houses shall deem it necessary, shall propose Amendments to this Constitution, or, on the

Application of the Legislatures of two thirds of the several States, shall call a Convention for proposing Amendments, which, in either Case, shall be valid to all Intents and Purposes, as Part of this Constitution, when ratified by the Legislatures of three fourths of the several States, or by Conventions in three fourths thereof, as the one or the other Mode of Ratification may be proposed by the Congress; Provided that no Amendment which may be made prior to the Year One thousand eight hundred and eight shall in any Manner affect the first and fourth Clauses in the Ninth Section of the first Article; and that no State, without its Consent, shall be deprived of its equal Suffrage in the Senate.

Article VI

All Debts contracted and Engagements entered into, before the Adoption of this Constitution, shall be as valid against the United States under this Constitution, as under the Confederation.

This Constitution, and the Laws of the United States which shall be made in Pursuance thereof; and all Treaties made, or which shall be made, under the Authority of the United States, shall be the supreme Law of the Land; and the Judges in every State shall be bound

thereby, any Thing in the Constitution or Laws of any State to the Contrary notwithstanding.

The Senators and Representatives before mentioned, and the Members of the several State Legislatures, and all executive and judicial Officers, both of the United States and of the several States, shall be bound by Oath or Affirmation, to support this Constitution; but no religious Test shall ever be required as a Qualification to any Office or public Trust under the United States.

Article VII

The Ratification of the Conventions of nine States, shall be sufficient for the Establishment of this Constitution between the States so ratifying the Same.

First Amendment

Congress shall make no law respecting an establishment of religion, or prohibiting the free exercise thereof; or abridging the freedom of speech, or of the press; or the right of the people peaceably to assemble, and to petition the Government for a redress of grievances.

Second Amendment

A well regulated Militia, being necessary to the security of a free State, the right of the people to keep and bear Arms, shall not be infringed.

Third Amendment

No Soldier shall, in time of peace be quartered in any house, without the consent of the Owner, nor in time of war, but in a manner to be prescribed by law.

Fourth Amendment

The right of the people to be secure in their persons, houses, papers, and effects, against unreasonable searches and seizures, shall not be violated, and no Warrants shall issue, but upon probable cause, supported by Oath or affirmation, and particularly describing the place to be searched, and the persons or things to be seized.

Fifth Amendment

No person shall be held to answer for a capital, or otherwise infamous crime, unless on a presentment or indictment of a Grand Jury, except

in cases arising in the land or naval forces, or in the Militia, when in actual service in time of War or public danger; nor shall any person be subject for the same offence to be twice put in jeopardy of life or limb; nor shall be compelled in any criminal case to be a witness against himself, nor be deprived of life, liberty, or property, without due process of law; nor shall private property be taken for public use, without just compensation.

Sixth Amendment

In all criminal prosecutions, the accused shall enjoy the right to a speedy and public trial, by an impartial jury of the State and district wherein the crime shall have been committed, which district shall have been previously ascertained by law, and to be informed of the nature and cause of the accusation; to be confronted with the witnesses against him; to have compulsory process for obtaining witnesses in his favor, and to have the Assistance of Counsel for his defence.

Seventh Amendment

In Suits at common law, where the value in controversy shall exceed twenty dollars, the right of trial by jury shall be preserved, and no fact

tried by a jury, shall be otherwise reexamined in any Court of the United States, than according to the rules of the common law.

Eighth Amendment

Excessive bail shall not be required, nor excessive fines imposed, nor cruel and unusual punishments inflicted.

Ninth Amendment

The enumeration in the Constitution, of certain rights, shall not be construed to deny or disparage others retained by the people.

10th Amendment

The powers not delegated to the United States by the Constitution, nor prohibited by it to the States, are reserved to the States respectively, or to the people.

11th Amendment

The Judicial power of the United States shall not be construed to extend to any suit in law or equity, commenced or prosecuted against

one of the United States by Citizens of another State, or by Citizens or Subjects of any Foreign State.

12th Amendment

The Electors shall meet in their respective states and vote by ballot for President and Vice-President, one of whom, at least, shall not be an inhabitant of the same state with themselves; they shall name in their ballots the person voted for as President, and in distinct ballots the person voted for as Vice-President, and they shall make distinct lists of all persons voted for as President, and of all persons voted for as Vice-President, and of the number of votes for each, which lists they shall sign and certify, and transmit sealed to the seat of the government of the United States, directed to the President of the Senate; -- The President of the Senate shall, in the presence of the Senate and House of Representatives, open all the certificates and the votes shall then be counted; -- The person having the greatest number of votes for President, shall be the President, if such number be a majority of the whole number of Electors appointed; and if no person have such majority, then from the persons having the highest numbers not exceeding three on the list of those voted for as President, the House of Representatives shall choose immediately, by ballot, the President. But in choosing the President, the votes shall be taken by

states, the representation from each state having one vote; a quorum for this purpose shall consist of a member or members from two-thirds of the states, and a majority of all the states shall be necessary to a choice. And if the House of Representatives shall not choose a President whenever the right of choice shall devolve upon them, before the fourth day of March next following, then the Vice-President shall act as President, as in case of the death or other constitutional disability of the President.-- The person having the greatest number of votes as Vice-President, shall be the Vice-President, if such number be a majority of the whole number of Electors appointed, and if no person have a majority, then from the two highest numbers on the list, the Senate shall choose the Vice-President; a quorum for the purpose shall consist of two-thirds of the whole number of Senators, and a majority of the whole number shall be necessary to a choice. But no person constitutionally ineligible to the office of President shall be eligible to that of Vice-President of the United States.

13th Amendment

Section 1

Neither slavery nor involuntary servitude, except as a punishment for crime whereof the party shall have been duly convicted, shall exist within the United States, or any place subject to their jurisdiction.

Section 2

Congress shall have power to enforce this article by appropriate legislation.

14th Amendment

Section 1

All persons born or naturalized in the United States, and subject to the jurisdiction thereof, are citizens of the United States and of the State wherein they reside. No State shall make or enforce any law which shall abridge the privileges or immunities of citizens of the United States; nor shall any State deprive any person of life, liberty, or property, without due process of law; nor deny to any person within its jurisdiction the equal protection of the laws.

Section 2

Representatives shall be apportioned among the several States according to their respective numbers, counting the whole number of persons in each State, excluding Indians not taxed. But when the right to vote at any election for the choice of electors for President and Vice-President of the United States, Representatives in Congress, the Executive and Judicial officers of a State, or the members of the Legislature thereof, is denied to any of the male inhabitants of such State, being twenty-one years of age, and citizens of the United

States, or in any way abridged, except for participation in rebellion, or other crime, the basis of representation therein shall be reduced in the proportion which the number of such male citizens shall bear to the whole number of male citizens twenty-one years of age in such State.

Section 3

No person shall be a Senator or Representative in Congress, or elector of President and Vice-President, or hold any office, civil or military, under the United States, or under any State, who, having previously taken an oath, as a member of Congress, or as an officer of the United States, or as a member of any State legislature, or as an executive or judicial officer of any State, to support the Constitution of the United States, shall have engaged in insurrection or rebellion against the same, or given aid or comfort to the enemies thereof. But Congress may by a vote of two-thirds of each House, remove such disability.

Section 4

The validity of the public debt of the United States, authorized by law, including debts incurred for payment of pensions and bounties for services in suppressing insurrection or rebellion, shall not be questioned. But neither the United States nor any State shall assume or pay any debt or obligation incurred in aid of insurrection or rebellion against the United States, or any claim for the loss or emancipation of

any slave; but all such debts, obligations and claims shall be held illegal and void.

Section 5

The Congress shall have the power to enforce, by appropriate legislation, the provisions of this article.

15th Amendment

Section 1

The right of citizens of the United States to vote shall not be denied or abridged by the United States or by any State on account of race, color, or previous condition of servitude.

Section 2

The Congress shall have the power to enforce this article by appropriate legislation.

16th Amendment

The Congress shall have power to lay and collect taxes on incomes, from whatever source derived, without apportionment among the several States, and without regard to any census or enumeration.

17th Amendment

The Senate of the United States shall be composed of two Senators from each State, elected by the people thereof, for six years; and each Senator shall have one vote. The electors in each State shall have the qualifications requisite for electors of the most numerous branch of the State legislatures.

When vacancies happen in the representation of any State in the Senate, the executive authority of such State shall issue writs of election to fill such vacancies: Provided, That the legislature of any State may empower the executive thereof to make temporary appointments until the people fill the vacancies by election as the legislature may direct.

This amendment shall not be so construed as to affect the election or term of any Senator chosen before it becomes valid as part of the Constitution.

18th Amendment

Section 1

After one year from the ratification of this article the manufacture, sale, or transportation of intoxicating liquors within, the importation thereof into, or the exportation thereof from the United States and all

territory subject to the jurisdiction thereof for beverage purposes is hereby prohibited.

Section 2

The Congress and the several States shall have concurrent power to enforce this article by appropriate legislation.

Section 3

This article shall be inoperative unless it shall have been ratified as an amendment to the Constitution by the legislatures of the several States, as provided in the Constitution, within seven years from the date of the submission hereof to the States by the Congress.

19th Amendment

The right of citizens of the United States to vote shall not be denied or abridged by the United States or by any State on account of sex.

Congress shall have power to enforce this article by appropriate legislation.

20th Amendment

Section 1

The terms of the President and the Vice President shall end at noon on the 20th day of January, and the terms of Senators and Representatives at noon on the 3d day of January, of the years in which such terms would have ended if this article had not been ratified; and the terms of their successors shall then begin.

Section 2

The Congress shall assemble at least once in every year, and such meeting shall begin at noon on the 3d day of January, unless they shall by law appoint a different day.

Section 3

If, at the time fixed for the beginning of the term of the President, the President elect shall have died, the Vice President elect shall become President. If a President shall not have been chosen before the time fixed for the beginning of his term, or if the President elect shall have failed to qualify, then the Vice President elect shall act as President until a President shall have qualified; and the Congress may by law provide for the case wherein neither a President elect nor a Vice President shall have qualified, declaring who shall then act as President, or the manner in which one who is to act shall be selected,

and such person shall act accordingly until a President or Vice President shall have qualified.

Section 4

The Congress may by law provide for the case of the death of any of the persons from whom the House of Representatives may choose a President whenever the right of choice shall have devolved upon them, and for the case of the death of any of the persons from whom the Senate may choose a Vice President whenever the right of choice shall have devolved upon them.

Section 5

Sections 1 and 2 shall take effect on the 15th day of October following the ratification of this article.

Section 6

This article shall be inoperative unless it shall have been ratified as an amendment to the Constitution by the legislatures of three-fourths of the several States within seven years from the date of its submission.

21st Amendment

Section 1

The eighteenth article of amendment to the Constitution of the United States is hereby repealed.

Section 2

The transportation or importation into any State, Territory, or Possession of the United States for delivery or use therein of intoxicating liquors, in violation of the laws thereof, is hereby prohibited.

Section 3

This article shall be inoperative unless it shall have been ratified as an amendment to the Constitution by conventions in the several States, as provided in the Constitution, within seven years from the date of the submission hereof to the States by the Congress.

22nd Amendment

Section 1

No person shall be elected to the office of the President more than twice, and no person who has held the office of President, or acted as President, for more than two years of a term to which some other person was elected President shall be elected to the office of President more than once. But this Article shall not apply to any person holding the office of President when this Article was proposed by Congress, and shall not prevent any person who may be holding the office of President, or acting as President, during the term within which this

Article becomes operative from holding the office of President or acting as President during the remainder of such term.

Section 2

This article shall be inoperative unless it shall have been ratified as an amendment to the Constitution by the legislatures of three-fourths of the several States within seven years from the date of its submission to the States by the Congress.

23rd Amendment

Section 1

The District constituting the seat of Government of the United States shall appoint in such manner as Congress may direct:

A number of electors of President and Vice President equal to the whole number of Senators and Representatives in Congress to which the District would be entitled if it were a State, but in no event more than the least populous State; they shall be in addition to those appointed by the States, but they shall be considered, for the purposes of the election of President and Vice President, to be electors appointed by a State; and they shall meet in the District and perform such duties as provided by the twelfth article of amendment.

Section 2

The Congress shall have power to enforce this article by appropriate legislation.

24th Amendment

Section 1

The right of citizens of the United States to vote in any primary or other election for President or Vice President, for electors for President or Vice President, or for Senator or Representative in Congress, shall not be denied or abridged by the United States or any State by reason of failure to pay poll tax or other tax.

Section 2

The Congress shall have power to enforce this article by appropriate legislation.

25th Amendment

Section 1

In case of the removal of the President from office or of his death or resignation, the Vice President shall become President.

Section 2

Whenever there is a vacancy in the office of the Vice President, the President shall nominate a Vice President who shall take office upon confirmation by a majority vote of both Houses of Congress.

Section 3

Whenever the President transmits to the President pro tempore of the Senate and the Speaker of the House of Representatives his written declaration that he is unable to discharge the powers and duties of his office, and until he transmits to them a written declaration to the contrary, such powers and duties shall be discharged by the Vice President as Acting President.

Section 4

Whenever the Vice President and a majority of either the principal officers of the executive departments or of such other body as Congress may by law provide, transmit to the President pro tempore of the Senate and the Speaker of the House of Representatives their written declaration that the President is unable to discharge the powers and duties of his office, the Vice President shall immediately assume the powers and duties of the office as Acting President.

Thereafter, when the President transmits to the President pro tempore of the Senate and the Speaker of the House of Representatives his

written declaration that no inability exists, he shall resume the powers and duties of his office unless the Vice President and a majority of either the principal officers of the executive department or of such other body as Congress may by law provide, transmit within four days to the President pro tempore of the Senate and the Speaker of the House of Representatives their written declaration that the President is unable to discharge the powers and duties of his office. Thereupon Congress shall decide the issue, assembling within forty-eight hours for that purpose if not in session. If the Congress, within twenty-one days after receipt of the latter written declaration, or, if Congress is not in session, within twenty-one days after Congress is required to assemble, determines by two-thirds vote of both Houses that the President is unable to discharge the powers and duties of his office, the Vice President shall continue to discharge the same as Acting President; otherwise, the President shall resume the powers and duties of his office.

26th Amendment

Section 1

The right of citizens of the United States, who are eighteen years of age or older, to vote shall not be denied or abridged by the United States or by any State on account of age.

Section 2

The Congress shall have power to enforce this article by appropriate legislation.

27th Amendment

No law, varying the compensation for the services of the Senators and Representatives, shall take effect, until an election of representatives shall have intervened.

Introduction

The [U.S. Constitution](#), is one of the world's most enduring symbols of democracy. It is also the oldest, and shortest, written constitutions of the modern era still in existence. Its writing was by no means inevitable, however. In many ways, the Constitution was both the culmination of American (and British) political thought about government power and a blueprint for the future.

It is tempting to think of the framers of the Constitution as a group of like-minded men aligned in their lofty thinking regarding rights and freedoms. This assumption makes it hard to oppose constitutional principles in modern-day politics because people admire the longevity of the Constitution and like to consider its ideals above petty partisan politics. However, the Constitution was designed largely out of necessity following the failure of the first revolutionary government, and it featured a series of pragmatic compromises among its disparate stakeholders. It is therefore quite appropriate that more than 225 years later the U.S. government still requires compromise to function properly.

How did the Constitution come to be written? What compromises were needed to ensure the ratification that made it into law? This chapter addresses these questions and also describes why the Constitution remains a living, changing document.

2.1 The Pre-Revolutionary Period and the Roots of the American Political Tradition

Learning Objectives

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

- Identify the origins of the core values in American political thought, including ideas regarding representational government
- Summarize Great Britain's actions leading to the American Revolution

American political ideas regarding liberty and self-government did not suddenly emerge full-blown at the moment the colonists declared their independence from Britain. The varied strands of what became the American republic had many roots, reaching far back in time and across the Atlantic Ocean to Europe. Indeed, it was not new ideas but old ones that led the colonists to revolt and form a new nation.

POLITICAL THOUGHT IN THE AMERICAN COLONIES

The beliefs and attitudes that led to the call for independence had long been an important part of colonial life. Of all the political thinkers who influenced American beliefs about government, the most important is surely John Locke ([Figure 2.2](#)). The most significant contributions of Locke, a seventeenth-century English philosopher, were his ideas regarding the relationship between government and natural rights, which were believed to be God-given rights to life, liberty, and property.



Figure 2.2 John Locke was one of the most influential thinkers of the Enlightenment. His writings form the basis for many modern political ideas.

Locke was not the first Englishman to suggest that people had rights. The British government had recognized its duty to protect the lives, liberties, and property of English citizens long before the settling of its North American colonies. In 1215, King John signed Magna Carta—a promise to his subjects that he and future monarchs would refrain from certain actions that harmed, or had the potential to harm, the people of England. Prominent in Magna Carta’s many provisions are protections for life, liberty, and property. For example, one of the document’s most famous clauses promises, “No freemen shall be taken, imprisoned . . . or in any way destroyed . . . except by the lawful judgment of his peers or by the law of the land.” Although it took a long time for modern ideas regarding due process to form, this clause lays the foundation for the Fifth and Sixth Amendments to the U.S. Constitution. While Magna Carta was intended to grant protections only to the English barons who were in revolt against King John in 1215, by the time of the American Revolution, English subjects, both in England and in North America, had come to regard the document as a cornerstone of liberty for men of all stations—a right that had been recognized by King John I in 1215, but the people had actually possessed long before then.

The rights protected by Magna Carta had been granted by the king, and, in theory, a future king or queen could take them away. The natural rights Locke described, however, had been granted by God and thus could never be abolished by human beings, even royal ones, or by the institutions they created.

So committed were the British to the protection of these natural rights that when the royal Stuart dynasty began to intrude upon them in the seventeenth century, Parliament removed King James II, already disliked because he was Roman Catholic, in the Glorious Revolution and invited his Protestant daughter and her husband to rule the nation. Before offering the throne to William and Mary, however, Parliament passed the English Bill of Rights in 1689. A bill of rights is a list of the liberties and protections possessed by a nation’s citizens. The English Bill of Rights, heavily influenced by Locke’s ideas, enumerated the rights of English citizens and explicitly guaranteed rights to life, liberty, and property. This document would profoundly influence the U.S. Constitution and Bill of Rights.

American colonists also shared Locke's concept of property rights. According to Locke, anyone who invested labor in the *commons*—the land, forests, water, animals, and other parts of nature that were free for the taking—might take as much of these as needed, by cutting trees, for example, or building a fence around a field. The only restriction was that no one could take so much that others were deprived of their right to take from the commons as well. In the colonists' eyes, all free White males should have the right to acquire property, and once it had been acquired, government had the duty to protect it. (The rights of women remained greatly limited for many more years.)

Perhaps the most important of Locke's ideas that influenced the British settlers of North America were those regarding the origins and purpose of government. Most Europeans of the time believed the institution of monarchy had been created by God, and kings and queens had been divinely appointed to rule. Locke, however, theorized that human beings, not God, had created government. People sacrificed a small portion of their freedom and consented to be ruled in exchange for the government's protection of their lives, liberty, and property. Locke called this implicit agreement between a people and their government the social contract. Should government deprive people of their rights by abusing the power given to it, the contract was broken and the people were no longer bound by its terms. The people could thus withdraw their consent to obey and form another government for their protection.

The belief that government should not deprive people of their liberties and should be restricted in its power over citizens' lives was an important factor in the controversial decision by the American colonies to declare independence from England in 1776. For Locke, withdrawing consent to be ruled by an established government and forming a new one meant replacing one monarch with another. For those colonists intent on rebelling, however, it meant establishing a new nation and creating a new government, one that would be greatly limited in the power it could exercise over the people.

The desire to limit the power of government is closely related to the belief that people should govern themselves. This core tenet of American political thought was rooted in a variety of traditions. First, the British government did allow for a degree of self-government. Laws were made by Parliament, and property-owning males were allowed to vote for representatives to Parliament. Thus, Americans were accustomed to the idea of representative government from the beginning. For instance, Virginia established its House of Burgesses in 1619. Upon their arrival in North America a year later, the English Separatists who settled the Plymouth Colony, commonly known as the Pilgrims, promptly authored the Mayflower Compact, an agreement to govern themselves according to the laws created by the male voters of the colony.¹ By the eighteenth century, all the colonies had established legislatures to which men were elected to make the laws for their fellow colonists. When American colonists felt that this longstanding tradition of representative self-government was threatened by the actions of Parliament and the King, the American Revolution began.

THE AMERICAN REVOLUTION

The American Revolution began when a small and vocal group of colonists became convinced the king and Parliament were abusing them and depriving them of their rights. By 1776, they

had been living under the rule of the British government for more than a century, and England had long treated the thirteen colonies with a degree of benign neglect. Each colony had established its own legislature. Taxes imposed by England were low, and property ownership was more widespread than in England. People readily proclaimed their loyalty to the king. For the most part, American colonists were proud to be British citizens and had no desire to form an independent nation.

All this began to change in 1763 when the Seven Years War between Great Britain and France came to an end, and Great Britain gained control of most of the French territory in North America. The colonists had fought on behalf of Britain, and many colonists expected that after the war they would be allowed to settle on land west of the Appalachian Mountains that had been taken from France. However, their hopes were not realized. Hoping to prevent conflict with Indian tribes in the Ohio Valley, Parliament passed the Proclamation of 1763, which forbade the colonists to purchase land or settle west of the Appalachian Mountains.²

To pay its debts from the war and maintain the troops it left behind to protect the colonies, the British government had to take new measures to raise revenue. Among the acts passed by Parliament were laws requiring American colonists to pay British merchants with gold and silver instead of paper currency and a mandate that suspected smugglers be tried in vice-admiralty courts, without jury trials. What angered the colonists most of all, however, was the imposition of direct taxes: taxes imposed on individuals instead of on transactions.

Because the colonists had not consented to direct taxation, their primary objection was that it reduced their status as free men. The right of the people or their representatives to consent to taxation was enshrined in both Magna Carta and the English Bill of Rights. Taxes were imposed by the House of Commons, one of the two houses of the British Parliament. The North American colonists, however, were not allowed to elect representatives to that body. In their eyes, taxation by representatives they had not voted for was a denial of their rights. Members of the House of Commons and people living in England had difficulty understanding this argument. All British subjects had to obey the laws passed by Parliament, including the requirement to pay taxes. Those who were not allowed to vote, such as women and Black people, were considered to have virtual representation in the British legislature; representatives elected by those who could vote made laws on behalf of those who could not. Many colonists, however, maintained that anything except direct representation was a violation of their rights as English subjects.

The first such tax to draw the ire of colonists was the Stamp Act, passed in 1765, which required that almost all paper goods, such as diplomas, land deeds, contracts, and newspapers, have revenue stamps placed on them. The outcry was so great that the new tax was quickly withdrawn, but its repeal was soon followed by a series of other tax acts, such as the Townshend Acts (1767), which imposed taxes on many everyday objects such as glass, tea, and paint.

The taxes imposed by the Townshend Acts were as poorly received by the colonists as the Stamp Act had been. The Massachusetts legislature sent a petition to the king asking for relief from the taxes and requested that other colonies join in a boycott of British manufactured

goods. British officials threatened to suspend the legislatures of colonies that engaged in a boycott and, in response to a request for help from Boston's customs collector, sent a warship to the city in 1768. A few months later, British troops arrived, and on the evening of March 5, 1770, an altercation erupted outside the customs house. Shots rang out as the soldiers fired into the crowd ([Figure 2.3](#)). Several people were hit; three died immediately. Britain had taxed the colonists without their consent. Now, British soldiers had taken colonists' lives.



Figure 2.3 The Sons of Liberty circulated this sensationalized version of the events of March 5, 1770, in order to promote the rightness of their cause; it depicts British soldiers firing on unarmed civilians in the event that became known as the Boston Massacre. Later portrayals would more prominently feature Crispus Attucks, an African American who was one of the first to die. Eight British soldiers were tried for murder as a result of the confrontation.

Following this event, later known as the Boston Massacre, resistance to British rule grew, especially in the colony of Massachusetts. In December 1773, a group of Boston men boarded a ship in Boston harbor and threw its cargo of tea, owned by the British East India Company, into the water to protest British policies, including the granting of a monopoly on tea to the British East India Company, which many colonial merchants resented.³ This act of defiance became known as the Boston Tea Party. In the 2010s, many who did not agree with the positions of the Democratic or the Republican Party organized themselves into an oppositional group dubbed the Tea Party ([Figure 2.4](#)).



(a)



(b)

Figure 2.4 Members of the modern Tea Party movement claim to represent the same spirit as their colonial forebears in the iconic lithograph *The Destruction of Tea at Boston Harbor* (a) and protest against what they perceive as government's interference with people's rights. In April 2010, members of a Tea Party Express rally on the Boston Common signed a signature wall to record their protest (b). (credit b: modification of work by Tim Pierce)

In the early months of 1774, Parliament responded to this latest act of colonial defiance by passing a series of laws called the Coercive Acts, intended to punish Boston for leading resistance to British rule and to restore order in the colonies. These acts virtually abolished town meetings in Massachusetts and otherwise interfered with the colony's ability to govern itself. This assault on Massachusetts and its economy enraged people throughout the colonies, and delegates from all the colonies except Georgia formed the First Continental Congress to create a unified opposition to Great Britain. Among other things, members of the institution developed a declaration of rights and grievances.

In May 1775, delegates met again in the Second Continental Congress. By this time, war with Great Britain had already begun, following skirmishes between colonial militiamen and British troops at Lexington and Concord, Massachusetts. Congress drafted a Declaration of Causes explaining the colonies' reasons for rebellion. On July 2, 1776, Congress declared American independence from Britain and two days later signed the Declaration of Independence.

Drafted by Thomas Jefferson, the [Declaration of Independence](#) officially proclaimed the colonies' separation from Britain. In it, Jefferson eloquently laid out the reasons for rebellion. God, he wrote, had given everyone the rights of life, liberty, and the pursuit of happiness. People had created governments to protect these rights and consented to be governed by them so long as government functioned as intended. However, "whenever any Form of Government becomes destructive of these ends, it is the Right of the People to alter or to abolish it, and to institute new Government." Britain had deprived the colonists of their rights. The king had "establish[ed] . . . an absolute Tyranny over these States." Just as their English forebears had removed King James II from the throne in 1689, the colonists now wished to establish a new rule.

Jefferson then proceeded to list the many ways in which the British monarch had abused his power and failed in his duties to his subjects. The king, Jefferson charged, had taxed the colonists without the consent of their elected representatives, interfered with their trade, denied them the right to trial by jury, and deprived them of their right to self-government. Such intrusions on their rights could not be tolerated. With their signing of the Declaration of Independence ([Figure 2.5](#)), the founders of the United States committed themselves to the creation of a new kind of government.



Figure 2.5 The presentation of the Declaration of Independence is commemorated in a painting by John Trumbull in 1817. It was commissioned to hang in the Capitol in Washington, DC.

[Link to Learning](#)

Thomas Jefferson explains in the [Declaration of Independence](#) why many colonists felt the need to form a new nation. His evocation of the natural rights of man and his list of grievances against the king also served as the model for the [Declaration of Sentiments](#) that was written in 1848 in favor of giving women in the United States rights equal to those of men. View both documents and compare.

2.2 The Articles of Confederation

Learning Objectives

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

- Describe the steps taken during and after the American Revolution to create a government
- Identify the main features of the Articles of Confederation
- Describe the crises resulting from key features of the Articles of Confederation

Waging a successful war against Great Britain required that the individual colonies, now sovereign states that often distrusted one another, form a unified nation with a central government capable of directing the country's defense. Gaining recognition and aid from foreign nations would also be easier if the new United States had a national government able to borrow money and negotiate treaties. Accordingly, the Second Continental Congress called upon its delegates to create a new government strong enough to win the country's independence but not so powerful that it would deprive people of the very liberties for which they were fighting.

PUTTING A NEW GOVERNMENT IN PLACE

The final draft of the Articles of Confederation, which formed the basis of the new nation's government, was accepted by Congress in November 1777 and submitted to the states for ratification. It would not become the law of the land until all thirteen states had approved it. Within two years, all except Maryland had done so. Maryland argued that all territory west of the Appalachians, to which some states had laid claim, should instead be held by the national government as public land for the benefit of all the states. When the last of these states, Virginia, relinquished its land claims in early 1781, Maryland approved the Articles.⁴ A few months later, the British surrendered.

Americans wished their new government to be a republic, a regime in which the people, not a monarch, held power and elected representatives to govern according to the rule of law. Many, however, feared that a nation as large as the United States could not be ruled effectively as a republic. Many also worried that even a government of representatives elected by the people might become too powerful and overbearing. Thus, a confederation was created—an entity in which independent, self-governing states form a union for the purpose of acting together in areas such as defense. Fearful of replacing one oppressive national government with another, however, the framers of the Articles of Confederation created an alliance of sovereign states held together by a weak central government.

Link to Learning

View the [Articles of Confederation](#) at the National Archives. The [timeline for drafting and ratifying the Articles of Confederation](#) is available at the Library of Congress.

Following the Declaration of Independence, each of the thirteen states had drafted and ratified a constitution providing for a republican form of government in which political power rested in

the hands of the people, although the right to vote was limited to free (White) men, and the property requirements for voting differed among the states. Each state had a governor and an elected legislature. In the new nation, the states remained free to govern their residents as they wished. The central government had authority to act in only a few areas, such as national defense, in which the states were assumed to have a common interest (and would, indeed, have to supply militias). This arrangement was meant to prevent the national government from becoming too powerful or abusing the rights of individual citizens. In the careful balance between power for the national government and liberty for the states, the Articles of Confederation favored the states.

Thus, powers given to the central government were severely limited. The Confederation Congress, formerly the Continental Congress, had the authority to exchange ambassadors and make treaties with foreign governments and Indian tribes, declare war, coin currency and borrow money, and settle disputes between states. Each state legislature appointed delegates to the Congress; these men could be recalled at any time. Regardless of its size or the number of delegates it chose to send, each state would have only one vote. Delegates could serve for no more than three consecutive years, lest a class of elite professional politicians develop. The nation would have no independent chief executive or judiciary. Nine votes were required before the central government could act, and the Articles of Confederation could be changed only by unanimous approval of all thirteen states.

WHAT WENT WRONG WITH THE ARTICLES?

The Articles of Confederation satisfied the desire of those in the new nation who wanted a weak central government with limited power. Ironically, however, their very success led to their undoing. It soon became apparent that, while they protected the sovereignty of the states, the Articles had created a central government too weak to function effectively.

One of the biggest problems was that the national government had no power to impose taxes. To avoid any perception of “taxation without representation,” the Articles of Confederation allowed only state governments to levy taxes. To pay for its expenses, the national government had to request money from the states, which were required to provide funds in proportion to the value of the land within their borders. The states, however, were often negligent in this duty, and the national government was underfunded. Without money, it could not pay debts owed from the Revolution and had trouble conducting foreign affairs. For example, the inability of the U.S. government to raise sufficient funds to compensate colonists who had remained loyal to Great Britain for their property losses during and after the American Revolution was one of the reasons the British refused to evacuate the land west of the Appalachians. The new nation was also unable to protect American ships from attacks by the Barbary pirates.⁵ Foreign governments were also, understandably, reluctant to loan money to a nation that might never repay it because it lacked the ability to tax its citizens.

The fiscal problems of the central government meant that the currency it issued, called the Continental, was largely worthless and people were reluctant to use it. Furthermore, while the Articles of Confederation had given the national government the power to coin money, they had not prohibited the states from doing so as well. As a result, numerous state banks issued

their own banknotes, which had the same problems as the Continental. People who were unfamiliar with the reputation of the banks that had issued the banknotes often refused to accept them as currency. This reluctance, together with the overwhelming debts of the states, crippled the young nation's economy.

The country's economic woes were made worse by the fact that the central government also lacked the power to impose tariffs on foreign imports or regulate interstate commerce. Thus, it was unable to prevent British merchants from flooding the U.S. market with low-priced goods after the Revolution, and American producers suffered from the competition. Compounding the problem, states often imposed tariffs on items produced by other states and otherwise interfered with their neighbors' trade.

The national government also lacked the power to raise an army or navy. Fears of a standing army in the employ of a tyrannical government had led the writers of the Articles of Confederation to leave defense largely to the states. Although the central government could declare war and agree to peace, it had to depend upon the states to provide soldiers. If state governors chose not to honor the national government's request, the country would lack an adequate defense. This was quite dangerous at a time when England and Spain still controlled large portions of North America ([Table 2.1](#)).

Problems with the Articles of Confederation

Weakness of the Articles of Confederation	Why Was This a Problem?
The national government could not impose taxes on citizens. It could only request money from the states.	Requests for money were usually not honored. As a result, the national government did not have money to pay for national defense or fulfill its other responsibilities.
The national government could not regulate foreign trade or interstate commerce.	The government could not prevent foreign countries from hurting American competitors by shipping inexpensive products to the United States. It could not prevent states from passing laws that interfered with domestic trade.
The national government could not raise an army. It had to request the states to send men.	State governments could choose not to honor Congress's request for troops. This would make it hard to defend the nation.
Each state had only one vote in Congress regardless of its size.	Populous states were less well represented.
The Articles could not be changed without a unanimous vote to do so.	Problems with the Articles could not be easily fixed.
There was no national judicial system.	Judiciaries are important enforcers of national government power.

Table 2.1 The Articles of Confederation suffered from many problems that could not be easily repaired. The biggest problem was the lack of power given to the national government.

The weaknesses of the Articles of Confederation, already recognized by many, became apparent to all as a result of an uprising of Massachusetts farmers, led by Daniel Shays. Known as Shays' Rebellion, the incident panicked the governor of Massachusetts, who called upon the national government for assistance. However, with no power to raise an army, the government had no troops at its disposal. After several months, Massachusetts crushed the uprising with the help of local militias and privately funded armies, but wealthy people were frightened by this display of unrest on the part of poor men and by similar incidents taking place in other states.⁶ To find a solution and resolve problems related to commerce, members of Congress called for a revision of the Articles of Confederation.

Milestone

Shays' Rebellion: Symbol of Disorder and Impetus to Act

In the summer of 1786, farmers in western Massachusetts were heavily in debt, facing imprisonment and the loss of their lands. They owed taxes that had gone unpaid while they were away fighting the British during the Revolution. The Continental Congress had promised to pay them for their service, but the national government did not have sufficient money. Moreover, the farmers were unable to meet the onerous new tax burden Massachusetts imposed in order to pay its own debts from the Revolution.

Led by Daniel Shays ([Figure 2.6](#)), the heavily indebted farmers marched to a local courthouse demanding relief. Faced with the refusal of many Massachusetts militiamen to arrest the rebels, with whom they sympathized, Governor James Bowdoin called upon the national government for aid, but none was available. The uprising was finally brought to an end the following year by a privately funded militia after the protestors' unsuccessful attempt to raid the Springfield Armory.



Figure 2.6 This contemporary depiction of Continental Army veteran Daniel Shays (left) and Job Shattuck (right), who led an uprising of Massachusetts farmers in 1786–1787 that prompted

calls for a stronger national government, appeared on the cover of *Bickerstaff's Genuine Boston Almanack for 1787*.

Were Shays and his followers justified in their attacks on the government of Massachusetts? What rights might they have sought to protect?

2.3 The Development of the Constitution

Learning Objectives

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

- Identify the conflicts present and the compromises reached in drafting the Constitution
- Summarize the core features of the structure of U.S. government under the Constitution

In 1786, Virginia and Maryland invited delegates from the other eleven states to meet in Annapolis, Maryland, for the purpose of revising the Articles of Confederation. However, only five states sent representatives. Because all thirteen states had to agree to any alteration of the Articles, the convention in Annapolis could not accomplish its goal. Two of the delegates, Alexander Hamilton and James Madison, requested that all states send delegates to a convention in Philadelphia the following year to attempt once again to revise the Articles of Confederation. All the states except Rhode Island chose delegates to send to the meeting, a total of seventy men in all, but many did not attend. Among those not in attendance were John Adams and Thomas Jefferson, both of whom were overseas representing the country as diplomats. Because the shortcomings of the Articles of Confederation proved impossible to overcome, the convention that met in Philadelphia in 1787 decided to create an entirely new government.

POINTS OF CONTENTION

Fifty-five delegates arrived in Philadelphia in May 1787 for the meeting that became known as the Constitutional Convention. Many wanted to strengthen the role and authority of the national government but feared creating a central government that was too powerful. They wished to preserve state autonomy, although not to a degree that prevented the states from working together collectively or made them entirely independent of the will of the national government. While seeking to protect the rights of individuals from government abuse, they nevertheless wished to create a society in which concerns for law and order did not give way in the face of demands for individual liberty. They wished to give political rights to all free men but also feared mob rule, which many felt would have been the result of Shays' Rebellion had it succeeded. Delegates from small states did not want their interests pushed aside by delegations from more populous states like Virginia. And everyone was concerned about slavery. Representatives from southern states worried that delegates from states where it had been or was being abolished might try to outlaw the institution. Those who favored a nation free of the influence of slavery feared that southerners might attempt to make it a permanent part of American society. The only decision that all could agree on was the election of George

Washington, the former commander of the Continental Army and hero of the American Revolution, as the president of the convention.

The Question of Representation: Small States vs. Large States

One of the first differences among the delegates to become clear was between those from large states, such as New York and Virginia, and those who represented small states, like Delaware. When discussing the structure of the government under the new constitution, the delegates from Virginia called for a bicameral legislature consisting of two houses. The number of a state's representatives in each house was to be based on the state's population. In each state, representatives in the lower house would be elected by popular vote. These representatives would then select their state's representatives in the upper house from among candidates proposed by the state's legislature. Once a representative's term in the legislature had ended, the representative could not be reelected until an unspecified amount of time had passed.

Delegates from small states objected to this Virginia Plan. Another proposal, the New Jersey Plan, called for a unicameral legislature with one house, in which each state would have one vote. Thus, smaller states would have the same power in the national legislature as larger states. However, the larger states argued that because they had more residents, they should be allotted more legislators to represent their interests ([Figure 2.7](#)).

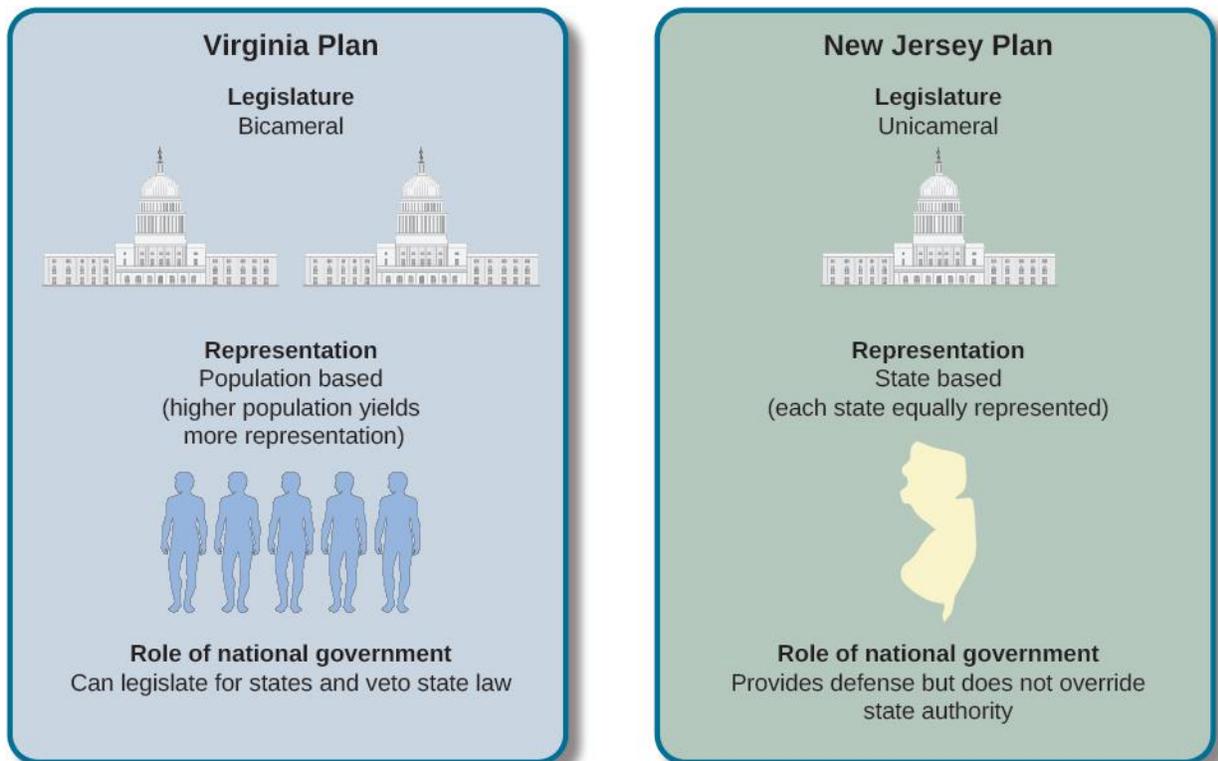


Figure 2.7 The Virginia Plan called for a two-house legislature. Representation in both houses would be based on population. A state's representatives in one house would be elected by the

state's voters. These representatives would then appoint representatives to the second house from among candidates chosen by the state's legislature. The New Jersey Plan favored maintaining a one-house Congress with each state being equally represented.

Slavery and Freedom

Another fundamental division separated the states. Following the Revolution, some of the northern states had either abolished slavery or instituted plans by which enslaved men and women would gradually be emancipated. Pennsylvania, for example, had passed the Act for the Gradual Abolition of Slavery in 1780. All people born in the state to enslaved mothers after the law's passage would become indentured servants to be set free at age twenty-eight. In 1783, Massachusetts had freed all enslaved people within the state. Many Americans believed slavery was opposed to the ideals stated in the Declaration of Independence. Others felt it was inconsistent with the teachings of Christianity. Some White people feared for their safety if the enslaved population or Americans' reliance on slavery were to increase. Although some southerners shared similar sentiments, none of the southern states had abolished slavery and none wanted the Constitution to interfere with the institution. In addition to supporting the agriculture of the South, enslaved people could be taxed as property and counted as population for purposes of a state's representation in the government.

Federal Supremacy vs. State Sovereignty

Perhaps the greatest division among the states split those who favored a strong national government and those who favored limiting its powers and allowing states to govern themselves in most matters. Supporters of a strong central government argued that it was necessary for the survival and efficient functioning of the new nation. Without the authority to maintain and command an army and navy, the nation could not defend itself at a time when European powers still maintained formidable empires in North America. Without the power to tax and regulate trade, the government would not have enough money to maintain the nation's defense, protect American farmers and manufacturers from foreign competition, create the infrastructure necessary for interstate commerce and communications, maintain foreign embassies, or pay federal judges and other government officials. Furthermore, other countries would be reluctant to loan money to the United States if the federal government lacked the ability to impose taxes in order to repay its debts. Besides giving more power to populous states, the Virginia Plan also favored a strong national government that would legislate for the states in many areas and would have the power to veto laws passed by state legislatures.

Others, however, feared that a strong national government might become too powerful and use its authority to oppress citizens and deprive them of their rights. They advocated a central government with sufficient authority to defend the nation but insisted that other powers be left to the states, which were believed to be better able to understand and protect the needs and interests of their residents. Such delegates approved the approach of the New Jersey Plan, which retained the unicameral Congress that had existed under the Articles of Confederation. It gave additional power to the national government, such as the power to regulate interstate and foreign commerce and to compel states to comply with laws passed by Congress. However, states still retained a lot of power, including power over the national government. Congress, for

example, could not impose taxes without the consent of the states. Furthermore, the nation's chief executive, appointed by the Congress, could be removed by Congress if state governors demanded it.

Individual Liberty vs. Social Stability

The belief that the king and Parliament had deprived colonists of their liberties had led to the Revolution, and many feared the government of the United States might one day attempt to do the same. They wanted and expected their new government to guarantee the rights of life, liberty, and property. Others believed it was more important for the national government to maintain order, and this might require it to limit personal liberty at times. All Americans, however, desired that the government not intrude upon people's rights to life, liberty, and property without reason.

COMPROMISE AND THE CONSTITUTIONAL DESIGN OF AMERICAN GOVERNMENT

Beginning in May 1787 and throughout the long, hot Philadelphia summer, the delegations from twelve states discussed, debated, and finally—after compromising many times—by September had worked out a new blueprint for the nation. The document they created, the U.S. Constitution, was an ingenious instrument that allayed fears of a too-powerful central government and solved the problems that had beleaguered the national government under the Articles of Confederation. For the most part, it also resolved the conflicts between small and large states, northern and southern states, and those who favored a strong federal government and those who argued for state sovereignty.

Link to Learning

The closest thing to minutes of the Constitutional Convention is the [collection of James Madison's letters and notes](#) about the proceedings in Philadelphia. Several such letters and notes may be found at the Library of Congress's American Memory project.

The Great Compromise

The Constitution consists of a preamble and seven articles. The first three articles divide the national government into three branches—Congress, the executive branch, and the federal judiciary—and describe the powers and responsibilities of each. In Article I, ten sections describe the structure of Congress, the basis for representation and the requirements for serving in Congress, the length of Congressional terms, and the powers of Congress. The national legislature created by the article reflects the compromises reached by the delegates regarding such issues as representation, slavery, and national power.

After debating at length over whether the Virginia Plan or the New Jersey Plan provided the best model for the nation's legislature, the framers of the Constitution had ultimately arrived at what is called the Great Compromise, suggested by Roger Sherman of Connecticut. Congress, it was decided, would consist of two chambers: the Senate and the House of Representatives. Each state, regardless of size, would have two senators, making for equal representation as in the New Jersey Plan. Representation in the House would be based on population. Senators were to be appointed by state legislatures, a variation on the Virginia Plan. Members of the

House of Representatives would be popularly elected by the voters in each state. Elected members of the House would be limited to two years in office before having to seek reelection, and those appointed to the Senate by each state's political elite would serve a term of six years.

Congress was given great power, including the power to tax, maintain an army and a navy, and regulate trade and commerce. Congress had authority that the national government lacked under the Articles of Confederation. It could also coin and borrow money, grant patents and copyrights, declare war, and establish laws regulating naturalization and bankruptcy. While legislation could be proposed by either chamber of Congress, it had to pass both chambers by a majority vote before being sent to the president to be signed into law, and all bills to raise revenue had to begin in the House of Representatives. Only those men elected by the voters to represent them could impose taxes upon them. There would be no more taxation without representation.

The Three-Fifths Compromise and the Debates over Slavery

The Great Compromise that determined the structure of Congress soon led to another debate, however. When states took a census of their population for the purpose of allotting House representatives, should enslaved people be counted? Southern states were adamant that they should be, while delegates from northern states were vehemently opposed, arguing that representatives from southern states could not represent the interests of those enslaved. If enslaved people were not counted, however, southern states would have far fewer representatives in the House than northern states did. For example, if South Carolina were allotted representatives based solely on its free population, it would receive only half the number it would have received if enslaved people, who made up approximately 43 percent of the population, were included.²

The Three-Fifths Compromise, illustrated in [Figure 2.8](#), resolved the impasse, although not in a manner that truly satisfied anyone. For purposes of Congressional apportionment, slaveholding states were allowed to count all their free population, including free African Americans and 60 percent (three-fifths) of their enslaved population. To mollify the north, the compromise also allowed counting 60 percent of a state's enslaved population for federal taxation, although no such taxes were ever collected. Another compromise regarding the institution of slavery granted Congress the right to impose taxes on imports in exchange for a twenty-year prohibition on laws attempting to ban the importation of enslaved people to the United States, which would hurt the economy of southern states more than that of northern states. Because the southern states, especially South Carolina, had made it clear they would leave the convention if abolition were attempted, no serious effort was made by the framers to abolish slavery in the new nation, even though many delegates disapproved of the institution.

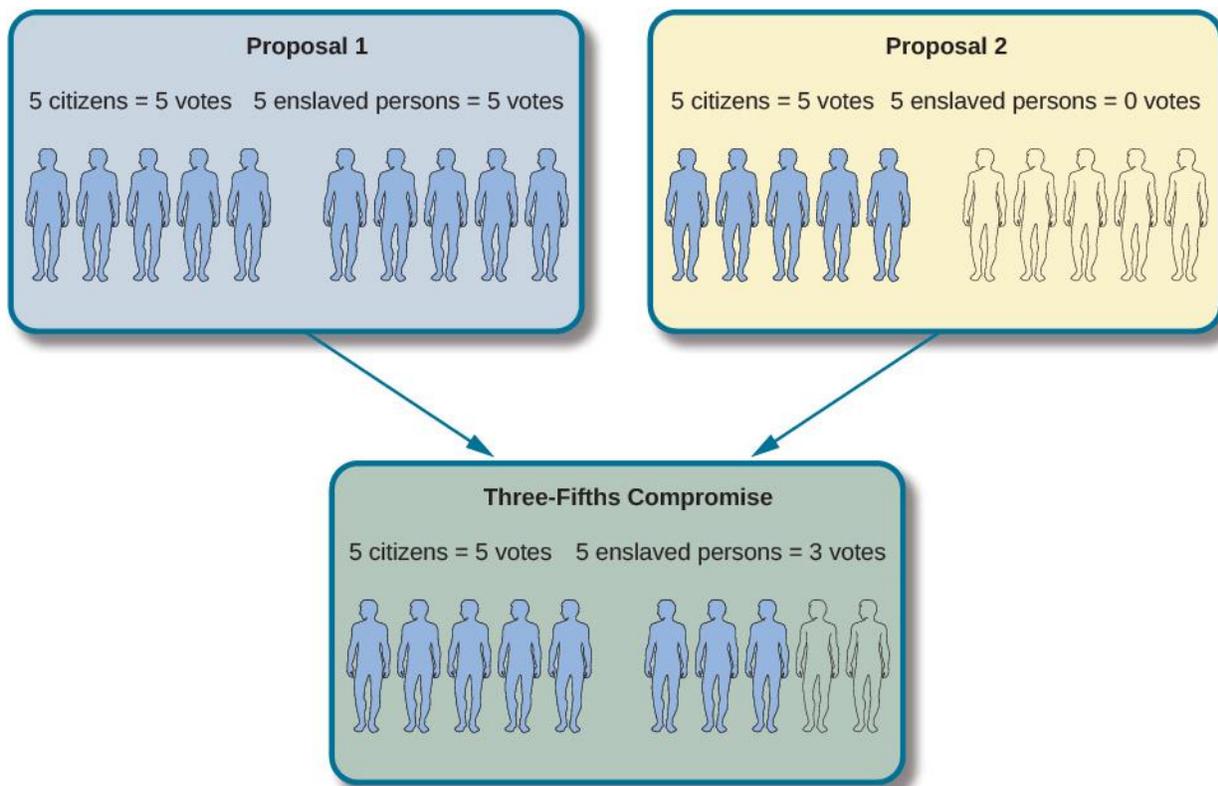


Figure 2.8 This infographic shows the methods proposed for counting enslaved populations and the resulting Three-Fifths Compromise.

Indeed, the Constitution contained two protections for slavery. Article I postponed the abolition of the foreign slave trade until 1808, and in the interim, those in slaveholding states were allowed to import as many enslaved people as they wished.⁸ Furthermore, the Constitution placed no restrictions on the domestic slave trade, so residents of one state could still sell enslaved people to other states. Article IV of the Constitution—which, among other things, required states to return freedom seekers to the states where they had been charged with crimes—also prevented the enslaved from gaining their freedom by escaping to states where slavery had been abolished. Clause 3 of Article IV (known as the fugitive slave clause) allowed enslavers to reclaim the enslaved in the states where they had fled.⁹

Separation of Powers and Checks and Balances

Although debates over slavery and representation in Congress occupied many at the convention, the chief concern was the challenge of increasing the authority of the national government while ensuring that it did not become too powerful. The framers resolved this problem through a separation of powers, dividing the national government into three separate branches and assigning different responsibilities to each one, as shown in [Figure 2.9](#). They also created a system of checks and balances by giving each of three branches of government the power to restrict the actions of the others, thus requiring them to work together.

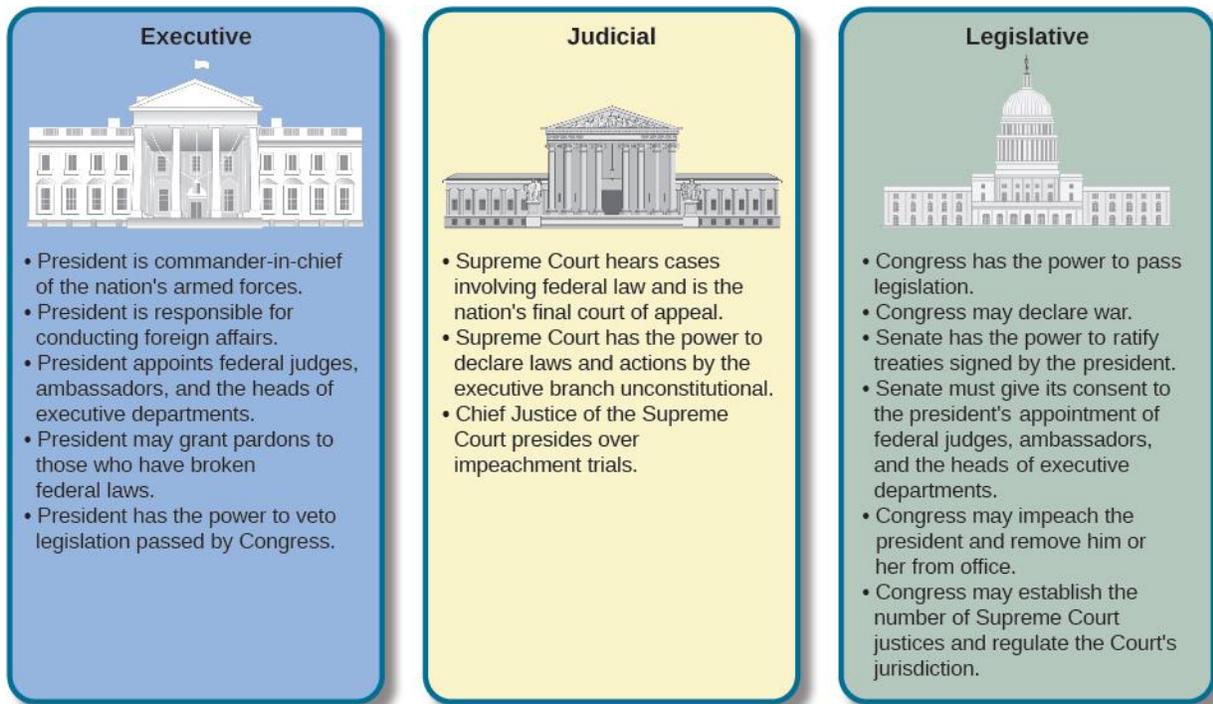


Figure 2.9 To prevent the national government, or any one group within it, from becoming too powerful, the Constitution divided the government into three branches with different powers. No branch could function without the cooperation of the others, and each branch could restrict the powers of the others.

Congress was given the power to make laws, but the executive branch, consisting of the president and the vice president, and the federal judiciary, notably the Supreme Court, were created to, respectively, enforce laws and try cases arising under federal law. Neither of these branches had existed under the Articles of Confederation. Thus, Congress can pass laws, but its power to do so can be checked by the president, who can veto potential legislation so that it cannot become a law. Later, in the 1803 case of *Marbury v. Madison*, the U.S. Supreme Court established its own authority to rule on the constitutionality of laws, a process called judicial review.

Other examples of checks and balances include the ability of Congress to limit the president's veto. Should the president veto a bill passed by both houses of Congress, the bill is returned to Congress to be voted on again. If the bill passes both the House of Representatives and the Senate with a two-thirds vote in its favor, it becomes law even though the president has refused to sign it.

Congress is also able to limit the president's power as commander-in-chief of the armed forces by refusing to declare war or provide funds for the military. To date, the Congress has never refused a president's request for a declaration of war. The president must also seek the advice and consent of the Senate before appointing members of the Supreme Court and ambassadors, and the Senate must approve the ratification of all treaties signed by the president. Congress may even remove the president from office. To do this, both chambers of Congress must work

together. The House of Representatives impeaches the president by bringing formal charges against the president, and the Senate tries the case in a proceeding overseen by the Chief Justice of the Supreme Court. The president is removed from office if found guilty.

According to political scientist Richard Neustadt, the system of separation of powers and checks and balances does not so much allow one part of government to control another as it encourages the branches to cooperate. Instead of a true separation of powers, the Constitutional Convention “created a government of separated institutions *sharing* powers.”¹⁰ For example, knowing the president can veto a law the president disapproves, Congress will attempt to draft a bill that addresses the president’s concerns before sending it to the White House for signing. Similarly, knowing that Congress can override a veto, the president will use this power sparingly.

Federal Power vs. State Power

The strongest guarantee that the power of the national government would be restricted and the states would retain a degree of sovereignty was the framers’ creation of a federal system of government. In a federal system, power is divided between the federal (or national) government and the state governments. Great or explicit powers, called enumerated powers, were granted to the federal government to declare war, impose taxes, coin and regulate currency, regulate foreign and interstate commerce, raise and maintain an army and a navy, maintain a post office, make treaties with foreign nations and with Native American tribes, and make laws regulating the naturalization of immigrants.

All powers not expressly given to the national government, however, were intended to be exercised by the states. These powers are known as reserved powers (Figure 2.10). Thus, states remained free to pass laws regarding such things as intrastate commerce (commerce within the borders of a state) and marriage. Some powers, such as the right to levy taxes, were given to both the state and federal governments. Both the states and the federal government have a chief executive to enforce the laws (a governor and the president, respectively) and a system of courts.



(a)



(b)

Figure 2.10 Reserve powers allow the states to pass intrastate legislation, such as laws on commerce, drug use, and marriage (a). However, sometimes judicial rulings at the federal level may supersede such legislation, as happened in *Obergefell v. Hodges* (2015), the recent Supreme Court case regarding marriage equality (b). (credit a: modification of work by Damian Gadal; credit b: modification of work by Ludovic Bertron)

Although the states retained a considerable degree of sovereignty, the supremacy clause in Article VI of the Constitution proclaimed that the Constitution, laws passed by Congress, and treaties made by the federal government were “the supreme Law of the Land.” In the event of a conflict between the states and the national government, the national government would triumph. Furthermore, although the federal government was to be limited to those powers enumerated in the Constitution, Article I provided for the expansion of Congressional powers if needed. The “necessary and proper” clause of Article I provides that Congress may “make all Laws which shall be necessary and proper for carrying into Execution the foregoing [enumerated] Powers, and all other Powers vested by this Constitution in the Government of the United States, or in any Department or Officer thereof.”

The Constitution also gave the federal government control over all “Territory or other Property belonging to the United States.” This would prove problematic when, as the United States expanded westward and population growth led to an increase in the power of the northern states in Congress, the federal government sought to restrict the expansion of slavery into newly acquired territories.

Link to Learning

A growing number of institutes and study centers focus on the Constitution and the founding of the republic. Examples such as the [Institute for the American Constitutional Heritage](#) and the [Bill of Rights Institute](#) have informative public websites with documents and videos. Another example is the [National Constitution Center](#) that also holds programs related to aspects of the enduring U.S. Constitution.

2.4 The Ratification of the Constitution

Learning Objectives

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

- Identify the steps required to ratify the Constitution
- Describe arguments the framers raised in support of a strong national government and counterpoints raised by the Anti-Federalists

On September 17, 1787, the delegates to the Constitutional Convention in Philadelphia voted to approve the document they had drafted over the course of many months. Some did not support it, but the majority did. Before it could become the law of the land, however, the Constitution faced another hurdle. It had to be ratified by the states.

THE RATIFICATION PROCESS

Article VII, the final article of the Constitution, required that before the Constitution could become law and a new government could form, the document had to be ratified by nine of the thirteen states. Eleven days after the delegates at the Philadelphia convention approved it, copies of the Constitution were sent to each of the states, which were to hold ratifying conventions to either accept or reject it.

This approach to ratification was an unusual one. Since the authority inherent in the Articles of Confederation and the Confederation Congress had rested on the consent of the states, changes to the nation's government should also have been ratified by the state legislatures. Instead, by calling upon state legislatures to hold ratification conventions to approve the Constitution, the framers avoided asking the legislators to approve a document that would require them to give up a degree of their own power. The men attending the ratification conventions would be delegates elected by their neighbors to represent their interests. They were not being asked to relinquish their power; in fact, they were being asked to place limits upon the power of their state legislators, whom they may not have elected in the first place. Finally, because the new nation was to be a republic in which power was held by the people through their elected representatives, it was considered appropriate to leave the ultimate acceptance or rejection of the Constitution to the nation's citizens. If convention delegates, who were chosen by popular vote, approved it, then the new government could rightly claim that it ruled with the consent of the people.

The greatest sticking point when it came to ratification, as it had been at the Constitutional Convention itself, was the relative power of the state and federal governments. The framers of the Constitution believed that without the ability to maintain and command an army and navy, impose taxes, and force the states to comply with laws passed by Congress, the young nation would not survive for very long. But many people resisted increasing the powers of the national government at the expense of the states. Virginia's Patrick Henry, for example, feared that the newly created office of president would place excessive power in the hands of one man. He also disapproved of the federal government's new ability to tax its citizens. This right, Henry believed, should remain with the states.

Other delegates, such as Edmund Randolph of Virginia, disapproved of the Constitution because it created a new federal judicial system. Their fear was that the federal courts would be too far away from where those who were tried lived. State courts were located closer to the homes of both plaintiffs and defendants, and it was believed that judges and juries in state courts could better understand the actions of those who appeared before them. In response to these fears, the federal government created federal courts in each of the states as well as in Maine, which was then part of Massachusetts, and Kentucky, which was part of Virginia.¹¹

Perhaps the greatest source of dissatisfaction with the Constitution was that it did not guarantee protection of individual liberties. State governments had given jury trials to residents charged with violating the law and allowed their residents to possess weapons for their protection. Some had practiced religious tolerance as well. The Constitution, however, did not contain reassurances that the federal government would do so. Although it provided for habeas

corpus and prohibited both a religious test for holding office and granting noble titles, some citizens feared the loss of their traditional rights and the violation of their liberties. This led many of the Constitution's opponents to call for a bill of rights and the refusal to ratify the document without one. The lack of a bill of rights was especially problematic in Virginia, as the Virginia Declaration of Rights was the most extensive rights-granting document among the states. The promise that a bill of rights would be drafted for the Constitution persuaded delegates in many states to support ratification.¹²

Insider Perspective

Thomas Jefferson on the Bill of Rights

John Adams and Thomas Jefferson carried on a lively correspondence regarding the ratification of the Constitution. In the following excerpt (reproduced as written) from a letter dated March 15, 1789, after the Constitution had been ratified by nine states but before it had been approved by all thirteen, Jefferson reiterates his previously expressed concerns that a bill of rights to protect citizens' freedoms was necessary and should be added to the Constitution:

"In the arguments in favor of a declaration of rights, . . . I am happy to find that on the whole you are a friend to this amendment. The Declaration of rights is like all other human blessings alloyed with some inconveniences, and not accomplishing fully it's object. But the good in this instance vastly overweighs the evil. . . . This instrument [the Constitution] forms us into one state as to certain objects, and gives us a legislative & executive body for these objects. It should therefore guard us against their abuses of power. . . . Experience proves the inefficacy of a bill of rights. True. But tho it is not absolutely efficacious under all circumstances, it is of great potency always, and rarely inefficacious. . . . There is a remarkable difference between the Inconveniences which attend a Declaration of rights, & those which attend the want of it. . . . The inconveniences of the want of a Declaration are permanent, afflicting & irreparable: they are in constant progression from bad to worse."¹³

What were some of the inconveniences of not having a bill of rights that Jefferson mentioned? Why did he decide in favor of having one?

It was clear how some states would vote. Smaller states, like Delaware, favored the Constitution. Equal representation in the Senate would give them a degree of equality with the larger states, and a strong national government with an army at its command would be better able to defend them than their state militias could. Larger states, however, had significant power to lose. They did not believe they needed the federal government to defend them and disliked the prospect of having to provide tax money to support the new government. Thus, from the very beginning, the supporters of the Constitution feared that New York, Massachusetts, Pennsylvania, and Virginia would refuse to ratify it. That would mean all nine of the remaining states would have to, and Rhode Island, the smallest state, was unlikely to do so. It had not even sent delegates to the convention in Philadelphia. And even if it joined the other states in ratifying the document and the requisite nine votes were cast, the new nation would not be secure without its largest, wealthiest, and most populous states as members of the union.

THE RATIFICATION CAMPAIGN

On the question of ratification, citizens quickly separated into two groups: Federalists and Anti-Federalists. The Federalists supported it. They tended to be among the elite members of society—wealthy and well-educated landowners, businessmen, and former military commanders who believed a strong government would be better for both national defense and economic growth. A national currency, which the federal government had the power to create, would ease business transactions. The ability of the federal government to regulate trade and place tariffs on imports would protect merchants from foreign competition. Furthermore, the power to collect taxes would allow the national government to fund internal improvements like roads, which would also help businessmen. Support for the Federalists was especially strong in New England.

Opponents of ratification were called Anti-Federalists. Anti-Federalists feared the power of the national government and believed state legislatures, with which they had more contact, could better protect their freedoms. Although some Anti-Federalists, like Patrick Henry, were wealthy, most distrusted the elite and believed a strong federal government would favor the rich over those of “the middling sort.” This was certainly the fear of Melancton Smith, a New York merchant and landowner, who believed that power should rest in the hands of small, landowning farmers of average wealth who “are more temperate, of better morals and less ambitious than the great.”¹⁴ Even members of the social elite, like Henry, feared that the centralization of power would lead to the creation of a political aristocracy, to the detriment of state sovereignty and individual liberty.

Related to these concerns were fears that the strong central government Federalists advocated for would levy taxes on farmers and planters, who lacked the hard currency needed to pay them. Many also believed Congress would impose tariffs on foreign imports that would make American agricultural products less welcome in Europe and in European colonies in the western hemisphere. For these reasons, Anti-Federalist sentiment was especially strong in the South.

Some Anti-Federalists also believed that the large federal republic that the Constitution would create could not work as intended. Americans had long believed that virtue was necessary in a nation where people governed themselves (i.e., the ability to put self-interest and petty concerns aside for the good of the larger community). In small republics, similarities among members of the community would naturally lead them to the same positions and make it easier for those in power to understand the needs of their neighbors. In a larger republic, one that encompassed nearly the entire Eastern Seaboard and ran west to the Appalachian Mountains, people would lack such a strong commonality of interests.¹⁵

Likewise, Anti-Federalists argued, the diversity of religion tolerated by the Constitution would prevent the formation of a political community with shared values and interests. The Constitution contained no provisions for government support of churches or of religious education, and Article VI explicitly forbade the use of religious tests to determine eligibility for public office. This caused many, like Henry Abbot of North Carolina, to fear that government would be placed in the hands of “pagans . . . and Mahometans [Muslims].”¹⁶

It is difficult to determine how many people were Federalists and how many were Anti-Federalists in 1787. The Federalists won the day, but they may not have been in the majority. First, the Federalist position tended to win support among businessmen, large farmers, and, in the South, plantation owners. These people tended to live along the Eastern Seaboard. In 1787, most of the states were divided into voting districts in a manner that gave more votes to the eastern part of the state than to the western part.¹⁷ Thus, in some states, like Virginia and South Carolina, small farmers who may have favored the Anti-Federalist position were unable to elect as many delegates to state ratification conventions as those who lived in the east. Small settlements may also have lacked the funds to send delegates to the convention.¹⁸

In all the states, educated men authored pamphlets and published essays and cartoons arguing either for or against ratification (Figure 2.11). Although many writers supported each position, it is the Federalist essays that are now best known. The arguments these authors put forth, along with explicit guarantees that amendments would be added to protect individual liberties, helped to sway delegates to ratification conventions in many states.

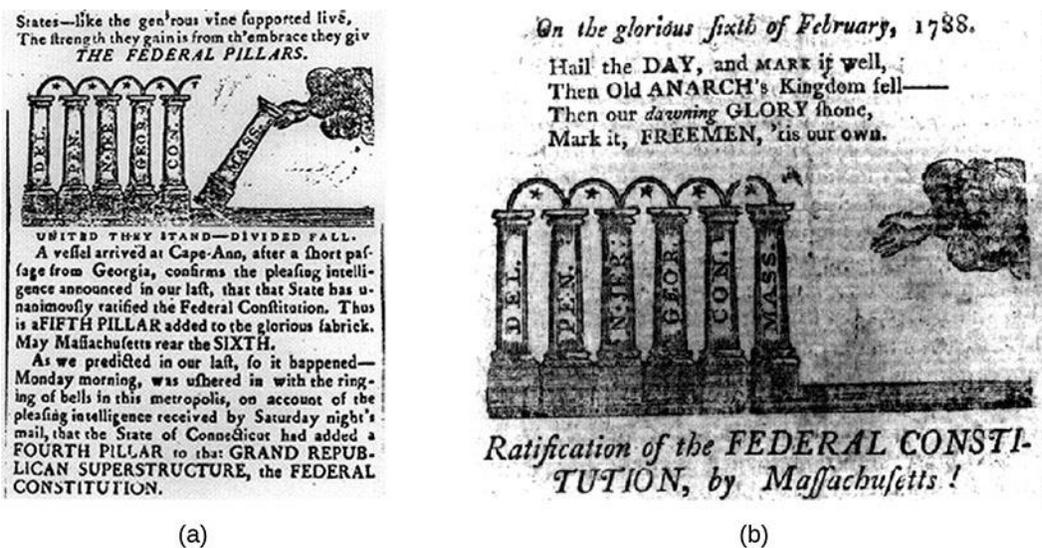


Figure 2.11 This *Massachusetts Sentinel* cartoon (a) encourages the state’s voters to join Georgia and neighboring Connecticut in ratifying the Constitution. Less than a month later, on February 6, 1788, Massachusetts became the sixth member of the newly formed federal union (b).

For obvious reasons, smaller, less populous states favored the Constitution and the protection of a strong federal government. As shown in Figure 2.12, Delaware and New Jersey ratified the document within a few months after it was sent to them for approval in 1787. Connecticut ratified it early in 1788. Some of the larger states, such as Pennsylvania and Massachusetts, also voted in favor of the new government. New Hampshire became the ninth state to ratify the Constitution in the summer of 1788.

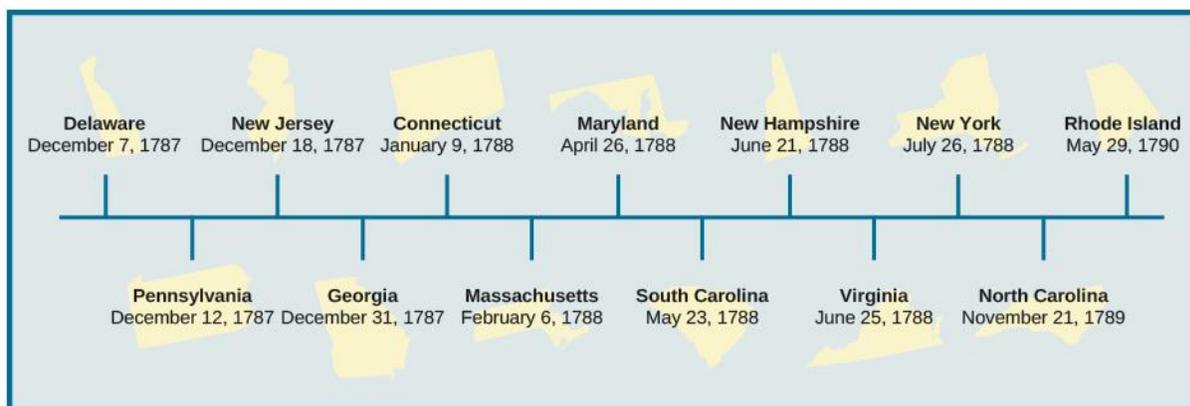


Figure 2.12 This timeline shows the order in which states ratified the new Constitution. Small states that would benefit from the protection of a larger union ratified the Constitution fairly quickly, such as Delaware and Connecticut. Larger, more populous states like Virginia and New York took longer. The last state to ratify was Rhode Island, a state that had always proven reluctant to act alongside the others.

Although the Constitution went into effect following ratification by New Hampshire, four states still remained outside the newly formed union. Two were the wealthy, populous states of Virginia and New York. In Virginia, James Madison’s active support and the intercession of George Washington, who wrote letters to the convention, changed the minds of many. Some who had initially opposed the Constitution, such as Edmund Randolph, were persuaded that the creation of a strong union was necessary for the country’s survival and changed their position. Other Virginia delegates were swayed by the promise that a bill of rights similar to the Virginia Declaration of Rights would be added after the Constitution was ratified. On June 25, 1788, Virginia became the tenth state to grant its approval.

The approval of New York was the last major hurdle. Facing considerable opposition to the Constitution in that state, Alexander Hamilton, James Madison, and John Jay wrote a series of essays, beginning in 1787, arguing for a strong federal government and support of the Constitution ([Figure 2.13](#)). Later compiled as *The Federalist* and now known as *The Federalist Papers*, these eighty-five essays were originally published in newspapers in New York and other states under the name of Publius, a supporter of the Roman Republic.

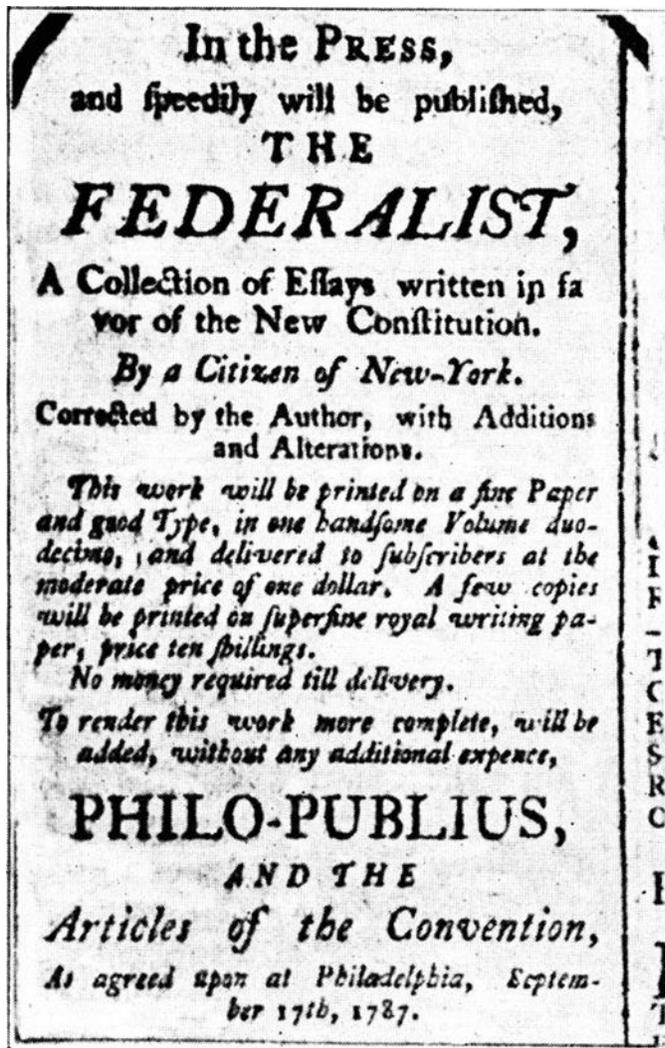
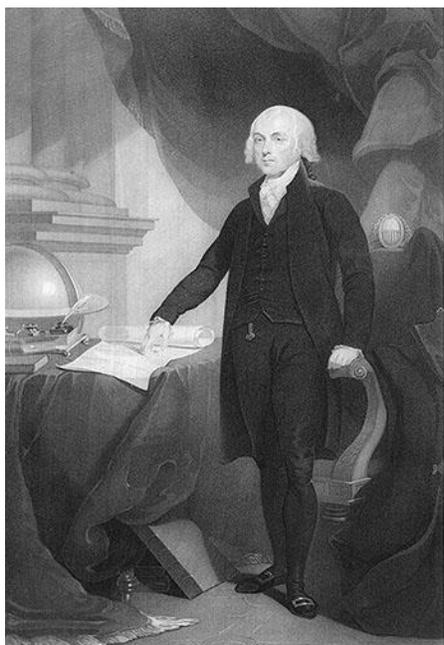


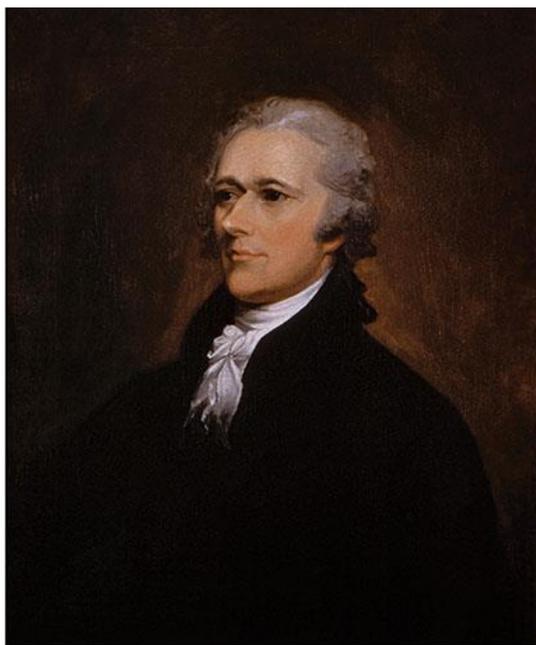
Figure 2.13 From 1787 to 1788, Alexander Hamilton, James Madison, and John Jay authored a series of essays intended to convince Americans, especially New Yorkers, to support the new Constitution. These essays, which originally appeared in newspapers, were collected and published together under the title *The Federalist* in 1788. They are now known as *The Federalist Papers*.

The essays addressed a variety of issues that troubled citizens. For example, in *Federalist* No. 51, attributed to James Madison ([Figure 2.14](#)), the author assured readers they did not need to fear that the national government would grow too powerful. The federal system, in which power was divided between the national and state governments, and the division of authority within the federal government into separate branches would prevent any one part of the government from becoming too strong. Furthermore, tyranny could not arise in a government in which “the legislature necessarily predominates.” Finally, the desire of office holders in each branch of government to exercise the powers given to them, described as “personal motives,” would encourage them to limit any attempt by the other branches to overstep their authority. According to Madison, “Ambition must be made to counteract ambition.”

Other essays countered different criticisms made of the Constitution and echoed the argument in favor of a strong national government. In *Federalist* No. 35, for example, Hamilton (Figure 2.14) argued that people's interests could in fact be represented by men who were not their neighbors. Indeed, Hamilton asked rhetorically, would American citizens best be served by a representative "whose observation does not travel beyond the circle of his neighbors and his acquaintances" or by someone with more extensive knowledge of the world? To those who argued that a merchant and land-owning elite would come to dominate Congress, Hamilton countered that the majority of men currently sitting in New York's state senate and assembly were landowners of moderate wealth and that artisans usually chose merchants, "their natural patron[s] and friend[s]," to represent them. An aristocracy would not arise, and if it did, its members would have been chosen by lesser men. Similarly, Jay reminded New Yorkers in *Federalist* No. 2 that union had been the goal of Americans since the time of the Revolution. A desire for union was natural among people of such "similar sentiments" who "were united to each other by the strongest ties," and the government proposed by the Constitution was the best means of achieving that union.



(a)



(b)

Figure 2.14 James Madison (a) played a vital role in the formation of the Constitution. He was an important participant in the Constitutional Convention and authored many of *The Federalist Papers*. Despite the fact that he did not believe that a Bill of Rights was necessary, he wrote one in order to allay the fears of those who believed the federal government was too powerful. He also served as Thomas Jefferson's vice president and was elected president himself in 1808. Alexander Hamilton (b) was one of the greatest political minds of the early United States. He authored the majority of *The Federalist Papers* and served as Secretary of the Treasury in George Washington's administration.

Objections that an elite group of wealthy and educated bankers, businessmen, and large landowners would come to dominate the nation's politics were also addressed by Madison in *Federalist* No. 10. Americans need not fear the power of factions or special interests, he argued, for the republic was too big and the interests of its people too diverse to allow the development of large, powerful political parties. Likewise, elected representatives, who were expected to "possess the most attractive merit," would protect the government from being controlled by "an unjust and interested [biased in favor of their own interests] majority."

For those who worried that the president might indeed grow too ambitious or king-like, Hamilton, in *Federalist* No. 68, provided assurance that placing the leadership of the country in the hands of one person was not dangerous. Electors from each state would select the president. Because these men would be members of a "transient" body called together only for the purpose of choosing the president and would meet in separate deliberations in each state, they would be free of corruption and beyond the influence of the "heats and ferments" of the voters. Indeed, Hamilton argued in *Federalist* No. 70, instead of being afraid that the president would become a tyrant, Americans should realize that it was easier to control one person than it was to control many. Furthermore, one person could also act with an "energy" that Congress did not possess. Making decisions alone, the president could decide what actions should be taken faster than could Congress, whose deliberations, because of its size, were necessarily slow. At times, the "decision, activity, secrecy, and dispatch" of the chief executive might be necessary.

Link to Learning

The Library of Congress has [The Federalist Papers](#) on their website. The Anti-Federalists also produced a body of writings, less extensive than *The Federalists Papers*, which argued against the ratification of the Constitution. However, these were not written by one small group of men as *The Federalist Papers* had been. A collection of the writings that are unofficially called [The Anti-Federalist Papers](#) is also available online.

The arguments of the Federalists were persuasive, but whether they actually succeeded in changing the minds of New Yorkers is unclear. Once Virginia ratified the Constitution on June 25, 1788, New York realized that it had little choice but to do so as well. If it did not ratify the Constitution, it would be the last large state that had not joined the union. Thus, on July 26, 1788, the majority of delegates to New York's ratification convention voted to accept the Constitution. A year later, North Carolina became the twelfth state to approve. Alone and realizing it could not hope to survive on its own, Rhode Island became the last state to ratify, nearly two years after New York had done so.

Finding a Middle Ground

Term Limits

One of the objections raised to the Constitution's new government was that it did not set term limits for members of Congress or the president. Those who opposed a strong central government argued that this failure could allow a handful of powerful men to gain control of the nation and rule it for as long as they wished. Although the framers did not anticipate the

idea of career politicians, those who supported the Constitution argued that reelecting the president and reappointing senators by state legislatures would create a body of experienced men who could better guide the country through crises. A president who did not prove to be a good leader would be voted out of office instead of being reelected. In fact, presidents long followed George Washington's example and limited themselves to two terms. Only in 1951, after Franklin Roosevelt had been elected four times, was the Twenty-Second Amendment passed to restrict the presidency to two terms.

Are term limits a good idea? Should they have originally been included in the Constitution? Why or why not? Are there times when term limits might not be good?

2.5 Constitutional Change

Learning Objectives

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

- Describe how the Constitution can be formally amended
- Explain the contents and significance of the Bill of Rights
- Discuss the importance of the Thirteenth, Fourteenth, Fifteenth, and Nineteenth Amendments

A major problem with the Articles of Confederation had been the nation's inability to change them without the unanimous consent of all the states. The framers learned this lesson well. One of the strengths they built into the Constitution was the ability to amend it to meet the nation's needs, reflect the changing times, and address concerns or structural elements they had not anticipated.

THE AMENDMENT PROCESS

Since ratification in 1789, the Constitution has been amended only twenty-seven times. The first ten amendments were added in 1791. Responding to charges by Anti-Federalists that the Constitution made the national government too powerful and provided no protections for the rights of individuals, the newly elected federal government tackled the issue of guaranteeing liberties for American citizens. James Madison, a member of Congress from Virginia, took the lead in drafting nineteen potential changes to the Constitution.

Madison followed the procedure outlined in Article V that says amendments can originate from one of two sources. First, they can be proposed by Congress. Then, they must be approved by a two-thirds majority in both the House and the Senate before being sent to the states for potential ratification. States have two ways to ratify or defeat a proposed amendment. First, if three-quarters of state legislatures vote to approve an amendment, it becomes part of the Constitution. Second, if three-quarters of state-ratifying conventions support the amendment, it is ratified. A second method of proposal of an amendment allows for the petitioning of Congress by the states: Upon receiving such petitions from two-thirds of the states, Congress must call a convention for the purpose of proposing amendments, which would then be

forwarded to the states for ratification by the required three-quarters. All the current constitutional amendments were created using the first method of proposal (via Congress).

Having drafted nineteen proposed amendments, Madison submitted them to Congress. Only twelve were approved by two-thirds of both the Senate and the House of Representatives and sent to the states for ratification. Of these, only ten were accepted by three-quarters of the state legislatures. In 1791, these first ten amendments were added to the Constitution and became known as the Bill of Rights.

The ability to change the Constitution has made it a flexible, living document that can respond to the nation's changing needs and has helped it remain in effect for more than 225 years. At the same time, the framers made amending the document sufficiently difficult that it has not been changed repeatedly; only seventeen amendments have been added since the ratification of the first ten (one of these, the Twenty-Seventh Amendment, was among Madison's rejected nine proposals). Recent conversations about needed amendments have related to women's rights, flag burning, and reforming the Electoral College. To date, none of these has advanced.

KEY CONSTITUTIONAL CHANGES

The Bill of Rights was intended to quiet the fears of Anti-Federalists that the Constitution did not adequately protect individual liberties and thus encourage their support of the new national government. Many of these first ten amendments were based on provisions of the English Bill of Rights and the Virginia Declaration of Rights. For example, the right to bear arms for protection (Second Amendment), the right not to have to provide shelter and provision for soldiers in peacetime (Third Amendment), the right to a trial by jury (Sixth and Seventh Amendments), and protection from excessive fines and from cruel and unusual punishment (Eighth Amendment) are taken from the English Bill of Rights. The Fifth Amendment, which requires among other things that people cannot be deprived of their life, liberty, or property except by a legal proceeding, was also greatly influenced by English law as well as the protections granted to Virginians in the Virginia Declaration of Rights.

Link to Learning

Learn more about the formal [process of amending the Constitution](#) and view exhibits related to the passage of specific amendments at the National Archives website.

Other liberties, however, do not derive from British precedents. The protections for religion, speech, the press, and assembly that are granted by the First Amendment did not exist under English law. (The right to petition the government did, however.) The prohibition in the First Amendment against the establishment of an official church by the federal government differed significantly from both English precedent and the practice of several states that had official churches. The Fourth Amendment, which protects Americans from unwarranted search and seizure of their property, was also new.

The Ninth and Tenth Amendments were intended to provide yet another assurance that people's rights would be protected and that the federal government would not become too powerful. The Ninth Amendment guarantees that liberties extend beyond those described in

the preceding documents. This was an important acknowledgment that the protected rights were extensive, and the government should not attempt to interfere with them. The Supreme Court, for example, has held that the Ninth Amendment protects the right to privacy even though none of the preceding amendments explicitly mentions this right. The Tenth Amendment, one of the first submitted to the states for ratification, ensures that states possess all powers not explicitly assigned to the federal government by the Constitution. This guarantee protects states' reserved powers to regulate such things as marriage, divorce, and intrastate transportation and commerce, and to pass laws affecting education and public health and safety.

Of the later amendments only one, the Twenty-First, repealed another amendment, the Eighteenth, which had prohibited the manufacture, import, export, distribution, transportation, and sale of alcoholic beverages. Other amendments rectify problems that have arisen over the years or that reflect changing times. For example, the Seventeenth Amendment, ratified in 1913, gave voters the right to directly elect U.S. senators. The Twentieth Amendment, which was ratified in 1933 during the Great Depression, moved the date of the presidential inauguration from March to January. In a time of crisis, like a severe economic depression, the president needed to take office almost immediately after being elected, and modern transportation allowed the new president to travel to the nation's capital quicker than before. The Twenty-Second Amendment, added in 1955, limits the president to two terms in office, and the Twenty-Seventh Amendment, first submitted for ratification in 1789, regulates the implementation of laws regarding salary increases or decreases for members of Congress.

Of the remaining amendments, four are of especially great significance. The Thirteenth, Fourteenth, Fifteenth and Nineteenth Amendments are the result of long-fought campaigns by supporters of abolition and the expansion of voting rights to all citizens regardless of gender or race. These campaigns gathered momentum during the Reconstruction Era, when prominent abolitionist Frederick Douglass argued that African American men had earned the right to vote by their service during the Civil War and women's rights leaders such as Susan B. Anthony and Ida B. Wells organized to promote voting rights for women.

Insider Perspective

Abolitionist and Suffragist Charlotte Forten Grimké

More than a century before Amanda Gorman wowed the country with her inspirational poem at the 2021 inauguration of President Joe Biden and Vice President Kamala Harris, another African American woman poet was making a difference in Washington, DC.



(a)



(b)

Figure 2.15 This undated photograph of Charlotte Forten Grimké is thought to have been taken c. 1860. (a). Amanda Gorman prepares to recite her inaugural poem, “The Hill We Climb,” at the presidential inauguration ceremony on January 20, 2021 (b). (credit a: modification of "Charlotte Forten Grimké full" by Unknown/Wikimedia Commons, Public Domain; credit b: modification of "Amanda Gorman" by Navy Petty Officer 1st Class Carlos M. Vazquez II and Chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff/Wikimedia Commons, Public Domain)

Charlotte Forten was born in Philadelphia in 1837 to a prominent family of abolitionists. She later became a teacher and writer, and, in her work, advanced the causes of women's suffrage and the abolition of slavery. During the Civil War, she taught newly freed enslaved people in South Carolina and later moved to Washington, DC, where she taught secondary school, wrote poetry, and participated in social movements related to race and gender, including helping establish the National Association of Colored Women and fighting for a woman's right to vote. In 1878, she married Francis J. Grimké, the nephew of famed abolitionists Sarah and Angelina Grimké. Today, her longtime home in the Dupont Circle neighborhood of Washington is on the National Register of Historic Places.¹⁹

Among her many publications is the inspirational poem “Wordsworth,” written in honor of Romantic poet William Wordsworth, one of her favorite authors.

Poet of the serene and thoughtful lay!
In youth's fair dawn, when the soul, still untried,
Longs for life's conflict, and seeks restlessly
Food for its cravings in the stirring songs,
The thrilling strains of more impassioned bards;
Or, eager for fresh joys, culls with delight
The flowers that bloom in fancy's fairy realm —
We may not prize the mild and steadfast ray
That streams from thy pure soul in tranquil song
But, in our riper years, when through the heat
And burden of the day we struggle on,

Breasting the stream upon whose shores we dreamed,
Weary of all the turmoil and the din
Which drowns the finer voices of the soul;
We turn to thee, true priest of Nature's fane,
And find the rest our fainting spirits need, —
The calm, more ardent singers cannot give;
As in the glare intense of tropic days,
Gladly we turn from the sun's radiant beams,
And grateful hail fair Luna's tender light.²⁰

Both Charlotte Forten Grimké and Amanda Gorman used their voices through poetry to give hope to a nation during challenging times. What other challenging times has the U.S. faced and who were the voices of hope that lifted us up?

The Thirteenth, Fourteenth, and Fifteenth Amendments, ratified at the end of the Civil War, changed the lives of African Americans who had been held in slavery. The Thirteenth Amendment abolished slavery in the United States. The Fourteenth Amendment granted citizenship to African Americans and equal protection under the law regardless of race or color. It also prohibited states from depriving their residents of life, liberty, or property without a legal proceeding. Over the years, the Fourteenth Amendment has been used to require states to protect most of the same federal freedoms granted by the Bill of Rights.

The Fifteenth and Nineteenth Amendments extended the right to vote. The Constitution had given states the power to set voting requirements, but the states had used this authority to deny women the right to vote. Most states before the 1830s had also used this authority to deny suffrage to property-less men and often to African American men as well. When states began to change property requirements for voters in the 1830s, many that had allowed free, property-owning African American men to vote restricted the suffrage to White men. The Fifteenth Amendment gave men the right to vote regardless of race or color, but women were still prohibited from voting in most states. After many years of campaigns for suffrage, as shown in [Figure 2.16](#), the Nineteenth Amendment finally gave women the right to vote in 1920.

Subsequent amendments further extended the suffrage. The Twenty-Third Amendment (1961) allowed residents of Washington, DC to vote for the president. The Twenty-Fourth Amendment (1964) abolished the use of poll taxes. Many southern states had used a poll tax, a tax placed on voting, to prevent poor African Americans from voting. Thus, the states could circumvent the Fifteenth Amendment; they argued that they were denying African American men and women the right to vote not because of their race but because of their inability to pay the tax. The last great extension of the suffrage occurred in 1971 in the midst of the Vietnam War. The Twenty-Sixth Amendment reduced the voting age from twenty-one to eighteen. Many people had complained that the young men who were fighting in Vietnam should have the right to vote for or against those making decisions that might literally mean life or death for them. Many other amendments have been proposed over the years, including an amendment to guarantee equal rights to women, but all have failed.



Figure 2.16 Suffragists encourage Ohio men to support votes for women. Before the Nineteenth Amendment was added to the Constitution in 1920, there were only a few western states such as Wyoming in which women had the right to vote. These women seem to be attracting a primarily female audience to hear their cause.

Get Connected!

Guaranteeing Your First Amendment Rights

The liberties of U.S. citizens are protected by the Bill of Rights, but potential or perceived threats to these freedoms arise constantly. This is especially true regarding First Amendment rights. Read about some of these threats at the [American Civil Liberties Union \(ACLU\)](https://www.aclu.org/) website and let people know how you feel about these issues.

What issue regarding First Amendment protections causes you the most concern?

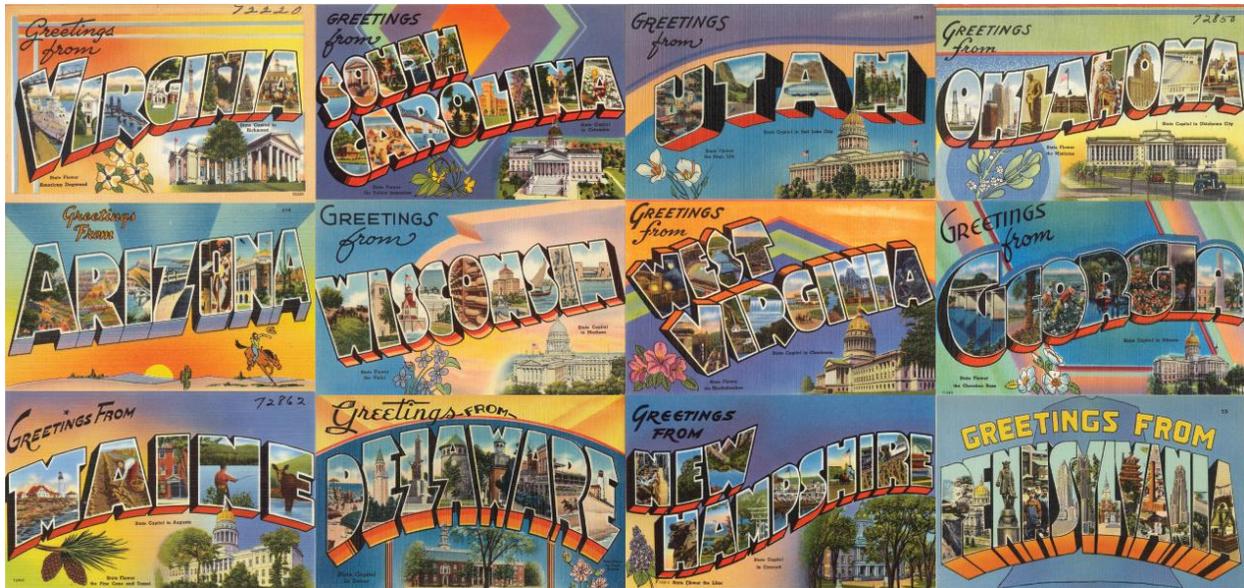


Figure 3.1 Your first encounter with differences across states may have come from visiting relatives or going on a cross-country trip with your parents during vacation. The distinct postcard images of different states that come to your mind are symbolic of American federalism. (credit: modification of work by Boston Public Library)

Introduction

Federalism figures prominently in the U.S. political system. Specifically, the federal design spelled out in the Constitution divides powers between two levels of government—the states and the federal government—and creates a mechanism for them to check and balance one another. As an institutional design, federalism both safeguards state interests and creates a strong union led by a capable central government. American federalism also seeks to balance the forces of decentralization and centralization. We see decentralization when we cross state lines and encounter different taxation levels, welfare eligibility requirements, and voting regulations. Centralization is apparent in the fact that the federal government is the only entity permitted to print money, to challenge the legality of state laws, or to employ money grants and mandates to shape state actions. Colorful billboards with simple messages may greet us at state borders ([Figure 3.1](#)), but behind them lies a complex and evolving federal design that has structured relationships between states and the federal government since the late 1700s.

What specific powers and responsibilities are granted to the federal and state governments? How does our process of government keep these separate governing entities in balance? To answer these questions and more, this chapter traces the origins, evolution, and functioning of the American system of federalism, as well as its advantages and disadvantages for citizens.

3.1 The Division of Powers

Learning Objectives

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

- Explain the concept of federalism
- Discuss the constitutional logic of federalism
- Identify the powers and responsibilities of federal, state, and local governments

Modern democracies divide governmental power in two general ways; some, like the United States, use a combination of both structures. The first and more common mechanism shares power among three branches of government—the legislature, the executive, and the judiciary. The second, federalism, apportions power between two levels of government: national and subnational. In the United States, the term *federal government* refers to the government at the national level, while the term *states* means governments at the subnational level.

FEDERALISM DEFINED AND CONTRASTED

Federalism is an institutional arrangement that creates two relatively autonomous levels of government, each possessing the capacity to act directly on behalf of the people with the authority granted to it by the national constitution.¹ Although today's federal systems vary in design, five structural characteristics are common to the United States and other federal systems around the world, including Germany and Mexico.

First, all federal systems establish two levels of government, with both levels being elected by the people and each level assigned different functions. The national government is responsible for handling matters that affect the country as a whole, for example, defending the nation against foreign threats and promoting national economic prosperity. Subnational, or state governments, are responsible for matters that lie within their regions, which include ensuring the well-being of their people by administering education, health care, public safety, and other public services. By definition, a system like this requires that different levels of government cooperate, because the institutions at each level form an interacting network. In the U.S. federal system, all national matters are handled by the federal government, which is led by the president and members of Congress, all of whom are elected by voters across the country. All matters at the subnational level are the responsibility of the fifty states, each headed by an elected governor and legislature. Thus, there is a separation of functions between the federal and state governments, and voters choose the leader at each level.²

The second characteristic common to all federal systems is a written national constitution that cannot be changed without the substantial consent of subnational governments. In the American federal system, the twenty-seven amendments added to the Constitution since its adoption were the result of an arduous process that required approval by two-thirds of both houses of Congress and three-fourths of the states. The main advantage of this supermajority requirement is that no changes to the Constitution can occur unless there is broad support within Congress and among states. The potential drawback is that numerous national amendment initiatives—such as the Equal Rights Amendment (ERA), which aims to guarantee equal rights regardless of sex—have failed because they cannot garner sufficient consent among members of Congress or, in the case of the ERA, the states. The ERA appeared to gain new life in 2020 as a thirty-eighth state (Virginia) formally voted to ratify the amendment. Although the amendment's original ratification deadline was in 1982, the U.S. House of

Representatives has passed legislation to extend the deadline; however, the Senate has not taken up the measure.³

Third, the constitutions of countries with federal systems formally allocate legislative, judicial, and executive authority to the two levels of government in such a way as to ensure each level some degree of autonomy from the other. Under the U.S. Constitution, the president assumes executive power, Congress exercises legislative powers, and the federal courts (e.g., U.S. district courts, appellate courts, and the Supreme Court) assume judicial powers. In each of the fifty states, a governor assumes executive authority, a state legislature makes laws, and state-level courts (e.g., trial courts, intermediate appellate courts, and supreme courts) possess judicial authority.

While each level of government is somewhat independent of the others, a great deal of interaction occurs among them. In fact, the ability of the federal and state governments to achieve their objectives often depends on the cooperation of the other level of government. For example, the federal government's efforts to ensure homeland security are bolstered by the involvement of law enforcement agents working at local and state levels. On the other hand, the ability of states to provide their residents with public education and health care is enhanced by the federal government's financial assistance.

Another common characteristic of federalism around the world is that national courts commonly resolve disputes between levels and departments of government. In the United States, conflicts between states and the federal government are adjudicated by federal courts, with the U.S. Supreme Court being the final arbiter. The resolution of such disputes can preserve the autonomy of one level of government, as illustrated recently when the Supreme Court ruled that states cannot interfere with the federal government's actions relating to immigration.⁴ In other instances, a Supreme Court ruling can erode that autonomy, as demonstrated in the 1940s when, in *United States v. Wrightwood Dairy Co.*, the Court enabled the federal government to regulate commercial activities that occurred within states, a function previously handled exclusively by the states.⁵

Finally, subnational governments are always represented in the upper house of the national legislature, enabling regional interests to influence national lawmaking.⁶ In the American federal system, the U.S. Senate functions as a territorial body by representing the fifty states: Each state elects two senators to ensure equal representation regardless of state population differences. Thus, federal laws are shaped in part by state interests, which senators convey to the federal policymaking process.

Link to Learning

The governmental design of the United States is unusual; most countries do not have a federal structure. Aside from the United States, [how many other countries](#) have a federal system?

Division of power can also occur via a unitary structure or confederation ([Figure 3.2](#)). In contrast to federalism, a unitary system makes subnational governments dependent on the national government, where significant authority is concentrated. Before the late 1990s, the United Kingdom's unitary system was centralized to the extent that the national government

held the most important levers of power. Since then, power has been gradually decentralized through a process of devolution, leading to the creation of regional governments in Scotland, Wales, and Northern Ireland as well as the delegation of specific responsibilities to them. Other democratic countries with unitary systems, such as France, Japan, and Sweden, have followed a similar path of decentralization.

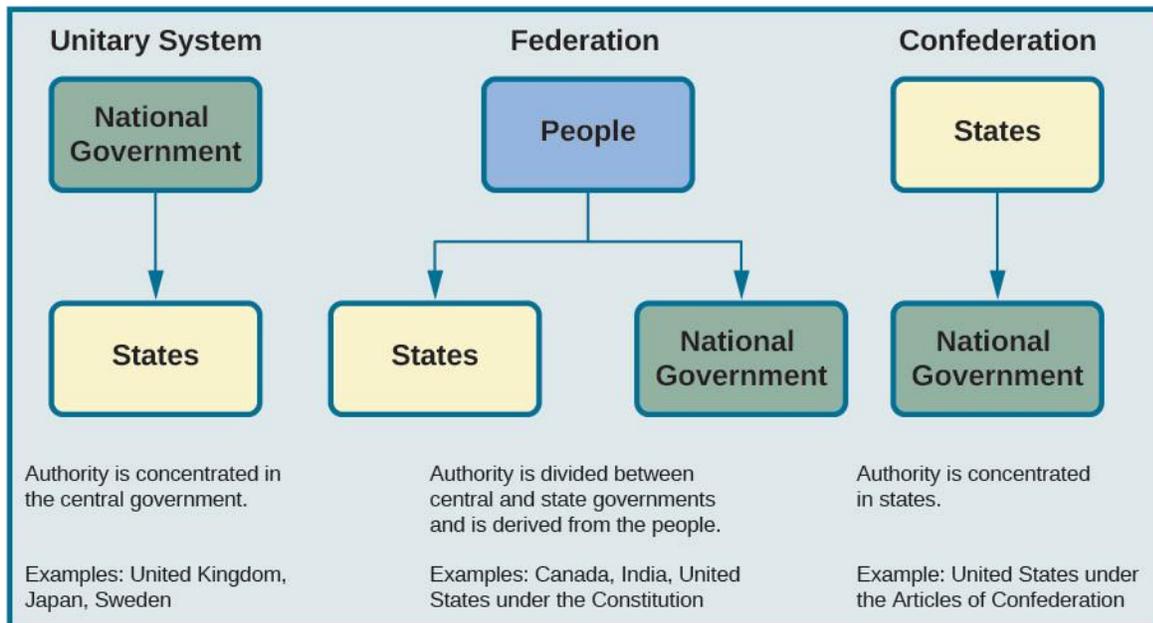


Figure 3.2 There are three general systems of government—unitary systems, federations, and confederations—each of which allocates power differently.

In a confederation, authority is decentralized, and the central government’s ability to act depends on the consent of the subnational governments. Under the Articles of Confederation (the first constitution of the United States), states were sovereign and powerful while the national government was subordinate and weak. Because states were reluctant to give up any of their power, the national government lacked authority in the face of challenges such as servicing the war debt, ending commercial disputes among states, negotiating trade agreements with other countries, and addressing popular uprisings that were sweeping the country. As the brief American experience with confederation clearly shows, the main drawback with this system of government is that it maximizes regional self-rule at the expense of effective national governance.

FEDERALISM AND THE CONSTITUTION

The Constitution contains several provisions that direct the functioning of U.S. federalism. Some delineate the scope of national and state power, while others restrict it. The remaining provisions shape relationships among the states and between the states and the federal government.

The enumerated powers of the national legislature are found in Article I, Section 8. These powers define the jurisdictional boundaries within which the federal government has authority. In seeking not to replay the problems that plagued the young country under the Articles of Confederation, the Constitution's framers granted Congress specific powers that ensured its authority over national and foreign affairs. To provide for the general welfare of the populace, it can tax, borrow money, regulate interstate and foreign commerce, and protect property rights, for example. To provide for the common defense of the people, the federal government can raise and support armies and declare war. Furthermore, national integration and unity are fostered with the government's powers over the coining of money, naturalization, postal services, and other responsibilities.

The last clause of Article I, Section 8, commonly referred to as the elastic clause or the *necessary and proper clause*, enables Congress "to make all Laws which shall be necessary and proper for carrying" out its constitutional responsibilities. While the enumerated powers define the policy areas in which the national government has authority, the elastic clause allows it to create the legal means to fulfill those responsibilities. However, the open-ended construction of this clause has enabled the national government to expand its authority beyond what is specified in the Constitution, a development also motivated by the expansive interpretation of the *commerce clause*, which empowers the federal government to regulate interstate economic transactions.

The powers of the state governments were never listed in the original Constitution. The consensus among the framers was that states would retain any powers not prohibited by the Constitution or delegated to the national government.⁷ However, when it came time to ratify the Constitution, a number of states requested that an amendment be added explicitly identifying the reserved powers of the states. What these Anti-Federalists sought was further assurance that the national government's capacity to act directly on behalf of the people would be restricted, which the first ten amendments (Bill of Rights) provided. The Tenth Amendment affirms the states' reserved powers: "The powers not delegated to the United States by the Constitution, nor prohibited by it to the States, are reserved to the States respectively, or to the people." Indeed, state constitutions had bills of rights, which the first Congress used as the source for the first ten amendments to the Constitution.

Some of the states' reserved powers are no longer exclusively within state domain, however. For example, since the 1940s, the federal government has also engaged in administering health, safety, income security, education, and welfare to state residents. The boundary between intrastate and interstate commerce has become indefinable as a result of broad interpretation of the commerce clause. Shared and overlapping powers have become an integral part of contemporary U.S. federalism. These concurrent powers range from taxing, borrowing, and making and enforcing laws to establishing court systems ([Figure 3.3](#)).⁸

Federal Government		State Government
<p>Enumerated Powers</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Coin money • Regulate interstate and foreign commerce • Conduct foreign affairs • Establish rules of naturalization • Punish counterfeiting • Establish copyright/patent laws • Regulate postal system • Establish courts inferior to Supreme Court • Declare war • Raise and support armies • Make all laws “necessary and proper” to carry out responsibilities <p>Powers Denied</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Tax state exports • Change state boundaries • Violate the Bill of Rights 	<p>Concurrent Powers</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Levy and collect taxes • Borrow money • Make and enforce laws • Establish courts • Charter banks and corporations • Take property for public purpose with just compensation (eminent domain) 	<p>Reserved Powers</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Regulate intrastate commerce • Conduct elections • Provide for public health, safety, welfare, and morals • Establish local governments • Maintain militia (National Guard) • Ratify amendments to the Constitution <p>Powers Denied</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Tax imports and exports • Coin money • Enter into treaties • Impair obligation of contracts • Abridge the privileges or immunities of citizens or deny due process and equal protection of the laws

Figure 3.3 Constitutional powers and responsibilities are divided between the U.S. federal and state governments. The two levels of government also share concurrent powers.

Article I, Sections 9 and 10, along with several constitutional amendments, lay out the restrictions on federal and state authority. The most important restriction Section 9 places on the national government prevents measures that cause the deprivation of personal liberty. Specifically, the government cannot suspend the writ of habeas corpus, which enables someone in custody to petition a judge to determine whether that person’s detention is legal; pass a bill of attainder, a legislative action declaring someone guilty without a trial; or enact an ex post facto law, which criminalizes an act retroactively. The Bill of Rights affirms and expands these constitutional restrictions, ensuring that the government cannot encroach on personal freedoms.

The states are also constrained by the Constitution. Article I, Section 10, prohibits the states from entering into treaties with other countries, coining money, and levying taxes on imports and exports. Like the federal government, the states cannot violate personal freedoms by suspending the writ of habeas corpus, passing bills of attainder, or enacting ex post facto laws. Furthermore, the Fourteenth Amendment, ratified in 1868, prohibits the states from denying citizens the rights to which they are entitled by the Constitution, due process of law, or the equal protection of the laws. Lastly, three civil rights amendments—the Fifteenth, Nineteenth, and Twenty-Sixth—prevent both the states and the federal government from abridging citizens’ right to vote based on race, sex, and age. This topic remains controversial because states have not always ensured equal protection.

The supremacy clause in Article VI of the Constitution regulates relationships between the federal and state governments by declaring that the Constitution and federal law are the supreme law of the land. This means that if a state law clashes with a federal law found to be within the national government's constitutional authority, the federal law prevails. The intent of the supremacy clause is not to subordinate the states to the federal government; rather, it affirms that one body of laws binds the country. In fact, all national and state government officials are bound by oath to uphold the Constitution regardless of the offices they hold. Yet enforcement is not always that simple. In the case of marijuana use, which the federal government defines to be illegal, thirty-six states and the District of Columbia have nevertheless established medical marijuana laws, others have decriminalized its recreational use, and fifteen states have completely legalized it. The federal government could act in this area if it wanted to. For example, in addition to the legalization issue, there is the question of how to treat the money from marijuana sales, which the national government designates as drug money and regulates under laws regarding its deposit in banks.

Various constitutional provisions govern state-to-state relations. Article IV, Section 1, referred to as the full faith and credit clause or the *comity clause*, requires the states to accept court decisions, public acts, and contracts of other states. Thus, an adoption certificate or driver's license issued in one state is valid in any other state. The movement for marriage equality has put the full faith and credit clause to the test in recent decades. In light of *Baehr v. Lewin*, a 1993 ruling in which the Hawaii Supreme Court asserted that the state's ban on same-sex marriage was unconstitutional, a number of states became worried that they would be required to recognize those marriage certificates.⁹ To address this concern, Congress passed and President Clinton signed the Defense of Marriage Act (DOMA) in 1996. The law declared that "No state (or other political subdivision within the United States) need recognize a marriage between persons of the same sex, even if the marriage was concluded or recognized in another state." The law also barred federal benefits for same-sex partners.

DOMA clearly made the topic a state matter. It denoted a choice for states, which led many states to take up the policy issue of marriage equality. Scores of states considered legislation and ballot initiatives on the question. The federal courts took up the issue with zeal after the U.S. Supreme Court in *United States v. Windsor* struck down the part of DOMA that outlawed federal benefits.¹⁰ That move was followed by upwards of forty federal court decisions that upheld marriage equality in particular states. In 2014, the Supreme Court decided not to hear several key case appeals from a variety of states, all of which were brought by opponents of marriage equality who had lost in the federal courts. The outcome of not hearing these cases was that federal court decisions in four states were affirmed, which, when added to other states in the same federal circuit districts, brought the total number of states permitting same-sex marriage to thirty.¹¹ Then, in 2015, the *Obergefell v. Hodges* case had a sweeping effect when the Supreme Court clearly identified a constitutional right to marriage based on the Fourteenth Amendment.¹²

The privileges and immunities clause of Article IV asserts that states are prohibited from discriminating against out-of-staters by denying them such guarantees as access to courts, legal protection, property rights, and travel rights. The clause has not been interpreted to mean

there cannot be *any* difference in the way a state treats residents and non-residents. For example, individuals cannot vote in a state in which they do not reside, tuition at state universities is higher for out-of-state residents, and in some cases individuals who have recently become residents of a state must wait a certain amount of time to be eligible for social welfare benefits. Another constitutional provision prohibits states from establishing trade restrictions on goods produced in other states. However, a state can tax out-of-state goods sold within its borders as long as state-made goods are taxed at the same level.

THE DISTRIBUTION OF FINANCES

Federal, state, and local governments depend on different sources of revenue to finance their annual expenditures. In 2014, total revenue (or receipts) reached \$3.2 trillion for the federal government, \$1.7 trillion for the states, and \$1.2 trillion for local governments.¹³ Two important developments have fundamentally changed the allocation of revenue since the early 1900s. First, the ratification of the Sixteenth Amendment in 1913 authorized Congress to impose income taxes without apportioning it among the states on the basis of population, a burdensome provision that Article I, Section 9, had imposed on the national government.¹⁴ With this change, the federal government's ability to raise revenue significantly increased and so did its ability to spend.

The second development regulates federal grants, that is, transfers of federal money to state and local governments. These transfers, which do not have to be repaid, are designed to support the activities of the recipient governments, but also to encourage them to pursue federal policy objectives they might not otherwise adopt. The expansion of the federal government's spending power has enabled it to transfer more grant money to lower government levels, which has accounted for an increasing share of their total revenue.¹⁵

The sources of revenue for federal, state, and local governments are detailed in [Figure 3.4](#). Although the data reflect 2020 results, the patterns we see in the figure give us a good idea of how governments have funded their activities in recent years. For the federal government, 47 percent of 2020 revenue came from individual income taxes and 38 percent from payroll taxes, which combine Social Security tax and Medicare tax.

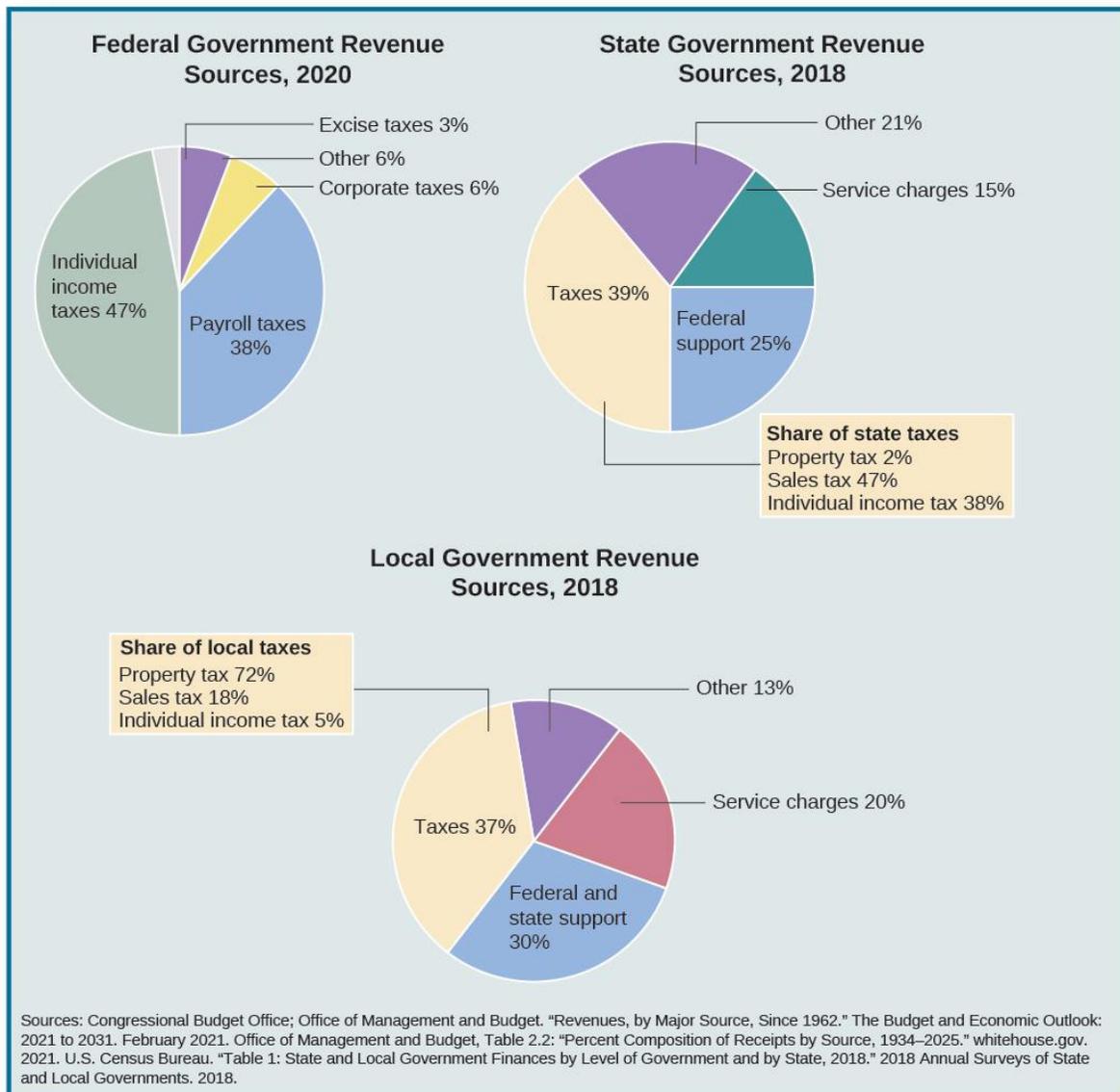


Figure 3.4 As these charts indicate, federal, state, and local governments raise revenue from different sources.

For state governments, 39 percent of revenue came from taxes, while 25 percent consisted of federal support. Sales tax—which includes taxes on purchased food, clothing, alcohol, amusements, insurance, motor fuels, tobacco products, and public utilities, for example—accounted for about 47 percent of total tax revenue, and individual income taxes represented roughly 38 percent. Revenue from service charges (e.g., tuition revenue from public universities and fees for hospital-related services) accounted for 15 percent.

The tax structure of states varies. Alaska, Florida, Nevada, South Dakota, Texas, Washington, and Wyoming do not have individual income taxes. Yet, such decisions on taxation reflect a classic tradeoff, as each state government must collect some mix of revenue in order to fund

their chosen public services. These states find revenue through higher property taxes and through tax revenues related to tourism. [Figure 3.5](#) illustrates yet another difference: Fuel tax as a percentage of total tax revenue is much higher in South Dakota and West Virginia than in Alaska and Hawaii. However, most states have done little to prevent the erosion of the fuel tax's share of their total tax revenue between 2007 and 2009 (notice that for many states the dark blue dots for 2010 are to the *left* of the light blue numbers for 2007). Fuel tax revenue is typically used to finance state highway transportation projects, although some states do use it to fund non-transportation projects.

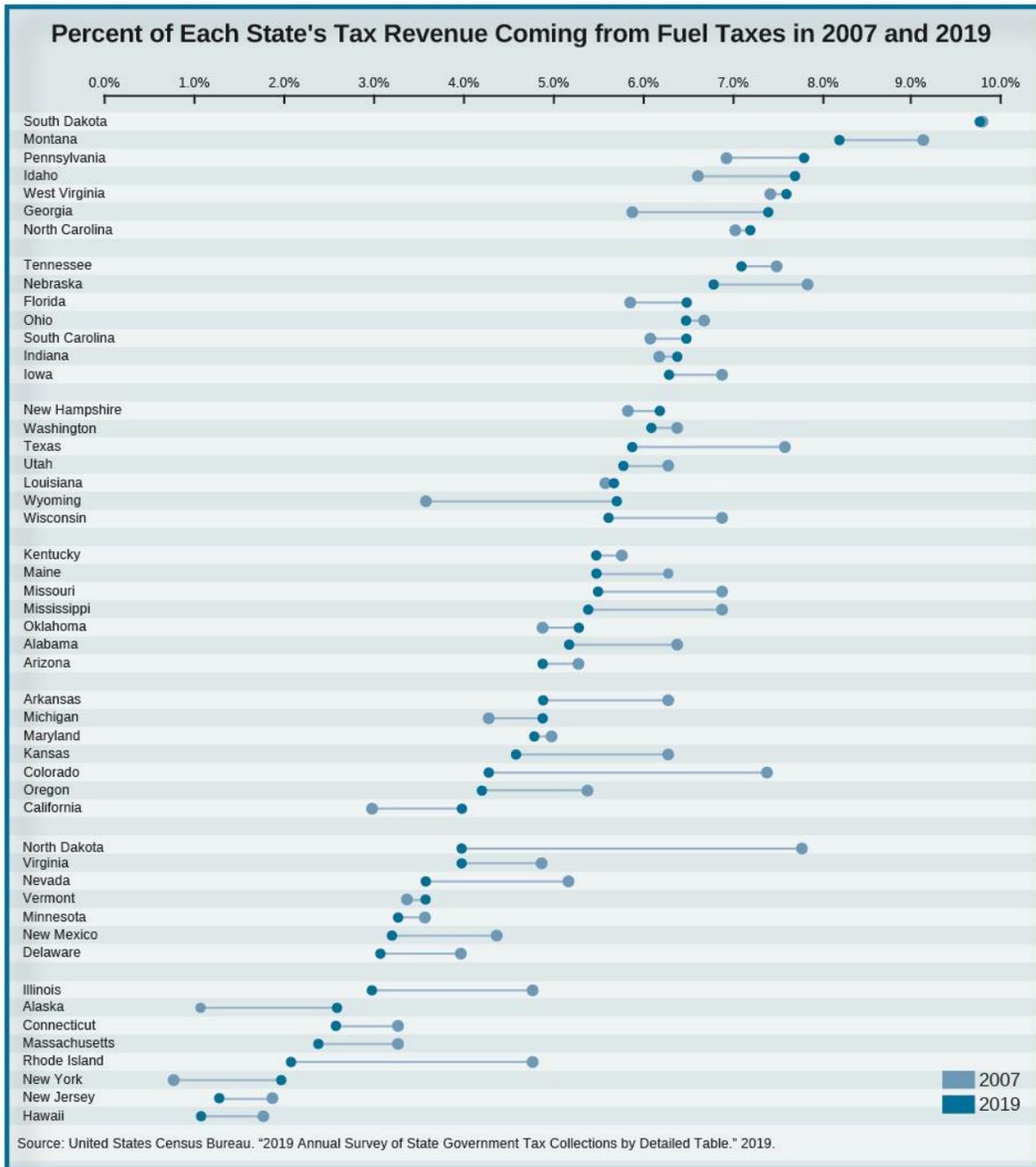


Figure 3.5 The fuel tax as a percentage of tax revenue varies greatly across states.

The most important sources of revenue for local governments in 2018 were taxes, federal and state grants, and service charges. For local governments the property tax, a levy on residential and commercial real estate, was the most important source of tax revenue, accounting for about 72 percent of the total. Federal and state grants accounted for 30 percent of local government revenue. Charges for hospital-related services, sewage and solid-waste

management, public city university tuition, and airport services are important sources of general revenue for local governments.

Intergovernmental grants are important sources of revenue for both state and local governments. When economic times are good, such grants help states, cities, municipalities, and townships carry out their regular functions. However, during hard economic times, such as the Great Recession of 2007–2009, intergovernmental transfers provide much-needed fiscal relief as the revenue streams of state and local governments dry up. During the Great Recession, tax receipts dropped as business activities slowed, consumer spending dropped, and family incomes decreased due to layoffs or work-hour reductions. To offset the adverse effects of the recession on the states and local governments, federal grants increased by roughly 33 percent during this period.¹⁶

The COVID-19 pandemic of 2020–2021 ushered in a massive mobilization of activity and coordination at and between various levels of U.S. government in the hope of defeating the deadly virus that overwhelmed hospitals and led to nearly 600,000 deaths nationwide as well as a bleeding of state and local government jobs. The amount of federal funding to the states eclipsed the levels provided during the Great Recession. The \$1.9 trillion American Rescue Plan Act passed by Congress and signed by President Biden included \$350 billion in direct aid to state, local, and tribal governments.¹⁷ Furthermore, earlier in the pandemic, the CARES Act, signed by President Trump, established the \$150 billion Coronavirus Relief Fund to aid these same governments. Many other federal funding flows occurred outside these two packages, including support for vaccinations and the vaccine rollout across the nation.¹⁸

How are the revenues generated by our tax dollars, fees we pay to use public services and obtain licenses, and monies from other sources put to use by the different levels of government? A good starting point to gain insight on this question as it relates to the federal government is Article I, Section 8, of the Constitution. Recall, for instance, that the Constitution assigns the federal government various powers that allow it to affect the nation as a whole. A look at the federal budget in 2019 ([Figure 3.6](#)) shows that the three largest spending categories were Social Security (24 percent of the total budget); Medicare, Medicaid, the Children’s Health Insurance Program, and marketplace subsidies under the Affordable Care Act (24 percent); and defense and international security assistance (18 percent). The rest was divided among categories such as safety net programs (11 percent), including the Earned Income Tax Credit and Child Tax Credit, unemployment insurance, food stamps, and other low-income assistance programs; interest on federal debt (7 percent); benefits for federal retirees and veterans (8 percent); and transportation infrastructure (3 percent).¹⁹ It is clear from the 2019 federal budget that providing for the general welfare and national defense consumes much of the government’s resources—not just its revenue, but also its administrative capacity and labor power.

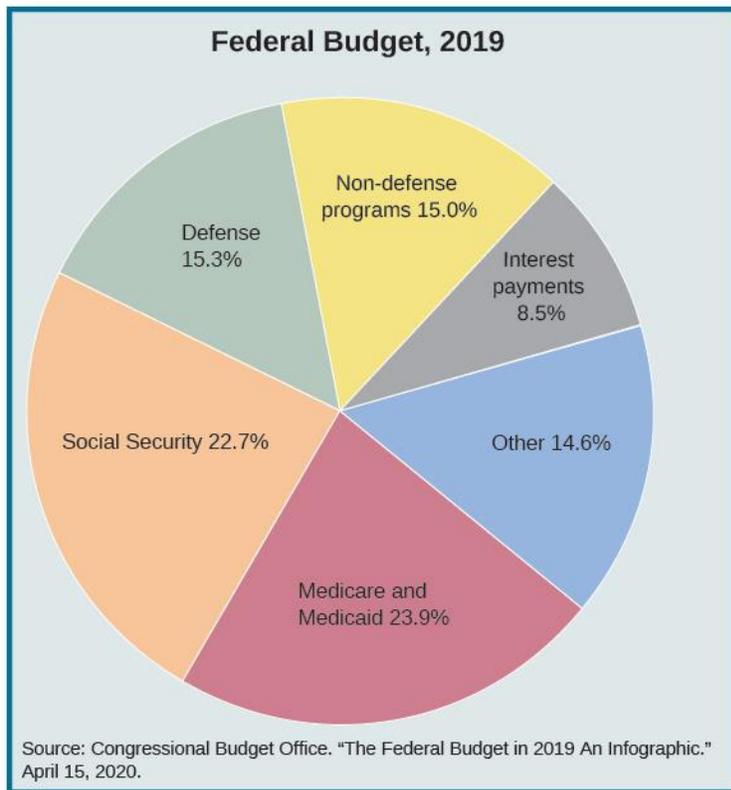


Figure 3.6 Approximately two-thirds of the federal budget is spent in just three categories: Social Security, health care and health insurance programs, and defense.

[Figure 3.7](#) compares recent spending activities of local and state governments. Educational expenditures constitute a major category for both. However, whereas the states spend comparatively more than local governments on university education, local governments spend even more on elementary and secondary education. That said, nationwide, state funding for public higher education has declined as a percentage of university revenues; this is primarily because states have taken in lower amounts of sales taxes as internet commerce has increased. Local governments allocate more funds to police protection, fire protection, housing and community development, and public utilities such as water, sewage, and electricity. And while state governments allocate comparatively more funds to public welfare programs, such as health care, income support, and highways, both local and state governments spend roughly similar amounts on judicial and legal services and correctional services.

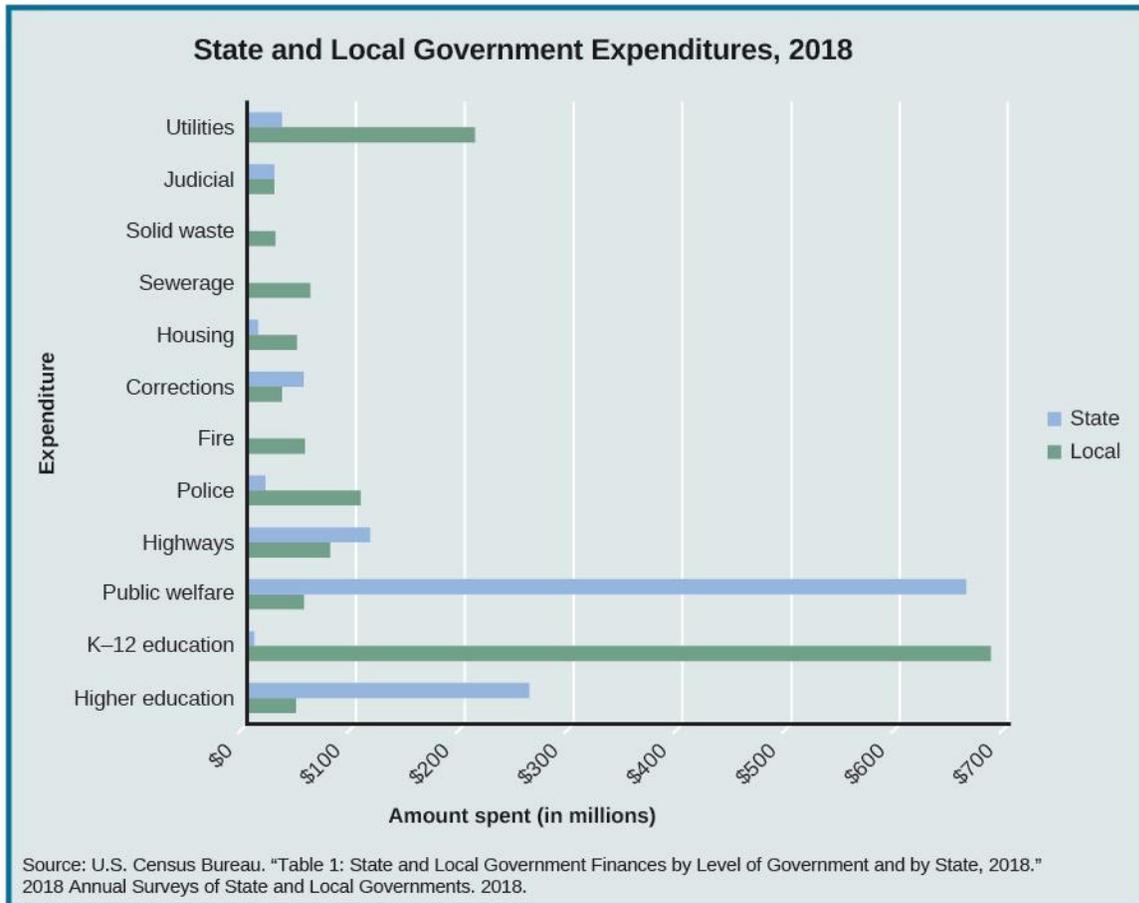


Figure 3.7 This list includes some of the largest expenditure items for state and local governments.

3.2 The Evolution of American Federalism

Learning Objectives

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

- Describe how federalism has evolved in the United States
- Compare different conceptions of federalism

The Constitution sketches a federal framework that aims to balance the forces of decentralized and centralized governance in general terms; it does not flesh out standard operating procedures that say precisely how the states and federal governments are to handle all policy contingencies imaginable. Therefore, officials at the state and national levels have had some room to maneuver as they operate within the Constitution's federal design. This has led to changes in the configuration of federalism over time, changes corresponding to different historical phases that capture distinct balances between state and federal authority.

THE STRUGGLE BETWEEN NATIONAL POWER AND STATE POWER

As George Washington's secretary of the treasury from 1789 to 1795, Alexander Hamilton championed legislative efforts to create a publicly chartered bank. For Hamilton, the establishment of the Bank of the United States was fully within Congress's authority, and he hoped the bank would foster economic development, print and circulate paper money, and provide loans to the government. Although Thomas Jefferson, Washington's secretary of state, staunchly opposed Hamilton's plan on the constitutional grounds that the national government had no authority to create such an instrument, Hamilton managed to convince the reluctant president to sign the legislation.²⁰

When the bank's charter expired in 1811, Jeffersonian Democratic-Republicans prevailed in blocking its renewal. However, the fiscal hardships that plagued the government during the War of 1812, coupled with the fragility of the country's financial system, convinced Congress and then-president James Madison to create the Second Bank of the United States in 1816. Many states rejected the Second Bank, arguing that the national government was infringing upon the states' constitutional jurisdiction.

A political showdown between Maryland and the national government emerged when James McCulloch, an agent for the Baltimore branch of the Second Bank, refused to pay a tax that Maryland had imposed on all out-of-state chartered banks. The standoff raised two constitutional questions: Did Congress have the authority to charter a national bank? Were states allowed to tax federal property? In *McCulloch v. Maryland*, Chief Justice John Marshall (Figure 3.8) argued that Congress could create a national bank even though the Constitution did not expressly authorize it.²¹ Under the necessary and proper clause of Article I, Section 8, the Supreme Court asserted that Congress could establish "all means which are appropriate" to fulfill "the legitimate ends" of the Constitution. In other words, the bank was an appropriate instrument that enabled the national government to carry out several of its enumerated powers, such as regulating interstate commerce, collecting taxes, and borrowing money.

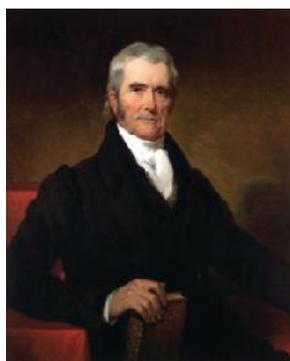


Figure 3.8 Chief Justice John Marshall, shown here in a portrait by Henry Inman, was best known for the principle of judicial review established in *Marbury v. Madison* (1803), which reinforced the influence and independence of the judiciary branch of the U.S. government.

This ruling established the doctrine of implied powers, granting Congress a vast source of discretionary power to achieve its constitutional responsibilities. The Supreme Court also sided

with the federal government on the issue of whether states could tax federal property. Under the supremacy clause of Article VI, legitimate national laws trump conflicting state laws. As the court observed, “the government of the Union, though limited in its powers, is supreme within its sphere of action and its laws, when made in pursuance of the constitution, form the supreme law of the land.” Maryland’s action violated national supremacy because “the power to tax is the power to destroy.” This second ruling established the principle of national supremacy, which prohibits states from meddling in the lawful activities of the national government.

Defining the scope of national power was the subject of another landmark Supreme Court decision in 1824. In *Gibbons v. Ogden*, the court had to interpret the commerce clause of Article I, Section 8; specifically, it had to determine whether the federal government had the sole authority to regulate the licensing of steamboats operating between New York and New Jersey.²² Aaron Ogden, who had obtained an exclusive license from New York State to operate steamboat ferries between New York City and New Jersey, sued Thomas Gibbons, who was operating ferries along the same route under a coasting license issued by the federal government. Gibbons lost in New York state courts and appealed. Chief Justice Marshall delivered a two-part ruling in favor of Gibbons that strengthened the power of the national government. First, interstate commerce was interpreted broadly to mean “commercial intercourse” among states, thus allowing Congress to regulate navigation. Second, because the federal Licensing Act of 1793, which regulated coastal commerce, was a constitutional exercise of Congress’s authority under the commerce clause, federal law trumped the New York State license-monopoly law that had granted Ogden an exclusive steamboat operating license. As Marshall pointed out, “the acts of New York must yield to the law of Congress.”²³

Various states railed against the nationalization of power that had been going on since the late 1700s. When President John Adams signed the Sedition Act in 1798, which made it a crime to speak openly against the government, the Kentucky and Virginia legislatures passed resolutions declaring the act null on the grounds that they retained the discretion to follow national laws. In effect, these resolutions articulated the legal reasoning underpinning the doctrine of nullification—that states had the right to reject national laws they deemed unconstitutional.²⁴

A nullification crisis emerged in the 1830s over President Andrew Jackson’s tariff acts of 1828 and 1832. Led by John Calhoun, President Jackson’s vice president, nullifiers argued that high tariffs on imported goods benefited northern manufacturing interests while disadvantaging economies in the South. South Carolina passed an Ordinance of Nullification declaring both tariff acts null and void and threatened to leave the Union. The federal government responded by enacting the Force Bill in 1833, authorizing President Jackson to use military force against states that challenged federal tariff laws. The prospect of military action coupled with the passage of the Compromise Tariff Act of 1833 (which lowered tariffs over time) led South Carolina to back off, ending the nullification crisis.

The ultimate showdown between national and state authority came during the Civil War. Prior to the conflict, in *Dred Scott v. Sandford*, the Supreme Court ruled that the national government lacked the authority to ban slavery in the territories.²⁵ But the election of President Abraham

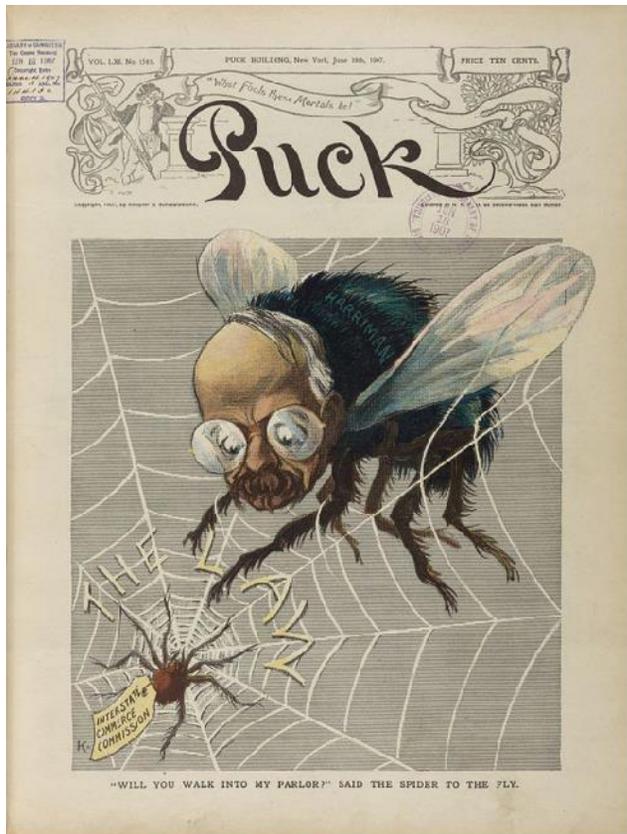
Lincoln in 1860 led eleven southern states to secede from the United States because they believed the new president would challenge the institution of slavery. What was initially a conflict to preserve the Union became a conflict to end slavery when Lincoln issued the Emancipation Proclamation in 1863, freeing all enslaved people in the rebellious states. The defeat of the South had a huge impact on the balance of power between the states and the national government in two important ways. First, the Union victory put an end to the right of states to secede and to challenge legitimate national laws. Second, Congress imposed several conditions for readmitting former Confederate states into the Union; among them was ratification of the Fourteenth and Fifteenth Amendments. In sum, after the Civil War the power balance shifted toward the national government, a movement that had begun several decades before with *McCulloch v. Maryland* (1819) and *Gibbons v. Ogden* (1824).

The period between 1819 and the 1860s demonstrated that the national government sought to establish its role within the newly created federal design, which in turn often provoked the states to resist as they sought to protect their interests. With the exception of the Civil War, the Supreme Court settled the power struggles between the states and national government. From a historical perspective, the national supremacy principle introduced during this period did not so much narrow the states' scope of constitutional authority as restrict their encroachment on national powers.²⁶

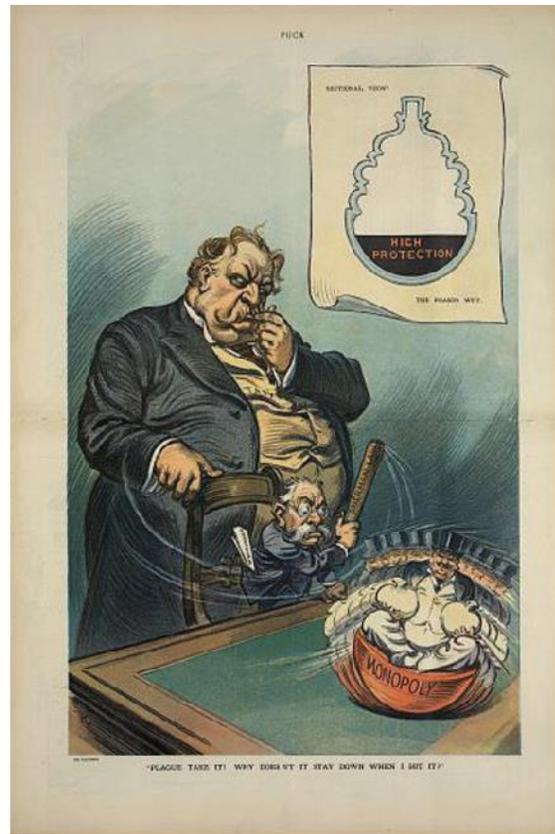
DUAL FEDERALISM

The late 1870s ushered in a new phase in the evolution of U.S. federalism. Under dual federalism, the states and national government exercise exclusive authority in distinctly delineated spheres of jurisdiction. Like the layers of a cake, the levels of government do not blend with one another but rather are clearly defined. Two factors contributed to the emergence of this conception of federalism. First, several Supreme Court rulings blocked attempts by both state and federal governments to step outside their jurisdictional boundaries. Second, the prevailing economic philosophy at the time loathed government interference in the process of industrial development.

Industrialization changed the socioeconomic landscape of the United States. One of its adverse effects was the concentration of market power. Because there was no national regulatory supervision to ensure fairness in market practices, collusive behavior among powerful firms emerged in several industries.²⁷ To curtail widespread anticompetitive practices in the railroad industry, Congress passed the Interstate Commerce Act in 1887, which created the Interstate Commerce Commission. Three years later, national regulatory capacity was broadened by the Sherman Antitrust Act of 1890, which made it illegal to monopolize or attempt to monopolize and conspire in restraining commerce ([Figure 3.9](#)). In the early stages of industrial capitalism, federal regulations were focused for the most part on promoting market competition rather than on addressing the social dislocations resulting from market operations, something the government began to tackle in the 1930s.²⁸



(a)



(b)

Figure 3.9 *Puck*, a humor magazine published from 1871 to 1918, satirized political issues of the day such as federal attempts to regulate commerce and prevent monopolies. “Will you walk into my parlor?” said the spider to the fly” (a) by Udo Keppler depicts a spider labeled “Interstate Commerce Commission” capturing a large fly in a web labeled “The Law” while “Plague take it! Why doesn’t it stay down when I hit it?” (b), also drawn by Keppler, shows President William Howard Taft and his attorney general, George W. Wickersham, trying to beat a “Monopoly” into submission with a stick labeled “Sherman Law.”

The new federal regulatory regime was dealt a legal blow early in its existence. In 1895, in *United States v. E. C. Knight*, the Supreme Court ruled that the national government lacked the authority to regulate manufacturing.²⁹ The case came about when the government, using its regulatory power under the Sherman Act, attempted to override American Sugar’s purchase of four sugar refineries, which would give the company a commanding share of the industry. Distinguishing between commerce among states and the production of goods, the court argued that the national government’s regulatory authority applied only to commercial activities. If manufacturing activities fell within the purview of the commerce clause of the Constitution, then “comparatively little of business operations would be left for state control,” the court argued.

In the late 1800s, some states attempted to regulate working conditions. For example, New York State passed the Bakeshop Act in 1897, which prohibited bakery employees from working

more than sixty hours in a week. In *Lochner v. New York*, the Supreme Court ruled this state regulation that capped work hours unconstitutional, on the grounds that it violated the due process clause of the Fourteenth Amendment.³⁰ In other words, the right to sell and buy labor is a “liberty of the individual” safeguarded by the Constitution, the court asserted. The federal government also took up the issue of working conditions, but that case resulted in the same outcome as in the *Lochner* case.³¹

COOPERATIVE FEDERALISM

The Great Depression of the 1930s brought economic hardships the nation had never witnessed before (Figure 3.10). Between 1929 and 1933, the national unemployment rate reached 25 percent, industrial output dropped by half, stock market assets lost more than half their value, thousands of banks went out of business, and the gross domestic product shrunk by one-quarter.³² Given the magnitude of the economic depression, there was pressure on the national government to coordinate a robust national response along with the states.



Figure 3.10 A line outside a Chicago soup kitchen in 1931, in the midst of the Great Depression. The sign above reads “Free Soup, Coffee, and Doughnuts for the Unemployed.”

Cooperative federalism was born of necessity and lasted well into the twentieth century as the national and state governments each found it beneficial. Under this model, both levels of government coordinated their actions to solve national problems, such as the Great Depression and the civil rights struggle of the following decades. In contrast to dual federalism, it erodes the jurisdictional boundaries between the states and national government, leading to a blending of layers as in a marble cake. The era of cooperative federalism contributed to the gradual incursion of national authority into the jurisdictional domain of the states, as well as the expansion of the national government’s power in concurrent policy areas.³³

The New Deal programs President Franklin D. Roosevelt proposed as a means to tackle the Great Depression ran afoul of the dual-federalism mindset of the justices on the Supreme Court in the 1930s. The court struck down key pillars of the New Deal—the National Industrial

Recovery Act and the Agricultural Adjustment Act, for example—on the grounds that the federal government was operating in matters that were within the purview of the states. The court’s obstructionist position infuriated Roosevelt, leading him in 1937 to propose a court-packing plan that would add one new justice for each one over the age of seventy, thus allowing the president to make a maximum of six new appointments. Before Congress took action on the proposal, the Supreme Court began leaning in support of the New Deal as Chief Justice Charles Evans Hughes and Justice Owen Roberts changed their view on federalism.³⁴

In *National Labor Relations Board (NLRB) v. Jones and Laughlin Steel*,³⁵ for instance, the Supreme Court ruled the National Labor Relations Act of 1935 constitutional, asserting that Congress can use its authority under the commerce clause to regulate both manufacturing activities and labor-management relations. The New Deal changed the relationship Americans had with the national government. Before the Great Depression, the government offered little in terms of financial aid, social benefits, and economic rights. After the New Deal, it provided old-age pensions (Social Security), unemployment insurance, agricultural subsidies, protections for organizing in the workplace, and a variety of other public services created during Roosevelt’s administration.

In the 1960s, President Lyndon Johnson’s administration expanded the national government’s role in society even more. Medicaid (which provides medical assistance to the indigent), Medicare (which provides health insurance to the elderly and some people with disabilities), and school nutrition programs were created. The Elementary and Secondary Education Act (1965), the Higher Education Act (1965), and the Head Start preschool program (1965) were established to expand educational opportunities and equality (Figure 3.11). The Clean Air Act (1965), the Highway Safety Act (1966), and the Fair Packaging and Labeling Act (1966) promoted environmental and consumer protection. Finally, laws were passed to promote urban renewal, public housing development, and affordable housing. In addition to these Great Society programs, the Civil Rights Act (1964) and the Voting Rights Act (1965) gave the federal government effective tools to promote civil rights equality across the country.



(a)



(b)

Figure 3.11 Lady Bird Johnson, the First Lady, reads to students enrolled in Head Start (a) at the Kemper School in Washington, DC, on March 19, 1966. President Obama visits a Head Start classroom (b) in Lawrence, Kansas, on January 22, 2015.

While the era of cooperative federalism witnessed a broadening of federal powers in concurrent and state policy domains, it is also the era of a deepening coordination between the states and the federal government in Washington. Nowhere is this clearer than with respect to the social welfare and social insurance programs created during the New Deal and Great Society eras, most of which are administered by both state and federal authorities and are jointly funded. The Social Security Act of 1935, which created federal subsidies for state-administered programs for the elderly; people with disabilities; dependent mothers; and children, gave state and local officials wide discretion over eligibility and benefit levels. The unemployment insurance program, also created by the Social Security Act, requires states to provide jobless benefits, but it allows them significant latitude to decide the level of tax to impose on businesses in order to fund the program as well as the duration and replacement rate of unemployment benefits. A similar multilevel division of labor governs Medicaid and Children’s Health Insurance.³⁶

Thus, the era of cooperative federalism left two lasting attributes on federalism in the United States. First, a nationalization of politics emerged as a result of federal legislative activism aimed at addressing national problems such as marketplace inefficiencies, social and political inequality, and poverty. The nationalization process expanded the size of the federal administrative apparatus and increased the flow of federal grants to state and local authorities, which have helped offset the financial costs of maintaining a host of New Deal- and Great Society-era programs. The second lasting attribute is the flexibility that states and local authorities were given in the implementation of federal social welfare programs. One consequence of administrative flexibility, however, is that it has led to cross-state differences in the levels of benefits and coverage.³⁷

NEW FEDERALISM

During the administrations of Presidents Richard Nixon (1969–1974) and Ronald Reagan (1981–1989), attempts were made to reverse the process of nationalization—that is, to restore states’ prominence in policy areas into which the federal government had moved in the past. New federalism is premised on the idea that the decentralization of policies enhances administrative efficiency, reduces overall public spending, and improves policy outcomes. During Nixon’s administration, general revenue sharing programs were created that distributed funds to the state and local governments with minimal restrictions on how the money was spent. The election of Ronald Reagan heralded the advent of a “devolution revolution” in U.S. federalism, in which the president pledged to return authority to the states according to the Constitution. In the Omnibus Budget Reconciliation Act of 1981, congressional leaders together with President Reagan consolidated numerous federal grant programs related to social welfare and reformulated them in order to give state and local administrators greater discretion in using federal funds.³⁸

However, Reagan’s track record in promoting new federalism was inconsistent. This was partly due to the fact that the president’s devolution agenda met some opposition from Democrats in Congress, moderate Republicans, and interest groups, preventing him from making further advances on that front. For example, his efforts to completely devolve Aid to Families With

Dependent Children (a New Deal-era program) and food stamps (a Great Society-era program) to the states were rejected by members of Congress, who feared states would underfund both programs, and by members of the National Governors' Association, who believed the proposal would be too costly for states. Reagan terminated general revenue sharing in 1986.³⁹

Several Supreme Court rulings also promoted new federalism by hemming in the scope of the national government's power, especially under the commerce clause. For example, in *United States v. Lopez*, the court struck down the Gun-Free School Zones Act of 1990, which banned gun possession in school zones.⁴⁰ It argued that the regulation in question did not "substantively affect interstate commerce." The ruling ended a nearly sixty-year period in which the court had used a broad interpretation of the commerce clause that by the 1960s allowed it to regulate numerous local commercial activities.⁴¹

However, many would say that the years since the 9/11 attacks have swung the pendulum back in the direction of central federal power. The creation of the Department of Homeland Security federalized disaster response power in Washington, and the Transportation Security Administration was created to federalize airport security. Broad new federal policies and mandates have also been carried out in the form of the Faith-Based Initiative and No Child Left Behind (during the George W. Bush administration) and the Affordable Care Act (during Barack Obama's administration).

Finding a Middle Ground

Cooperative Federalism versus New Federalism

Morton Grodzins coined the expression "marble-cake federalism" in the 1950s while conducting research on the evolution of American federalism as a professor of political science at the University of Chicago. Until then most scholars had thought of federalism as a layer cake, but according to Grodzins the 1930s ushered in "marble-cake federalism" (Figure 3.12): "The American form of government is often, but erroneously, symbolized by a three-layer cake. A far more accurate image is the rainbow or marble cake, characterized by an inseparable mingling of differently colored ingredients, the colors appearing in vertical and diagonal strands and unexpected whirls. As colors are mixed in the marble cake, so functions are mixed in the American federal system."⁴²

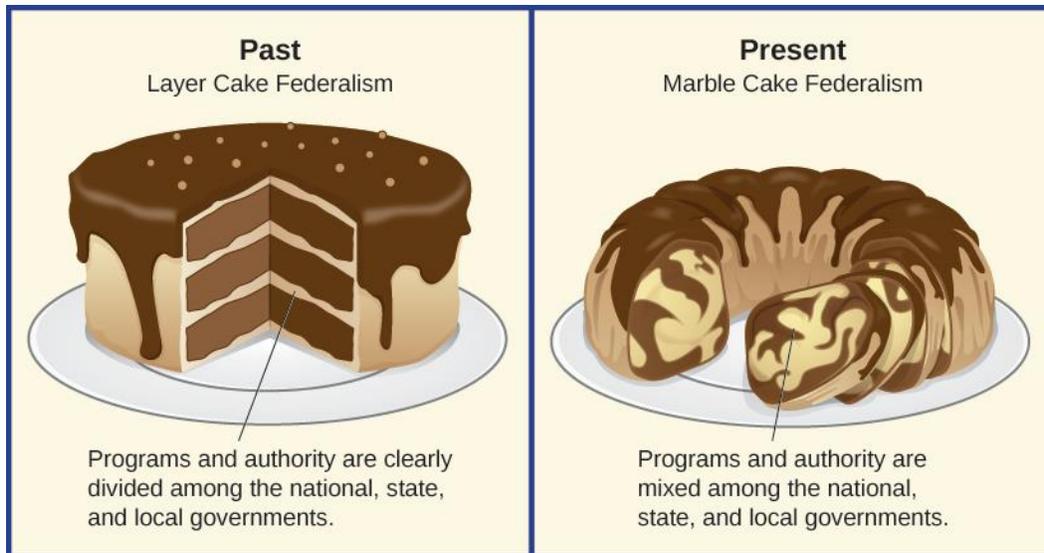


Figure 3.12 Morton Grodzins coined the expression “marble-cake federalism” in the 1950s to explain the evolution of federalism in the United States.

Cooperative federalism has several merits:

- Because state and local governments have varying fiscal capacities, the national government’s involvement in state activities such as education, health, and social welfare is necessary to ensure some degree of uniformity in the provision of public services to citizens in richer and poorer states.
- The problem of collective action, which dissuades state and local authorities from raising regulatory standards for fear they will be disadvantaged as others lower theirs, is resolved by requiring state and local authorities to meet minimum federal standards (e.g., minimum wage and air quality).
- Federal assistance is necessary to ensure state and local programs that generate positive externalities are maintained. For example, one state’s environmental regulations impose higher fuel prices on its residents, but the externality of the cleaner air they produce benefits neighboring states. Without the federal government’s support, this state and others like it would underfund such programs.

New federalism has advantages as well:

- Because of differences among states, one-size-fits-all features of federal laws are suboptimal. Decentralization accommodates the diversity that exists across states.
- By virtue of being closer to citizens, state and local authorities are better than federal agencies at discerning the public’s needs.
- Decentralized federalism fosters a marketplace of innovative policy ideas as states compete against each other to minimize administrative costs and maximize policy output.

Which model of federalism do you think works best for the United States? Why?

Link to Learning

The leading international journal devoted to the practical and theoretical study of federalism is called [Publius: The Journal of Federalism](#). Find out where its name comes from.

3.3 Intergovernmental Relationships

Learning Objectives

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

- Explain how federal intergovernmental grants have evolved over time
- Identify the types of federal intergovernmental grants
- Describe the characteristics of federal unfunded mandates

The national government’s ability to achieve its objectives often requires the participation of state and local governments. Intergovernmental grants offer positive financial inducements to get states to work toward selected national goals. A grant is commonly likened to a “carrot” to the extent that it is designed to entice the recipient to do something. On the other hand, unfunded mandates impose federal requirements on state and local authorities. Mandates are typically backed by the threat of penalties for non-compliance and provide little to no compensation for the costs of implementation. Thus, given its coercive nature, a mandate is commonly likened to a “stick.”

GRANTS

The national government has used grants to influence state actions as far back as the Articles of Confederation when it provided states with land grants. In the first half of the 1800s, land grants were the primary means by which the federal government supported the states. Millions of acres of federal land were donated to support road, railroad, bridge, and canal construction projects, all of which were instrumental in piecing together a national transportation system to facilitate migration, interstate commerce, postal mail service, and movement of military people and equipment. Numerous universities and colleges across the country, such as Oklahoma State University and President Biden's alma mater, the University of Delaware, are land-grant institutions because their campuses were built on land donated by the federal government or by using funding secured by the sale of donated federal land. In the segregated South, black land grant universities were established in 1890, including Florida A&M University and Prairie View A&M University (Texas).⁴³ At the turn of the twentieth century, cash grants replaced land grants as the main form of federal intergovernmental transfers and have become a central part of modern federalism.⁴⁴

Link to Learning

This [video about the creation of Iowa State University](#) shows how land grant universities were developed to bring higher education to the people.

Federal cash grants do come with strings attached; the national government has an interest in seeing that public monies are used for policy activities that advance national objectives.

Categorical grants are federal transfers formulated to limit recipients' discretion in the use of funds and subject them to strict administrative criteria that guide project selection, performance, and financial oversight, among other things. These grants also often require some commitment of matching funds. Medicaid and the food stamp program are examples of categorical grants. Block grants come with less stringent federal administrative conditions and provide recipients more flexibility over how to spend grant funds. Examples of block grants include the Workforce Investment Act program, which provides state and local agencies money to help youths and adults obtain skill sets that will lead to better-paying jobs, and the Surface Transportation Program, which helps state and local governments maintain and improve highways, bridges, tunnels, sidewalks, and bicycle paths. Finally, recipients of general revenue sharing faced the least restrictions on the use of federal grants. From 1972 to 1986, when revenue sharing was abolished, upwards of \$85 billion of federal money was distributed to states, cities, counties, towns, and villages.⁴⁵

During the 1960s and 1970s, funding for federal grants grew significantly, as the graphic shows in [Figure 3.13](#). Growth picked up again in the 1990s and 2000s. The increase since the 1990s is primarily due to the increase in federal grant money going to Medicaid. Federally funded health-care programs jumped from \$43.8 billion in 1990 to \$320 billion in 2014.⁴⁶ Health-related grant programs such as Medicaid and the Children's Health Insurance Program (CHIP) represented more than half of total federal grant expenses.

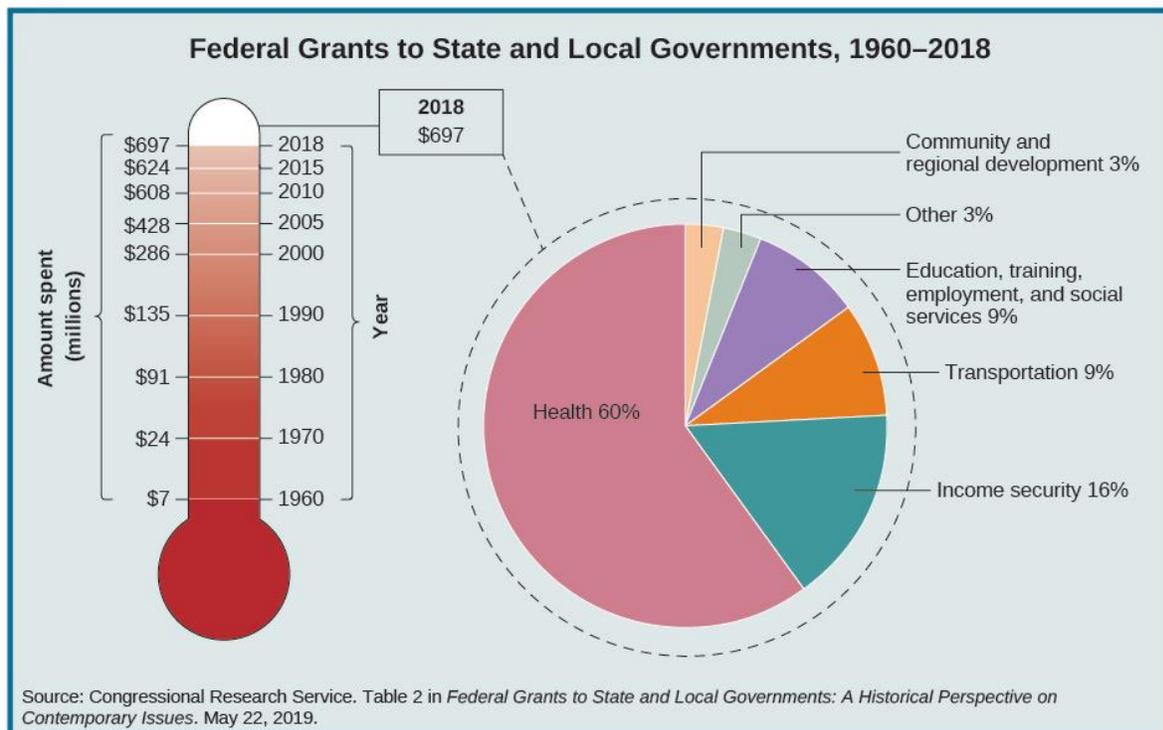


Figure 3.13 As the thermometer shows, federal grants to state and local governments have steadily increased since the 1960s. The pie chart shows how federal grants are allocated among different functional categories today.

Link to Learning

The federal government uses grants and other tools to achieve its national policy priorities. Take a look at the [National Priorities Project](#) to find out more.

The national government has greatly preferred using categorical grants to transfer funds to state and local authorities because this type of grant gives them more control and discretion in how the money is spent. In 2014, the federal government distributed 1,099 grants, 1,078 of which were categorical, while only 21 were block grants.⁴⁷ In response to the terrorist attack on the United States on September 11, 2001, more than a dozen new federal grant programs relating to homeland security were created, but as of 2011, only three were block grants.

There are a couple of reasons that categorical grants are more popular than block grants despite calls to decentralize public policy. One reason is that elected officials who sponsor these grants can take credit for their positive outcomes (e.g., clean rivers, better-performing schools, healthier children, a secure homeland) since elected officials, not state officials, formulate the administrative standards that lead to the results. Another reason is that categorical grants afford federal officials greater command over grant program performance. A common criticism leveled against block grants is that they lack mechanisms to hold state and local administrators accountable for outcomes, a reproach the Obama administration made about the Community Services Block Grant program. Finally, once categorical grants have been established, vested interests in Congress and the federal bureaucracy seek to preserve them. The legislators who enact them and the federal agencies that implement them invest heavily in defending them, ensuring their continuation.⁴⁸

Reagan's "devolution revolution" contributed to raising the number of block grants from six in 1981 to fourteen in 1989. Block grants increased to twenty-four in 1999 during the Clinton administration and to twenty-six during Obama's presidency, but by 2014 the total had dropped to twenty-one, accounting for 10 percent of total federal grant outlay.⁴⁹ President Trump proposed eliminating four discretionary block grants in his "skinny" budget, although the budget was not passed.

In 1994, the Republican-controlled Congress passed legislation that called for block-granting Medicaid, which would have capped federal Medicaid spending. President Clinton vetoed the legislation. However, congressional efforts to convert Aid to Families with Dependent Children (AFDC) to a block grant succeeded. The Temporary Assistance for Needy Families (TANF) block grant replaced the AFDC in 1996, marking the first time the federal government transformed an entitlement program (which guarantees individual rights to benefits) into a block grant. Under the AFDC, the federal government had reimbursed states a portion of the costs they bore for running the program without placing a ceiling on the amount. In contrast, the TANF block grant caps annual federal funding at \$16.489 billion and provides a yearly lump sum to each state, which it can use to manage its own program.

Block grants have been championed for their cost-cutting effects. By eliminating uncapped federal funding, as the TANF issue illustrates, the national government can reverse the escalating costs of federal grant programs. This point was not lost on Paul Ryan (R-WI), former chair of the House Budget Committee and the House Ways and Means Committee, who, during his tenure as Speaker of the House from October 2015 to January 2019, tried multiple times but without success to convert Medicaid into a block grant, a reform he estimated could save the federal government upwards of \$732 billion over ten years.⁵⁰

Another noteworthy characteristic of block grants is that their flexibility has been undermined over time as a result of creeping categorization, a process in which the national government places new administrative requirements on state and local governments or supplants block grants with new categorical grants.⁵¹ Among the more common measures used to restrict block grants' programmatic flexibility are set-asides (i.e., requiring a certain share of grant funds to be designated for a specific purpose) and cost ceilings (i.e., placing a cap on funding other purposes).

UNFUNDED MANDATES

Unfunded mandates are federal laws and regulations that impose obligations on state and local governments without fully compensating them for the administrative costs they incur. The federal government has used mandates increasingly since the 1960s to promote national objectives in policy areas such as the environment, civil rights, education, and homeland security. One type of mandate threatens civil and criminal penalties for state and local authorities that fail to comply with them across the board in all programs, while another provides for the suspension of federal grant money if the mandate is not followed. These types of mandates are commonly referred to as *crosscutting* mandates. Failure to fully comply with crosscutting mandates can result in punishments that normally include reduction of or suspension of federal grants, prosecution of officials, fines, or some combination of these penalties. If only one requirement is not met, state or local governments may not get any money at all.

For example, Title VI of the Civil Rights Act of 1964 authorizes the federal government to withhold federal grants as well as file lawsuits against state and local officials for practicing racial discrimination. Finally, some mandates come in the form of partial preemption regulations, whereby the federal government sets national regulatory standards but delegates the enforcement to state and local governments. For example, the Clean Air Act sets air quality regulations but instructs states to design implementation plans to achieve such standards (Figure 3.14).⁵²



Figure 3.14 The Clean Air Act is an example of an unfunded mandate. The Environmental Protection Agency sets federal standards regarding air and water quality, but it is up to each state to implement plans to achieve these standards.

The widespread use of federal mandates in the 1970s and 1980s provoked a backlash among state and local authorities, which culminated in the Unfunded Mandates Reform Act (UMRA) in 1995. The UMRA's main objective has been to restrain the national government's use of mandates by subjecting rules that impose unfunded requirements on state and local governments to greater procedural scrutiny. However, since the act's implementation, states and local authorities have obtained limited relief. A subsequent piece of legislation aimed to take this approach further. The 2017 Unfunded Mandates and Information Transparency Act, HR 50, passed the House in July 2018 before being referred to the Senate, where it was placed on the legislative calendar but moved no further.⁵³

The number of mandates has continued to rise, and some have been especially costly to states and local authorities. Consider the Real ID Act of 2005, a federal law designed to beef up homeland security. The law requires driver's licenses and state-issued identification cards (DL/IDs) to contain standardized anti-fraud security features, specific data, and machine-readable technology. It also requires states to verify the identity of everyone being reissued DL/IDs. The Department of Homeland Security announced a phased enforcement of the law in 2013, which required individuals to present compliant DL/IDs to board commercial airlines starting in 2016. The cost to states of re-issuing DL/IDs, implementing new identity verification

procedures, and redesigning DL/IDs is estimated to be \$11 billion, and the federal government stands to reimburse only a small fraction.⁵⁴ Compliance with the federal law has been onerous for many states; numerous extensions to states have been granted since 2016 and only thirty-eight were in full compliance with Real ID as of December 2018.⁵⁵ Ultimately, all fifty states and the District of Columbia were certified as compliant.

The continued use of unfunded mandates clearly contradicts new federalism's call for giving states and local governments more flexibility in carrying out national goals. The temptation to use them appears to be difficult for the federal government to resist, however, as the UMRA's poor track record illustrates. This is because mandates allow the federal government to fulfill its national priorities while passing most of the cost to the states, an especially attractive strategy for national lawmakers trying to cut federal spending.⁵⁶ Some leading federalism scholars have used the term *coercive federalism* to capture this aspect of contemporary U.S. federalism.⁵⁷ In other words, Washington has been as likely to use the stick of mandates as the carrot of grants to accomplish its national objectives. As a result, there have been more instances of confrontational interactions between the states and the federal government.

Milestone

The Clery Act

The Clery Act of 1990, formally the Jeanne Clery Disclosure of Campus Security Policy and Campus Crime Statistics Act, requires public and private colleges and universities that participate in federal student aid programs to disclose information about campus crime. The Act is named after Jeanne Clery, who in 1986 was raped and murdered by a fellow student in her Lehigh University dorm room.

The U.S. Department of Education's Clery Act Compliance Division is responsible for enforcing the 1990 Act. Specifically, to remain eligible for federal financial aid funds and avoid penalties, colleges and universities must comply with the following provisions:

- Publish an annual security report and make it available to current and prospective students and employees;
- Keep a public crime log that documents each crime on campus and is accessible to the public;
- Disclose information about incidents of criminal homicide, sex offenses, robbery, aggravated assault, burglary, motor vehicle theft, arson, and hate crimes that occurred on or near campus;
- Issue warnings about Clery Act crimes that pose a threat to students and employees;
- Develop a campus community emergency response and notification strategy that is subject to annual testing;
- Gather and report fire data to the federal government and publish an annual fire safety report;
- Devise procedures to address reports of missing students living in on-campus housing.

For more about the Clery Act, see Clery Center for Security on Campus, <http://clerycenter.org>.

Were you made aware of your campus's annual security report before you enrolled? Do you think reporting about campus security is appropriately regulated at the federal level under the Clery Act? Why or why not?

3.4 Competitive Federalism Today

Learning Objectives

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

- Explain the dynamic of competitive federalism
- Analyze some issues over which the states and federal government have contended

Certain functions clearly belong to the federal government, the state governments, and local governments. National security is a federal matter, the issuance of licenses is a state matter, and garbage collection is a local matter. One aspect of competitive federalism today is that some policy issues, such as immigration and the marital rights of LGBTQ people, have been redefined as the roles that states and the federal government play in them have changed. Another aspect of competitive federalism is that interest groups seeking to change the status quo can take a policy issue up to the federal government or down to the states if they feel it is to their advantage. Interest groups have used this strategy to promote their views on such issues as abortion, gun control, and the legal drinking age.

CONTENDING ISSUES

Immigration and marriage equality have not been the subject of much contention between states and the federal government until recent decades. Before that, it was understood that the federal government handled immigration and states determined the legality of marriage, whether between people of different races or the same sex. This understanding of exclusive responsibilities has changed; today both levels of government play roles in these two policy areas.

Immigration federalism describes the gradual movement of states into the immigration policy domain.⁵⁸ Since the late 1990s, states have asserted a right to make immigration policy on the grounds that they are enforcing, not supplanting, the nation's immigration laws, and they are exercising their jurisdictional authority by restricting undocumented immigrants' access to education, health care, and welfare benefits, areas that fall under the states' responsibilities. In 2005, twenty-five states had enacted a total of thirty-nine laws related to immigration; by 2014, forty-three states and Washington, DC, had passed a total of 288 immigration-related laws and resolutions.⁵⁹ In 2020, thirty-two different states enacted a total of 206 new measures, including many related to COVID-19.⁶⁰

Arizona has been one of the states at the forefront of immigration federalism. In 2010, it passed Senate Bill 1070, which sought to make it so difficult for undocumented immigrants to live in the state that they would return to their native country, a strategy referred to as "attrition by enforcement."⁶¹ The federal government filed suit to block the Arizona law, contending that it conflicted with federal immigration laws. Arizona's law has also divided society, because some

groups have supported its tough stance on immigrants, while other groups have opposed it for humanitarian and human-rights reasons (Figure 3.15). According to a poll of Latino voters in the state by Arizona State University researchers, 81 percent opposed this bill.⁶²



(a)



(b)

Figure 3.15 A group in St. Paul, Minnesota, protests on November 14, 2009 (a). Following the adoption of Senate Bill 1070 in Arizona, which took a tough stance on undocumented immigration, supporters of immigration reform demonstrated across the country in opposition to the bill, including in Lafayette Park (b), located across the street from the White House in Washington, DC. (credit a: modification of work by “Fibonacci Blue”/Flickr; credit b: modification of work by Nevele Otseog)

In 2012, in *Arizona v. United States*, the Supreme Court affirmed federal supremacy on immigration.⁶³ The court struck down three of the four central provisions of the Arizona law—namely, those allowing police officers to arrest an undocumented immigrant without a warrant if they had probable cause to think the immigrant had committed a crime that could lead to deportation, making it a crime to seek a job without proper immigration documentation, and making it a crime to be in Arizona without valid immigration papers. The court upheld the “show me your papers” provision, which authorizes police officers to check the immigration status of anyone they stop or arrest who they suspect is an undocumented immigrant.⁶⁴ However, in letting this provision stand, the court warned Arizona and other states with similar laws that they could face civil rights lawsuits if police officers applied it based on racial profiling.⁶⁵ All in all, Justice Anthony Kennedy’s opinion embraced an expansive view of the U.S. government’s authority to regulate immigration, describing it as broad and undoubted. That authority derived from the legislative power of Congress to “establish a uniform Rule of Naturalization,” enumerated in the Constitution. During the COVID-19 pandemic, California moved in the opposite direction. The California Immigrant Resilience Fund led to the provision of \$75 million for undocumented Californians not eligible for other COVID-19 programs.

Link to Learning

Arizona’s Senate Bill 1070 has been the subject of heated debate. Read the [views of proponents and opponents](#) of the law.

LGBTQ marital rights have also significantly changed in recent years. By passing the Defense of Marriage Act (DOMA) in 1996, the federal government stepped into this policy issue. Not only did DOMA allow states to choose whether to recognize same-sex marriages, it also defined marriage as a union between a man and a woman, which meant that same-sex couples were denied various federal provisions and benefits—such as the right to file joint tax returns and receive Social Security survivor benefits. In 1997, more than half the states in the union had passed some form of legislation banning same-sex marriage. By 2006, two years after Massachusetts became the first state to recognize marriage equality, twenty-seven states had passed constitutional bans on same-sex marriage. In *United States v. Windsor*, the Supreme Court changed the dynamic established by DOMA by ruling that the federal government had no authority to define marriage. The Court held that states possess the “historic and essential authority to define the marital relation,” and that the federal government’s involvement in this area “departs from this history and tradition of reliance on state law to define marriage.”⁶⁶

Insider Perspective

Edith Windsor: Icon of the Marriage Equality Movement

Edith Windsor, the plaintiff in the landmark Supreme Court case *United States v. Windsor*, became an icon of the marriage equality movement for her successful effort to force repeal the DOMA provision that denied married same-sex couples a host of federal provisions and protections. In 2007, after having lived together since the late 1960s, Windsor and her partner Thea Spyer were married in Canada, where same-sex marriage was legal. After Spyer died in 2009, Windsor received a \$363,053 federal tax bill on the estate Spyer had left her. Because her marriage was not valid under federal law, her request for the estate-tax exemption that applies to surviving spouses was denied. With the counsel of her lawyer, Roberta Kaplan, Windsor sued the federal government and won ([Figure 3.16](#)).



Figure 3.16 With her client Edith Windsor looking on, attorney Roberta Kaplan speaks to the crowd at the site of the 1969 Stonewall Riots, a historic landmark in the movement for LGBTQ rights. (credit: “Boss Tweed” /Flickr)

Because of the *Windsor* decision, federal laws could no longer discriminate against same-sex married couples. What is more, marriage equality became a reality in a growing number of states as federal court after federal court overturned state constitutional bans on same-sex marriage. The *Windsor* case gave federal judges the moment of clarity from the U.S. Supreme Court that they needed. James Esseks, director of the American Civil Liberties Union's (ACLU) Lesbian Gay Bisexual Transgender & AIDS Project, summarizes the significance of the case as follows: "Part of what's gotten us to this exciting moment in American culture is not just Edie's lawsuit but the story of her life. The love at the core of that story, as well as the injustice at its end, is part of what has moved America on this issue so profoundly."⁶⁷ In the final analysis, same-sex marriage is a protected constitutional right as decided by the U.S. Supreme Court, which took up the issue again when it heard *Obergefell v. Hodges* in 2015.

What role do you feel the story of Edith Windsor played in reframing the debate over same-sex marriage? How do you think it changed the federal government's view of its role in legislation regarding same-sex marriage relative to the role of the states?

Following the *Windsor* decision, the number of states that recognized same-sex marriages increased rapidly, as illustrated in [Figure 3.17](#). In 2015, marriage equality was recognized in thirty-six states plus Washington, DC, up from seventeen in 2013. The diffusion of marriage equality across states was driven in large part by federal district and appeals courts, which have used the rationale underpinning the *Windsor* case (i.e., laws cannot discriminate between same-sex and different-sex couples based on the equal protection clause of the Fourteenth Amendment) to invalidate state bans on same-sex marriage. The 2014 court decision not to hear a collection of cases from four different states essentially affirmed same-sex marriage in thirty states. And in 2015 the Supreme Court gave same-sex marriage a constitutional basis of right nationwide in *Obergefell v. Hodges*. In sum, as the immigration and marriage equality examples illustrate, constitutional disputes have arisen as states and the federal government have sought to reposition themselves on certain policy issues, disputes that the federal courts have had to sort out.

Same-Sex Marriage in the United States, 2009–2015

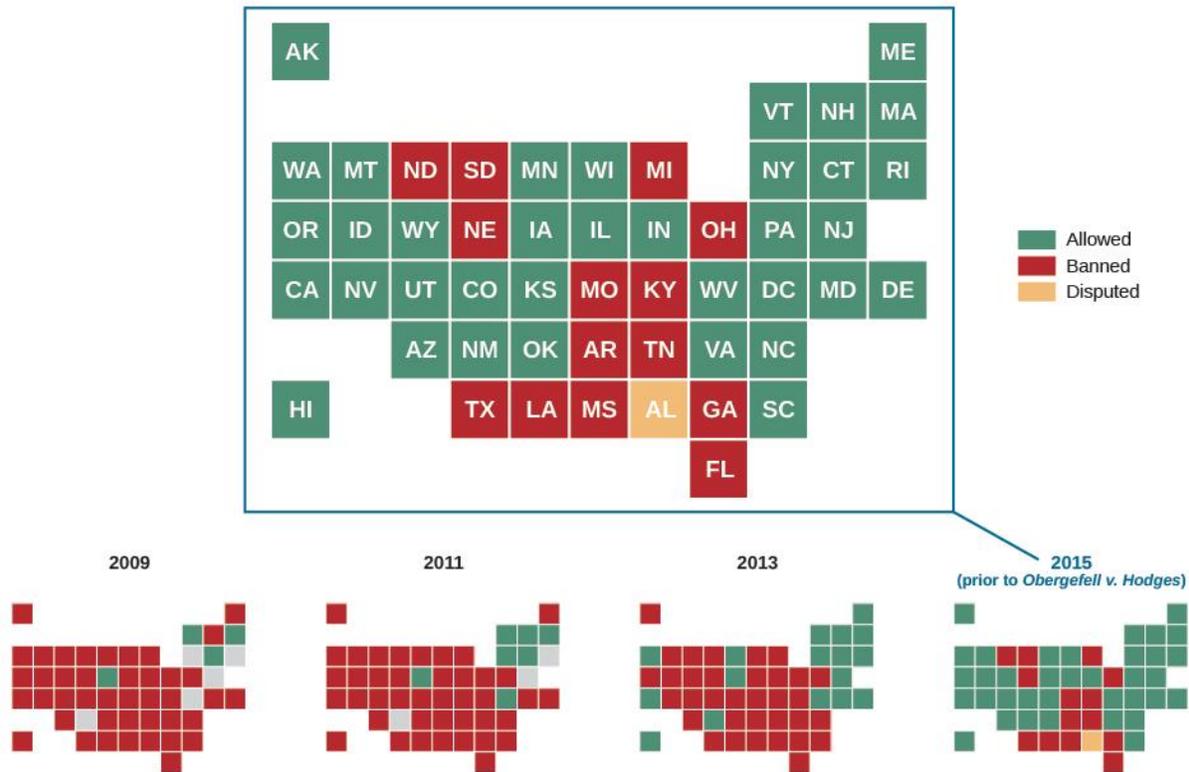


Figure 3.17 The number of states that practiced marriage equality gradually increased between 2008 and 2015, with the fastest increase occurring between *United States v. Windsor* in 2013 and *Obergefell v. Hodges* in 2015. Since the *Obergefell* ruling, state-level bans against same-sex marriages have been rendered obsolete.

STRATEGIZING ABOUT NEW ISSUES

Mothers Against Drunk Driving (MADD) was established in 1980 by a woman whose thirteen-year-old daughter had been killed by a drunk driver. The organization lobbied state legislators to raise the drinking age and impose tougher penalties, but without success. States with lower drinking ages had an economic interest in maintaining them because they lured youths from neighboring states with restricted consumption laws. So MADD decided to redirect its lobbying efforts at Congress, hoping to find sympathetic representatives willing to take action. In 1984, the federal government passed the National Minimum Drinking Age Act (NMDAA), a crosscutting mandate that gradually reduced federal highway grant money to any state that failed to increase the legal age for alcohol purchase and possession to twenty-one. After losing a legal battle against the NMDAA, all states were in compliance by 1988.⁶⁸

By creating two institutional access points—the federal and state governments—the U.S. federal system enables interest groups such as MADD to strategize about how best to achieve their policy objectives. The term venue shopping refers to a strategy in which interest groups select the level and branch of government (legislature, judiciary, or executive) they calculate

will be most advantageous for them.⁶⁹ If one institutional venue proves unreceptive to an advocacy group's policy goal, as state legislators were to MADD, the group will attempt to steer its issue to a more responsive venue.

The strategy anti-abortion advocates have used in recent years is another example of venue shopping. In their attempts to limit abortion rights in the wake of the 1973 *Roe v. Wade* Supreme Court decision making abortion legal nationwide, anti-abortion advocates initially targeted Congress in hopes of obtaining restrictive legislation.⁷⁰ Lack of progress at the national level prompted them to shift their focus to state legislators, where their advocacy efforts have been more successful. By 2015, for example, thirty-eight states required some form of parental involvement in a minor's decision to have an abortion, forty-six states allowed individual health-care providers to refuse to participate in abortions, and thirty-two states prohibited the use of public funds to carry out an abortion except when the woman's life is in danger or the pregnancy is the result of rape or incest. While 31 percent of U.S. women of childbearing age resided in one of the thirteen states that had passed restrictive abortion laws in 2000, by 2013, about 56 percent of such women resided in one of the twenty-seven states where abortion is restricted.⁷¹

3.5 Advantages and Disadvantages of Federalism

Learning Objectives

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

- Discuss the advantages of federalism
- Explain the disadvantages of federalism

The federal design of our Constitution has had a profound effect on U.S. politics. Several positive and negative attributes of federalism have manifested themselves in the U.S. political system.

THE BENEFITS OF FEDERALISM

Among the merits of federalism are that it promotes policy innovation and political participation and accommodates diversity of opinion. On the subject of policy innovation, Supreme Court Justice Louis Brandeis observed in 1932 that "a single courageous state may, if its citizens choose, serve as a laboratory; and try novel social and economic experiments without risk to the rest of the country."⁷² What Brandeis meant was that states could harness their constitutional authority to engage in policy innovations that might eventually be diffused to other states and at the national level. For example, a number of New Deal breakthroughs, such as child labor laws, were inspired by state policies. Prior to the passage of the Nineteenth Amendment, women already had the right to vote in several states. California has led the way in establishing standards for fuel emissions and other environmental policies ([Figure 3.18](#)). Recently, the health insurance exchanges run by Connecticut, Kentucky, Rhode Island, and Washington have served as models for other states seeking to improve the performance of their exchanges.⁷³



(a)



(b)

Figure 3.18 The California Air Resources Board was established in 1967, before passage of the federal Clean Air Act. The federal Environmental Protection Agency has adopted California emissions standards nationally, starting with the 2016 model year, and is working with California regulators to establish stricter national emissions standards going forward. The Trump Administration revoked California's authority to set higher standards than their lower federal standards; however California challenged this ruling in court. The Biden Administration is expected to reverse the Trump ruling and, in anticipation of this change, fifteen states and the District of Columbia have upped their standards.⁷⁴ (credit a: modification of work by Antti T. Nissinen; credit b: modification of work by Marcin Wichary)

Another advantage of federalism is that because our federal system creates two levels of government with the capacity to take action, failure to attain a desired policy goal at one level can be offset by successfully securing the support of elected representatives at another level. Thus, individuals, groups, and social movements are encouraged to actively participate and help shape public policy.

Get Connected!

Federalism and Political Office

Thinking of running for elected office? Well, you have several options. As [Table 3.1](#) shows, there are a total of 510,682 elected offices at the federal, state, and local levels. Elected representatives in municipal and township governments account for a little more than half the total number of elected officials in the United States. Political careers rarely start at the national level. In fact, a very small share of politicians at the subnational level transition to the national stage as representatives, senators, vice presidents, or presidents.

Elected Officials at the Federal, State, and Local Levels

	Number of Elective Bodies	Number of Elected Officials
Federal Government	1	
Executive branch		2
U.S. Senate		100

U.S. House of Representatives		435
State Government	50	
State legislatures		7,382
Statewide offices		1,036
State boards		1,331
Local Government		
County governments	3,034	58,818
Municipal governments	19,429	135,531
Town governments	16,504	126,958
School districts	13,506	95,000
Special districts	35,052	84,089
Total	87,576	510,682

Table 3.1 This table lists the number of elected bodies and elected officials at the federal, state, and local levels.⁷⁵

If you are interested in serving the public as an elected official, there are more opportunities to do so at the local and state levels than at the national level. As an added incentive for setting your sights at the subnational stage, consider the following. Whereas only 35 percent of U.S. adults trusted Congress in 2018, according to Gallup, about 63 percent trusted their state governments and 72 percent had confidence in their local governments.⁷⁶, ⁷⁷

If you ran for public office, what problems would you most want to solve? What level of government would best enable you to solve them, and why?

The system of checks and balances in our political system often prevents the federal government from imposing uniform policies across the country. As a result, states and local communities have the latitude to address policy issues based on the specific needs and interests of their citizens. The diversity of public viewpoints across states is manifested by differences in the way states handle access to abortion, distribution of alcohol, gun control, and social welfare benefits, for example.

THE DRAWBACKS OF FEDERALISM

Federalism also comes with drawbacks. Chief among them are economic disparities across states, race-to-the-bottom dynamics (i.e., states compete to attract business by lowering taxes and regulations), and the difficulty of taking action on issues of national importance.

Stark economic differences across states have a profound effect on the well-being of citizens. For example, in 2017, Maryland had the highest median household income (\$80,776), while West Virginia had the lowest (\$43,469).⁷⁸ There are also huge disparities in school funding across states. In 2016, New York spent \$22,366 per student for elementary and secondary education, while Utah spent \$6,953.⁷⁹ Furthermore, health-care access, costs, and quality vary

greatly across states.⁸⁰ Proponents of social justice contend that federalism has tended to obstruct national efforts to effectively even out these disparities. When national policy-making is stymied, and policy advocates move to the state level, it takes fifty-one different advocacy efforts to bring about change, compared to one effort were the national government to take the lead.

Link to Learning

The National Education Association discusses the problem of inequality in the educational system of the United States. Visit the [Racial & Social Justice page of the NEA website](#) to see how NEA EdJustice is advocating for change in this area.

The economic strategy of using race-to-the-bottom tactics in order to compete with other states in attracting new business growth also carries a social cost. For example, workers' safety and pay can suffer as workplace regulations are lifted, and the reduction in payroll taxes for employers has led a number of states to end up with underfunded unemployment insurance programs.⁸¹ As of March 2021, twelve states have also opted not to expand Medicaid, as encouraged by the Patient Protection and Affordable Care Act in 2010, for fear it will raise state public spending and increase employers' cost of employee benefits, despite provisions that the federal government will pick up nearly all cost of the expansion.⁸² ⁸³ More than half of these states are in the South.

The federal design of our Constitution and the system of checks and balances has jeopardized or outright blocked federal responses to important national issues. President Roosevelt's efforts to combat the scourge of the Great Depression were initially struck down by the Supreme Court. More recently, President Obama's effort to make health insurance accessible to more Americans under the Affordable Care Act immediately ran into legal challenges⁸⁴ from some states, but it has been supported by the Supreme Court so far. However, the federal government's ability to defend the voting rights of citizens suffered a major setback when the Supreme Court in 2013 struck down a key provision of the Voting Rights Act of 1965.⁸⁵ No longer are the nine states with histories of racial discrimination in their voting processes required to submit plans for changes to the federal government for approval. After a tumultuous 2020 election, many states in 2021 advanced legislation to make voting rules and processes more rigorous, a move many said was an effort to limit voting access. For example, elected leaders in Georgia passed a law making voter ID requirements much stricter and also significantly limited options to vote outside of Election Day itself.⁸⁶



Figure 4.1 The COVID-19 pandemic brought individual religious liberty and community safety into sharp conflict. To prevent disease spread in Washington, DC, local officials implemented strict policies to disallow gatherings. Church leaders sued and won in *Capitol Hill Baptist Church v. Bowser et al.*, at which point congregations could hold outdoor services, such as this one held in Franconia, Virginia. (credit: “Franconia service” by Capitol Hill Baptist Church/Flickr, CC BY; used with permission)

Introduction

Recent Black Lives Matter demonstrations across the nation provide an example of the freedom of assembly protected by the Bill of Rights. This right may now be in jeopardy as bills in several state legislatures threaten peaceful gatherings and even shield citizens who attack such protesters. Fights like this—in the streets, courts, legislatures, and public opinion—are hardly unique in U.S. history. In fact, they are the main driver of political change. The COVID-19 pandemic offers new examples that involve real and perceived infringement on the rights of individuals: to mingle unmasked, to gather in close proximity, or even to assemble at all.¹

The framers of the Constitution wanted a government that would not repeat the abuses of individual liberties and rights that caused them to declare independence from Britain. However, laws and other “parchment barriers” (or written documents) alone have not protected freedoms over the years; instead, citizens have learned the truth of the old saying (often attributed to Thomas Jefferson but actually said by Irish politician John Philpot Curran), “Eternal vigilance is the price of liberty.” The actions of ordinary citizens, lawyers, and politicians have been at the core of a vigilant effort to protect constitutional liberties.

But what are those freedoms? And how should we balance them against the interests of society and other individuals? These are the key questions we will tackle in this chapter.

4.1 What Are Civil Liberties?

Learning Objectives

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

- Define civil liberties and civil rights
- Describe the origin of civil liberties in the U.S. context
- Identify the key positions on civil liberties taken at the Constitutional Convention
- Explain the Civil War origin of concern that the states should respect civil liberties

The [U.S. Constitution](#)—in particular, the first ten amendments that form the Bill of Rights—protects the freedoms and rights of individuals. It does not limit this protection just to citizens or adults; instead, in most cases, the Constitution simply refers to “persons,” which over time has grown to mean that even children, visitors from other countries, and immigrants—permanent or temporary, legal or undocumented—enjoy the same freedoms when they are in the United States or its territories as adult citizens do. So, whether you are a Japanese tourist visiting Disney World or someone who has stayed beyond the limit of days allowed on your visa, you do not sacrifice your liberties. In everyday conversation, we tend to treat freedoms, liberties, and rights as interchangeable—similar to how separation of powers and checks and balances are often used synonymously, when, in fact, these are distinct concepts.

DEFINING CIVIL LIBERTIES

To be more precise in their language, political scientists and legal experts make a distinction between civil liberties and civil rights, even though the Constitution has been interpreted to protect both. We typically envision civil liberties as limitations on government power, intended to protect freedoms upon which governments may not legally intrude. For example, the First Amendment denies the government the power to prohibit “the free exercise” of religion. This means that neither states nor the national government can forbid people to follow a religion of their choice, even if politicians and judges think the religion is misguided, blasphemous, or otherwise inappropriate. Unlike most of the rest of world at the time, U.S. citizens could even create their own faiths recruit followers to it (subject to the U.S. Supreme Court deeming it a religion), even if both society and government disapprove of its tenets. That said, the *way* you practice your religion, like any other practice, may be regulated if it impinges on the rights of others. To return to the previous example, religious communities may believe their faith will protect them and loved ones from disease, but they may not have the right to both not vaccinate their children *and* have those children publicly educated, where they would pose a risk to others. The Eighth Amendment says the government cannot impose “cruel and unusual punishments” on individuals for their criminal acts. Although the definitions of *cruel* and *unusual* have expanded over the years, the courts have generally and consistently interpreted this provision as making it unconstitutional for government officials to torture suspects. As we will see later in this chapter, courts are currently debating the degree to which extended solitary confinement and certain forms of capital punishment might count as cruel and unusual.

Civil rights, on the other hand, are guarantees that government officials will treat people equally and that decisions will be made on the basis of merit rather than race, gender, or other personal characteristics. Because of the Constitution’s civil rights guarantee, it is unlawful for any publicly-funded entity, such as a school or state university, or even a landlord or potential landlord to treat people differently based on their race, ethnicity, age, sex, or national origin. In the 1960s and 1970s, many states had separate schools where only students of a certain race or gender were able to study. However, the courts decided that these policies violated the civil rights of students who could not be admitted because of those rules.² In 2017, the Trump administration began enacting a policy at border entries in El Paso that entailed separating undocumented parents and children as they entered the United States. They expanded that policy in 2018. Today, the government continues to try to reunite families who were separated during that time.³

The idea that Americans—indeed, people in general—have fundamental rights and liberties was at the core of the arguments in favor of their independence. In writing the [Declaration of Independence](#) in 1776, Thomas Jefferson drew on the ideas of English philosopher John Locke to express the colonists’ belief that they had certain inalienable or natural rights that no ruler had the power or authority to deny to their subjects. It was a scathing legal indictment of King George III for violating the colonists’ liberties. Although the Declaration of Independence does not guarantee specific freedoms, its language was instrumental in inspiring many of the states to adopt protections for civil liberties and rights in their own constitutions, and in expressing principles of the founding era that have resonated in the United States since its independence. In particular, Jefferson’s words “all men are created equal” became the centerpiece of struggles for the rights of women and minorities ([Figure 4.2](#)).



Figure 4.2 Actors and civil rights activists Sidney Poitier (left), Harry Belafonte (center), and Charlton Heston (right) on the steps of the Lincoln Memorial on August 28, 1963, during the March on Washington.

Link to Learning

Founded in 1920, the [American Civil Liberties Union \(ACLU\)](#) is one of the oldest interest groups in the United States. The mission of this non-partisan, not-for-profit organization is “to defend and preserve the individual rights and liberties guaranteed to every person in this country by the Constitution and laws of the United States.” Many of the Supreme Court cases in this chapter were litigated by, or with the support of, the ACLU. The ACLU offers a [listing of state and local chapters](#) on their website.

CIVIL LIBERTIES AND THE CONSTITUTION

The Constitution as drafted in 1787 did not include a Bill of Rights, although the idea of including one was proposed and, after brief discussion, dismissed in the final week of the Constitutional Convention. The framers of the Constitution believed they faced much more pressing concerns than the protection of civil rights and liberties—most notably keeping the fragile union together in the light of internal unrest and external threats.

Moreover, the framers thought that they had adequately covered rights issues in the main body of the document. Indeed, the Federalists did include in the Constitution some protections against legislative acts that might restrict the liberties of citizens, based on the history of real and perceived abuses by both British kings and parliaments as well as royal governors. In Article I, Section 9, the Constitution limits the power of Congress in three ways: prohibiting the passage of bills of attainder, prohibiting ex post facto laws, and limiting the ability of Congress to suspend the writ of habeas corpus.

A bill of attainder is a law that convicts or punishes someone for a crime without a trial, a tactic used fairly frequently in England against the king’s enemies. Prohibition of such laws means that the U.S. Congress cannot simply punish people who are unpopular or who *seem* to be guilty of crimes. An ex post facto law has a retroactive effect: it can be used to punish crimes that were not crimes at the time they were committed, or it can be used to increase the severity of punishment after the fact.

Finally, the writ of habeas corpus is used in our common-law legal system to demand that a neutral judge decide whether someone has been lawfully detained. Particularly in times of war, or even in response to threats against national security, the government has held suspected enemy agents without access to civilian courts, often without access to lawyers or a defense, seeking instead to try them before military tribunals or detain them indefinitely without trial. For example, during the Civil War, President Abraham Lincoln detained suspected Confederate saboteurs and sympathizers in Union-controlled states and attempted to have them tried in military courts, leading the Supreme Court to rule in *Ex parte Milligan* that the government could not bypass the civilian court system in states where it was operating.⁴ In 1919, Justice Oliver Wendell Holmes was the lone dissenter in the *Abrams v. United States* decision that

convicted four, young, antiwar activists for pamphleteering against U.S. involvement in the Russian Civil War, which now would be exercised as a clear case of freedom of speech.

During World War II, the Roosevelt administration interned Japanese Americans and had other suspected enemy agents—including U.S. citizens—tried by military courts rather than by the civilian justice system, a choice the Supreme Court upheld in *Ex parte Quirin* (Figure 4.3).⁵ More recently, in the wake of the 9/11 attacks on the World Trade Center and the Pentagon, the Bush and Obama administrations detained suspected terrorists captured both within and outside the United States and sought to avoid trials in civilian courts, and surveilled U.S. citizens to detect threats. Hence, there have been times in our history when national security issues trumped individual liberties.



Figure 4.3 Richard Quirin and seven other trained German saboteurs had once lived in the United States and had secretly returned in June 1942. Upon their capture, a military commission (shown here) convicted the men—six of them received death sentences. *Ex parte Quirin* set a precedent for the trial by military commission of any unlawful combatant against the United States. (credit: Library of Congress)

Debate has always swirled over these issues. The Federalists reasoned that the limited set of named or enumerated powers of Congress, along with the limitations on those powers in Article I, Section 9 of the Constitution, would suffice, and that no separate bill of rights was needed. Writing as Publius in *Federalist* No. 84, Alexander Hamilton argued that the Constitution was “merely intended to regulate the general political interests of the nation” rather than contend with “the regulation of every species of personal and private concerns.” Hamilton went on to argue that listing some rights might actually be dangerous, because it would provide a pretext for people to claim that rights *not* included in such a list were not protected. Later, James Madison, in his speech introducing the proposed amendments that would become the Bill of Rights, acknowledged another Federalist argument: “It has been said, that a bill of rights is not necessary, because the establishment of this government has not repealed those declarations of rights which are added to the several state constitutions.”⁶ Neither had the Articles of Confederation included a specific listing of rights, even if it was

predictable that state governments would differ in what they would tolerate, grant, and prohibit among their citizens.

Anti-Federalists argued that the Federalists' position was incorrect and perhaps even insincere. The Anti-Federalists believed provisions such as the so-called elastic clause in Article I, Section 8 of the Constitution would allow Congress to legislate on matters well beyond those foreseen by the Constitution's authors. Thus, they held that a bill of rights was necessary. One of the Anti-Federalists, Brutus, whom most scholars believe to be Robert Yates, wrote: "The powers, rights, and authority, granted to the general government by this Constitution, are as complete, with respect to every object to which they extend, as that of any state government—It reaches to every thing which concerns human happiness—Life, liberty, and property, are under its controul [sic]. There is the same reason, therefore, that the exercise of power, in this case, should be restrained within proper limits, as in that of the state governments."² The experience of the past two centuries has suggested that the Anti-Federalists may have been correct in this regard. While the states retain a great deal of importance, the scope and powers of the national government are much broader today than in 1787—likely beyond even the imaginings of the Federalists themselves.

The struggle to have rights clearly delineated and the decision of the framers to omit a bill of rights from the Constitution nearly derailed the ratification process. While some of the states were willing to ratify without any further guarantees, in some of the larger states—New York and Virginia in particular—the Constitution's lack of specified rights became a serious point of contention. The Constitution could go into effect with the support of only nine states, but the Federalists knew it could not be effective without the participation of the largest states. To secure majorities in favor of ratification in New York and Virginia, as well as Massachusetts, they agreed to consider incorporating provisions suggested by the ratifying states as amendments to the Constitution.

Ultimately, James Madison delivered on this promise by proposing a package of amendments in the First Congress, drawing from the Declaration of Rights in the Virginia state constitution, suggestions from the ratification conventions, and other sources. Each of these were extensively debated in both houses of Congress and, ultimately, proposed as twelve separate amendments for ratification by the states. Ten of the amendments were successfully ratified by the requisite 75 percent of the states and became known as the Bill of Rights ([Table 4.1](#)).

Rights and Liberties Protected by the First Ten Amendments

First Amendment	Right to freedoms of religion and speech; right to assemble and to petition the government for redress of grievances; right to a free press
Second Amendment	Right to keep and bear arms to maintain a well-regulated militia
Third Amendment	Right to not house soldiers during time of war
Fourth Amendment	Right to be secure from unreasonable search and seizure

Fifth Amendment	Rights in criminal cases, including due process and indictment by grand jury for capital crimes, as well as the right not to testify against oneself
Sixth Amendment	Right to a speedy trial by an impartial jury
Seventh Amendment	Right to a jury trial in civil cases
Eighth Amendment	Right to not face excessive bail, excessive fines, or cruel and unusual punishment
Ninth Amendment	Rights retained by the people, even if they are not specifically enumerated by the Constitution
Tenth Amendment	States' rights to powers not specifically delegated to the federal government

Table 4.1

Finding a Middle Ground

Debating the Need for a Bill of Rights

One of the most serious debates between the Federalists and the Anti-Federalists was over the necessity of limiting the power of the new federal government with a Bill of Rights. As we saw in this section, the Federalists believed a Bill of Rights was unnecessary—and perhaps even dangerous to liberty, because it might invite violations of rights that weren't included in it—while the Anti-Federalists thought the national government would prove adept at expanding its powers and influence and that citizens couldn't depend on the good judgment of Congress alone to protect their rights.

As George Washington's call for a bill of rights in his first inaugural address suggested, while the Federalists ultimately had to add the Bill of Rights to the Constitution in order to win ratification, the Anti-Federalists' fear that the national government might intrude on civil liberties proved to be prescient. In 1798, at the behest of President John Adams during the Quasi-War with France, Congress passed a series of four laws collectively known as the Alien and Sedition Acts. These laws were drafted to allow the president to imprison or deport foreign citizens that he believed were "dangerous to the peace and safety of the United States" and to restrict speech and newspaper articles critical of the federal government or its officials. The laws were primarily used against members and supporters of the opposition, the Democratic-Republican Party.

State laws and constitutions protecting free speech and freedom of the press proved ineffective in limiting this new federal power. Although the courts did not decide on the constitutionality of these laws at the time, most scholars believe the Sedition Act, in particular, would be ruled unconstitutional if it had remained in effect. Three of the four laws were repealed in the Jefferson administration, but one—the Alien Enemies Act—remains on the books today. Two centuries later, the issue of free speech and freedom of the press during times of international conflict remains a subject of intense public debate.

Should the government be able to restrict or censor unpatriotic, disloyal, or critical speech in times of international conflict? What about from government whistle-blowers or employees who leak sensitive information? How much freedom should journalists have to report on stories from the perspective of enemies or to repeat propaganda from opposing forces?

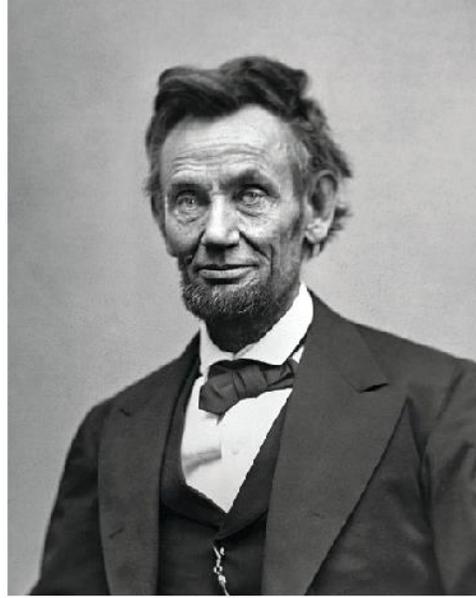
EXTENDING THE BILL OF RIGHTS TO THE STATES

In the decades following the Constitution's ratification, the Supreme Court declined to expand the Bill of Rights to curb the power of the states, most notably in the 1833 case of *Barron v. Baltimore*.⁸ In this case, which dealt with property rights under the Fifth Amendment, the Supreme Court unanimously decided that the Bill of Rights applied only to actions by the federal government, not state or local governments. Explaining the court's ruling, Chief Justice John Marshall wrote that it was incorrect to argue that "the Constitution was intended to secure the people of the several states against the undue exercise of power by their respective state governments; as well as against that which might be attempted by their [Federal] government."

The festering issue of the rights of enslaved persons and the convulsions of the Civil War and its aftermath forced a reexamination of the prevailing thinking about the application of the Bill of Rights to the states. Soon after slavery was abolished by the Thirteenth Amendment, state governments—particularly those in the former Confederacy—began to pass "Black codes" that restricted the rights of formerly enslaved people, including the right to hold office, own land, or vote, relegating them to second-class citizenship. Angered by these actions, members of the Radical Republican faction in Congress demanded that the Black codes be overturned. In the short term, they advocated suspending civilian government in most of the southern states and replacing politicians who had enacted these discriminatory laws. Their long-term solution was to propose and enforce two amendments to the Constitution to guarantee the rights of freed men and women. These became the Fourteenth Amendment, which dealt with civil liberties and rights in general, and the Fifteenth Amendment, which protected the right to vote in particular ([Figure 4.4](#)), though still not for women or Native Americans.



(a)



(b)

Figure 4.4 Representative John Bingham (R-OH) (a) is considered the author of the Fourteenth Amendment, adopted on July 9, 1868. Influenced by his mentor, Salmon P. Chase, Bingham was a strong supporter of the antislavery cause. After Chase lost the Republican presidential nomination to Abraham Lincoln (b), Bingham became one of the president’s most ardent supporters.

With the ratification of the Fourteenth Amendment in 1868, the scope and limits of civil liberties became clearer. First, the amendment says, “no State shall make or enforce any law which shall abridge the privileges or immunities of citizens of the United States,” which is a provision that echoes the privileges and immunities clause in Article IV, Section 2 of the original Constitution ensuring that states treat citizens of other states the same as their own citizens. (To use an example from today, the punishment for speeding by an out-of-state driver cannot be more severe than the punishment for an in-state driver). Legal scholars and the courts have extensively debated the meaning of this privileges or immunities clause over the years, with some arguing that it was supposed to extend the entire Bill of Rights (or at least the first eight amendments) to the states, and others arguing that only some rights are extended. In 1999, Justice John Paul Stevens, writing for a majority of the Supreme Court, argued in *Saenz v. Roe* that the clause protects the right to travel from one state to another.⁹ More recently, Justice Clarence Thomas argued in the 2010 *McDonald v. Chicago* ruling that the individual right to bear arms applied to the states because of this clause.¹⁰

The second provision of the Fourteenth Amendment pertaining to the application of the Bill of Rights to the states is the due process clause, which famously reads, “nor shall any State deprive any person of life, liberty, or property, without due process of law.” Like the Fifth Amendment, this clause refers to “due process,” a term that is interpreted to require both access to procedural justice (such as the right to a trial) as well as the more substantive implication that people be treated fairly and impartially by government officials. Although the

text of the provision does not mention rights specifically, the courts have held in a series of cases that due process also implies that there are certain fundamental liberties that cannot be denied by the states. For example, in *Sherbert v. Verner* (1963), the Supreme Court ruled that states could not deny unemployment benefits to an individual who turned down a job because it required working on the Sabbath.¹¹

Beginning in 1897, the Supreme Court has found that various provisions of the Bill of Rights protecting these fundamental liberties must be upheld by the states, even if their state constitutions and laws (and the Tenth Amendment itself) do not protect them as fully as the Bill of Rights does—or at all. This means there has been a process of selective incorporation of the Bill of Rights into the practices of the states: the Constitution effectively inserts parts of the Bill of Rights into state laws and constitutions, even though it doesn't do so explicitly. When cases arise to clarify particular issues and procedures, the Supreme Court decides whether state laws violate the Bill of Rights and are therefore unconstitutional.

For example, under the Fifth Amendment, a person can be tried in federal court for a felony—a serious crime—only after a grand jury issues an indictment indicating that it is reasonable to try them. (A grand jury is a group of citizens charged with deciding whether there is enough evidence of a crime to prosecute someone.) The Supreme Court has ruled that states don't have to use grand juries as long as they ensure people accused of crimes are indicted using an equally fair process.

Selective incorporation is an ongoing process. When the Supreme Court initially decided in 2008 that the Second Amendment protects an individual's right to keep and bear arms, it did not decide then that it was a fundamental liberty the states must uphold as well. It was only in the *McDonald v. Chicago* case two years later that the Supreme Court incorporated the Second Amendment into state law. Another area in which the Supreme Court gradually moved to incorporate the Bill of Rights regards censorship and the Fourteenth Amendment. In *Near v. Minnesota* (1931), the Court disagreed with state courts regarding censorship and ruled it unconstitutional except in rare cases.¹²

4.2 Securing Basic Freedoms

Learning Objectives

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

- Identify the liberties and rights guaranteed by the first four amendments to the Constitution
- Explain why in practice these rights and liberties are limited
- Explain why interpreting some amendments has been controversial

We can broadly divide the provisions of the Bill of Rights into three categories. The First, Second, Third, and Fourth Amendments protect basic individual freedoms; the Fourth (partly), Fifth, Sixth, Seventh, and Eighth protect people suspected or accused of criminal activity or facing civil litigation; and the Ninth and Tenth, are consistent with the framers' view that the

Bill of Rights is not necessarily an exhaustive list of all the rights people have and guarantees a role for state as well as federal government ([Figure 4.5](#)).

Categories of Rights and Protections

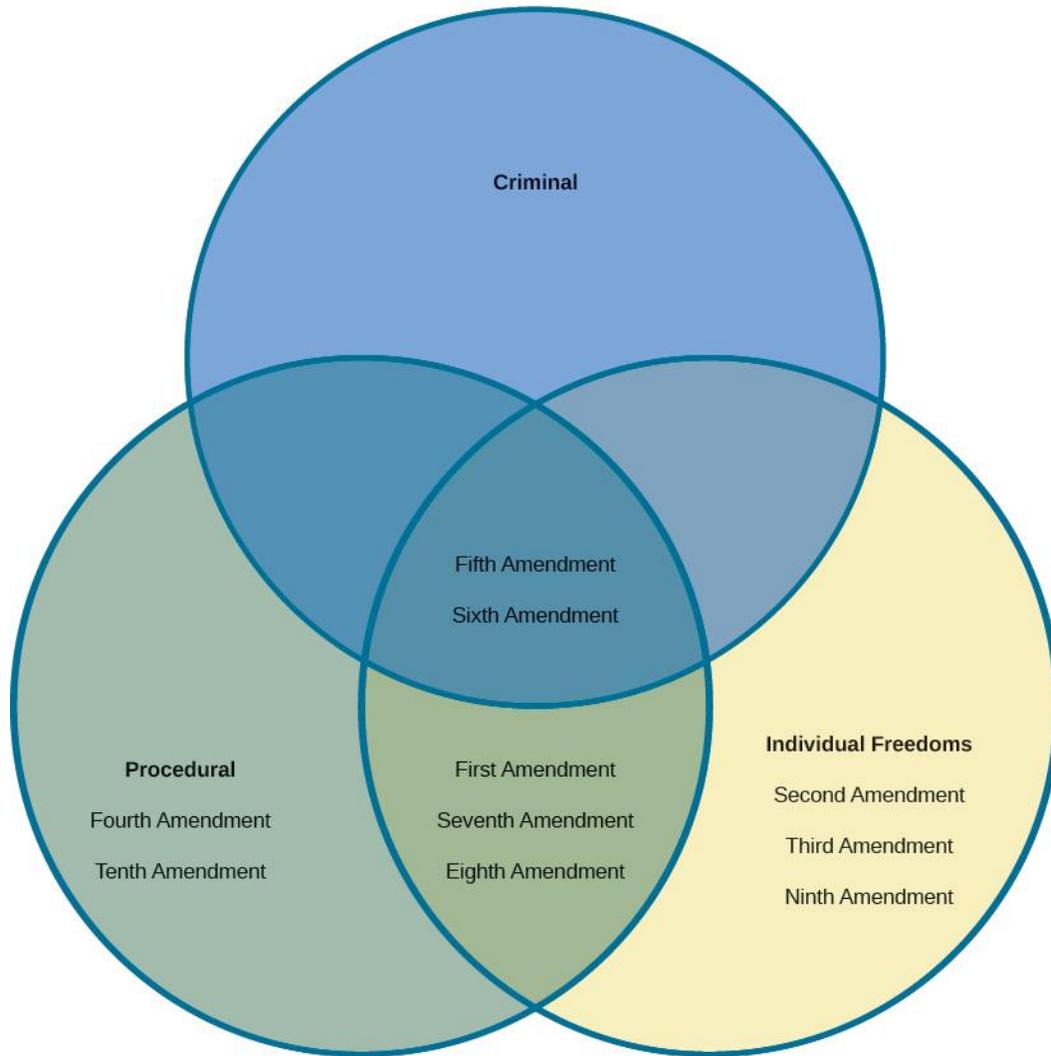


Figure 4.5

The First Amendment protects the right to freedom of religious conscience and practice and the right to free expression, particularly of political and social beliefs. The Second Amendment—perhaps the most controversial today—protects the right to defend yourself in your home or other property, and, until the establishment of the National Guard, the collective right to self-defense as part of a militia. The Third Amendment prohibits the government from commandeering people’s homes to house soldiers, particularly in peacetime. Finally, the Fourth Amendment prevents the government from searching one’s person or property or taking evidence without a warrant issued by a judge, with certain exceptions.

THE FIRST AMENDMENT

The First Amendment is perhaps the most famous provision of the Bill of Rights. It is arguably also the most extensive, because it guarantees both religious freedoms and the right to express your views in public. Specifically, the First Amendment says:

“Congress shall make no law respecting an establishment of religion, or prohibiting the free exercise thereof; or abridging the freedom of speech, or of the press; or the right of the people peaceably to assemble, and to petition the Government for a redress of grievances.”

Given the broad scope of this amendment, it is helpful to break it into its two major parts.

The first portion deals with religious freedom. However, it actually protects two related sorts of freedom: first, it protects people from having a set of religious beliefs imposed on them by the government, and second, it protects people from having their own religious beliefs restricted by government authorities.

The Establishment Clause

The first of these two freedoms is known as the establishment clause. Congress is prohibited from creating or promoting a state-sponsored religion (this now includes the states). When the United States was founded, most countries around the world had an established church or religion—an officially sponsored set of religious beliefs and values. In Europe, bitter wars were fought between and within states, often because the established church of one territory was in conflict with that of another. Wars and civil strife were common, particularly between states with Protestant and Catholic churches that had differing interpretations of Christianity. Even today, the legacy of these wars remains, most notably in Ireland, where complications from Brexit have rekindled tensions between a mostly Catholic south and a largely Protestant north that have been simmering for nearly a century.

Many settlers in the United States came to this continent as refugees from such wars; others came to find a place where they could follow their own religion with like-minded people in relative peace. Even if the early United States had wanted to establish a single national religion, the diversity of religious beliefs within and between the colonies would have made this quite impossible. Nonetheless the differences were small; most people were of European origin and professed some form of Christianity (although in private some of the founders, most notably Thomas Jefferson, Thomas Paine, and Benjamin Franklin, held what today would be seen as more pluralistic Unitarian or deistic views). So for much of U.S. history, the establishment clause was not particularly important—the vast majority of citizens were Protestant Christians of some form, and since the federal government was relatively uninvolved in the day-to-day lives of the people, there was little opportunity for conflict. That said, there were some citizenship and office-holding restrictions on Jews within some of the states.

Worry about state sponsorship of religion in the United States began to reemerge in the latter part of the nineteenth century. An influx of immigrants from Ireland and eastern and southern Europe brought large numbers of Catholics. Fearing the new immigrants and their children

would not assimilate, states passed laws forbidding government aid to religious schools. New religious organizations, such as The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints, Seventh-day Adventists, Jehovah's Witnesses, and many others, also emerged, blending aspects of Protestant beliefs with other ideas and teachings at odds with the more traditional Protestant churches of the era. At the same time, public schooling was beginning to take root on a wide scale. Since most states had traditional Protestant majorities and most state officials were Protestants themselves, the public school curriculum incorporated many Protestant features; at times, these features would come into conflict with the beliefs of children from other Christian sects or from other religious traditions.

The establishment clause today tends to be interpreted a bit more broadly than in the past; it not only forbids the creation of a "Church of the United States" or "Church of Ohio" it also forbids the government from favoring one set of religious beliefs over others or favoring religion (of any variety) over non-religion. Thus, the government cannot promote, say, Islamic beliefs over Sikh beliefs or belief in God over atheism or agnosticism ([Figure 4.6](#)).



Figure 4.6 In this illustration from a contemporary manuscript, Henry Bolingbroke (i.e., Henry IV) claims the throne in 1399 surrounded by the Lords Spiritual and Temporal (secular). While the Lords Spiritual have been a minority in the House of Lords since the time of Henry VIII, and religion does not generally play a large role in British politics today, the Church of England nevertheless remains represented in Parliament by twenty-six bishops.

The key question that faces the courts is whether the establishment clause should be understood as imposing, in Thomas Jefferson's words, "a wall of separation between church and state." In a 1971 case known as *Lemon v. Kurtzman*, the Supreme Court established the Lemon test for deciding whether a law or other government action that might promote a particular religious practice should be allowed to stand.¹³ The Lemon test has three criteria that must be satisfied for such a law or action to be found constitutional and remain in effect:

1. The action or law must not lead to *excessive government entanglement* with religion; in other words, policing the boundary between government and religion

should be relatively straightforward and not require extensive effort by the government.

2. The action or law cannot either *inhibit* or *advance* religious practice; it should be neutral in its effects on religion.

3. The action or law must have some *secular purpose*; there must be some non-religious justification for the law.

For example, imagine your state decides to fund a school voucher program that allows children to attend private and parochial schools at public expense; the vouchers can be used to pay for school books and transportation to and from school. Would this voucher program be constitutional?

Let's start with the secular-purpose prong of the test. Educating children is a clear, non-religious purpose, so the law has a secular purpose. The law would neither inhibit nor advance religious practice, so that prong would be satisfied. The remaining question—and usually the one on which court decisions turn—is whether the law leads to excessive government entanglement with religious practice. Given that transportation and school books generally have no religious purpose, there is little risk that paying for them would lead the state to much entanglement with religion. The decision would become more difficult if the funding were unrestricted in use or helped to pay for facilities or teacher salaries; if that were the case, it might indeed be used for a religious purpose, and it would be harder for the government to ensure that it wasn't without audits or other investigations that could lead to too much government entanglement with religion.

The use of education as an example is not an accident; in fact, many of the court's cases dealing with the establishment clause have involved education, particularly public education, because school-age children are considered a special and vulnerable population. Perhaps no subject affected by the First Amendment has been more controversial than the issue of prayer in public schools. Discussion about school prayer has been particularly fraught because in many ways it appears to bring the two religious liberty clauses into conflict with each other. The free exercise clause, discussed below, guarantees the right of individuals to practice their religion without government interference—and while the rights of children are not as extensive in all areas as those of adults, the courts have consistently ruled that the free exercise clause's guarantee of religious freedom applies to children as well.

At the same time, however, government actions that require or encourage particular religious practices might infringe upon children's rights to follow their own religious beliefs and thus, in effect, be unconstitutional establishments of religion. For example, a teacher, an athletic coach, or even a student reciting a prayer in front of a class or leading students in prayer as part of the organized school activities constitutes an illegal establishment of religion.¹⁴ Yet a school cannot prohibit voluntary, non-disruptive prayer by its students, because that would impair the free exercise of religion. So although the blanket statement that “prayer in schools is illegal” or unconstitutional is incorrect, the establishment clause does limit official endorsement of religion, including prayers organized or otherwise facilitated by school authorities, even as part of off-campus or extracurricular activities.¹⁵

But some laws that may appear to establish certain religious practices are allowed. For example, the courts have permitted religiously inspired blue laws that limit working hours or even shutter businesses on Sunday, the Christian day of rest, because by allowing people to practice their (Christian) faith, such rules may help ensure the “health, safety, recreation, and general well-being” of citizens. They have allowed restrictions on the sale of alcohol and sometimes other goods on Sunday for similar reasons. Such laws in Bergen County, New Jersey, and especially its borough of Paramus, shutter many retail stores every Sunday, despite Bergen having one of the largest concentrations of retail space in the nation and five large enclosed shopping malls. While various political figures, including Chris Christie, have proposed repealing the laws, town and county officials have vowed to keep them in place as a “quality of life” element. Many citizens support them, while others cite the difficulty in doing their own shopping and the impact on smaller retailers in their rationale for eliminating the restrictions.

The meaning of the establishment clause has been controversial at times because, as a matter of course, government officials acknowledge that we live in a society with vigorous religious practice where most people believe in God—even if we disagree on what God is. Disputes often arise over how much the government can acknowledge this widespread religious belief. The courts have generally allowed for a certain tolerance of what is described as ceremonial deism, an acknowledgement of God or a creator that generally lacks any substantive religious content. For example, the national motto “In God We Trust,” which appears on our coins and paper money (Figure 4.7), is seen as more an acknowledgment that most citizens believe in God than any serious effort by government officials to promote religious belief and practice. This reasoning has also been used to permit the inclusion of the phrase “under God” in the Pledge of Allegiance—a change that came about during the early years of the Cold War as a means of contrasting the United States with the “godless” Soviet Union.

In addition, the courts have allowed some religiously motivated actions by government agencies, such as clergy delivering prayers to open city council meetings and legislative sessions, on the presumption that—unlike school children—adult participants can distinguish between the government’s allowing someone to speak and endorsing that person’s speech. Yet, while some displays of religious codes (e.g., Ten Commandments) are permitted in the context of showing the evolution of law over the centuries (Figure 4.7), in other cases, these displays have been removed after state supreme court rulings. In Oklahoma, the courts ordered the removal of a Ten Commandments sculpture at the state capitol when other groups, including Satanists and the Church of the Flying Spaghetti Monster, attempted to get their own sculptures allowed there.



(a)



(b)

Figure 4.7 The motto “In God We Trust” has appeared intermittently on U.S. coins since the 1860s (a), yet it was not mandated on paper currency until 1957. The Ten Commandments are prominently displayed on the grounds of the Texas State Capitol in Austin (b), though a similar sculpture was ordered to be removed in Oklahoma. (credit a: modification of work by Kevin Dooley)

The Free Exercise Clause

The free exercise clause, on the other hand, limits the ability of the government to control or restrict religious practices. This portion of the First Amendment regulates not the government’s promotion of religion, but rather government *suppression* of religious beliefs and practices. Much of the controversy surrounding the free exercise clause reflects the way laws or rules that apply to everyone might apply to people with particular religious beliefs. For example, can a Jewish police officer whose religious belief, if followed strictly, requires them to observe Shabbat be compelled to work on a Friday night or during the day on Saturday? Or must the government accommodate this religious practice, even if it means the general law or rule in question is not applied equally to everyone?

In the 1930s and 1940s, cases involving Jehovah’s Witnesses demonstrated the difficulty of striking the right balance. In addition to following their church’s teaching that they should not participate in military combat, members refuse to participate in displays of patriotism, including saluting the flag and reciting the Pledge of Allegiance, and they regularly engage in door-to-door evangelism to recruit converts. These activities have led to frequent conflict with local authorities. Jehovah’s Witness children were punished in public schools for failing to salute the flag or recite the Pledge of Allegiance, and members attempting to evangelize were arrested for violating laws against door-to-door solicitation of customers. In early legal challenges brought by Jehovah’s Witnesses, the Supreme Court was reluctant to overturn state and local laws that burdened their religious beliefs.¹⁶ However, in later cases, the court was willing to uphold the rights of Jehovah’s Witnesses to proselytize and refuse to salute the flag or recite the Pledge.¹⁷

The rights of conscientious objectors—individuals who claim the right to refuse to perform military service on the grounds of freedom of thought, conscience, or religion—have also been controversial, although many conscientious objectors have contributed service as non-combatant medics during wartime. To avoid serving in the Vietnam War, many people claimed

to have a conscientious objection to military service on the basis that they believed this particular war was unwise or unjust. However, the Supreme Court ruled in *Gillette v. United States* that to claim to be a conscientious objector, a person must be opposed to serving in *any* war, not just some wars.¹⁸

Establishing a general framework for deciding whether a religious belief can trump general laws and policies has been a challenge for the Supreme Court. In the 1960s and 1970s, the court decided two cases in which it laid out a general test for deciding similar cases in the future. In both *Sherbert v. Verner*, a case dealing with unemployment compensation, and *Wisconsin v. Yoder*, which dealt with the right of Amish parents to homeschool their children, the court said that for a law to be allowed to limit or burden a religious practice, the government must meet two criteria.¹⁹ It must demonstrate both that it had a “compelling governmental interest” in limiting that practice and that the restriction was “narrowly tailored.” In other words, it must show there was a very good reason for the law in question and that the law was the only feasible way of achieving that goal. This standard became known as the Sherbert test. Since the burden of proof in these cases was on the government, the Supreme Court made it very difficult for the federal and state governments to enforce laws against individuals that would infringe upon their religious beliefs.

In 1990, the Supreme Court made a controversial decision substantially narrowing the Sherbert test in *Employment Division v. Smith*, more popularly known as “the peyote case.”²⁰ This case involved two men who were members of the Native American Church, a religious organization that uses the hallucinogenic peyote plant as part of its sacraments. After being arrested for possession of peyote, the two men were fired from their jobs as counselors at a private drug rehabilitation clinic. When they applied for unemployment benefits, the state refused to pay on the basis that they had been dismissed for work-related reasons. The men appealed the denial of benefits and were initially successful, since the state courts applied the Sherbert test and found that the denial of unemployment benefits burdened their religious beliefs. However, the Supreme Court ruled in a 6–3 decision that the “compelling governmental interest” standard should not apply; instead, so long as the law was not designed to target a person’s religious beliefs in particular, it was not up to the courts to decide that those beliefs were more important than the law in question.

On the surface, a case involving the Native American Church seems unlikely to arouse much controversy. But because it replaced the Sherbert test with one that allowed more government regulation of religious practices, followers of other religious traditions grew concerned that state and local laws, even ones neutral on their face, might be used to curtail their religious practices. In 1993, in response to this decision, Congress passed a law known as the Religious Freedom Restoration Act (RFRA), which was followed in 2000 by the Religious Land Use and Institutionalized Persons Act after part of the RFRA was struck down by the Supreme Court. In addition, since 1990, twenty-one states have passed state RFRA that include the Sherbert test in state law, and state court decisions in eleven states have enshrined the Sherbert test’s compelling governmental interest interpretation of the free exercise clause into state law.²¹

However, the RFRA itself has not been without its critics. While it has been relatively uncontroversial as applied to the rights of individuals, debate has emerged about whether businesses and other groups can be said to have religious liberty. In explicitly religious organizations, such as an Orthodox Union congregation or the Roman Catholic Church, it is fairly obvious members have a meaningful, shared religious belief. But the application of the RFRA has become more problematic in businesses and non-profit organizations whose owners or organizers may share a religious belief while the organization has some secular, non-religious purpose.

Such a conflict emerged in the 2014 Supreme Court case known as *Burwell v. Hobby Lobby*.²² The Hobby Lobby chain of stores sells arts and crafts merchandise at hundreds of stores and its founder, David Green, is a fundamentalist Christian whose beliefs include opposition to abortion and contraception. Consistent with these beliefs, he used his business to object to a provision of the Patient Protection and Affordable Care Act (ACA or Obamacare) requiring employer-backed insurance plans to include no-charge access to the morning-after pill, a form of emergency contraception, arguing that this requirement infringed on his conscience. Based in part on the federal RFRA, the Supreme Court agreed 5–4 with Green and Hobby Lobby’s position and said that Hobby Lobby and other closely held businesses did not have to provide employees free access to emergency contraception or other birth control if doing so would violate the religious beliefs of the business’ owners, because there were other less restrictive ways the government could ensure access to these services for Hobby Lobby’s employees (e.g., paying for them directly).

In 2015, state RFRA laws became controversial when individuals and businesses that provided wedding services (e.g., catering and photography) were compelled to provide these for same-sex weddings in states where the practice had been newly legalized ([Figure 4.8](#)). Proponents of state RFRA laws argued that people and businesses ought not be compelled to endorse practices that their religious beliefs hold to be immoral or indecent. They also indicated concerns that clergy might be compelled to officiate same-sex marriages against their religion’s teachings. Opponents of RFRA laws argued that individuals and businesses should be required, per *Obergefell v. Hodges*, to serve same-sex marriages on an equal basis as a matter of ensuring the civil rights of gays and lesbian people, just as they would be obliged to cater or photograph an interracial marriage.²³ It should be noted that religious organizations and clergy are not homogeneous in their view of marriage. For example, same-sex marriage is supported by Episcopalians, a sizable number of Methodists, and many leaders in the Jewish and Hindu faiths.²⁴



Figure 4.8 One of the most recent notorious cases related to the free exercise clause involved an Oregon bakery whose owners refused to bake a wedding cake for a lesbian couple in January 2013, citing the owners' religious beliefs. The couple was eventually awarded \$135,000 in damages as a result of the ongoing dispute. However, in a similar case, *Masterpiece Cakeshop v. Colorado Civil Rights Commission*, the U.S. Supreme Court ruled in favor of the baker's rights.(credit: modification of work by Bev Sykes)

Despite ongoing controversy, however, the courts have consistently found some public interests sufficiently compelling to override the free exercise clause. For example, since the late nineteenth century, the courts have consistently held that people's religious beliefs do not exempt them from the general laws against polygamy, drug use, or human sacrifice. Yet, the public interest did not trump individual rights during the COVID-19 pandemic, when the Supreme Court overturned California's ban on indoor gatherings.²⁵ Other potential acts in the name of religion that are also out of the question are drug use and human sacrifice.

Freedom of Expression

Although the remainder of the First Amendment protects four distinct rights—free speech, press, assembly, and petition—we generally think of these rights today as encompassing a right to freedom of expression, particularly since the world's technological evolution has blurred the lines between oral and written communication (i.e., speech and press) in the centuries since the First Amendment was written and adopted.

Controversies over freedom of expression were rare until the 1900s, even though government censorship was quite common. For example, during the Civil War, the Union post office refused to deliver newspapers that opposed the war or sympathized with the Confederacy, while allowing pro-war newspapers to be mailed. The emergence of photography and movies, in particular, led to new public concerns about morality, causing both state and federal politicians to censor lewd and otherwise improper content. At the same time, writers became more ambitious in their subject matter by including explicit references to sex and using obscene language, leading to government censorship of books and magazines.

Censorship reached its height during World War I. The United States was swept up in two waves of hysteria. Anti-German feeling was provoked by the actions of Germany and its allies leading up to the war, including the sinking of the RMS *Lusitania* and the Zimmerman Telegram, an effort by the Germans to conclude an alliance with Mexico against the United States. This concern was compounded in 1917 by the Bolshevik revolution against the more moderate interim government of Russia; the leaders of the Bolsheviks, most notably Vladimir Lenin, Leon Trotsky, and Joseph Stalin, withdrew from the war against Germany and called for communist revolutionaries to overthrow the capitalist, democratic governments in western Europe and North America.

Americans who vocally supported the communist cause or opposed the war often found themselves in jail. In *Schenck v. United States*, the Supreme Court ruled that people encouraging young men to dodge the draft could be imprisoned for doing so, arguing that recommending that people disobey the law was tantamount to “falsely shouting fire in a theatre and causing a panic” and thus presented a “clear and present danger” to public order.²⁶ Similarly, communists and other revolutionary anarchists and socialists during the Red Scare after the war were prosecuted under various state and federal laws for supporting the forceful or violent overthrow of government. This general approach to political speech remained in place for the next fifty years.

In the 1960s, however, the Supreme Court’s rulings on free expression became more liberal, in response to the Vietnam War and the growing antiwar movement. In a 1969 case involving the Ku Klux Klan, *Brandenburg v. Ohio*, the Supreme Court found that only speech or writing that constituted a direct call or plan to imminent lawless action, an illegal act in the immediate future, could be suppressed; the mere advocacy of a hypothetical revolution was not enough.²⁷ The Supreme Court also found that various forms of symbolic speech—wearing clothing like an armband that carried a political symbol or raising a fist in the air, for example—were subject to the same protections as written and spoken communication. More recently, symbolic speech related to the U.S. flag has engendered intense debate. Whether one should kneel during the national anthem, or ought to be able to burn the U.S. flag, are key questions.

Milestone

Burning the U.S. Flag

Perhaps no act of symbolic speech has been as controversial in U.S. history as the burning of the flag ([Figure 4.9](#)). Citizens tend to revere the flag as a unifying symbol of the country in much the same way most people in Britain would treat the reigning queen (or king). States and the federal government have long had laws protecting the flag from being desecrated—defaced, damaged, or otherwise treated with disrespect. Perhaps in part because of these laws, people who have wanted to drive home a point in opposition to U.S. government policies have found desecrating the flag a useful way to gain public and press attention to their cause.



Figure 4.9 On the eve of the 2008 election, a U.S. flag was burned in protest in New Hampshire. (credit: modification of work by Jennifer Parr)

One such person was Gregory Lee Johnson, a member of various pro-communist and antiwar groups. In 1984, as part of a protest near the Republican National Convention in Dallas, Texas, Johnson set fire to a U.S. flag that another protestor had torn from a flagpole. He was arrested, charged with “desecration of a venerated object” (among other offenses), and eventually convicted of that offense. However, in 1989, the Supreme Court decided in *Texas v. Johnson* that burning the flag was a form of symbolic speech protected by the First Amendment and found the law, as applied to flag desecration, to be unconstitutional.²⁸

This court decision was strongly criticized, and Congress responded by passing a federal law, the Flag Protection Act, intended to overrule it; the act, too, was struck down as unconstitutional in 1990.²⁹ Since then, Congress has tried and failed on several occasions to propose constitutional amendments allowing the states and federal government to re-criminalize flag desecration.

Should we amend the Constitution to allow Congress or the states to pass laws protecting the U.S. flag from desecration? Should we protect other national symbols as well, such as standing for the national anthem? Why or why not?

Freedom of the press is an important component of the right to free expression as well. In *Near v. Minnesota*, an early case regarding press freedoms, the Supreme Court ruled that the government generally could not engage in prior restraint; that is, states and the federal government could not in advance prohibit someone from publishing something without a very compelling reason.³⁰ This standard was reinforced in 1971 in the Pentagon Papers case, in which the Supreme Court found that the government could not prohibit the *New York Times*

and *Washington Post* newspapers from publishing the Pentagon Papers.³¹ These papers included materials from a secret history of the Vietnam War that had been compiled by the military. More specifically, the papers were compiled at the request of Secretary of Defense Robert McNamara and provided a study of U.S. political and military involvement in Vietnam from 1945 to 1967. Daniel Ellsberg famously released passages of the Papers to the press to show that the United States had secretly enlarged the scope of the war by bombing Cambodia and Laos among other deeds while lying to the American public about doing so.

Although people who leak secret information to the media can still be prosecuted and punished, this does not generally extend to reporters and news outlets that pass that information on to the public. The Edward Snowden case is another good case in point. Snowden himself, rather than those involved in promoting the information that he shared, is the object of criminal prosecution.

Furthermore, the courts have recognized that government officials and other public figures might try to silence press criticism and avoid unfavorable news coverage by threatening a lawsuit for defamation of character. In the 1964 *New York Times v. Sullivan* case, the Supreme Court decided that public figures needed to demonstrate not only that a negative press statement about them was untrue but also that the statement was published or made with either malicious intent or “reckless disregard” for the truth.³² This ruling made it much harder for politicians to silence potential critics or to bankrupt their political opponents through the courts.

The right to freedom of expression is not absolute; several key restrictions limit our ability to speak or publish opinions under certain circumstances. We have seen that the Constitution protects most forms of offensive and unpopular expression, particularly political speech; however, *incitement* of a criminal act, “fighting words,” and genuine threats are not protected. So, for example, you can’t point at someone in front of an angry crowd and shout, “Let’s beat up that guy!” And the Supreme Court has allowed laws that ban threatening symbolic speech, such as burning a cross on the lawn of an African American family’s home ([Figure 4.10](#)).³³ Finally, as we’ve just seen, defamation of character—whether in written form (libel) or spoken form (slander)—is not protected by the First Amendment, so people who are subject to false accusations can sue to recover damages, although criminal prosecutions of libel and slander are uncommon.

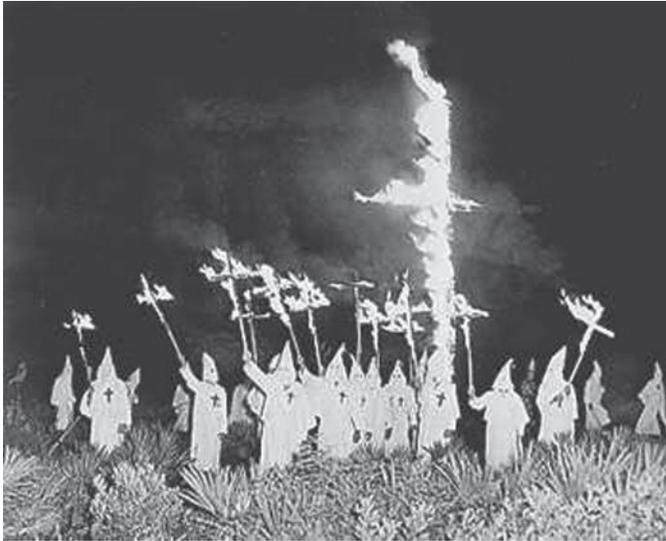


Figure 4.10 The Supreme Court has allowed laws that ban threatening symbolic speech, such as burning crosses on the lawns of African American families, an intimidation tactic used by the Ku Klux Klan, pictured here at a meeting in Gainesville, Florida, on December 31, 1922.

Another key exception to the right to freedom of expression is obscenity, acts or statements that are extremely offensive under current societal standards. Defining obscenity has been something of a challenge for the courts; Supreme Court Justice Potter Stewart famously said of obscenity, having watched pornography in the Supreme Court building, “I know it when I see it.” Into the early twentieth century, written work was frequently banned as being obscene, including works by noted authors such as James Joyce and Henry Miller, although today it is rare for the courts to uphold obscenity charges for written material alone. In 1973, the Supreme Court established the Miller test for deciding whether something is obscene: “(a) whether the average person, applying contemporary community standards, would find that the work, taken as a whole, appeals to the prurient interest, (b) whether the work depicts or describes, in a patently offensive way, sexual conduct specifically defined by the applicable state law; and (c) whether the work, taken as a whole, lacks serious literary, artistic, political, or scientific value.”³⁴ However, the application of this standard has at times been problematic. In particular, the concept of “contemporary community standards” raises the possibility that obscenity varies from place to place; many people in New York or San Francisco might not bat an eye at something people in Memphis or Salt Lake City would consider offensive. The one form of obscenity that has been banned almost without challenge is child pornography, although even in this area the courts have found exceptions.

The courts have allowed censorship of less-than-obscene content when it is broadcast over the airwaves, particularly when it is available for anyone to receive. In general, these restrictions on indecency—a quality of acts or statements that offend societal norms or may be harmful to minors—apply only to radio and television programming broadcast when children might be in the audience, although most cable and satellite channels follow similar standards for commercial reasons. An infamous case of televised indecency occurred during the halftime show of the 2004 Super Bowl, during a performance by singer Janet Jackson in which a part of

her clothing was removed by fellow performer Justin Timberlake, revealing her right breast. The network responsible for the broadcast, CBS, was ultimately presented with a fine of \$550,000 by the Federal Communications Commission, the government agency that regulates television broadcasting. However, CBS was not ultimately required to pay.

On the other hand, in 1997, the NBC network showed a broadcast of *Schindler's List*, a film depicting events during the Holocaust in Nazi Germany, without any editing, so it included graphic nudity and depictions of violence. NBC was not fined or otherwise punished, suggesting there is no uniform standard for indecency. Similarly, in the 1990s Congress compelled television broadcasters to implement a television ratings system, enforced by a "V-Chip" in televisions and cable boxes, so parents could better control the television programming their children might watch. However, similar efforts to regulate indecent content on the Internet to protect children from pornography have largely been struck down as unconstitutional. This outcome suggests that technology has created new avenues for obscene material to be disseminated. The Children's Internet Protection Act, however, requires K–12 schools and public libraries receiving Internet access using special E-rate discounts to filter or block access to obscene material and other material deemed harmful to minors, with certain exceptions.

The courts have also allowed laws that forbid or compel certain forms of expression by businesses, such as laws that require the disclosure of nutritional information on food and beverage containers and warning labels on tobacco products ([Figure 4.11](#)). The federal government requires the prices advertised for airline tickets to include all taxes and fees. Many states regulate advertising by lawyers. And, in general, false or misleading statements made in connection with a commercial transaction can be illegal if they constitute fraud.

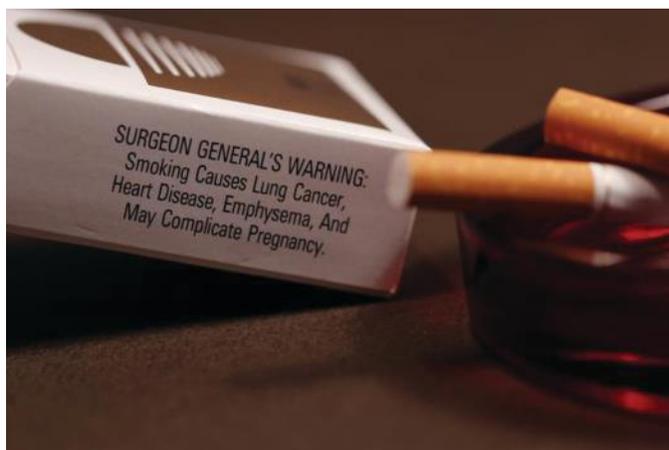


Figure 4.11 The surgeon general's warning label on a box of cigarettes is mandated by the Food and Drug Administration. The United States was the first nation to require a health warning on cigarette packages. (credit: Debora Cartagena, Centers for Disease Control and Prevention)

Furthermore, the courts have ruled that, although public school officials are government actors, the First Amendment freedom of expression rights of children attending public schools are somewhat limited. In particular, in *Tinker v. Des Moines* (1969) and *Hazelwood v. Kuhlmeier*

(1988), the Supreme Court has upheld restrictions on speech that creates “substantial interference with school discipline or the rights of others”³⁵ or is “reasonably related to legitimate pedagogical concerns.”³⁶ For example, the content of school-sponsored activities like school newspapers and speeches delivered by students can be controlled, either for the purposes of instructing students in proper adult behavior or to deter conflict between students.

Free expression includes the right to assemble peaceably and the right to petition government officials. This right even extends to members of groups whose views most people find abhorrent, such as American Nazis and the vehemently anti-LGBTQ Westboro Baptist Church, whose members have become known for their protests at the funerals of U.S. soldiers who have died fighting in the war on terror.³⁷ Free expression—although a broad right—is subject to certain constraints to balance it against the interests of public order. In particular, the nature, place, and timing of protests—but not their substantive content—are subject to reasonable limits. The courts have ruled that while people may peaceably assemble in a place that is a public forum, not all public property is a public forum. For example, the inside of a government office building or a college classroom—particularly while someone is teaching—is not generally considered a public forum.

Rallies and protests on land that has other dedicated uses, such as roads and highways, can be limited to groups that have secured a permit in advance, and those organizing large gatherings may be required to give sufficient notice so government authorities can ensure there is enough security available. However, any such regulation must be viewpoint-neutral; the government may not treat one group differently than another because of its opinions or beliefs. For example, the government can’t permit a rally by a group that favors a government policy but forbid opponents from staging a similar rally. Finally, there have been controversial situations in which government agencies have established free-speech zones for protesters during political conventions, presidential visits, and international meetings in areas that are arguably selected to minimize their public audience or to ensure that the subjects of the protests do not have to encounter the protesters.

THE SECOND AMENDMENT

There has been increased conflict over the Second Amendment in recent years due to school shootings and gun violence. As a result, gun rights have become a highly charged political issue. The text of the Second Amendment is among the shortest of those included in the Constitution:

“A well regulated Militia, being necessary to the security of a free State, the right of the people to keep and bear Arms, shall not be infringed.”

But the relative simplicity of its text has not kept it from controversy; arguably, the Second Amendment has become controversial in large part because of its text. Is this amendment merely a protection of the right of the states to organize and arm a “well regulated militia” for civil defense, or is it a protection of a “right of the people” as a whole to individually bear arms?

Before the Civil War, this would have been a nearly meaningless distinction. In most states at that time, White males of military age were considered part of the militia, liable to be called for

service to put down rebellions or invasions, and the right “to keep and bear Arms” was considered a common-law right inherited from English law that predated the federal and state constitutions. The Constitution was not seen as a limitation on state power, and since the states expected all free men to keep arms as a matter of course, what gun control there was mostly revolved around ensuring enslaved people (and their abolitionist allies) didn’t have guns.

With the beginning of selective incorporation after the Civil War, debates over the Second Amendment were reinvigorated. In the meantime, as part of their Black codes designed to reintroduce most of the trappings of slavery, several southern states adopted laws that restricted the carrying and ownership of weapons by formerly enslaved people. Despite acknowledging a common-law individual right to keep and bear arms, in 1876 the Supreme Court declined, in *United States v. Cruickshank*, to intervene to ensure the states would respect it.³⁸

In the following decades, states gradually began to introduce laws to regulate gun ownership. Federal gun control laws began to be introduced in the 1930s in response to organized crime, with stricter laws that regulated most commerce and trade in guns coming into force in the wake of the street protests of the 1960s. In the early 1980s, following an assassination attempt on President Ronald Reagan, laws requiring background checks for prospective gun buyers were passed. During this period, the Supreme Court’s decisions regarding the meaning of the Second Amendment were ambiguous at best. In *United States v. Miller*, the Supreme Court upheld the 1934 National Firearms Act’s prohibition of sawed-off shotguns, largely on the basis that possession of such a gun was not related to the goal of promoting a “well regulated militia.”³⁹ This finding was generally interpreted as meaning that the Second Amendment protected the right of the states to organize a militia, rather than an individual right, and thus lower courts generally found most firearm regulations—including some city and state laws that virtually outlawed the private ownership of firearms—to be constitutional.

However, in 2008, in a narrow 5–4 decision on *District of Columbia v. Heller*, the Supreme Court found that at least some gun control laws *did* violate the Second Amendment and that this amendment does protect an individual’s right to keep and bear arms, at least in some circumstances—in particular, “for traditionally lawful purposes, such as self-defense within the home.”⁴⁰ Because the District of Columbia is not a state, this decision immediately applied the right only to the federal government and territorial governments. Two years later, in *McDonald v. Chicago*, the Supreme Court overturned the *Cruickshank* decision (5–4) and again found that the right to bear arms was a fundamental right incorporated against the states, meaning that state regulation of firearms might, in some circumstances, be unconstitutional. In 2015, however, the Supreme Court allowed several of San Francisco’s strict gun control laws to remain in place, suggesting that—as in the case of rights protected by the First Amendment—the courts will not treat gun rights as absolute (Figure 4.12).⁴¹ Elsewhere in the political system, the gun issue remains similarly unsettled. However, in the wake of especially traumatic shootings at a Las Vegas outdoor concert and at a school in Parkland, Florida, there has been increased activism around gun control and community safety, especially among the young.⁴²



Figure 4.12 A “No Firearms” sign is posted at Binghamton Park in Memphis, Tennessee, demonstrating that the right to possess a gun is not absolute. (credit: modification of work by Thomas R Machnitzki)

THE THIRD AMENDMENT

The Third Amendment says in full:

“No Soldier shall, in time of peace be quartered in any house, without the consent of the Owner, nor in time of war, but in a manner to be prescribed by law.”

Most people consider this provision of the Constitution obsolete and unimportant. However, it is worthwhile to note its relevance in the context of the time: citizens remembered having their cities and towns occupied by British soldiers and mercenaries during the Revolutionary War, and they viewed the British laws that required the colonists to house soldiers particularly offensive, to the point that it had been among the grievances listed in the Declaration of Independence.

Today it seems unlikely the federal government would need to house military forces in civilian lodgings against the will of property owners or tenants; however, perhaps in the same way we consider the Second and Fourth amendments, we can think of the Third Amendment as reflecting a broader idea that our homes lie within a “zone of privacy” that government officials should not violate unless absolutely necessary.

THE FOURTH AMENDMENT

The Fourth Amendment sits at the boundary between general individual freedoms and the rights of those suspected of crimes. We saw earlier that perhaps it reflects James Madison’s broader concern about establishing an expectation of privacy from government intrusion at

home. Another way to think of the Fourth Amendment is that it protects us from overzealous efforts by law enforcement to root out crime by ensuring that police have good reason before they intrude on people's lives with criminal investigations.

The text of the Fourth Amendment is as follows:

“The right of the people to be secure in their persons, houses, papers, and effects, against unreasonable searches and seizures, shall not be violated, and no Warrants shall issue, but upon probable cause, supported by Oath or affirmation, and particularly describing the place to be searched, and the persons or things to be seized.”

The amendment places limits on both *searches* and *seizures*: Searches are efforts to locate documents and contraband. Seizures are the taking of these items by the government for use as evidence in a criminal prosecution (or, in the case of a person, the detention or taking of the person into custody).

In either case, the amendment indicates that government officials are required to apply for and receive a search warrant prior to a search or seizure; this warrant is a legal document, signed by a judge, allowing police to search and/or seize persons or property. Since the 1960s, however, the Supreme Court has issued a series of rulings limiting the warrant requirement in situations where a person can be said to lack a “reasonable expectation of privacy” outside the home. Police can also search and/or seize people or property without a warrant if the owner or renter consents to the search, if there is a reasonable expectation that evidence may be destroyed or tampered with before a warrant can be issued (i.e., exigent circumstances), or if the items in question are in plain view of government officials.

Furthermore, the courts have found that police do not generally need a warrant to search the passenger compartment of a car ([Figure 4.13](#)), or to search people entering the United States from another country.⁴³ When a warrant is needed, law enforcement officers do not need enough evidence to secure a conviction, but they must demonstrate to a judge that there is probable cause to believe a crime has been committed or evidence will be found. Probable cause is the legal standard for determining whether a search or seizure is constitutional or a crime has been committed; it is a lower threshold than the standard of proof at a criminal trial.

Critics have argued that this requirement is not very meaningful because law enforcement officers are almost always able to get a search warrant when they request one. On the other hand, since we wouldn't expect the police to waste their time or a judge's time trying to get search warrants that are unlikely to be granted, perhaps the high rate at which they get them should not be so surprising. The use of "no-knock" warrants based on the premise that a suspect would destroy drug evidence has recently been curtailed after the wrongful killing of Breonna Taylor by police serving such a warrant.⁴⁴, ⁴⁵



Figure 4.13 A state police officer conducting a traffic stop near Walla Walla, Washington. (credit: modification of work by Richard Bauer)

What happens if the police conduct an illegal search or seizure without a warrant and find evidence of a crime? In the 1961 Supreme Court case *Mapp v. Ohio*, the court decided that evidence obtained without a warrant that didn't fall under one of the exceptions mentioned above could not be used as evidence in a state criminal trial, giving rise to the broad application of what is known as the exclusionary rule, which was first established in 1914 on a federal level in *Weeks v. United States*.⁴⁶ The exclusionary rule doesn't just apply to evidence found or to items or people seized without a warrant (or falling under an exception noted above); it also applies to any evidence developed or discovered as a result of the illegal search or seizure.

For example, if police search your home without a warrant, find bank statements showing large cash deposits on a regular basis, and discover you are engaged in some other crime in which they were previously unaware (e.g., blackmail, drugs, or prostitution), they can neither use the bank statements as evidence of criminal activity, nor prosecute you for the crimes they discovered during the illegal search. This extension of the exclusionary rule is sometimes called the "fruit of the poisonous tree," because just as the metaphorical tree (i.e., the original search or seizure) is poisoned, so is anything that grows out of it.⁴⁷

However, like the requirement for a search warrant, the exclusionary rule does have exceptions. The courts have allowed evidence to be used that was obtained without the necessary legal procedures in circumstances where police executed warrants they believed were correctly granted but in fact were not ("good faith" exception), and when the evidence would have been found anyway had they followed the law ("inevitable discovery").

The requirement of probable cause also applies to arrest warrants. A person cannot generally be detained by police or taken into custody without a warrant, although most states allow police to arrest someone suspected of a felony crime without a warrant so long as probable

cause exists, and police can arrest people for minor crimes or misdemeanors they have witnessed themselves.

The Supreme Court's 2012 and 2018 decisions in *United States v. Jones* and *Carpenter v. United States* extended the prohibition of illegal search and seizure to warrantless location tracking, either by installing a GPS device, as in the *Jones* case, or by accessing that information provided to cellular companies, as in *Carpenter*.

4.3 The Rights of Suspects

Learning Objectives

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

- Identify the rights of those suspected or accused of criminal activity
- Explain how Supreme Court decisions transformed the rights of the accused
- Explain why the Eighth Amendment is controversial regarding capital punishment

In addition to protecting the personal freedoms of individuals, the Bill of Rights protects those suspected or accused of crimes from various forms of unfair or unjust treatment. The prominence of these protections in the Bill of Rights may seem surprising. Given the colonists' experience of what they believed to be unjust rule by British authorities, however, and the use of the legal system to punish rebels and their sympathizers for political offenses, the impetus to ensure fair, just, and impartial treatment to everyone accused of a crime—no matter how unpopular—is perhaps more understandable. What is more, the revolutionaries, and the eventual framers of the Constitution, wanted to keep the best features of English law as well.

In addition to the protections outlined in the Fourth Amendment, which largely pertain to investigations conducted before someone has been charged with a crime, the next four amendments pertain to those suspected, accused, or convicted of crimes, as well as people engaged in other legal disputes. At every stage of the legal process, the Bill of Rights incorporates protections for these people.

THE FIFTH AMENDMENT

Many of the provisions dealing with the rights of the accused are included in the Fifth Amendment; accordingly, it is one of the longest in the Bill of Rights. The Fifth Amendment states in full:

“No person shall be held to answer for a capital, or otherwise infamous crime, unless on a presentment or indictment of a Grand Jury, except in cases arising in the land or naval forces, or in the Militia, when in actual service in time of War or public danger; nor shall any person be subject for the same offence to be twice put in jeopardy of life or limb; nor shall be compelled in any criminal case to be a witness against himself, nor be deprived of life, liberty, or property, without due process of law; nor shall private property be taken for public use, without just compensation.”

The first clause requires that serious crimes be prosecuted only after an indictment has been issued by a grand jury. However, several exceptions are permitted as a result of the evolving interpretation and understanding of this amendment by the courts, given the Constitution is a living document. First, the courts have generally found this requirement to apply only to felonies; less serious crimes can be tried without a grand jury proceeding. Second, this provision of the Bill of Rights does *not* apply to the states because it has not been incorporated; many states instead require a judge to hold a preliminary hearing to decide whether there is enough evidence to hold a full trial. Finally, members of the armed forces who are accused of crimes are not entitled to a grand jury proceeding.

The Fifth Amendment also protects individuals against double jeopardy, a process that subjects a suspect to prosecution twice for the same criminal act. No one who has been acquitted (found not guilty) of a crime can be prosecuted again for that crime. But the prohibition against double jeopardy has its own exceptions. The most notable is that it prohibits a second prosecution only at the same level of government (federal or state) as the first; the federal government can try you for violating federal law, even if a state or local court finds you not guilty of the same action. For example, in the early 1990s, several Los Angeles police officers accused of brutally beating motorist Rodney King during his arrest were acquitted of various charges in a state court, but some were later convicted in a federal court of violating King's civil rights.

The double jeopardy rule does not prevent someone from recovering damages in a civil case—a legal dispute between individuals over a contract or compensation for an injury—that results from a criminal act, even if the person accused of that act is found not guilty. One famous case from the 1990s involved former football star and television personality O. J. Simpson. Simpson, although acquitted of the murders of his ex-wife Nicole Brown and her friend Ron Goldman in a criminal court, was later found to be responsible for their deaths in a subsequent civil case and as a result was forced to forfeit most of his wealth to pay damages to their families.

Perhaps the most famous provision of the Fifth Amendment is its protection against self-incrimination, or the right to remain silent. This provision is so well known that we have a phrase for it: “taking the Fifth.” People have the right not to give evidence in court or to law enforcement officers that might constitute an admission of guilt or responsibility for a crime. Moreover, in a criminal trial, if someone does not testify in their own defense, the prosecution cannot use that failure to testify as evidence of guilt or imply that an innocent person would testify. This provision became embedded in the public consciousness following the Supreme Court's 1966 ruling in *Miranda v. Arizona*, whereby suspects were required to be informed of their most important rights, including the right against self-incrimination, before being interrogated in police custody.⁴⁸ However, contrary to some media depictions of the Miranda warning, law enforcement officials do not necessarily have to inform suspects of their rights before they are questioned in situations where they are free to leave.

Like the Fourteenth Amendment's due process clause, the Fifth Amendment prohibits the federal government from depriving people of their “life, liberty, or property, without due process of law.” Recall that due process is a guarantee that people will be treated fairly and

impartially by government officials when the government seeks to fine or imprison them or take their personal property away from them. The courts have interpreted this provision to mean that government officials must establish consistent, fair procedures to decide when people's freedoms are limited. In other words, citizens cannot be detained, their freedom limited, or their property taken arbitrarily or on a whim by police or other government officials. As a result, an entire body of procedural safeguards comes into play for the legal prosecution of crimes. However, the Patriot Act, passed into law after the 9/11 terrorist attacks, somewhat altered this notion.

The final provision of the Fifth Amendment has little to do with crime at all. The *takings clause* says that "private property [cannot] be taken for public use, without just compensation." This provision, along with the due process clause's provisions limiting the taking of property, can be viewed as a protection of individuals' economic liberty: their right to obtain, use, and trade tangible and intangible property for their own benefit. For example, you have the right to trade your knowledge, skills, and labor for money through work or the use of your property, or trade money or goods for other things of value, such as clothing, housing, education, or food.

A significant recent controversy over economic liberty has been sparked by cities' and states' use of the power of eminent domain to take property for redevelopment. Traditionally, the main use of eminent domain was to obtain property for transportation corridors like railroads, highways, canals and reservoirs, and pipelines, which require fairly straight routes to be efficient. Because any single property owner could effectively block a particular route or extract an unfair price for land if it was the last piece needed to assemble a route, there are reasonable arguments for using eminent domain as a last resort in these circumstances, particularly for projects that convey substantial benefits to the public at large.

However, increasingly eminent domain has been used to allow economic development, with beneficiaries ranging from politically connected big businesses such as car manufacturers building new factories to highly profitable sports teams seeking ever-more-luxurious stadiums ([Figure 4.14](#)). And, while we traditionally think of property owners as relatively well-off people who can fend for themselves in the political system and whose rights don't necessarily need protecting, these cases frequently pit lower- and middle-class homeowners against multinational corporations or multimillionaires with the ear of city and state officials. In a notorious 2005 case, *Kelo v. City of New London*, the Supreme Court sided with municipal officials taking homes in a middle-class neighborhood to obtain land for a large pharmaceutical company's corporate campus.⁴⁹ Ultimately, the campus was not built on the seized land and the case led to a public backlash against the use of eminent domain and legal changes in many states, making it harder for cities to take property from one private party and give it to another for economic redevelopment purposes. Eminent domain has once again become a salient issue in the context of the Trump administration's attempt to use the doctrine to seize several parcels of private property for the proposed border wall.⁵⁰



Figure 4.14 AT&T Stadium in Arlington, Texas, sits on land taken by eminent domain. (credit: John Purget)

Some disputes over economic liberty have gone beyond the idea of eminent domain. In the past few years, companies seeking to offer profitable services online such as direct sales by electric car manufacturer Tesla Motors, on-demand ride-sharing services like Lyft and Uber, and short-term property rentals through companies like Airbnb have led to conflict with states and cities trying to regulate these businesses, and with incumbent service providers such as hotels and taxi cabs. In the absence of new public policies to clarify rights, the path forward is often determined through norms established by governments or by court cases.

Sometimes, however, the legislative process seeks to clarify or improve the interpretation and application of amendments. The Fifth Amendment Integrity Restoration Act is aimed at reducing the practice of civil forfeiture, in which governments and law enforcement entities seize property of people suspected of crimes, prior to conviction and sometimes without bringing formal charges. The government can take financial assets, jewelry, vehicles, art, and other items of value. The bipartisan bill backed by organizations ranging from the conservative-leaning Heritage Foundation to the ACLU, would reduce what its Senate sponsor, Rand Paul, refers to as "policing for profit." Civil forfeiture was a mainstay of the war on drugs and contributed to the mass incarceration of people of color. It can be economically damaging even for those who are never charged or convicted, because in many cases seized property is not returned to its owner. Various court cases have ruled on aspects of the practice, but have not eliminated it derisively, leaving the opportunity for a new law to address it.

THE SIXTH AMENDMENT

Once someone has been charged with a crime and indicted, the next stage in a criminal case is typically the trial itself, unless a plea bargain is reached. The Sixth Amendment contains the provisions that govern criminal trials. In full, it states:

“In all criminal prosecutions, the accused shall enjoy the right to a speedy and public trial, by an impartial jury of the State and district wherein the crime shall have been

committed, which district shall have been previously ascertained by law, and to be informed of the nature and cause of the accusation; to be confronted with the witnesses against him; to have compulsory process for obtaining witnesses in his favor, and to have the Assistance of Counsel for his defence [sic].”

The first of these guarantees is the right to have a speedy, public trial by an impartial jury. Although there is no absolute limit on the length of time that may pass between an indictment and a trial, the Supreme Court has said that excessively lengthy delays must be justified and balanced against the potential harm to the defendant.⁵¹ In effect, the speedy trial requirement protects people from being detained indefinitely by the government. Yet the courts have ruled that there are exceptions to the public trial requirement; if a public trial would undermine the defendant’s right to a fair trial, it can be held behind closed doors, while prosecutors can request closed proceedings only in certain, narrow circumstances (generally, to protect witnesses from retaliation or to guard classified information). In general, a prosecution must also be made in the “state and district” where the crime was committed; however, people accused of crimes may ask for a change of venue for their trial if they believe pre-trial publicity or other factors make it difficult or impossible for them to receive a fair trial where the crime occurred.

Link to Learning

Although the Supreme Court’s proceedings are not televised and there is no video of the courtroom, audio recordings of the oral arguments and decisions announced in cases have been made since 1955. A complete collection of these recordings can be found at the [Oyez Project](#) website along with full information about each case.

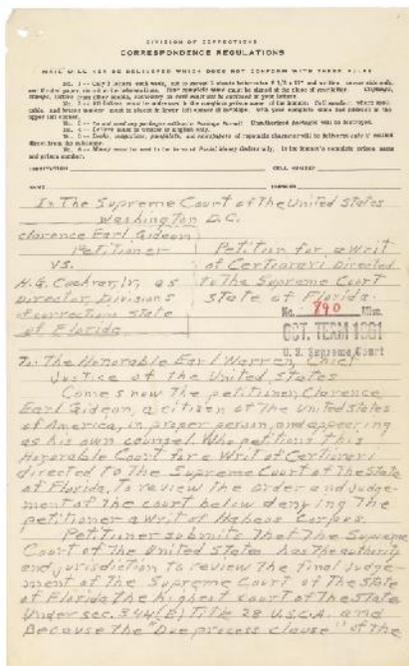
Most people accused of crimes decline their right to a jury trial. This choice is typically the result of a plea bargain, an agreement between the defendant and the prosecutor in which the defendant pleads guilty to the charge(s) in question, or perhaps to less serious charges, in exchange for more lenient punishment than they might receive if convicted after a full trial. There are a number of reasons why this might happen. The evidence against the accused may be so overwhelming that conviction is a near-certainty, so the accused might decide that avoiding the more serious penalty (perhaps even the death penalty) is better than taking the small chance of being acquitted after a trial. Someone accused of being part of a larger crime or criminal organization might agree to testify against others in exchange for lighter punishment. At the same time, prosecutors might want to ensure a win in a case that might not hold up in court by securing convictions for offenses they know they can prove, while avoiding a lengthy trial on other charges they might lose.

The requirement that a jury be impartial is a critical requirement of the Sixth Amendment. Both the prosecution and the defense are permitted to reject potential jurors who they believe are unable to fairly decide the case without prejudice. However, the courts have also said that the composition of the jury as a whole may in itself be prejudicial, so potential jurors may not be rejected simply because of their race or sex, for example.⁵²

The Sixth Amendment guarantees the right of those accused of crimes to present witnesses in their own defense (if necessary, compelling them to testify) and to confront and cross-examine

witnesses presented by the prosecution. In general, the only testimony acceptable in a criminal trial must be given in a courtroom and be subject to cross-examination; hearsay, or testimony by one person about what another person has said, is generally inadmissible, although hearsay may be presented as evidence when it is an admission of guilt by the defendant or a “dying declaration” by a person who has passed away. Although both sides in a trial have the opportunity to examine and cross-examine witnesses, the judge may exclude testimony deemed irrelevant or prejudicial.

Finally, the Sixth Amendment guarantees the right of those accused of crimes to have the assistance of an attorney in their defense. Historically, many states did not provide attorneys to those accused of most crimes who could not afford one themselves, and even when an attorney was provided, their assistance was often inadequate, at best. This situation changed as a result of the Supreme Court’s decision in *Gideon v. Wainwright* (1963).⁵³ Clarence Gideon, a poor drifter, was accused of breaking into and stealing money and other items from a pool hall in Panama City, Florida. Denied a lawyer, Gideon was tried and convicted and sentenced to a five-year prison term. While in prison and still without assistance of a lawyer, he drafted a handwritten appeal and sent it to the Supreme Court, which agreed to hear his case (Figure 4.15). The justices unanimously ruled that Gideon, and anyone else accused of a serious crime, was entitled to the assistance of a lawyer, even if they could not afford one, as part of the general due process right to a fair trial.



(a)



(b)

Figure 4.15 The handwritten petition for appeal (a) sent to the Supreme Court by Clarence Gideon, shown here circa 1961 (b), the year of his Florida arrest for breaking and entering.

The Supreme Court later extended the *Gideon v. Wainwright* ruling to apply to any case in which an accused person faced the possibility of “loss of liberty,” even for one day. The courts

have also overturned convictions in which people had incompetent or ineffective lawyers through no fault of their own. The *Gideon* ruling has led to an increased need for professional public defenders, lawyers who are paid by the government to represent those who cannot afford an attorney themselves, although some states instead require practicing lawyers to represent poor defendants on a pro bono basis (essentially, donating their time and energy to the case).

Link to Learning

The [National Association for Public Defense](#) represents public defenders, lobbying for better funding for public defense and improvements in the justice system in general.

Insider Perspective

Criminal Justice: Theory Meets Practice

Typically, a person charged with a serious crime will have a brief hearing before a judge to be informed of the charges against the person, to be made aware of the right to counsel, and to enter a plea. Other hearings may be held to decide on the admissibility of evidence seized or otherwise obtained by prosecutors.

If the two sides cannot agree on a plea bargain during this period, the next stage is the selection of a jury. A pool of potential jurors is summoned to the court and screened for impartiality, with the goal of seating twelve (in most states) and one or two alternates. All hear the evidence in the trial and unless an alternate must serve, the original twelve decide whether the evidence overwhelmingly points toward guilt, or innocence beyond a reasonable doubt.

In the trial itself, the lawyers for the prosecution and defense make opening arguments, followed by testimony by witnesses for the prosecution (and any cross-examination), and then testimony by witnesses for the defense, including the defendant if the defendant chooses. Additional prosecution witnesses may be called to rebut testimony by the defense. Finally, both sides make closing arguments. The judge then issues instructions to the jury, including an admonition not to discuss the case with anyone outside the jury room. The jury members leave the courtroom to enter the jury room and begin their deliberations ([Figure 4.16](#)).



Figure 4.16 A typical courtroom in the United States. The jury sits along one side, between the judge/witness stand and the tables for the defense and prosecution.

The jurors pick a foreman or forewoman to coordinate their deliberations. They may ask to review evidence or to hear transcripts of testimony. They deliberate in secret and their decision must be unanimous. If they are unable to agree on a verdict after extensive deliberation, a mistrial may be declared, which in effect requires the prosecution to try the case all over again.

A defendant found not guilty of all charges will be immediately released unless other charges are pending (e.g., the defendant is wanted for a crime in another jurisdiction). If the defendant is found guilty of one or more offenses, the judge will choose an appropriate sentence based on the law and the circumstances. In the federal system, this sentence will typically be based on guidelines that assign point values to various offenses and facts in the case. If the prosecution is pursuing the death penalty, the jury will decide whether the defendant should be subject to capital punishment or life imprisonment.

The reality of court procedure is much less dramatic and exciting than what is typically portrayed in television shows and movies. Nonetheless, most Americans will participate in the legal system at least once in their lives as a witness, juror, or defendant.

Have you or any member of your family served on a jury? If so, was the experience a positive one? Did the trial proceed as expected? If you haven't served on a jury, is it something you look forward to? Why or why not?

THE SEVENTH AMENDMENT

The Seventh Amendment deals with the rights of those engaged in civil disputes—disagreements between individuals or businesses in which people are typically seeking compensation for some harm caused. For example, in an automobile accident, the person responsible is compelled to compensate any others (either directly or through their insurance company). Much of the work of the legal system consists of efforts to resolve civil disputes. The Seventh Amendment, in full, reads:

“In Suits at common law, where the value in controversy shall exceed twenty dollars, the right of trial by jury shall be preserved, and no fact tried by a jury, shall be otherwise re-examined in any Court of the United States, than according to the rules of the common law.”

Because of this provision, all trials in civil cases must take place before a jury unless both sides waive their right to a jury trial. However, this right is not always incorporated. In many states, civil disputes—particularly those involving small sums of money, which may be heard by a dedicated small claims court—need not be tried in front of a jury and may instead be decided by a judge working alone.

The Seventh Amendment limits the ability of judges to reconsider questions of fact, rather than of law, that were originally decided by a jury. For example, if a jury decides a person was responsible for an action and the case is appealed, the appeals judge cannot decide someone

else was responsible. This preserves the traditional common-law distinction that judges are responsible for deciding questions of law while jurors are responsible for determining the facts of a particular case.

THE EIGHTH AMENDMENT

The Eighth Amendment says, in full:

“Excessive bail shall not be required, nor excessive fines imposed, nor cruel and unusual punishments inflicted.”

Bail is a payment of money that allows a person accused of a crime to be freed pending trial. If you “make bail” in a case and do not show up for your trial, you will forfeit the money you paid. Since many people cannot afford to pay bail directly, they may instead get a *bail bond*, which allows them to pay a fraction of the money (typically 10 percent) to a person who sells bonds and who pays the full bail amount. (In most states, the bond seller makes money because the defendant does not get back the money for the bond, and most people show up for their trials.) However, people believed likely to flee or who represent a risk to the community while free may be denied bail and held in jail until their trial takes place.

It is rare for bail to be successfully challenged for being excessive. The Supreme Court has defined an excessive fine as one “so grossly excessive as to amount to deprivation of property without due process of law” or “grossly disproportional to the gravity of a defendant’s offense.”⁵⁴ Historically, the courts have rarely struck down fines as excessive, though California and other states have recently passed legislation seeking to reform the more discriminatory aspects of the bail system.

The most controversial provision of the Eighth Amendment is the ban on “cruel and unusual punishments.” Various torturous forms of execution common in the past—drawing and quartering, burning people alive, and the electric chair—are prohibited by this provision.⁵⁵ Recent controversies over lethal injections and firing squads demonstrate that the topic of whether and how to execute is still very much alive. The Dutch producer of one of the chemicals in the most common lethal injection cocktail recently refused to export it to the United States when it was shown to protract the dying process for some inmates, maintaining consciousness, prolonging suffering, and paralyzing response. In a 2021 case, one death row prisoner lost an appeal to request death by firing squad in lieu of lethal injection. While the Supreme Court has never established a definitive test for what constitutes a cruel and unusual punishment, it has generally allowed most penalties short of death for adults, even when the punishment appears disproportionate or excessive to outside observers.⁵⁶

In recent years the Supreme Court has issued a series of rulings substantially narrowing the application of the death penalty. As a result, defendants who have intellectual disabilities may not be executed.⁵⁷ Defendants who were under eighteen when they committed an offense that would otherwise be subject to the death penalty may not be executed.⁵⁸ The court has generally rejected the application of the death penalty to crimes that did not result in the death of another human being, most notably in the case of rape.⁵⁹ And, while permitting the death

penalty to be applied to murder in some cases, the Supreme Court has generally struck down laws that require the application of the death penalty in certain circumstances. Still, the United States is among ten countries with the most executions worldwide, with the Trump Justice Department pushing through a flurry of thirteen executions in the last four months of his administration, breaking with the 130-year-old precedent of pausing executions amid a presidential transition (Figure 4.17).

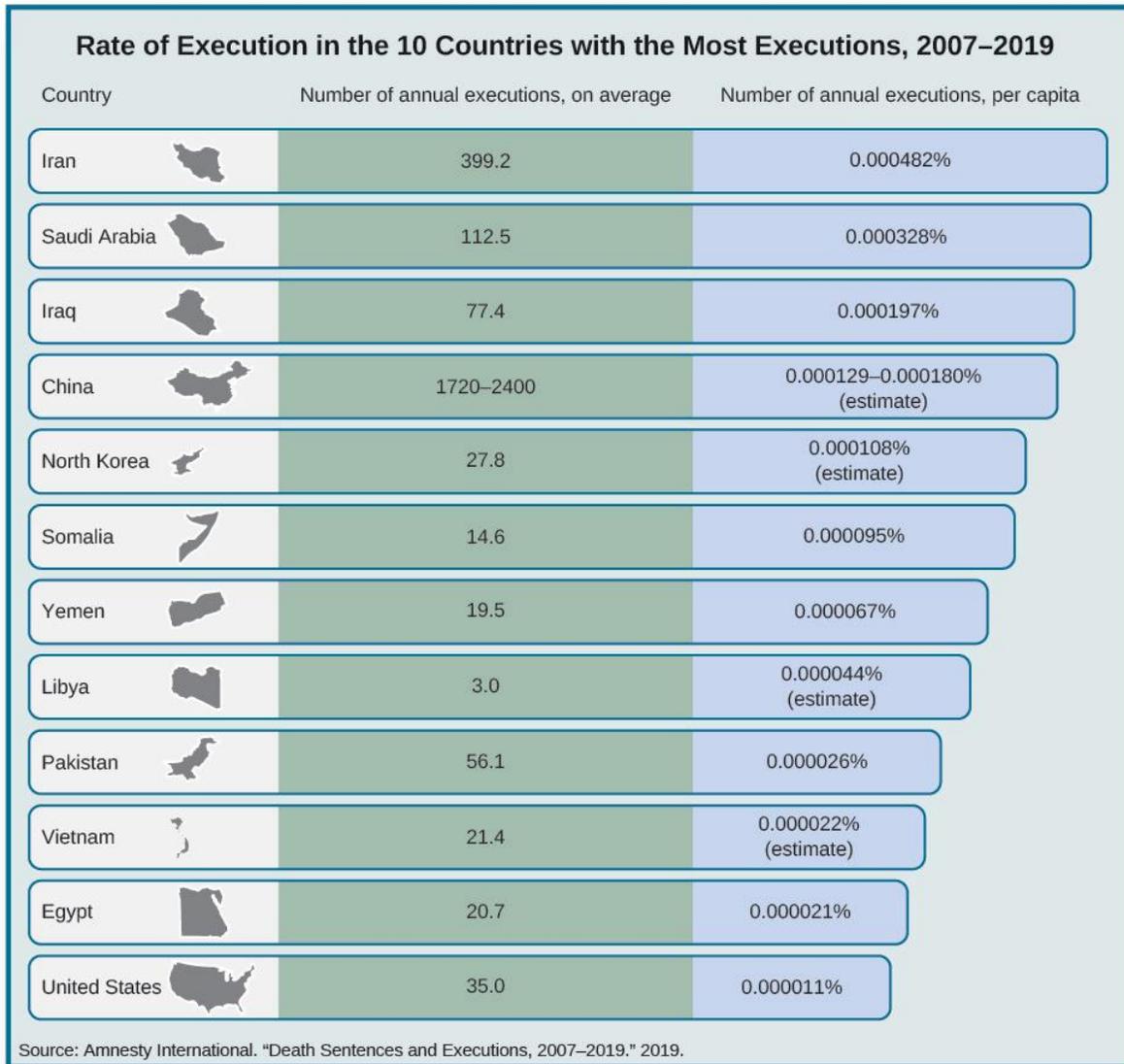


Figure 4.17 The United States has the twelfth highest per capita rate of execution in the world.

At the same time, however, it appears that the public mood may have shifted somewhat against the death penalty, perhaps due in part to an overall decline in violent crime. The reexamination of past cases through DNA evidence has revealed dozens in which people were wrongfully executed.⁶⁰ For example, Claude Jones was executed for murder based on 1990-era

DNA testing of a single hair that was determined at that time to be his but that with better DNA testing technology was later found to be that of the victim.⁶¹ Perhaps as a result of this and other cases, seven additional states have abolished capital punishment since 2007. As of 2015, nineteen states and the District of Columbia no longer apply the death penalty in new cases, and several other states do not carry out executions despite sentencing people to death.⁶² It remains to be seen whether this gradual trend toward the elimination of the death penalty by the states will continue, or whether the Supreme Court will eventually decide to follow former Justice Harry Blackmun’s decision to “no longer... tinker with the machinery of death” and abolish it completely.

4.4 Interpreting the Bill of Rights

Learning Objectives

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

- Describe how the Ninth and Tenth Amendments reflect on our other rights
- Identify the two senses of the “right to privacy” embodied in the Constitution
- Explain the controversy over privacy when applied to abortion and same-sex relationships

As this chapter has suggested, the provisions of the Bill of Rights have been interpreted and reinterpreted repeatedly over the past two centuries. However, the first eight amendments are largely silent on the status of traditional common law, which was the legal basis for many of the natural rights claimed by the framers in the Declaration of Independence. These amendments largely reflect the worldview of the time in which they were written. New technology, societal norms, and economic realities furnish challenges that fail to fit neatly into the framework established in the late eighteenth century.

In this section, we consider the final two amendments of the Bill of Rights and the way they affect our understanding of the Constitution as a whole. Rather than protecting specific rights and liberties, the Ninth and Tenth Amendments indicate how the Constitution and the Bill of Rights should be interpreted, and lay out the residual powers of the state governments. We will also examine privacy rights, an area the Bill of Rights does not address directly. Rather, the emergence of defined privacy rights demonstrates how the Ninth and Tenth Amendments have been applied to expand the scope of rights protected by the Constitution.

THE NINTH AMENDMENT

We saw above that James Madison and the other framers were aware they might endanger some rights if they listed a few in the Constitution and omitted others. To ensure that those interpreting the Constitution would recognize that the listing of freedoms and rights in the Bill of Rights was not exhaustive, the Ninth Amendment states:

“The enumeration in the Constitution, of certain rights, shall not be construed to deny or disparage others retained by the people.”

These rights “retained by the people” include the common-law and natural rights inherited from the laws, traditions, and past court decisions of England. To this day, we regularly exercise and take for granted rights that aren’t written down in the federal constitution, like the right to marry, the right to seek opportunities for employment and education, and the right to have children and raise a family. Supreme Court justices over the years have interpreted the Ninth Amendment in different ways, with some arguing that it was intended to extend the rights protected by the Constitution to those natural and common-law rights and others arguing that it does not prohibit states from changing their constitutions and laws to modify or limit those rights as they see fit.

Critics of a broad interpretation of the Ninth Amendment point out that the Constitution provides ways to protect newly formalized rights through the amendment process. For example, in the nineteenth and twentieth centuries, the right to vote was gradually expanded by a series of constitutional amendments (the Fifteenth and Nineteenth), even though at times this expansion was the subject of great public controversy. However, supporters of a broad interpretation of the Ninth Amendment point out that the rights of the people—particularly people belonging to political or demographic minorities—should not be subject to the whims of popular majorities. One right the courts have said may be at least partially based on the Ninth Amendment is a general right to privacy, discussed later in the chapter.

THE TENTH AMENDMENT

The Tenth Amendment is as follows:

“The powers not delegated to the United States by the Constitution, nor prohibited by it to the States, are reserved to the States respectively, or to the people.”

Unlike the other provisions of the Bill of Rights, this amendment focuses on *power* rather than rights. The courts have generally read the Tenth Amendment as merely stating, as Chief Justice Harlan Stone put it, a “truism that all is retained which has not been surrendered.”⁶³ In other words, rather than limiting the power of the federal government in any meaningful way, it simply restates what is made obvious elsewhere in the Constitution: the federal government has both enumerated and implied powers, but where the federal government does not (or chooses not to) exercise power, the states may do so. Others read this final “or” as capturing the essential question of U.S. political history: do the states who agreed to unite in a federal system remain sovereign, or once united, is it the federal government’s responsibility to protect the power of the people—including against states that might infringe upon them?

At times, politicians and state governments have argued that the Tenth Amendment means states can engage in *interposition* or *nullification* by blocking federal government laws and actions they deem to exceed the constitutional powers of the national government. But the courts have rarely been sympathetic to these arguments, except when the federal government appears to be directly requiring state and local officials to do something. For example, in 1997 the Supreme Court struck down part of a federal law that required state and local law enforcement to participate in conducting background checks for prospective gun purchasers, while in 2012 the court ruled that the government could not compel states to participate in

expanding the joint state-federal Medicaid program by taking away all their existing Medicaid funding if they refused to do so.⁶⁴

However, the Tenth Amendment also allows states to guarantee rights and liberties more fully or extensively than the federal government does, or to include additional rights. For example, many state constitutions guarantee the right to a free public education, several states give victims of crimes certain rights, and eighteen states include the right to hunt game and/or fish.⁶⁵ A number of state constitutions explicitly guarantee equal rights for men and women. Starting with Wyoming in 1869, some states permitted women to vote before the Nineteenth Amendment secured the franchise for all women in 1920. Similarly, people aged 18–20 could vote in a few states before the Twenty-Sixth Amendment came into force in 1971. As we will see below, several states also explicitly recognize a right to privacy. State courts at times have interpreted state constitutional provisions to include broader protections for basic liberties than their federal counterparts. For example, though people do not generally have the right to free speech and assembly on private property owned by others without their permission, California’s constitutional protection of freedom of expression was extended to portions of some privately owned shopping centers by the state’s supreme court ([Figure 4.18](#)).⁶⁶



Figure 4.18 This sign outside a California branch of the Trader Joe’s supermarket chain is one of many anti-solicitation signs that sprang up in the wake of a court case involving the Pruneyard Shopping Center, which resulted in the protection of free expression in some privately owned shopping centers. (credit: modification of work by “IvyMike”/Flickr)

These state protections do not extend the other way, however. If the federal government passes a law or adopts a constitutional amendment that restricts rights or liberties, or a Supreme Court decision interprets the Constitution in a way that narrows these rights, the

state's protection no longer applies. For example, if Congress decided to outlaw hunting and fishing and the Supreme Court decided this law was a valid exercise of federal power, the state constitutional provisions that protect the right to hunt and fish would effectively be meaningless. More concretely, federal laws that control weapons and drugs override state laws and constitutional provisions that otherwise permit them. While federal marijuana policies are not strictly enforced, state-level marijuana policies in Colorado and Washington provide a prominent exception to that clarity.

Get Connected!

Student-Led Constitutional Change

Although the United States has not had a national constitutional convention since 1787, the states have generally been much more willing to revise their constitutions. In 1998, two politicians in Texas decided to do something a little bit different: they enlisted the help of college students at Angelo State University to draft a completely new constitution for the state of Texas, which was then formally proposed to the state legislature.⁶⁷ Although the proposal failed, it was certainly a valuable learning experience for the students who took part.

Each state has a different process for changing its constitution. In some, like California and Mississippi, voters can propose amendments to their state constitution directly, bypassing the state legislature. In others, such as Tennessee and Texas, the state legislature controls the process of initiation. The process can affect the sorts of amendments likely to be considered; it shouldn't be surprising, for example, that amendments limiting the number of terms legislators can serve in office have been much more common in states where the legislators themselves have no say in whether such provisions are adopted.

What rights or liberties do you think ought to be protected by your state constitution that aren't already? Or would you get rid of some of these protections instead? Find a copy of your current state constitution, read through it, and decide. Then find out what steps would be needed to amend your state's constitution to make the changes you would like to see.

THE RIGHT TO PRIVACY

Although the term *privacy* does not appear in the Constitution or Bill of Rights, scholars have interpreted several Bill of Rights provisions as an indication that James Madison and Congress sought to protect a common-law right to privacy as it would have been understood in the late eighteenth century: a right to be free of government intrusion into our personal life, particularly within the bounds of the home. For example, one could see the Second Amendment as standing for the common-law right to self-defense in the home; the Third Amendment as a statement that government soldiers should not be housed in anyone's home; the Fourth Amendment as setting a high legal standard for allowing agents of the state to intrude on someone's home; and the due process and takings clauses of the Fifth Amendment as applying an equally high legal standard to the government's taking a home or property (reinforced after the Civil War by the Fourteenth Amendment). Alternatively, one could argue that the Ninth Amendment anticipated the existence of a common-law right to privacy, among other rights, when it acknowledged the existence of basic, natural rights not listed in the Bill of

Rights or the body of the Constitution itself.⁶⁸ Lawyers Samuel D. Warren and Louis Brandeis (the latter a future Supreme Court justice) famously developed the concept of privacy rights in a law review article published in 1890.⁶⁹

Although several state constitutions do list the right to privacy as a protected right, the explicit recognition by the Supreme Court of a right to privacy in the U.S. Constitution emerged only in the middle of the twentieth century. In 1965, the court spelled out the right to privacy for the first time in *Griswold v. Connecticut*, a case that struck down a state law forbidding even married individuals to use any form of contraception.⁷⁰ Although many subsequent cases before the Supreme Court also dealt with privacy in the course of intimate, sexual conduct, the issue of privacy matters as well in the context of surveillance and monitoring by government and private parties of our activities, movements, and communications. Both these senses of privacy are examined below.

Sexual Privacy

Although the *Griswold* case originally pertained only to married couples, in 1972 it was extended to apply the right to obtain contraception to unmarried people as well.⁷¹ Although neither decision was entirely without controversy, the “sexual revolution” taking place at the time may well have contributed to a sense that anti-contraception laws were at the very least dated, if not in violation of people’s rights. The contraceptive coverage controversy surrounding the Hobby Lobby case shows that this topic remains relevant.

The Supreme Court’s application of the right to privacy doctrine to abortion rights proved far more problematic, legally and politically. In 1972, four states permitted abortions without restrictions, while thirteen allowed abortions “if the pregnant woman’s life or physical or mental health were endangered, if the fetus would be born with a severe physical or mental defect, or if the pregnancy had resulted from rape or incest”; abortions were completely illegal in Pennsylvania and heavily restricted in the remaining states.⁷² On average, several hundred American women a year died as a result of “back alley abortions” in the 1960s.

The legal landscape changed dramatically as a result of the 1973 ruling in *Roe v. Wade*,⁷³ in which the Supreme Court decided the right to privacy encompassed a right for women to terminate a pregnancy, at least under certain scenarios. The justices ruled that while the government did have an interest in protecting the “potentiality of human life,” nonetheless this had to be balanced against the interests of both women’s health and women’s right to decide whether to have an abortion. Accordingly, the court established a framework for deciding whether abortions could be regulated based on the fetus’s viability (i.e., potential to survive outside the womb) and the stage of pregnancy, with no restrictions permissible during the first three months of pregnancy (i.e., the first trimester), during which abortions were deemed safer for women than childbirth itself.

Starting in the 1980s, Supreme Court justices appointed by Republican presidents began to roll back the *Roe* decision. A key turning point was the court’s ruling in *Planned Parenthood v. Casey* in 1992, in which a plurality of the court rejected *Roe*’s framework based on trimesters of pregnancy and replaced it with the undue burden test, which allows restrictions prior to

viability that are not “substantial obstacle[s]” (undue burdens) to women seeking an abortion.⁷⁴ Thus, the court upheld some state restrictions, including a required waiting period between arranging and having an abortion, parental consent (or, if not possible for some reason such as incest, authorization of a judge) for minors, and the requirement that women be informed of the health consequences of having an abortion. Other restrictions such as a requirement that a married woman notify her spouse prior to an abortion were struck down as an undue burden. Since the *Casey* decision, many states have passed other restrictions on abortions, such as banning certain procedures, requiring women to have and view an ultrasound before having an abortion, and implementing more stringent licensing and inspection requirements for facilities where abortions are performed. Although no majority of Supreme Court justices has ever moved to overrule *Roe*, the restrictions on abortion the Court has upheld in the last few decades have made access to abortions more difficult in many areas of the country, particularly in rural states and communities along the U.S.–Mexico border (Figure 4.19). However, in *Whole Woman’s Health v. Hellerstedt* (2016), the Court reinforced *Roe* 5–3 by disallowing two Texas state regulations regarding the delivery of abortion services.⁷⁵ Yet, the issue is far from settled, as the Supreme Court decided in May 2021 to hear in their next term a Mississippi case that would roll back abortion rights considerably. The case would disallow abortions after fifteen weeks.⁷⁶



(a)



(b)

Figure 4.19 A “March for Life” in Knoxville, Tennessee, on January 20, 2013 (a), marks the anniversary of the *Roe v. Wade* decision. On November 15, 2014, protestors in Chicago demonstrate against a crisis pregnancy center (b), a type of organization that counsels against abortion. (credit a: modification of work by Brian Stansberry; credit b: modification of work by Samuel Henderson)

Beyond the issues of contraception and abortion, the right to privacy has been interpreted to encompass a more general right for adults to have noncommercial, consensual sexual relationships in private. However, this legal development is relatively new; as recently as 1986, the Supreme Court ruled that states could still criminalize sex acts between two people of the same sex.⁷⁷ That decision was overturned in 2003 in *Lawrence v. Texas*, which invalidated state laws that criminalized sodomy.⁷⁸

The state and national governments still have leeway to regulate sexual morality to some degree; “anything goes” is not the law of the land, even for actions that are consensual. The Supreme Court has declined to strike down laws in a few states that outlaw the sale of vibrators and other sex toys. Prostitution remains illegal in every state except in certain rural counties in Nevada; both polygamy (marriage to more than one other person) and bestiality (sex with animals) are illegal everywhere. And, as we saw earlier, the states may regulate obscene materials and, in certain situations, material that may be harmful to minors or otherwise indecent; to this end, states and localities have sought to ban or regulate the production, distribution, and sale of pornography.

Privacy of Communications and Property

Another example of heightened concerns about privacy in the modern era is the reality that society is under pervasive surveillance. In the past, monitoring the public was difficult at best. During the Cold War, regimes in the Soviet bloc employed millions of people as domestic spies and informants in an effort to suppress internal dissent through constant monitoring of the general public. Not only was this effort extremely expensive in terms of the human and monetary capital it required, but it also proved remarkably ineffective. Groups like the East German Stasi and the Romanian Securitate were unable to suppress the popular uprisings that undermined communist one-party rule in most of those countries in the late 1980s.

Technology has now made it much easier to track and monitor people. Police cars and roadways are equipped with cameras that can photograph the license plate of every passing car or truck and record it in a database; while allowing police to recover stolen vehicles and catch fleeing suspects, this data can also be used to track the movements of law-abiding citizens. But law enforcement officials don’t even have to go to this much work; millions of car and truck drivers pay tolls electronically without stopping at toll booths thanks to transponders attached to their vehicles, which can be read by scanners well away from any toll road or bridge to monitor traffic flow or any other purpose (Figure 4.20). The pervasive use of GPS (Global Positioning System) raises similar issues.



Figure 4.20 One form of technology that has made it easier to potentially monitor people’s movements is electronic toll collection, such as the E-ZPass system in the Midwest and Northeast, FasTrak in California, and I-Pass in Illinois. (credit: modification of work by Kerry Ceszyk)

Even pedestrians and cyclists are relatively easy to track today. Cameras pointed at sidewalks and roadways can employ facial recognition software to identify people as they walk or bike around a city. Many people carry smartphones that constantly report their location to the nearest cell phone tower and broadcast a beacon signal to nearby wireless hotspots and Bluetooth devices. Police can set up a small device called a Stingray that identifies and tracks all cell phones that attempt to connect to it within a radius of several thousand feet. With the right software, law enforcement and criminals can remotely activate a phone's microphone and camera, effectively planting a bug in someone's pocket without the person even knowing it.

These aren't just gimmicks in a bad science fiction movie; businesses and governments have openly admitted they are using these methods. Research shows that even metadata—information about the messages we send and the calls we make and receive, such as time, location, sender, and recipient but excluding their content—can tell governments and businesses a lot about what someone is doing. Even when this information is collected in an anonymous way, it is often still possible to trace it back to specific individuals, since people travel and communicate in largely predictable patterns.

The next frontier of privacy issues may well be the increased use of drones, small preprogrammed or remotely piloted aircraft. Drones can fly virtually undetected and monitor events from overhead. They can peek into backyards surrounded by fences, and using infrared cameras they can monitor activity inside houses and other buildings. The Fourth Amendment was written in an era when finding out what was going on in someone's home meant either going inside or peeking through a window; applying its protections today, when seeing into someone's house can be as easy as looking at a computer screen miles away, is no longer simple.

In the United States, many advocates of civil liberties are concerned that laws such as the USA PATRIOT Act (i.e., Uniting and Strengthening America by Providing Appropriate Tools Required to Intercept and Obstruct Terrorism Act), passed weeks after the 9/11 attacks in 2001, have given the federal government too much power by making it easy for officials to seek and obtain search warrants or, in some cases, to bypass warrant requirements altogether. Critics have argued that the Patriot Act has largely been used to prosecute ordinary criminals, in particular drug dealers, rather than terrorists as intended. Most European countries, at least on paper, have opted for laws that protect against such government surveillance, perhaps mindful of past experience with communist and fascist regimes. European countries also tend to have stricter laws limiting the collection, retention, and use of private data by companies, which makes it harder for governments to obtain and use that data. Most recently, the battle between Apple Inc. and the National Security Agency (NSA) over whether Apple should allow the government access to key information that is encrypted has made the discussion of this tradeoff salient once again. A recent court outcome in the United States suggests that America may follow Europe's lead. In *Carpenter v. United States* (2018), the first case of its kind, the U.S. Supreme Court ruled that, under the Fourth Amendment, police need a search warrant to gather phone location data as evidence to be used in trials.⁷⁹

Link to Learning

Several groups lobby the government, such as [The Electronic Frontier Foundation](#) and [The Electronic Privacy Information Center](#), on issues related to privacy in the information age, particularly on the Internet.

All this is not to say that technological surveillance tools do not have value or are inherently bad. They can be used for many purposes that would benefit society and, perhaps, even enhance our freedoms. Spending less time stuck in traffic because we know there's been an accident—detected automatically because the cell phones that normally whiz by at the speed limit are now crawling along—gives us time to spend on more valuable activities. Capturing criminals and terrorists by recognizing them or their vehicles before they can continue their agendas will protect the life, liberty, and property of the public at large. At the same time, however, the emergence of these technologies means calls for vigilance and limits on what businesses and governments can do with the information they collect and the length of time they may retain it. We might also be concerned about how this technology could be used by more oppressive regimes. If the technological resources that are at the disposal of today's governments had been available to the East Germany Stasi and the Romanian Securitate, would those repressive regimes have fallen? How much privacy and freedom should citizens sacrifice in order to feel safe?



Figure 5.1 Georgia on My Mind. On August 6, 1965, President Lyndon B. Johnson meets with Atlanta native Martin Luther King, Jr. at the signing of the Voting Rights Act (left). Prior to his election to represent Georgia in the U.S. Senate, Raphael Warnock (D-GA) meets with voters on August 12, 2020 (right). In recent years, Georgia has become ground zero for issues surrounding voter suppression. (credit left: modification of "Lyndon Johnson and Martin Luther King, Jr. - Voting Rights Act" by Yoichi Okamoto/Wikimedia Commons, Public Domain; credit right: modification of "GH_7791" by Reverend Raphael Warnock/Flickr, Public Domain)

Introduction

The U.S Constitution and its founding principles of liberty, equality, and justice are admired and emulated the world over. However, not everyone living in the U.S. has enjoyed the same treatment and freedoms the law promises. When we consider the experiences of women, immigrants, people of color, LGBTQ people, people with disabilities, and other groups, a majority of Americans have been deprived of basic rights and opportunities, and sometimes of citizenship itself. This idea of America is, indeed, a work in progress.

The struggle for civil rights is a story of courageous individuals and social movements awakening fellow Americans, compelling lawmakers, and inspiring the courts to make good on these founding promises. While many changes must still be made, the past one hundred years have seen remarkable progress. Yet, as the rash of thinly-veiled voter suppression bills making their way through state legislatures demonstrate, ([Figure 5.1](#)), members of these groups still encounter prejudice, discrimination, and even exclusion from civic life.

What is the difference between civil liberties and civil rights? How did the African American struggle for civil rights evolve? What challenges did women overcome in securing the right to vote, and what obstacles do they and other U.S. groups still face? This chapter addresses these and other questions in exploring the essential concepts of civil rights.

5.1 What Are Civil Rights and How Do We Identify Them?

Learning Objectives

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

- Define the concept of civil rights
- Describe the standards that courts use when deciding whether a discriminatory law or regulation is unconstitutional
- Identify three core questions for recognizing a civil rights problem

The belief that people should be treated equally under the law is one of the cornerstones of political thought in the United States. Yet not all citizens have been treated equally throughout the nation’s history, and some are treated differently even today. For example, until 1920, nearly all women in the United States lacked the right to vote. Black men received the right to vote in 1870, but as late as 1940, only 3 percent of African American adults living in the South were registered to vote, due largely to laws designed to keep them from the polls.¹ Americans were not allowed to enter into legal marriage with a member of the same sex in many U.S. states until 2015. Some types of unequal treatment are considered acceptable in some contexts, while others are clearly not. No one would consider it acceptable to allow a ten-year-old to vote, because a child lacks the ability to understand important political issues, but all reasonable people would agree that it is wrong to mandate racial segregation or to deny someone voting rights on the basis of race. It is important to understand which types of inequality are unacceptable and why.

DEFINING CIVIL RIGHTS

Essentially, *civil rights* are guarantees by the government that it will treat people equally—particularly people belonging to groups that have historically been denied the same rights and opportunities as others. The due process clause of the Fifth Amendment to the U.S. Constitution enacted the Declaration of Independence's proclamation that “all men are created equal” by providing *de jure* equal treatment under the law. According to Chief Justice Earl Warren in the Supreme Court case of *Bolling v. Sharpe* (1954), “discrimination may be so unjustifiable as to be violative of due process.”² Additional guarantees of equality were provided in 1868 by the equal protection clause of the Fourteenth Amendment, which states, in part, that “No State shall . . . deny to any person within its jurisdiction the equal protection of the laws.” Thus, between the Fifth and Fourteenth Amendments, neither state governments nor the federal government may treat people unequally unless unequal treatment is necessary to maintain important governmental interests such as public safety.

We can contrast civil rights with *civil liberties*, which are limitations on government power designed to protect our fundamental freedoms. For example, the Eighth Amendment prohibits the application of “cruel and unusual punishments” to those convicted of crimes, a limitation on the power of members of each governmental branch: judges, law enforcement, and lawmakers. As another example, the guarantee of equal protection means the laws and the Constitution must be applied on an equal basis, limiting the government’s ability to discriminate or treat some people differently, unless the unequal treatment is based on a valid reason, such as age. A law that imprisons men twice as long as women for the same offense, or restricting people with disabilities from contacting members of Congress, would treat some people differently from others for no valid reason and would therefore be unconstitutional. According to the Supreme Court’s interpretation of the Equal Protection Clause, “all persons

similarly circumstanced shall be treated alike.”³ If people are not similarly circumstanced, however, they may be treated differently. Asian Americans and Latinos overstaying a visa are similarly circumstanced; however, a blind driver or a ten-year-old driver is differently circumstanced than a sighted, adult driver.

IDENTIFYING DISCRIMINATION

Laws that treat one group of people differently from others are not always unconstitutional. In fact, the government engages in legal discrimination quite often. In most states, you must be eighteen years old to smoke cigarettes and twenty-one to drink alcohol; these laws discriminate against the young. To get a driver’s license so you can legally drive a car on public roads, you have to be a minimum age and pass tests showing your knowledge, practical skills, and vision. Some public colleges and universities run by the government have an open admission policy, which means the school admits all who apply, but others require that students have a high school diploma or a particular score on the SAT or ACT or a GPA above a certain number. This is a kind of discrimination, because these requirements treat people who do not have a high school diploma or a high enough GPA or SAT score differently. How can the federal, state, and local governments discriminate in all these ways even though the equal protection clause seems to suggest that everyone be treated the same?

The answer to this question lies in the *purpose* of the discriminatory practice. In most cases when the courts are deciding whether discrimination is unlawful, the government has to demonstrate only that it has a good reason to do so. Unless the person or group challenging the law can prove otherwise, the courts will generally decide the discriminatory practice is allowed. In these cases, the courts are applying the rational basis test. That is, as long as there’s a reason for treating some people differently that is “rationally related to a legitimate government interest,” the discriminatory act or law or policy is acceptable.⁴ For example, since letting blind people operate cars would be dangerous to others on the road, the law forbidding them to drive is reasonably justified on the grounds of safety and is therefore allowed even though it discriminates against the blind. Similarly, when universities and colleges refuse to admit students who fail to meet a certain test score or GPA, they can discriminate against students with weaker grades and test scores because these students most likely do not yet possess the knowledge or skills needed to do well in their classes and graduate from the institution. The universities and colleges have a legitimate reason for denying these students entrance.

The courts, however, are much more skeptical when it comes to certain other forms of discrimination. Because of the United States’ history of ethnic, racial, gender, and religious discrimination, the courts apply more stringent rules to policies, laws, and actions that discriminate on these bases (race, ethnicity, gender, religion, or national origin).⁵

Discrimination based on gender or sex is generally examined with intermediate scrutiny. The standard of intermediate scrutiny was first applied by the Supreme Court in *Craig v. Boren* (1976) and again in *Clark v. Jeter* (1988).⁶ It requires the government to demonstrate that treating men and women differently is “substantially related to an important governmental objective.” This puts the burden of proof on the *government* to demonstrate why the unequal treatment is justifiable, not on the individual who alleges unfair discrimination has taken place.

In practice, this means laws that treat men and women differently are sometimes upheld, although usually they are not. For example, in the 1980s and 1990s, the courts ruled that states could not operate single-sex institutions of higher education and that such schools, like South Carolina’s military college The Citadel, shown in [Figure 5.2](#), must admit both male and female students.⁷ Women in the military are now also allowed to serve in all combat roles, although the courts have continued to allow the Selective Service System (the draft) to register only men and not women.⁸

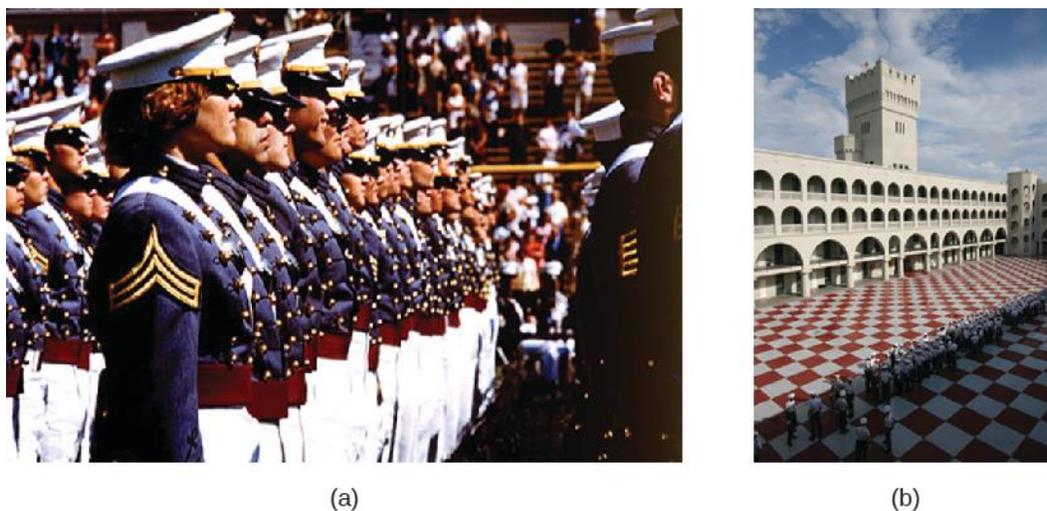


Figure 5.2 While the first female cadets graduated from the U.S. Military Academy at West Point in 1980 (a), The Citadel, a military college in South Carolina (b), was an all-male institution until 1995 when a young woman named Shannon Faulkner enrolled in the school.

Discrimination against members of racial, ethnic, or religious groups or those of various national origins is reviewed to the greatest degree by the courts, which apply the strict scrutiny standard in these cases. Under strict scrutiny, the burden of proof is on the government to demonstrate that there is a compelling governmental interest in treating people from one group differently from those who are not part of that group—the law or action can be “narrowly tailored” to achieve the goal in question, and that it is the “least restrictive means” available to achieve that goal.⁹ In other words, if there is a non-discriminatory way to accomplish the goal in question, discrimination should not take place. In the modern era, laws and actions that are challenged under strict scrutiny have rarely been upheld. Strict scrutiny, however, was the legal basis for the Supreme Court’s 1944 upholding of the legality of the internment of Japanese Americans during World War II, discussed later in this chapter.¹⁰ Finally, affirmative action consists of government programs and policies designed to benefit members of groups historically subject to discrimination. Much of the controversy surrounding affirmative action is about whether strict scrutiny should be applied to these cases.

PUTTING CIVIL RIGHTS IN THE CONSTITUTION

At the time of the nation’s founding, of course, the treatment of many groups was unequal: the rights of women were decidedly fewer than those of men, and neither they, the hundreds of thousands of enslaved people of African descent, or indigenous Americans were considered

fully human, let alone U.S. citizens. While the early United States was perhaps a more inclusive society than most of the world at that time, equal treatment of all remained a radical idea.

The aftermath of the Civil War marked a turning point for civil rights. The Republican majority in Congress was enraged by the actions of the reconstituted governments of the southern states. In these states, many former Confederate politicians and their sympathizers returned to power and attempted to circumvent the Thirteenth Amendment's freeing of enslaved men and women by passing laws known as the Black codes. These laws were designed to reduce formerly enslaved people to the status of serfs or indentured servants. Black people were not just denied the right to vote, but also could be arrested and jailed for vagrancy or idleness if they lacked jobs. Black people were excluded from public schools and state colleges and were subject to violence at the hands of White people (Figure 5.3).¹¹

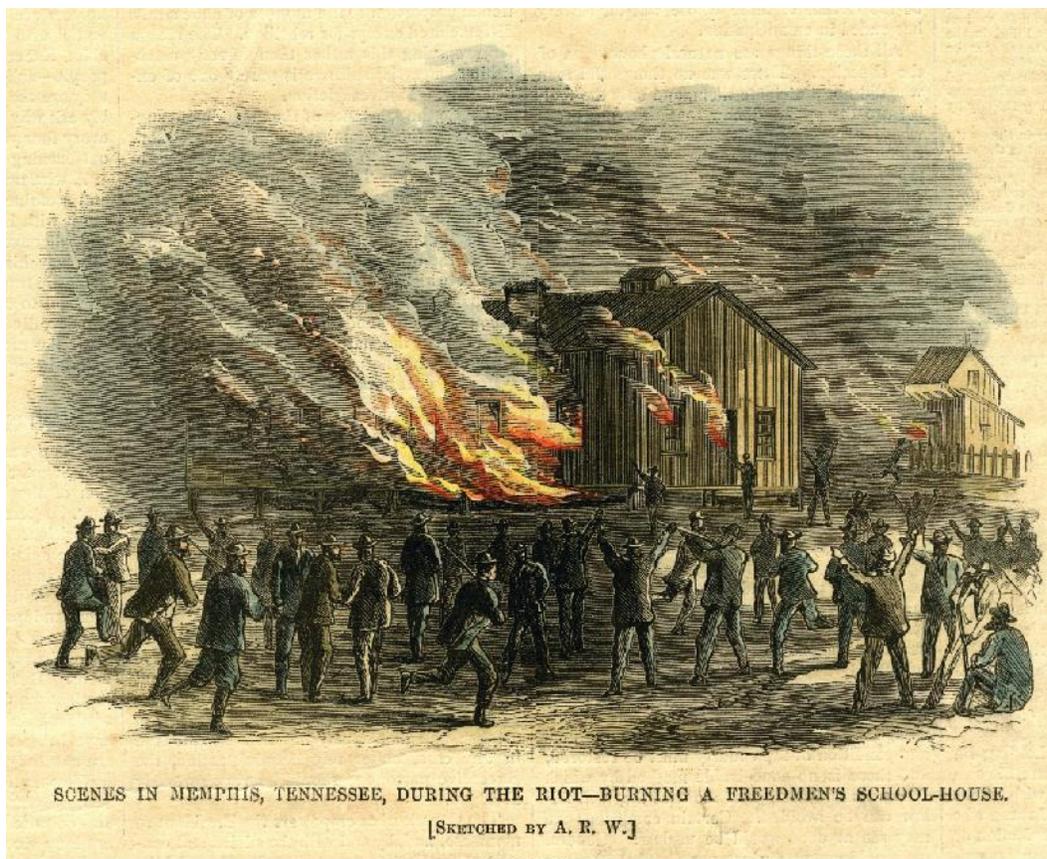


Figure 5.3 A school built by the federal government for formerly enslaved people burned after being set on fire during a race riot in Memphis, Tennessee, in 1866. White southerners, angered by their defeat in the Civil War and the loss of the enslaved people they considered property, attacked and killed formerly enslaved people, destroyed their property, and terrorized White northerners who attempted to improve the lives of freed men and women.

To override the southern states' actions, lawmakers in Congress proposed two amendments to the Constitution designed to give political equality and power to formerly enslaved people. Once passed by Congress and ratified by the necessary number of states, these became the

Fourteenth and Fifteenth Amendments. In addition to including the equal protection clause as noted above, the Fourteenth Amendment also was designed to ensure that the states would respect the civil liberties of freed people. The Fifteenth Amendment was proposed to secure the right to vote for Black men, which will be discussed in more detail later in this chapter.

IDENTIFYING CIVIL RIGHTS ISSUES

Looking back, it's relatively easy to identify civil rights issues that arose, looking into the future is much harder. For example, few people fifty years ago would have identified the rights of gay or transgender Americans as an important civil rights issue, or predicted it would become one. Similarly, in past decades the rights of those with disabilities, particularly intellectual disabilities, were often ignored by the public at large. Many people with disabilities were institutionalized and given little further thought, and until very recently, laws remained on the books in some states allowing those with intellectual or developmental disabilities to be subject to forced sterilization.¹² Today, most of us view this treatment as barbaric.

Clearly, then, new civil rights issues can emerge over time. How can we, as citizens, identify them as they emerge and distinguish genuine claims of discrimination from claims by those who have merely been unable to convince a majority to agree with their viewpoints? For example, how do we decide if sixteen-year-olds are discriminated against because they are not allowed to vote, as some U.S. lawmakers are starting to suggest? We can identify true discrimination by applying the following analytical process:

1. *Which groups?* First, identify the group of people who are facing discrimination.
2. *Which right(s) are threatened?* Second, what right or rights are being denied to members of this group?
3. *What do we do?* Third, what can the government do to bring about a fair situation for the affected group? Is proposing and enacting such a remedy realistic?

Get Connected!

Join the Fight for Civil Rights

One way to get involved in the fight for civil rights is to stay informed. The Southern Poverty Law Center (SPLC) is a not-for-profit advocacy group based in Montgomery, Alabama. Lawyers for the SPLC specialize in civil rights litigation and represent many people whose rights have been violated, from victims of hate crimes to undocumented immigrants. They provide [summaries of important civil rights cases](#) under their Docket section.

Activity: Visit the [SPLC website](#) to find current information about a variety of different hate groups. In what part of the country do hate groups seem to be concentrated? Where are hate incidents most likely to occur? What might be some reasons for this?

Link to Learning

Civil rights institutes are found throughout the United States and especially in the south. One of the most prominent civil rights institutes is the [Birmingham Civil Rights Institute](#), which is located in Alabama.

5.2 The African American Struggle for Equality

Learning Objectives

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

- Identify key events in the history of African American civil rights
- Explain how the courts, Congress, and the executive branch supported the civil rights movement
- Describe the role of grassroots efforts in the civil rights movement

Many groups in U.S. history have sought recognition as equal citizens. Although each group's efforts have been notable and important, arguably the greatest, longest, and most violent struggle remains that of African Americans, whose dehumanization was even written into the text of the Constitution in the clause counting them as three fifths of a person. Their fight for freedom and equality provided the legal and moral foundation for others who sought recognition of their equality later on.

SLAVERY AND THE CIVIL WAR

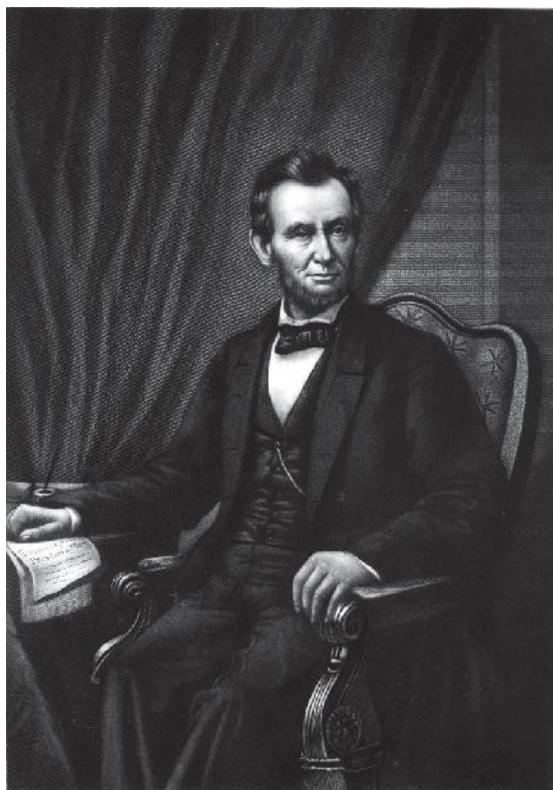
In the Declaration of Independence, Thomas Jefferson made the radical statement that “all men are created equal” and “are endowed by their Creator with certain unalienable Rights, that among these are Life, Liberty and the pursuit of Happiness.” Yet, like other wealthy landowners of his time, Jefferson also owned dozens of other human beings as his personal property. He recognized this contradiction, personally considered the institution of slavery to be a “hideous blot” on the nation, and agreed to free those he held in bondage upon his death.¹³ However, to forge a political union that would stand the test of time, he and the other founders—and later the framers of the Constitution—chose not to address the issue in any definitive way. Political support for abolition was very much a minority stance in the United States at the time, although after the Revolution many of the northern states followed the European example of fifty years prior in abolishing slavery.¹⁴

As the new United States expanded westward, however, the issue of slavery became harder to ignore and ignited much controversy. Many opponents of slavery were willing to accept the institution if it remained largely confined to the South but did not want it to spread westward. They feared the expansion of slavery would lead to the political dominance of the South over the North and would deprive small farmers in the newly acquired western territories who could not afford to enslave others.¹⁵ Abolitionists, primarily in the North, argued that slavery was immoral and contrary to the nation's values and demanded an end to it.

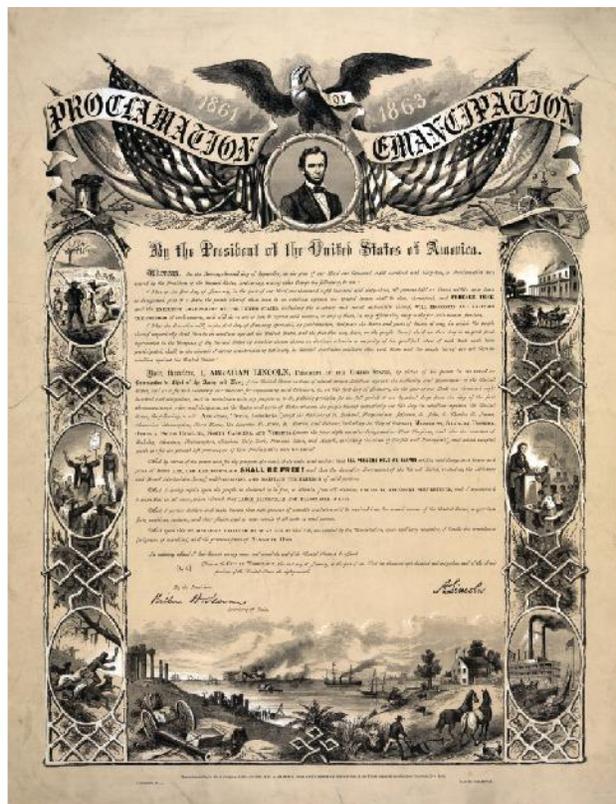
The spread of slavery into the West seemed inevitable, however, following the Supreme Court's 1857 ruling in the case *Dred Scott v. Sandford*.¹⁶ The justices rejected Scott's argument that though he had been born into slavery, his time spent in free states and territories where slavery had been banned by the federal government had made him a free man. In fact, the Court's majority stated that Scott had no legal right to sue for his freedom at all because Black people (whether free or enslaved) were not, and could not become, U.S. citizens. Thus, Scott lacked

the standing to even appear before the court. The Court also held that Congress lacked the power to decide whether slavery would be permitted in a territory that had been acquired after the Constitution was ratified. This decision had the effect of prohibiting the federal government from passing any laws that would limit the expansion of slavery into any part of the West.

Ultimately, of course, the issue was decided by the Civil War (1861–1865), with the southern states seceding to defend "states' rights," specifically, the purported right to own human property, without federal interference.¹⁷ Although at the beginning of the war, President Abraham Lincoln had been willing to allow slavery to continue in the South to preserve the Union, he changed his policies regarding abolition over the course of the war. The first step was the issuance of the Emancipation Proclamation on January 1, 1863 (Figure 5.4). Although it stated "all persons held as slaves . . . henceforward shall be free," the proclamation was limited in effect to the states that had rebelled. Enslaved people in states that had remained within the Union, such as Maryland and Delaware were not set free, nor were they in parts of the Confederacy already occupied by the Union army. Although enslaved people in rebel states were freed by federal decree, the relatively small Union troop presence made it impossible to enforce their release from bondage.¹⁸



(a)



(b)

Figure 5.4 In this memorial engraving from 1865 (the year he was assassinated), President Abraham Lincoln is shown with his hand resting on a copy of the Emancipation Proclamation (a). Despite popular belief, the Emancipation Proclamation (b) actually freed very few enslaved people, though it did change the meaning of the war.

RECONSTRUCTION

At the end of the Civil War, the South entered a period called Reconstruction (1865–1877) during which state governments were reorganized before the rebellious states were allowed to be readmitted to the Union. As part of this process, the Republican Party pushed for a permanent end to slavery. A constitutional amendment to this effect was passed by the House of Representatives in January of 1865, after having already been approved by the Senate in April of 1864, and it was ratified in December of 1865 as the Thirteenth Amendment. The amendment's first section states, "Neither slavery nor involuntary servitude, except as a punishment for crime whereof the party shall have been duly convicted, shall exist within the United States, or any place subject to their jurisdiction." In effect, this amendment outlawed slavery in the United States.

The changes wrought by the Fourteenth Amendment were more extensive. In addition to introducing the equal protection clause to the Constitution, this amendment also extended the due process clause of the Fifth Amendment to the states, required the states to respect the privileges or immunities of all citizens, and, for the first time, defined citizenship at the national and state levels. People could no longer be excluded from citizenship based solely on their race. Although lack of political or judicial action rendered some of these provisions toothless, others were pivotal in the expansion of civil rights.

The Fifteenth Amendment stated that people could not be denied the right to vote based on "race, color, or previous condition of servitude." This construction allowed states to continue to decide the qualifications of voters as long as those qualifications seemed to be race-neutral. Thus, while states could not deny Black people the right to vote on the basis of race, they could deny it on any number of arbitrary grounds such as literacy, landownership, affluence, or political knowledge.

Although the immediate effect of these provisions was quite profound, over time the Republicans in Congress gradually lost interest in pursuing Reconstruction policies, and the Reconstruction ended with the end of military rule in the South and the withdrawal of the Union army in 1877.¹⁹ Following the army's removal, political control of the South fell once again into the hands of White men, and violence was used to discourage Black people from exercising the rights they had been granted.²⁰ The revocation of voting rights, or disenfranchisement, took a number of forms; not every southern state used the same methods, and some states used more than one, but they all disproportionately affected Black voter registration and turnout.²¹

Perhaps the most famous of the tools of disenfranchisement were literacy tests and understanding tests. Literacy tests, which had been used in the North since the 1850s to disqualify naturalized European immigrants from voting, called on the prospective voter to demonstrate his (and later, her) ability to read a particular passage of text. However, since voter registration officials had discretion to decide what text the voter was to read, they could give easy passages to voters they wanted to register (typically, white people) and more difficult passages to those whose registration they wanted to deny (typically, Black people). Understanding tests required the prospective voter to explain the *meaning* of a particular

passage of text, often a provision of the U.S. Constitution, or answer a series of questions related to citizenship. Again, since the official examining the prospective voter could decide which passage or questions to choose, the difficulty of the test might vary dramatically between African American and white applicants.²² Even had these tests been administered fairly and equitably, however, most African Americans would have been at a huge disadvantage, because few had been taught to read. Although schools for Black people had existed in some places, southern states had made it largely illegal to teach enslaved people to read and write. At the beginning of the Civil War, only 5 percent of Black people could read and write, and most of them lived in the North.²³ Some were able to take advantage of educational opportunities after they were freed, but many were not able to gain effective literacy.

In some states, poorer, less-literate white voters feared being disenfranchised by the literacy and understanding tests. Some states introduced a loophole, known as the grandfather clause, to allow less literate white people to vote. The grandfather clause exempted those who had been allowed to vote in that state prior to the Civil War and their descendants from literacy and understanding tests.²⁴ Because Black people were not allowed to vote prior to the Civil War, but most White men had been voting at a time when there were no literacy tests, this loophole allowed most illiterate white people to vote ([Figure 5.5](#)) while leaving obstacles in place for Black people who wanted to vote as well. Time limits were often placed on these provisions because state legislators realized that they might quickly be declared unconstitutional, but they lasted long enough to allow illiterate White men to register to vote.²⁵



Figure 5.5 A magazine cartoon from 1879 ridicules the practice of illiterate, southern White people requiring that a “blakman” be “eddikated” before he could vote. The grandfather clause made such a situation possible.

In states where the voting rights of poor white people were less of a concern, another tool for disenfranchisement was the poll tax (Figure 5.6). This was an annual per-person tax, typically one or two dollars (on the order of \$20 to \$50 today), that a person had to pay to register to vote. People who didn’t want to vote didn’t have to pay, but in several states the poll tax was cumulative, so if you decided to vote you would have to pay not only the tax due for that year but any poll tax from previous years as well. Because formerly enslaved people were usually quite poor, they were less likely than White men to be able to pay poll taxes.²⁶

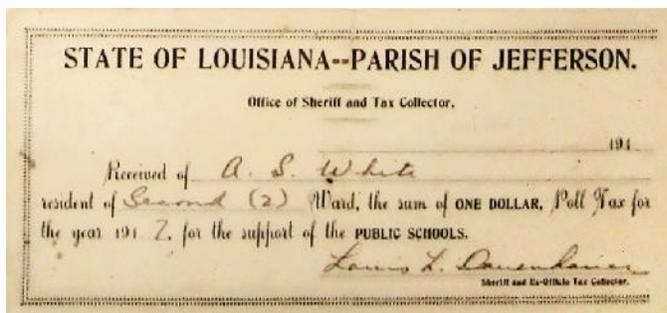


Figure 5.6 According to this receipt, a man named A. S. White paid his \$1 poll tax in Jefferson Parish, Louisiana, in 1917.

Although these methods were usually sufficient to ensure that Black people were kept away from the polls, some dedicated African Americans did manage to register to vote despite the obstacles placed in their way. To ensure their vote was largely meaningless, the White elites used their control of the Democratic Party to create the white primary: primary elections in which only White people were allowed to vote. The state party organizations argued that as private groups, rather than part of the state government, they had no obligation to follow the Fifteenth Amendment's requirement not to deny the right to vote on the basis of race. Furthermore, they contended, voting for nominees to run for office was not the same as electing those who would actually hold office. So they held primary elections to choose the Democratic nominee in which only White citizens were allowed to vote.²⁷ Once the nominee had been chosen, they might face token opposition from a Republican or minor-party candidate in the general election, but since White voters had agreed beforehand to support whoever won the Democrats' primary, the outcome of the general election was a foregone conclusion.

With Black people effectively disenfranchised, the restored southern state governments undermined guarantees of equal treatment in the Fourteenth Amendment. They passed laws that excluded African Americans from juries and allowed the imprisonment and forced labor of "idle" Black citizens. The laws also called for segregation of White and Black people in public places under the doctrine known as "separate but equal." As long as nominally equal facilities were provided for both races, it was legal to require members of each race to use the facilities designated for them. Similarly, state and local governments passed laws limiting neighborhoods in which Black and White people could live. Collectively, these discriminatory laws came to be known as Jim Crow laws. The Supreme Court upheld the separate but equal doctrine in 1896 in *Plessy v. Ferguson*, inconsistent with the Fourteenth Amendment's equal protection clause, and allowed segregation to continue.²⁸

CIVIL RIGHTS IN THE COURTS

By the turn of the twentieth century, the position of African Americans was quite bleak. Even outside the South, racial inequality was a fact of everyday life. African American leaders and thinkers themselves disagreed on the right path forward. Some, like Booker T. Washington, argued that acceptance of inequality and segregation over the short term would allow African Americans to focus their efforts on improving their educational and social status until White people were forced to acknowledge them as equals. W. E. B. Du Bois, however, argued for a

more confrontational approach and in 1909 founded the National Association for the Advancement of Colored People (NAACP) as a rallying point for securing equality. White liberals dominated the organization in its early years, but Black people assumed control over its operations in the 1920s.²⁹

The NAACP soon focused on a strategy of overturning Jim Crow laws through the courts. Perhaps its greatest series of legal successes consisted of its efforts to challenge segregation in education. Early cases brought by the NAACP dealt with racial discrimination in higher education. In 1938, the Supreme Court essentially gave states a choice: they could either integrate institutions of higher education, or they could establish an equivalent university or college for African Americans.³⁰ Southern states chose to establish colleges for Black people rather than allow them into all-White state institutions. Although this ruling expanded opportunities for professional and graduate education in areas such as law and medicine for African Americans by requiring states to provide institutions for them to attend, it nevertheless allowed segregated colleges and universities to continue to exist.

Link to Learning

The [NAACP](#) was pivotal in securing African American civil rights and today continues to address civil rights violations, such as police brutality and the disproportionate percentage of African American people that die under the death penalty.

The landmark court decision of the judicial phase of the civil rights movement settled the *Brown v. Board of Education* case in 1954.³¹ In this case, the Supreme Court unanimously overturned its decision in *Plessy v. Ferguson* as it pertained to public education, stating that a separate but equal education was a logical impossibility. Even with the same funding and equivalent facilities, a segregated school could not have the same teachers or environment as the equivalent school for another race. The court also rested its decision in part on social science studies suggesting that racial discrimination led to feelings of inferiority among Black children. The only way to dispel this sense of inferiority was to end segregation and integrate public schools.

It is safe to say this ruling was controversial. While integration of public schools took place without much incident in some areas of the South, particularly where there were few Black students, elsewhere, it was confrontational—or nonexistent. In recognition of the fact that southern states would delay school integration for as long as possible, civil rights activists urged the federal government to enforce the Supreme Court’s decision. Bayard Rustin and A. Philip Randolph organized a Prayer Pilgrimage for Freedom in Washington, DC, on May 17, 1957, in which approximately twenty-five thousand African Americans participated.³²

A few months later, in Little Rock, Arkansas, governor Orval Faubus resisted court-ordered integration and mobilized National Guard troops to keep Black students out of Central High School. President Eisenhower then called up the Arkansas National Guard for federal duty (essentially taking the troops out of Faubus’s hands) and sent soldiers of the 101st Airborne Division to escort students to and from classes, as shown in [Figure 5.7](#). To avoid integration, Faubus closed four high schools in Little Rock the following school year.³³



Figure 5.7 Opposition to the 1957 integration of Little Rock’s all-White Central High School led President Eisenhower to call in soldiers of the 101st Airborne Division. For a year, they escorted nine African American students to and from school and to and from classes within the school. (credit: The U.S. Army)

In Virginia, state leaders employed a strategy of “massive resistance” to school integration, which led to the closure of a large number of public schools across the state, some for years.³⁴ Although *de jure* segregation, segregation mandated by law, had ended on paper, in practice, few efforts were made to integrate schools in most school districts with substantial Black student populations until the late 1960s. Many White southerners who objected to sending their children to school with Black students then established private academies that admitted only White students; many of these schools remain overwhelmingly White today.³⁵

School and other segregation was and is hardly limited to the South. Many neighborhoods in northern cities remain segregated by virtue of “red lining” districts where minorities were allowed and not allowed to live. Restrictive real estate covenants bound White residents to not sell their houses to African Americans and sometimes not to Chinese, Japanese, Mexicans, Filipinos, Jews, and other ethnic minorities. In New York City in the late 1950s, a group of activist parents led by Mae Mallory protested the inadequate schools in their neighborhood; a court ruled that New York was engaging in *de facto* segregation, and forced the city to institute policies that would provide more equitable access.³⁶ More recently, banks have been fined for not lending to people of color to buy homes and start business at rates commensurate with similarly situated prospective White borrowers. Relegation of minority residents to less desirable neighborhoods has the practical effect of diminishing both generational wealth, and the tax base needed to build, maintain, and improve schools and other institutions that might hasten equality and integration.

In the postwar era of White flight, however, the Supreme Court had been evolving into a more progressive force in the promotion and preservation of civil rights. In the case of *Shelley v. Kraemer* (1948), the Supreme Court held that while such covenants did not violate the Fourteenth Amendment because they consisted of agreements between private citizens, their

provisions could not be enforced by courts.³⁷ Because state courts are government institutions and the Fourteenth Amendment prohibits the government from denying people equal protection of the law, the courts' enforcement of such covenants would be a violation of the amendment. Thus, if a White family chose to sell its house to a Black family and the other homeowners in the neighborhood tried to sue the seller, the court would not hear the case. In 1967, the Supreme Court struck down a Virginia law that prohibited interracial marriage in *Loving v. Virginia*.³⁸

LEGISLATING CIVIL RIGHTS

Beyond these favorable court rulings, however, progress toward equality for African Americans remained slow in the 1950s. In 1962, Congress proposed what later became the Twenty-Fourth Amendment, which banned the poll tax in elections to federal (but not state or local) office; the amendment went into effect after being ratified in early 1964. Several southern states continued to require residents to pay poll taxes in order to vote in state elections until 1966 when, in the case of *Harper v. Virginia Board of Elections*, the Supreme Court declared that requiring payment of a poll tax in order to vote in an election at any level was unconstitutional.³⁹

The slow rate of progress led to frustration within the Black community. Newer, grassroots organizations such as the Southern Christian Leadership Conference (SCLC), Congress of Racial Equality (CORE), and Student Non-Violent Coordinating Committee (SNCC) challenged the NAACP's position as the leading civil rights organization and questioned its legal-focused strategy. These newer groups tended to prefer more confrontational approaches, including the use of direct action campaigns relying on marches and demonstrations. The strategies of nonviolent resistance and civil disobedience, or the refusal to obey an unjust law, had been effective in the campaign led by Mahatma Gandhi to liberate colonial India from British rule in the 1930s and 1940s. Civil rights pioneers adopted these measures in the 1955–1956 Montgomery bus boycott. After Rosa Parks refused to give up her bus seat to a White person and was arrested, a group of Black women carried out a day-long boycott of Montgomery's public transit system. This boycott was then extended for over a year and overseen by union organizer E. D. Nixon. The effort desegregated public transportation in that city.⁴⁰

Direct action also took such forms as the sit-in campaigns to desegregate lunch counters that began in Greensboro, North Carolina, in 1960, and the 1961 Freedom Rides in which Black and White volunteers rode buses and trains through the South to enforce a 1946 Supreme Court decision that desegregated interstate transportation (*Morgan v. Virginia*).⁴¹ While such focused campaigns could be effective, they often had little impact in places where they were not replicated. In addition, some of the campaigns led to violence against both the campaigns' leaders and ordinary people; Rosa Parks, a longtime NAACP member and graduate of the Highlander Folk School for civil rights activists, whose actions had begun the Montgomery boycott, received death threats, E. D. Nixon's home was bombed, and the Freedom Riders were attacked in Alabama.⁴²

As the campaign for civil rights continued and gained momentum, President John F. Kennedy called for Congress to pass new civil rights legislation, which began to work its way through

Congress in 1963. The resulting law (pushed heavily and then signed by President Lyndon B. Johnson after Kennedy's assassination) was the Civil Rights Act of 1964, which had wide-ranging effects on U.S. society. Not only did the act outlaw government discrimination and the unequal application of voting qualifications by race, but it also, for the first time, outlawed segregation and other forms of discrimination by most businesses that were open to the public, including hotels, theaters, and restaurants that were not private clubs. It outlawed discrimination on the basis of race, ethnicity, religion, sex, or national origin by most employers, and it created the Equal Employment Opportunity Commission (EEOC) to monitor employment discrimination claims and help enforce this provision of the law. The provisions that affected private businesses and employers were legally justified not by the Fourteenth Amendment's guarantee of equal protection of the laws but instead by Congress's power to regulate interstate commerce.⁴³

Even though the Civil Rights Act of 1964 had a monumental impact over the long term, it did not end efforts by many southern White people to maintain the White-dominated political power structure in the region. Progress in registering African American voters remained slow in many states despite increased federal activity supporting it, so civil rights leaders including Martin Luther King, Jr. decided to draw the public eye to the area where the greatest resistance to voter registration drives were taking place. The SCLC and SNCC particularly focused their attention on the city of Selma, Alabama, which had been the site of violent reactions against civil rights activities.

The organizations' leaders planned a march from Selma to Montgomery in March 1965. Their first attempt to march was violently broken up by state police and sheriff's deputies ([Figure 5.8](#)). The second attempt was aborted because King feared it would lead to a brutal confrontation with police and violate a court order from a federal judge who had been sympathetic to the movement in the past. That night, three of the marchers, White ministers from the north, were attacked and beaten with clubs by members of the Ku Klux Klan; one of the victims died from his injuries. Televised images of the brutality against protesters and the death of a minister led to greater public sympathy for the cause. Eventually, a third march was successful in reaching the state capital of Montgomery.⁴⁴



(a)



(b)

Figure 5.8 The police attack on civil rights demonstrators as they crossed the Edmund Pettus Bridge on their way from Selma to Montgomery on March 7, 1965, is remembered as “Bloody Sunday” (a). John Lewis's funeral procession crosses the Edmund Pettus bridge on July 26, 2020 (b). (credit a: modification of "Bloody Sunday-officers await demonstrators" by U.S. Department of Justice/Wikimedia Commons, Public Domain; credit b: modification of "Rep. John Lewis Funeral Procession Over Edmund Pettus Bridge" by C-SPAN/YouTube, Public Domain)

Link to Learning

The 1987 PBS documentary [Eyes on the Prize](#) won several Emmys and other awards for its coverage of major events in the civil rights movement, including the Montgomery bus boycott, the battle for school integration in Little Rock, the march from Selma to Montgomery, and Martin Luther King, Jr.'s leadership of the march on Washington, DC.

The events at Selma galvanized support in Congress for a follow-up bill solely dealing with the right to vote. The Voting Rights Act of 1965 went beyond previous laws by requiring greater oversight of elections by federal officials. Literacy and understanding tests, and other devices used to discriminate against voters on the basis of race, were banned. The Voting Rights Act proved to have much more immediate and dramatic effect than the laws that preceded it; what had been a fairly slow process of improving voter registration and participation was replaced by a rapid increase of Black voter registration rates—although White registration rates increased over this period as well.⁴⁵ To many people's way of thinking, however, the Supreme Court turned back the clocks when it gutted a core aspect of the Voting Rights Act in *Shelby County v. Holder* (2013).⁴⁶ No longer would states need federal approval to change laws and policies related to voting. Indeed, many states with a history of voter discrimination quickly resumed restrictive practices with laws requiring photo ID; limiting early voting, ballot drop-off locations, and hours; and making registering and waiting to vote more onerous. Some of the new restrictions are already being challenged in the courts.⁴⁷

Not all African Americans in the civil rights movement were comfortable with gradual change. Instead of using marches and demonstrations to change people's attitudes, calling for tougher civil rights laws, or suing for their rights in court, they favored more immediate action to prevent White oppression and protect their communities. Men like Malcolm X, and groups like the Black Panthers were willing to use other means to achieve their goals ([Figure 5.9](#)).⁴⁸ Faced with continual violence at the hands of police and acts of terrorism like the bombing of a Black church in Alabama that killed four girls, Malcolm X expressed significant distrust of White people. He sought to raise the self-esteem of Black people and advocated for their separation from the United States through eventual emigration to Africa. In general, Malcolm X rejected the mainstream civil right's movement's integration and assimilation approach, and laid the foundation for the Black Power movement, which sought self-determination and independence for Black people. His position was attractive to many young African Americans, especially after Martin Luther King, Jr. was assassinated in 1968.



Figure 5.9 Martin Luther King, Jr. (left) and Malcolm X (right) adopted different approaches to securing civil rights for Black people. This occasion, a Senate debate of the Civil Rights Act of 1964, was the only time the two men ever met.

CONTINUING CHALLENGES FOR AFRICAN AMERICANS

The civil rights movement for African Americans did not end with the passage of the Voting Rights Act in 1965. For the last fifty years, the African American community has faced challenges related to both past and current discrimination, and progress on both fronts remains slow, uneven, and often frustrating.

Legacies of the *de jure* segregation of the past remain in much of the United States. Many Black people still live in predominantly Black neighborhoods where their ancestors were forced by laws and housing covenants to live.⁴⁹ Even those who live in the suburbs, once largely populated only by White people, tend to live in suburbs that are mostly populated by Black people.⁵⁰ Some two million African American young people attend schools whose student body is composed almost entirely of students of color.⁵¹ During the late 1960s and early 1970s, efforts to tackle these problems were stymied by large-scale public opposition, not just in the South but across the nation. Attempts to integrate public schools through the use of busing—transporting students from one segregated neighborhood to another to achieve more racially balanced schools—were particularly unpopular and helped contribute to “White flight” from cities to the suburbs.⁵² This White flight has created *de facto* segregation, a form of segregation that results from the choices of individuals to live in segregated communities without government action or support.

Today, a lack of well-paying jobs in many urban areas, combined with the poverty resulting from the legacies of slavery, Jim Crow era terror, and persistent racism, has trapped many Black people in under-served neighborhoods with markedly lower opportunity and life expectancy.⁵³ While the Civil Rights Act of 1964 created opportunities for members of the Black middle class to advance economically and socially, and to live in the same neighborhoods as the White middle class, their departure left many Black neighborhoods mired in poverty and without the strong community ties that existed during the era of legal segregation. Many of these neighborhoods continue to suffer from high rates of crime and violence.⁵⁴ Police also appear, consciously or subconsciously, to engage in racial profiling: singling out Black people (and Latino people) for greater attention than members of other racial and ethnic groups, as former FBI director James B. Comey and former New York police commissioner Bill Bratton have admitted.⁵⁵ When incidents of real or perceived injustice arise, as recently occurred after a series of deaths of Black people at the hands of police in Ferguson, Missouri; Staten Island, New York; Baltimore, Maryland; Louisville, Kentucky; and Minneapolis, Minnesota, many African Americans turn to the streets to protest because they feel abandoned or ignored by politicians of all races.

While the public mood may have shifted toward greater concern about economic inequality in the United States, substantial policy changes to immediately improve the economic standing of African Americans in general have not followed. The Obama administration proposed new rules under the Fair Housing Act that were intended to lead to more integrated communities in the future; however, the Trump administration repeatedly sought to weaken the Fair Housing Act, primarily through lack of enforcement of existing regulations.⁵⁶ Meanwhile, grassroots movements to improve neighborhoods and local schools have taken root in many Black communities across America, and perhaps in those movements is the hope for greater future progress.

Other recent movements are more troubling, notably the increased presence and influence of White nationalism throughout the country. This movement espouses White supremacy and does not shrink from the threat or use of violence to achieve it. Such violence occurred in Charlottesville, Virginia, in August 2017, when various White supremacist groups and alt-right forces joined together in a "Unite the Right" rally ([Figure 5.10](#)). This rally included chants and racial slurs against African Americans and Jews. Those rallying clashed with counter-protestors, one of whom died when an avowed Neo-Nazi deliberately drove his car into a group of peaceful protestors. He has since been convicted and sentenced to life in prison for his actions. This event sent shockwaves through U.S. politics, as leaders tried to grapple with the significance of the event. President Trump said that "good people existed on both sides of the clash," and later, for inciting a group of protestors to storm the Capitol after a rally of his in which he repeated the false claim that the election had been stolen from him.⁵⁷



Figure 5.10 As part of the "Unite the Right" rally on August 12, 2017, White supremacists and other alt-right groups prepare to enter Emancipation Park in Charlottesville, Virginia, carrying Nazi and Confederate flags. The rally was planned in part as a response to the removal of a statue of Robert E. Lee from the park earlier that year. (credit: Anthony Crider)

Finding a Middle Ground

Affirmative Action

One of the major controversies regarding race in the United States today is related to affirmative action, the practice of ensuring that members of historically disadvantaged or underrepresented groups have equal access to opportunities in education, the workplace, and government contracting. The phrase *affirmative action* originated in the Civil Rights Act of 1964 and Executive Order 11246, and it has drawn controversy ever since. The Civil Rights Act of 1964 prohibited discrimination in employment, and Executive Order 11246, issued in 1965, forbade employment discrimination not only within the federal government but by federal contractors and contractors and subcontractors who received government funds.

Clearly, Black people, as well as other groups, have been subject to discrimination in the past and present, limiting their opportunity to compete on a level playing field with those who face no such challenge. Opponents of affirmative action, however, point out that many of its beneficiaries are ethnic minorities from relatively affluent backgrounds, while White and Asian Americans who grew up in poverty are expected to succeed despite facing challenges related to their socioeconomic status and those related to educational issues in lower income areas.

Because affirmative action attempts to redress discrimination on the basis of race or ethnicity, it is generally subject to the strict scrutiny standard, which means the burden of proof is on the government to demonstrate the necessity of racial discrimination to achieve a compelling governmental interest. In 1978, in *Bakke v. California*, the Supreme Court upheld affirmative action and said that colleges and universities could consider race when deciding whom to admit but could not establish racial quotas.⁵⁸ In 2003, the Supreme Court reaffirmed the Bakke decision in *Grutter v. Bollinger*, which said that taking race or ethnicity into account as one of several factors in admitting a student to a college or university was acceptable, but a system setting aside seats for a specific quota of minority students was not.⁵⁹ All these issues are back under discussion in the Supreme Court with the re-arguing of *Fisher v. University of Texas*.⁶⁰ In

Fisher v. University of Texas (2013, known as *Fisher I*), University of Texas student Abigail Fisher brought suit to declare UT's race-based admissions policy as inconsistent with *Grutter*. The court did not see the UT policy that way and allowed it, so long as it remained narrowly tailored and not quota-based. *Fisher II* (2016) was decided by a 4–3 majority. It allowed race-based admissions, but required that the utility of such an approach had to be re-established on a regular basis.

Should race be a factor in deciding who will be admitted to a particular college? Why or why not?

5.3 The Fight for Women's Rights

Learning Objectives

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

- Describe early efforts to achieve rights for women
- Explain why the Equal Rights Amendment failed to be ratified
- Describe the ways in which women acquired greater rights in the twentieth century
- Analyze why women continue to experience unequal treatment

Along with African Americans, women of all races and ethnicities have long been discriminated against in the United States, and the women's rights movement began at the same time as the movement to abolish slavery in the United States. Indeed, the women's movement came about largely as a result of the difficulties women encountered while trying to abolish slavery. The trailblazing Seneca Falls Convention for women's rights was held in 1848, a few years before the Civil War. But the abolition and African American civil rights movements largely eclipsed the women's movement throughout most of the nineteenth century. Women began to campaign actively again in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, and another movement for women's rights began in the 1960s.

THE EARLY WOMEN'S RIGHTS MOVEMENT AND WOMEN'S SUFFRAGE

At the time of the American Revolution, women had few rights. Although single women were allowed to own property, married women were not. When women married, their separate legal identities were erased under the legal principle of coverture. Not only did women adopt their husbands' names, but all personal property they owned legally became their husbands' property. Husbands could not sell their wives' real property—such as land or in some states enslaved people—without their permission, but they were allowed to manage it and retain the profits. If women worked outside the home, their husbands were entitled to their wages.⁶¹ So long as a man provided food, clothing, and shelter for his wife, she was not legally allowed to leave him. Divorce was difficult and in some places impossible to obtain.⁶² Higher education for

women was not available, and women were barred from professional positions in medicine, law, and ministry.

Following the Revolution, women's conditions did not improve. Women were not granted the right to vote by any of the states except New Jersey, which at first allowed all taxpaying property owners to vote. However, in 1807, the law changed to limit the vote to men.⁶³ Changes in property laws actually hurt women by making it easier for their husbands to sell their real property without their consent.

Although women had few rights, they nevertheless played an important role in transforming American society. This was especially true in the 1830s and 1840s, a time when numerous social reform movements swept across the United States. In 1832, for example, African American writer and activist Maria W. Stewart became the first American-born woman to give a speech to a mixed audience. While there was racism within the suffrage movement, including calls for segregated marches and a lack of scrutiny on the topic of lynchings, many women were active in the abolition movement and the temperance movement, which tried to end the excessive consumption of liquor.⁶⁴ They often found they were hindered in their efforts, however, either by the law or by widely held beliefs that they were weak, silly creatures who should leave important issues to men.⁶⁵ One of the leaders of the early women's movement, Elizabeth Cady Stanton ([Figure 5.11](#)), was shocked and angered when she sought to attend an 1840 antislavery meeting in London, only to learn that women would not be allowed to participate and had to sit apart from the men. At this convention, she made the acquaintance of another American woman abolitionist, Lucretia Mott ([Figure 5.11](#)), who was also appalled by the male reformers' treatment of women.⁶⁶



(a)



(b)

Figure 5.11 Elizabeth Cady Stanton (a) and Lucretia Mott (b) both emerged from the abolitionist movement as strong advocates of women's rights.

In 1848, Stanton and Mott called for a women's rights convention, the first ever held specifically to address the subject, at Seneca Falls, New York. At the Seneca Falls Convention, Stanton wrote the Declaration of Sentiments, which was modeled after the Declaration of Independence and proclaimed women were equal to men and deserved the same rights. Among the rights Stanton wished to see granted to women was suffrage, the right to vote. When called upon to sign the Declaration, many of the delegates feared that if women demanded the right to vote, the movement would be considered too radical and its members would become a laughingstock. The Declaration passed, but the resolution demanding suffrage was the only one that did not pass unanimously.⁶⁷

Along with other feminists (advocates of women's equality), such as her friend and colleague Susan B. Anthony, Stanton fought for rights for women besides suffrage, including the right to seek higher education. As a result of their efforts, several states passed laws that allowed married women to retain control of their property and let divorced women keep custody of their children.⁶⁸ Amelia Bloomer, another activist, also campaigned for dress reform, believing women could lead better lives and be more useful to society if they were not restricted by voluminous heavy skirts and tight corsets.

The women's rights movement attracted many women who, like Stanton and Anthony, were active in either the temperance movement, the abolition movement, or both movements. Sarah and Angelina Grimke, the daughters of a wealthy slaveholding family in South Carolina, became first abolitionists and then women's rights activists.⁶⁹ Prominent Black and formerly enslaved women such as Sojourner Truth, Frances Ellen Watkins Harper, and Mary Anne Shadd Cary joined the women's movement after establishing themselves as key figures in the abolition movement. These women were known for direct, unorthodox, and effective arguments for the suffragist cause. Truth's "Ain't I A Woman" speech is among the most well known of the movement, and Cary, a lawyer, delivered a critical equality argument before the Senate Judiciary Committee..

Following the Civil War and the abolition of slavery, the women's rights movement fragmented. Stanton and Anthony denounced the Fifteenth Amendment because it granted voting rights only to Black men and not to women of any race.⁷⁰ The fight for women's rights did not die, however. In 1869, Stanton and Anthony formed the National Woman Suffrage Association (NWSA), which demanded that the Constitution be amended to grant the right to vote to all women. It also called for more lenient divorce laws and an end to sex discrimination in employment. The less radical Lucy Stone formed the American Woman Suffrage Association (AWSA) in the same year; AWSA hoped to win the suffrage for women by working on a state-by-state basis instead of seeking to amend the Constitution.⁷¹ Four western states—Utah, Colorado, Wyoming, and Idaho—did extend the right to vote to women in the late nineteenth century, but no other states did.

Women were also granted the right to vote on matters involving liquor licenses, in school board elections, and in municipal elections in several states. However, this was often done because of

stereotyped beliefs that associated women with moral reform and concern for children, not as a result of a belief in women's equality. Furthermore, voting in municipal elections was restricted to women who owned property.⁷² In 1890, the two suffragist groups united to form the National American Woman Suffrage Association (NAWSA). To call attention to their cause, members circulated petitions, lobbied politicians, and held parades in which hundreds of women and girls marched through the streets ([Figure 5.12](#)).



Figure 5.12 In October 1917, suffragists marched down Fifth Avenue in New York demanding the right to vote. They carried a petition that had been signed by one million women.

The more radical National Woman's Party (NWP), led by Alice Paul, advocated the use of stronger tactics. The NWP held public protests and picketed outside the White House ([Figure 5.13](#)).⁷³ Demonstrators were often beaten and arrested, and suffragists were subjected to cruel treatment in jail. When some, like Paul, began hunger strikes to call attention to their cause, their jailers force-fed them, an incredibly painful and invasive experience for the women.⁷⁴ Finally, in 1920, the triumphant passage of the Nineteenth Amendment granted all women the right to vote.



Figure 5.13 Members of the National Woman's Party picketed outside the White House six days a week from January 10, 1917, when President Woodrow Wilson took office, until June 4,

1919, when the Nineteenth Amendment was passed by Congress. The protesters wore banners proclaiming the name of the institution of higher learning they attended.

CIVIL RIGHTS AND THE EQUAL RIGHTS AMENDMENT

Just as the passage of the Thirteenth, Fourteenth, and Fifteenth Amendments did not result in equality for African Americans, the Nineteenth Amendment did not end discrimination against women in education, employment, or other areas of life, which continued to be legal. Although women could vote, they very rarely ran for or held public office. Women continued to be underrepresented in the professions, and relatively few sought advanced degrees. Until the mid-twentieth century, the ideal in U.S. society was typically for women to marry, have children, and become housewives. Those who sought work for pay outside the home were routinely denied jobs because of their sex and, when they did find employment, were paid less than men. Women who wished to remain childless or limit the number of children they had in order to work or attend college found it difficult to do so. In some states it was illegal to sell contraceptive devices, and abortions were largely illegal and difficult for women to obtain.

A second women's rights movement emerged in the 1960s to address these problems. Title VII of the Civil Rights Act of 1964 prohibited discrimination in employment on the basis of sex as well as race, color, national origin, and religion. Nevertheless, women continued to be denied jobs because of their sex and were often sexually harassed at the workplace. In 1966, feminists who were angered by the lack of progress made by women and by the government's lackluster enforcement of Title VII organized the National Organization for Women (NOW). NOW promoted workplace equality, including equal pay for women, and also called for the greater presence of women in public office, the professions, and graduate and professional degree programs.

NOW also declared its support for the Equal Rights Amendment (**ERA**), which mandated equal treatment for all regardless of sex. The ERA, written by Alice Paul and Crystal Eastman, was first proposed to Congress, unsuccessfully, in 1923. It was introduced in every Congress thereafter but did not pass both the House and the Senate until 1972. The amendment was then sent to the states for ratification with a deadline of March 22, 1979. Although many states ratified the amendment in 1972 and 1973, the ERA still lacked sufficient support as the deadline drew near. Opponents, including both women and men, argued that passage would subject women to military conscription and deny them alimony and custody of their children should they divorce.⁷⁵ In 1978, Congress voted to extend the deadline for ratification to June 30, 1982. Even with the extension, however, the amendment failed to receive the support of the required thirty-eight states; by the time the deadline arrived, it had been ratified by only thirty-five, some of those had rescinded their ratifications, and no new state had ratified the ERA during the extension period ([Figure 5.14](#)). In 2020, Virginia became the thirty-eighth state to ratify, though well after the deadline. That led the U.S. House of Representatives to consider and pass legislation to remove the original deadlines. However, the Senate did not take up the legislation. In 2021, Senator Lisa Murkowski (R-AK) and Senator Ben Cardin (D-MD) introduced a new joint resolution to remove the deadline. That resolution has yet to be taken up by the Senate.⁷⁶

While women's rights have progressed well beyond where they were in the 1800s, questions of equity continue. In 2021, the massive disparities between the facilities and housing for men and women in their respective NCAA national tournaments became front page news.⁸⁰ Also in the news recently were the disparities in pay and resources for the U.S. Men's and Women's National Soccer teams. Again, women received much less in terms of resources than men, despite (in this case) being the more successful international team and World Cup champions.⁸¹ In the business world, women are still underrepresented in some jobs and are less likely to hold executive positions than are men.

Many believe the glass ceiling, an invisible barrier caused by discrimination, prevents women from rising to the highest levels of American organizations, including corporations, governments, academic institutions, and religious groups. Women earn less money than men for the same work. As of 2014, fully employed women earned seventy-nine cents for every dollar earned by a fully employed man.⁸² This problem may be compounded by other factors, as women from under-represented groups are even more discriminated against than other women.⁸³ Women are also more likely to be single parents than are men.⁸⁴ As a result, more women live below the poverty line than do men, and, as of 2012, households headed by single women are twice as likely to live below the poverty line than those headed by single men.⁸⁵ Women remain underrepresented in elective offices. As of June 2021, women held only about 27 percent of seats in Congress and only about 31 percent of seats in state legislatures.⁸⁶

Women remain subject to sexual harassment in the workplace and are more likely than men to be the victims of domestic violence. Approximately one-third of all women have experienced domestic violence; one in five women is assaulted during her college years.⁸⁷

Many in the United States continue to call for a ban on abortion, and states have attempted to restrict women's access to the procedure. For example, many states have required abortion clinics to meet the same standards set for hospitals, such as corridor size and parking lot capacity, despite lack of evidence regarding the benefits of such standards. Abortion clinics, which are smaller than hospitals, often cannot meet such standards. Other restrictions include mandated counseling before the procedure and the need for minors to secure parental permission before obtaining abortion services.⁸⁸ *Whole Woman's Health v. Hellerstedt* (2016) cited the lack of evidence for the benefit of larger clinics and further disallowed two Texas laws that imposed special requirements on doctors in order to perform abortions.⁸⁹ Furthermore, the federal government will not pay for abortions for low-income women except in cases of rape or incest or in situations in which carrying the fetus to term would endanger the life of the mother.⁹⁰

To address these issues, many have called for additional protections for women. These include laws mandating equal pay for equal work. According to the doctrine of comparable worth, people should be compensated equally for work requiring comparable skills, responsibilities, and effort. Thus, even though women are underrepresented in certain fields, they should receive the same wages as men if performing jobs requiring the same level of accountability, knowledge, skills, and/or working conditions, even though the specific job may be different.

For example, garbage collectors are predominantly male. The chief job requirements are the ability to drive a sanitation truck and to lift heavy bins and toss their contents into the back of truck. The average wage for a garbage collector is \$15.34 an hour.⁹¹ Most people employed as daycare workers are female, and the average pay is \$9.12 an hour.⁹² However, the work arguably requires more skills and is a more responsible position. Daycare workers must be able to feed, clean, and dress small children; prepare meals for them; entertain them; give them medicine if required; and teach them basic skills. They must be educated in first aid and assume responsibility for the children's safety. In terms of the skills and physical activity required and the associated level of responsibility of the job, daycare workers should be paid at least as much as garbage collectors and perhaps more. Women's rights advocates also call for stricter enforcement of laws prohibiting sexual harassment, and for harsher punishment, such as mandatory arrest, for perpetrators of domestic violence.

Insider Perspective

Harry Burn and the Tennessee General Assembly

In 1918, the proposed Nineteenth Amendment to the Constitution, extending the right to vote to all adult female citizens of the United States, was passed by both houses of Congress and sent to the states for ratification. Thirty-six votes were needed. Throughout 1918 and 1919, the Amendment dragged through legislature after legislature as pro- and anti-suffrage advocates made their arguments. By the summer of 1920, only one more state had to ratify it before it became law. The Amendment passed through Tennessee's state Senate and went to its House of Representatives. Arguments were bitter and intense. Pro-suffrage advocates argued that the amendment would reward women for their service to the nation during World War I and that women's supposedly greater morality would help to clean up politics. Those opposed claimed women would be degraded by entrance into the political arena and that their interests were already represented by their male relatives. On August 18, the amendment was brought for a vote before the House. The vote was closely divided, and it seemed unlikely it would pass. But as a young anti-suffrage representative waited for his vote to be counted, he remembered a note he had received from his mother that day. In it, she urged him, "Hurrah and vote for suffrage!" At the last minute, Harry Burn abruptly changed his ballot. The amendment passed the House by one vote, and eight days later, the Nineteenth Amendment was added to the Constitution.

How are women perceived in politics today compared to the 1910s? What were the competing arguments for Harry Burn's vote?

Link to Learning

The website for the [Women's National History Project](https://www.womenhistoryproject.org/) contains a variety of resources for learning more about the women's rights movement and women's history. It features a history of the women's movement, a "This Day in Women's History" page, and quizzes to test your knowledge.

5.4 Civil Rights for Indigenous Groups: Native Americans, Alaskans, and Hawaiians

Learning Objectives

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

- Outline the history of discrimination against Native Americans
- Describe the expansion of Native American civil rights from 1960 to 1990
- Discuss the persistence of problems Native Americans face today

Native Americans have long suffered the effects of segregation and discrimination imposed by the U.S. government and the larger White society. Ironically, Native Americans were not granted the full rights and protections of U.S. citizenship until long after African Americans and women were, with many having to wait until the Nationality Act of 1940 to become citizens.⁹³ This was long after the passage of the Fourteenth Amendment in 1868, which granted citizenship to African Americans but not, the Supreme Court decided in *Elk v. Wilkins* (1884), to Native Americans.⁹⁴ White women had been citizens of the United States since its very beginning even though they were not granted the full rights of citizenship. Furthermore, Native Americans are the only group of Americans who were forcibly removed en masse from the lands on which they and their ancestors had lived so that others could claim this land and its resources. This issue remains relevant today as can be seen in the recent protests of the Dakota Access Pipeline, which have led to intense confrontations between those in charge of the pipeline and Native Americans.

NATIVE AMERICANS LOSE THEIR LAND AND THEIR RIGHTS

From the very beginning of European settlement in North America, Native Americans were abused and exploited. Early British settlers attempted to enslave the members of various tribes, especially in the southern colonies and states.⁹⁵ Following the American Revolution, the U.S. government assumed responsibility for conducting negotiations with Indian tribes, all of which were designated as sovereign nations, and regulating commerce with them. Because Indians were officially regarded as citizens of other nations, they were denied U.S. citizenship.⁹⁶

As White settlement spread westward over the course of the nineteenth century, Indian tribes were forced to move from their homelands. Although the federal government signed numerous treaties guaranteeing Indians the right to live in the places where they had traditionally farmed, hunted, or fished, land-hungry White settlers routinely violated these agreements and the federal government did little to enforce them.⁹⁷

In 1830, Congress passed the Indian Removal Act, which forced Native Americans to move west of the Mississippi River.⁹⁸ Not all tribes were willing to leave their land, however. The Cherokee in particular resisted, and in the 1820s, the state of Georgia tried numerous tactics to force them from their territory. Efforts intensified in 1829 after gold was discovered there. Wishing to remain where they were, the tribe sued the state of Georgia.⁹⁹ In 1831, the Supreme Court decided in *Cherokee Nation v. Georgia* that Indian tribes were not sovereign nations, but also that tribes were entitled to their ancestral lands and could not be forced to move from them.¹⁰⁰

The next year, in *Worcester v. Georgia*, the Court ruled that non-Native Americans could not enter tribal lands without the tribe's permission. White Georgians, however, refused to abide by the Court's decision, and President Andrew Jackson, a former Indian fighter, refused to enforce it.¹⁰¹ Between 1831 and 1838, members of several southern tribes, including the Cherokees, were forced by the U.S. Army to move west along routes shown in [Figure 5.15](#). The forced removal of the Cherokees to Oklahoma Territory, which had been set aside for settlement by displaced tribes and designated Indian Territory, resulted in the death of one-quarter of the tribe's population.¹⁰² The Cherokees remember this journey as the Trail of Tears.

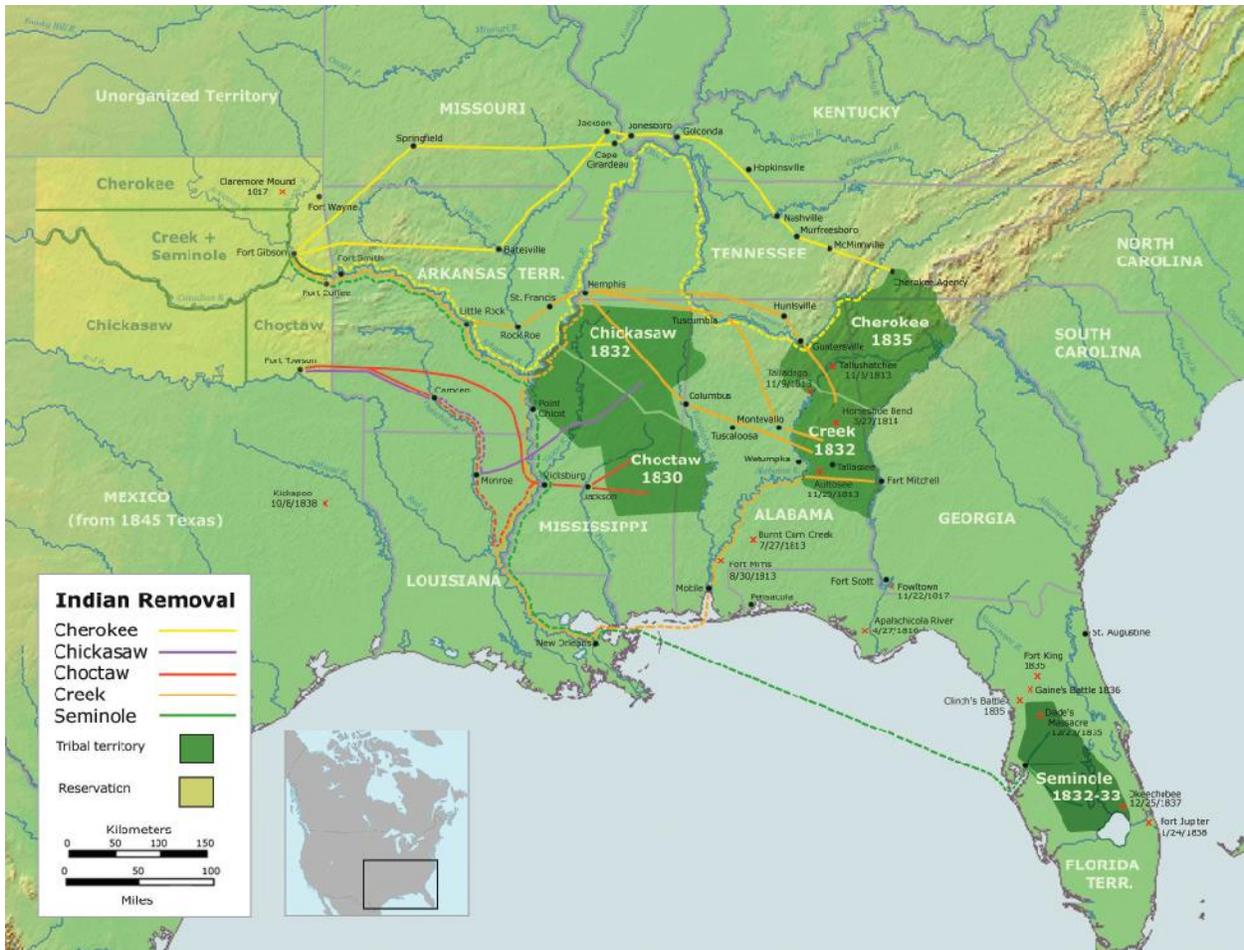


Figure 5.15 After the passage of the Indian Removal Act, the U.S. military forced the removal of the Cherokee, Chickasaw, Choctaw, Creek, and Seminole from the Southeast to the western territory (present-day Oklahoma), marching them along the routes shown here. The lines in yellow mark the routes taken by the Cherokee on the Trail of Tears.

By the time of the Civil War, most Indian tribes had been relocated west of the Mississippi. However, once large numbers of White Americans and European immigrants had also moved west after the Civil War, Native Americans once again found themselves displaced. They were confined to reservations, which are federal lands set aside for their use where non-Indians could not settle. Reservation land was usually poor, however, and attempts to farm or raise

livestock, not traditional occupations for most western tribes anyway, often ended in failure. Unable to feed themselves, the tribes became dependent on the Bureau of Indian Affairs (BIA) in Washington, DC, for support. Protestant missionaries were allowed to “adopt” various tribes, to convert them to Christianity and thus speed their assimilation. In an effort to hasten this process, Indian children were taken from their parents and sent to boarding schools, many of them run by churches, where they were forced to speak English and abandon their traditional cultures.¹⁰³

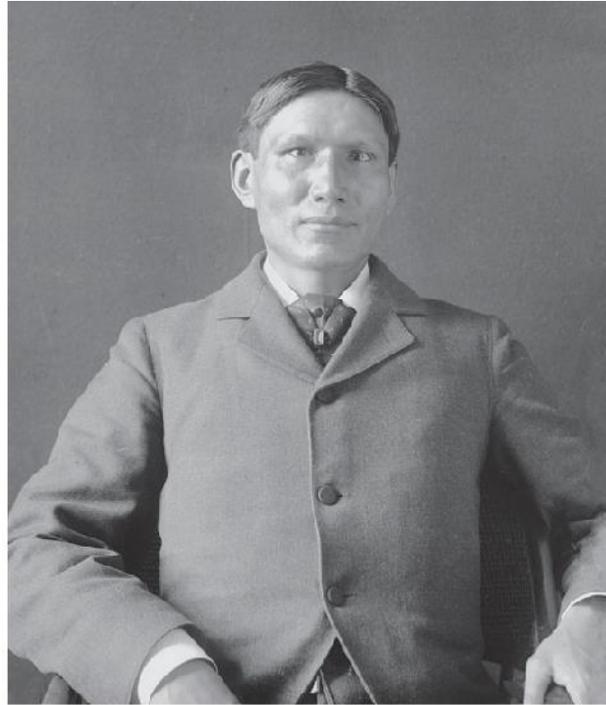
In 1887, the Dawes Severalty Act, another effort to assimilate Indians to White society, divided reservation lands into individual allotments. Native Americans who accepted these allotments and agreed to sever tribal ties were also given U.S. citizenship. All lands remaining after the division of reservations into allotments were offered for sale by the federal government to White farmers and ranchers. As a result, Indians swiftly lost control of reservation land.¹⁰⁴ In 1898, the Curtis Act dealt the final blow to Indian sovereignty by abolishing all tribal governments.¹⁰⁵

THE FIGHT FOR NATIVE AMERICAN RIGHTS

As Indians were removed from their tribal lands and increasingly saw their traditional cultures being destroyed over the course of the nineteenth century, a movement to protect their rights began to grow. Sarah Winnemucca ([Figure 5.16](#)), member of the Paiute tribe, lectured throughout the east in the 1880s in order to acquaint White audiences with the injustices suffered by the western tribes.¹⁰⁶ Lakota physician Charles Eastman ([Figure 5.16](#)) also worked for Native American rights. In 1924, the Indian Citizenship Act granted citizenship to all Native Americans born after its passage. Native Americans born before the act took effect, who had not already become citizens as a result of the Dawes Severalty Act or service in the army in World War I, had to wait until the Nationality Act of 1940 to become citizens. In 1934, Congress passed the Indian Reorganization Act, which ended the division of reservation land into allotments. It returned to Native American tribes the right to institute self-government on their reservations, write constitutions, and manage their remaining lands and resources. It also provided funds for Native Americans to start their own businesses and attain a college education.¹⁰⁷



(a)



(b)

Figure 5.16 Sarah Winnemucca (a), called the “Paiute Princess” by the press, and Dr. Charles Eastman (b), of the Lakota tribe, campaigned for Native American rights in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries. Winnemucca wears traditional dress for a publicity photograph.

Despite the Indian Reorganization Act, conditions on the reservations did not improve dramatically. Most tribes remained impoverished, and many Native Americans, despite the fact that they were now U.S. citizens, were denied the right to vote by the states in which they lived. States justified this violation of the Fifteenth Amendment by claiming that Native Americans might be U.S. citizens but were not state residents because they lived on reservations. Other states denied Native Americans voting rights if they did not pay taxes.¹⁰⁸ Despite states’ actions, the federal government continued to uphold the rights of tribes to govern themselves. Federal concern for tribal sovereignty was part of an effort on the government’s part to end its control of, and obligations to, Indian tribes.¹⁰⁹

In the 1960s, a modern Native American civil rights movement, inspired by the African American civil rights movement, began to grow. In 1969, a group of Native American activists from various tribes, part of a new Pan-Indian movement, took control of Alcatraz Island in San Francisco Bay, which had once been the site of a federal prison. Attempting to strike a blow for Red Power, the power of Native Americans united by a Pan-Indian identity and demanding federal recognition of their rights, they maintained control of the island for more than a year and a half. They claimed the land as compensation for the federal government’s violation of numerous treaties and offered to pay for it with beads and trinkets. In January 1970, some of the occupiers began to leave the island. Some may have been disheartened by the accidental death of the daughter of one of the activists. In May 1970, all electricity and telephone service

to the island was cut off by the federal government, and more of the occupiers began to leave. In June, the few people remaining on the island were removed by the government. Though the goals of the activists were not achieved, the occupation of Alcatraz had brought national attention to the concerns of Native American activists.¹¹⁰

In 1973, members of the American Indian Movement (**AIM**), a more radical group than the occupiers of Alcatraz, temporarily took over the offices of the Bureau of Indian Affairs in Washington, DC. The following year, members of AIM and some two hundred Oglala Lakota supporters occupied the town of Wounded Knee on the Lakota tribe's Pine Ridge Reservation in South Dakota, the site of an 1890 massacre of Lakota men, women, and children by the U.S. Army ([Figure 5.17](#)). Many of the Oglala were protesting the actions of their half-White tribal chieftain, who they claimed had worked too closely with the BIA. The occupiers also wished to protest the failure of the Justice Department to investigate acts of White violence against Lakota tribal members outside the bounds of the reservation.

The occupation led to a confrontation between the Native American protestors and the FBI and U.S. Marshals. Violence erupted; two Native American activists were killed, and a marshal was shot ([Figure 5.17](#)). After the second death, the Lakota called for an end to the occupation and negotiations began with the federal government. Two of AIM's leaders, Russell Means and Dennis Banks, were arrested, but the case against them was later dismissed.¹¹¹ Violence continued on the Pine Ridge Reservation for several years after the siege; the reservation had the highest per capita murder rate in the United States. Two FBI agents were among those who were killed. The Oglala blamed the continuing violence on the federal government.¹¹²



(a)



(b)

Figure 5.17 A memorial stone (a) marks the spot of the mass grave of the Lakotas killed in the 1890 massacre at Wounded Knee. The bullet-riddled car (b) of FBI agent Ronald Williams reveals the level of violence reached during—and for years after—the 1973 occupation of the town.

Link to Learning

The official website of the [American Indian Movement](#) provides information about ongoing issues in Native American communities in both North and South America.

The current relationship between the U.S. government and Native American tribes was established by the Indian Self-Determination and Education Assistance Act of 1975. Under the act, tribes assumed control of programs that had formerly been controlled by the BIA, such as education and resource management, and the federal government provided the funding.¹¹³ Many tribes have also used their new freedom from government control to legalize gambling and to open casinos on their reservations. Although the states in which these casinos are located have attempted to control gaming on Native American lands, the Supreme Court and the Indian Gaming Regulatory Act of 1988 have limited their ability to do so.¹¹⁴ The 1978 American Indian Religious Freedom Act granted tribes the right to conduct traditional ceremonies and rituals, including those that use otherwise prohibited substances like peyote cactus and eagle bones, which can be procured only from vulnerable or protected species.¹¹⁵

In another important recent development, several federal court cases have raised standing for Native American tribes to sue to regain former reservation lands lost to the U.S. government. Through a key 5-4 decision by the Supreme Court in *McGirt v. Oklahoma*, Native Americans realized the most important advancement in rights since the reapplication of the Winters Doctrine (which led to a stronger footing for tribes in water negotiations).¹¹⁶ The initial case taken up by the Court in 2019, *Carpenter v. Murphy*, which revolved around a murder case in Oklahoma, became quite salient, given the history of the Trail of Tears. At issue was whether Mr. Murphy committed murder on private land in the state of Oklahoma or on the Muscogee (Creek) reservation and who should have jurisdiction over his case. If the court decided to proclaim the land as a reservation, that would potentially lead to half the State of Oklahoma being designated as such.¹¹⁷ After hearing arguments in late 2018, they did not hand down a decision in 2019. However, in the follow-up case, *McGirt v. Oklahoma*, the Court took the step that strengthened Native American rights. The landmark decision held that a large part of Oklahoma is tribal land. Moreover, the court argued that crimes committed on those lands are subject to federal, not state authority. In this case, Jimcy McGirt was convicted in Oklahoma state court in 1997 of various sexual crimes. McGirt challenged the conviction on the basis that Oklahoma lacked jurisdiction to prosecute a member of the Muscogee Creek Nation tribe for crimes committed on tribal land.¹¹⁸

In addition to gains in water rights and land rights, Native American tribes made other gains in recent decades. Tribes have robust and well-recognized governing institutions based on democratic principles. Moreover, many tribes now have governing compacts negotiated with the states where their ancestral lands lay. The proliferation of Indian gaming has further strengthened the success and political influence of the tribes. Finally, the appointment by President Biden, and subsequent Senate confirmation, of Rep. Deb Haaland (D-NM) as Secretary of the Interior was a powerful and pathbreaking moment. She is the first Native American to hold that position at Interior, which includes the Bureau of Indian Affairs.

ALASKA NATIVES AND NATIVE HAWAIIANS REGAIN SOME RIGHTS

Alaska Natives and Native Hawaiians endured many of the same abuses as Native Americans, including loss of land and forced assimilation. Following the discovery of oil in Alaska, however, the state, in an effort to gain undisputed title to oil rich land, settled the issue of Alaska Natives' land claims with the passage of the Alaska Native Claims Settlement Act in 1971. According to the terms of the act, Alaska Natives received 44 million acres of resource-rich land and more than \$900 million in cash in exchange for relinquishing claims to ancestral lands to which the state wanted title.¹¹⁹

Native Hawaiians also lost control of their land—nearly two million acres—through the overthrow of the Hawaiian monarchy in 1893 and the subsequent formal annexation of the Hawaiian Islands by the United States in 1898. The indigenous population rapidly decreased in number, and white settlers tried to erase all trace of traditional Hawaiian culture. Two acts passed by Congress in 1900 and 1959, when the territory was granted statehood, returned slightly more than one million acres of federally owned land to the state of Hawaii. The state was to hold it in trust and use profits from the land to improve the condition of Native Hawaiians.¹²⁰

In September 2015, the U.S. Department of Interior, the same department that contains the Bureau of Indian Affairs, created guidelines for Native Hawaiians who wish to govern themselves in a relationship with the federal government similar to that established with Native American and Alaska Native tribes. Such a relationship would grant Native Hawaiians power to govern themselves while remaining U.S. citizens. Voting began in fall 2015 for delegates to a constitutional convention that would determine whether or not such a relationship should exist between Native Hawaiians and the federal government.¹²¹ When non-Native Hawaiians and some Native Hawaiians brought suit on the grounds that, by allowing only Native Hawaiians to vote, the process discriminated against members of other ethnic groups, a federal district court found the election to be legal. While the Supreme Court stopped the election, in September 2016 a separate ruling by the Interior Department allowed for a referendum to be held. Native Hawaiians in favor are working to create their own nation.¹²²

Despite significant advances, American Indians, Alaska Natives, and Native Hawaiians still trail behind U.S. citizens of other ethnic backgrounds in many important areas. These groups continue to suffer widespread poverty and high unemployment. Some of the poorest counties in the United States are those in which Native American reservations are located. These minorities are also less likely than white Americans, African Americans, or Asian Americans to complete high school or college.¹²³ Many American Indian and Alaskan tribes endure high rates of infant mortality, alcoholism, and suicide.¹²⁴ Native Hawaiians are also more likely to live in poverty than White people in Hawaii, and they are more likely than white Hawaiians to be unhoused or unemployed.¹²⁵

5.5 Equal Protection for Other Groups

Learning Objectives

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

- Discuss the discrimination faced by Hispanic/Latino Americans and Asian Americans
- Describe the influence of the African American civil rights movement on Hispanic/Latino, Asian American, and LGBTQ civil rights movements
- Describe federal actions to improve opportunities for people with disabilities
- Describe discrimination faced by religious minorities

Many groups in American society have faced and continue to face challenges in achieving equality, fairness, and equal protection under the laws and policies of the federal government and/or the states. Some of these groups are often overlooked because they are not as large of a percentage of the U.S. population as women or African Americans, and because organized movements to achieve equality for them are relatively young. This does not mean, however, that the discrimination they face has not been as longstanding or as severe.

HISPANIC/LATINO CIVIL RIGHTS

Hispanic and Latino people in the United States have faced many of the same problems as African Americans and Native Americans. Although the terms Hispanic and Latino are often used interchangeably, they are not the same. *Hispanic* usually refers to native speakers of Spanish or those descended from Spanish-speaking countries. *Latino* refers to people who come from, or whose ancestors came from, Latin America. Not all Hispanics are Latinos and vice versa. People from Spain are Hispanic but are not Latino, while people from Brazil are Latino but not Hispanic. Both Hispanics and Latinos may be of any race or ethnicity; they may be of European, African, Native American descent, or they may be of mixed racial or ethnic background. We will use the term "Latino" here, while acknowledging that many these days prefer the term Latinx as it is gender neutral.¹²⁶

Many Latinos became part of the U.S. population following the annexation of Texas by the United States in 1845 and of California, Arizona, New Mexico, Nevada, Utah, and Colorado following the War with Mexico in 1848. Most were subject to discrimination and could find employment only as poorly paid migrant farm workers, railroad workers, and unskilled laborers.¹²⁷ The Spanish-speaking population of the United States increased following the Spanish-American War in 1898 with the incorporation of Puerto Rico as a U.S. territory. In 1917, during World War I, the Jones Act granted U.S. citizenship to Puerto Ricans.

In the early twentieth century, waves of violence aimed at Mexicans and Mexican Americans swept the Southwest. Mexican Americans in Arizona and in parts of Texas were denied the right to vote, which they had previously possessed, and Mexican American children were barred from attending Anglo-American schools. During the Great Depression of the 1930s, Mexican immigrants and many Mexican Americans, both U.S.-born and naturalized citizens, living in the Southwest and Midwest were deported by the government so that Anglo-Americans could take

the jobs that they had once held.¹²⁸ When the United States entered World War II, however, Mexicans were invited to immigrate to the United States as farmworkers under the Bracero (*bracero* meaning “manual laborer” in Spanish) Program to make it possible for these American men to enlist in the armed services.¹²⁹

Mexican Americans and Puerto Ricans did not passively accept discriminatory treatment, however. In 1903, Mexican farmworkers joined with Japanese farmworkers, who were also poorly paid, to form the first union to represent agricultural laborers. In 1929, Latino civil rights activists formed the League of United Latin American Citizens (LULAC) to protest against discrimination and to fight for greater rights for Latinos.¹³⁰

Just as in the case of African Americans, however, true civil rights advances for Hispanic and Latino people did not take place until the end of World War II. Hispanic and Latino activists targeted the same racist practices as did African Americans and used many of the same tactics to end them. In 1946, Mexican American parents in California, with the assistance of the NAACP, sued several California school districts that forced Mexican and Mexican American children to attend segregated schools. In the case of *Mendez v. Westminster* (1947), the Court of Appeals for the Ninth Circuit Court held that the segregation of Mexican and Mexican American students into separate schools was unconstitutional.¹³¹

Although Latinos made some civil rights advances in the decades following World War II, discrimination continued. Alarmed by the large number of undocumented Mexicans crossing the border into the United States in the 1950s, the United States government began Operation Wetback (*wetback* is a derogatory term for Mexicans living unofficially in the United States). From 1953 to 1958, more than three million Mexican immigrants, and some Mexican Americans as well, were deported from California, Texas, and Arizona.¹³² To limit the entry of Hispanic and Latino immigrants to the United States, in 1965 Congress imposed an immigration quota of 120,000 newcomers from the Western Hemisphere.

At the same time that the federal government sought to restrict Hispanic and Latino immigration to the United States, the Mexican American civil rights movement grew stronger and more radical, just as the African American civil rights movement had done. While African Americans demanded Black Power and called for Black Pride, young Mexican American civil rights activists called for Brown Power and began to refer to themselves as Chicanos, a term disliked by many older, conservative Mexican Americans, in order to stress their pride in their hybrid Spanish-Native American cultural identity.¹³³ Demands by Mexican American activists often focused on improving education for their children, and they called upon school districts to hire teachers and principals who were bilingual in English and Spanish, to teach Mexican and Mexican American history, and to offer instruction in both English and Spanish for children with limited ability to communicate in English.¹³⁴

Milestone

East L.A. Student Walkouts

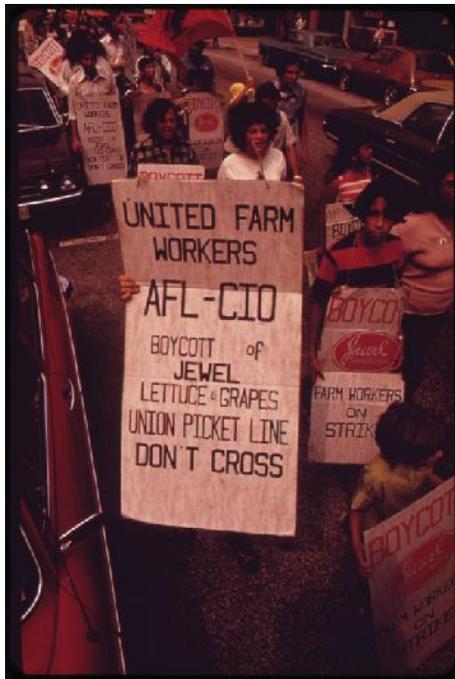
In March 1968, Chicano students at five high schools in East Los Angeles went on strike to demand better education for students of Mexican ancestry. Los Angeles schools did not allow

Latino students to speak Spanish in class and gave no place to study Mexican history in the curriculum. Guidance counselors also encouraged students, regardless of their interests or ability, to pursue vocational careers instead of setting their sights on college. Some students were placed in specialized classes for people with disabilities. As a result, the dropout rate among Mexican American students was very high.

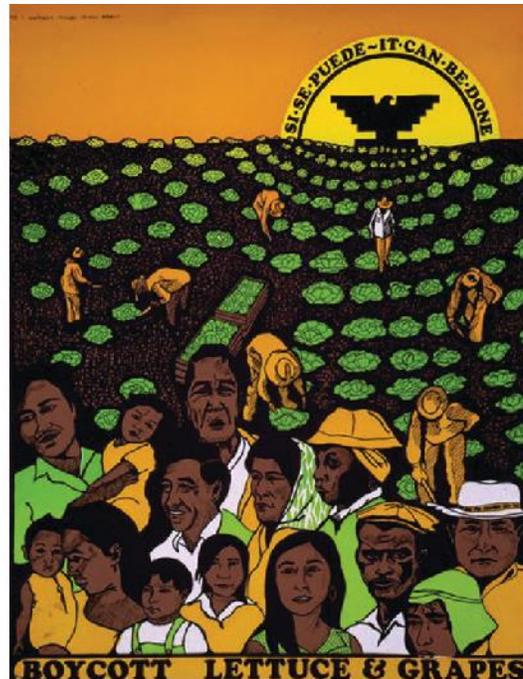
School administrators refused to meet with the student protestors to discuss their grievances. After a week, police were sent in to end the strike. Thirteen of the organizers of the walkout were arrested and charged with conspiracy to disturb the peace. After Sal Castro, a teacher who had led the striking students, was dismissed from his job, activists held a sit-in at school district headquarters until Castro was reinstated. Student protests spread across the Southwest, and in response many schools did change. That same year, Congress passed the Bilingual Education Act, which required school districts with large numbers of Hispanic or Latino students to provide instruction in Spanish.¹³⁵

Bilingual education remains controversial, even among Hispanic and Latino people. What are some arguments they might raise both for and against it? Are these different from arguments coming from non-Latinos?

Mexican American civil rights leaders were active in other areas as well. Throughout the 1960s, Cesar Chavez and Dolores Huerta fought for the rights of Mexican American agricultural laborers through their organization, the United Farm Workers (UFW), a union for migrant workers they founded in 1962. Chavez, Huerta, and the UFW proclaimed their solidarity with Filipino farm workers by joining them in a strike against grape growers in Delano, California, in 1965. Chavez consciously adopted the tactics of the African American civil rights movement. In 1965, he called upon all U.S. consumers to boycott California grapes ([Figure 5.18](#)), and in 1966, he led the UFW on a 300-mile march to Sacramento, the state capital, to bring the state farm workers' problems to the attention of the entire country. The strike finally ended in 1970 when the grape growers agreed to give the pickers better pay and benefits.¹³⁶



(a)



(b)

Figure 5.18 Protestors picket a grocery store in 1973, urging consumers not to buy grapes or lettuce picked by underpaid farm workers (a). The boycott, organized by Cesar Chavez and the United Farm Workers using the slogan “Sí se puede” or “Yes, it can be done!” (b), ultimately forced California growers to improve conditions for migrant laborers.

As Latino immigration to the United States increased in the late twentieth and early twenty-first centuries, discrimination also increased in many places. In 1994, California voters passed Proposition 187. The proposition sought to deny non-emergency health services, food stamps, welfare, and Medicaid to undocumented immigrants. It also banned children from attending public school unless they could present proof that they and their parents were legal residents of the United States. A federal court found it unconstitutional in 1997 on the grounds that the law’s intention was to regulate immigration, a power held only by the federal government.¹³⁷

In 2005, discussion began in Congress on proposed legislation that would make it a felony to enter the United States illegally or to give assistance to anyone who had done so. Although the bill quickly died, on May 1, 2006, hundreds of thousands of people, primarily Latinos, staged public demonstrations in major U.S. cities, refusing to work or attend school for one day.¹³⁸ The protestors claimed that people seeking a better life should not be treated as criminals and that undocumented immigrants already living in the United States should have the opportunity to become citizens.

Following the failure to make undocumented immigration a felony under federal law, several states attempted to impose their own sanctions on unauthorized entry. In April 2010, Arizona passed a law that made illegal immigration a state crime. The law also forbade undocumented immigrants from seeking work and allowed law enforcement officers to arrest people suspected of being in the U.S. illegally. Thousands protested the law, claiming that it

encouraged racial profiling. In 2012, in *Arizona v. United States*, the U.S. Supreme Court struck down those provisions of the law that made it a state crime to reside in the United States illegally, forbade undocumented immigrants to take jobs, and allowed the police to arrest those suspected of being illegal immigrants.¹³⁹ The court, however, upheld the authority of the police to ascertain the immigration status of someone suspected of being an undocumented entrant if the person had been stopped or arrested by the police for other reasons.¹⁴⁰

Today, Latinos constitute the largest minority group in the United States. They also have one of the highest birth rates of any ethnic group.¹⁴¹ Although Hispanic people lag behind non-Hispanic White people in terms of income and high school graduation rates, they are enrolling in college at higher rates than non-Hispanic White people.¹⁴² Topics that remain at the forefront of public debate today include immigration reform, the DREAM Act (a proposal for granting undocumented immigrants permanent residency in stages), and court action on executive orders on immigration. The Trump administration was very active on issues of immigration and border security. Aside from the proposal to build a border wall, other areas of action have included various travel bans and the policy of separating families at the border as they attempt to enter the country.¹⁴³

ASIAN AMERICAN CIVIL RIGHTS

As the rash of recent violence against them has shown, Asian Americans have also often been discriminated against and denied their civil rights. Often stereotyped as the "the model minority" (because it is assumed they are generally financially successful and do well academically), the underlying reality is complex. The truth is that Asian Americans have long faced discrimination. Indeed, in the nineteenth century, Asian people were among the most despised of all immigrant groups and were often subjected to the same laws enforcing segregation and forbidding interracial marriage as were African Americans and American Indians.

The Chinese were the first large group of Asian people to immigrate to the United States. They arrived in large numbers in the mid-nineteenth century to work in the mining industry and on the Central Pacific Railroad. Others worked as servants or cooks or operated laundries. Their willingness to work for less money than White workers led White workers in California to call for a ban on Chinese immigration. In 1882, Congress passed the Chinese Exclusion Act, which prevented Chinese from immigrating to the United States for ten years and prevented Chinese already in the country from becoming citizens ([Figure 5.19](#)). In 1892, the Geary Act extended the ban on Chinese immigration for another ten years. In 1913, California passed a law preventing all Asian people, not just the Chinese, from owning land. With the passage of the Immigration Act of 1924, all Asian people, with the exception of Filipinos, were prevented from immigrating to the United States or becoming naturalized citizens. Laws in several states barred marriage between Chinese and White Americans, and some cities with large Asian populations required Asian children to attend segregated schools.¹⁴⁴

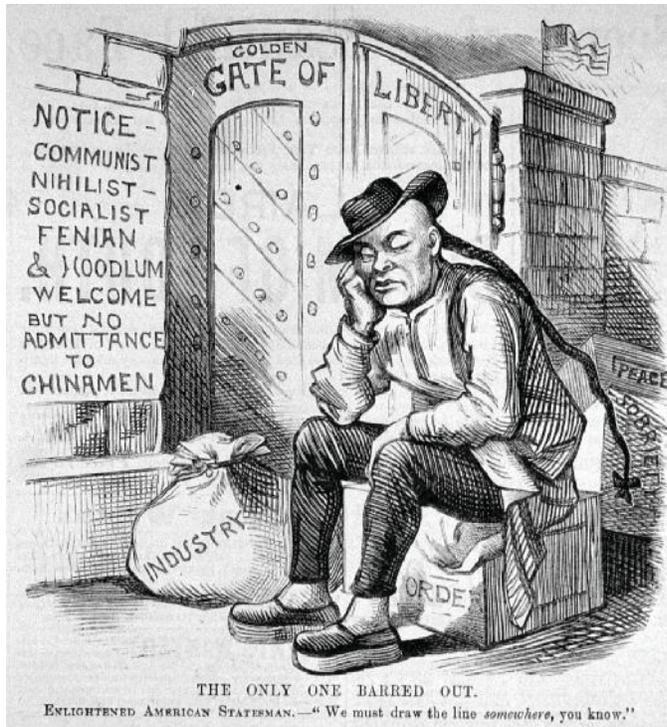


Figure 5.19 The cartoon shows a Chinese laborer, the personification of industry and sobriety, outside the “Golden Gate of Liberty.” The Chinese Exclusion Act of 1882 has barred him from entering the country, while communists and “hoodlums” are allowed in.

During World War II, citizens of Japanese descent living on the West Coast, whether naturalized immigrants or Japanese Americans born in the United States, were subjected to the indignity of being removed from their communities and interned under Executive Order 9066 ([Figure 5.20](#)). The reason was fear that they might prove disloyal to the United States and give assistance to Japan. Although Italians and Germans suspected of disloyalty were also interned by the U.S. government, only the Japanese were imprisoned solely on the basis of their ethnicity. None of the more than 110,000 Japanese and Japanese American internees was ever found to have committed a disloyal act against the United States, and many young Japanese American men served in the U.S. army during the war.¹⁴⁵ Although Japanese American Fred Korematsu challenged the right of the government to imprison law-abiding citizens, the Supreme Court decision in the 1944 case of *Korematsu v. United States* upheld the actions of the government as a necessary precaution in a time of war.¹⁴⁶ When internees returned from the camps after the war was over, many of them discovered that the houses, cars, and businesses they had left behind, often in the care of White neighbors, had been sold or destroyed.¹⁴⁷



Figure 5.20 Japanese Americans displaced from their homes by the U.S. government during World War II stand in line outside the mess hall at a relocation center in San Bruno, California, on April 29, 1942.

Link to Learning

Explore the resources at [Japanese American Internment](#) and [Digital History](#) to learn more about experiences of Japanese Americans during World War II.

The growth of the African American, Chicano, and Native American civil rights movements in the 1960s inspired many Asian Americans to demand their own rights. Discrimination against Asian Americans, regardless of national origin, increased during the Vietnam War. Ironically, violence directed indiscriminately against Chinese, Japanese, Koreans, and Vietnamese caused members of these groups to unite around a shared pan-Asian identity, much as Native Americans had in the Pan-Indian movement. In 1968, students of Asian ancestry at the University of California at Berkeley formed the Asian American Political Alliance. Asian American students also joined Chicano, Native American, and African American students to demand that colleges offer ethnic studies courses.¹⁴⁸ In 1974, in the case of *Lau v. Nichols*, Chinese American students in San Francisco sued the school district, claiming its failure to provide them with assistance in learning English denied them equal educational opportunities.¹⁴⁹ The Supreme Court found in favor of the students.

Until recent attacks against Asian Americans during the COVID-19 pandemic, the Asian American movement was not as active as other civil rights movements. While not keeping them free from discrimination, their educational achievement and economic success placed Asian Americans in a much better position to defend their rights. Unfortunately, racist vitriol related to the origin of COVID-19 has recently highlighted discrimination against Asian Americans and the formerly quiet movement has become highly salient. Hate crimes against Asian Americans increased 150 percent in 2020 and rose over 800 percent in New York City.¹⁵⁰

THE FIGHT FOR CIVIL RIGHTS IN THE LGBTQ COMMUNITY

Laws against homosexuality, which was regarded as a sin and a moral failing, existed in most states throughout the nineteenth and twentieth centuries. By the late nineteenth century,

homosexuality had come to be regarded as a form of mental illness as well as a sin, and gay men were often erroneously believed to be pedophiles.¹⁵¹ As a result, lesbians, gay men, bisexuals, and transgender people, collectively known as the LGBTQ community, had to keep their sexual orientation hidden or “closeted.” Secrecy became even more important in the 1950s, when fear of gay men increased and the federal government believed they could be led into disloyal acts either as a result of their “moral weakness” or through blackmail by Soviet agents. As a result, many men lost or were denied government jobs. Fears of lesbians also increased after World War II as U.S. society stressed conformity to traditional gender roles and the importance of marriage and childrearing.¹⁵²

The very secrecy in which lesbian, gay, bisexual, and transgender people had to live made it difficult for them to organize to fight for their rights as other, more visible groups had done. Some organizations did exist, however. The Mattachine Society, established in 1950, was one of the first groups to champion the rights of gay men. Its goal was to unite gay men who otherwise lived in secrecy and to fight against abuse. The Mattachine Society often worked with the Daughters of Bilitis, a lesbian rights organization. Among the early issues targeted by the Mattachine Society was police entrapment of gay men.¹⁵³

In the 1960s, the gay and lesbian rights movements began to grow more radical, in a manner similar to other civil rights movements. In 1962, gay Philadelphians demonstrated in front of Independence Hall. In 1966, transgender prostitutes who were tired of police harassment rioted in San Francisco. In June 1969, gay men, lesbians, and transgender people erupted in violence when New York City police attempted to arrest customers at a gay bar in Greenwich Village called the Stonewall Inn. The patrons’ ability to resist arrest and fend off the police inspired many members of New York’s LGBTQ community, and the riots persisted over several nights. New organizations promoting LGBTQ rights that emerged after Stonewall were more radical and confrontational than the Mattachine Society and the Daughters of Bilitis had been. These groups, like the Gay Activists Alliance and the Gay Liberation Front, called not just for equality before the law and protection against abuse but also for “liberation,” Gay Power, and Gay Pride.¹⁵⁴

Although LGBTQ people gained their civil rights later than many other groups, changes did occur beginning in the 1970s, remarkably quickly when we consider how long other minority groups had fought for their rights. The decade saw 18 states decriminalize same-sex relations, following Illinois and Connecticut, which had done so in the 1960s. In 1973, the American Psychological Association ended its classification of homosexuality as a mental disorder. In 1994, the U.S. military adopted the policy of “Don’t ask, don’t tell.” This act, Department of Defense Directive 1304.26, officially prohibited discrimination against gay, lesbian, and bisexual people by the U.S. military. It also prohibited superior officers from asking about or investigating the sexual orientation of those below them in rank.¹⁵⁵ However, those gay, lesbian, and bisexual people who spoke openly about their sexual orientation were still subject to dismissal because it remained illegal for anyone except straight people to serve in the armed forces. The policy ended in 2011, and now gay, lesbian, and bisexual people may serve openly in the military.¹⁵⁶ Transgender people were banned from serving in the military in 1960. The ban lasted until 2016, when the government began a gradual process of expanding and altering

the limitations on their service. In early 2021, the Biden administration announced that there would no longer be restrictions on military service by transgender individuals, that medical support for gender transition would be provided, and that procedures would be developed to change a service member's official gender marker.

In 2003, in the case of *Lawrence v. Texas*, the Supreme Court ruled unconstitutional fourteen remaining states' laws that criminalized sexual intercourse between consenting adults of the same sex.¹⁵⁷ Beginning in 2000, several states made it possible for same-sex couples to enter into legal relationships known as civil unions or domestic partnerships. These arrangements extended many of the same protections enjoyed by heterosexual married couples to same-sex couples. LGBTQ activists, however, continued to fight for the right to marry. Same-sex marriages would allow partners to enjoy exactly the same rights as married heterosexual couples and accord their relationships the same dignity and importance. In 2004, Massachusetts became the first state to grant legal status to same-sex marriage. Other states quickly followed. This development prompted a backlash among many religious conservatives, who considered homosexuality a sin and argued that allowing same-sex couples to marry would lessen the value and sanctity of heterosexual marriage. Many states passed laws banning same-sex marriage, and many gay and lesbian couples challenged these laws, successfully, in the courts. Finally, in *Obergefell v. Hodges*, the Supreme Court overturned state bans and made same-sex marriage legal throughout the United States on June 26, 2015 ([Figure 5.21](#)).¹⁵⁸



Figure 5.21 Supporters of marriage equality celebrate outside the Supreme Court on June 26, 2015, following the announcement of the Court's decision in *Obergefell v. Hodges* declaring same-sex marriage a constitutional right under the Fourteenth Amendment. (credit: Matt Popovich)

The legalization of same-sex marriage throughout the United States led some people to feel their religious beliefs were under attack, and many religiously conservative business owners have refused to acknowledge LGBT rights or the legitimacy of same-sex marriages. Following swiftly upon the heels of the *Obergefell* ruling, the Indiana legislature passed a Religious Freedom Restoration Act (RFRA). Congress had already passed such a law in 1993; it was

intended to extend protection to minority religions, such as by allowing rituals of the Native American Church. However, the Supreme Court in *City of Boerne v. Flores* (1997) ruled that the 1993 law applied only to the federal government and not to state governments.¹⁵⁹ Thus several state legislatures later passed their own Religious Freedom Restoration Acts. These laws state that the government cannot “substantially burden an individual’s exercise of religion” unless it would serve a “compelling governmental interest” to do so. They allow individuals, which also include businesses and other organizations, to discriminate against others, primarily same-sex couples and LGBTQ people, if the individual’s religious beliefs are opposed to homosexuality.

LGBTQ Americans still encounter difficulties in other areas as well. While the Supreme Court ruled in 2020 that employers cannot discriminate based on sexual orientation and transgender status, LGBTQ people are not protected from housing discrimination. The federal Department of Housing and Urban Development has indicated that refusing to rent or sell homes to transgender people may be considered sex discrimination, but there is no nationwide clarity on the law.¹⁶⁰ Violence against members of the LGBTQ community remains a serious problem; this violence occurs on the streets and in their homes.¹⁶¹ The enactment of the Matthew Shepard and James Byrd Jr. Hate Crimes Prevention Act, also known as the Matthew Shepard Act, in 2009 made it a federal hate crime to attack someone based on gender, gender identity, sexual orientation, or disability and made it easier for federal, state, and local authorities to investigate hate crimes, but it has not necessarily made the world safer for LGBTQ Americans. Transgender rights have also been increasingly under scrutiny as 2021 brought a record number of pieces of anti-transgender legislation in state legislatures.¹⁶² The U.S. Supreme Court, however, gave the transgender community a win when they chose not to hear a school’s appeal of a lower court decision on a transgender student bathroom case.¹⁶³ Soon after, the federal government indicated that it would follow the approach of many states in including a non-binary gender marker option on official documents, such as passports.

CIVIL RIGHTS AND THE AMERICANS WITH DISABILITIES ACT

People with disabilities make up one of the last groups whose civil rights have been recognized. For a long time, they were denied employment and access to public education. Many were institutionalized. A *eugenics* movement in the United States in the late nineteenth and early to mid-twentieth centuries sought to encourage childbearing among White people without disabilities and discourage it among those with physical or intellectual disabilities. Many states passed laws prohibiting marriage among people who had what were believed to be hereditary “defects.” Among those affected were people who were blind or deaf, those with epilepsy, people with intellectual or developmental disabilities, and those with mental illnesses. In some states, programs existed to sterilize people considered “feeble minded” by the standards of the time, without their will or consent.¹⁶⁴ When this practice was challenged by a woman in a state institution in Virginia, the Supreme Court, in the 1927 case of *Buck v. Bell*, upheld the right of state governments to sterilize those people believed likely to have children who would become dependent upon public welfare.¹⁶⁵ Some of these programs persisted into the 1970s, as [Figure 5.22](#) shows.¹⁶⁶

Peak of Eugenic Program in North Carolina, July 1946–June 1968

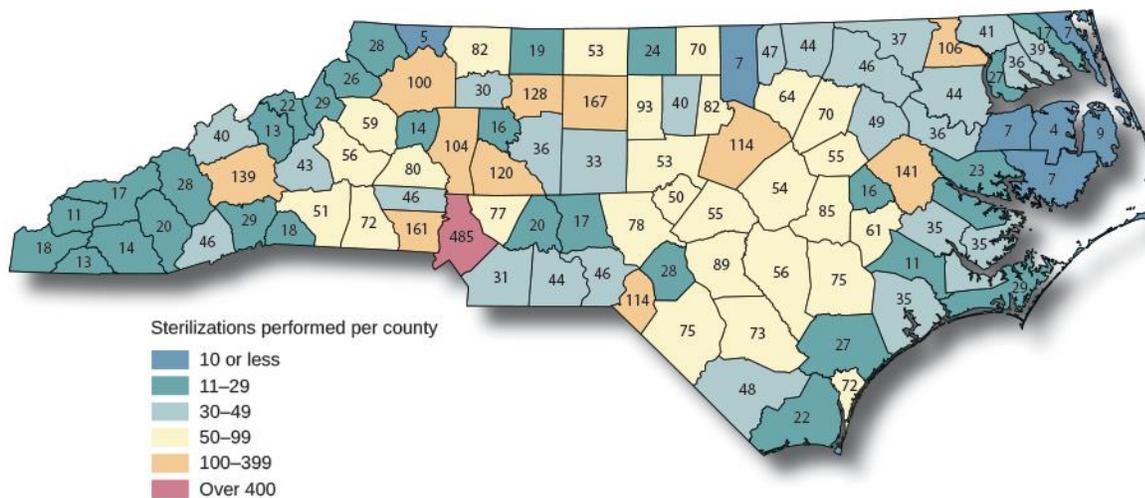


Figure 5.22 The map shows the number of sterilizations performed by the state in each of the counties of North Carolina between July 1946 and June 1968. Nearly five hundred sterilizations took place during this time period in the purple county.

By the 1970s, however, concern for extending equal opportunities to all led to the passage of two important acts by Congress. In 1973, the Rehabilitation Act made it illegal to discriminate against people with disabilities in federal employment or in programs run by federal agencies or receiving federal funding. This was followed by the Education for all Handicapped Children Act of 1975, which required public schools to educate children with disabilities. The act specified that schools consult with parents to create a plan tailored for each child’s needs that would provide an educational experience as close as possible to that received by other children.

In 1990, the Americans with Disabilities Act (ADA) greatly expanded opportunities and protections for people of all ages with disabilities. It also significantly expanded the categories and definition of disability. The ADA prohibits discrimination in employment based on disability. It also requires employers to make reasonable accommodations available to workers who need them. Finally, the ADA mandates that public transportation and public accommodations be made accessible to those with disabilities. The Act was passed despite the objections of some who argued that the cost of providing accommodations would be prohibitive for small businesses. While the ADA has inarguably improved opportunities for Americans with disabilities to receive public services equally and to pursue educational opportunities, challenges continue in this space. On college campuses, disability resource centers are often slow and understaffed, causing stress for students and professors alike.¹⁶⁷ And, in schools and colleges, full access to certain buildings and spaces remains elusive.¹⁶⁸

Link to Learning

The community of people with disabilities is well organized in the twenty-first century, as evidenced by the considerable network of [disability rights organizations](#) in the United States.

THE RIGHTS OF RELIGIOUS MINORITIES

The right to worship as a person chooses was one of the reasons for the initial settlement of the United States. Thus, it is ironic that many people throughout U.S. history have been denied their civil rights because of their status as members of a religious minority. Beginning in the early nineteenth century with the immigration of large numbers of Irish Catholics to the United States, anti-Catholicism became a common feature of American life and remained so until the mid-twentieth century. Catholic immigrants were denied jobs, and in the 1830s and 1840s anti-Catholic literature accused Catholic priests and nuns of committing horrific acts. Anti-Mormon sentiment was also quite common, and members of the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints were accused of kidnapping women and building armies for the purpose of dominating their neighbors. At times, these fears led to acts of violence. A convent in Charlestown, Massachusetts, was burned to the ground in 1834.¹⁶⁹ In 1844, Joseph Smith, the founder of the Church of Christ, and his brother were murdered by a mob in Illinois.¹⁷⁰

For many years, Jewish Americans faced discrimination in employment, education, and housing based on their religion. Many of the restrictive real estate covenants that prohibited people from selling their homes to Black people also prohibited them from selling to Jewish people, and a “gentlemen’s agreement” among the most prestigious universities in the United States limited the number of Jewish students accepted. Indeed, a tradition of confronting discrimination led many American Jews to become actively involved in the civil rights movements for women and African Americans.¹⁷¹

Anti-semitism remains a significant issue in the United States and worldwide. According to the FBI, Jewish people or property are the most frequent targets of hate crimes motivated by religious bias. Jewish cemeteries and places of worship are frequently attacked or defaced, and insensitive jokes and frequent references to the Holocaust are widely used. Muslims have also experienced a rise in discrimination and hate crimes, and most Americans, including non-Muslims, report a belief that significant anti-Muslim sentiment exists in the United States. Although Title VII of the Civil Rights Act of 1964 prevents employment discrimination on the basis of religion and requires employers to make reasonable accommodations so that employees can engage in religious rituals and practices, Muslim employees are often discriminated against. Often the source of controversy is the wearing of head coverings by observant Muslims, which some employers claim violates uniform policies or dress codes, even when non-Muslim coworkers are allowed to wear head coverings that are not part of work uniforms.¹⁷² Hate crimes against Muslims have also increased, and many Muslims believe they are subject to racial profiling by law enforcement officers who suspect them of being terrorists.¹⁷³

Many Christians have recently argued that they are being deprived of their rights because of their religious beliefs and have used this claim to justify their refusal to acknowledge the rights of others. The owner of Hobby Lobby Stores, for example, a conservative Christian, argued that his company’s health-care plan should not have to pay for contraception because his religious beliefs are opposed to the practice. In 2014, in the case of *Burwell v. Hobby Lobby Stores, Inc.*, the Supreme Court ruled in his favor.¹⁷⁴ As discussed earlier, many conservative Christians have

also argued that they should not have to recognize same-sex marriages because they consider homosexuality to be a sin.



Figure 6.1 While the Capitol is the natural focus point of Capitol Hill and the workings of Congress, the Capitol complex includes over a dozen buildings, including the House of Representatives office buildings (left), the Senate office buildings (far right), the Library of Congress buildings (lower left), and the Supreme Court (lower right). (credit: modification of work by the Library of Congress)

Introduction

When U.S. citizens think of governmental power, they most likely think of the presidency. The framers of the Constitution, however, clearly intended that Congress would be the cornerstone of the new republic. After years of tyranny under a king, they had little interest in creating another system with an overly powerful single individual at the top. Instead, while recognizing the need for centralization in terms of a stronger national government with an elected executive wielding its own authority, those at the Constitutional Convention wanted a strong representative assembly at the national level that would use careful consideration, deliberate action, and constituent representation to carefully draft legislation to meet the needs of the new republic. Thus, Article I of the Constitution grants several key powers to Congress, which include overseeing the budget and all financial matters, introducing legislation, confirming or rejecting judicial and executive nominations, and even declaring war.

Today, however, Congress is the institution most criticized by the public, and the most misunderstood. How exactly does Capitol Hill operate ([Figure 6.1](#))? What are the different structures and powers of the House of Representatives and the Senate? How are members of Congress elected? How do they reach their decisions about legislation, budgets, and military action? This chapter addresses these aspects and more as it explores “the first branch” of government.

6.1 The Institutional Design of Congress

Learning Objectives

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

- Describe the role of Congress in the U.S. constitutional system
- Define bicameralism
- Explain gerrymandering and the apportionment of seats in the House of Representatives
- Discuss the three kinds of powers granted to Congress

The origins of the U.S. Constitution and the convention that brought it into existence are rooted in failure—the failure of the Articles of Confederation. After only a handful of years, the states of the union decided that the Articles were simply unworkable. In order to save the young republic, a convention was called, and delegates were sent to assemble and revise the Articles. From the discussions and compromises in this convention emerged Congress in the form we recognize today. In this section, we will explore the debates and compromises that brought about the bicameral (two-chamber) Congress, made up of a House of Representatives and Senate. We will also explore the goals of bicameralism and how it functions. Finally, we will look at the different ways seats are apportioned in the two chambers.

THE GREAT COMPROMISE AND THE BASICS OF BICAMERALISM

Only a few years after the adoption of the Articles of Confederation, the republican experiment seemed on the verge of failure. States deep in debt were printing increasingly worthless paper currency, many were mired in interstate trade battles with each other, and in western Massachusetts, a small group of Revolutionary War veterans angry over the prospect of losing their farms broke into armed open revolt against the state, in what came to be known as Shays' Rebellion. The conclusion many reached was that the Articles of Confederation were simply not strong enough to keep the young republic together. In the spring of 1787, a convention was called, and delegates from all the states (except Rhode Island, which boycotted the convention) were sent to Philadelphia to hammer out a solution to this central problem.

The meeting these delegates convened became known as the Constitutional Convention of 1787. Although its prescribed purpose was to revise the Articles of Confederation, a number of delegates charted a path toward disposing of the Articles entirely. Under the Articles, the national legislature had been made up of a single chamber composed of an equal number of delegates from each of the states. Large states, like Virginia, felt it would be unfair to continue with this style of legislative institution. As a result, Virginia's delegates proposed a plan that called for bicameralism, or the division of legislators into two separate assemblies. In this proposed two-chamber Congress, states with larger populations would have more representatives in each chamber. Predictably, smaller states like New Jersey were unhappy with this proposal. In response, they issued their own plan, which called for a single-chamber Congress with equal representation and more state authority ([Figure 6.2](#)).

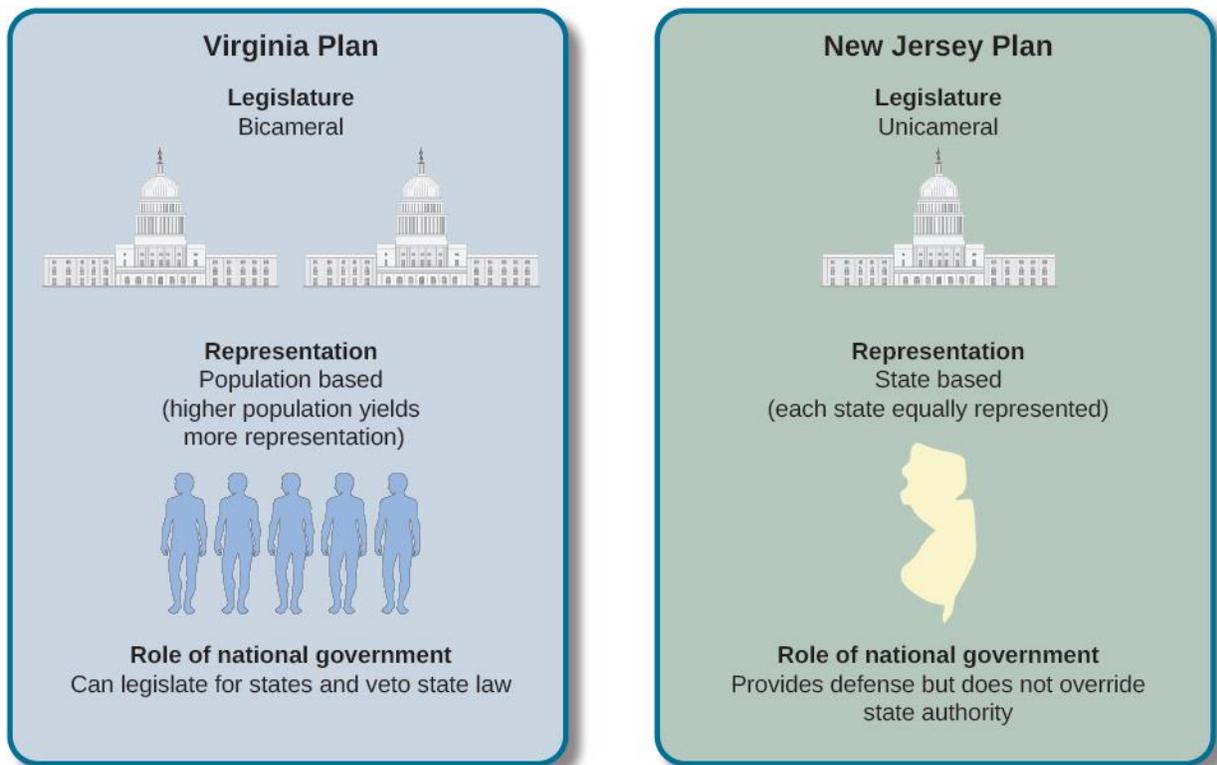


Figure 6.2 The Virginia or “large state” plan called for a two-chamber legislature, with representation by population in each chamber. The plan proposed by smaller states like New Jersey favored maintaining a one-house Congress in which all states were equally represented.

The storm of debate over how to allocate power between large and small states was eventually calmed by a third proposal. The Connecticut Compromise, also called the Great Compromise, proposed a bicameral congress with members apportioned differently in each house. The upper house, the Senate, was to have two members from each state. This soothed the fears of the small states. In the lower house, the House of Representatives, membership would be proportional to the population in each state. This measure protected the interests of the large states.

In the final draft of the U.S. Constitution, the bicameral Congress established by the convention of 1787 was given a number of powers and limitations. These are outlined in Article I ([Appendix B](#)). This article describes the minimum age of congresspersons (Section 2), requires that Congress meet at least once a year (Section 4), guarantees members’ pay (Section 6), and gives Congress the power to levy taxes, borrow money, and regulate commerce (Section 8). These powers and limitations were the Constitutional Convention’s response to the failings of the Articles of Confederation.

Although the basic design of the House and Senate resulted from a political deal between large and small states, the bicameral legislature established by the convention did not emerge from thin air. The concept had existed in Europe as far back as the medieval era. At that time, the two chambers of a legislature were divided based on class and designed to reflect different

types of representation. The names of the two houses in the United Kingdom’s bicameral parliament still reflect this older distinction today: the House of Lords and the House of Commons. Likewise, those at the Constitutional Convention purposely structured the U.S. Senate differently from the House of Representatives in the hopes of encouraging different representative memberships in the two houses. Initially, for example, the power to elect senators was given to the state legislatures instead of to the voting public as it is now. The minimum age requirement is also lower for the House of Representatives: A person must be at least twenty-five years old to serve in the House, whereas one must be at least thirty to be a senator.

The bicameral system established at the Constitutional Convention and still followed today requires the two houses to pass identical bills, or proposed items of legislation. This ensures that after all amending and modifying has occurred, the two houses ultimately reach an agreement about the legislation they send to the president. Passing the same bill in both houses is no easy feat, and this is by design. The framers intended there to be a complex and difficult process for legislation to become law. This challenge serves a number of important and related functions. First, the difficulty of passing legislation through both houses makes it less likely, though hardly impossible, that the Congress will act on fleeting instincts or without the necessary deliberation. Second, the bicameral system ensures that large-scale dramatic reform is exceptionally difficult to pass and that the status quo is more likely to win the day. This maintains a level of conservatism in government, something the landed elite at the convention preferred. Third, the bicameral system makes it difficult for a single faction or interest group to enact laws and restrictions that would unfairly favor it.

Link to Learning

The [website of the U.S. Congress Visitor Center](#) contains a number of interesting online exhibits and informational tidbits about the U.S. government’s “first branch” (so called because it is described in Article I of the Constitution).

SENATE REPRESENTATION AND HOUSE APPORTIONMENT

The Constitution specifies that every state will have two senators who each serve a six-year term. Therefore, with fifty states in the Union, there are currently one hundred seats in the U.S. Senate. Senators were originally appointed by state legislatures, but in 1913, the Seventeenth Amendment was approved, which allowed for senators to be elected by popular vote in each state. Seats in the House of Representatives are distributed among the states based on each state’s population and each member of the House is elected by voters in a specific congressional district. Each state is guaranteed at least one seat in the House ([Table 6.1](#)).

The 117th Congress

	House of Representatives	Senate
Total Number of Members	435	100
Number of Members per State	1 or more, based on population	2
Length of Term of Office	2 years	6 years

Minimum Age Requirement	25	30
-------------------------	----	----

Table 6.1

Congressional apportionment today is achieved through the *equal proportions method*, which uses a mathematical formula to allocate seats based on U.S. Census Bureau population data, gathered every ten years as required by the Constitution. At the close of the first U.S. Congress in 1791, there were sixty-five representatives, each representing approximately thirty thousand citizens. Then, as the territory of the United States expanded, sometimes by leaps and bounds, the population requirement for each new district increased as well. Adjustments were made, but the roster of the House of Representatives continued to grow until it reached 435 members after the 1910 census. Ten years later, following the 1920 census and with urbanization changing populations across the country, Congress failed to reapportion membership because it became deadlocked on the issue. In 1929, an agreement was reached to permanently cap the number of seats in the House at 435.

Redistricting occurs every ten years, after the U.S. Census has established how many persons live in the United States and where. The boundaries of legislative districts are redrawn as needed to maintain similar numbers of voters in each while still maintaining a total number of 435 districts. Because local areas can see their population grow as well as decline over time, these adjustments in district boundaries are typically needed after ten years have passed. Currently, there are seven states with only one representative (Alaska, Delaware, Montana, North Dakota, South Dakota, Vermont, and Wyoming), whereas the most populous state, California, has a total of fifty-three congressional districts ([Figure 6.3](#)).

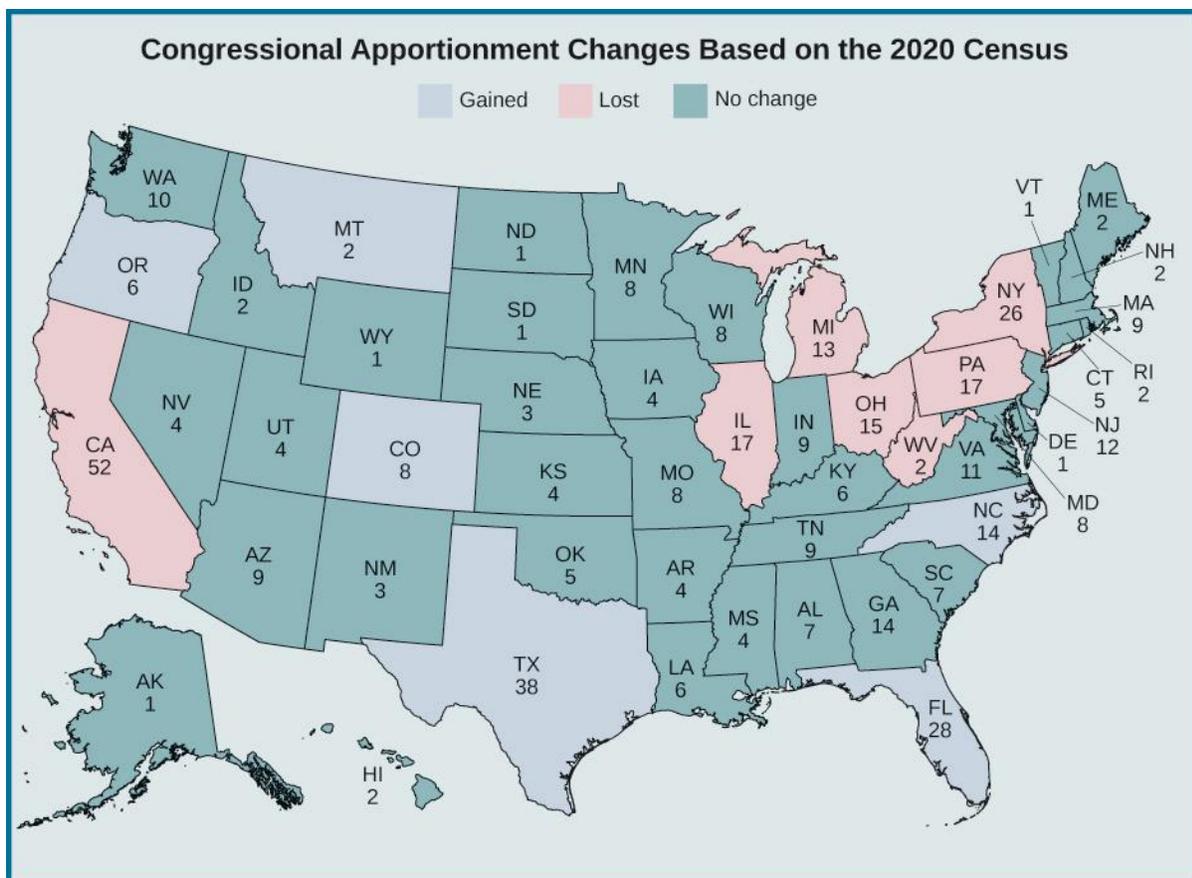


Figure 6.3 Although the total number of seats in the House of Representatives has been capped at 435, the apportionment of seats by state may change each decade following the official census. In this map, we see the changes in seat reapportionment that followed the 2020 Census.

Two remaining problems in the House are the size of each representative’s constituency—the body of voters who elect the representative—and the challenge of Washington, DC. First, the average number of citizens in a congressional district now tops 700,000. This is arguably too many for House members to remain very close to the people. George Washington advocated for thirty thousand per elected member to retain effective representation in the House. The second problem is that the approximately 675,000 residents of the federal district of Washington (District of Columbia) do not have voting representation. Like those living in the U.S. territories, they merely have a non-voting delegate.¹

The stalemate in the 1920s wasn’t the first time reapportionment in the House resulted in controversy (or the last). The first incident took place before any apportionment had even occurred, while the process was being discussed at the Constitutional Convention. Representatives from large slaveholding states believed that enslaved people should be counted as part of their total population. States with few or no enslaved people predictably argued against this. The compromise eventually reached allowed for each enslaved person

(who could not vote) to count as three-fifths of a person for purposes of congressional representation. Following the abolition of slavery and the end of Reconstruction, the former slaveholding states in the South took a number of steps to prevent formerly enslaved people and their children from voting. Yet because these formerly enslaved people were now free persons, they were counted fully toward the states' congressional representation.

Attempts at African American disenfranchisement continued until the civil rights struggle of the 1960s finally brought about the Voting Rights Act of 1965. The act cleared several final hurdles to voter registration and voting for African Americans. Following its adoption, many Democrats led the charge to create congressional districts that would enhance the power of African American voters. The idea was to create *majority-minority districts* within states, districts in which African Americans became the majority and thus gained the electoral power to send representatives to Congress.

While the strangely drawn districts succeeded in their stated goals, nearly quintupling the number of African American representatives in Congress in just over two decades, they have frustrated others who claim they are merely a new form of an old practice, gerrymandering. *Gerrymandering* is the manipulation of legislative district boundaries as a way of favoring a particular candidate. The term combines the word salamander, a reference to the strange shape of these districts, with the name of Massachusetts governor Elbridge Gerry, who in 1812, signed a redistricting plan designed to benefit his party. Despite the questionable ethics behind gerrymandering, the practice is legal, and both major parties have used it to their benefit. It is only when political redistricting appears to dilute the votes of racial minorities that gerrymandering efforts can be challenged under the Voting Rights Act ([Figure 6.4](#)). Other forms of gerrymandering are frequently employed in states where a dominant party seeks to maintain that domination. As we saw in the chapter on political parties, gerrymandering can be a tactic to draw district lines in a way that creates “safe seats” for a particular political party. In states like Maryland, these are safe seats for Democrats. In states like Louisiana, they are safe seats for Republicans.

Gerrymandering in Austin, TX, 2003–2015

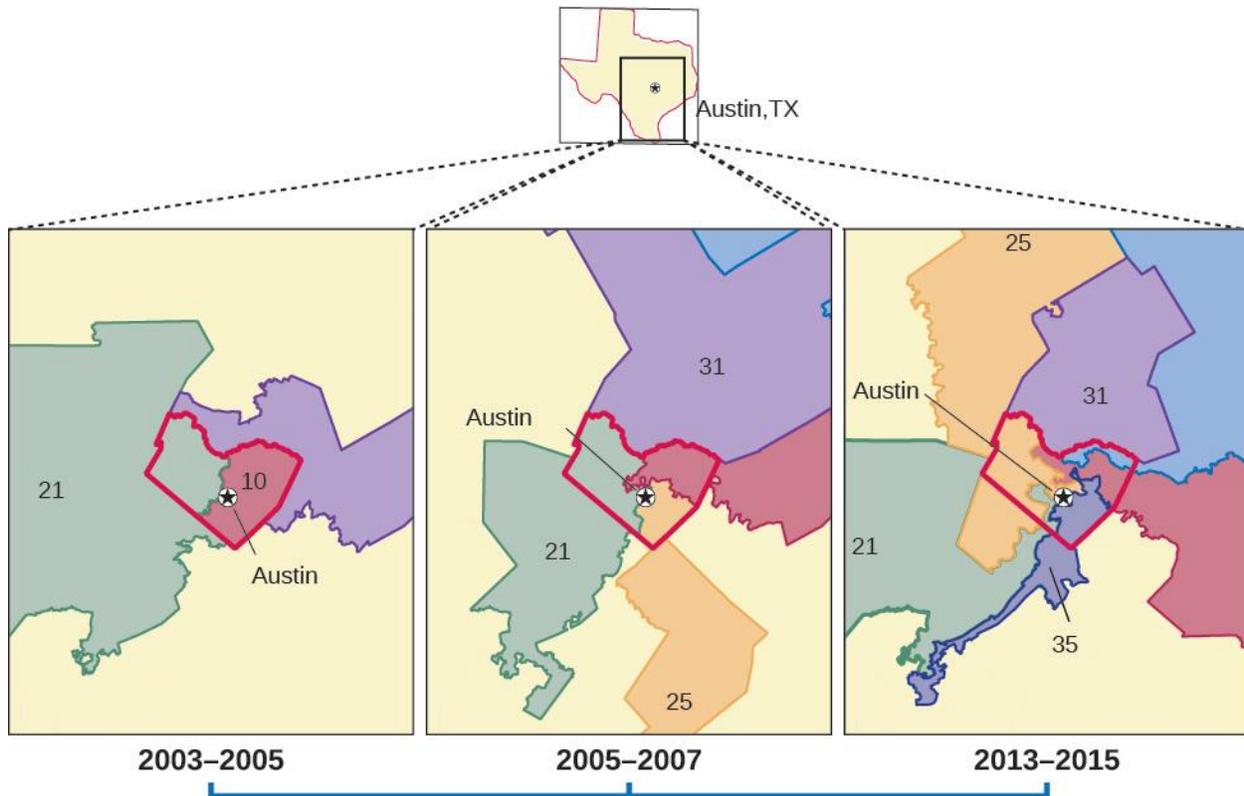


Figure 6.4 These maps show examples of gerrymandering in Texas, where the Republican-controlled legislature has redrawn House districts to reduce the number of Democratic seats by combining voters in Austin with those in surrounding counties, sometimes even several hundred miles away. Today, Austin is represented by six different congressional representatives.

Finding a Middle Ground

Racial Gerrymandering and the Paradox of Minority Representation

In Ohio, one skirts the shoreline of Lake Erie like a snake. In Louisiana, one meanders across the southern part of the state from the eastern shore of Lake Ponchartrain, through much of New Orleans and north along the Mississippi River to Baton Rouge. And in Illinois, another wraps around the city of Chicago and its suburbs in a wandering line that, when seen on a map, looks like the mouth of a large, bearded alligator attempting to drink from Lake Michigan.

These aren't geographical features or large infrastructure projects. Rather, they are racially gerrymandered congressional districts. Their strange shapes are the product of careful district restructuring organized around the goal of enhancing the votes of minority groups. The alligator-mouth District 4 in Illinois, for example, was drawn to bring a number of geographically autonomous Latino groups in Illinois together in the same congressional district.

While the strategy of creating majority-minority districts has been a success for minorities' representation in Congress, its long-term effect has revealed a disturbing paradox: Congress as

a whole has become less enthusiastic about minority-specific issues. How is this possible? The problem is that by creating districts with high percentages of minority constituents, strategists have made the other districts less diverse. The representatives in those districts are under very little pressure to consider the interests of minority groups. As a result, they typically do not.²

What changes might help correct this problem? Are majority-minority districts no longer an effective strategy for increasing minority representation in Congress? Are there better ways to achieve a higher level of minority representation?

CONGRESSIONAL POWERS

The authority to introduce and pass legislation is a very strong power. But it is only one of the many that Congress possesses. In general, congressional powers can be divided into three types: enumerated, implied, and inherent. An enumerated power is a power explicitly stated in the Constitution. An implied power is one not specifically detailed in the Constitution but inferred as necessary to achieve the objectives of the national government. And an inherent power, while not enumerated or implied, must be assumed to exist as a direct result of the country's existence. In this section, we will learn about each type of power and the foundations of legitimacy they claim. We will also learn about the way the different branches of government have historically appropriated powers not previously granted to them and the way congressional power has recently suffered in this process.

Article I, Section 8, of the U.S. Constitution details the enumerated powers of the legislature. These include the power to levy and collect taxes, declare war, raise an army and navy, coin money, borrow money, regulate commerce among the states and with foreign nations, establish federal courts and bankruptcy rules, establish rules for immigration and naturalization, and issue patents and copyrights. Other powers, such as the power of Congress to establish federal courts below the Supreme Court, are found elsewhere in the Constitution (Article III, Section 1). The first of these enumerated powers, to levy taxes, is quite possibly the most important power Congress possesses. Without it, most of the others, whether enumerated, implied, or inherent, would be largely theoretical. The power to levy and collect taxes, along with the appropriations power, gives Congress what is typically referred to as “the power of the purse” ([Figure 6.5](#)). This means Congress controls the money.

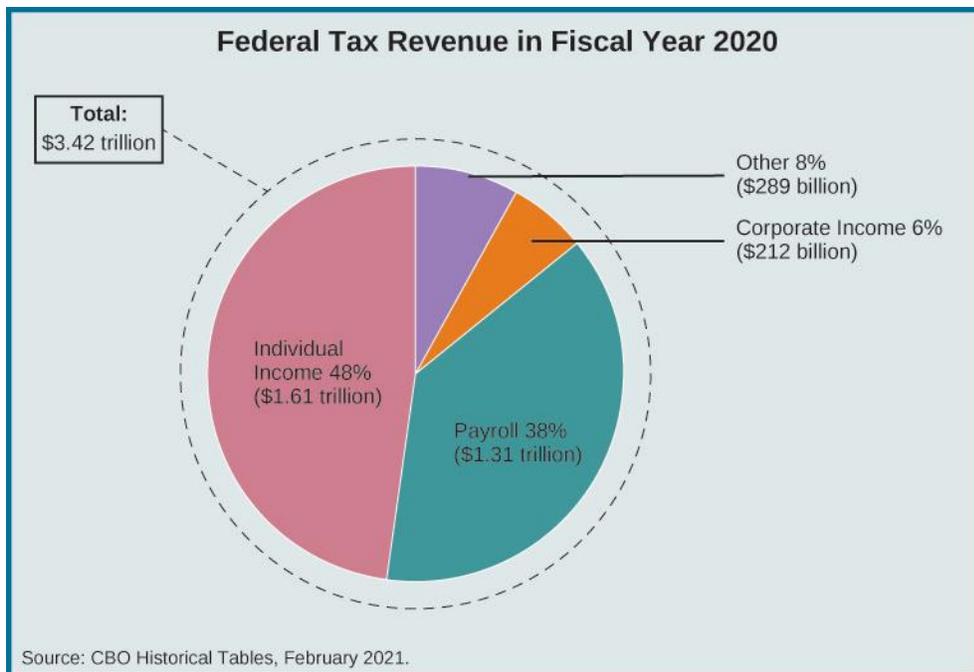


Figure 6.5 The ability to levy and collect taxes is the first, and most important, of Congress’s enumerated powers. In 2020, U.S. federal tax revenue totaled \$3.42 trillion.

Some enumerated powers invested in the Congress were included specifically to serve as checks on the other powerful branches of government. These include Congress’s sole power to introduce legislation, the Senate’s final say on many presidential nominations and treaties signed by the president, and the House’s ability to impeach or formally accuse the president or other federal officials of wrongdoing (the first step in removing the person from office; the second step, trial and removal, takes place in the U.S. Senate). Each of these powers also grants Congress oversight of the actions of the president and the administration—that is, the right to review and monitor other bodies such as the executive branch. The fact that Congress has the sole power to introduce legislation effectively limits the power of the president to develop the same laws the president is empowered to enforce. The Senate’s exclusive power to give final approval for many of the president’s nominees, including cabinet members and judicial appointments, compels the president to consider the needs and desires of Congress when selecting top government officials. Finally, removing a president from office who has been elected by the entire country should never be done lightly. Giving this responsibility to a large deliberative body of elected officials ensures it will occur only very rarely.

Despite the fact that the Constitution outlines specific enumerated powers, most of the actions Congress takes on a day-to-day basis are not actually included in this list. The reason is that the Constitution not only gives Congress the power to make laws but also gives it some general direction as to what those laws should accomplish. The “necessary and proper clause” directs Congress “to make all Laws which shall be necessary and proper for carrying into Execution the foregoing Powers, and all other Powers vested by this Constitution in the Government of the

United States, or in any Department or Officer thereof.” Laws that regulate banks, establish a minimum wage, and allow for the construction and maintenance of interstate highways are all possible because of the implied powers granted by the necessary and proper clause. Today, the overwhelming portion of Congress’s work is tied to the necessary and proper clause.

Finally, Congress’s inherent powers are unlike either the enumerated or the implied powers. Inherent powers are not only not mentioned in the Constitution, but they do not even have a convenient clause in the Constitution to provide for them. Instead, they are powers Congress has determined it must assume if the government is going to work at all. The general assumption is that these powers were deemed so essential to any functioning government that the framers saw no need to spell them out. Such powers include the power to control borders of the state, the power to expand the territory of the state, and the power to defend itself from internal revolution or coups. These powers are not granted to the Congress, or to any other branch of the government for that matter, but they exist because the country exists.

Finding a Middle Ground

Understanding the Limits of Congress’s Power to Regulate

One of the most important constitutional anchors for Congress’s implicit power to regulate all manner of activities within the states is the short clause in Article I, Section 8, which says Congress is empowered to “to regulate Commerce with foreign Nations, and among the several States, and with Indian Tribes.” The Supreme Court’s broad interpretation of this so-called commerce clause has greatly expanded the power and reach of Congress over the centuries.

From the earliest days of the republic until the end of the nineteenth century, the Supreme Court consistently handed down decisions that effectively broadened the Congress’s power to regulate interstate and intrastate commerce.³ The growing country, the demands of its expanding economy, and the way changes in technology and transportation contributed to the shrinking of space between the states demanded that Congress be able to function as a regulator. For a short period in the 1930s when federal authority was expanded to combat the Great Depression, the Court began to interpret the commerce clause far more narrowly. But after this interlude, the court’s interpretation swung in an even-broader direction. This change proved particularly important in the 1960s, when Congress rolled back racial segregation throughout much of the South and beyond, and in the 1970s, as federal environmental regulations and programs took root.

But in *United States v. Lopez*, a decision issued in 1995, the Court changed course again and, for the first time in half a century, struck down a law as an unconstitutional overstepping of the commerce clause.⁴ Five years later, the Court did it again, convincing many that the country may be witnessing the beginning of a rollback in Congress’s power to regulate in the states. When the Patient Protection and Affordable Care Act (also known as the ACA, or Obamacare) came before the Supreme Court in 2012, many believed the Court would strike it down. Instead, the justices took the novel approach of upholding the law based on the Congress’s enumerated power to tax, rather than the commerce clause. The decision was a shock to

many.⁵ And, by not upholding the law on the basis of the commerce clause, the Court left open the possibility that it would continue to pursue a narrower interpretation of the clause.

What are the advantages of the Supreme Court's broad interpretation of the commerce clause? How do you think this interpretation affects the balance of power between the branches of government? Why are some people concerned that the Court's view of the clause could change?

In the early days of the republic, Congress's role was rarely if ever disputed. However, with its decision in *Marbury v. Madison* (1803), the Supreme Court asserted its authority over judicial review and assumed the power to declare laws unconstitutional.⁶ Yet, even after that decision, the Court was reluctant to use this power and didn't do so for over half a century. Initially, the presidency was also a fairly weak branch of government compared with the legislature. But presidents have sought to increase their power almost from the beginning, typically at the expense of the Congress. By the nature of the enumerated powers provided to the president, it is during wartime that the chief executive is most powerful and Congress least powerful. For example, President Abraham Lincoln, who oversaw the prosecution of the Civil War, stretched the bounds of his legal authority in a number of ways, such as by issuing the Emancipation Proclamation that freed enslaved people in the confederate states.⁷

In the twentieth century, the modern tussle over power between the Congress and the president really began. There are two primary reasons this struggle emerged. First, as the country grew larger and more complex, the need for the government to assert its regulatory power grew. The executive branch, because of its hierarchical organization with the president at the top, is naturally seen as a more smoothly run governmental machine than the cumbersome Congress. This gives the president advantages in the struggle for power and indeed gives Congress an incentive to delegate authority to the president on processes, such as trade agreements and national monument designations, that would be difficult for the legislature to carry out. The second reason has to do with the president's powers as commander-in-chief in the realm of foreign policy.

The twin disasters of the Great Depression in the 1930s and World War II, which lasted until the mid-1940s, provided President Franklin D. Roosevelt with a powerful platform from which to expand presidential power. His popularity and his ability to be elected four times allowed him to greatly overshadow Congress. As a result, Congress attempted to restrain the power of the presidency by proposing the Twenty-Second Amendment to the Constitution, which limited a president to only two full terms in office.⁸ Although this limitation is a significant one, it has not held back the tendency for the presidency to assume increased power.

In the decades following World War II, the United States entered the Cold War, a seemingly endless conflict with the Soviet Union without actual war, and therefore a period that allowed the presidency to assert more authority, especially in foreign affairs. In an exercise of this increased power, in the 1950s, President Harry Truman effectively went around an enumerated power of Congress by sending troops into battle in Korea without a congressional declaration of war ([Figure 6.6](#)). By the time of the Kennedy administration in the 1960s, the presidency had assumed nearly all responsibility for creating foreign policy, effectively shutting Congress out.

Following the twin scandals of Vietnam and Watergate in the early 1970s, Congress attempted to assert itself as a coequal branch, even in creating foreign policy, but could not hold back the trend. The War Powers Resolution (covered in the foreign policy chapter) was intended to strengthen congressional war powers but ended up clarifying presidential authority in the first sixty days of a military conflict. The war on terrorism after 9/11 has also strengthened the president's hand. Today, the seemingly endless bickering between the president and the Congress is a reminder of the ongoing struggle for power between the branches, and indeed between the parties, in Washington, DC. Presidential use of executive orders on domestic policy, and executive agreements on foreign policy, allowed in areas in which Congress has delegated authority to the president, have furthered this trend. When used, they replace legislation and treaties.⁹



Figure 6.6 President Truman did not think it necessary to go through Congress to prosecute the war in Korea. This action opened the door to an extended era in which Congress has been effectively removed from decisions about whether to go to war, an era that continues today.

6.2 Congressional Elections

Learning Objectives

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

- Explain how fundamental characteristics of the House and Senate shape their elections
- Discuss campaign funding and the effects of incumbency in the House and Senate
- Analyze the way congressional elections can sometimes become nationalized

The House and Senate operate very differently, partly because their members differ in the length of their terms, as well as in their age and other characteristics. In this section, we will explore why constitutional rules affect the elections for the two types of representatives and the reason the two bodies function differently by design. We also look at campaign finance to better understand how legislators get elected and stay elected.

UNDERSTANDING THE HOUSE AND SENATE

The U.S. Constitution is very clear about who can be elected as a member of the House or Senate. A House member must be a U.S. citizen of at least seven years' standing and at least twenty-five years old. Senators are required to have nine years' standing as citizens and be at least thirty years old when sworn in. Representatives serve two-year terms, whereas senators serve six-year terms. Per the Supreme Court decision in *U.S. Term Limits v. Thornton* (1995), there are currently no term limits for either senators or representatives, despite efforts by many states to impose them in the mid-1990s.¹⁰ House members are elected by the voters in their specific congressional districts. There are currently 435 congressional districts in the United States and thus 435 House members, and each state has a number of House districts roughly proportional to its share of the total U.S. population, with states guaranteed at least one House member. Two senators are elected by each state.

The structural and other differences between the House and Senate have practical consequences for the way the two chambers function. The House of Representatives has developed a stronger and more structured leadership than the Senate. Because its members serve short, two-year terms, they must regularly answer to the demands of their constituency when they run for election or reelection. Even House members of the same party in the same state will occasionally disagree on issues because of the different interests of their specific districts. Thus, the House can be highly partisan at times.

In contrast, members of the Senate are furthest from the demands and scrutiny of their constituents. Because of their longer six-year terms, they will see every member of the House face constituents multiple times before they themselves are forced to seek reelection. Originally, when a state's two U.S. senators were appointed by the state legislature, the Senate chamber's distance from the electorate was even greater. Also, unlike members of the House who can seek the narrower interests of their district, senators must maintain a broader appeal in order to earn a majority of the votes across their entire state. In addition, the rules of the Senate allow individual members to slow down or stop legislation they dislike. These structural differences between the two chambers create real differences in the actions of their members. The heat of popular, sometimes fleeting, demands from constituents often glows red hot in the House. The Senate has the flexibility to allow these passions to cool. Dozens of major initiatives were passed by the House and had a willing president, for example, only to be defeated in the Senate. In 2012, the Buffett Rule would have implemented a minimum tax rate of 30 percent on wealthy Americans. Sixty senators had to agree to bring it to a vote, but the bill fell short of that number and died.¹¹ Similarly, although the ACA became widely known as "Obamacare," the president did not send a piece of legislation to Capitol Hill; he asked Congress to write the bills. Both the House and Senate authored their own versions of the legislation. The House's version was much bolder and larger in terms of establishing a national health care system. However, it did not stand a chance in the Senate, where a more moderate version of the legislation was introduced. In the end, House leaders saw the Senate version as preferable to doing nothing and ultimately supported it.

CONGRESSIONAL CAMPAIGN FUNDING

Modern political campaigns in the United States are expensive, and they have been growing more so. For example, in 1986, the costs of running a successful House and Senate campaign were \$849,111 and \$7,243,782, respectively, in 2020 dollars. By 2020, those values had shot to \$2.4 million and \$27.2 million ([Figure 6.7](#)).¹² Raising this amount of money takes quite a bit of time and effort. Indeed, a presentation for incoming Democratic representatives suggested a daily Washington schedule of five hours reaching out to donors, while only three or four were to be used for actual congressional work. As this advice reveals, raising money for reelection constitutes a large proportion of the work a congressperson does. This has caused many to wonder whether the amount of money in politics has truly become a corrupting influence. However, overall, the lion's share of direct campaign contributions in congressional elections comes from individual donors, who are less influential than the political action committees (PACs) that contribute the remainder.¹³



Figure 6.7 The most expensive House race in 2020 was that of House minority whip Steve Scalise, who ran unopposed. He criss-crossed the country helping other Republican candidates in their own races. (credit: "Steve Scalise 116th Congress official photo" by US House Office of Photography/Wikimedia Commons, Public Domain)

Nevertheless, the complex problem of funding campaigns has a long history in the United States. For nearly the first hundred years of the republic, there were no federal campaign finance laws. Then, between the late nineteenth century and the start of World War I, Congress pushed through a flurry of reforms intended to bring order to the world of campaign finance. These laws made it illegal for politicians to solicit contributions from civil service workers, made corporate contributions illegal, and required candidates to report their fundraising. As

politicians and donors soon discovered, however, these laws were full of loopholes and were easily skirted by those who knew the ins and outs of the system.

Another handful of reform attempts were therefore pushed through in the wake of World War II, but then Congress neglected campaign finance reform for a few decades. That lull ended in the early 1970s when the Federal Election Campaign Act was passed. Among other things, it created the Federal Election Commission (FEC), required candidates to disclose where their money was coming from and where they were spending it, limited individual contributions, and provided for public financing of presidential campaigns.

Another important reform occurred in 2002, when Senators John McCain (R-AZ) and Russell Feingold (D-WI) drafted, and Congress passed, the Bipartisan Campaign Reform Act (BCRA), also referred to as the McCain-Feingold Act. The purpose of this law was to limit the use of “soft money,” which is raised for purposes like party-building efforts, get-out-the-vote efforts, and issue-advocacy ads. Unlike “hard money” contributed directly to a candidate, which is heavily regulated and limited, soft money had almost no regulations or limits. It had never been a problem before the mid-1990s, when a number of very imaginative political operatives developed a great many ways to spend this money. After that, soft-money donations skyrocketed. But the McCain-Feingold bill greatly limited this type of fundraising.

McCain-Feingold placed limits on total contributions to political parties, prohibited coordination between candidates and PAC campaigns, and required candidates to include personal endorsements on their political ads. Until 2010, it also limited advertisements run by unions and corporations thirty days before a primary and sixty days before a general election.¹⁴ The FEC’s enforcement of the law spurred numerous court cases challenging it. The most controversial decision was handed down by the Supreme Court in 2010, whose ruling on *Citizens United v. Federal Election Commission* led to the removal of spending limits on corporations. Justices in the majority argued that the BCRA violated a corporation’s free-speech rights.¹⁵

The *Citizens United* case began as a lawsuit against the FEC filed by Citizens United, a nonprofit organization that wanted to advertise a documentary critical of former senator and Democratic hopeful Hillary Clinton on the eve of the 2008 Democratic primaries. Advertising or showing the film during this time window was prohibited by the McCain-Feingold Act. But the Court found that this type of restriction violated the organization’s First Amendment right to free speech. As critics of the decision predicted at the time, the Court thus opened the floodgates to private soft money flowing into campaigns again.

In the wake of the *Citizens United* decision, a new type of advocacy group emerged, the super PAC. A traditional PAC is an organization designed to raise hard money to elect or defeat candidates. Such PACs tended to be run by businesses and other groups, like the Teamsters Union and the National Rifle Association, to support their special interests. They are highly regulated in regard to the amount of money they can take in and spend, but super PACs aren’t bound by these regulations. While they cannot give money directly to a candidate or a candidate’s party, they can raise and spend unlimited funds, and they can spend independently

of a campaign or party. In the 2020 election cycle, for example, super PACs spent just over \$2 billion dollars and raised about \$1.3 billion more.¹⁶

At the same time, several limits on campaign contributions have been upheld by the courts and remain in place. Individuals may contribute up to \$2900 per candidate per election. Individuals may also give \$5000 to PACs and \$36,500 to a national party committee. PACs that contribute to more than one candidate are permitted to contribute \$5000 per candidate per election, and up to \$15,000 to a national party. PACs created to give money to only one candidate are limited to only \$2900 per candidate, however (Figure 6.8).¹⁷ The amounts are adjusted every two years, based on inflation. These limits are intended to create a more equal playing field for the candidates, so that candidates must raise their campaign funds from a broad pool of contributors.

CONTRIBUTION LIMITS FOR 2021–2022 FEDERAL ELECTIONS					
DONORS	RECIPIENTS				
	Candidate Committee	PAC ¹ (SSF and Nonconnected)	State/District/Local Party Committee	National Party Committee	Additional National Party Committee Accounts ²
Individual	\$2,900* per election	\$5,000 per year	\$10,000 per year (combined)	\$36,500* per year	\$109,500* per account, per year
Candidate Committee	\$2,000 per election	\$5,000 per year	Unlimited Transfers	Unlimited Transfers	
PAC-Multicandidate	\$5,000 per election	\$5,000 per year	\$5,000 per year (combined)	\$15,000 per year	\$45,000 per account, per year
PAC-Nonmulticandidate	\$2,900 per election	\$5,000 per year	\$10,000 per year (combined)	\$36,500* per year	\$109,500* per account, per year
State/District/Local Party Committee	\$5,000 per election (combined)	\$5,000 per election (combined)	Unlimited Transfers		
National Party Committee	\$5,000 per election ³	\$5,000 per year			

*- Indexed for inflation in odd-numbered years.

¹ "PAC" here refers to a committee that makes contributions to other federal political committees. Independent-expenditure-only political committees (sometimes called "super PACs") may accept unlimited contributions, including from corporations and labor organizations.

² The limits in this column apply to a national party committee's accounts for: (i) the presidential nominating convention; (ii) election recounts and contests and other legal proceedings; and (iii) national party headquarters buildings. A party's national committee, Senate campaign committee and House campaign committee are each considered separate national party committees with separate limits. Only a national party committee, not the parties' national congressional campaign committees, may have an account for the presidential nominating convention.

³ Additionally, a national party committee and its Senatorial campaign committee may contribute up to \$51,200 combined per campaign to each Senate candidate.

Source: Federal Election Commission. "Contribution Limits for 2021–2022 Federal Elections." January, 2021.

Figure 6.8 The Federal Election Commission has strict federal election guidelines on who can contribute, to whom, and how much.

Link to Learning

The [Center for Responsive Politics](#) reports donation amounts that are required by law to be disclosed to the Federal Elections Commission. One finding is that, counter to conventional wisdom, the vast majority of direct campaign contributions come from individual donors, not from PACs and political parties.

INCUMBENCY EFFECTS

Not surprisingly, the jungle of campaign financing regulations and loopholes is more easily navigated by incumbents in Congress than by newcomers. Incumbents are elected officials who currently hold an office. The amount of money they raise against their challengers demonstrates their advantage. In 2020, for example, the average Senate incumbent raised \$28,649,593, whereas the average challenger raised only \$5,264,022.¹⁸ This is one of the many reasons incumbents win a large majority of congressional races each electoral cycle. Incumbents attract more money because people want to give to a winner. In the House, the percentage of incumbents winning reelection has hovered between 85 and 100 percent for the last half century. In the Senate, there is only slightly more variation, given the statewide nature of the race, but it is still a very high majority of incumbents who win reelection ([Figure 6.9](#)). As these rates show, even in the worst political environments, incumbents are very difficult to defeat.

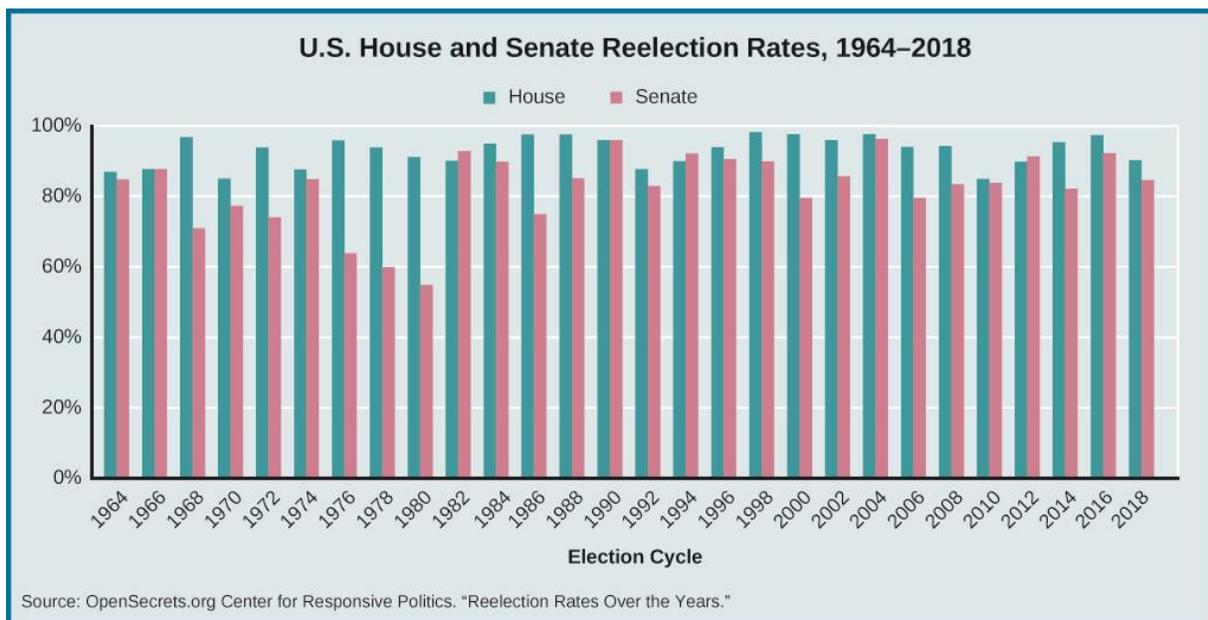


Figure 6.9 Historically, incumbents in both the House and the Senate enjoy high rates of reelection.

The historical difficulty of unseating an incumbent in the House or Senate is often referred to as the *incumbent advantage* or the *incumbency effect*. The advantage in financing is a huge part of this effect, but it is not the only important part. Incumbents often have a much higher level of name recognition. All things being equal, voters are far more likely to select the name of the

person they recall seeing on television and hearing on the radio for the last few years than the name of a person they hardly know. And donors are more likely to want to give to a proven winner.

But more important is the way the party system itself privileges incumbents. A large percentage of congressional districts across the country are “safe seats” in uncompetitive districts, meaning candidates from a particular party are highly likely to consistently win the seat. This means the functional decision in these elections occurs during the primary, not in the general election. Political parties in general prefer to support incumbents in elections, because the general consensus is that incumbents are better candidates, and their record of success lends support to this conclusion. That said, while the political parties themselves to a degree control and regulate the primaries, popular individual candidates and challengers sometimes rule the day. This has especially been the case in recent years as conservative incumbents have been “primaried” by challengers more conservative than they.

Insider Perspective

The End of Incumbency Advantage?

At the start of 2014, House majority whip Eric Cantor, a representative from Virginia, was at the top of his game. He was handsome, popular with talk show hosts and powerful insiders, an impressive campaign fundraiser and speaker, and apparently destined to become Speaker of the House when the current speaker stepped down. Four months later, Cantor lost the opportunity to run for his own congressional seat in a shocking primary election upset that shook the Washington political establishment to its core.

What happened? How did such a powerful incumbent lose a game in which the cards had been stacked so heavily in his favor? Analyses of the stunning defeat quickly showed there were more chinks in Cantor’s polished armor than most wanted to admit. But his weakness wasn’t that he was unable to play the political game. Rather, he may have learned to play it too well. He became seen as too much of a Washington insider.

Cantor’s ambition, political skill, deep connections to political insiders, and ability to come out squeaky clean after even the dirtiest political tussling should have given him a clear advantage over any competitor. But in the political environment of 2014, when conservative voices around the country criticized the party for ignoring the people and catering to political insiders, his strengths became weaknesses. Indeed, Cantor was the only highest-level Republican representative sacrificed to conservative populism.

Were the winds of change blowing for incumbents? Between 1946 and 2012, only 5 percent of incumbent senators and 2 percent of House incumbents lost their party primaries.¹⁹ In 2014, Cantor was one of four House incumbents who did so, while no incumbent senators suffered defeat. All evidence suggests the incumbent advantage, especially in the primary system, is alive and well. The story of Eric Cantor may very well be the classic case of an exception proving the rule.

If you are a challenger running against an incumbent, what are some strategies you could use to make the race competitive? Would Congress operate differently if challengers defeated incumbents more often?

Another reason incumbents wield a great advantage over their challengers is the state power they have at their disposal.²⁰ One of the many responsibilities of a sitting congressperson is *constituent casework*. Constituents routinely reach out to their congressperson for powerful support to solve complex problems, such as applying for and tracking federal benefits or resolving immigration and citizenship challenges.²¹ Incumbent members of Congress have paid staff, influence, and access to specialized information that can help their constituents in ways other persons cannot. And congresspersons are hardly reticent about their efforts to support their constituents. Often, they will publicize their casework on their websites or, in some cases, create television advertisements that boast of their helpfulness. Election history has demonstrated that this form of publicity is very effective in garnering the support of voters.

LOCAL AND NATIONAL ELECTIONS

The importance of airing positive constituent casework during campaigns is a testament to the accuracy of saying, “All politics is local.” This phrase, attributed to former Speaker of the House Tip O’Neill (D-MA), essentially means that the most important motivations directing voters are rooted in local concerns. In general, this is true. People naturally feel more driven by the things that affect them on a daily basis. These are concerns like the quality of the roads, the availability of good jobs, and the cost and quality of public education. Good senators and representatives understand this and will seek to use their influence and power in office to affect these issues for the better. This is an age-old strategy for success in office and elections.

Political scientists have taken note of some voting patterns that appear to challenge this common assumption, however. In 1960, political scientist Angus Campbell proposed the surge-and-decline theory to explain these patterns.²² Campbell noticed that since the Civil War, with the exception of 1934, the president’s party has consistently lost seats in Congress during the midterm elections. He proposed that the reason was a surge in political stimulation during presidential elections, which contributes to greater turnout and brings in voters who are ordinarily less interested in politics. These voters, Campbell argued, tend to favor the party holding the presidency. In contrast, midterm elections witness the opposite effect. They are less stimulating and have lower turnout because less-interested voters stay home. This shift, in Campbell’s theory, provides an advantage to the party not currently occupying the presidency.

In the decades since Campbell’s influential theory was published, a number of studies have challenged his conclusions. Nevertheless, the pattern of midterm elections benefiting the president’s opposition has persisted.²³ Only in exceptional years has this pattern been broken: first in 1998 during President Bill Clinton’s second term and the Monica Lewinsky scandal, when exit polls indicated most voters opposed the idea of impeaching the president, and then again in 2002, following the 9/11 terrorist attacks and the ensuing declaration of a “war on terror.”

The evidence does suggest that national concerns, rather than local ones, can function as powerful motivators at the polls. Consider, for example, the role of the Iraq War in bringing

about a Democratic rout of the Republicans in the House in 2006 and in the Senate in 2008. Unlike previous wars in Europe and Vietnam, the war in Iraq was fought by a very small percentage of the population.²⁴ The vast majority of citizens were not soldiers, few had relatives fighting in the war, and most did not know anyone who directly suffered from the prolonged conflict. Voters in large numbers were motivated by the political and economic disaster of the war to vote for politicians they believed would end it (Figure 6.10).



Figure 6.10 Wars typically have the power to nationalize local elections. What makes the Iraq War different is that the overwhelming majority of voters had little to no intimate connection with the conflict and were motivated to vote for those who would end it. (credit: "Lipton sale"/Wikimedia Commons)

Congressional elections may be increasingly driven by national issues. Just two decades ago, straight-ticket, party-line voting was still relatively rare across most of the country.²⁵ In much of the South, which began to vote overwhelmingly Republican in presidential elections during the 1960s and 1970s, Democrats were still commonly elected to the House and Senate. The candidates themselves and the important local issues, apart from party affiliation, were important drivers in congressional elections. This began to change in the 1980s and 1990s, as Democratic representatives across the region began to dwindle. And the South isn't alone; areas in the Northeast and the Northwest have grown increasingly Democratic. Indeed, the 2014 midterm election was the most nationalized election in many decades and that trend has continued since. Voters who favor a particular party in a presidential election are now much more likely to also support that same party in House and Senate elections than was the case just a few decades ago.

6.3 Congressional Representation

Learning Objectives

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

- Explain the basics of representation
- Describe the extent to which Congress as a body represents the U.S. population
- Explain the concept of collective representation
- Describe the forces that influence congressional approval ratings

The tension between local and national politics described in the previous section is essentially a struggle between interpretations of representation. Representation is a complex concept. It can mean paying careful attention to the concerns of constituents, understanding that representatives must act as they see fit based on what they feel best for the constituency, or relying on the particular ethnic, racial, or gender diversity of those in office. In this section, we will explore three different models of representation and the concept of descriptive representation. We will look at the way members of Congress navigate the challenging terrain of representation as they serve, and all the many predictable and unpredictable consequences of the decisions they make.

TYPES OF REPRESENTATION: LOOKING OUT FOR CONSTITUENTS

By definition and title, senators and House members are representatives. This means they are intended to be drawn from local populations around the country so they can speak for and make decisions for those local populations, their constituents, while serving in their respective legislative houses. That is, representation refers to an elected leader's looking out for constituents while carrying out the duties of the office.²⁶

Theoretically, the process of constituents voting regularly and reaching out to their representatives helps these congresspersons better represent them. It is considered a given by some in representative democracies that representatives will seldom ignore the wishes of constituents, especially on salient issues that directly affect the district or state. In reality, the job of representing in Congress is often quite complicated, and elected leaders do not always know where their constituents stand. Nor do constituents always agree on everything. Navigating their sometimes contradictory demands and balancing them with the demands of the party, powerful interest groups, ideological concerns, the legislative body, their own personal beliefs, and the country as a whole can be a complicated and frustrating process for representatives.

Traditionally, representatives have seen their role as that of a delegate, a trustee, or someone attempting to balance the two. Representatives who see themselves as delegates believe they are empowered merely to enact the wishes of constituents. Delegates must employ some means to identify the views of their constituents and then vote accordingly. They are not permitted the liberty of employing their own reason and judgment while acting as representatives in Congress. This is the delegate model of representation.

In contrast, a representative who understands their role to be that of a trustee believes they are entrusted by the constituents with the power to use good judgment to make decisions on the constituents' behalf. In the words of the eighteenth-century British philosopher Edmund Burke, who championed the trustee model of representation, "Parliament is not a congress of ambassadors from different and hostile interests . . . [it is rather] a deliberative assembly of one nation, with one interest, that of the whole."²⁷ In the modern setting, trustee representatives will look to party consensus, party leadership, powerful interests, the member's own personal views, and national trends to better identify the voting choices they should make.

Understandably, few if any representatives adhere strictly to one model or the other. Instead, most find themselves attempting to balance the important principles embedded in each. Political scientists call this the politico model of representation. In it, members of Congress act as either trustee or delegate based on rational political calculations about who is best served, the constituency or the nation.

For example, every representative, regardless of party or conservative versus liberal leanings, must remain firm in support of some ideologies and resistant to others. On the political right, an issue that demands support might be gun rights; on the left, it might be a woman's right to an abortion. For votes related to such issues, representatives will likely pursue a delegate approach. For other issues, especially complex questions the public at large has little patience for, such as subtle economic reforms, representatives will tend to follow a trustee approach. This is not to say their decisions on these issues run contrary to public opinion. Rather, it merely means they are not acutely aware of or cannot adequately measure the extent to which their constituents support or reject the proposals at hand. It could also mean that the issue is not salient to their constituents. Congress works on hundreds of different issues each year, and constituents are likely not aware of the particulars of most of them.

DESCRIPTIVE REPRESENTATION IN CONGRESS

In some cases, representation can seem to have very little to do with the substantive issues representatives in Congress tend to debate. Instead, proper representation for some is rooted in the racial, ethnic, socioeconomic, gender, and sexual identity of the representatives themselves. This form of representation is called descriptive representation.

At one time, there was relatively little concern about descriptive representation in Congress. A major reason is that until well into the twentieth century, White men of European background constituted an overwhelming majority of the voting population. African Americans were routinely deprived of the opportunity to participate in democracy, and Hispanics and other minority groups were fairly insignificant in number and excluded by the states. While women in many western states could vote sooner, all women were not able to exercise their right to vote nationwide until passage of the Nineteenth Amendment in 1920, and they began to make up more than 5 percent of either chamber only in the 1990s.

Many advances in women's rights have been the result of women's greater engagement in politics and representation in the halls of government, especially since the founding of the National Organization for Women in 1966 and the National Women's Political Caucus (NWPC)

in 1971. The NWPC was formed by Bella Abzug ([Figure 6.11](#)), Gloria Steinem, Shirley Chisholm, and other leading feminists to encourage women’s participation in political parties, elect women to office, and raise money for their campaigns. For example, Patsy Mink (D-HI) ([Figure 6.11](#)), the first Asian American woman elected to Congress, was the coauthor of the Education Amendments Act of 1972, Title IX of which prohibits sex discrimination in education. Mink had been interested in fighting discrimination in education since her youth, when she opposed racial segregation in campus housing while a student at the University of Nebraska. She went to law school after being denied admission to medical school because of her gender. Like Mink, many other women sought and won political office, many with the help of the NWPC. Today, EMILY’s List, a PAC founded in 1985 to help elect pro-choice Democratic women to office, plays a major role in fundraising for female candidates. In the 2018 midterm elections, thirty-four women endorsed by EMILY’s List won election to the U.S. House.²⁸ In 2020, the Republicans took a page from the Democrats’ playbook when they made the recruitment and support of quality female candidates a priority and increased the number of Republican women in the House from thirteen to twenty-eight, including ten seats formerly held by Democrats.²⁹



Figure 6.11 Patsy Mink (a), a Japanese American from Hawaii, was the first Asian American woman elected to the House of Representatives. In her successful 1970 congressional campaign, Bella Abzug (b) declared, “This woman’s place is in the House... the House of Representatives!”

In the wake of the Civil Rights Movement, African American representatives also began to enter Congress in increasing numbers. In 1971, to better represent their interests, these representatives founded the Congressional Black Caucus (CBC), an organization that grew out of a Democratic select committee formed in 1969. Founding members of the CBC include Ralph Metcalfe (D-IL), a former sprinter from Chicago who had medaled at both the Los Angeles (1932) and Berlin (1936) Olympic Games, and Shirley Chisholm, a founder of the NWPC and the first African American woman to be elected to the House of Representatives ([Figure 6.12](#)).



Figure 6.12 This photo shows the founding members of the Congressional Black Caucus, which at the time of its founding in 1971 had thirteen members and included only one woman (Shirley Chisholm). Currently, fifty-seven African Americans serve in Congress.

In recent decades, Congress has become much more descriptively representative of the United States. The 117th Congress, which began in January 2021 had a historically large percentage of racial and ethnic minorities. African Americans made up the largest percentage, with sixty-two members (including two delegates and two people who would soon resign to serve in the executive branch), while Latinos accounted for fifty-four members (including two delegates and the Resident Commissioner of Puerto Rico), up from thirty just a decade before.³⁰ Yet, demographically speaking, Congress as a whole is still a long way from where the country is and is composed of largely White wealthy men. For example, although more than half the U.S. population is female, only 25 percent of Congress is. Congress is also overwhelmingly Christian (Figure 6.13).

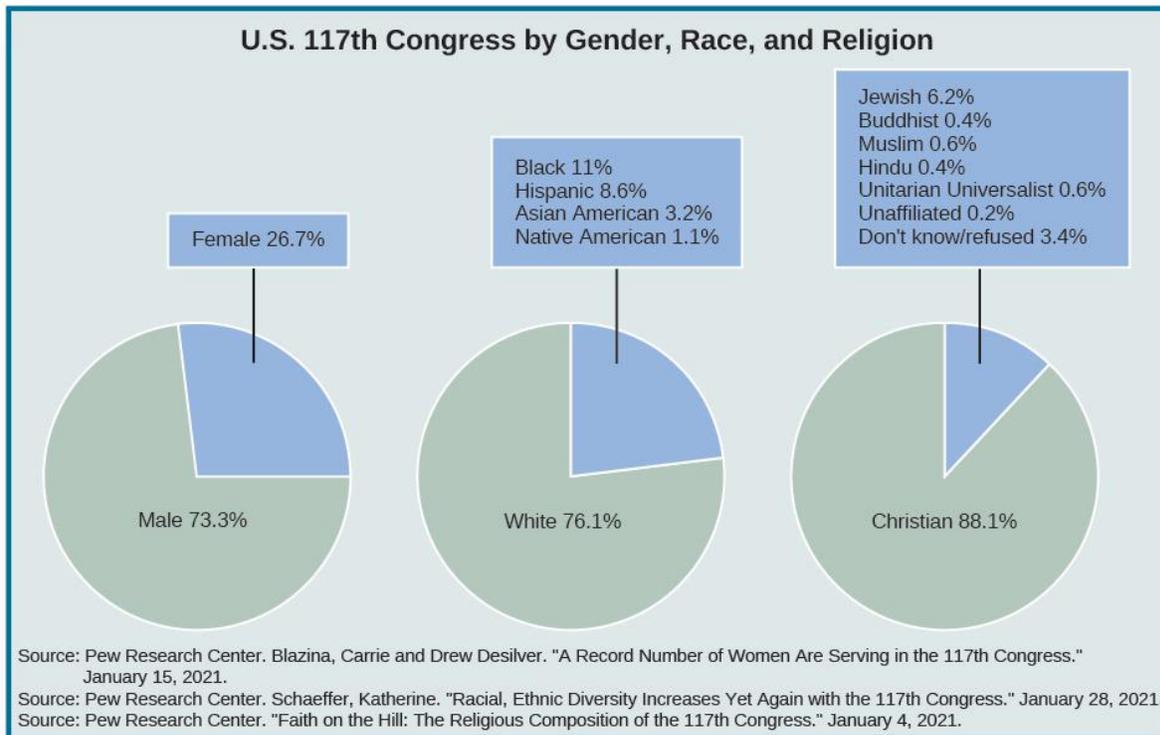


Figure 6.13 The diversity of the country is not reflected in the U.S. Congress, whose current membership is approximately 73 percent male, 76 percent White, and 88 percent Christian.

REPRESENTING CONSTITUENTS

Ethnic, racial, gender, or ideological identity aside, it is a representative's actions in Congress that ultimately reflect their understanding of representation. Congress members' most important function as lawmakers is writing, supporting, and passing bills. And as representatives of their constituents, they are charged with addressing those constituents' interests. Historically, this job has included what some have affectionately called "bringing home the bacon" but what many (usually those outside the district in question) call pork-barrel politics. As a term and a practice, pork-barrel politics—federal spending on projects designed to benefit a particular district or set of constituents—has been around since the nineteenth century, when barrels of salt pork were both a sign of wealth and a system of reward. While pork-barrel politics are often deplored during election campaigns, and earmarks—funds appropriated for specific projects—are no longer permitted in Congress (see feature box below), legislative control of local appropriations nevertheless still exists. In more formal language, *allocation*, or the influencing of the national budget in ways that help the district or state, can mean securing funds for a specific district's project like an airport, or getting tax breaks for certain types of agriculture or manufacturing.

Get Connected!

Language and Metaphor

The language and metaphors of war and violence are common in politics. Candidates routinely “smell blood in the water,” “battle for delegates,” go “head-to-head,” and “make heads roll.” But references to actual violence aren’t the only metaphorical devices commonly used in politics. Another is mentions of food. Powerful speakers frequently “throw red meat to the crowds”; careful politicians prefer to stick to “meat-and-potato issues”; and representatives are frequently encouraged by their constituents to “bring home the bacon.” And the way members of Congress typically “bring home the bacon” is often described with another agricultural metaphor, the “earmark.”

In ranching, an earmark is a small cut on the ear of a cow or other animal to denote ownership. Similarly, in Congress, an earmark is a mark in a bill that directs some of the bill’s funds to be spent on specific projects or for specific tax exemptions. Since the 1980s, the earmark has become a common vehicle for sending money to various projects around the country. Many a road, hospital, and airport can trace its origins back to a few skillfully drafted earmarks.

Relatively few people outside Congress had ever heard of the term before the 2008 presidential election, when Republican nominee Senator John McCain touted his career-long refusal to use the earmark as a testament to his commitment to reforming spending habits in Washington.³¹ McCain’s criticism of the earmark as a form of corruption cast a shadow over a previously common legislative practice. As the country sank into recession and Congress tried to use spending bills to stimulate the economy, the public grew more acutely aware of its earmarking habits. Congresspersons then were eager to distance themselves from the practice. In fact, the use of earmarks to encourage Republicans to help pass health care reform actually made the bill less popular with the public.

In 2011, after Republicans took over the House, they outlawed earmarks. But with deadlocks and stalemates becoming more common, some quiet voices have begun asking for a return to the practice. They argue that Congress works because representatives can satisfy their responsibilities to their constituents by making deals. The earmarks are those deals. By taking them away, Congress has hampered its own ability to “bring home the bacon.”

Are earmarks a vital part of legislating or a corrupt practice that was rightly jettisoned? Pick a cause or industry, and investigate whether any earmarks ever favored it, or research the way earmarks have hurt or helped your state or district, and decide for yourself.

Follow-up activity: Find out where your congressional representative stands on the ban on earmarks and write to support or dissuade them.

Such budgetary allocations aren’t always looked upon favorably by constituents. Consider, for example, the passage of the ACA in 2010. The desire for comprehensive universal health care had been a driving position of the Democrats since at least the 1960s. During the 2008 campaign, that desire was so great among both Democrats and Republicans that both parties put forth plans. When the Democrats took control of Congress and the presidency in 2009, they

quickly began putting together their plan. Soon, however, the politics grew complex, and the proposed plan became very contentious for the Republican Party.

Nevertheless, the desire to make good on a decades-old political promise compelled Democrats to do everything in their power to pass something. They offered sympathetic members of the Republican Party valuable budgetary concessions; they attempted to include allocations they hoped the opposition might feel compelled to support; and they drafted the bill in a purposely complex manner to avoid future challenges. These efforts, however, had the opposite effect. The Republican Party's constituency interpreted the allocations as bribery and the bill as inherently flawed, and felt it should be scrapped entirely. The more Democrats dug in, the more frustrated the Republicans became ([Figure 6.14](#)).



Figure 6.14 In 2009, the extended debates and legislative maneuvering in Congress over the proposed health care reform bill triggered a firestorm of disapproval from the Republicans and protests from their supporters. In many cases, hyperbole ruled the day. (credit: "dbking"/Flickr)

The Republican opposition, which took control of the House during the 2010 midterm elections, promised constituents they would repeal the law. Their attempts were complicated, however, by the fact that Democrats still held the Senate and the presidency. Yet, the desire to represent the interests of their constituents compelled Republicans to use another tool at their disposal, the symbolic vote. During the 112th and 113th Congresses, Republicans voted more than sixty times to either repeal or severely limit the reach of the law. They understood these efforts had little to no chance of ever making it to the president's desk. And if they did, he would certainly have vetoed them. But it was important for these representatives to demonstrate to their constituents that they understood their wishes and were willing to act on them.

Historically, representatives have been able to balance their role as members of a national legislative body with their role as representatives of a smaller community. The Obamacare

fight, however, gave a boost to the growing concern that the power structure in Washington divides representatives from the needs of their constituency.³² This has exerted pressure on representatives to the extent that some now pursue a more straightforward delegate approach to representation. Indeed, following the 2010 election, a handful of Republicans began living in their offices in Washington, convinced that by not establishing a residence in Washington, they would appear closer to their constituents at home.³³

COLLECTIVE REPRESENTATION AND CONGRESSIONAL APPROVAL

The concept of collective representation describes the relationship between Congress and the United States as a whole. That is, it considers whether the institution itself represents the American people, not just whether a particular member of Congress represents their district. Predictably, it is far more difficult for Congress to maintain a level of collective representation than it is for individual members of Congress to represent their own constituents. Not only is Congress a mixture of different ideologies, interests, and party affiliations, but the collective constituency of the United States has an even-greater level of diversity. Nor is it a solution to attempt to match the diversity of opinions and interests in the United States with those in Congress. Indeed, such an attempt would likely make it more difficult for Congress to maintain collective representation. Its rules and procedures require Congress to use flexibility, bargaining, and concessions. Yet, it is this flexibility and these concessions, which many now interpret as corruption, that tend to engender the high public disapproval ratings experienced by Congress.

After many years of deadlocks and bickering on Capitol Hill, the national perception of Congress has tended to run under 20 percent approval in recent years, with large majorities disapproving. Through mid-2021, the Congress, narrowly under Democratic control, was receiving higher approval ratings, above 30 percent. However, congressional approval still lags public approval of the presidency and Supreme Court by a considerable margin. In the two decades following the Watergate scandal in the early 1970s, the national approval rating of Congress hovered between 30 and 40 percent, then trended upward in the 1990s, before trending downward in the twenty-first century.³⁴

Yet, incumbent reelections have remained largely unaffected. The reason has to do with the remarkable ability of many in the United States to separate their distaste for Congress from their appreciation for their own representative. Paradoxically, this tendency to hate the group but love one's own representative actually perpetuates the problem of poor congressional approval ratings. The reason is that it blunts voters' natural desire to replace those in power who are earning such low approval ratings.

As decades of polling indicate, few events push congressional approval ratings above 50 percent. Indeed, when the ratings are graphed, the two noticeable peaks are at 57 percent in 1998 and 84 percent in 2001 ([Figure 6.15](#)). In 1998, according to Gallup polling, the rise in approval accompanied a similar rise in other mood measures, including President Bill Clinton's approval ratings and general satisfaction with the state of the country and the economy. In 2001, approval spiked after the September 11 terrorist attacks and the Bush administration launched the "War on Terror," sending troops first to Afghanistan and later to Iraq. War has the

power to bring majorities of voters to view their Congress and president in an overwhelmingly positive way.³⁵

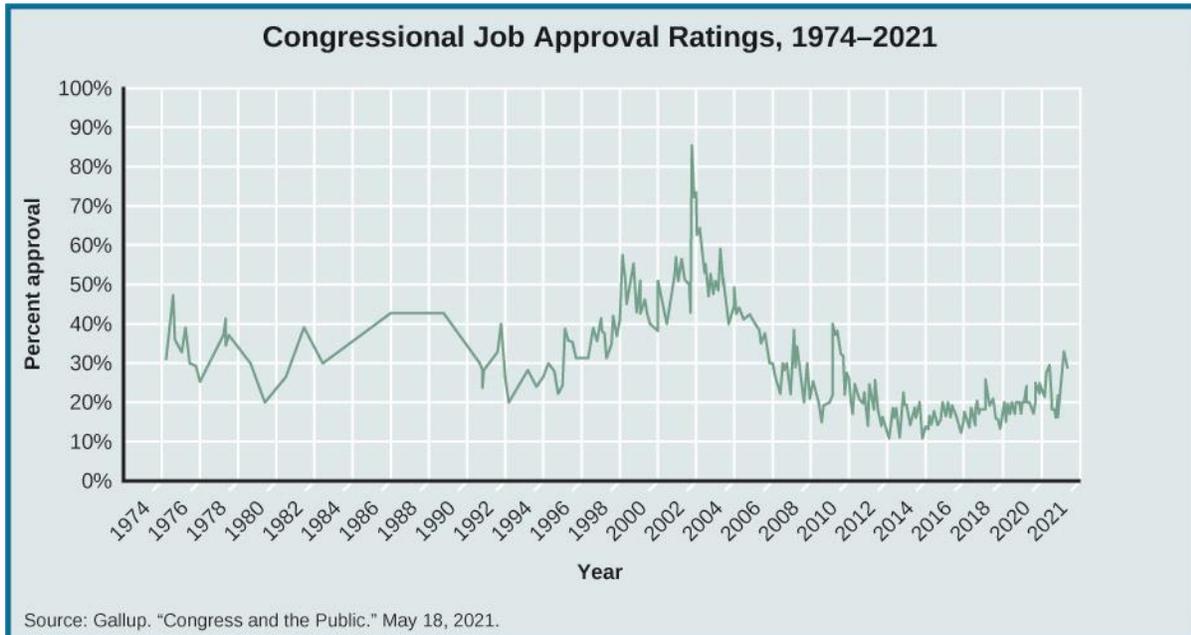


Figure 6.15 Congress’s job approval rating reached a high of 84 percent in October 2001 following the 9/11 terrorist attacks. It declined steadily after that, reaching a low of 9 percent in November 2013, just after the federal government shutdown of the previous month. However, in early 2021, under narrow Democratic control, congressional approval levels rose above 30 percent for the first time since 2009.

Nevertheless, all things being equal, citizens tend to rate Congress more highly when things get done and more poorly when things do not get done. For example, during the first half of President Obama’s first term, Congress’s approval rating reached a relative high of about 40 percent. Both houses were dominated by members of the president’s own party, and many people were eager for Congress to take action to end the deep recession and begin to repair the economy. Millions were suffering economically, out of work, or losing their jobs, and the idea that Congress was busy passing large stimulus packages, working on finance reform, and grilling unpopular bank CEOs and financial titans appealed to many. Approval began to fade as the Republican Party slowed the wheels of Congress during the tumultuous debates over Obamacare and reached a low of 9 percent following the federal government shutdown in October 2013.

One of the events that began the approval rating’s downward trend was Congress’s divisive debate over national deficits. A deficit is what results when Congress spends more than it has available. It then conducts additional deficit spending by increasing the national debt. Many modern economists contend that during periods of economic decline, the nation should run deficits, because additional government spending has a stimulative effect that can help restart

a sluggish economy. Despite this benefit, voters rarely appreciate deficits. They see Congress as spending wastefully during a time when they themselves are cutting costs to get by.

The disconnect between the common public perception of running a deficit and its legitimate policy goals is frequently exploited for political advantage. For example, while running for the presidency in 2008, Barack Obama slammed the deficit spending of the George W. Bush presidency, saying it was “unpatriotic.” This sentiment echoed complaints Democrats had been issuing for years as a weapon against President Bush’s policies. Following the election of President Obama and the Democratic takeover of the Senate, the concern over deficit spending shifted parties, with Republicans championing a spendthrift policy as a way of resisting Democratic policies.

Link to Learning

Find your representative at the [U.S. House website](#) and then explore their website and social media accounts to see whether the issues on which your representative spends time are the ones you think are most appropriate.

6.4 House and Senate Organizations

Learning Objectives

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

- Explain the division of labor in the House and in the Senate
- Describe the way congressional committees develop and advance legislation

Not all the business of Congress involves bickering, political infighting, government shutdowns, and Machiavellian maneuvering. Congress does actually get work done. Traditionally, it does this work in a very methodical way. In this section, we will explore how Congress functions at the leadership and committee levels. We will learn how the party leadership controls their conferences and how the many committees within Congress create legislation that can then be moved forward or die on the floor.

PARTY LEADERSHIP

The party leadership in Congress controls the actions of Congress. Leaders are elected by the two-party conferences in each chamber. In the House of Representatives, these are the House Democratic Conference and the House Republican Conference. These conferences meet regularly and separately not only to elect their leaders but also to discuss important issues and strategies for moving policy forward. Based on the number of members in each conference, one conference becomes the majority conference and the other becomes the minority conference. Independents like Senator Bernie Sanders will typically join one or the other major party conference, as a matter of practicality and often based on ideological affinity. Without the membership to elect their own leadership, independents would have a very difficult time getting things done in Congress unless they had a relationship with the leaders.

Despite the power of the conferences, however, the most important leadership position in the House is actually elected by the entire body of representatives. This position is called the Speaker of the House and is the only House officer mentioned in the Constitution. The Constitution does not require the Speaker to be a member of the House, although to date, all fifty-four Speakers have been. The Speaker is the presiding officer, the administrative head of the House, the partisan leader of the majority party in the House, and an elected representative of a single congressional district ([Figure 6.16](#)). As a testament to the importance of the Speaker, since 1947, the holder of this position has been second in line to succeed the president in an emergency, after the vice president.

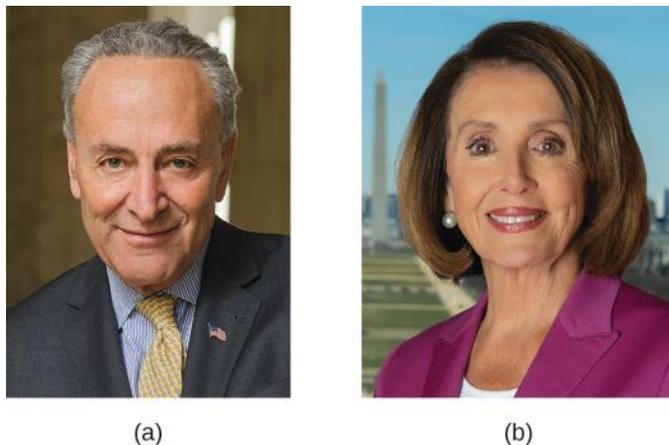


Figure 6.16 Democrat Chuck Schumer of New York (a), the majority leader in the Senate, and Democrat Nancy Pelosi of California (b), the Speaker of the House, are the most powerful congressional leaders in their respective chambers. (credit a: modification of "Chuck Schumer official photo" by U.S. Senate Photographic Studio/Jeff McEvoy/Wikimedia Commons, Public Domain; credit b: modification of "Official photo of Speaker Nancy Pelosi in 2019" by United States House of Representatives/Wikimedia Commons, Public Domain)

The Speaker serves until their party loses, or until the Speaker is voted out of the position or chooses to step down. Republican Speaker John Boehner became the latest Speaker to walk away from the position when it appeared his position was in jeopardy. This event shows how the party conference (or caucus) oversees the leadership as much as, if not more than, the leadership oversees the party membership in the chamber. The Speaker is invested with quite a bit of power, such as the ability to assign bills to committees and decide when a bill will be presented to the floor for a vote. The Speaker also rules on House procedures, often delegating authority for certain duties to other members. He or she appoints members and chairs to committees, creates select committees to fulfill a specific purpose and then disband, and can even select a member to be speaker *pro tempore*, who acts as Speaker in the Speaker's absence. Finally, when the Senate joins the House in a joint session, the Speaker presides over these sessions, because they are usually held in the House of Representatives.

Below the Speaker, the majority and minority conferences each elect two leadership positions arranged in hierarchical order. At the top of the hierarchy are the floor leaders of each party. These are generally referred to as the majority and minority leaders. The minority leader has a

visible if not always a powerful position. As the official leader of the opposition, they technically hold the rank closest to that of the Speaker, makes strategy decisions, and attempts to keep order within the minority. However, the majority rules the day in the House, like a cartel. On the majority side, because it holds the speakership, the majority leader also has considerable power. Historically, moreover, the majority leader tends to be in the best position to assume the speakership when the current Speaker steps down.

Below these leaders are the two party's respective whips. A whip's job, as the name suggests, is to whip up votes and otherwise enforce party discipline. Whips make the rounds in Congress, telling members the position of the leadership and the collective voting strategy, and sometimes they wave various carrots and sticks in front of recalcitrant members to bring them in line. The remainder of the leadership positions in the House include a handful of chairs and assistantships.

Like the House, the Senate also has majority and minority leaders and whips, each with duties very similar to those of their counterparts in the House. Unlike the House, however, the Senate doesn't have a Speaker. The duties and powers held by the Speaker in the House fall to the majority leader in the Senate. Another difference is that, according to the U.S. Constitution, the Senate's president is actually the elected vice president of the United States, but may vote only in case of a tie. Apart from this and very few other exceptions, the president of the Senate does not actually operate in the Senate. Instead, the Constitution allows for the Senate to choose a president *pro tempore*—usually the most senior senator of the majority party—who presides over the Senate. Despite the title, the job is largely a formal and powerless role. The real power in the Senate is in the hands of the majority leader ([Figure 6.16](#)) and the minority leader. Like the Speaker of the House, the majority leader is the chief spokesperson for the majority party, but, unlike in the House, does not run the floor alone. Because of the traditions of unlimited debate and the filibuster, the majority and minority leaders often occupy the floor together in an attempt to keep things moving along. At times, their interactions are intense and partisan, but for the Senate to get things done, they must cooperate to get the sixty votes needed to run this super-majority legislative institution.

THE COMMITTEE SYSTEM

With 535 members in Congress and a seemingly infinite number of domestic, international, economic, agricultural, regulatory, criminal, and military issues to deal with at any given moment, the two chambers must divide their work based on specialization. Congress does this through the committee system. Specialized committees (or subcommittees) in both the House and the Senate are where bills originate and most of the work that sets the congressional agenda takes place. Committees are roughly approximate to a bureaucratic department in the executive branch. There are well over two hundred committees, subcommittees, select committees, and joint committees in the Congress. The core committees are called standing committees. There are twenty standing committees in the House and sixteen in the Senate ([Table 6.2](#)).

Congressional Standing and Permanent Select Committees

House of Representatives	Senate
Agriculture	Agriculture, Nutrition, and Forestry
Appropriations	Appropriations
Armed Services	Armed Services
Budget	Banking, Housing, and Urban Affairs
Education and Labor	Budget
Energy and Commerce	Commerce, Science, and Transportation
Ethics	Energy and Natural Resources
Financial Services	Environment and Public Works
Foreign Affairs	Ethics (select)
Homeland Security	Finance
House Administration	Foreign Relations
Intelligence (select)	Health, Education, Labor and Pensions
Judiciary	Homeland Security and Governmental Affairs
Natural Resources	Indian Affairs
Oversight and Reform	Intelligence (select)
Rules	Judiciary
Science, Space, and Technology	Rules and Administration
Small Business	Small Business and Entrepreneurship
Transportation and Infrastructure	Veterans' Affairs
Veterans' Affairs	
Ways and Means	

Table 6.2

Members of both parties compete for positions on various committees. These positions are typically filled by majority and minority members to roughly approximate the ratio of majority to minority members in the respective chambers, although committees are chaired by members of the majority party. Committees and their chairs have a lot of power in the legislative process, including the ability to stop a bill from going to the floor (the full chamber) for a vote. Indeed, most bills die in committee. But when a committee is eager to develop legislation, it takes a number of methodical steps. It will reach out to relevant agencies for comment on resolutions to the problem at hand, such as by holding hearings with experts to collect information. In the Senate, committee hearings are also held to confirm presidential appointments (Figure 6.17). After the information has been collected, the committee meets to discuss amendments and legislative language. Finally, the committee will send the bill to the full chamber along with a committee report. The report provides the majority opinion about why

the bill should be passed, a minority view to the contrary, and estimates of the proposed law's cost and impact.



Figure 6.17 In 2017, Supreme Court justice Amy Coney Barrett had her confirmation hearings before the U.S. Senate Committee on the Judiciary. The Senate Judiciary Committee is one of the oldest of the sixteen standing committees in the Senate. (credit: modification of work from C-SPAN, Public Domain)

Four types of committees exist in the House and the Senate. The first is the standing, or permanent, committee. This committee is the first call for proposed bills, fewer than 10 percent of which are reported out of committee to the floor. The second type is the joint committee. Joint committee members are appointed from both the House and the Senate, and are charged with exploring a few key issues, such as the economy and taxation. However, joint committees have no bill-referral authority whatsoever—they are informational only. A conference committee is used to reconcile different bills passed in both the House and the Senate. The conference committees are appointed on an ad hoc basis as necessary when a bill passes the House and Senate in different forms. Conference committees are sometimes skipped in the interest of expedience, in which one of the chambers relents to the other chamber. For example, the House demurred to the Senate over the Affordable Care Act instead of going to battle in a conference committee. Still, conference committees are the norm on most major pieces of legislation. A recent example is the Tax Cuts and Jobs Act of 2017, passed in December. Finally, ad hoc, special, or select committees are temporary committees set up to address specific topics. These types of committees often conduct special investigations, such as on aging or ethics.

Committee hearings can become politically driven public spectacles. Consider the House Select Committee on Benghazi, the committee assembled by Republicans to further investigate the 2011 attacks on the U.S. Consulate in Benghazi, Libya. This prolonged investigation became particularly partisan as Republicans focused on then-secretary of state Hillary Clinton, who was running for the presidency at the time. In two multi-hour hearings in which Secretary Clinton was the only witness, Republicans tended to grandstand in the hopes of gaining political advantage or tripping her up, while Democrats tended to use their time to ridicule Republicans

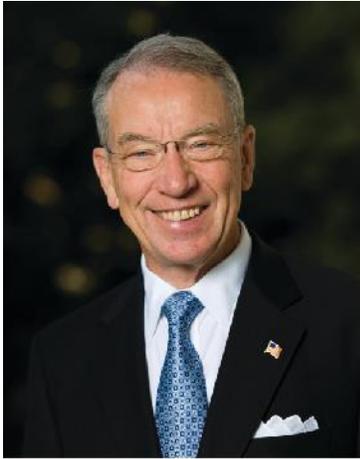
([Figure 6.18](#)).³⁶ In the end, the long hearings uncovered little more than the elevated state of partisanship in the House, which had scarcely been a secret before.



Figure 6.18 On October 22, 2015, former Secretary of State Hillary Clinton testified for the second time before the House Select Committee on Benghazi, answering questions from members for more than eight hours.

Members of Congress bring to their roles a variety of specific experiences, interests, and levels of expertise, and try to match these to committee positions. For example, House members from states with large agricultural interests will typically seek positions on the Agriculture Committee. Senate members with a background in banking or finance may seek positions on the Senate Finance Committee. Members can request these positions from their chambers' respective leadership, and the leadership also selects the committee chairs.

Committee chairs are very powerful. They control the committee's budget and choose when the committee will meet, when it will hold hearings, and even whether it will consider a bill ([Figure 6.19](#)). A chair can convene a meeting when members of the minority are absent or adjourn a meeting when things are not progressing as the majority leadership wishes. Chairs can hear a bill even when the rest of the committee objects. They do not remain in these powerful positions indefinitely, however. In the House, rules prevent committee chairs from serving more than six consecutive years and from serving as the chair of a subcommittee at the same time. A senator may serve only six years as chair of a committee but may, in some instances, also serve as a chair or ranking member of another committee.



(a)



(b)

Figure 6.19 In 2016, Republican Chuck Grassley of Iowa (a), the chair of the Senate Judiciary Committee, refused to hold hearings on the nomination of Merrick Garland to the Supreme Court, despite the urging of his committee colleagues. In the meantime, Garland met with numerous senators, such as Republican Susan Collins of Maine (b). As of Election Day, no hearings had been held, and Garland's nomination expired on January 3, 2017. Just ten days after his inauguration, Republican president Donald Trump announced his nomination of Neil Gorsuch to the Court. Gorsuch was confirmed in April 2017, despite a filibuster by the Democrats.

Because the Senate is much smaller than the House, senators hold more committee assignments than House members. There are sixteen standing committees in the Senate, and each position must be filled. In contrast, in the House, with 435 members and only twenty standing committees, committee members have time to pursue a more in-depth review of a policy. House members historically defer to the decisions of committees, while senators tend to view committee decisions as recommendations, often seeking additional discussion that could lead to changes.

Link to Learning

Take a look at the [scores of committees](#) in the [House](#) and Senate. The late House Speaker Tip O'Neill once quipped that if you didn't know a new House member's name, you could just call him Mr. Chairperson.

6.5 The Legislative Process

Learning Objectives

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

- Explain the steps in the classic bill-becomes-law diagram
- Describe the modern legislative processes that alter the classic process in some way

A dry description of the function of congressional leadership and the many committees and subcommittees in Congress may suggest that the drafting and amending of legislation is a finely tuned process that has become ever more refined over the course of the last few centuries. In reality, however, committees are more likely to kill legislation than to pass it. And the last few decades have seen a dramatic transformation in the way Congress does business. Creative interpretations of rules and statutes have turned small loopholes into the large gateways through which much congressional work now gets done. In this section, we will explore both the traditional legislative route by which a bill becomes a law and the modern incarnation of the process. We will also learn how and why the transformation occurred.

THE CLASSIC LEGISLATIVE PROCESS

The traditional process by which a bill becomes a law is called the *classic legislative process*. First, legislation must be drafted. Theoretically, anyone can do this. Much successful legislation has been initially drafted by someone who is not a member of Congress, such as a think tank or advocacy group, or the president. However, Congress is under no obligation to read or introduce this legislation, and only a bill introduced by a member of Congress can hope to become law. Even the president must rely on legislators to introduce that president's legislative agenda.

Technically, bills that raise revenue, like tax bills, must begin in the House. This exception is encoded within the Constitution in Article I, Section 7, which states, "All Bills for raising Revenue shall originate in the House of Representatives; but the Senate may propose or concur with amendments as on other Bills." Yet, despite the seemingly clear language of the Constitution, Congress has found ways to get around this rule.

Once legislation has been proposed, however, the majority leadership consults with the parliamentarian about which committee to send it to. Each chamber has a *parliamentarian*, an advisor, typically a trained lawyer, who has studied the long and complex rules of the chamber. While Congress typically follows the advice of its parliamentarians, it is not obligated to, and the parliamentarian has no power to enforce their own interpretation of the rules. Once a committee has been selected, the committee chair is empowered to move the bill through the committee process as they see fit. This occasionally means the chair will refer the bill to one of the committee's subcommittees.

Whether at the full committee level or in one of the subcommittees, the next step is typically to hold a hearing on the bill. If the chair decides to not hold a hearing, this is tantamount to killing the bill in committee. The hearing provides an opportunity for the committee to hear and evaluate expert opinions on the bill or aspects of it. Experts typically include officials from the agency that would be responsible for executing the bill, the bill's sponsors from Congress, and industry lobbyists, interest groups, and academic experts from a variety of relevant fields. Typically, the committee will also accept written statements from the public concerning the bill in question. For many bills, the hearing process can be very routine and straightforward.

Once hearings have been completed, the bill enters the markup stage. This is essentially an amending and voting process. In the end, with or without amendments, the committee or

subcommittee will vote. If the committee decides not to advance the bill at that time, it is tabled. *Tabling a bill* typically means the bill is dead, but there is still an option to bring it back up for a vote again. If the committee decides to advance the bill, however, it is printed and goes to the chamber, either the House or the Senate. For the sake of example, we will assume that a bill goes first to the House (although the reverse could be true, and, in fact, bills can move simultaneously through both chambers). Before it reaches the House floor, it must first go through the House Committee on Rules. This committee establishes the rules of debate, such as time limits and limits on the number and type of amendments. After these rules have been established, the bill moves through the floor, where it is debated and amendments can be added. Once the limits of debate and amendments have been reached, the House holds a vote. If a simple majority, 50 percent plus 1, votes to advance the bill, it moves out of the House and into the Senate.

Once in the Senate, the bill is placed on the calendar so it can be debated. Or, more typically, the Senate will also consider the bill (or a companion version) in its own committees. Since the Senate is much smaller than the House, it can afford to be much more flexible in its rules for debate. Typically, senators allow each other to talk and debate as long as the speaker wants, though they can agree as a body to create time limits. But without these limits, debate continues until a motion to table has been offered and voted on.

This flexibility about speaking in the Senate gave rise to a unique tactic, the filibuster. The word “filibuster” comes from the Dutch word *vrijbouter*, which means pirate. And the name is appropriate, since it was historically the practice that a senator who launches a filibuster virtually hijacks the floor of the chamber by speaking for long periods of time, thus preventing the Senate from closing debate and acting on a bill. The tactic was perfected in the 1850s as Congress wrestled with the complicated issue of slavery. After the Civil War, the use of the filibuster became even more common. Eventually, in 1917, the Senate passed Rule 22, which allowed the chamber to hold a cloture vote to end debate. To invoke cloture, the Senate had to get a two-thirds majority. This was difficult to do, but it generally did prevent anyone from hijacking the Senate floor, with the salient exception of Senator Strom Thurmond’s record twenty-four-hour filibuster of the Civil Rights Act. The classic approach still occasionally occurs, such as when Senator Ted Cruz (R-TX) executed a filibuster in 2013 on legislation related to the Affordable Care Act, which included reading the Dr. Seuss children's classic, *Green Eggs and Ham*.³⁷ However, the vast majority of the time, the actual filibuster action is not needed since floor leaders rarely bring bills to the floor that don't meet the cloture threshold.

In 1975, after the heightened partisanship of the civil rights era, the Senate further weakened the filibuster by reducing the number needed for cloture from two-thirds to three-fifths, or sixty votes, where it remains today (except for judicial nominations for which only fifty-one votes are needed to invoke cloture). Moreover, filibusters are not permitted on the annual budget reconciliation act. In this way, the Reconciliation Act of 2010 was how the implementing legislation for Obamacare was passed. The budget reconciliation process was also used by Republicans to pass the Tax Cuts and Jobs Act of 2017 and by Democrats to pass the American Rescue Plan Act of 2021, which contained a massive COVID relief package.

Milestone

The Noble History of the Filibuster?

When most people think of the Senate filibuster, they probably picture actor Jimmy Stewart standing exasperated at a podium and demanding the Senate come to its senses and do the right thing. Even for those not familiar with the classic Frank Capra film *Mr. Smith Goes to Washington*, the image of a heroic single senator sanding up to the power of the entire chamber while armed only with oratorical skill naturally tends to inspire. Unfortunately, the history of the filibuster is less heartwarming.

This is not to say that noble causes haven't been championed by filibustering senators; they most certainly have. But they have largely been overshadowed by the outright ridiculous and sometimes racist filibusters of the twentieth century. In the first category, the fifteen-and-a-half-hour marathon of Senator Huey Long of Louisiana stands out: Hoping to retain the need for Senate confirmation of some jobs he wanted to keep from his political enemies, Long spent much of his filibuster analyzing the Constitution, talking about his favorite recipes, and telling amusing stories, as was his custom.

In a defining moment for the filibuster, Senator Strom Thurmond of South Carolina spoke for twenty-four hours and eighteen minutes against a weak civil rights bill in 1957. A vocal proponent of segregation and White supremacy, Thurmond had made no secret of his views and had earlier run for the presidency on a segregationist platform. Nor was Thurmond the first to use the filibuster to preserve segregation and prevent the expansion of civil rights for African Americans. Groups of dedicated southern senators used the filibuster to prevent the passage of anti-lynching legislation on multiple occasions during the first half of the twentieth century. Later, when faced with the 1964 Civil Rights Act, southern senators staged a fifty-seven-day filibuster to try and kill it. But the momentum of the nation was against them. The bill passed over their obstructionism and helped to reduce segregation.

Is the filibuster the tool of the noble minority attempting to hold back the tide of a powerful minority? Or does its history as a weapon supporting segregation expose it as merely a tactic of obstruction?

Because both the House and the Senate can and often do amend bills, the bills that pass out of each chamber frequently look different. This presents a problem, since the Constitution requires that both chambers pass identical bills. One simple solution is for the first chamber to simply accept the bill that ultimately makes it out of the second chamber. Another solution is for first chamber to further amend the second chamber's bill and send it back to the second chamber. Congress typically takes one of these two options, but about one in every eight bills cannot be resolved in this way. These bills must be sent to a conference committee that negotiates a reconciliation both chambers can accept without amendment. Only then can the bill progress to the president's desk for signature or veto. If the president does veto the bill, both chambers must muster a two-thirds vote to overcome the veto and make the bill law without presidential approval ([Figure 6.20](#)).

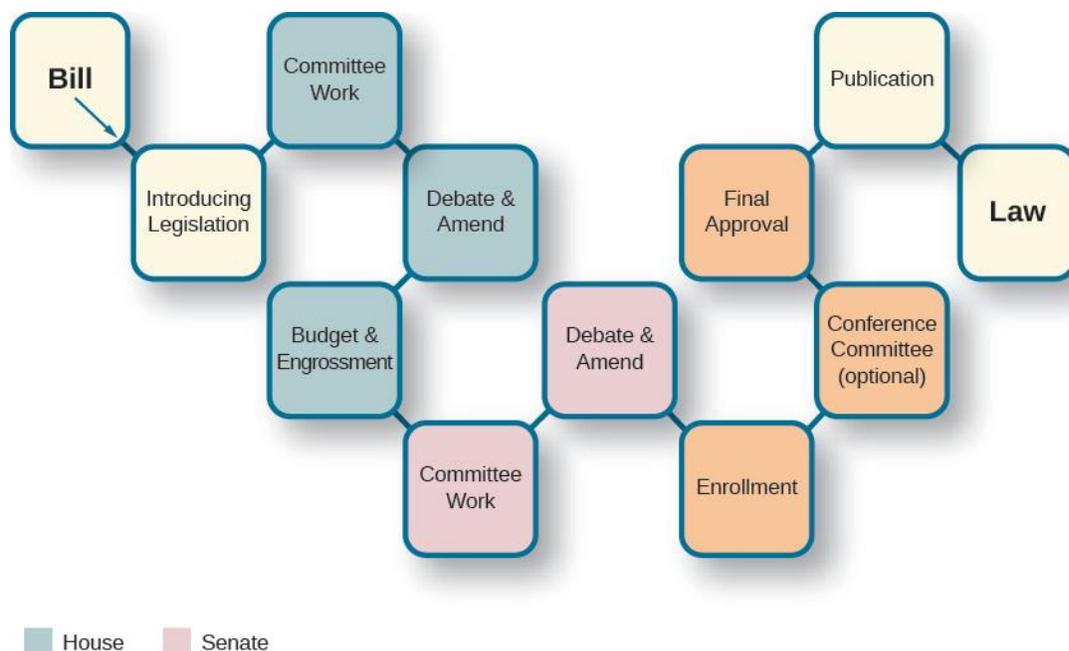


Figure 6.20 The process by which a bill becomes law is long and complicated, but it is designed to ensure that in the end all parties are satisfied with the bill’s provisions.

Link to Learning

For one look at the classic legislative process, visit [YouTube](#) to view “I’m Just a Bill” from the *ABC Schoolhouse Rock!* series.

MODERN LEGISLATION IS DIFFERENT

For much of the nation’s history, the process described above was the standard method by which a bill became a law. Over the course of the last three and a half decades, however, changes in rules and procedure have created a number of alternate routes. Collectively, these different routes constitute what some political scientists have described as a new but unorthodox legislative process. According to political scientist Barbara Sinclair, the primary trigger for the shift away from the classic legislative route was the budget reforms of the 1970s. The 1974 Budget and Impoundment Control Act gave Congress a mechanism for making large, all-encompassing, budget decisions. In the years that followed, the budget process gradually became the vehicle for creating comprehensive policy changes. One large step in this transformation occurred in 1981 when President Ronald Reagan’s administration suggested using the budget to push through his economic reforms.

The benefit of attaching the reforms to the budget resolution was that Congress could force an up or down (yea or nay) vote on the whole package. Such a packaged bill is called an *omnibus bill*.³⁸ Creating and voting for an omnibus bill allows Congress to quickly accomplish policy changes that would have taken many votes and the expending of great political capital over a long period of time. This and successive similar uses of the budget process convinced many in Congress of the utility of this strategy. During the contentious and ideologically divided 1990s,

the budget process became the common problem-solving mechanism in the legislature, thus laying the groundwork for the way legislation works today.

An important characteristic feature of modern legislating is the greatly expanded power and influence of the party leadership over the control of bills. One reason for this change was the heightened partisanship that stretches back to the 1980s and is still with us today. With such high political stakes, the party leadership is reluctant to simply allow the committees to work things out on their own. In the House, the leadership uses special rules to guide bills through the legislative process and toward a particular outcome. Uncommon just a few decades ago, these now widely used rules restrict debate and options, and are designed to focus the attention of members.

The practice of multiple referrals, with which entire bills or portions of those bills are referred to more than one committee, greatly weakened the different specialization monopolies committees held primarily in the House but also to an extent in the Senate. With less control over the bills, committees naturally reached out to the leadership for assistance. Indeed, as a testament to its increasing control, the leadership may sometimes avoid committees altogether, preferring to work things out on the floor. And even when bills move through the committees, the leadership often seeks to adjust the legislation before it reaches the floor.

Another feature of the modern legislative process, exclusively in the Senate, is the application of the modern filibuster. Unlike the traditional filibuster, in which a senator took the floor and held it for as long as possible, the modern filibuster is actually a perversion of the cloture rules adopted to control the filibuster. When partisanship is high, as it has been frequently, the senators can request cloture before any bill can get a vote. This has the effect of increasing the number of votes needed for a bill to advance from a simple majority of fifty-one to a super majority of sixty. The effect is to give the Senate minority great power to obstruct if it is inclined to do so.

[Link to Learning](#)

The Library of Congress's [Congress.gov website](#) has provided scholars, citizens, and media with a bounty of readily available data on members and bills for more than two decades.



Figure 7.1 On September 14, 2001, President George W. Bush addresses the crowd at Ground Zero in New York City (left). President Joe Biden takes the oath of office in front of the U.S. Capitol on January 20, 2021 (right). (credit left: modification of "EMA - 3905 - Photograph by SFC Thomas R. Roberts taken on 09-14-2001 in New York" by SFC Thomas R. Roberts/Wikimedia Commons, Public Domain; credit right: modification of "President Joe Biden, joined by First Lady Jill Biden and their children Ashley Biden and Hunter Biden, takes the oath of office as President of the United States Wednesday, Jan. 20, 2021, during the 59th Presidential Inauguration at the U.S. Capitol in Washington, D.C. (Official White House Photo by Chuck Kennedy)" by The White House/Wikimedia Commons, Public Domain)

Introduction

The presidency is the most visible position in the U.S. government ([Figure 7.1](#)). During the Constitutional Convention of 1787, delegates accepted the need to empower a relatively strong and vigorous chief executive. But they also wanted this chief executive to be bound by checks from the other branches of the federal government as well as by the Constitution itself. Over time, the power of the presidency has grown in response to circumstances and challenges. However, to this day, a president must still work with the other branches to be most effective. Unilateral actions, in which the president acts alone on important and consequential matters, such as President Barack Obama's strategy on the Iran nuclear deal, are bound to be controversial and suggest potentially serious problems within the federal government. Effective presidents, especially in peacetime, are those who work with the other branches through persuasion and compromise to achieve policy objectives.

What are the powers, opportunities, and limitations of the presidency? How does the chief executive lead in our contemporary political system? What guides the chief executive's actions, including unilateral actions? If it is most effective to work with others to get things done, how does the president do so? What can get in the way of this goal? This chapter answers these and other questions about the nation's most visible leader.

7.1 The Design and Evolution of the Presidency

Learning Objectives

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

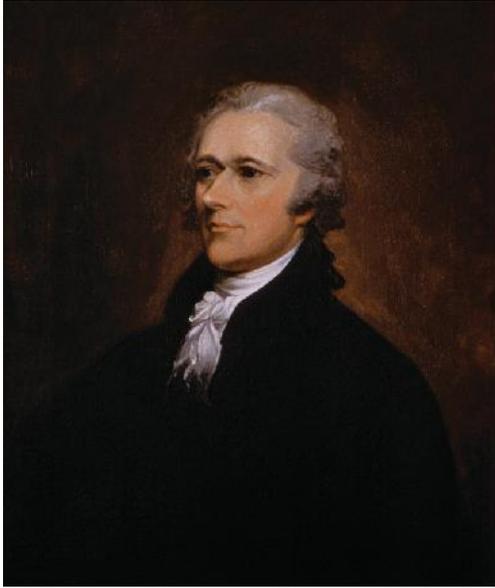
- Explain the reason for the design of the executive branch and its plausible alternatives
- Analyze the way presidents have expanded presidential power and why
- Identify the limitations on a president's power

Since its invention at the Constitutional Convention of 1787, the presidential office has gradually become more powerful, giving its occupants a far-greater chance to exercise leadership at home and abroad. The role of the chief executive has changed over time, as various presidents have confronted challenges in domestic and foreign policy in times of war as well as peace, and as the power of the federal government has grown.

INVENTING THE PRESIDENCY

The Articles of Confederation made no provision for an executive branch, although they did use the term “president” to designate the presiding officer of the Confederation Congress, who also handled other administrative duties.¹ The presidency was proposed early in the Constitutional Convention in Philadelphia by Virginia’s Edmund Randolph, as part of James Madison’s proposal for a federal government, which became known as the Virginia Plan. Madison offered a rather sketchy outline of the executive branch, leaving open whether what he termed the “national executive” would be an individual or a set of people. He proposed that Congress select the executive, whose powers and authority, and even length of term of service, were left largely undefined. He also proposed a “council of revision” consisting of the national executive and members of the national judiciary, which would review laws passed by the legislature and have the power of veto.²

Early deliberations produced agreement that the executive would be a single person, elected for a single term of seven years by the legislature, empowered to veto legislation, and subject to impeachment and removal by the legislature. New Jersey’s William Paterson offered an alternate model as part of his proposal, typically referred to as the small-state or New Jersey Plan. This plan called for merely amending the Articles of Confederation to allow for an executive branch made up of a committee elected by a unicameral Congress for a single term. Under this proposal, the executive committee would be particularly weak because it could be removed from power at any point if a majority of state governors so desired. Far more extreme was Alexander Hamilton’s suggestion that the executive power be entrusted to a single individual. This individual would be chosen by electors, would serve for life, and would exercise broad powers, including the ability to veto legislation, the power to negotiate treaties and grant pardons in all cases except treason, and the duty to serve as commander-in-chief of the armed forces ([Figure 7.2](#)).



(a)



(b)

Figure 7.2 Alexander Hamilton (a), who had served under General George Washington (b) during the Revolutionary War, argued for a strong executive in *Federalist* No. 70. Indeed, ten other *Federalist Papers* discuss the role of the presidency.

Debate and discussion continued throughout the summer. Delegates eventually settled upon a single executive, but they remained at a loss for how to select that person. Pennsylvania's James Wilson, who had triumphed on the issue of a single executive, at first proposed the direct election of the president. When delegates rejected that idea, he responded with the suggestion that electors, chosen throughout the nation, should select the executive. Over time, Wilson's idea gained ground with delegates who were uneasy at the idea of an election by the legislature, which presented the opportunity for intrigue and corruption. The idea of a shorter term of service combined with eligibility for reelection also became more attractive to delegates. The framers of the Constitution struggled to find the proper balance between giving the president the power to perform the job on one hand and opening the way for a president to abuse power and act like a monarch on the other.

By early September, the Electoral College had emerged as the way to select a president for four years who was eligible for reelection. This process is discussed more fully in the chapter on elections. Today, the Electoral College consists of a body of 538 people called electors, each representing one of the fifty states or the District of Columbia, who formally cast votes for the election of the president and vice president ([Figure 7.3](#)). In forty-eight states and the District of Columbia, the candidate who wins the popular vote in November receives all the state's electoral votes. In two states, Nebraska and Maine, the electoral votes are divided: The candidate who wins the popular vote in the state gets two electoral votes, but the winner of each congressional district also receives an electoral vote.

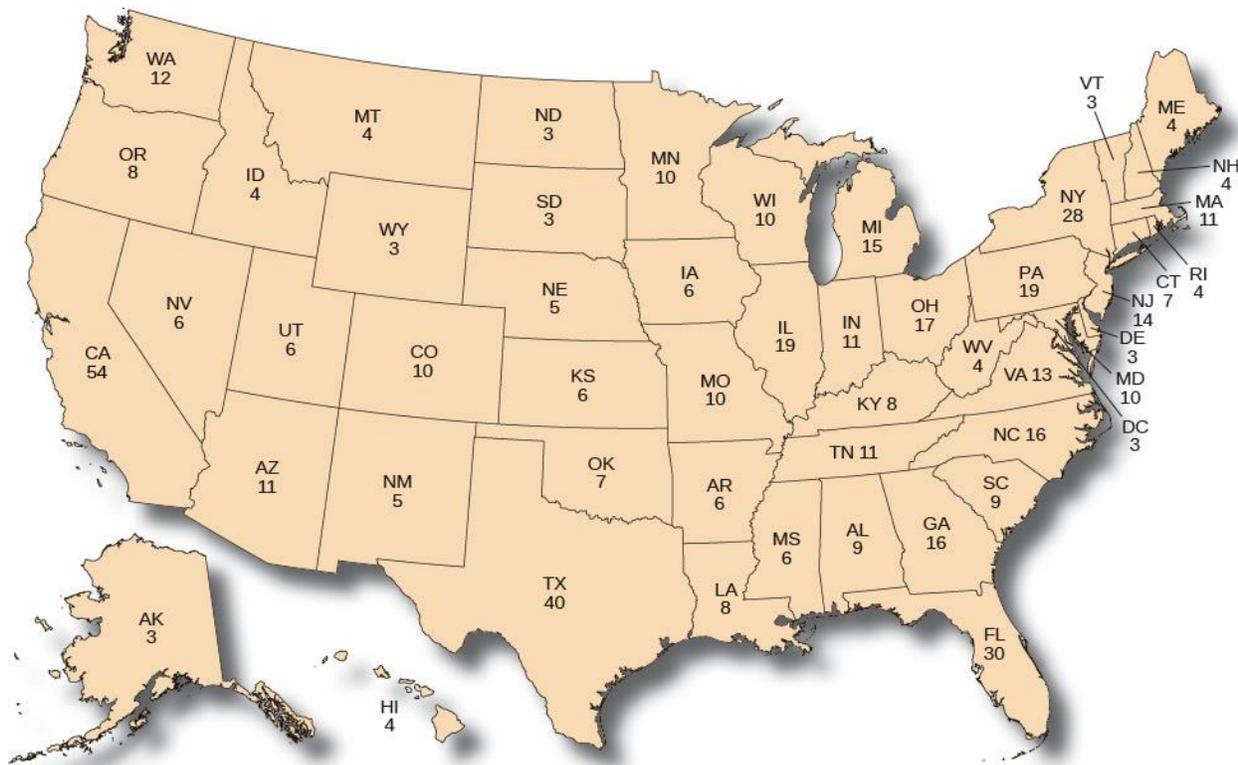


Figure 7.3 This map shows the distribution by state of delegate votes available in the 2024 national election. The number of Electoral College votes granted to each state equals the total number of representatives and senators that state has in the U.S. Congress or, in the case of Washington, DC, as many electors as it would have if it were a state. The number of representatives may fluctuate based on state population, which is determined every ten years by the U.S. Census.

In the original design implemented for the first four presidential elections (1788–89, 1792, 1796, and 1800), the electors cast two ballots (but only one could go to a candidate from the elector’s state), and the person who received a majority won the election. The second-place finisher became vice president. Should no candidate receive a majority of the votes cast, the House of Representatives would select the president, with each state casting a single vote, while the Senate chose the vice president.

While George Washington was elected president twice with this approach, the design resulted in controversy in both the 1796 and 1800 elections. In 1796, John Adams won the presidency, while his opponent and political rival Thomas Jefferson was elected vice president. In 1800, Thomas Jefferson and his running mate Aaron Burr finished tied in the Electoral College. Jefferson was elected president in the House of Representatives on the thirty-sixth ballot. These controversies led to the proposal and ratification of the Twelfth Amendment, which couples a particular presidential candidate with that candidate’s running mate in a unified ticket.³

For the last two centuries or so, the Twelfth Amendment has worked fairly well. But this doesn't mean the arrangement is foolproof. For example, the amendment created a separate ballot for the vice president but left the rules for electors largely intact. One of those rules states that the two votes the electors cast cannot both be for "an inhabitant of the same state with themselves."⁴ This rule means that an elector from, say, Louisiana, could not cast votes for a presidential candidate and a vice presidential candidate who were both from Louisiana; that elector could vote for only one of these people. The intent of the rule was to encourage electors from powerful states to look for a more diverse pool of candidates. But what would happen in a close election where the members of the winning ticket were both from the same state?

The nation almost found out in 2000. In the presidential election of that year, the Republican ticket won the election by a very narrow electoral margin. To win the presidency or vice presidency, a candidate must get 270 electoral votes (a majority). George W. Bush and Dick Cheney won by the skin of their teeth with just 271. Both, however, were living in Texas. This should have meant that Texas's 32 electoral votes could have gone to only one or the other. Cheney anticipated this problem and had earlier registered to vote in Wyoming, where he was originally from and where he had served as a representative years earlier.⁵ It's hard to imagine that the 2000 presidential election could have been even more complicated than it was, but thanks to that seemingly innocuous rule in Article II of the Constitution, that was a real possibility.

Despite provisions for the election of a vice president (to serve in case of the president's death, resignation, or removal through the impeachment process), and apart from the suggestion that the vice president should be responsible for presiding over the Senate, the framers left the vice president's role undeveloped. As a result, the influence of the vice presidency has varied dramatically, depending on how much of a role the vice president is given by the president. Some vice presidents, such as Dan Quayle under President George H. W. Bush, serve a mostly ceremonial function, while others, like Dick Cheney under President George W. Bush, become a partner in governance and rival the White House chief of staff in terms of influence.

[Link to Learning](#)

Read about [James Madison's evolving views](#) of the presidency and the Electoral College.

In addition to describing the process of election for the presidency and vice presidency, the delegates to the Constitutional Convention also outlined who was eligible for election and how Congress might remove the president. Article II of the Constitution lays out the agreed-upon requirements—the chief executive must be at least thirty-five years old and a “natural born” citizen of the United States (or a citizen at the time of the Constitution's adoption) who has been an inhabitant of the United States for at least fourteen years.⁶ While Article II also states that the term of office is four years and does not expressly limit the number of times a person might be elected president, after Franklin D. Roosevelt was elected four times (from 1932 to 1944), the Twenty-Second Amendment was proposed and ratified, limiting the presidency to two four-year terms.

An important means of ensuring that no president could become tyrannical was to build into the Constitution a clear process for removing the chief executive—impeachment. Impeachment is the act of charging a government official with serious wrongdoing; the Constitution calls this wrongdoing high crimes and misdemeanors. The method the framers designed required two steps and both chambers of the Congress. First, the House of Representatives could impeach the president by a simple majority vote. In the second step, the Senate could remove the president from office by a two-thirds majority, with the chief justice of the Supreme Court presiding over the trial. Upon conviction and removal of the president, if that occurred, the vice president would become president.

Four presidents have faced impeachment proceedings in the House; none has been both impeached by the House and removed by the Senate. In the wake of the Civil War, President Andrew Johnson faced congressional contempt for decisions made during Reconstruction. President Richard Nixon faced an overwhelming likelihood of impeachment in the House for his cover-up of key information relating to the 1972 break-in at the Democratic Party's campaign headquarters at the Watergate hotel and apartment complex. Nixon likely would have also been removed by the Senate, since there was strong bipartisan consensus for his impeachment and removal. Instead, he resigned before the House and Senate could exercise their constitutional prerogatives.

The 1990s brought the impeachment of President Bill Clinton, brought on by his lying about an extramarital affair with a White House intern named Monica Lewinsky. Voting fell largely along party lines. House Republicans felt the affair and Clinton's initial public denial of it rose to a level of wrongdoing worthy of impeachment. House Democrats believed it fell short of an impeachable offense and that a simply censure made better sense. Clinton's trial in the Senate went nowhere because too few Senators wanted to move forward with removing the president.

The most recent impeachments were of President Donald Trump, who was impeached in the House twice. However, support for removal in the Senate did not meet the super-majority requirement, although on the second attempt in 2021 a solid majority favored removal. The first Trump impeachment brought charges of “abuse of power” and “obstruction of Congress” related to allegations that he improperly used his office to seek help from Ukrainian officials to facilitate his re-election. The second Trump impeachment was for “incitement of insurrection” related to the attack on the U.S. Capitol building during the counting of Electoral College votes on January 6, 2021. This second impeachment led to Republicans supporting impeachment in the House, including Representative Liz Cheney (R-WY), one of the central party leaders, and removal in the Senate, including Senator Mitt Romney (R-UT).⁷ Ongoing federal investigations of the insurrection continue, and an attempt to launch an independent commission to investigate the event (similar to the 9/11 commission) passed the House, but was blocked by Republicans in the Senate.⁸

Looking across the span of U.S. history, impeachment of a president remains a rare event indeed and removal has never occurred. However, with three of the five impeachment trials having occurred in the last twenty-five years, and with two of the five most recent presidents

having faced impeachment, it will be interesting to watch if the trend continues in our partisan era. The fact that a president could be impeached and removed is an important reminder of the role of the executive in the broader system of shared powers. The same outcome occurred in the case of Andrew Johnson in the nineteenth century though he came closer to the threshold of votes needed for removal than did Clinton.

The Constitution that emerged from the deliberations in Philadelphia treated the powers of the presidency in concise fashion. The president was to be commander-in-chief of the armed forces of the United States, negotiate treaties with the advice and consent of the Senate, and receive representatives of foreign nations ([Figure 7.4](#)). Charged to “take care that the laws be faithfully executed,” the president was given broad power to pardon those convicted of federal offenses, except for officials removed through the impeachment process.⁹ The chief executive would present to Congress information about the state of the union; call Congress into session when needed; veto legislation if necessary, although a two-thirds supermajority in both houses of Congress could override that veto; and make recommendations for legislation and policy as well as call on the heads of various departments to make reports and offer opinions.



Figure 7.4 During visits from foreign heads of state, the president of the United States is often surrounded by representatives of the military, a symbol of the president's dual role as head of state and commander-in-chief. Here, President Barack Obama delivers remarks during a welcoming ceremony for Angela Merkel, chancellor of the Federal Republic of Germany. (credit: Stephen Hassay)

Finally, the president's job included nominating federal judges, including Supreme Court justices, as well as other federal officials, and making appointments to fill military and diplomatic posts. The number of judicial appointments and nominations of other federal

officials is great. In recent decades, two-term presidents have nominated well over three hundred federal judges while in office.¹⁰ Moreover, new presidents nominate close to five hundred top officials to their Executive Office of the President, key agencies (such as the Department of Justice), and regulatory commissions (such as the Federal Reserve Board), whose appointments require Senate majority approval.¹¹

THE EVOLVING EXECUTIVE BRANCH

No sooner had the presidency been established than the occupants of the office, starting with George Washington, began acting in ways that expanded both its formal and informal powers. For example, Washington established a cabinet or group of advisors to help him administer his duties, consisting of the most senior appointed officers of the executive branch. Today, the heads of the fifteen executive departments serve as the president's advisers.¹² And, in 1793, when it became important for the United States to take a stand in the evolving European conflicts between France and other European powers, especially Great Britain, Washington issued a neutrality proclamation that extended his rights as diplomat-in-chief far more broadly than had at first been conceived.

Later presidents built on the foundation of these powers. Some waged undeclared wars, as John Adams did against the French in the Quasi-War (1798–1800). Others agreed to negotiate for significant territorial gains, as Thomas Jefferson did when he oversaw the purchase of Louisiana from France. Concerned that he might be violating the powers of the office, Jefferson rationalized that his not facing impeachment charges constituted Congress's tacit approval of his actions. James Monroe used his annual message in 1823 to declare that the United States would consider it an intolerable act of aggression for European powers to intervene in the affairs of the nations of the Western Hemisphere. Later dubbed the Monroe Doctrine, this declaration of principles laid the foundation for the growth of American power in the twentieth century. Andrew Jackson employed the veto as a measure of policy to block legislative initiatives with which he did not agree and acted unilaterally when it came to depositing federal funds in several local banks around the country instead of in the Bank of the United States. This move changed the way vetoes would be used in the future. Jackson's twelve vetoes were more than those of all prior presidents combined, and he issued them due to policy disagreements (their basis today) rather than as a legal tool to protect against encroachments by Congress on the president's powers.

Of the many ways in which the chief executive's power grew over the first several decades, the most significant was the expansion of presidential war powers. While Washington, Adams, and Jefferson led the way in waging undeclared wars, it was President James K. Polk who truly set the stage for the broad growth of this authority. In 1846, as the United States and Mexico were bickering over the messy issue of where Texas's southern border lay, Polk purposely raised anxieties and ruffled feathers through his envoy in Mexico. He then responded to the newly heightened state of affairs by sending U.S. troops to the Rio Grande, the border Texan expansionists claimed for Texas. Mexico sent troops in response, and the Mexican-American War began soon afterward.¹³

Abraham Lincoln, a member of Congress at the time, was critical of Polk's actions. Later, however, as president himself, Lincoln used presidential war powers and the concepts of military necessity and national security to undermine the Confederate effort to seek independence for the Southern states. In suspending the privilege of the writ of habeas corpus, Lincoln blurred the boundaries between acceptable dissent and unacceptable disloyalty. He also famously used a unilateral proclamation to issue the Emancipation Proclamation, which cited the military necessity of declaring millions of enslaved people in Confederate-controlled territory to be free. His successor, Andrew Johnson, became so embroiled with Radical Republicans about ways to implement Reconstruction policies and programs after the Civil War that the House of Representatives impeached him, although the legislators in the Senate were unable to successfully remove him from office.¹⁴

Over the course of the twentieth century, presidents expanded and elaborated upon these powers. The rather vague wording in Article II, which says that the "executive power shall be vested" in the president, has been subject to broad and sweeping interpretation in order to justify actions beyond those specifically enumerated in the document.¹⁵ As the federal bureaucracy expanded, so too did the president's power to grow agencies like the Secret Service and the Federal Bureau of Investigation. Presidents also further developed the concept of executive privilege, the right to withhold information from Congress, the judiciary, or the public. This right, not enumerated in the Constitution, was first asserted by George Washington to curtail inquiry into the actions of the executive branch.¹⁶ The more general defense of its use by White House officials and attorneys ensures that the president can secure candid advice from advisors and staff members.

Increasingly over time, presidents have made more use of their unilateral powers, including executive orders, rules that bypass Congress but still have the force of law if the courts do not overturn them. More recently, presidents have offered their own interpretation of legislation as they sign it via signing statements (discussed later in this chapter) directed to the bureaucratic entity charged with implementation. In the realm of foreign policy, Congress permitted the widespread use of executive agreements to formalize international relations, so long as important matters still came through the Senate in the form of treaties.¹⁷ Recent presidents have continued to rely upon an ever more expansive definition of war powers to act unilaterally at home and abroad. Finally, presidents, often with Congress's blessing through the formal delegation of authority, have taken the lead in framing budgets, negotiating budget compromises, and at times impounding funds in an effort to prevail in matters of policy.

Milestone

The Budget and Accounting Act of 1921

Developing a budget in the nineteenth century was a chaotic mess. Unlike the case today, in which the budgeting process is centrally controlled, Congresses in the nineteenth century developed a budget in a piecemeal process. Federal agencies independently submitted budget requests to Congress, and these requests were then considered through the congressional committee process. Because the government was relatively small in the first few decades of the republic, this approach was sufficient. However, as the size and complexity of the U.S. economy

grew over the course of the nineteenth century, the traditional congressional budgeting process was unable to keep up.¹⁸

Things finally came to a head following World War I, when federal spending and debt skyrocketed. Reformers proposed the solution of putting the executive branch in charge of developing a budget that could be scrutinized, amended, and approved by Congress. However, President Woodrow Wilson, owing to a provision tacked onto the bill regarding presidential appointments, vetoed the legislation that would have transformed the budgeting process in this way. His successor, Warren Harding, felt differently and signed the Budget and Accounting Act of 1921. The act gave the president first-mover advantage in the budget process via the first “executive budget.” It also created the first-ever budget staff at the disposal of a president, at the time called the Bureau of the Budget but decades later renamed the Office of Management and Budget (Figure 7.5). With this act, Congress willingly delegated significant authority to the executive and made the president the chief budget agenda setter.



Figure 7.5 In December 1936, the House Appropriations Committee hears Secretary of Treasury Henry Morgenthau, Jr. (bottom, left) and Acting Director of the Budget Daniel Bell (top, right) on the federal finances. (credit: modification of work by the Library of Congress)

The Budget Act of 1921 effectively shifted some congressional powers to the president. Why might Congress have felt it important to centralize the budgeting process in the executive branch? What advantages could the executive branch have over the legislative branch in this regard?

The growth of presidential power is also attributable to the growth of the United States and the power of the national government. As the nation has grown and developed, so has the office. Whereas most important decisions were once made at the state and local levels, the increasing complexity and size of the domestic economy have led people in the United States to look to the federal government more often for solutions. At the same time, the rising profile of the United States on the international stage has meant that the president is a far more important figure as leader of the nation, as diplomat-in-chief, and as commander-in-chief. Finally, with the

rise of electronic mass media, a president who once depended on newspapers and official documents to distribute information beyond an immediate audience can now bring that message directly to the people via radio, television, and social media. Major events and crises, such as the Great Depression, two world wars, the Cold War, and the war on terrorism, have further contributed to presidential stature.

7.2 The Presidential Election Process

Learning Objectives

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

- Describe changes over time in the way the president and vice president are selected
- Identify the stages in the modern presidential selection process
- Assess the advantages and disadvantages of the Electoral College

The process of electing a president every four years has evolved over time. This evolution has resulted from attempts to correct the cumbersome procedures first offered by the framers of the Constitution and as a result of political parties' rising power to act as gatekeepers to the presidency. Over the last several decades, the manner by which parties have chosen candidates has trended away from congressional caucuses and conventions and towards a drawn-out series of state contests, called primaries and caucuses, which begin in the winter prior to the November general election.

SELECTING THE CANDIDATE: THE PARTY PROCESS

The framers of the Constitution made no provision in the document for the establishment of political parties. Indeed, parties were not necessary to select the first president, since George Washington ran unopposed. Following the first election of Washington, the political party system gained steam and power in the electoral process, creating separate nomination and general election stages. Early on, the power to nominate presidents for office bubbled up from the party operatives in the various state legislatures and toward what was known as the king caucus or congressional caucus. The *caucus* or large-scale gathering was made up of legislators in the Congress who met informally to decide on nominees from their respective parties. In somewhat of a countervailing trend in the general election stage of the process, by the presidential election of 1824, many states were using popular elections to choose their electors. This became important in that election when Andrew Jackson won the popular vote and the largest number of electors, but the presidency was given to John Quincy Adams instead. Out of the frustration of Jackson's supporters emerged a powerful two-party system that took control of the selection process.¹⁹

In the decades that followed, party organizations, party leaders, and workers met in national conventions to choose their nominees, sometimes after long struggles that took place over multiple ballots. In this way, the political parties kept a tight control on the selection of a candidate. In the early twentieth century, however, some states began to hold primaries, elections in which candidates vied for the support of state delegations to the party's

nominating convention. Over the course of the century, the primaries gradually became a far more important part of the process, though the party leadership still controlled the route to nomination through the convention system. This has changed in recent decades, and now a majority of the delegates are chosen through primary elections, and the party conventions themselves are little more than a widely publicized rubber-stamping event.

The rise of the presidential primary and caucus system as the main means by which presidential candidates are selected has had a number of anticipated and unanticipated consequences. For one, the campaign season has grown longer and more costly. In 1960, John F. Kennedy declared his intention to run for the presidency just eleven months before the general election. Compare this to Hillary Clinton, who announced her intention to run nearly two years before the 2008 general election. Today's long campaign seasons are seasoned with a seemingly ever-increasing number of debates among contenders for the nomination. In 2016, when the number of candidates for the Republican nomination became large and unwieldy, two debates among them were held, in which only those candidates polling greater support were allowed in the more important prime-time debate. The runners-up spoke in the other debate. In 2020, it was the Democratic party that had a large field that required staggered debates, before the field narrowed and ultimately led to the nomination of former vice president Joe Biden, who would go on to choose fellow campaigner Kamala Harris as his running mate.

Finally, the process of going straight to the people through primaries and caucuses has created some opportunities for party outsiders to rise. Neither Ronald Reagan nor Bill Clinton was especially popular with the party leadership of the Republicans or the Democrats (respectively) at the outset. The outsider phenomenon has been most clearly demonstrated, however, in the 2016 presidential nominating process, as those distrusted by the party establishment, such as Senator Ted Cruz and Donald Trump, who never before held political office, raced ahead of party favorites like Jeb Bush early in the primary process ([Figure 7.6](#)).



Figure 7.6 Senator Ted Cruz (R-TX), though disliked by the party establishment, was able to rise to the top in the Iowa caucuses in 2016 because of his ability to reach the conservative base of the party. Ultimately, Cruz bowed out of the race when Donald Trump effectively clinched the Republican nomination in Indiana in early May 2016. (credit: Michael Vadon)

The rise of the primary system during the Progressive Era came at the cost of party regulars' control of the process of candidate selection. Some party primaries even allow registered independents or members of the opposite party to vote. Even so, the process tends to attract the party faithful at the expense of independent voters, who often hold the key to victory in the fall contest. Thus, candidates who want to succeed in the primary contests seek to align themselves with committed partisans, who are often at the ideological extreme. Those who survive the primaries in this way have to moderate their image as they enter the general election if they hope to succeed among the rest of the party adherents and the uncommitted.

Primaries offer tests of candidates' popular appeal, while state caucuses testify to their ability to mobilize and organize grassroots support among committed followers. Primaries also reward candidates in different ways, with some giving the winner all the state's convention delegates, while others distribute delegates proportionately according to the distribution of voter support. Finally, the order in which the primary elections and caucus selections are held shape the overall race.²⁰ Currently, the Iowa caucuses and the New Hampshire primary occur first. These early contests tend to shrink the field as candidates who perform poorly leave the race. At other times in the campaign process, some states will maximize their impact on the race by holding their primaries on the same day that other states do. The media has dubbed these critical groupings "Super Tuesdays," "Super Saturdays," and so on. They tend to occur later in the nominating process as parties try to force the voters to coalesce around a single nominee.

The rise of the primary has also displaced the convention itself as the place where party regulars choose their standard bearer. Once true contests in which party leaders fought it out to elect a candidate, by the 1970s, party conventions more often than not simply served to rubber-stamp the choice of the primaries. By the 1980s, the convention drama was gone, replaced by a long, televised commercial designed to extol the party's greatness (Figure 7.7). Without the drama and uncertainty, major news outlets have steadily curtailed their coverage of the conventions, convinced that few people are interested. The 2016 elections seem to support the idea that the primary process produces a nominee rather than party insiders. Outsiders Donald Trump on the Republican side and Senator Bernie Sanders on the Democratic side had much success despite significant concerns about them from party elites. Whether this pattern could be reversed in the case of a closely contested selection process remains to be seen.



Figure 7.7 Traditional party conventions, like the Republican national convention in 1964 pictured here, could be contentious meetings at which the delegates made real decisions about who would run. These days, party conventions are little more than long promotional events. (credit: the Library of Congress)

ELECTING THE PRESIDENT: THE GENERAL ELECTION

Early presidential elections, conducted along the lines of the original process outlined in the Constitution, proved unsatisfactory. So long as George Washington was a candidate, his election was a foregone conclusion. But it took some manipulation of the votes of electors to ensure that the second-place winner (and thus the vice president) did not receive the same number of votes. When Washington declined to run again after two terms, matters worsened. In 1796, political rivals John Adams and Thomas Jefferson were elected president and vice president, respectively. Yet the two men failed to work well together during Adams's administration, much of which Jefferson spent at his Virginia residence at Monticello. As noted earlier in this chapter, the shortcomings of the system became painfully evident in 1800, when Jefferson and his running mate Aaron Burr finished tied, thus leaving it to the House of Representatives to elect Jefferson.²¹

The Twelfth Amendment, ratified in 1804, provided for the separate election of president and vice president as well as setting out ways to choose a winner if no one received a majority of the electoral votes. Only once since the passage of the Twelfth Amendment, during the election of 1824, has the House selected the president under these rules, and only once, in 1836, has the Senate chosen the vice president. In several elections, such as in 1876 and 1888, a candidate who received less than a majority of the popular vote has claimed the presidency, including cases when the losing candidate secured a majority of the popular vote. A recent case

was the 2000 election, in which Democratic nominee Al Gore won the popular vote, while Republican nominee George W. Bush won the Electoral College vote and hence the presidency. The 2016 election brought another such irregularity as Donald Trump comfortably won the Electoral College by narrowly winning the popular vote in several states, while Hillary Clinton collected nearly 2.9 million more votes nationwide.

Not everyone is satisfied with how the Electoral College fundamentally shapes the election, especially in cases such as those noted above, when a candidate with a minority of the popular vote claims victory over a candidate who drew more popular support. Yet movements for electoral reform, including proposals for a straightforward nationwide direct election by popular vote, have gained little traction.

Supporters of the current system defend it as a manifestation of federalism, arguing that it also guards against the chaos inherent in a multiparty environment by encouraging the current two-party system. They point out that under a system of direct election, candidates would focus their efforts on more populous regions and ignore others.²² Critics, on the other hand, charge that the current system negates the one-person, one-vote basis of U.S. elections, subverts majority rule, works against political participation in states deemed safe for one party, and might lead to chaos should an elector desert a candidate, thus thwarting the popular will. Despite all this, the system remains in place. It appears that many people are more comfortable with the problems of a flawed system than with the uncertainty of change.²³

Get Connected!

Electoral College Reform

Following the 2000 presidential election, when then-governor George W. Bush won by a single electoral vote and with over half a million fewer individual votes than his challenger, astonished voters called for Electoral College reform. Years later, however, nothing of any significance had been done. The absence of reform in the wake of such a problematic election is a testament to the staying power of the Electoral College. The 2016 election results were even more disparate. While in 2000, Al Gore won a narrow victory in the popular vote with Bush prevailing by one vote in the Electoral College, in 2016, Clinton won the popular vote by a margin of almost 3 million votes, while Trump won the Electoral College comfortably. In 2020, the results aligned, with Joe Biden winning the popular vote and Electoral College by comfortable margins, although several battleground states were very close.

Those who insist that the Electoral College should be reformed argue that its potential benefits pale in comparison to the way the Electoral College depresses voter turnout and fails to represent the popular will. In addition to favoring small states, since individual votes there count more than in larger states due to the mathematics involved in the distribution of electors, the Electoral College results in a significant number of “safe” states that receive no real electioneering, such that nearly 75 percent of the country is ignored in the general election.

One potential solution to the problems with the Electoral College is to scrap it all together and replace it with the popular vote. The popular vote would be the aggregated totals of the votes in the fifty states and District of Columbia, as certified by the head election official of each

state. A second solution often mentioned is to make the Electoral College proportional. That is, as each state assigns its electoral votes, it would do so based on the popular vote percentage in their state, rather than with the winner-take-all approach almost all the states use today.

A third alternative for Electoral College reform has been proposed by an organization called National Popular Vote. The National Popular Vote movement is an interstate compact between multiple states that sign onto the compact. Once a combination of states constituting 270 Electoral College votes supports the movement, each state entering the compact pledges all of its Electoral College votes to the national popular vote winner. This reform does not technically change the Electoral College structure, but it results in a mandated process that makes the Electoral College reflect the popular vote. Thus far, fifteen states and the District of Columbia with a total of 196 electoral votes among them have signed onto the compact.

In what ways does the current Electoral College system protect the representative power of small states and less densely populated regions? Why might it be important to preserve these protections?

Follow-up activity: View the [National Popular Vote](#) website to learn more about their position. Consider reaching out to them to learn more, offer your support, or even to argue against their proposal.

Link to Learning

See how the Electoral College and the idea of swing states fundamentally shapes elections by experimenting with the [interactive Electoral College map](#) at 270 to Win.

The general election usually features a series of debates between the presidential contenders as well as a debate among vice presidential candidates. Because the stakes are high, quite a bit of money and resources are expended on all sides. Attempts to rein in the mounting costs of modern general-election campaigns have proven ineffective. Nor has public funding helped to solve the problem. Indeed, starting with Barack Obama's 2008 decision to forfeit public funding so as to skirt the spending limitations imposed, candidates now regularly opt to raise more money rather than to take public funding.²⁴ In addition, political action committees (PACs), supposedly focused on issues rather than specific candidates, seek to influence the outcome of the race by supporting or opposing a candidate according to the PAC's own interests. But after all the spending and debating is done, those who have not already voted by other means set out on the first Tuesday following the first Monday in November to cast their votes. Several weeks later, the electoral votes are counted and the president is formally elected ([Figure 7.8](#)).

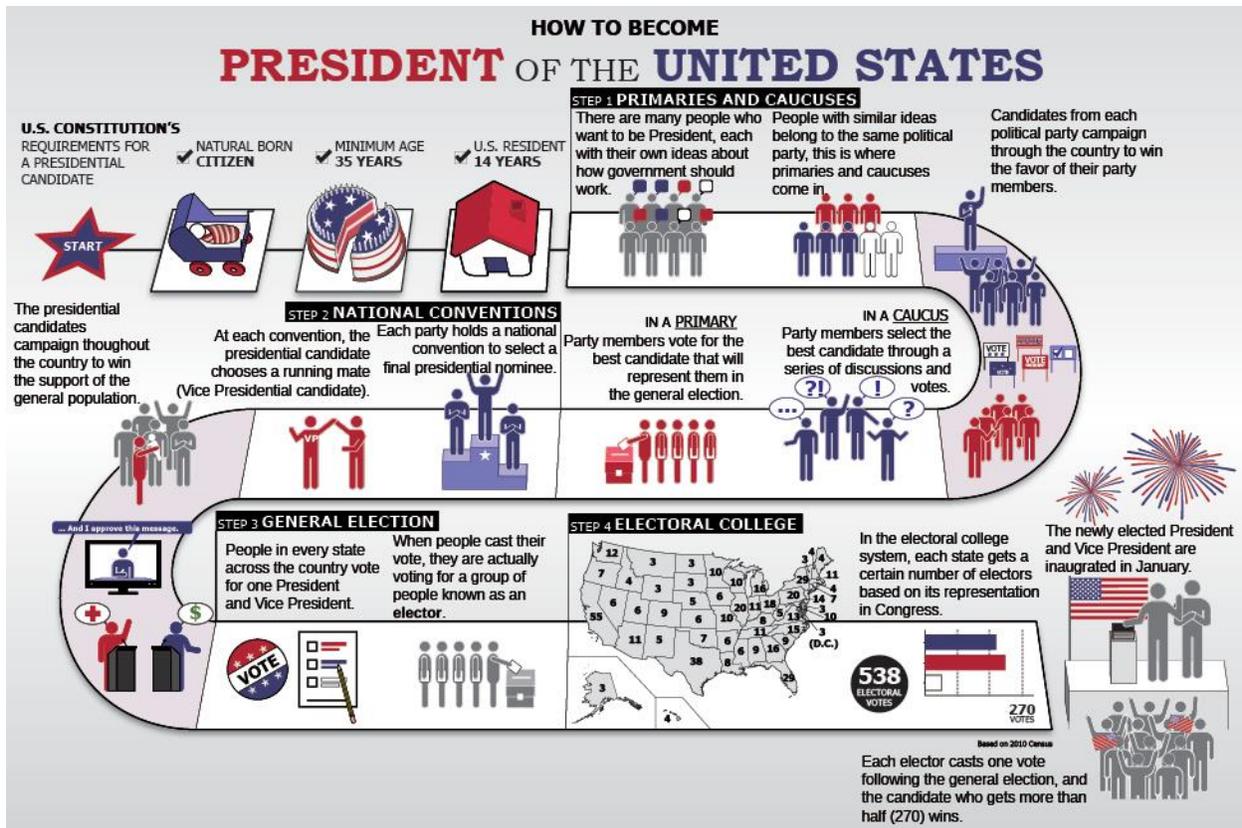


Figure 7.8 The process of becoming president has become an increasingly longer one, but the underlying steps remain largely the same. (credit: modification of work by the U. S. General Services Administration, Federal Citizen Information Center, Ifrah Syed)

7.3 Organizing to Govern

Learning Objectives

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

- Explain how incoming and outgoing presidents peacefully transfer power
- Describe how new presidents fill positions in the executive branch
- Discuss how incoming presidents use their early popularity to advance larger policy solutions

It is one thing to win an election; it is quite another to govern, as many frustrated presidents have discovered. Critical to a president's success in office is the ability to make a deft transition from the previous administration, including naming a cabinet and filling other offices. The new chief executive must also fashion an agenda, which they will often preview in general terms in an inaugural address. Presidents usually embark upon their presidency benefitting from their own and the nation's renewed hope and optimism, although often unrealistic expectations set the stage for subsequent disappointment.

TRANSITION AND APPOINTMENTS

In the immediate aftermath of the election, the incoming and outgoing administrations work together to help facilitate the transfer of power. While the General Services Administration oversees the logistics of the process, such as office assignments, information technology, and the assignment of keys, prudent candidates typically prepare for a possible victory by appointing members of a transition team during the lead-up to the general election. The success of the team's actions becomes apparent on inauguration day, when the transition of power takes place in what is often a seamless fashion, with people evacuating their offices (and the White House) for their successors.

Link to Learning

Read about [presidential transitions](#) as well as explore other topics related to the transfer of power at the White House Transition Project website.

Among the president-elect's more important tasks is the selection of a cabinet. George Washington's cabinet was made up of only four people, the attorney general and the secretaries of the Departments of War, State, and the Treasury. Currently, however, there are fifteen members of the cabinet, including the Secretaries of Labor, Agriculture, Education, and others ([Figure 7.9](#)). The most important members—the heads of the Departments of Defense, Justice, State, and the Treasury (echoing Washington's original cabinet)—receive the most attention from the president, the Congress, and the media. These four departments have been referred to as the inner cabinet, while the others are called the outer cabinet. When selecting a cabinet, presidents consider ability, expertise, influence, and reputation. More recently, presidents have also tried to balance political and demographic representation (gender, race, religion, and other considerations) to produce a cabinet that is capable as well as descriptively representative, meaning that those in the cabinet look like the U.S. population (see the chapter on bureaucracy and the term "representative bureaucracy"). A recent president who explicitly stated this as his goal was Bill Clinton, who talked about an "E.G.G. strategy" for senior-level appointments, where the E stands for ethnicity, G for gender, and the second G for geography.



Figure 7.9 President Joe Biden and Vice President Kamala Harris pose with the Presidential Cabinet on April 1, 2021, in the Grand Foyer of the White House. Seated directly behind the president and vice president are (from left to right) Treasury Secretary Janet Yellen, Secretary of State Antony Blinken, and Defense Secretary Lloyd Austin. In addition to being historically diverse, Biden's Cabinet has more government experience than his predecessors, with more than 95 percent of the Cabinet having prior government experience. (credit: "Cabinet of President Joe Biden in April 2021" by Adam Schultz, The White House/Wikimedia Commons, Public Domain)

Once the new president has been inaugurated and can officially nominate people to fill cabinet positions, the Senate confirms or rejects these nominations. At times, though rarely, cabinet nominations have failed to be confirmed or have even been withdrawn because of questions raised about the past behavior of the nominee.²⁵ Prominent examples of such failures were Senator John Tower for defense secretary (George H. W. Bush) and Zoe Baird for attorney general (Bill Clinton): Senator Tower's indiscretions involving alcohol and womanizing led to concerns about his fitness to head the military and his rejection by the Senate,²⁶ whereas Zoe Baird faced controversy and withdrew her nomination when it was revealed, through what the press dubbed "Nannygate," that house staff of hers were undocumented workers. These two cases are emblematic of a change in how presidential nominations fail in the Senate. Failures used to involve outright rejections in committee votes or floor votes, like the Tower case. More recently, failures typically die of inattention. However, these cases are rare exceptions to the rule, which is to give approval to the nominees that the president wishes to have in the cabinet. Other possible candidates for cabinet posts may decline to be considered for a number of reasons, from the reduction in pay that can accompany entrance into public life to unwillingness to be subjected to the vetting process that accompanies a nomination.

Also subject to Senate approval are a number of non-cabinet subordinate administrators in the various departments of the executive branch, as well as the administrative heads of several agencies and commissions. These include the heads of the Internal Revenue Service, the Central Intelligence Agency, the Office of Management and Budget, the Federal Reserve, the Social Security Administration, the Environmental Protection Agency, the National Labor Relations Board, and the Equal Employment Opportunity Commission. The Office of Management and Budget (OMB) is the president's own budget department. In addition to preparing the executive budget proposal and overseeing budgetary implementation during the federal fiscal year, the OMB oversees the actions of the executive bureaucracy.

Not all the non-cabinet positions are open at the beginning of an administration, but presidents move quickly to install their preferred choices in most roles when given the opportunity. Finally, new presidents usually take the opportunity to nominate new ambassadors, whose appointments are subject to Senate confirmation. New presidents make thousands of new appointments in their first two years in office. All the senior cabinet agency positions and nominees for all positions in the Executive Office of the President are made as presidents enter office or when positions become vacant during their presidency. Federal judges serve for life. Therefore, vacancies for the federal courts and the U.S. Supreme Court occur gradually as judges retire.

Throughout much of the history of the republic, the Senate has closely guarded its constitutional duty to consent to the president's nominees, although in the end it nearly always confirms them. Still, the Senate does occasionally hold up a nominee. Benjamin Fishbourn, President George Washington's nomination for a minor naval post, was rejected largely because he had insulted a particular senator.²⁷ Other rejected nominees included Clement Haynsworth and G. Harrold Carswell, nominated for the U.S. Supreme Court by President Nixon; Theodore Sorensen, nominated by President Carter for director of the Central Intelligence Agency; and John Tower, discussed earlier. At other times, the Senate has used its power to rigorously scrutinize the president's nominees (Figure 7.10). Supreme Court nominee Clarence Thomas, who faced numerous sexual harassment charges from former employees, was forced to sit through repeated questioning of his character and past behavior during Senate hearings, something he referred to as "a high-tech lynching for uppity Blacks."²⁸



Figure 7.10 In 2013, President Barack Obama nominated former Republican senator Chuck Hagel to run the Department of Defense. The president hoped that by nominating a former senator from the opposition he could ensure the confirmation process would go smoothly. Instead, however, Senator Ted Cruz used the confirmation hearing to question the Vietnam War hero's patriotism. Hagel was eventually confirmed by a 58–41 vote. (credit: Leon E. Panetta)

More recently, the Senate has attempted a new strategy, refusing to hold hearings at all, a strategy of defeat that scholars have referred to as "malign neglect."²⁹ Despite the fact that one-third of U.S. presidents have appointed a Supreme Court justice in an election year, when Associate Justice Antonin Scalia died unexpectedly in early 2016, Senate majority leader Mitch McConnell declared that the Senate would not hold hearings on a nominee until after the upcoming presidential election.³⁰ McConnell remained adamant even after President Barack Obama, saying he was acting in fulfillment of his constitutional duty, nominated Merrick Garland, longtime chief judge of the federal Circuit Court of Appeals for the DC Circuit. Garland was highly respected by senators from both parties and had won confirmation to his DC circuit position by a 76–23 vote in the Senate. When Republican Donald Trump was elected president in the fall, this strategy appeared to pay off. The Republican Senate and Judiciary Committee confirmed Trump's nominee, Neil Gorsuch, in April 2017, exercising the so-called "nuclear

option," which allowed Republicans to break the Democrats' filibuster of the nomination by a simple majority vote. Ultimately, Senator McConnell reversed his "proximity to the next election" explanation for waiting to fill a Supreme Court vacancy when Justice Ruth Bader Ginsburg passed away just prior to the 2020 election and McConnell and the Republicans quickly processed and confirmed Justice Amy Coney Barrett.

Other presidential selections are not subject to Senate approval, including the president's personal staff (whose most important member is the White House chief of staff) and various advisers (most notably the national security adviser). The Executive Office of the President, created by Franklin D. Roosevelt (FDR), contains a number of advisory bodies, including the Council of Economic Advisers, the National Security Council, the OMB, and the Office of the Vice President. Presidents also choose political advisers, speechwriters, and a press secretary to manage the politics and the message of the administration. In recent years, the president's staff has become identified by the name of the place where many of its members work: the West Wing of the White House. These people serve at the pleasure of the president, and often the president reshuffles or reforms the staff during the term. Just as government bureaucracy has expanded over the centuries, so has the White House staff, which under Abraham Lincoln numbered a handful of private secretaries and a few minor functionaries. A recent report pegged the number of employees working within the White House over 450.³¹ When the staff in nearby executive buildings of the Executive Office of the President are added in, that number increases four-fold.

Finding a Middle Ground

No Fun at Recess: Dueling Loopholes and the Limits of Presidential Appointments

When Supreme Court justice Antonin Scalia died unexpectedly in early 2016, many in Washington braced for a political sandstorm of obstruction and accusations. Such was the record of Supreme Court nominations during the Obama administration and, indeed, for the last few decades. Nor is this phenomenon restricted to nominations for the highest court in the land. The Senate has been known to occasionally block or slow appointments not because the quality of the nominee was in question but rather as a general protest against the policies of the president and/or as part of the increasing partisan bickering that occurs when the presidency is controlled by one political party and the Senate by the other. This occurred, for example, when the Senate initially refused to nominate anyone to head the Consumer Financial Protection Bureau, established in 2011, because Republicans disliked the existence of the bureau itself.

Such political holdups, however, tend to be the exception rather than the rule. For example, historically, nominees to the presidential cabinet are rarely rejected. And each Congress oversees the approval of around four thousand civilian and sixty-five thousand military appointments from the executive branch.³² The overwhelming majority of these are confirmed in a routine and systematic fashion, and only rarely do holdups occur. But when they do, the Constitution allows for a small presidential loophole called the recess appointment. The relevant part of Article II, Section 2, of the Constitution reads:

“The President shall have Power to fill up all Vacancies that may happen during the Recess of the Senate, by granting Commissions which shall expire at the End of their next Session.”

The purpose of the provision was to give the president the power to temporarily fill vacancies during times when the Senate was not in session and could not act. But presidents have typically used this loophole to get around a Senate that’s inclined to obstruct. Presidents Bill Clinton and George W. Bush made 139 and 171 recess appointments, respectively. President Obama made far fewer recess appointments, with a total of only thirty-two during his presidency.³³ One reason this number is so low is another loophole the Senate began using at the end of George W. Bush’s presidency, the pro forma session.

A pro forma session is a short meeting held with the understanding that no work will be done. These sessions have the effect of keeping the Senate officially in session while functionally in recess. In 2012, President Obama decided to ignore the pro forma session and make four recess appointments anyway. The Republicans in the Senate were furious and contested the appointments. Eventually, the Supreme Court had the final say in a 2014 decision that declared unequivocally that “the Senate is in session when it says it is.”³⁴ For now at least, the court’s ruling means that the president’s loophole and the Senate’s loophole cancel each other out. It seems they’ve found the middle ground whether they like it or not.

What might have been the legitimate original purpose of the recess appointment loophole? Do you believe the Senate is unfairly obstructing by effectively ending recesses altogether so as to prevent the president from making appointments without its approval?

The most visible, though arguably the least powerful, member of a president’s cabinet is the vice president. Throughout most of the nineteenth and into the twentieth century, the vast majority of vice presidents took very little action in the office unless fate intervened. Few presidents consulted with their running mates. Indeed, until the twentieth century, many presidents had little to do with the naming of their running mate at the nominating convention. The office was seen as a form of political exile, and that motivated Republicans to name Theodore Roosevelt as William McKinley’s running mate in 1900. The strategy was to get the ambitious politician out of the way while still taking advantage of his popularity. This scheme backfired, however, when McKinley was assassinated and Roosevelt became president ([Figure 7.11](#)).



(a)



(b)

Figure 7.11 In September 1901, President William McKinley's assassination, shown here in a sketch by T. Dart Walker (a), made forty-two-year-old vice president Theodore Roosevelt (b) the youngest person to ever assume the office of U.S. president.

Vice presidents were often sent on minor missions or used as mouthpieces for the administration, often with a sharp edge. Richard Nixon's vice president Spiro Agnew is an example. But in the 1970s, starting with Jimmy Carter, presidents made a far more conscious effort to make their vice presidents part of the governing team, placing them in charge of increasingly important issues. Sometimes, as in the case of Bill Clinton and Al Gore, the partnership appeared to be smooth if not always harmonious. In the case of George W. Bush and his very experienced vice president Dick Cheney, observers speculated whether the vice president might have exercised too much influence. Barack Obama's choice for a running mate and subsequent two-term vice president, former Senator Joseph Biden, was picked for his experience, especially in foreign policy. President Obama relied on Vice President Biden for advice throughout his tenure. President Trump relied on Vice President Mike Pence to lead initiatives on health care reform and COVID-19, and Pence would gather West Wing officials and Cabinet members together, when Trump was occupied with other matters, in a manner atypical for a vice president. President Joe Biden involves Vice President Kamala Harris in every important policy discussion and has charged her with leading discussion of border control matters [Figure 7.12](#). In any case, the vice presidency is no longer quite as weak as it once was, and a capable vice president can do much to augment the president's capacity to govern across issues if the president so desires.³⁵



Figure 7.12 Vice President Kamala Harris speaks to State Department employees in Washington, DC on February 4, 2021. Vice President Harris continues a strong trend of vice presidents doing important and substantive work alongside the president. (credit: "Vice President Harris Delivers Remarks to State Department Employees" by U.S. Department of State/Wikimedia Commons, Public Domain)

FORGING AN AGENDA

Having secured election, the incoming president must soon decide how to deliver upon what was promised during the campaign. The chief executive must set priorities, choose what to emphasize, and formulate strategies to get the job done. He or she labors under the shadow of a measure of presidential effectiveness known as the first hundred days in office, a concept popularized during Franklin Roosevelt's first term in the 1930s. While one hundred days is possibly too short a time for any president to boast of any real accomplishments, most presidents do recognize that they must address their major initiatives during their first two years in office. This is the time when the president is most powerful and is given the benefit of the doubt by the public and the media (aptly called the honeymoon period), especially if entering the White House with a politically aligned Congress, as Barack Obama did. However, recent history suggests that even one-party control of Congress and the presidency does not ensure efficient policymaking. This difficulty is due as much to divisions within the governing party as to obstructionist tactics skillfully practiced by the minority party in Congress. Democratic president Jimmy Carter's battles with a Congress controlled by Democratic majorities provide a good case in point.

The incoming president must deal to some extent with the outgoing president's last budget proposal. While some modifications can be made, it is more difficult to pursue new initiatives immediately. Most presidents are well advised to prioritize what they want to achieve during the first year in office and not lose control of their agenda. At times, however, unanticipated events can determine policy, as happened in 2001 when nineteen hijackers perpetrated the

worst terrorist attack in U.S. history and transformed U.S. foreign and domestic policy in dramatic ways.

Moreover, presidents must be sensitive to what some scholars have termed “political time,” meaning the circumstances under which they assume power. Sometimes, the nation is prepared for drastic proposals to solve deep and pressing problems that cry out for immediate solutions, as was the case following the 1932 election of FDR at the height of the Great Depression. Most times, however, the country is far less inclined to accept revolutionary change. Being an effective president means recognizing the difference.³⁶

The first act undertaken by the new president—the delivery of an inaugural address—can do much to set the tone for what is intended to follow. While such an address may be an exercise in rhetorical inspiration, it also allows the president to set forth priorities within the overarching vision of what they intend to do. Abraham Lincoln used his inaugural addresses to calm rising concerns in the South that he would act to overturn slavery. Unfortunately, this attempt at appeasement fell on deaf ears, and the country descended into civil war. Franklin Roosevelt used his first inaugural address to boldly proclaim that the country need not fear the change that would deliver it from the grip of the Great Depression, and he set to work immediately enlarging the federal government to that end. John F. Kennedy, who entered the White House at the height of the Cold War, made an appeal to talented young people around the country to help him make the world a better place. He followed up with new institutions like the Peace Corps, which sends young citizens around the world to work as secular missionaries for American values like democracy and free enterprise.

Link to Learning

Listen to [clips](#) of the most famous inaugural address in presidential history at the *Washington Post* website.

7.4 The Public Presidency

Learning Objectives

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

- Explain how technological innovations have empowered presidents
- Identify ways in which presidents appeal to the public for approval
- Explain how the role of first ladies changed over the course of the twentieth century

With the advent of motion picture newsreels and voice recordings in the 1920s, presidents began to broadcast their message to the general public. Franklin Roosevelt, while not the first president to use the radio, adopted this technology to great effect. Over time, as radio gave way to newer and more powerful technologies like television, the Internet, and social media, other presidents have been able magnify their voices to an even-larger degree. Presidents now have far more tools at their disposal to shape public opinion and build support for policies. However, the choice to “go public” does not always lead to political success; it is difficult to convert popularity in public opinion polls into political power. Moreover, the modern era of

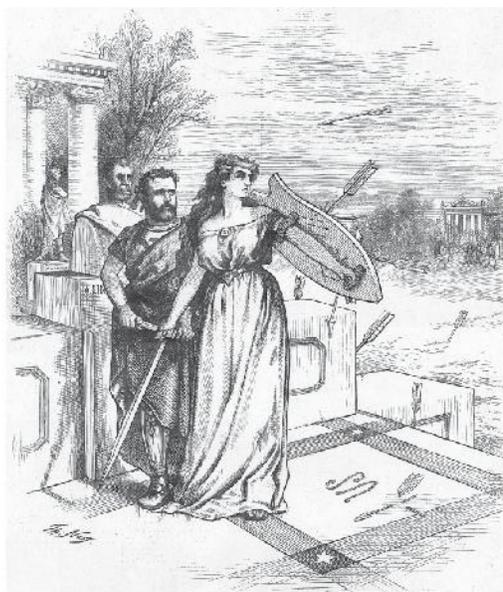
information and social media empowers opponents at the same time that it provides opportunities for presidents.

THE SHAPING OF THE MODERN PRESIDENCY

From the days of the early republic through the end of the nineteenth century, presidents were limited in the ways they could reach the public to convey their perspective and shape policy. Inaugural addresses and messages to Congress, while circulated in newspapers, proved clumsy devices to attract support, even when a president used plain, blunt language. Some presidents undertook tours of the nation, notably George Washington and Rutherford B. Hayes. Others promoted good relationships with newspaper editors and reporters, sometimes going so far as to sanction a pro-administration newspaper. One president, Ulysses S. Grant, cultivated political cartoonist Thomas Nast to present the president's perspective in the pages of the magazine *Harper's Weekly*.³⁷ Abraham Lincoln experimented with public meetings recorded by newspaper reporters and public letters that would appear in the press, sometimes after being read at public gatherings (Figure 7.13). Most presidents gave speeches, although few proved to have much immediate impact, including Lincoln's memorable Gettysburg Address.



(a)



(b)

Figure 7.13 While President Abraham Lincoln was not the first president to be photographed, he was the first to use the relatively new power of photography to enhance his power as president and commander-in-chief. Here, Lincoln poses with Union soldiers (a) during his visit to Antietam, Maryland, on October 3, 1862. President Ulysses S. Grant cultivated a relationship with popular cartoonist Thomas Nast, who often depicted the president in the company of “Lady Liberty” (b) in addition to relentlessly attacking his opponent Horace Greeley.

Rather, most presidents exercised the power of patronage (or appointing people who are loyal and help them out politically) and private deal-making to get what they wanted at a time when Congress usually held the upper hand in such transactions. But even that presidential power

began to decline with the emergence of civil service reform in the later nineteenth century, which led to most government officials being hired on their merit instead of through patronage. Only when it came to diplomacy and war were presidents able to exercise authority on their own, and even then, institutional as well as political restraints limited their independence of action.

Theodore Roosevelt came to the presidency in 1901, at a time when movie newsreels were becoming popular. Roosevelt, who had always excelled at cultivating good relationships with the print media, eagerly exploited this new opportunity as he took his case to the people with the concept of the presidency as **bully pulpit**, a platform from which to push his agenda to the public. His successors followed suit, and they discovered and employed new ways of transmitting their message to the people in an effort to gain public support for policy initiatives. With the popularization of radio in the early twentieth century, it became possible to broadcast the president's voice into many of the nation's homes. Most famously, FDR used the radio to broadcast his thirty "fireside chats" to the nation between 1933 and 1944.

In the post–World War II era, television began to replace radio as the medium through which presidents reached the public. This technology enhanced the reach of the handsome young president John F. Kennedy and the trained actor Ronald Reagan. At the turn of the twentieth century, the new technology was the Internet. The extent to which this mass media technology can enhance the power and reach of the president has yet to be fully realized. In the twenty-first century, presidents face a paradox. While there are more ways than ever to get their message out, be it television channels or social media networks, the complexity of modern media makes the prospects for presidents of directly reaching the public less certain. Former president Donald Trump took going public to the extreme, some days sending dozens of tweets to both promote his agenda and attack political opponents. Even his allies and senior officials would be surprised by some of the tweets.

Other presidents have used advances in transportation to take their case to the people. Woodrow Wilson traveled the country to advocate formation of the League of Nations. However, he fell short of his goal when he suffered a stroke in 1919 and cut his tour short. Both Franklin Roosevelt in the 1930s and 1940s and Harry S. Truman in the 1940s and 1950s used air travel to conduct diplomatic and military business. Under President Dwight D. Eisenhower, a specific plane, commonly called Air Force One, began carrying the president around the country and the world. This gives the president the ability to take their message directly to the far corners of the nation at any time.

GOING PUBLIC: PROMISE AND PITFALLS

The concept of going public involves the president delivering a major television address in the hope that Americans watching the address will be compelled to contact their House and Senate member and that such public pressure will result in the legislators supporting the president on a major piece of legislation. Technological advances have made it more efficient for presidents to take their messages directly to the people than was the case before mass media ([Figure 7.14](#)). Presidential visits can build support for policy initiatives or serve political purposes, helping the president reward supporters, campaign for candidates, and seek reelection. It

remains an open question, however, whether choosing to go public actually enhances a president's political position in battles with Congress. Political scientist George C. Edwards goes so far as to argue that taking a president's position public serves to polarize political debate, increase public opposition to the president, and complicate the chances to get something done. It replaces deliberation and compromise with confrontation and campaigning. Edwards believes the best way for presidents to achieve change is to keep issues private and negotiate resolutions that preclude partisan combat. Going public may be more effective in rallying supporters than in gaining additional support or changing minds.³⁸



Figure 7.14 With the advent of video technology and cable television, the power of the president to reach huge audiences increased exponentially. President Ronald Reagan, shown here giving one of his most famous speeches in Berlin, was an expert at using technology to help mold and project his presidential image to the public. His training as an actor certainly helped in this regard.

Link to Learning

Today, it is possible for the [White House](#) to take its case directly to the people via websites like White House Live, where the public can watch live press briefings and speeches.

THE FIRST LADY: A SECRET WEAPON?

The president is not the only member of the First Family who often attempts to advance an agenda by going public. First ladies increasingly exploited the opportunity to gain public support

for an issue of deep interest to them. Before 1933, most first ladies served as private political advisers to their husbands. In the 1910s, Edith Bolling Wilson took a more active but still private role assisting her husband, President Woodrow Wilson, afflicted by a stroke, in the last years of his presidency. However, as the niece of one president and the wife of another, it was Eleanor Roosevelt in the 1930s and 1940s who opened the door for first ladies to do something more.

Eleanor Roosevelt took an active role in championing civil rights, becoming in some ways a bridge between her husband and the civil rights movement. She coordinated meetings between FDR and members of the NAACP, championed antilynching legislation, openly defied segregation laws, and pushed the Army Nurse Corps to allow Black women in its ranks. She also wrote a newspaper column and had a weekly radio show. Her immediate successors returned to the less visible role held by her predecessors, although in the early 1960s, Jacqueline Kennedy gained attention for her efforts to refurbish the White House along historical lines, and Lady Bird Johnson in the mid- and late 1960s endorsed an effort to beautify public spaces and highways in the United States. She also established the foundations of what came to be known as the Office of the First Lady, complete with a news reporter, Liz Carpenter, as her press secretary.

Betty Ford took over as first lady in 1974 and became an avid advocate of women's rights, proclaiming that she was pro-choice when it came to abortion and lobbying for the ratification of the Equal Rights Amendment (ERA). She shared with the public the news of her breast cancer diagnosis and subsequent mastectomy. Her successor, Rosalynn Carter, attended several cabinet meetings and pushed for the ratification of the ERA as well as for legislation addressing mental health issues ([Figure 7.15](#)).



Figure 7.15 On November 19, 1977, Rosalynn Carter (center left) and Betty Ford (center right) attended a rally in favor of the passage of the Equal Rights Amendment.

The increasing public political role of the first lady continued in the 1980s with Nancy Reagan's "Just Say No" antidrug campaign and in the early 1990s with Barbara Bush's efforts on behalf of literacy. The public role of the first lady reach a new level with Hillary Clinton in the 1990s when her husband put her in charge of his efforts to achieve health care reform, a controversial decision that did not meet with political success. Her successors, Laura Bush in the first decade of the twenty-first century and Michelle Obama in the second, returned to the roles played by predecessors in advocating less controversial policies: Laura Bush advocated literacy and education, while Michelle Obama has emphasized physical fitness and healthy diet and exercise. Nevertheless, the public and political profiles of first ladies remain high, and in the future, the president's spouse will have the opportunity to use that unelected position to advance policies that might well be less controversial and more appealing than those pushed by the president.

Insider Perspective

A New Role for the First Lady?

While running for the presidency for the first time in 1992, Bill Clinton frequently touted the experience and capabilities of his wife. There was a lot to brag about. Hillary Rodham Clinton was a graduate of Yale Law School, had worked as a member of the impeachment inquiry staff during the height of the Watergate scandal in Nixon's administration, and had been a staff attorney for the Children's Defense Fund before becoming the first lady of Arkansas. Acknowledging these qualifications, candidate Bill Clinton once suggested that by electing him, voters would get "two for the price of one." The clear implication in this statement was that his wife would take on a far larger role than previous first ladies, and this proved to be the case.³⁹

Shortly after taking office, Clinton appointed the first lady to chair the Task Force on National Health Care Reform. This organization was to follow through on his campaign promise to fix the problems in the U.S. healthcare system. Hillary Clinton had privately requested the appointment, but she quickly realized that the complex web of business interests and political aspirations combined to make the topic of health care reform a hornet's nest. This put the Clinton administration's first lady directly into partisan battles few if any previous first ladies had ever faced.

As a testament to both the large role the first lady had taken on and the extent to which she had become the target of political attacks, the recommendations of the task force were soon dubbed "Hillarycare" by opponents. In a particularly contentious hearing in the House, the first lady and Republican representative Dick Armey exchanged pointed jabs with each other. At one point, Armey suggested that the reports of her charm were "overstated" after the first lady likened him to Dr. Jack Kevorkian, a physician known for helping patients commit suicide ([Figure 7.16](#)).⁴⁰ The following summer, the first lady attempted to use a national bus tour to popularize the health care proposal, although distaste for her and for the program had reached such a fevered pitch that she sometimes was compelled to wear a bulletproof vest. In the end, the

efforts came up short and the reform attempts were abandoned as a political failure. Nevertheless, Hillary Clinton remained a political lightning rod for the rest of the Clinton presidency.



Figure 7.16 Hillary Clinton during her presentation at a congressional hearing on health care reform in 1993. (credit: Library of Congress)

What do the challenges of First Lady Hillary Clinton's foray into national politics suggest about the dangers of a first lady abandoning the traditionally safe nonpartisan goodwill efforts? What do the actions of the first ladies since Clinton suggest about the lessons learned or not learned?

7.5 Presidential Governance: Direct Presidential Action

Learning Objectives

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

- Identify the power presidents have to effect change without congressional cooperation
- Analyze how different circumstances influence the way presidents use unilateral authority
- Explain how presidents persuade others in the political system to support their initiatives
- Describe how historians and political scientists evaluate the effectiveness of a presidency

A president's powers can be divided into two categories: direct actions the chief executive can take by employing the formal institutional powers of the office and informal powers of persuasion and negotiation essential to working with the legislative branch. When a president governs alone through direct action, it may break a policy deadlock or establish new grounds for action, but it may also spark opposition that might have been handled differently through negotiation and discussion. Moreover, such decisions are subject to court challenge, legislative reversal, or revocation by a successor. What may seem to be a sign of strength is often more properly understood as independent action undertaken in the wake of a failure to achieve a solution through the legislative process, or an admission that such an effort would prove futile.

When it comes to national security, international negotiations, or war, the president has many more opportunities to act directly and in some cases must do so when circumstances require quick and decisive action.

DOMESTIC POLICY

Presidents may not be able to appoint key members of their administration without Senate confirmation, but they can demand the resignation or removal of cabinet officers, high-ranking appointees (such as ambassadors), and members of the presidential staff. During Reconstruction, Congress tried to curtail the president's removal power with the Tenure of Office Act (1867), which required Senate concurrence to remove presidential nominees who took office upon Senate confirmation. Andrew Johnson's violation of that legislation provided the grounds for his impeachment in 1868. Subsequent presidents secured modifications of the legislation before the Supreme Court ruled in 1926 that the Senate had no right to impair the president's removal power.⁴¹ In the case of Senate failure to approve presidential nominations, the president is empowered to issue recess appointments (made while the Senate is in recess) that continue in force until the end of the next session of the Senate (unless the Senate confirms the nominee).

The president also exercises the power of pardon without conditions. Once used fairly sparingly—apart from Andrew Johnson's wholesale pardons of former Confederates during the Reconstruction period—the pardon power has become more visible in recent decades. President Harry S. Truman issued over two thousand pardons and commutations, more than any other post–World War II president.⁴² President Gerald Ford has the unenviable reputation of being the only president to pardon another president (his predecessor Richard Nixon, who resigned after the Watergate scandal) ([Figure 7.17](#)). While not as generous as Truman, President Jimmy Carter also issued a great number of pardons, including several for draft dodging during the Vietnam War. President Reagan was reluctant to use the pardon as much, as was President George H. W. Bush. President Clinton pardoned few people for much of his presidency, but did make several last-minute pardons, which led to some controversy. By the end of his presidency, Barack Obama had granted 212 pardons, or 6 percent of petitions received, numbers similar to that of his predecessor, George W. Bush.⁴³ Early on in his presidency, Donald Trump used the pardon in a few visible cases. He set aside sentences for controversial former Sheriff Joe Arpaio of Maricopa County, Arizona, and for former Vice President Dick Cheney's confidante, Scooter Libby.⁴⁴ Like other presidents, with his presidency's end in sight after losing the November 2020 election to Joe Biden, his use of pardons escalated. In the end, he granted 237 pardons.



Figure 7.17 In 1974, President Ford became the first and still the only president to pardon a previous president (Richard Nixon). Here he is speaking before the House Judiciary Subcommittee on Criminal Justice meeting explaining his reasons. While the pardon was unpopular with many and may have cost Ford the election two years later, his constitutional power to issue it is indisputable. (credit: modification of work by the Library of Congress)

Presidents may choose to issue executive orders or proclamations to achieve policy goals. Usually, executive orders direct government agencies to pursue a certain course in the absence of congressional action. A more subtle version pioneered by recent presidents is the executive memorandum, which tends to attract less attention. Many of the most famous executive orders have come in times of war or invoke the president's authority as commander-in-chief, including Franklin Roosevelt's order permitting the internment of Japanese Americans in 1942 and Harry Truman's directive desegregating the armed forces (1948). The most famous presidential proclamation was Abraham Lincoln's Emancipation Proclamation (1863), which declared enslaved people in areas under Confederate control to be free (with a few exceptions).

Executive orders are subject to court rulings or changes in policy enacted by Congress. During the Korean War, the Supreme Court revoked Truman's order seizing the steel industry.⁴⁵ These orders are also subject to reversal by presidents who come after, and recent presidents have wasted little time reversing the orders of their predecessors in cases of disagreement. Sustained executive orders, which are those not overturned in courts, typically have some prior authority from Congress that legitimizes them. When there is no prior authority, it is much more likely that an executive order will be overturned by a later president. For this reason, while there has been significant use of executive orders in recent years, including an increase in use with President Trump, the last several presidents have used them sparingly compared to presidents in the early twentieth century. ([Figure 7.18](#)).

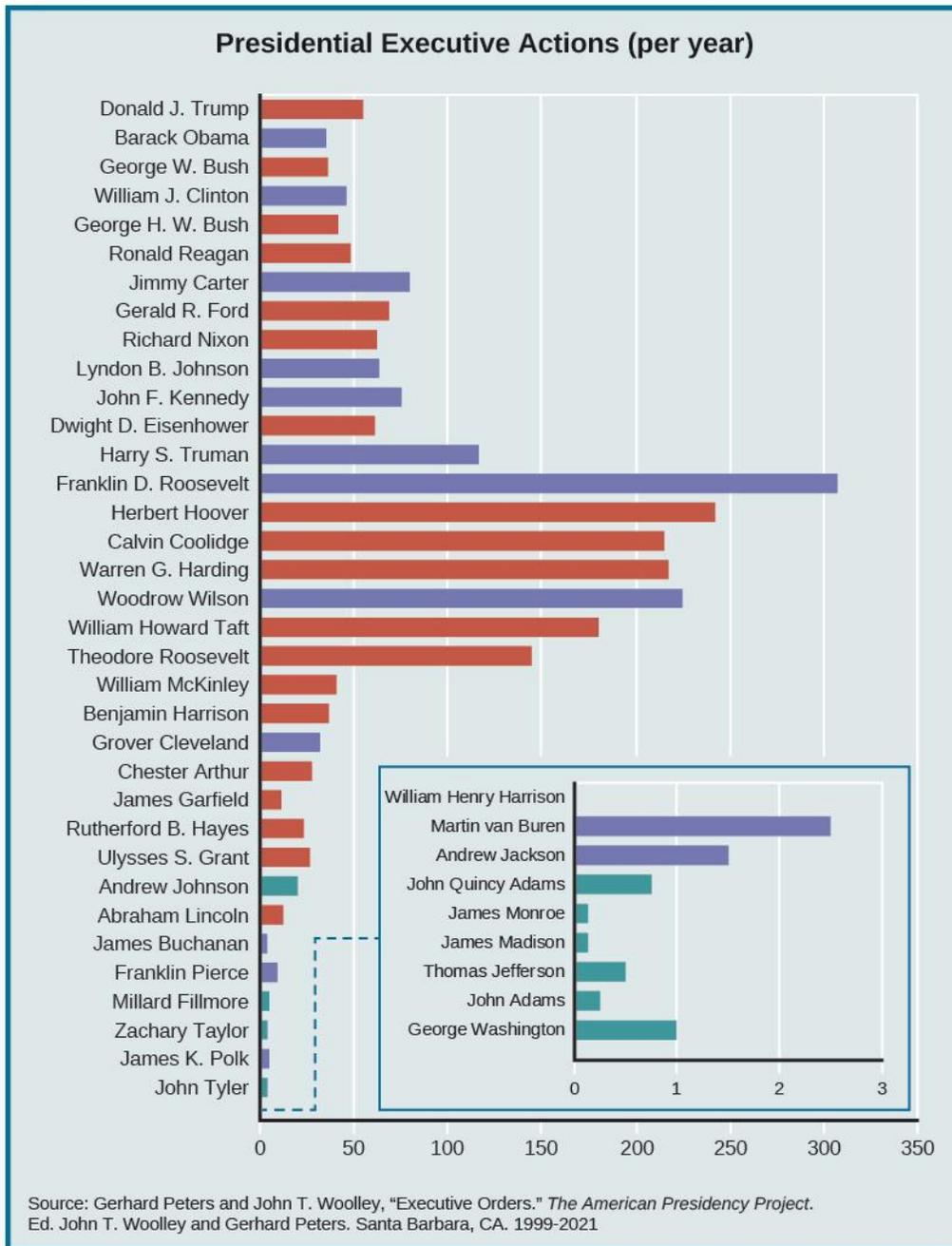


Figure 7.18 Executive actions were unusual until the late nineteenth century. They became common in the first half of the twentieth century but have been growing less popular for the last few decades because they often get overturned in court if the Congress has not given the president prior delegated authority.

Milestone

Executive Order 9066

Following the devastating Japanese attacks on the U.S. Pacific fleet at Pearl Harbor in 1941, many in the United States feared that Japanese Americans on the West Coast had the potential and inclination to form a fifth column (a hostile group working from the inside) for the purpose of aiding a Japanese invasion. These fears mingled with existing anti-Japanese sentiment across the country and created a paranoia that washed over the West Coast like a large wave. In an attempt to calm fears and prevent any real fifth-column actions, President Franklin D. Roosevelt signed Executive Order 9066, which authorized the removal of people from military areas as necessary. When the military dubbed the entire West Coast a military area, it effectively allowed for the removal of more than 110,000 Japanese Americans from their homes. These people, many of them U.S. citizens, were moved to relocation centers in the interior of the country. They lived in the camps there for two and a half years ([Figure 7.19](#)).⁴⁶



Figure 7.19 This sign appeared outside a store in Oakland, California, owned by a Japanese American after the bombing of Pearl Harbor in 1941. After the president's executive order, the store was closed and the owner evacuated to an internment camp for the duration of the war. (credit: the Library of Congress)

The overwhelming majority of Japanese Americans felt shamed by the actions of the Japanese empire and willingly went along with the policy in an attempt to demonstrate their loyalty to the United States. But at least one Japanese American refused to go along. His name was Fred Korematsu, and he decided to go into hiding in California rather than be taken to the internment camps with his family. He was soon discovered, turned over to the military, and sent to the internment camp in Utah that held his family. But his challenge to the internment system and the president's executive order continued.

In 1944, Korematsu's case was heard by the Supreme Court. In a 6–3 decision, the Court ruled against him, arguing that the administration had the constitutional power to sign the order

because of the need to protect U.S. interests against the threat of espionage.⁴⁷ Forty-four years after this decision, President Reagan issued an official apology for the internment and provided some compensation to the survivors. In 2011, the Justice Department went a step further by filing a notice officially recognizing that the solicitor general of the United States acted in error by arguing to uphold the executive order. (The solicitor general is the official who argues cases for the U.S. government before the Supreme Court.) However, despite these actions, in 2014, the late Supreme Court justice Antonin Scalia was documented as saying that while he believed the decision was wrong, it could occur again.⁴⁸

What do the Korematsu case and the internment of over 100,000 Japanese Americans suggest about the extent of the president's war powers? What does this episode in U.S. history suggest about the weaknesses of constitutional checks on executive power during times of war?

Link to Learning

To learn more about the relocation and confinement of Japanese Americans during World War II, visit [Heart Mountain](#) online.

Finally, presidents have also used the line-item veto and signing statements to alter or influence the application of the laws they sign. A line-item veto is a type of veto that keeps the majority of a spending bill unaltered but nullifies certain lines of spending within it. While a number of states allow their governors the line-item veto (discussed in the chapter on state and local government), the president acquired this power only in 1996 after Congress passed a law permitting it. President Clinton used the tool sparingly. However, those entities that stood to receive the federal funding he lined out brought suit. Two such groups were the City of New York and the Snake River Potato Growers in Idaho.⁴⁹ The Supreme Court heard their claims together and just sixteen months later declared unconstitutional the act that permitted the line-item veto.⁵⁰ Since then, presidents have asked Congress to draft a line-item veto law that would be constitutional, although none have made it to the president's desk.

On the other hand, signing statements are statements issued by a president when agreeing to legislation that indicate how the chief executive will interpret and enforce the legislation in question. Signing statements are less powerful than vetoes, though congressional opponents have complained that they derail legislative intent. Signing statements have been used by presidents since at least James Monroe, but they became far more common in this century.

NATIONAL SECURITY, FOREIGN POLICY, AND WAR

Presidents are more likely to justify the use of executive orders in cases of national security or as part of their war powers. In addition to mandating emancipation and the internment of Japanese Americans, presidents have issued orders to protect the homeland from internal threats. Most notably, Lincoln ordered the suspension of the privilege of the writ of habeas corpus in 1861 and 1862 before seeking congressional legislation to undertake such an act. Presidents hire and fire military commanders; they also use their power as commander-in-chief to aggressively deploy U.S. military force. Congress rarely has taken the lead over the course of history, with the War of 1812 being the lone exception. Pearl Harbor was a salient case where

Congress did make a clear and formal declaration when asked by FDR. However, since World War II, it has been the president and not Congress who has taken the lead in engaging the United States in military action outside the nation's boundaries, most notably in Korea, Vietnam, and the Persian Gulf ([Figure 7.20](#)).



Figure 7.20 By landing on an aircraft carrier and wearing a flight suit to announce the end of major combat operations in Iraq in 2003, President George W. Bush was carefully emphasizing his presidential power as commander-in-chief. (credit: Tyler J. Clements)

Presidents also issue executive agreements with foreign powers. Executive agreements are formal agreements negotiated between two countries but not ratified by a legislature as a treaty must be. As such, they are not treaties under U.S. law, which require two-thirds of the Senate for ratification. Treaties, presidents have found, are particularly difficult to get ratified. And with the fast pace and complex demands of modern foreign policy, concluding treaties with countries can be a tiresome and burdensome chore. That said, some executive agreements do require some legislative approval, such as those that commit the United States to make payments and thus are restrained by the congressional power of the purse. But for the most part, executive agreements signed by the president require no congressional action and are considered enforceable as long as the provisions of the executive agreement do not conflict with current domestic law.

[Link to Learning](#)

The [American Presidency Project](#) has gathered data outlining presidential activity, including measures for executive orders and signing statements.

THE POWER OF PERSUASION

The framers of the Constitution, concerned about the excesses of British monarchical power, made sure to design the presidency within a network of checks and balances controlled by the other branches of the federal government. Such checks and balances encourage consultation, cooperation, and compromise in policymaking. This is most evident at home, where the Constitution makes it difficult for either Congress or the chief executive to prevail unilaterally, at least when it comes to constructing policy. Although much is made of political stalemate and obstructionism in national political deliberations today, the framers did not want to make it too easy to get things done without a great deal of support for such initiatives.

It is left to the president to employ a strategy of negotiation, persuasion, and compromise in order to secure policy achievements in cooperation with Congress. In 1960, political scientist Richard Neustadt put forward the thesis that presidential power is the power to persuade, a process that takes many forms and is expressed in various ways.⁵¹ Yet the successful employment of this technique can lead to significant and durable successes. For example, legislative achievements tend to be of greater duration because they are more difficult to overturn or replace, as the case of health care reform under President Barack Obama suggests. Obamacare has faced court cases and repeated (if largely symbolic) attempts to gut it in Congress. Overturning it will take a new president who opposes it, together with a Congress that can pass the dissolving legislation.

In some cases, cooperation is essential, as when the president nominates and the Senate confirms persons to fill vacancies on the Supreme Court, an increasingly contentious area of friction between branches. While Congress cannot populate the Court on its own, it can frustrate the president's efforts to do so. Presidents who seek to prevail through persuasion, according to Neustadt, target Congress, members of their own party, the public, the bureaucracy, and, when appropriate, the international community and foreign leaders. Of these audiences, perhaps the most obvious and challenging is Congress.

Link to Learning

Read “Power Lessons for Obama” at this [website](#) to learn more about applying Richard Neustadt's framework to the leaders of today.

Much depends on the balance of power within Congress: Should the opposition party hold control of both houses, it will be difficult indeed for the president to realize their own objectives, especially if the opposition is intent on frustrating all initiatives. However, even control of both houses by the president's own party is no guarantee of success or even of productive policymaking. For example, neither Barack Obama nor Donald Trump achieved all they desired despite having favorable conditions for the first two years of their presidencies. In times of divided government (when one party controls the presidency and the other controls one or both chambers of Congress), it is up to the president to cut deals and make compromises that will attract support from at least some members of the opposition party without excessively alienating members of their own party. Both Ronald Reagan and Bill Clinton proved effective in dealing with divided government—indeed, Clinton scored more successes with Republicans in control of Congress than he did with Democrats in charge.

It is more difficult to persuade members of the president's own party or the public to support a president's policy without risking the dangers inherent in going public. There is precious little opportunity for private persuasion while also going public in such instances, at least directly. The way the president and their staff handle media coverage of the administration may afford some opportunities for indirect persuasion of these groups. It is not easy to persuade the federal bureaucracy to do the president's bidding unless the chief executive has made careful appointments. When it comes to diplomacy, the president must relay some messages privately while offering incentives, both positive and negative, in order to elicit desired responses, although at times, people heed only the threat of force and coercion.

While presidents may choose to go public in an attempt to put pressure on other groups to cooperate, most of the time they "stay private" as they attempt to make deals and reach agreements out of the public eye. The tools of negotiation have changed over time. Once chief executives played patronage politics, rewarding friends while attacking and punishing critics as they built coalitions of support. But the advent of civil service reform in the 1880s systematically deprived presidents of that option and reduced its scope and effectiveness. Although the president may call upon various agencies for assistance in lobbying for proposals, such as the Office of Legislative Liaison with Congress, it is often left to the chief executive to offer incentives and rewards. Some of these are symbolic, like private meetings in the White House or an appearance on the campaign trail. The president must also find common ground and make compromises acceptable to all parties, thus enabling everyone to claim they secured something they wanted.

Complicating Neustadt's model, however, is that many of the ways he claimed presidents could shape favorable outcomes require going public, which as we have seen can produce mixed results. Political scientist Fred Greenstein, on the other hand, touted the advantages of a "hidden hand presidency," in which the chief executive did most of the work behind the scenes, wielding both the carrot and the stick.⁵² Greenstein singled out President Dwight Eisenhower as particularly skillful in such endeavors.

OPPORTUNITY AND LEGACY

What often shapes a president's performance, reputation, and ultimately legacy depends on circumstances that are largely out of their control. Did the president prevail in a landslide or was it a closely contested election? Did they come to office as the result of death, assassination, or resignation? How much support does the president's party enjoy, and is that support reflected in the composition of both houses of Congress, just one, or neither? Will the president face a Congress ready to embrace proposals or poised to oppose them? Whatever a president's ambitions, it will be hard to realize them in the face of a hostile or divided Congress, and the options to exercise independent leadership are greater in times of crisis and war than when looking at domestic concerns alone.

Then there is what political scientist Stephen Skowronek calls "political time."⁵³ Some presidents take office at times of great stability with few concerns. Unless there are radical or unexpected changes, a president's options are limited, especially if voters hoped for a simple continuation of what had come before. Other presidents take office at a time of crisis or when

the electorate is looking for significant changes. Then there is both pressure and opportunity for responding to those challenges. Some presidents, notably Theodore Roosevelt, openly bemoaned the lack of any such crisis, which Roosevelt deemed essential for him to achieve greatness as a president.

People in the United States claim they want a strong president. What does that mean? At times, scholars point to presidential independence, even defiance, as evidence of strong leadership. Thus, vigorous use of the veto power in key situations can cause observers to judge a president as strong and independent, although far from effective in shaping constructive policies. Nor is such defiance and confrontation always evidence of presidential leadership skill or greatness, as the case of Andrew Johnson should remind us. When is effectiveness a sign of strength, and when are we confusing being headstrong with being strong? Sometimes, historians and political scientists see cooperation with Congress as evidence of weakness, as in the case of Ulysses S. Grant, who was far more effective in garnering support for administration initiatives than scholars have given him credit for.

These questions overlap with those concerning political time and circumstance. While domestic policymaking requires far more give-and-take and a fair share of cajoling and collaboration, national emergencies and war offer presidents far more opportunity to act vigorously and at times independently. This phenomenon often produces the rally around the flag effect, in which presidential popularity spikes during international crises. A president must always be aware that politics, according to Otto von Bismarck, is the art of the possible, even as it is a president's duty to increase what might be possible by persuading both members of Congress and the general public of what needs to be done.

Finally, presidents often leave a legacy that lasts far beyond their time in office ([Figure 7.21](#)). Sometimes, this is due to the long-term implications of policy decisions. Critical to the notion of legacy is the shaping of the Supreme Court as well as other federal judges. Long after John Adams left the White House in 1801, his appointment of John Marshall as chief justice shaped American jurisprudence for over three decades. No wonder confirmation hearings have grown more contentious in the cases of highly visible nominees. Other legacies are more difficult to define, although they suggest that, at times, presidents cast a long shadow over their successors. It was a tough act to follow George Washington, and in death, Abraham Lincoln's presidential stature grew to extreme heights. Theodore and Franklin D. Roosevelt offered models of vigorous executive leadership, while the image and style of John F. Kennedy and Ronald Reagan influenced and at times haunted or frustrated successors. Nor is this impact limited to chief executives deemed successful: Lyndon Johnson's Vietnam and Richard Nixon's Watergate offered cautionary tales of presidential power gone wrong, leaving behind legacies that include terms like *Vietnam syndrome* and the tendency to add the suffix "-gate" to scandals and controversies.



(a)



(b)

Figure 7.21 The youth and glamour that John F. Kennedy and first lady Jacqueline brought to the White House in the early 1960s (a) helped give rise to the legend of “one brief shining moment that was Camelot” after Kennedy’s presidency was cut short by his assassination on November 22, 1963. Despite a tainted legacy, President Richard Nixon gives his trademark “V for Victory” sign as he leaves the White House on August 9, 1974 (b), after resigning in the wake of the Watergate scandal.



Figure 8.1 The Marriage Equality Act vote in Albany, New York, on July 24, 2011 (left), was just one of a number of cases testing the constitutionality of both federal and state law that ultimately led the Supreme Court to take on the controversial issue of same-sex marriage. In the years leading up to the 2015 ruling that same-sex couples have a right to marry in all fifty states, marriage equality had become a key civil rights issue for the LGBTQ community, as demonstrated at Seattle’s 2012 Pride parade (right). (credit left: modification of work by “Celebration chapel”/Wikimedia; credit right: modification of work by Brett Curtiss)

Introduction

If democratic institutions struggle to balance individual freedoms and collective well-being, the judiciary is arguably the branch where the individual has the best chance to be heard. For those seeking protection on the basis of sexual orientation, for example, in recent years, the courts have expanded rights, such as the 2015 decision in which the Supreme Court ruled that same-sex couples have the right to marry in all fifty states ([Figure 8.1](#)).¹

The U.S. courts pride themselves on two achievements: (1) as part of the system of checks and balances, they protect the sanctity of the U.S. Constitution from breaches by the other branches of government, and (2) they protect individual rights against societal and governmental oppression. At the federal level, nine Supreme Court judges are nominated by the president and confirmed by the Senate for lifetime appointments. This provides them the independence they need to carry out their duties. However, court power is confined to rulings on those cases the courts decide to hear.²

How do the courts make decisions, and how do they exercise their power to protect individual rights? How are the courts structured, and what distinguishes the Supreme Court from all others? This chapter answers these and other questions in delineating the power of the judiciary in the United States.

8.1 Guardians of the Constitution and Individual Rights

Learning Objectives

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

- Describe the evolving role of the courts since the ratification of the Constitution
- Explain why courts are uniquely situated to protect individual rights
- Recognize how the courts make public policy

Under the Articles of Confederation, there was no national judiciary. The U.S. Constitution changed that, but its Article III, which addresses “the judicial power of the United States,” is the shortest and least detailed of the three articles that created the branches of government. It calls for the creation of “one supreme Court” and establishes the Court’s jurisdiction, or its authority to hear cases and make decisions about them, and the types of cases the Court may hear. It distinguishes which are matters of original jurisdiction and which are for appellate jurisdiction. Under original jurisdiction, a case is heard for the first time, whereas under appellate jurisdiction, a court hears a case on appeal from a lower court and may change the lower court’s decision. The Constitution also limits the Supreme Court’s original jurisdiction to those rare cases of disputes between states, or between the United States and foreign ambassadors or ministers. So, for the most part, the Supreme Court is an appeals court, operating under appellate jurisdiction and hearing appeals from the lower courts. The rest of the development of the judicial system and the creation of the lower courts were left in the hands of Congress.

To add further explanation to Article III, Alexander Hamilton wrote details about the federal judiciary in *Federalist* No. 78. In explaining the importance of an independent judiciary separated from the other branches of government, he said “interpretation” was a key role of the courts as they seek to protect people from unjust laws. But he also believed “the Judiciary Department” would “always be the least dangerous” because “with no influence over either the sword or the purse,” it had “neither force nor will, but merely judgment.” The courts would only make decisions, not take action. With no control over how those decisions would be implemented and no power to enforce their choices, they could exercise only judgment, and their power would begin and end there. Hamilton would no doubt be surprised by what the judiciary has become: a key component of the nation’s constitutional democracy, finding its place as the chief interpreter of the Constitution and the equal of the other two branches, though still checked and balanced by them.

The first session of the first U.S. Congress laid the framework for today’s federal judicial system, established in the Judiciary Act of 1789. Although legislative changes over the years have altered it, the basic structure of the judicial branch remains as it was set early on: At the lowest level are the district courts, where federal cases are tried, witnesses testify, and evidence and arguments are presented. A losing party who is unhappy with a district court decision may appeal to the circuit courts, or U.S. courts of appeals, where the decision of the lower court is reviewed. Still further, appeal to the U.S. Supreme Court is possible, but of the thousands of petitions for appeal, the Supreme Court will typically hear fewer than one hundred a year.³

Link to Learning

This public site maintained by the [Administrative Office of the U.S. Courts](#) provides detailed information from and about the judicial branch.

HUMBLE BEGINNINGS

Starting in New York in 1790, the early Supreme Court focused on establishing its rules and procedures and perhaps trying to carve its place as the new government's third branch. However, given the difficulty of getting all the justices even to show up, and with no permanent home or building of its own for decades, finding its footing in the early days proved to be a monumental task. Even when the federal government moved to the nation's capital in 1800, the Court had to share space with Congress in the Capitol building. This ultimately meant that "the high bench crept into an undignified committee room in the Capitol beneath the House Chamber."⁴

It was not until the Court's 146th year of operation that Congress, at the urging of Chief Justice—and former president—William Howard Taft, provided the designation and funding for the Supreme Court's own building, "on a scale in keeping with the importance and dignity of the Court and the Judiciary as a coequal, independent branch of the federal government."⁵ It was a symbolic move that recognized the Court's growing role as a significant part of the national government ([Figure 8.2](#)).



Figure 8.2 The Supreme Court building in Washington, DC, was not completed until 1935. Engraved on its marble front is the motto "Equal Justice Under Law," while its east side says, "Justice, the Guardian of Liberty."

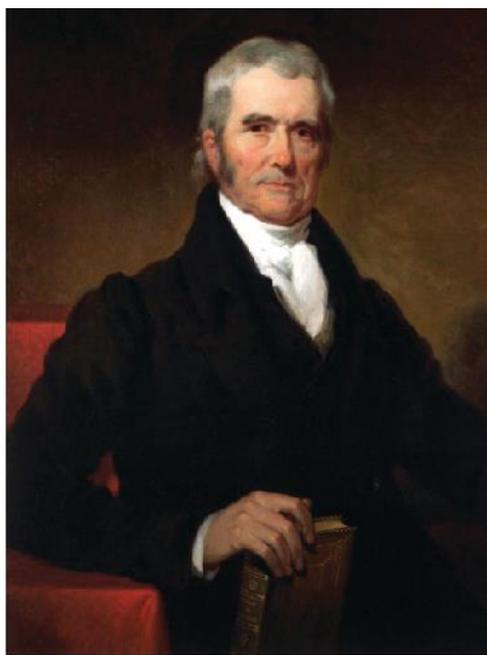
But it took years for the Court to get to that point, and it faced a number of setbacks on the way to such recognition. In their first case of significance, *Chisholm v. Georgia* (1793), the justices ruled that the federal courts could hear cases brought by a citizen of one state against a citizen of another state, and that Article III, Section 2, of the Constitution did not protect the states from facing such an interstate lawsuit.⁶ However, their decision was almost immediately overturned by the Eleventh Amendment, passed by Congress in 1794 and ratified by the states in 1795. In protecting the states, the Eleventh Amendment put a prohibition on the courts by stating, "The Judicial power of the United States shall not be construed to extend to any suit in law or equity, commenced or prosecuted against one of the United States by Citizens of

another State, or by Citizens or Subjects of any Foreign State.” It was an early hint that Congress had the power to change the jurisdiction of the courts as it saw fit and stood ready to use it.

In an atmosphere of perceived weakness, the first chief justice, John Jay, an author of *The Federalist Papers* and appointed by President George Washington, resigned his post to become governor of New York and later declined President John Adams’s offer of a subsequent term.⁷ In fact, the Court might have remained in a state of what Hamilton called its “natural feebleness” if not for the man who filled the vacancy Jay had refused—the fourth chief justice, John Marshall. Often credited with defining the modern court, clarifying its power, and strengthening its role, Marshall served in the chief’s position for thirty-four years. One landmark case during his tenure changed the course of the judicial branch’s history ([Figure 8.3](#)).⁸



(a)



(b)

Figure 8.3 John Jay (a) was the first chief justice of the Supreme Court but resigned his post to become governor of New York. John Marshall (b), who served as chief justice for thirty-four years, is often credited as the major force in defining the modern court’s role in the U.S. governmental system.

In 1803, the Supreme Court declared for itself the power of judicial review, a power to which Hamilton had referred but that is not expressly mentioned in the Constitution. Judicial review is the power of the courts, as part of the system of checks and balances, to look at actions taken by the other branches of government and the states and determine whether they are constitutional. If the courts find an action to be unconstitutional, it becomes null and void. Judicial review was established in the Supreme Court case *Marbury v. Madison*, when, for the first time, the Court declared an act of Congress to be unconstitutional.⁹ Wielding this power is a role Marshall defined as the “very essence of judicial duty,” and it continues today as one of

the most significant aspects of judicial power. Judicial review lies at the core of the court's ability to check the other branches of government—and the states.

Since *Marbury*, the power of judicial review has continually expanded, and the Court has not only ruled actions of Congress and the president to be unconstitutional, but it has also extended its power to include the review of state and local actions. The power of judicial review is not confined to the Supreme Court but is also exercised by the lower federal courts and even the state courts. Any legislative or executive action at the federal or state level inconsistent with the U.S. Constitution or a state constitution can be subject to judicial review.¹⁰

Milestone

Marbury v. Madison (1803)

The Supreme Court found itself in the middle of a dispute between the outgoing presidential administration of John Adams and that of incoming president (and opposition party member) Thomas Jefferson. It was an interesting circumstance at the time, particularly because Jefferson and the man who would decide the case—John Marshall—were themselves political rivals.

President Adams had appointed William Marbury to a position in Washington, DC, but his commission was not delivered before Adams left office. So Marbury petitioned the Supreme Court to use its power under the Judiciary Act of 1789 and issue a writ of mandamus to force the new president's secretary of state, James Madison, to deliver the commission documents. It was a task Madison refused to do. A unanimous Court under the leadership of Chief Justice John Marshall ruled that although Marbury was entitled to the job, the Court did not have the power to issue the writ and order Madison to deliver the documents, because the provision in the Judiciary Act that had given the Court that power was unconstitutional.¹¹

Perhaps Marshall feared a confrontation with the Jefferson administration and thought Madison would refuse his directive anyway. In any case, his ruling shows an interesting contrast in the early Court. On one hand, it humbly declined a power—issuing a writ of mandamus—given to it by Congress, but on the other, it laid the foundation for legitimizing a much more important one—judicial review. Marbury never got his commission, but the Court's ruling in the case has become more significant for the precedent it established: As the first time the Court declared an act of Congress unconstitutional, it established the power of judicial review, a key power that enables the judicial branch to remain a powerful check on the other branches of government.

Consider the dual nature of John Marshall's opinion in Marbury v. Madison: On one hand, it limits the power of the courts, yet on the other it also expanded their power. Explain the different aspects of the decision in terms of these contrasting results.

THE COURTS AND PUBLIC POLICY

Even with judicial review in place, the courts do not always stand ready just to throw out actions of the other branches of government. More broadly, as Marshall put it, “it is emphatically the province and duty of the judicial department to say what the law is.”¹² The

United States has a common law system in which law is largely developed through binding judicial decisions. With roots in medieval England, the system was inherited by the American colonies along with many other British traditions.¹³ It stands in contrast to code law systems, which provide very detailed and comprehensive laws that do not leave room for much interpretation and judicial decision-making. With code law in place, as it is in many nations of the world, it is the job of judges to simply apply the law. But under common law, as in the United States, they interpret it. Often referred to as a system of judge-made law, common law provides the opportunity for the judicial branch to have stronger involvement in the process of law-making itself, largely through its ruling and interpretation on a case-by-case basis.

In their role as policymakers, Congress and the president tend to consider broad questions of public policy and their costs and benefits. But the courts consider specific cases with narrower questions, thus enabling them to focus more closely than other government institutions on the exact context of the individuals, groups, or issues affected by the decision. This means that while the legislature can make policy through statute, and the executive can form policy through regulations and administration, the judicial branch can also influence policy through its rulings and interpretations. As cases are brought to the courts, court decisions can help shape policy.

Consider health care, for example. In 2010, President Barack Obama signed into law the Patient Protection and Affordable Care Act (ACA), a statute that brought significant changes to the nation's healthcare system. With its goal of providing more widely attainable and affordable health insurance and health care, "Obamacare" was hailed by some but soundly denounced by others as bad policy. People who opposed the law and understood that a congressional repeal would not happen any time soon looked to the courts for help. They challenged the constitutionality of the law in *National Federation of Independent Business v. Sebelius*, hoping the Supreme Court would overturn it.¹⁴ The practice of judicial review enabled the law's critics to exercise this opportunity, even though their hopes were ultimately dashed when, by a narrow 5–4 margin, the Supreme Court upheld the health care law as a constitutional extension of Congress's power to tax.

Since this 2012 decision, the ACA has continued to face challenges, the most notable of which have also been decided by court rulings. It faced a setback in 2014, for instance, when the Supreme Court ruled in *Burwell v. Hobby Lobby* that, for religious reasons, some for-profit corporations could be exempt from the requirement that employers provide insurance coverage of contraceptives for their female employees.¹⁵ But the ACA also attained a victory in *King v. Burwell*, when the Court upheld the ability of the federal government to provide tax credits for people who bought their health insurance through an exchange created by the law.¹⁶

With each ACA case it has decided, the Supreme Court has served as the umpire, upholding the law and some of its provisions on one hand, but ruling some aspects of it unconstitutional on the other. Both supporters and opponents of the law have claimed victory and faced defeat. In each case, the Supreme Court has further defined and fine-tuned the law passed by Congress and the president, determining which parts stay and which parts go, thus having its say in the way the act has manifested itself, the way it operates, and the way it serves its public purpose.

In this same vein, the courts have become the key interpreters of the U.S. Constitution, continuously interpreting it and applying it to modern times and circumstances. For example, it was in 2015 that we learned a man's threat to kill his ex-wife, written in rap lyrics and posted to her Facebook wall, was not a real threat and thus could not be prosecuted as a felony under federal law.¹⁷ Certainly, when the Bill of Rights first declared that government could not abridge freedom of speech, its framers could never have envisioned Facebook—or any other modern technology for that matter.

But freedom of speech, just like many constitutional concepts, has come to mean different things to different generations, and it is the courts that have designed the lens through which we understand the Constitution in modern times. It is often said that the Constitution changes less by amendment and more by the way it is interpreted. Rather than collecting dust on a shelf, the nearly 230-year-old document has come with us into the modern age, and the accepted practice of judicial review has helped carry it along the way.

COURTS AS A LAST RESORT

While the U.S. Supreme Court and state supreme courts exert power over many when reviewing laws or declaring acts of other branches unconstitutional, they become particularly important when an individual or group comes before them believing there has been a wrong. A citizen or group that feels mistreated can approach a variety of institutional venues in the U.S. system for assistance in changing policy or seeking support. Organizing protests, garnering special interest group support, and changing laws through the legislative and executive branches are all possible, but an individual is most likely to find the courts especially well-suited to analyzing the particulars of a case.

The adversarial judicial system comes from the common law tradition: In a court case, it is one party versus the other, and it is up to an impartial person or group, such as the judge or jury, to determine which party prevails. The federal court system is most often called upon when a case touches on constitutional rights. For example, when Samantha Lauf, a Muslim woman, was denied a job working for the clothing retailer Abercrombie & Fitch because a headscarf she wears as religious practice violated the company's dress code, the Supreme Court ruled that her First Amendment rights had been violated, making it possible for her to sue the store for monetary damages.

Lauf had applied for an Abercrombie sales job in Oklahoma in 2008. Her interviewer recommended her based on her qualifications, but she was never given the job because the clothing retailer wanted to avoid having to accommodate her religious practice of wearing a headscarf, or hijab. In so doing, the Court ruled, Abercrombie violated Title VII of the Civil Rights Act of 1964, which prohibits employers from discriminating on the basis of race, color, religion, sex, or national origin, and requires them to accommodate religious practices.¹⁸

Rulings like this have become particularly important for members of religious minority groups, including Muslims, Sikhs, and Jews, who now feel more protected from employment discrimination based on their religious attire, head coverings, or beards.¹⁹ Such decisions illustrate how the expansion of individual rights and liberties for particular persons or groups

over the years has come about largely as a result of court rulings made for individuals on a case-by-case basis.

Although the United States prides itself on the Declaration of Independence’s statement that “all men are created equal,” and “equal protection of the laws” is a written constitutional principle of the Fourteenth Amendment, the reality is less than perfect. But it is evolving. Changing times and technology have and will continue to alter the way fundamental constitutional rights are defined and applied, and the courts have proven themselves to be crucial in that definition and application.

Societal traditions, public opinion, and politics have often stood in the way of the full expansion of rights and liberties to different groups, and not everyone has agreed that these rights should be expanded as they have been by the courts. Schools were long segregated by race until the Court ordered desegregation in *Brown v. Board of Education* (1954), and even then, many stood in opposition and tried to block students at the entrances to all-White schools.²⁰ Factions have formed on opposite sides of the abortion and handgun debates, because many do not agree that women should have abortion rights or that individuals should have the right to a handgun. People disagree about whether members of the LGBTQ community should be allowed to marry or whether arrested persons should be read their rights, guaranteed an attorney, and/or have their cell phones protected from police search.

But the Supreme Court has ruled in favor of all these issues and others. Even without unanimous agreement among citizens, Supreme Court decisions have made all these possibilities a reality, a particularly important one for the individuals who become the beneficiaries ([Table 8.1](#)). The judicial branch has often made decisions the other branches were either unwilling or unable to make, and Hamilton was right in *Federalist* No. 78 when he said that without the courts exercising their duty to defend the Constitution, “all the reservations of particular rights or privileges would amount to nothing.”

Examples of Supreme Court Cases Involving Individuals

Case Name	Year	Court’s Decision
<i>Brown v. Board of Education</i>	1954	Public schools must be desegregated.
<i>Gideon v. Wainwright</i>	1963	Poor criminal defendants must be provided an attorney.
<i>Miranda v. Arizona</i>	1966	Criminal suspects must be read their rights.
<i>Roe v. Wade</i>	1973	Women have a constitutional right to abortion.
<i>McDonald v. Chicago</i>	2010	An individual has the right to a handgun in his or her home.
<i>Riley v. California</i>	2014	Police may not search a cell phone without a warrant.
<i>Obergefell v. Hodges</i>	2015	Same-sex couples have the right to marry in all states.

Table 8.1 Over time, the courts have made many decisions that have broadened the rights of individuals. This table is a sampling of some of these Supreme Court cases.

The courts seldom if ever grant rights to a person instantly and upon request. In a number of cases, they have expressed reluctance to expand rights without limit, and they still balance that expansion with the government's need to govern, provide for the common good, and serve a broader societal purpose. For example, the Supreme Court has upheld the constitutionality of the death penalty, ruling that the Eighth Amendment does not prevent a person from being put to death for committing a capital crime and that the government may consider "retribution and the possibility of deterrence" when it seeks capital punishment for a crime that so warrants it.²¹ In other words, there is a greater good—more safety and security—that may be more important than sparing the life of an individual who has committed a heinous crime.

Yet the Court has also put limits on the ability to impose the death penalty, ruling, for example, that the government may not execute a person with cognitive disabilities, a person who was under eighteen at the time of the crime, or a child rapist who did not kill his victim.²² So the job of the courts on any given issue is never quite done, as justices continuously keep their eye on government laws, actions, and policy changes as cases are brought to them and then decide whether those laws, actions, and policies can stand or must go. Even with an issue such as the death penalty, about which the Court has made several rulings, there is always the possibility that further judicial interpretation of what does (or does not) violate the Constitution will be needed.

This happened, for example, as recently as 2015 in a case involving the use of lethal injection as capital punishment in the state of Oklahoma, where death-row inmates are put to death through the use of three drugs—a sedative to bring about unconsciousness (midazolam), followed by two others that cause paralysis and stop the heart. A group of these inmates challenged the use of midazolam as unconstitutional. They argued that since it could not reliably cause unconsciousness, its use constituted an Eighth Amendment violation against cruel and unusual punishment and should be stopped by the courts. The Supreme Court rejected the inmates' claims, ruling that Oklahoma could continue to use midazolam as part of its three-drug protocol.²³ But with four of the nine justices dissenting from that decision, a sharply divided Court leaves open a greater possibility of more death-penalty cases to come. The 2015–2016 session alone includes four such cases, challenging death-sentencing procedures in such states as Florida, Georgia, and Kansas.²⁴ In another recent case, *Bucklew v. Precythe* (2019), the court again rejected an Eighth Amendment claim of the death penalty as torture.²⁵ Yet, while case outcomes would suggest that it is easier, not harder, to carry out the death penalty, the number of executions across the U.S. has plummeted in recent years.²⁶

Therefore, we should not underestimate the power and significance of the judicial branch in the United States. Today, the courts have become a relevant player, gaining enough clout and trust over the years to take their place as a separate yet coequal branch.

8.2 The Dual Court System

Learning Objectives

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

- Describe the dual court system and its three tiers
- Explain how you are protected and governed by different U.S. court systems
- Compare the positive and negative aspects of a dual court system

Before the writing of the U.S. Constitution and the establishment of the permanent national judiciary under Article III, the states had courts. Each of the thirteen colonies had also had its own courts, based on the British common law model. The judiciary today continues as a dual court system, with courts at both the national and state levels. Both levels have three basic tiers consisting of trial courts, appellate courts, and finally courts of last resort, typically called supreme courts, at the top (Figure 8.4).

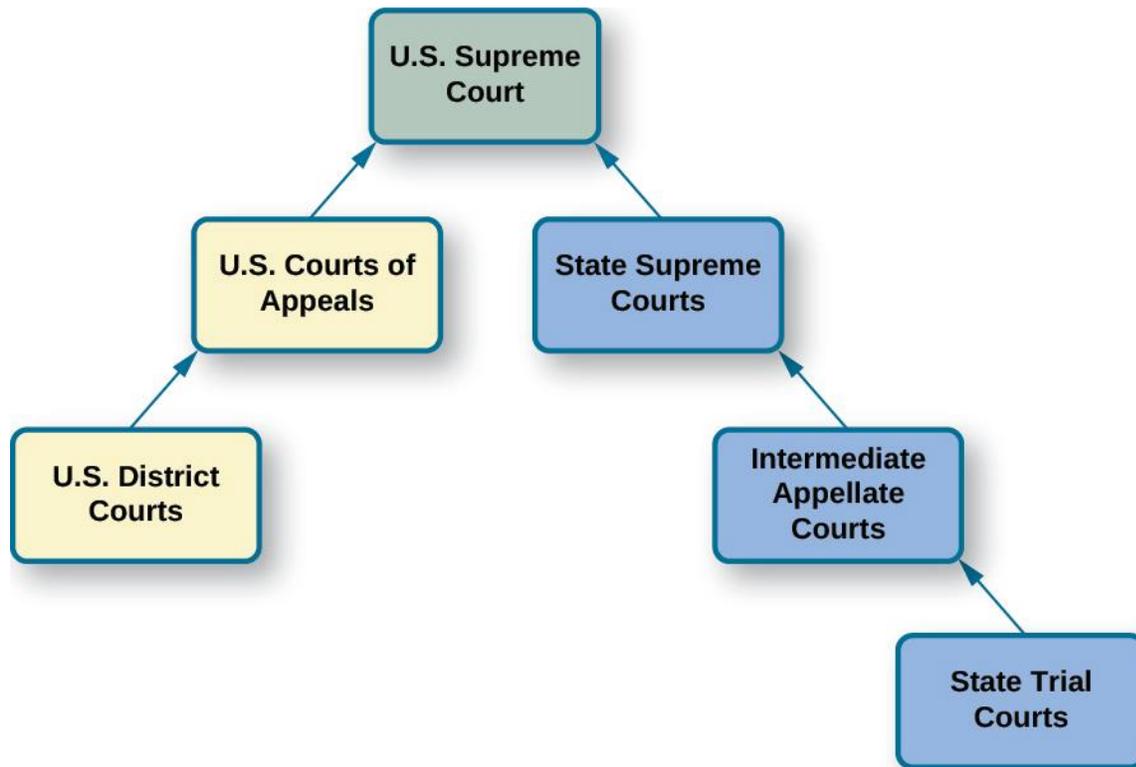


Figure 8.4 The U.S. judiciary features a dual court system comprising a federal court system and the courts in each of the fifty states. On both the federal and state sides, the U.S. Supreme Court is at the top and is the final court of appeal.

To add to the complexity, the state and federal court systems sometimes intersect and overlap each other, and no two states are exactly alike when it comes to the organization of their courts. Since a state's court system is created by the state itself, each one differs in structure,

the number of courts, and even name and jurisdiction. Thus, the organization of state courts closely resembles but does not perfectly mirror the more clear-cut system found at the federal level.²⁷ Still, we can summarize the overall three-tiered structure of the dual court model and consider the relationship that the national and state sides share with the U.S. Supreme Court, as illustrated in [Figure 8.4](#).

Cases heard by the U.S. Supreme Court come from two primary pathways: (1) the circuit courts, or U.S. courts of appeals (after the cases have originated in the federal district courts), and (2) state supreme courts (when there is a substantive federal question in the case). In a later section of the chapter, we discuss the lower courts and the movement of cases through the dual court system to the U.S. Supreme Court. But first, to better understand how the dual court system operates, we consider the types of cases state and local courts handle and the types for which the federal system is better designed.

COURTS AND FEDERALISM

Courts hear two different types of disputes: criminal and civil. Under criminal law, governments establish rules and punishments; laws define conduct that is prohibited because it can harm others and impose punishment for committing such an act. Crimes are usually labeled felonies or misdemeanors based on their nature and seriousness; felonies are the more serious crimes. When someone commits a criminal act, the government (state or national, depending on which law has been broken) charges that person with a crime, and the case brought to court contains the name of the charging government, as in *Miranda v. Arizona* discussed below.²⁸ On the other hand, civil law cases involve two or more private (non-government) parties, at least one of whom alleges harm or injury committed by the other. In both criminal and civil matters, the courts decide the remedy and resolution of the case, and in all cases, the U.S. Supreme Court is the final court of appeal.

Link to Learning

This site provides an interesting challenge: Look at the [different cases presented](#) and decide whether each would be heard in the state or federal courts. You can check your results at the end.

Although the Supreme Court tends to draw the most public attention, it typically hears fewer than one hundred cases every year. In fact, the entire federal side—both trial and appellate—handles proportionately very few cases, with about 90 percent of all cases in the U.S. court system being heard at the state level.²⁹ The several hundred thousand cases handled every year on the federal side pale in comparison to the several million handled by the states.

State courts really are the core of the U.S. judicial system, and they are responsible for a huge area of law. Most crimes and criminal activity, such as robbery, rape, and murder, are violations of state laws, and cases are thus heard by state courts. State courts also handle civil matters; personal injury, malpractice, divorce, family, juvenile, probate, and contract disputes and real estate cases, to name just a few, are usually state-level cases.

The federal courts, on the other hand, will hear any case that involves a foreign government, patent or copyright infringement, Native American rights, maritime law, bankruptcy, or a controversy between two or more states. Cases arising from activities across state lines (interstate commerce) are also subject to federal court jurisdiction, as are cases in which the United States is a party. A dispute between two parties not from the same state or nation and in which damages of at least \$75,000 are claimed is handled at the federal level. Such a case is known as a diversity of citizenship case.³⁰

However, some cases cut across the dual court system and may end up being heard in both state and federal courts. Any case has the potential to make it to the federal courts if it invokes the U.S. Constitution or federal law. It could be a criminal violation of federal law, such as assault with a gun, the illegal sale of drugs, or bank robbery. Or it could be a civil violation of federal law, such as employment discrimination or securities fraud. Also, any perceived violation of a liberty protected by the Bill of Rights, such as freedom of speech or the protection against cruel and unusual punishment, can be argued before the federal courts. A summary of the basic jurisdictions of the state and federal sides is provided in [Table 8.2](#).

Jurisdiction of the Courts: State vs. Federal

State Courts	Federal Courts
Hear most day-to-day cases, covering 90 percent of all cases	Hear cases that involve a “federal question,” involving the Constitution, federal laws or treaties, or a “federal party” in which the U.S. government is a party to the case
Hear both civil and criminal matters	Hear both civil and criminal matters, although many criminal cases involving federal law are tried in state courts
Help the states retain their own sovereignty in judicial matters over their state laws, distinct from the national government	Hear cases that involve “interstate” matters, “diversity of citizenship” involving parties of two different states, or between a U.S. citizen and a citizen of another nation (and with a damage claim of at least \$75,000)

Table 8.2

While we may certainly distinguish between the two sides of a jurisdiction, looking on a case-by-case basis will sometimes complicate the seemingly clear-cut division between the state and federal sides. It is always possible that issues of federal law may start in the state courts before they make their way over to the federal side. And any case that starts out at the state and/or local level on state matters can make it into the federal system on appeal—but only on points that involve a federal law or question, and usually after all avenues of appeal in the state courts have been exhausted.³¹

Consider the case *Miranda v. Arizona*.³² Ernesto Miranda, arrested for kidnapping and rape, which are violations of state law, was easily convicted and sentenced to prison after a key piece of evidence—his own signed confession—was presented at trial in the Arizona court. On appeal

first to the Arizona Supreme Court and then to the U.S. Supreme Court to exclude the confession on the grounds that its admission was a violation of his constitutional rights, Miranda won the case. By a slim 5–4 margin, the justices ruled that the confession had to be excluded from evidence because in obtaining it, the police had violated Miranda’s Fifth Amendment right against self-incrimination and his Sixth Amendment right to an attorney. In the opinion of the Court, because of the coercive nature of police interrogation, no confession can be admissible unless a suspect is made aware of his rights and then in turn waives those rights. For this reason, Miranda’s original conviction was overturned.

Yet the Supreme Court considered only the violation of Miranda’s constitutional rights, but not whether he was guilty of the crimes with which he was charged. So there were still crimes committed for which Miranda had to face charges. He was therefore retried in state court in 1967, the second time without the confession as evidence, found guilty again based on witness testimony and other evidence, and sent to prison.

Miranda’s story is a good example of the tandem operation of the state and federal court systems. His guilt or innocence of the crimes was a matter for the state courts, whereas the constitutional questions raised by his trial were a matter for the federal courts. Although he won his case before the Supreme Court, which established a significant precedent that criminal suspects must be read their so-called Miranda rights before police questioning, the victory did not do much for Miranda himself. After serving prison time, he was stabbed to death in a bar fight in 1976 while out on parole, and due to a lack of evidence, no one was ever convicted in his death.

THE IMPLICATIONS OF A DUAL COURT SYSTEM

From an individual’s perspective, the dual court system has both benefits and drawbacks. On the plus side, each person has more than just one court system ready to protect that individual’s rights. The dual court system provides alternate venues in which to appeal for assistance, as Ernesto Miranda’s case illustrates. The U.S. Supreme Court found for Miranda an extension of his Fifth Amendment protections—a constitutional right to remain silent when faced with police questioning. It was a right he could not get solely from the state courts in Arizona, but one those courts had to honor nonetheless.

The fact that a minority voice like Miranda’s can be heard in court, and that grievances can be resolved in a minority voice’s favor if warranted, says much about the role of the judiciary in a democratic republic. In Miranda’s case, a resolution came from the federal courts, but it can also come from the state side. In fact, the many differences among the state courts themselves may enhance an individual’s potential to be heard.

State courts vary in the degree to which they take on certain types of cases or issues, give access to particular groups, or promote certain interests. If a particular issue or topic is not taken up in one place, it may be handled in another, giving rise to many different opportunities for an interest to be heard somewhere across the nation. In their research, Paul Brace and Melinda Hall found that state courts are important instruments of democracy because they provide different alternatives and varying arenas for political access. They wrote, “Regarding

courts, one size does not fit all, and the republic has survived in part because federalism allows these critical variations.”³³

But the existence of the dual court system and variations across the states and nation also mean that there are different courts in which a person could face charges for a crime or for a violation of another person’s rights. Except for the fact that the U.S. Constitution binds judges and justices in all the courts, it is state law that governs the authority of state courts, so judicial rulings about what is legal or illegal may differ from state to state. These differences are particularly pronounced when the laws across the states and the nation are not the same, as we see with marijuana laws today.

Finding a Middle Ground

Marijuana Laws and the Courts

There are so many differences in marijuana laws between states, and between the states and the national government, that uniform application of treatment in courts across the nation is nearly impossible (Figure 8.5). What is legal in one state may be illegal in another, and state laws do not cross state geographic boundary lines—but people do. What’s more, a person residing in any of the fifty states is still subject to federal law.

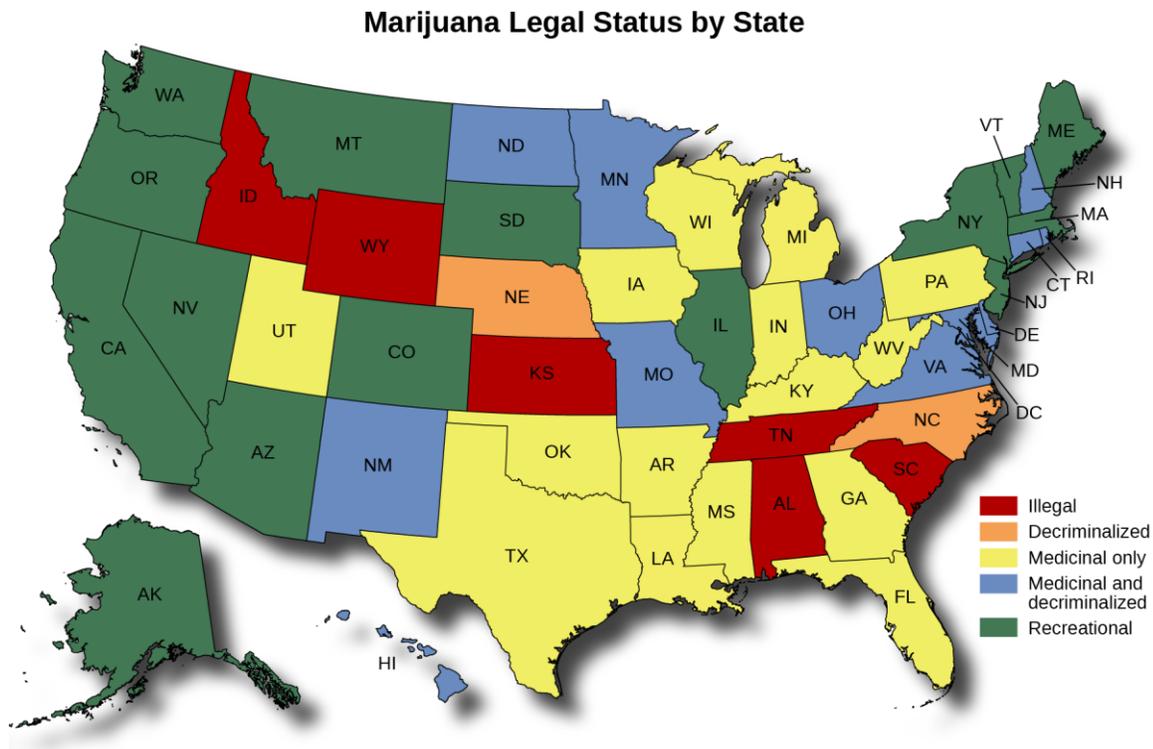


Figure 8.5 Marijuana laws vary remarkably across the fifty states. In many states, marijuana use is illegal, as it is under federal law, but some states have decriminalized it, some allow it for medicinal use, and some have done both. As of the middle of 2021, marijuana was legal for recreational use in eighteen states.

For example, a person over the age of twenty-one may legally buy marijuana for recreational use in sixteen states and for medicinal purpose in more than 80 percent of the country, but could face charges—and time in court—for possession in a neighboring state where marijuana use is not legal. Under federal law, too, marijuana is still regulated as a Schedule 1 (most dangerous) drug, and federal authorities often find themselves pitted against states that have legalized it. Such differences can lead, somewhat ironically, to arrests and federal criminal charges for people who have marijuana in states where it is legal, or to federal raids on growers and dispensaries that would otherwise be operating legally under their state’s law.

Differences among the states have also prompted a number of lawsuits against states with legalized marijuana, as people opposed to those state laws seek relief from (none other than) the courts. They want the courts to resolve the issue, which has left in its wake contradictions and conflicts between states that have legalized marijuana and those that have not, as well as conflicts between states and the national government. These lawsuits include at least one filed by the states of Nebraska and Oklahoma against Colorado. Citing concerns over cross-border trafficking, difficulties with law enforcement, and violations of the Constitution’s supremacy clause, Nebraska and Oklahoma have petitioned the U.S. Supreme Court to intervene and rule on the legality of Colorado’s marijuana law, hoping to get it overturned.³⁴ The Supreme Court has yet to take up the case.

How do you think differences among the states and differences between federal and state law regarding marijuana use can affect the way a person is treated in court? What, if anything, should be done to rectify the disparities in application of the law across the nation?

Where you are physically located can affect not only what is allowable and what is not, but also how cases are judged. For decades, political scientists have confirmed that political culture affects the operation of government institutions, and when we add to that the differing political interests and cultures at work within each state, we end up with court systems that vary greatly in their judicial and decision-making processes.³⁵ Each state court system operates with its own individual set of biases. People with varying interests, ideologies, behaviors, and attitudes run the disparate legal systems, so the results they produce are not always the same. Moreover, the selection method for judges at the state and local level varies. In some states, judges are elected rather than appointed, which can affect their rulings.

Just as the laws vary across the states, so do judicial rulings and interpretations, and the judges who make them. That means there may not be uniform application of the law—even of the same law—nationwide. We are somewhat bound by geography and do not always have the luxury of picking and choosing the venue for our particular case. So, while having such a decentralized and varied set of judicial operations affects the kinds of cases that make it to the courts and gives citizens alternate locations to get their case heard, it may also lead to disparities in the way they are treated once they get there.

8.3 The Federal Court System

Learning Objectives

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

- Describe the differences between the U.S. district courts, circuit courts, and the Supreme Court
- Explain the significance of precedent in the courts' operations
- Describe how judges are selected for their positions

Congress has made numerous changes to the federal judicial system throughout the years, but the three-tiered structure of the system is quite clear-cut today. Federal cases typically begin at the lowest federal level, the district (or trial) court. Losing parties may appeal their case to the higher courts—first to the circuit courts, or U.S. courts of appeals, and then, if chosen by the justices, to the U.S. Supreme Court. Decisions of the higher courts are binding on the lower courts. The precedent set by each ruling, particularly by the Supreme Court's decisions, both builds on principles and guidelines set by earlier cases and frames the ongoing operation of the courts, steering the direction of the entire system. Reliance on precedent has enabled the federal courts to operate with logic and consistency that has helped validate their role as the key interpreters of the Constitution and the law—a legitimacy particularly vital in the United States where citizens do not elect federal judges and justices but are still subject to their rulings.

THE THREE TIERS OF FEDERAL COURTS

There are ninety-four U.S. district courts in the fifty states and U.S. territories, of which eighty-nine are in the states (at least one in each state). The others are in Washington, DC; Puerto Rico; Guam; the U.S. Virgin Islands; and the Northern Mariana Islands. These are the trial courts of the national system, in which federal cases are tried, witness testimony is heard, and evidence is presented. No district court crosses state lines, and a single judge oversees each one. Some cases are heard by a jury, and some are not.

There are thirteen U.S. courts of appeals, or circuit courts, eleven across the nation and two in Washington, DC (the DC circuit and the federal circuit courts), as illustrated in [Figure 8.6](#). Each court is overseen by a rotating panel of three judges who do not hold trials but instead review the rulings of the trial (district) courts within their geographic circuit. As authorized by Congress, there are currently 179 such judges. The circuit courts are often referred to as the *intermediate appellate courts* of the federal system, since their rulings can be appealed to the U.S. Supreme Court. Moreover, different circuits can hold legal and cultural views, which can lead to differing outcomes on similar legal questions. In such scenarios, clarification from the U.S. Supreme Court might be needed.

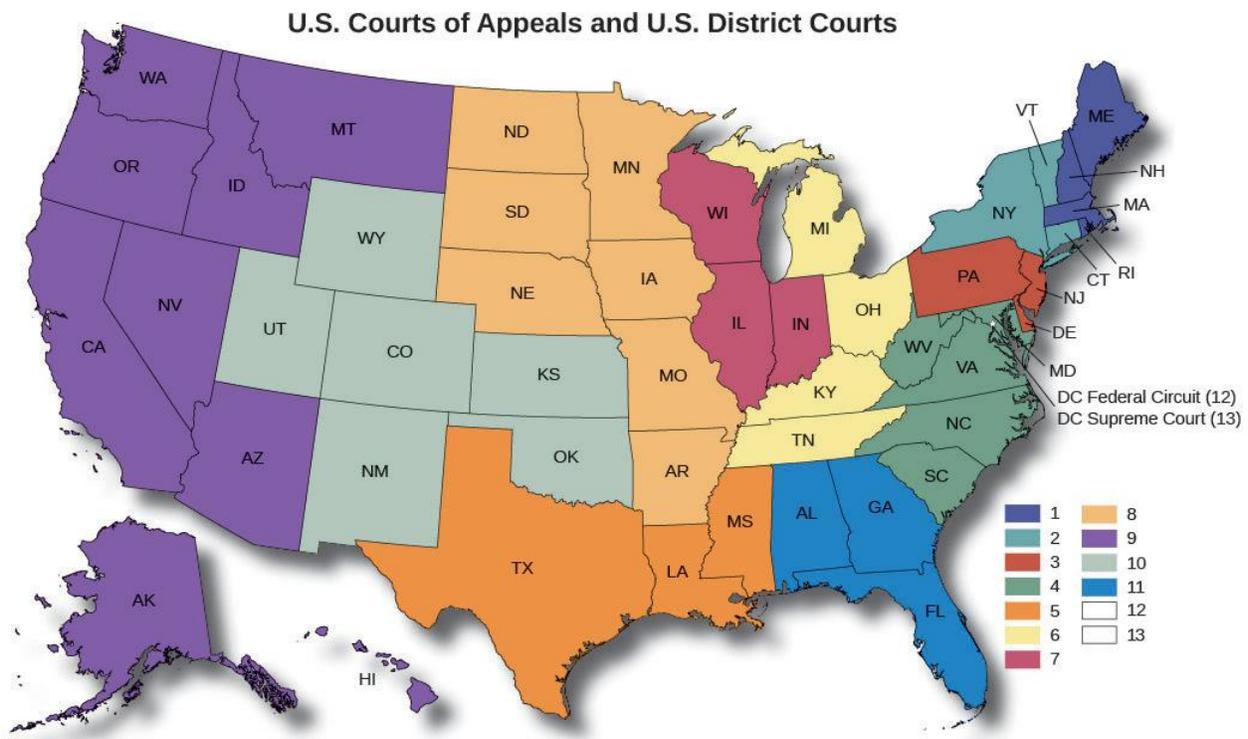


Figure 8.6 There are thirteen judicial circuits: eleven in the geographical areas marked on the map and two in Washington, DC.

Today's federal court system was not an overnight creation; it has been changing and transitioning for more than two hundred years through various acts of Congress. Since district courts are not called for in Article III of the Constitution, Congress established them and narrowly defined their jurisdiction, at first limiting them to handling only cases that arose within the district. Beginning in 1789 when there were just thirteen, the district courts became the basic organizational units of the federal judicial system. Gradually over the next hundred years, Congress expanded their jurisdiction, in particular over federal questions, which enables them to review constitutional issues and matters of federal law. In the Judicial Code of 1911, Congress made the U.S. district courts the sole general-jurisdiction trial courts of the federal judiciary, a role they had previously shared with the circuit courts.³⁶

The circuit courts started out as the trial courts for most federal criminal cases and for some civil suits, including those initiated by the United States and those involving citizens of different states. But early on, they did not have their own judges; the local district judge and two Supreme Court justices formed each circuit court panel. (That is how the name "circuit" arose—judges in the early circuit courts traveled from town to town to hear cases, following prescribed paths or circuits to arrive at destinations where they were needed.³⁷) Circuit courts also exercised appellate jurisdiction (meaning they receive appeals on federal district court cases) over most civil suits that originated in the district courts; however, that role ended in 1891, and their appellate jurisdiction was turned over to the newly created circuit courts, or U.S. courts of

appeals. The original circuit courts—the ones that did not have “of appeals” added to their name—were abolished in 1911, fully replaced by these new circuit courts of appeals.³⁸

While we often focus primarily on the district and circuit courts of the federal system, other federal trial courts exist that have more specialized jurisdictions, such as the Court of International Trade, Court of Federal Claims, and U.S. Tax Court. Specialized federal appeals courts include the Court of Appeals for the Armed Forces and the Court of Appeals for Veterans Claims. Cases from any of these courts may also be appealed to the Supreme Court, although that result is very rare.

On the U.S. Supreme Court, there are nine justices—one chief justice and eight associate justices. Circuit courts each contain three justices, whereas federal district courts have just one judge each. As the national court of last resort for all other courts in the system, the Supreme Court plays a vital role in setting the standards of interpretation that the lower courts follow. The Supreme Court’s decisions are binding across the nation and establish the precedent by which future cases are resolved in all the system’s tiers.

The U.S. court system operates on the principle of *stare decisis* (Latin for *stand by things decided*), which means that today’s decisions are based largely on rulings from the past, and tomorrow’s rulings rely on what is decided today. *Stare decisis* is especially important in the U.S. common law system, in which the consistency of precedent ensures greater certainty and stability in law and constitutional interpretation, and it also contributes to the solidity and legitimacy of the court system itself. As former Supreme Court justice Benjamin Cardozo summarized it years ago, “Adherence to precedent must then be the rule rather than the exception if litigants are to have faith in the even-handed administration of justice in the courts.”³⁹

Link to Learning

With a focus on federal courts and the public, this website reveals the [different ways](#) the federal courts affect the lives of U.S. citizens and how those citizens interact with the courts.

When the legal facts of one case are the same as the legal facts of another, *stare decisis* dictates that they should be decided the same way, and judges are reluctant to disregard precedent without justification. However, that does not mean there is no flexibility or that new precedents or rulings can never be created. They often are. Certainly, court interpretations can change as times and circumstances change—and as the courts themselves change when new judges are selected and take their place on the bench. For example, the membership of the Supreme Court had changed entirely between *Plessey v. Ferguson* (1896), which brought the doctrine of “separate but equal” and *Brown v. Board of Education* (1954), which required integration.⁴⁰

THE SELECTION OF JUDGES

Judges fulfill a vital role in the U.S. judicial system and are carefully selected. At the federal level, the president nominates a candidate to a judgeship or justice position, and the nominee

must be confirmed by a majority vote in the U.S. Senate, a function of the Senate’s “advice and consent” role. All judges and justices in the national courts serve lifetime terms of office.

The president sometimes chooses nominees from a list of candidates maintained by the American Bar Association, a national professional organization of lawyers.⁴¹ The president’s nominee is then discussed (and sometimes hotly debated) in the Senate Judiciary Committee. After a committee vote, the candidate must be confirmed by a majority vote of the full Senate. He or she is then sworn in, taking an oath of office to uphold the Constitution and the laws of the United States.

When a vacancy occurs in a lower federal court, by custom, the president consults with that state’s U.S. senators before making a nomination. Through such senatorial courtesy, senators exert considerable influence on the selection of judges in their state, especially those senators who share a party affiliation with the president. In many cases, a senator can block a proposed nominee just by voicing opposition. Thus, a presidential nominee typically does not get far without the support of the senators from the nominee’s home state.

Most presidential appointments to the federal judiciary go unnoticed by the public, but when a president has the rarer opportunity to make a Supreme Court appointment, it draws more attention. That is particularly true now, when many people get their news primarily from the Internet and social media. It was not surprising to see not only television news coverage but also blogs and tweets about President Obama’s nominees to the high court, Sonia Sotomayor and Elena Kagan, or President Trump’s nominees Neil Gorsuch, Brett Kavanaugh, and Amy Coney Barrett. (Figure 8.7).



Figure 8.7 President Obama made two appointments to the U.S. Supreme Court, Justices Sonia Sotomayor in 2009 and Elena Kagan (a) in 2010. Since their appointments, both justices have made rulings consistent with a more liberal ideology. President Trump made three appointments to the U.S. Supreme Court, Justice Neil Gorsuch (b) in 2017, Justice Brett Kavanaugh in 2018, and, most recently, Amy Coney Barrett (c) in October 2020, solidifying the Court's conservative majority. (credit a: modification of "Elena Kagan, Associate Justice of the Supreme Court of the United States" by Steve Petteway, Collection of the Supreme Court of the

United States/Wikimedia Commons, Public Domain; credit b: modification of "Associate Justice Neil M. Gorsuch" by Franz Jantzen, Supreme Court of the United States/Wikimedia Commons, Public Domain; credit c: modification of "Barrett's official portrait" by United States Supreme Court/Wikimedia Commons, Public Domain)

Presidential nominees for the courts typically reflect the chief executive's own ideological position. With a confirmed nominee serving a lifetime appointment, a president's ideological legacy has the potential to live on long after the end of the term.⁴² President Obama surely considered the ideological leanings of his two Supreme Court appointees, and both Sotomayor and Kagan have consistently ruled in a more liberal ideological direction. The timing of the two nominations also dovetailed nicely with the Democratic Party's gaining control of the Senate in the 111th Congress of 2009–2011, which helped guarantee their confirmations. Similarly, Republican Donald Trump was able to confirm his three nominees (Neil Gorsuch, Brett Kavanaugh, and Amy Coney Barrett) while Republicans controlled the Senate.

But some nominees turn out to be surprises or end up ruling in ways that the president who nominated them did not anticipate. Democratic-appointed judges sometimes side with conservatives, just as Republican-appointed judges sometimes side with liberals. Republican Dwight D. Eisenhower reportedly called his nomination of Earl Warren as chief justice—in an era that saw substantial broadening of civil and criminal rights—"the biggest damn fool mistake" he had ever made. Sandra Day O'Connor, nominated by Republican president Ronald Reagan, often became a champion for women's rights. David Souter, nominated by Republican George H. W. Bush, more often than not sided with the Court's liberal wing. Anthony Kennedy, a Reagan appointee who retired in the summer of 2018, was notorious as the Court's swing vote, sometimes siding with the more conservative justices but sometimes not. Current chief justice John Roberts, though most typically an ardent member of the Court's more conservative wing, has twice voted to uphold provisions of the Affordable Care Act.

One of the reasons the framers of the U.S. Constitution included the provision that federal judges would be appointed for life was to provide the judicial branch with enough independence such that it could not easily be influenced by the political winds of the time. The nomination of Brett Kavanaugh tested that notion, as the process became intensely partisan within the Senate and with the nominee himself. (Kavanaugh's previous nomination to the U.S. Court of Appeals for the D.C. Circuit by President George W. Bush in 2003 also stalled for three years over charges of partisanship.) Sharp divisions emerged early in the confirmation process and an upset Kavanaugh called out several Democratic senators in his impassioned testimony in front of the Judiciary Committee. The high partisan drama of the Kavanaugh confirmation compelled Chief Justice Roberts to express concerns about the process and decry the threat of partisanship and conflict of interest on the Court.

Once a justice has started a lifetime tenure on the Court and years begin to pass, many people simply forget which president nominated him or her. For better or worse, sometimes it is only a controversial nominee who leaves a president's legacy behind. For example, the Reagan presidency is often remembered for two controversial nominees to the Supreme Court—Robert Bork and Douglas Ginsburg, the former accused of taking an overly conservative and "extremist

view of the Constitution”⁴³ and the latter of having used marijuana while a student and then a professor at Harvard University (Figure 8.8). President George W. Bush’s nomination of Harriet Miers was withdrawn in the face of criticism from both sides of the political spectrum, questioning her ideological leanings and especially her qualifications, suggesting she was not ready for the job.⁴⁴ After Miers’ withdrawal, the Senate went on to confirm Bush’s subsequent nomination of Samuel Alito, who remains on the Court today.

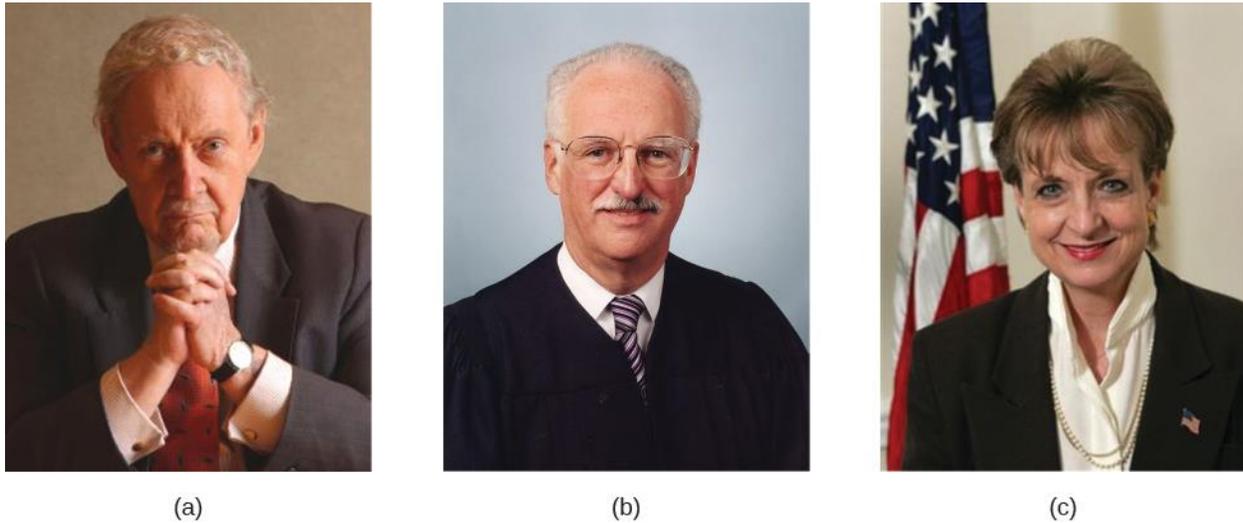


Figure 8.8 Presidential nominations to the Supreme Court sometimes go awry, as illustrated by the failed nominations of Robert Bork (a), Douglas Ginsburg (b), and Harriet Miers (c).

Presidential legacy and controversial nominations notwithstanding, there is one certainty about the overall look of the federal court system: What was once a predominately White, male, Protestant institution is today much more diverse. As a look at Table 8.3 reveals, the membership of the Supreme Court has changed with the passing years.

Supreme Court Justice Firsts

First Catholic	Roger B. Taney (nominated in 1836)
First Jew	Louis J. Brandeis (1916)
First (and only) former U.S. President	William Howard Taft (1921)
First African American	Thurgood Marshall (1967)
First Woman	Sandra Day O’Connor (1981)
First Hispanic American	Sonia Sotomayor (2009)

Table 8.3

The lower courts are also more diverse today. In the past few decades, the U.S. judiciary has expanded to include more women and minorities at both the federal and state levels.⁴⁵ However, the number of women and people of color on the courts still lags behind the overall number of White men. As of 2021, the federal judiciary consists of 67 percent men and 33

percent women. In terms of race and ethnicity, 74 percent of federal judges are White, 12 percent African American, 8 percent Latinx, and 4 percent Asian American.⁴⁶

8.4 The Supreme Court

Learning Objectives

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

- Analyze the structure and important features of the Supreme Court
- Explain how the Supreme Court selects cases to hear
- Discuss the Supreme Court's processes and procedures

The Supreme Court of the United States, sometimes abbreviated SCOTUS, is a one-of-a-kind institution. While a look at the Supreme Court typically focuses on the nine justices themselves, they represent only the top layer of an entire branch of government that includes many administrators, lawyers, and assistants who contribute to and help run the overall judicial system. The Court has its own set of rules for choosing cases, and it follows a unique set of procedures for hearing them. Its decisions not only affect the outcome of the individual case before the justices, but they also create lasting impacts on legal and constitutional interpretation for the future.

THE STRUCTURE OF THE SUPREME COURT

The original court in 1789 had six justices, but Congress set the number at nine in 1869, and it has remained there ever since. There is one chief justice, who is the lead or highest-ranking judge on the Court, and eight associate justices. All nine serve lifetime terms, after successful nomination by the president and confirmation by the Senate. There was discussion of expanding the court during Franklin D. Roosevelt's presidency and also during the 2020 presidential election. Nothing has come of court expansion, however.

The current court is fairly diverse in terms of gender, religion (Christians and Jews), ethnicity, and ideology, as well as length of tenure. Some justices have served for three decades, whereas others were only recently appointed by President Trump. [Figure 8.9](#) lists the names of the nine justices serving on the Court as of June 2021 along with their year of appointment and the president who nominated them.

Brett M. Kavanaugh" by The Collection of the Supreme Court of the United States/Wikimedia Commons, Public Domain; credit c: modification of "John G. Roberts, Jr., Chief Justice of the United States of America (cropped version of official photo)" by Steve Petteway/Wikimedia Commons, Public Domain)

Link to Learning

While not formally connected with the public the way elected leaders are, the [Supreme Court](#) nonetheless offers visitors a great deal of information at its official website.

For unofficial summaries of recent Supreme Court cases or news about the Court, visit the [Oyez website](#) or [SCOTUS](#) blog.

In fact, none of the justices works completely in an ideological bubble. While their numerous opinions have revealed certain ideological tendencies, they still consider each case as it comes to them, and they don't always rule in a consistently predictable or expected way. Furthermore, they don't work exclusively on their own. Each justice has three or four law clerks, recent law school graduates who temporarily work for the justice, do research, help prepare the justice with background information, and assist with the writing of opinions. The law clerks' work and recommendations influence whether the justices will choose to hear a case, as well as how they will rule. As the profile below reveals, the role of the clerks is as significant as it is varied.

Insider Perspective

Profile of a United States Supreme Court Clerk

A Supreme Court clerkship is one of the most sought-after legal positions, giving “thirty-six young lawyers each year a chance to leave their fingerprints all over constitutional law.”⁴⁷ A number of current and former justices were themselves clerks, including Chief Justice John Roberts, Justices Stephen Breyer and Elena Kagan, and former chief justice William Rehnquist.

Supreme Court clerks are often reluctant to share insider information about their experiences, but it is always fascinating and informative to hear about their jobs. Former clerk Philippa Scarlett, who worked for Justice Stephen Breyer, describes four main responsibilities:⁴⁸

Review the cases: Clerks participate in a “*cert. pool*” (short for writ of *certiorari*, a request that the lower court send up its record of the case for review) and make recommendations about which cases the Court should choose to hear.

Prepare the justices for oral argument: Clerks analyze the filed briefs (short arguments explaining each party's side of the case) and the law at issue in each case waiting to be heard.

Research and draft judicial opinions: Clerks do detailed research to assist justices in writing an opinion, whether it is the majority opinion or a dissenting or concurring opinion.

Help with emergencies: Clerks also assist the justices in deciding on emergency applications to the Court, many of which are applications by incarcerated people to stay their death sentences and are sometimes submitted within hours of a scheduled execution.

Explain the role of law clerks in the Supreme Court system. What is your opinion about the role they play and the justices' reliance on them?

HOW THE SUPREME COURT SELECTS CASES

The Supreme Court begins its annual session on the first Monday in October and ends late the following June. Every year, there are literally thousands of people who would like to have their case heard before the Supreme Court, but the justices will select only a handful to be placed on the docket, which is the list of cases scheduled on the Court's calendar. The Court typically accepts fewer than 2 percent of the as many as ten thousand cases it is asked to review every year.⁴⁹

Case names, written in italics, list the name of a petitioner versus a respondent, as in *Roe v. Wade*, for example.⁵⁰ For a case on appeal, you can tell which party lost at the lower level of court by looking at the case name: The party unhappy with the decision of the lower court is the one bringing the appeal and is thus the petitioner, or the first-named party in the case. For example, in *Brown v. Board of Education* (1954), Oliver Brown was one of the thirteen parents who brought suit against the Topeka public schools for discrimination based on racial segregation.

Most often, the petitioner is asking the Supreme Court to grant a writ of *certiorari*, a request that the lower court send up its record of the case for review. Once a writ of *certiorari* (*cert.* for short) has been granted, the case is scheduled on the Court's docket. The Supreme Court exercises discretion in the cases it chooses to hear, but four of the nine justices must vote to accept a case. This is called the Rule of Four.

For decisions about *cert.*, the Court's Rule 10 (Considerations Governing Review on Writ of *Certiorari*) takes precedence.⁵¹ The Court is more likely to grant *certiorari* when there is a conflict on an issue between or among the lower courts. Examples of conflicts include (1) conflicting decisions among different courts of appeals on the same matter, (2) decisions by an appeals court or a state court conflicting with precedent, and (3) state court decisions that conflict with federal decisions. Occasionally, the Court will fast-track a case that has special urgency, such as *Bush v. Gore* in the wake of the 2000 election.⁵²

Past research indicated that the amount of interest-group activity surrounding a case before it is granted *cert.* has a significant impact on whether the Supreme Court puts the case on its agenda. The more activity, the more likely the case will be placed on the docket.⁵³ But more recent research broadens that perspective, suggesting that too much interest-group activity when the Court is considering a case for its docket may actually have diminishing impact and that external actors may have less influence on the work of the Court than they have had in the past.⁵⁴ Still, the Court takes into consideration external influences, not just from interest groups but also from the public, from media attention, and from a very key governmental actor—the solicitor general.

The solicitor general is the lawyer who represents the federal government before the Supreme Court: He or she decides which cases (in which the United States is a party) should be appealed

from the lower courts and personally approves each one presented ([Figure 8.11](#)). Most of the cases the solicitor general brings to the Court will be given a place on the docket. About two-thirds of all Supreme Court cases involve the federal government.⁵⁵

The solicitor general determines the position the government will take on a case. The attorneys of the office prepare and file the petitions and briefs, and the solicitor general (or an assistant) presents the oral arguments before the Court.



Figure 8.11 Thurgood Marshall (a), who later served on the Supreme Court, was appointed solicitor general by Lyndon Johnson and was the first African American to hold the post. Noel Francisco (b) was the forty-seventh solicitor general of the United States, starting his term of office in September 2017.

In other cases in which the United States is not the petitioner or the respondent, the solicitor general may choose to intervene or comment as a third party. Before a case is granted *cert.*, the justices will sometimes ask the solicitor general to comment on or file a brief in the case, indicating their potential interest in getting it on the docket. The solicitor general may also recommend that the justices decline to hear a case. Though research has shown that the solicitor general's special influence on the Court is not unlimited, it remains quite significant. In particular, the Court does not always agree with the solicitor general, and "while justices are not lemmings who will unwittingly fall off legal cliffs for tortured solicitor general recommendations, they nevertheless often go along with them even when we least expect them to."⁵⁶

Some have credited Donald B. Verrilli, the solicitor general under President Obama, with holding special sway over the five-justice majority ruling on same-sex marriage in June 2015. Indeed, his position that denying same-sex couples the right to marry would mean "thousands and thousands of people are going to live out their lives and go to their deaths without their states ever recognizing the equal dignity of their relationships" became a foundational point of the Court's opinion, written by then-Justice Anthony Kennedy.⁵⁷ With such power over the Court, the solicitor general is sometimes referred to as "the tenth justice."

SUPREME COURT PROCEDURES

Once a case has been placed on the docket, briefs, or short arguments explaining each party's view of the case, must be submitted—first by the petitioner putting forth the case, then by the respondent. After initial briefs have been filed, both parties may file subsequent briefs in response to the first. Likewise, people and groups that are not party to the case but are interested in its outcome may file an *amicus curiae* (“friend of the court”) brief giving their opinion, analysis, and recommendations about how the Court should rule. Interest groups in particular can become heavily involved in trying to influence the judiciary by filing *amicus* briefs—both before and after a case has been granted *cert*. And, as noted earlier, if the United States is not party to a case, the solicitor general may file an *amicus* brief on the government's behalf.

With briefs filed, the Court hears oral arguments in cases from October through April. The proceedings are quite ceremonial. When the Court is in session, the robed justices make a formal entrance into the courtroom to a standing audience and the sound of a banging gavel. The Court's marshal presents them with a traditional chant: “The Honorable, the Chief Justice and the Associate Justices of the Supreme Court of the United States. Oyez! Oyez! Oyez! [Hear ye!] All persons having business before the Honorable, the Supreme Court of the United States, are admonished to draw near and give their attention, for the Court is now sitting. God save the United States and this Honorable Court!”⁵⁸ It has not gone unnoticed that the Court, which has defended the First Amendment's religious protection and the traditional separation of church and state, opens its every public session with a mention of God.

During oral arguments, each side's lawyers have thirty minutes to make their legal case, though the justices often interrupt the presentations with questions. The justices consider oral arguments not as a forum for a lawyer to restate the merits of the case as written in the briefs, but as an opportunity to get answers to any questions they may have.⁵⁹ When the United States is party to a case, the solicitor general (or one of the solicitor general's assistants) will argue the government's position; even in other cases, the solicitor general may still be given time to express the government's position on the dispute.

When oral arguments have been concluded, the justices have to decide the case, and they do so in conference, which is held in private twice a week when the Court is in session and once a week when it is not. The conference is also a time to discuss petitions for *certiorari*, but for those cases already heard, each justice may state their views on the case, ask questions, or raise concerns. The chief justice speaks first about a case, then each justice speaks in turn, in descending order of seniority, ending with the most recently appointed justice.⁶⁰ The judges take an initial vote in private before the official announcement of their decisions is made public.

Oral arguments are open to the public, but cameras are not allowed in the courtroom, so the only picture we get is one drawn by an artist's hand, an illustration or rendering. Cameras seem to be everywhere today, especially to provide security in places such as schools, public buildings, and retail stores, so the lack of live coverage of Supreme Court proceedings may seem unusual or old-fashioned. Over the years, groups have called for the Court to let go of this tradition and open its operations to more “sunshine” and greater transparency. Nevertheless,

the justices have resisted the pressure and remain neither filmed nor photographed during oral arguments.⁶¹

8.5 Judicial Decision-Making and Implementation by the Supreme Court

Learning Objectives

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

- Describe how the Supreme Court decides cases and issues opinions
- Identify the various influences on the Supreme Court
- Explain how the judiciary is checked by the other branches of government

The courts are the least covered and least publicly known of the three branches of government. The inner workings of the Supreme Court and its day-to-day operations certainly do not get as much public attention as its rulings, and only a very small number of its announced decisions are enthusiastically discussed and debated. The Court's 2015 decision on same-sex marriage was the exception, not the rule, since most court opinions are filed away quietly in the *United States Reports*, sought out mostly by judges, lawyers, researchers, and others with a particular interest in reading or studying them.

Thus, we sometimes envision the justices formally robed and cloistered away in their chambers, unaffected by the world around them, but the reality is that they are not that isolated, and a number of outside factors influence their decisions. Though they lack their own mechanism for enforcement of their rulings and their power remains checked and balanced by the other branches, the effect of the justices' opinions on the workings of government, politics, and society in the United States is much more significant than the attention they attract might indicate.

JUDICIAL OPINIONS

Every Court opinion sets precedent for the future. The Supreme Court's decisions are not always unanimous, however; the published majority opinion, or explanation of the justices' decision, is the one with which a majority of the nine justices agree. It can represent a vote as narrow as five in favor to four against. A tied vote is rare but can occur at a time of vacancy, absence, or abstention from a case, perhaps where there is a conflict of interest. In the event of a tied vote, the decision of the lower court stands.

Most typically, though, the Court will put forward a majority opinion. If in the majority, the chief justice decides who will write the opinion. If not, then the most senior justice ruling with the majority chooses the writer. Likewise, the most senior justice in the dissenting group can assign a member of that group to write the dissenting opinion; however, any justice who disagrees with the majority may write a separate dissenting opinion. If a justice agrees with the outcome of the case but not with the majority's reasoning in it, that justice may write a concurring opinion.

Court decisions are released at different times throughout the Court's term, but all opinions are announced publicly before the Court adjourns for the summer. Some of the most controversial and hotly debated rulings are released near or on the last day of the term and thus are avidly anticipated ([Figure 8.12](#)).



Figure 8.12 On June 26, 2015, supporters of marriage equality in front of the U.S. Supreme Court building eagerly await the announcement of a decision in the case of *Obergefell v. Hodges* (2015). (credit: Matt Popovich)

[Link to Learning](#)

One of the [most prominent writers](#) on judicial decision-making in the U.S. system is Dr. Forrest Maltzman of George Washington University. Maltzman's articles, chapters, and manuscripts, along with articles by other prominent authors in the field, are downloadable at this site.

INFLUENCES ON THE COURT

Many of the same players who influence whether the Court will grant *cert.* in a case, discussed earlier in this chapter, also play a role in its decision-making, including law clerks, the solicitor general, interest groups, and the mass media. But additional legal, personal, ideological, and political influences weigh on the Supreme Court and its decision-making process. On the legal side, courts, including the Supreme Court, cannot make a ruling unless they have a case before them, and even with a case, courts must rule on its facts. Although the courts' role is interpretive, judges and justices are still constrained by the facts of the case, the Constitution, the relevant laws, and the courts' own precedent.

Justices' decisions are influenced by how they define their role as a jurist, with some justices believing strongly in judicial activism, or the need to defend individual rights and liberties, and they aim to stop actions and laws by other branches of government that they see as infringing on these rights. A judge or justice who views the role with an activist lens is more likely to use judicial power to broaden personal liberty, justice, and equality. Still others believe in judicial restraint, which leads them to defer decisions (and thus policymaking) to the elected branches of government and stay focused on a narrower interpretation of the Bill of Rights. These justices are less likely to strike down actions or laws as unconstitutional and are less likely to

focus on the expansion of individual liberties. While it is typically the case that liberal actions are described as unnecessarily activist, conservative decisions can be activist as well.

Critics of the judiciary often deride activist courts for involving themselves too heavily in matters they believe are better left to the elected legislative and executive branches. However, as Justice Anthony Kennedy has said, “An activist court is a court that makes a decision you don’t like.”⁶²

Justices’ personal beliefs and political attitudes also matter in their decision-making. Although we may prefer to believe a justice can leave political ideology or party identification outside the doors of the courtroom, the reality is that a more liberal-thinking judge may tend to make more liberal decisions and a more conservative-leaning judge may tend toward more conservative ones. Although this is not true 100 percent of the time, and an individual’s decisions are sometimes a cause for surprise, the influence of ideology is real, and at a minimum, it often guides presidents to aim for nominees who mirror their own political or ideological image. It is likely not possible to find a potential justice who is completely apolitical.

And the courts themselves are affected by another “court”—the court of public opinion. Though somewhat isolated from politics and the volatility of the electorate, justices may still be swayed by special-interest pressure, the leverage of elected or other public officials, the mass media, and the general public. As times change and the opinions of the population change, the court’s interpretation is likely to keep up with those changes, lest the courts face the danger of losing their own relevance.

Take, for example, rulings on sodomy laws: In 1986, the Supreme Court upheld the constitutionality of the State of Georgia’s ban on sodomy,⁶³ but it reversed its decision seventeen years later, invalidating sodomy laws in Texas and thirteen other states.⁶⁴ No doubt the Court considered what had been happening nationwide: In the 1960s, sodomy was banned in all the states. By 1986, that number had been reduced by about half. By 2002, thirty-six states had repealed their sodomy laws, and most states were only selectively enforcing them. Changes in state laws, along with an emerging LGBTQ movement, no doubt swayed the Court and led it to the reversal of its earlier ruling with the 2003 decision, *Lawrence v. Texas* (Figure 8.13).⁶⁵ This decision was an especially important one because it meant all prior and existing laws that formally made same-sex relationships illegal were null and void.



Figure 8.13 The Supreme Court’s 2003 decision in *Lawrence v. Texas* that overturned an earlier ruling on sodomy made national headlines and shows that Court rulings can change with the times.

Heralded by advocates of gay rights as important progress toward greater equality, the ruling in *Lawrence v. Texas* illustrates that the Court is willing to reflect upon what is going on in the world. Even with their heavy reliance on precedent and reluctance to throw out past decisions, justices are not completely inflexible and do tend to change and evolve with the times.

Get Connected!

The Importance of Jury Duty

Since judges and justices are not elected, we sometimes consider the courts removed from the public; however, this is not always the case, and there are times when average citizens may get involved with the courts firsthand as part of their decision-making process at either the state or federal levels. At some point, if you haven’t already been called, you may receive a summons for jury duty from your local court system. You may be asked to serve on federal jury duty, such as U.S. district court duty or federal grand jury duty, but service at the local level, in the state court system, is much more common.

While your first reaction may be to start planning a way to get out of it, participating in jury service is vital to the operation of the judicial system, because it provides individuals in court the chance to be heard and to be tried fairly by a group of their peers. And jury duty has benefits for those who serve as well. You will no doubt come away better informed about how the judicial system works and ready to share your experiences with others. Who knows? You might even get an unexpected surprise, as some citizens in Dallas, Texas did recently when former President George W. Bush showed up to serve jury duty with them.

Have you ever been called to jury duty? Describe your experience. What did you learn about the judicial process? What advice would you give to someone called to jury duty for the first time? If you’ve never been called to jury duty, what questions do you have for those who have?

THE COURTS AND THE OTHER BRANCHES OF GOVERNMENT

Both the executive and legislative branches check and balance the judiciary in many different ways. The president can leave a lasting imprint on the bench through nominations, even long after leaving office. The president may also influence the Court through the solicitor general's involvement or through the submission of *amicus* briefs in cases in which the United States is not a party.

President Franklin D. Roosevelt even attempted to stack the odds in his favor in 1937, with a “court-packing scheme” in which he tried to get a bill passed through Congress that would have reorganized the judiciary and enabled him to appoint up to six additional judges to the high court (Figure 8.14). The bill never passed, but other presidents have also been accused of trying similar moves at different courts in the federal system.



Figure 8.14 A 1937 cartoon mocks the court-packing plan of President Franklin D. Roosevelt (depicted on the far right). Roosevelt was not successful in increasing the number of justices on the Supreme Court, and it remains at nine.

Likewise, Congress has checks on the judiciary. It retains the power to modify the federal court structure and its appellate jurisdiction, and the Senate may accept or reject presidential nominees to the federal courts. Faced with a court ruling that overturns one of its laws, Congress may rewrite the law or even begin a constitutional amendment process.

But the most significant check on the Supreme Court is executive and legislative leverage over the implementation and enforcement of its rulings. This process is called judicial implementation. While it is true that courts play a major role in policymaking, they have no mechanism to make their rulings a reality. Remember it was Alexander Hamilton in *Federalist* No. 78 who remarked that the courts had “neither force nor will, but merely judgment.” And even years later, when the 1832 Supreme Court ruled the State of Georgia’s seizing of Native American lands unconstitutional,⁶⁶ President Andrew Jackson is reported to have said, “John Marshall has made his decision, now let him enforce it,” and the Court’s ruling was basically ignored.⁶⁷ Abraham Lincoln, too, famously ignored Chief Justice Roger B. Taney’s order finding

unconstitutional Lincoln’s suspension of habeas corpus rights in 1861, early in the Civil War. Thus, court rulings matter only to the extent they are heeded and followed.

The Court relies on the executive to implement or enforce its decisions and on the legislative branch to fund them. As the Jackson and Lincoln stories indicate, presidents may simply ignore decisions of the Court, and Congress may withhold funding needed for implementation and enforcement. Fortunately for the courts, these situations rarely happen, and the other branches tend to provide support rather than opposition. In general, presidents have tended to see it as their duty to both obey and enforce Court rulings, and Congress seldom takes away the funding needed for the president to do so.

For example, in 1957, President Dwight D. Eisenhower called out the military by executive order to enforce the Supreme Court’s order to racially integrate the public schools in Little Rock, Arkansas. Eisenhower told the nation: “Whenever normal agencies prove inadequate to the task and it becomes necessary for the executive branch of the federal government to use its powers and authority to uphold federal courts, the president’s responsibility is inescapable.”⁶⁸ Executive Order 10730 nationalized the Arkansas National Guard to enforce desegregation because the governor refused to use the state National Guard troops to protect the Black students trying to enter the school ([Figure 8.15](#)).



Figure 8.15 President Eisenhower sent federal troops to escort nine Black students (the “Little Rock Nine”) into an Arkansas high school in 1957 to enforce the Supreme Court’s order outlawing racial segregation in public schools.

So what becomes of court decisions is largely due to their credibility, their viability, and the assistance given by the other branches of government. It is also somewhat a matter of tradition and the way the United States has gone about its judicial business for more than two centuries.

Although not everyone agrees with the decisions made by the Court, rulings are generally accepted and followed, and the Court is respected as the key interpreter of the laws and the Constitution. Over time, its rulings have become yet another way policy is legitimately made and justice more adequately served in the United States.



Figure 9.1 Mayor Pete Buttigieg participates in a Vote Vets presidential candidate forum in Manchester, New Hampshire, on September 7, 2019. Buttigieg served as an intelligence officer in the U.S. Navy Reserve, including a seven-month stint in Afghanistan. He currently serves as secretary of transportation in the Biden administration. (credit: modification of "Mayor Pete Buttigieg participates in Vote Vets Forum and Military Families Presidential Forum in Manchester NH, Sept. 7 2019" by Chuck Kennedy, "Pete for America"/Flickr, Public Domain)

Introduction

Emerging as a competitive candidate in a deep and diverse field of Democratic presidential hopefuls in the 2020 election, Pete Buttigieg was the young and relatively unknown mayor of South Bend, Indiana, whose government experience was limited compared to many of his rivals. However, what Buttigieg lacked in formal experience he made up for with a talent for speaking about complex policies in a clear way and an ability to take the heat from reporters and remain calm, even positive, in the process. He was unusual in the Democratic field for repeatedly agreeing to being interviewed by Fox News. Buttigieg is a Harvard graduate and a Rhodes Scholar who served in the U.S. Navy Reserve from 2009 to 2017, including a seven-month deployment to Afghanistan. He was also the first LGBTQ candidate from either party to make a serious run into the presidential primary season.

Buttigieg declared for the presidency on April 14, 2019. He worked hard to make the requisite visits to the early voting states of Iowa and New Hampshire, including the Vote Vets candidate forum in Manchester in September 2019. In emphasizing specific aspects of his work in the military, Buttigieg sought to make the crowd see him as a fellow veteran, as one of them.¹ Like candidates for office at all levels of U.S. government, Buttigieg understood that campaigns must reach out to the voters and compel them to vote or the candidate will fail miserably. But what brings voters to the polls, and how do they make their voting decisions? Those are just two of the questions about voting and elections this chapter will explore.

9.1 Voter Registration

Learning Objectives

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

- Identify ways the U.S. government has promoted voter rights and registration
- Summarize similarities and differences in states' voter registration methods
- Analyze ways states increase voter registration and decrease fraud

Before most voters are allowed to cast a ballot, they must register to vote in their state. This process may be as simple as checking a box on a driver's license application or as difficult as filling out a long form with complicated questions. Registration allows governments to determine which citizens are allowed to vote and, in some cases, from which list of candidates they may select a party nominee. Ironically, while government wants to increase voter turnout, the registration process may prevent various groups of citizens and non-citizens from participating in the electoral process.

VOTER REGISTRATION ACROSS THE UNITED STATES

Elections are state-by-state contests. They include general elections for president and statewide offices (e.g., governor and U.S. senator), and they are often organized and paid for by the states. Because political cultures vary from state to state, the process of voter registration similarly varies. For example, suppose an 85-year-old retiree with an expired driver's license wants to register to vote. He or she might be able to register quickly in California or Florida, but a current government ID might be required prior to registration in Texas or Indiana.

The varied registration and voting laws across the United States have long caused controversy. In the aftermath of the Civil War, southern states enacted literacy tests, grandfather clauses, and other requirements intended to disenfranchise Black voters in Alabama, Georgia, and Mississippi. Literacy tests were long and detailed exams on local and national politics, history, and more. They were often administered arbitrarily with more African Americans required to take them than White people.² Poll taxes required voters to pay a fee to vote. Grandfather clauses exempted individuals from taking literacy tests or paying poll taxes if they or their fathers or grandfathers had been permitted to vote prior to a certain point in time. While the Supreme Court determined that grandfather clauses were unconstitutional in 1915, states continued to use poll taxes and literacy tests to deter potential voters from registering.³ States also ignored instances of violence and intimidation against African Americans wanting to register or vote.⁴

The ratification of the Twenty-Fourth Amendment in 1964 ended poll taxes, but the passage of the Voting Rights Act (VRA) in 1965 had a more profound effect ([Figure 9.2](#)). The act protected the rights of minority voters by prohibiting state laws that denied voting rights based on race. The VRA gave the attorney general of the United States authority to order federal examiners to areas with a history of discrimination. These examiners had the power to oversee and monitor voter registration and elections. States found to violate provisions of the VRA were required to

get any changes in their election laws approved by the U.S. attorney general or by going through the court system. However, in *Shelby County v. Holder* (2013), the Supreme Court, in a 5–4 decision, threw out the standards and process of the VRA, effectively gutting the landmark legislation.⁵ This decision effectively pushed decision-making and discretion for election policy in VRA states to the state and local level. Several such states subsequently made changes to their voter ID laws and North Carolina changed its plans for how many polling places were available in certain areas. This is the legal avenue through which legislators in scores of U.S. states in 2021 have introduced legislation to make voter registration requirements more stringent and to limit options in terms of voting methods. The extent to which such changes will violate equal protection is unknown in advance, but such changes often do not have a neutral effect.

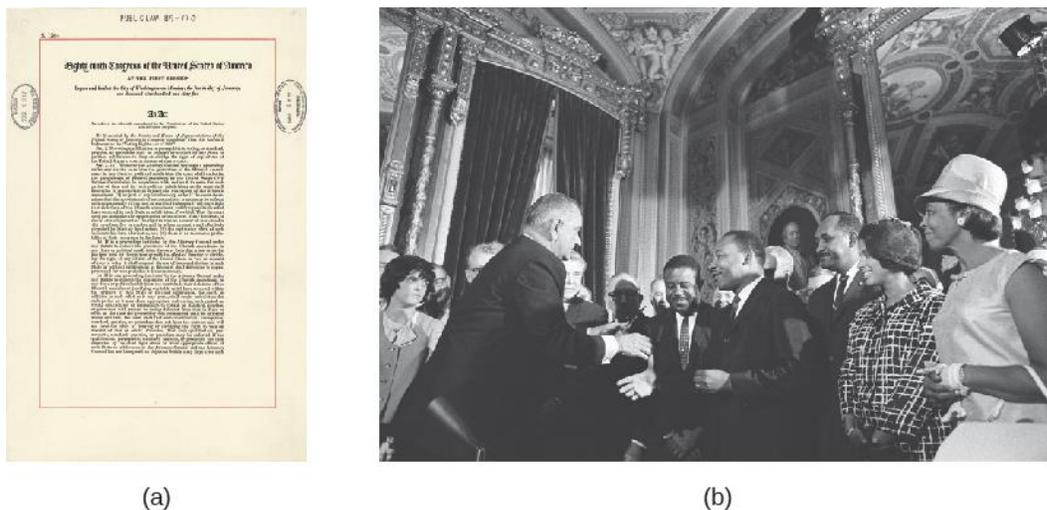


Figure 9.2 The Voting Rights Act (a) was signed into law by President Lyndon B. Johnson (b, left) on August 6, 1965, in the presence of major figures of the civil rights movement, including Rosa Parks and Martin Luther King Jr. (b, center).

The effects of the VRA were visible almost immediately. In Mississippi, only 6.7 percent of Black people were registered to vote in 1965; however, by the fall of 1967, nearly 60 percent were registered. Alabama experienced similar effects, with African American registration increasing from 19.3 percent to 51.6 percent. Voter turnout across these two states similarly increased. Mississippi went from 33.9 percent turnout to 53.2 percent, while Alabama increased from 35.9 percent to 52.7 percent between the 1964 and 1968 presidential elections.⁶

Following the implementation of the VRA, many states have sought other methods of increasing voter registration. Several states make registering to vote relatively easy for citizens who have government documentation. Oregon has few requirements for registering and registers many of its voters automatically. North Dakota has no registration at all. In 2002, Arizona was the first state to offer online voter registration, which allowed citizens with a driver's license to register to vote without any paper application or signature. The system matches the information on the application to information stored at the Department of Motor Vehicles, to ensure each citizen is registering to vote in the right precinct. Citizens without a

driver's license still need to file a paper application. More than eighteen states have moved to online registration or passed laws to begin doing so. The National Conference of State Legislatures estimates, however, that adopting an online voter registration system can initially cost a state between \$250,000 and \$750,000.⁷

Other states have decided against online registration due to concerns about voter fraud and security. Legislators also argue that online registration makes it difficult to ensure that only citizens are registering and that they are registering in the correct precincts. As technology continues to update other areas of state recordkeeping, online registration may become easier and safer. In some areas, citizens have pressured the states and pushed the process along. A bill to move registration online in Florida stalled for over a year in the legislature, based on security concerns. With strong citizen support, however, it was passed and signed in 2015, despite the governor's lingering concerns. In other states, such as Texas, both the government and citizens are concerned about identity fraud, so traditional paper registration is still preferred.

HOW DOES SOMEONE REGISTER TO VOTE?

The National Commission on Voting Rights completed a study in September 2015 that found state registration laws can either raise or reduce voter turnout rates, especially among citizens who are young or whose income falls below the poverty line. States with simple voter registration had more registered citizens.⁸

In all states except North Dakota, a citizen wishing to vote must complete an application. Whether the form is online or on paper, the prospective voters will list their name, residency address, and in many cases party identification (with Independent as an option) and affirm that they are competent to vote. States may also have a residency requirement, which establishes how long a citizen must live in a state before becoming eligible to register: it is often thirty days. Beyond these requirements, there may be an oath administered or more questions asked, such as felony convictions. If the application is completely online and the citizen has government documents (e.g., driver's license or state identification card), the system will compare the application to other state records and accept an online signature or affidavit if everything matches up correctly. Citizens who do not have these state documents are often required to complete paper applications. States without online registration often allow a citizen to fill out an application on a website, but the citizen will receive a paper copy in the mail to sign and mail back to the state.

Another aspect of registering to vote is the timeline. States may require registration to take place as much as thirty days before voting, or they may allow same-day registration. Maine first implemented same-day registration in 1973. Fourteen states and the District of Columbia now allow voters to register the day of the election if they have proof of residency, such as a driver's license or utility bill. Many of the more populous states (e.g., Michigan and Texas), require registration forms to be mailed thirty days before an election. Moving means citizens must re-register or update addresses ([Figure 9.3](#)). College students, for example, may have to re-register or update addresses each year as they move. States that use same-day registration had a 4 percent higher voter turnout in the 2012 presidential election than states that did not.⁹ Yet another consideration is how far in advance of an election one must apply to change one's

political party affiliation. In states with closed primaries, it is important for voters to be allowed to register into whichever party they prefer. This issue came up during the 2016 presidential primaries in New York, where there is a lengthy timeline for changing your party affiliation.

MAIL TO:
DMV CHANGE OF ADDRESS
P. O. BOX 942859
SACRAMENTO, CA 94259-0001

A SEPARATE FORM IS NEEDED FOR EACH DRIVER OR VEHICLE OWNER

NOTICE OF CHANGE OF ADDRESS

DMV USE ONLY
DL address updated by FO
24002

Please Print Characters In Capital Letters Using Black or Dark Blue Ink only.

1 2 3 4 5 6 7 8 9 0 A B C D E F G H I J K L M N O P Q R S T U V W X Y Z

INSTRUCTIONS:

- Enter the information as shown on the document, i.e. California driver license, ID card, or vehicle registration card, for which a change is being requested.
- Names not matching DMV records and/or unreadable information cannot be updated.
- Type or write your new address on a small piece of paper with your signature and date. Keep it with your driver license or ID card.
- A commercial licensed driver must maintain a California residence address or the driver license will be downgraded to non commercial status.

Personal Information

LAST NAME: _____ DRIVER LICENSE/ID CARD NO.: _____

FIRST: _____ INITIAL: _____ BIRTH DATE: _____

Voter Change of Address

We will change your voting address if you have moved and still live in the same county. If you have moved to a new county or are not registered to vote, you must complete a new voter registration card. DMV provides the form or call 1-800-345-VOTE or logon to the Secretary of State's website at www.sos.ca.gov.

Use only with DL Change of Address Mark this box if you do not want to change your voting address.

New or Correct Residence Address

STREET NUMBER ONLY: _____ STREET NAME: _____

APT. NO.: _____

CITY - DO NOT ABBREVIATE - USE FIRST 22 CHARACTERS IN CITY NAME: _____ STATE: _____ ZIP CODE: _____

Do Not Use P. O. Box in this space

New or Correct Mailing Address

STREET NUMBER ONLY: _____ P. O. BOX OR STREET NAME OR STREET NAME AND PRIVATE MAIL BOX: _____

APT. NO.: _____

CITY - DO NOT ABBREVIATE - USE FIRST 22 CHARACTERS IN CITY NAME: _____ STATE: _____ ZIP CODE: _____

If Different From Residence Address

Voter Change of Address

We will change your voting address if you have moved and still live in the same county. If you have moved to a new county or are not registered to vote, you must complete a new voter registration card. DMV provides the form or call 1-800-345-VOTE or logon to the Secretary of State's website at www.sos.ca.gov.

Use only with DL Change of Address Mark this box if you do not want to change your voting address.

Figure 9.3 Moving requires a voter to re-register or update their address in the system. Depending on the state, this notification can sometimes be completed through the Department of Motor Vehicles, as in California.

Some attempts have been made to streamline voter registration. The National Voter Registration Act (1993), often referred to as Motor Voter, was enacted to expedite the registration process and make it as simple as possible for voters. The act required states to allow citizens to register to vote when they sign up for driver's licenses and Social Security benefits. On each government form, the citizen need only mark an additional box to also register to vote. Unfortunately, while increasing registrations by 7 percent between 1992 and 2012, Motor Voter did not dramatically increase voter turnout.¹⁰ In fact, for two years following the passage of the act, voter turnout decreased slightly.¹¹ It appears that the main users of the expedited system were those already intending to vote. One study, however, found that preregistration may have a different effect on youth than on the overall voter pool; in Florida, it increased turnout of young voters by 13 percent.¹²

In 2015, Oregon made news when it took the concept of Motor Voter further. When citizens turn eighteen, the state now automatically registers most of them using driver's license and state identification information. When a citizen moves, the voter rolls are updated when the license is updated. While this policy has been controversial, with some arguing that private

information may become public or that Oregon is moving toward mandatory voting, automatic registration is consistent with the state's efforts to increase registration and turnout.¹³

Oregon's example offers a possible solution to a recurring problem for states—maintaining accurate voter registration rolls. During the 2000 election, in which George W. Bush won Florida's electoral votes by a slim majority, attention turned to the state's election procedures and voter registration rolls. Journalists found that many states, including Florida, had large numbers of phantom voters on their rolls, voters had moved or died but remained on the states' voter registration rolls.¹⁴ The Help America Vote Act of 2002 (HAVA) was passed in order to reform voting across the states and reduce these problems. As part of the Act, states were required to update voting equipment, make voting more accessible to people with disabilities, and maintain computerized voter rolls that could be updated regularly.¹⁵

Over a decade later, there has been some progress. In Louisiana, voters are placed on ineligible lists if a voting registrar is notified that they have moved or become ineligible to vote. If the voter remains on this list for two general elections, that registration is cancelled. In Oklahoma, the registrar receives a list of deceased residents from the Department of Health.¹⁶ Twenty-nine states now participate in the Interstate Voter Registration Crosscheck Program, which allows states to check for duplicate registrations.¹⁷ At the same time, Florida's use of the federal Systematic Alien Verification for Entitlements (SAVE) database has proven to be controversial, because county elections supervisors are allowed to remove voters deemed ineligible to vote.¹⁸

Link to Learning

The National Association of Secretaries of State maintains a [website](#) that directs users to their state's information regarding voter registration, identification policies, and polling locations.

WHO IS ALLOWED TO REGISTER?

In order to be eligible to vote in the United States, a person must be a citizen, resident, and eighteen years old. But states often place additional requirements on the right to vote. The most common requirement is that voters must be deemed competent and not currently serving time in jail. Some states enforce more stringent or unusual requirements on citizens who have committed crimes. Kentucky permanently bars felons and ex-felons from voting unless they obtain a pardon from the governor, while Florida, Mississippi, and Nevada allow former felons to apply to have their voting rights restored.¹⁹ Florida previously had a strict policy against felony voting, like Kentucky. However, through a 2018 initiative petition, Florida voters approved a reinstatement of voting rights for felons after their sentences are completed and any financial debt to society paid.²⁰ On the other end of the spectrum, Vermont does not limit voting based on incarceration unless the crime was election fraud.²¹ Maine citizens serving in Maine prisons also may vote in elections.

Beyond those jailed, some citizens have additional expectations placed on them when they register to vote. Wisconsin requires that voters “not wager on an election,” and Vermont citizens must recite the “Voter's Oath” before they register, swearing to cast votes with a conscience and “without fear or favor of any person.”²²

Get Connected!

Where to Register?

Across the United States, over twenty million college and university students begin classes each fall, many away from home. The simple act of moving away to college presents a voter registration problem. Elections are local. Each citizen lives in a district with state legislators, city council or other local elected representatives, a U.S. House of Representatives member, and more. State and national laws require voters to reside in their districts, but students are an unusual case. They often hold temporary residency while at school and return home for the summer. Therefore, they have to decide whether to register to vote near campus or vote back in their home district. What are the pros and cons of each option?

Maintaining voter registration back home is legal in most states, assuming a student holds only temporary residency at school. This may be the best plan, because students are likely more familiar with local politicians and issues. But it requires the student to either go home to vote or apply for an absentee ballot. With classes, clubs, work, and more, it may be difficult to remember this task. One study found that students living more than two hours from home were less likely to vote than students living within thirty minutes of campus, which is not surprising.²³

Registering to vote near campus makes it easier to vote, but it requires an extra step that students may forget (Figure 9.4). And in many states, registration to vote in a November election takes place in October, just when students are acclimating to the semester. They must also become familiar with local candidates and issues, which takes time and effort they may not have. But they will not have to travel to vote, and their vote is more likely to affect their college and local town.



(a)



(b)

Figure 9.4 On National Voter Registration Day in 2012, Roshanda McLean (a, left), campus director of the Associated Students of the University of Missouri, and David Vaughn (a, right), a Missouri Student Association senator, register voters on campus. Cassie Dorman (b, left) and Samantha Peterson (b, right), both eighteen years old, were just two of the University of Missouri students registering to vote for the first time. (credit a, b: modification of work by “KOMUnews”/Flickr)

Have you registered to vote in your college area, or will you vote back home? What factors influenced your decision about where to vote?

9.2 Voter Turnout

Learning Objectives

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

- Identify factors that motivate registered voters to vote
- Discuss circumstances that prevent citizens from voting
- Analyze reasons for low voter turnout in the United States

Campaign managers worry about who will show up at the polls on Election Day. Will more Republicans come? More Democrats? Will a surge in younger voters occur this year, or will an older population cast ballots? We can actually predict with strong accuracy who is likely to vote each year, based on identified influence factors such as age, education, and income. Campaigns will often target each group of voters in different ways, spending precious campaign dollars on the groups already most likely to show up at the polls rather than trying to persuade citizens who are highly unlikely to vote.

COUNTING VOTERS

Low voter turnout has long caused the media and others to express concern and frustration. A healthy democratic society is expected to be filled with citizens who vote regularly and participate in the electoral process. People like Stacey Abrams, who founded Fair Fight Action in 2018, and organizations such as the League of Women Voters and Project Vote Smart ([Figure 9.5](#)) work hard to increase voter turnout in all age groups across the United States. But just how low is voter turnout? The answer depends on who is calculating it and how. There are several methods, each of which highlights a different problem with the electoral system in the United States.



(a)



(b)



(c)

Figure 9.5 Stacey Abrams, shown here campaigning in Georgia in 2018, became involved in voter turnout efforts after losing her closely contested gubernatorial election (a). Women represent The League of Women Voters of California at a Sacramento convention in 2017 (b). Congresswoman Joyce Beatty (center), who represents Ohio's 3rd Congressional District in the U.S. House of Representatives, attends a voter registration drive in September 2020 (c). (credit a: modification of "Stacey Abrams Campaigning in 2018" by The Circus/Wikimedia Commons,

CC BY; credit b: modification of "The League of Women Voters of California" by League of Women Voters/Flickr, CC BY; credit c: modification of "Joyce Beatty at Voter Registration Drive in Ohio" by Office off Joyce Beatty/Wikimedia Commons, Public Domain)

Link to Learning

Interested in mobilizing voters? Explore [Rock the Vote](#) and [The Voter Participation Center](#) for more information.

Calculating voter turnout begins by counting how many ballots were cast in a particular election. These votes must be cast on time, either by mail or in person. The next step is to count how many people *could* have voted in the same election. This is the number that causes different people to calculate different turnout rates. The complete population of the country includes all people, regardless of age, nationality, ability, health, or freedom. We can count subsections of this population to calculate voter turnout. For instance, the next largest population in the country is the voting-age population (VAP), which consists of persons who are eighteen and older. Some of these persons may not be eligible to vote in their state, but they are included because they are of age to do so.²⁴

An even smaller group is the voting-eligible population (VEP), citizens eighteen and older who, whether they have registered or not, are eligible to vote because they are citizens, and not imprisoned. If a state has more stringent requirements, such as not having a felony conviction, citizens counted in the VEP must meet those criteria as well. States also have different guidelines or requirements for people with intellectual disabilities, mental illness, and other criteria, which can be used to temporarily or permanently bar people from voting. (The practices have frequently been used in a discriminatory way.) As a result, this population is much harder to measure, but statisticians who use the VEP will generally take the VAP and subtract the state's prison population and any other known group that cannot vote. This results in a number that is somewhat theoretical; however, in a way, it is more accurate when determining voter turnout.²⁵

The last and smallest population is registered voters, who, as the name implies, are citizens currently registered to vote. Now we can appreciate how reports of voter turnout can vary. As [Figure 9.6](#) shows, 77 percent of registered voters voted in the 2020 presidential election, which represents 48.5 percent of the total U.S. population. While 48 percent is indeed low and might cause alarm, some people included in it are under eighteen, not citizens, or unable to vote due to competency or prison status. The next number shows that just over 62 percent of the voting-age population voted, and 67 percent of the voting-eligible population. The highest turnout ratio is calculated using the smallest population: 77 percent of registered voters voted. Those who argue that a healthy democracy needs high voter turnout will look at the voting-age population or voting-eligible population as proof that the United States has a problem. Those who believe only informed and active citizens should vote point to the registered voter turnout numbers instead. However, looking at only one number can be deceiving. For example, if one compares the percentage of registered voters who voted in 2020 (77 percent) versus 2012 (87 percent), it would seem as if voter turnout had dropped significantly; however, if one looks at the percentage of the voting-eligible population who voted in these same years (67 percent in

2020 versus 60 percent in 2012), one can see that is not the case. In fact, the number of votes cast in the 2020 election increased by more than double what one would expect based on the increase in the voting-age population, mostly due to a significant increase in registration. So, while a smaller percentage of registered voters voted in 2020 versus 2012, the pool of registered voters was much larger.²⁶

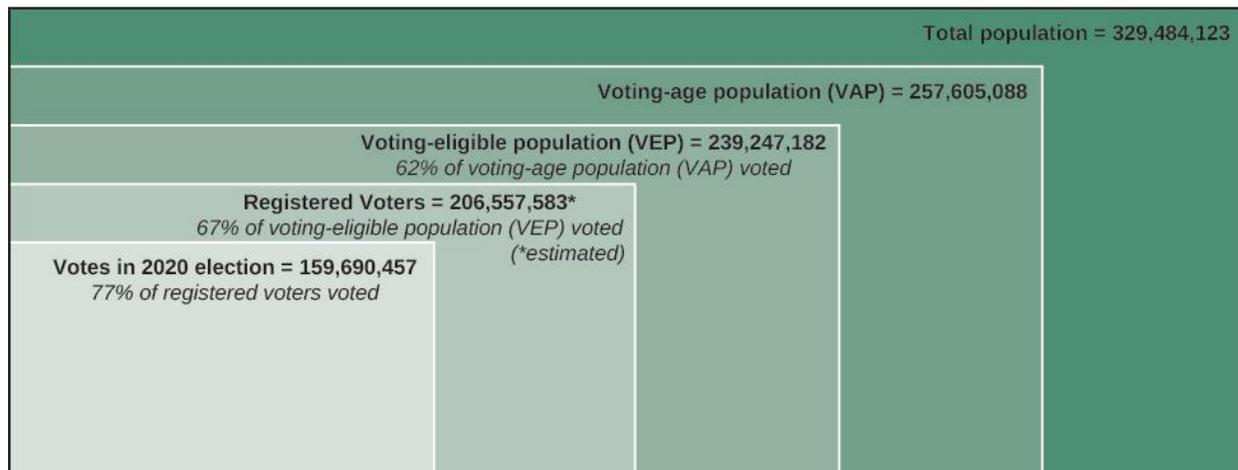


Figure 9.6 There are many ways to measure voter turnout depending on whether we calculate it using the total population, the voting-age population (VAP), the voting-eligible population (VEP), or the total number of registered voters.

WHAT FACTORS DRIVE VOTER TURNOUT?

Political parties and campaign managers approach every population of voters differently, based on what they know about factors that influence turnout. Everyone targets likely voters, which are the category of registered voters who vote regularly. Most campaigns also target registered voters in general, because they are more likely to vote than unregistered citizens. For this reason, many polling agencies ask respondents whether they are already registered and whether they voted in the last election. Those who are registered and did vote in the last election are likely to have a strong interest in politics and elections and will vote again, provided they are not angry with the political system or politicians.

Some campaigns and civic groups target members of the voting-eligible population who are not registered, especially in states that are highly contested during a particular election. The Association of Community Organizations for Reform Now (ACORN), which is now defunct, was both lauded and criticized for its efforts to get voters in low socio-economic areas registered during the 2008 election.²⁷ Similarly, interest groups in Los Angeles were criticized for registering homeless citizens as a part of an effort to gather signatures to place propositions on the ballot.²⁸ These potential voters may not think they can vote, but they might be persuaded to register and then vote if the process is simplified or the information they receive encourages them to do so.

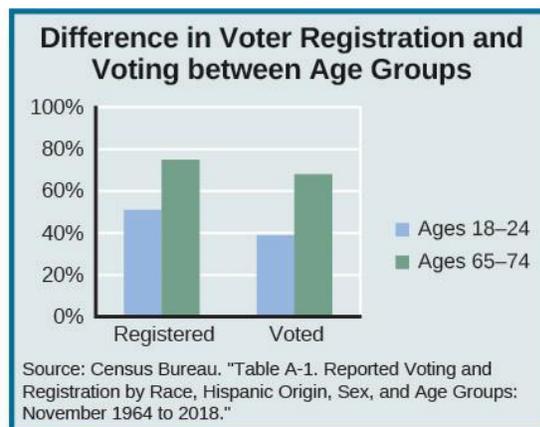
Campaigns also target different age groups with different intensity, because age is a relatively consistent factor in predicting voting behavior. Those between eighteen and twenty-five are

least likely to vote, while those sixty-five to seventy-four are most likely. One reason for lower voter turnout among younger citizens may be that they move frequently.²⁹ Another reason may be circular: Youth are less active in government and politics, leading the parties to neglect them. When people are neglected, they are in turn less likely to become engaged in government.³⁰ They may also be unaware of what a government provides. Younger people are often still in college, perhaps working part-time and earning low wages. They are unlikely to be receiving government benefits beyond Pell Grants or government-subsidized tuition and loans. They are also unlikely to be paying taxes at a high rate. Government is a distant concept rather than a daily concern, which may drive down turnout.

In 2016, for example, the Census Bureau reported that only 51 percent of eligible voters between the ages of eighteen and twenty-four registered and 39 percent voted, while 75 percent of sixty-five to seventy-four-year-olds registered and 68 percent voted.³¹ Once a person has retired, reliance on the government will grow if they draw income from Social Security, receive health care from Medicare, and enjoy benefits such as transportation and social services from state and local governments (Figure 9.7).



(a)



(b)

Figure 9.7 On January 7, 2008, John McCain campaigned in New Hampshire among voters holding AARP signs (a). AARP, formerly the American Association of Retired Persons, is one of the most influential interest groups because senior citizens are known to vote at nearly double the rate of young people (b), thanks in part to their increased reliance on government programs as they age. (credit a: modification of "John McCain" by Ryan Glenn/Flickr, CC BY)

Due to consistently low turnout among the young, several organizations have made special efforts to demonstrate to younger citizens that voting is an important activity. Rock the Vote began in 1990, with the goal of bringing music, art, and pop culture together to encourage the youth to participate in government. The organization hosts rallies, festivals, and concerts that also register voters and promote voter awareness, bringing celebrities and musicians to set examples of civic involvement. Rock the Vote also maintains a website that helps young adults find out how to register in their state. In 2018, former first lady Michelle Obama founded the organization "When We All Vote" to encourage voter registration and participation in the 2020 electoral process. Joining Obama as co-chairs on her "voting squad" were Tom Hanks, Rita

Wilson, Selena Gomez, Faith Hill, Lin-Manuel Miranda, and Chris Paul. These efforts may indeed have helped increase turnout, as 2020 brought record levels of participation, despite the challenges of the COVID-19 pandemic. ([Figure 9.8](#)).³²

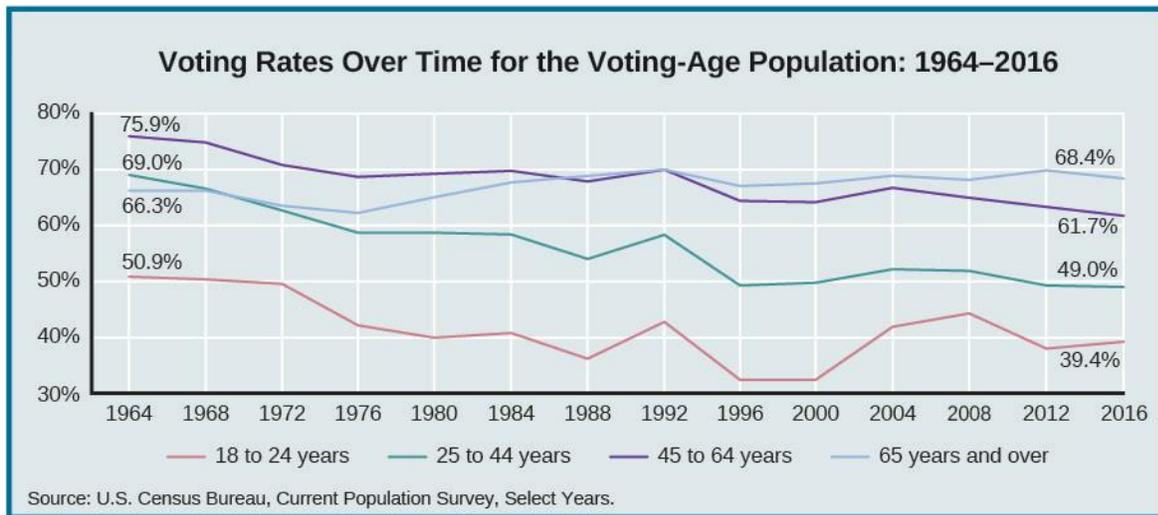


Figure 9.8 Voting rates by age groups have tended downward since 1964, with the exception of those 65 and over, who now lead in terms of turnout.

Milestone

Making a Difference

In 2008, for the first time since 1972, a presidential candidate intrigued America’s youth and persuaded them to flock to the polls in record numbers. Barack Obama not only spoke to young people’s concerns but his campaign also connected with them via technology, wielding texts and tweets to bring together a new generation of voters ([Figure 9.9](#)).

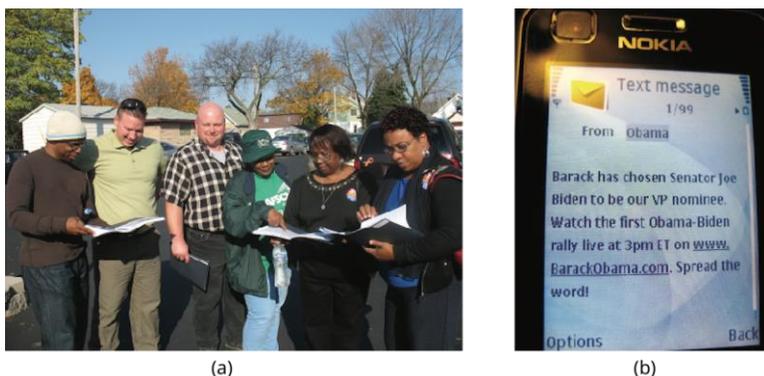


Figure 9.9 On November 5, 2008, union members get ready to hit the streets in Milwaukee, Wisconsin, to “get out the vote” (GOTV) for Barack Obama (a). On August 23, 2008, the Obama campaign texted supporters directly in order to announce that he had selected then- Senator

Joe Biden (D-DE) as his running mate (b). (credit a: modification of work by Casie Yoder; credit b: modification of work by “brownpau”/Flickr)

The high level of interest Obama inspired among college-aged voters was a milestone in modern politics. Since the 1971 passage of the Twenty-Sixth Amendment, which lowered the voting age from 21 to 18, voter turnout in the under-25 range has been low. While opposition to the Vietnam War and the military draft sent 50.9 percent of 21- to 24-year-old voters to the polls in 1964, after 1972, turnout in that same age group dropped to below 40 percent as youth became disenchanted with politics. In 2008, however, it briefly increased to 45 percent from only 32 percent in 2000. Yet, despite high interest in Obama’s candidacy in 2008, younger voters were less enchanted in 2012—only 38 percent showed up to vote that year.³³

What qualities should a presidential or congressional candidate show in order to get college students excited and voting? Why?

Citizens’ socioeconomic status—the combination of education, income, and social status—may also predict whether they will vote. Among those who have completed college, the 2020 voter turnout rate jumps to 80 percent of eligible voters, compared to about 60 percent for those without a college degree.³⁴ This is due in part to the powerful effect of education, one of the strongest predictors of voting turnout. Income also has a strong effect on the likelihood of voting. Citizens earning \$150,000 a year or more are very likely to vote and over 80 percent of them do, while only 55 percent of those who earn \$25,000 a year vote.³⁵ Once high income and college education are combined, the resulting high socioeconomic status strongly predicts the likelihood that a citizen will vote.

Race is also a factor. White people turn out to vote in the highest numbers, with 71 percent of non-Hispanic White citizens voting in 2020. In comparison, 63 percent of African Americans, 59 percent of Asian Americans, and 54 percent of Hispanic citizens voted in 2020. Voting turnout can increase or decrease based upon the political culture of a state, however. Hispanics, for example, often vote in higher numbers in states where there has historically been higher Hispanic involvement and representation, such as New Mexico, where 59 percent of Hispanic voters turned out in 2020.³⁶ In 2016, while Donald Trump rode a wave of discontent among White voters to the presidency, the fact that Hillary Clinton nearly beat him may have had as much to do with the record turnout of Latinos in response to numerous remarks on immigration that Trump made throughout his campaign. Latinos made up 13 percent of the electorate in 2020, up from nearly 12 percent in 2016, and 10 percent in 2012.³⁷

While less of a factor today, gender has historically been a factor in voter turnout. After 1920, when the Nineteenth Amendment gave women the right to vote, women began slowly turning out to vote, and now they do so in high numbers. Today, more women vote than men. In 2016, a record 73.7 million women (63.3 percent) reporting voting, as compared to 63.8 million men (59.3 percent).³⁸ While women do not vote exclusively for one political party, 41 percent are likely to identify as Democrats and only 25 percent are likely to identify as Republicans.³⁹ The margin that Hillary Clinton won was more narrow in Florida than many presumed it would be and may have helped Donald Trump win that state. Even after allegations of sexual assault and

revelations of several instances of sexism by Mr. Trump, Clinton only won 54 percent of the women's vote in Florida. In contrast, rural voters voted overwhelmingly for Trump, at much higher rates than they had for Mitt Romney in 2012.

Link to Learning

Check out this [website](#) to find out who is voting and who isn't.

WHAT FACTORS DECREASE VOTER TURNOUT?

Just as political scientists and campaign managers worry about who does vote, they also look at why people choose to stay home on Election Day. Over the years, studies have explored why a citizen might not vote. The reasons range from the obvious excuse of being too busy (19 percent) to more complex answers, such as transportation problems (3.3 percent) and restrictive registration laws (5.5 percent).⁴⁰ With only 62 percent of our voting-age population (VAP) voting in the presidential election of 2020, however, we should examine why the rest do not participate.

One prominent reason for low national voter turnout is that participation is not mandated. Some countries, such as Belgium and Turkey, have compulsory voting laws, which require citizens to vote in elections or pay a fine. This helps the two countries attain VAP turnouts of 87 percent and 86 percent, respectively, compared to the U.S. turnout of 54 percent. Sweden and Germany automatically register their voters, and 83 percent and 66 percent vote, respectively. Chile's decision to move from compulsory voting to voluntary voting caused a drop in participation from 87 percent to 46 percent.⁴¹

Link to Learning

Do you wonder what voter turnout looks like in other developed countries? Visit the [Pew Research Center report on international voting turnout](#) to find out.

Low turnout also occurs when some citizens are not allowed to vote. One method of limiting voter access is the requirement to show identification at polling places. Supporters of strict voter ID requirements argue that these restrictions are required to prevent fraud, such as casting multiple votes, and to maintain the integrity of election results. Opponents, however, claim there is little evidence that such fraud is taking place. Research into the effect of voter ID laws on voter turnout is equally split. Some studies have concluded that strict voter ID laws reduce turnout, especially among minority voters.⁴² Other studies have determined that such laws have little to no effect on turnout.⁴³

In 2005, the Indiana legislature passed the first strict photo identification law. Voters must provide photo identification that shows their names match the voter registration records, clearly displays an expiration date, is current or has expired only since the last general election, and was issued by the state of Indiana or the U.S. government. Student identification cards that meet the standards and are from an Indiana state school are allowed.⁴⁴ Indiana's law allows voters without an acceptable identification to obtain a free state identification card.⁴⁵ The state also extended service hours for state offices that issue identification in the days leading up to elections.⁴⁶

The photo identification law was quickly contested. The American Civil Liberties Union and other groups argued that it placed an unfair burden on people who were poor, older, or had limited finances, while the state argued that it would prevent fraud. In *Crawford v. Marion County Election Board* (2008), the Supreme Court decided that Indiana's voter identification requirement was constitutional, although the decision left open the possibility that another case might meet the burden of proof required to overturn the law.⁴⁷

In 2011, Texas passed a strict photo identification law for voters, allowing concealed-handgun permits as identification but not student identification. The Texas law was blocked by the Obama administration before it could be implemented, because Texas was on the Voting Rights Act's preclearance list. Other states, such as Alabama, Alaska, Arizona, Georgia, and Virginia similarly had laws and districting changes blocked.⁴⁸ As a result, Shelby County, Alabama, and several other states sued the U.S. attorney general, arguing the Voting Rights Act's preclearance list was unconstitutional and that the formula that determined whether states had violated the VRA was outdated. In *Shelby County v. Holder* (2013), the Supreme Court agreed. In a 5–4 decision, the justices in the majority said the formula for placing states on the VRA preclearance list was outdated and reached into the states' authority to oversee elections.⁴⁹ States and counties on the preclearance list were released, and Congress was told to design new guidelines for placing states on the list.

Following the *Shelby* decision, Texas implemented its photo identification law, leading plaintiffs to bring cases against the state, charging that the law disproportionately affects minority voters.⁵⁰ Alabama, Georgia, and Virginia similarly implemented their photo identification laws, joining Kansas, South Carolina, Tennessee, and Wisconsin. Some of these states offer low-cost or free identification for the purposes of voting or will offer help with the completion of registration applications, but citizens must provide birth certificates or other forms of identification, which can be difficult and/or costly to obtain.

Opponents of photo identification laws argue that these restrictions are unfair because they have an unusually strong effect on some demographics. One study, done by Reuters, found that requiring a photo ID would disproportionately prevent citizens aged 18–24, Hispanics, and those without a college education from voting. These groups are unlikely to have the right paperwork or identification, unlike citizens who have graduated from college. The same study found that 4 percent of households with yearly incomes under \$25,000 said they did not have an ID that would be considered valid for voting.⁵¹ For this reason, some assert that such changes tend to favor Republicans over Democrats. In the 2018 elections, there were controversial results and allegations of voter suppression in Florida, Georgia, and North Carolina, three jurisdictions where elections were very close.⁵² Additional allegations of voter suppression emerged in 2020 in many states, including Georgia and Texas. In some places in Georgia, voters had to wait for ten hours to cast their votes.⁵³ In Texas, many drive-by voting stations employed during the primary election to assist with voting during COVID-19 were eliminated for the general election.⁵⁴ In many states in 2021, policies were considered to further constrict voting, including Georgia's new law.

Another reason for not voting is that polling places may be open only on Election Day. This makes it difficult for voters juggling school, work, and child care during polling hours ([Figure 9.10](#)). Many states have tried to address this problem with early voting, which opens polling places as much as two weeks early. Texas opened polling places on weekdays and weekends in 1988 and initially saw an increase in voting in gubernatorial and presidential elections, although the impact tapered off over time.⁵⁵ Other states with early voting, however, showed a decline in turnout, possibly because there is less social pressure to vote when voting is spread over several days.⁵⁶ Early voting was used in a widespread manner across forty-four states in 2020, totaling over 100 million votes cast in this manner.⁵⁷



Figure 9.10 On February 5, 2008, dubbed “Super Duper Tuesday” by the press, twenty-four states held caucuses or primary elections—the largest simultaneous number of state presidential primary elections in U.S. history. As a result, over half the Democratic delegates were allocated unusually early in the election season. This polling station, on the Stanford University campus in Palo Alto, California, had long lines, commonly seen only on Election Day, and nearly ran out of Democratic ballots. (credit: Josh Thompson)

In a similar effort, Colorado, Hawaii, Oregon, Utah, and Washington have moved to mail-in voting systems.⁵⁸ These states have seen a rise in turnout, with Colorado’s numbers increasing from 1.8 million votes in the 2010 congressional elections to 2.6 million votes in the 2018 congressional elections.⁵⁹ ⁶⁰ One argument against early and mail-only voting is that those who vote early cannot change their minds during the final days of the campaign, such as in response to an “October surprise,” a highly negative story about a candidate that leaks right before Election Day in November. (For example, a week before the 2000 election, a *Dallas Morning News* journalist reported that George W. Bush had lied about whether he had been arrested for driving under the influence.⁶¹) In 2016, two such stories, one for each nominee, broke just prior

to Election Day. First, the Billy Bush Access Hollywood tape showed a braggadocian Donald Trump detailing his ability to do what he pleases with women, including grabbing at their genitals. This tape led some Republican officeholders, such as Senator Jeff Flake (R-AZ), to disavow Trump. However, perhaps eclipsing this episode was the release by former FBI director James Comey of a letter to Congress re-opening the Hillary Clinton email investigation a mere eleven days prior to the election. It is impossible to know the exact dynamics of how someone decides to vote, but one theory is that women jumped from Trump after the Access Hollywood tape emerged, only to go back to supporting him when the FBI seemed to reopen its investigation. Moreover, we later learned of significant Russian meddling in the 2016 election. Robert S. Mueller III, a well-respected former FBI director for presidents from both parties, was appointed as the independent special investigator to delve into matters related to the 2016 election and potential interaction between Russian actors and American election processes.⁶² That investigation led to a host of Trump campaign and Trump administration officials facing indictments and convictions, including his former campaign manager Paul Manafort, personal attorney Michael Cohen, and long-time confidant Roger Stone. To date, the former president has not faced charges.⁶³ The 2020 elections, which saw record turnout despite the COVID-19 pandemic, were declared by election experts to be the safest and most carefully monitored elections in American history.⁶⁴

Apathy may also play a role. Some people avoid voting because their vote is unlikely to make a difference or the election is not competitive. If one party has a clear majority in a state or district, for instance, members of the minority party may see no reason to vote. Democrats in Utah and Republicans in California are so outnumbered that they are unlikely to affect the outcome of an election, and they may opt to stay home. Because the presidential candidate with the highest number of popular votes receives all of Utah's and California's electoral votes, there is little incentive for some citizens to vote: they will never change the outcome of the state-level election. These citizens, as well as those who vote for third parties like the Green Party or the Libertarian Party, are sometimes referred to as the chronic minority. While third-party candidates sometimes win local or state office or even dramatize an issue for national discussion, such as when Ross Perot discussed the national debt during his campaign as an independent presidential candidate in 1992, they never win national elections.

Finally, some voters may view non-voting as a means of social protest or may see volunteering as a better way to spend their time. Younger voters are more likely to volunteer their time rather than vote, believing that serving others is more important than voting.⁶⁵ Possibly related to this choice is voter fatigue. In many states, due to our federal structure with elections at many levels of government, voters may vote many times per year on ballots filled with candidates and issues to research. The less time there is between elections, the lower the turnout.⁶⁶

9.3 Elections

Learning Objectives

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

- Describe the stages in the election process
- Compare the primary and caucus systems
- Summarize how primary election returns lead to the nomination of the party candidates

Elections offer American voters the opportunity to participate in their government with little investment of time or personal effort. Yet voters should make decisions carefully. The electoral system allows them the chance to pick party nominees as well as office-holders, although not every citizen will participate in every step. The presidential election is often criticized as a choice between two evils, yet citizens can play a prominent part in every stage of the race and influence who the final candidates actually are.

DECIDING TO RUN

Running for office can be as easy as collecting one hundred signatures on a city election form or paying a registration fee of several thousand dollars to run for governor of a state. However, a potential candidate still needs to meet state-specific requirements covering length of residency, voting status, and age. Potential candidates must also consider competitors, family obligations, and the likelihood of drawing financial backing. His or her spouse, children, work history, health, financial history, and business dealings also become part of the media's focus, along with many other personal details about the past. Candidates for office are slightly more diverse than the representatives serving in legislative and executive bodies, but the realities of elections drive many eligible and desirable candidates away from running.⁶⁷

Despite these problems, most elections will have at least one candidate per party on the ballot. In states or districts where one party holds a supermajority, such as Oklahoma, candidates from the other party may be discouraged from running because they don't think they have a chance to win.⁶⁸ Candidates are likely to be moving up from prior elected office or are professionals, like lawyers, who can take time away from work to campaign and serve in office.⁶⁹

When candidates run for office, they are most likely to choose local or state office first. For women, studies have shown that family obligations rather than desire or ambition account for this choice. Further, women are more likely than men to wait until their children are older before entering politics, and women say that they struggle to balance campaigning and their workload with parenthood.⁷⁰ Because higher office is often attained only after service in lower office, there are repercussions to women waiting so long. If they do decide to run for the U.S. House of Representatives or Senate, they are often older, and fewer in number, than their male colleagues ([Figure 9.11](#)). In 2015, only 24.4 percent of state legislators and 20 percent of U.S. Congress members were women.⁷¹ However, in the 2018 midterm elections, a record number of women and younger members were elected to national office. Today, while still lagging men's representation, women make up almost 27 percent of the 117th Congress, and 31 percent of state legislative seats are held by women.⁷²

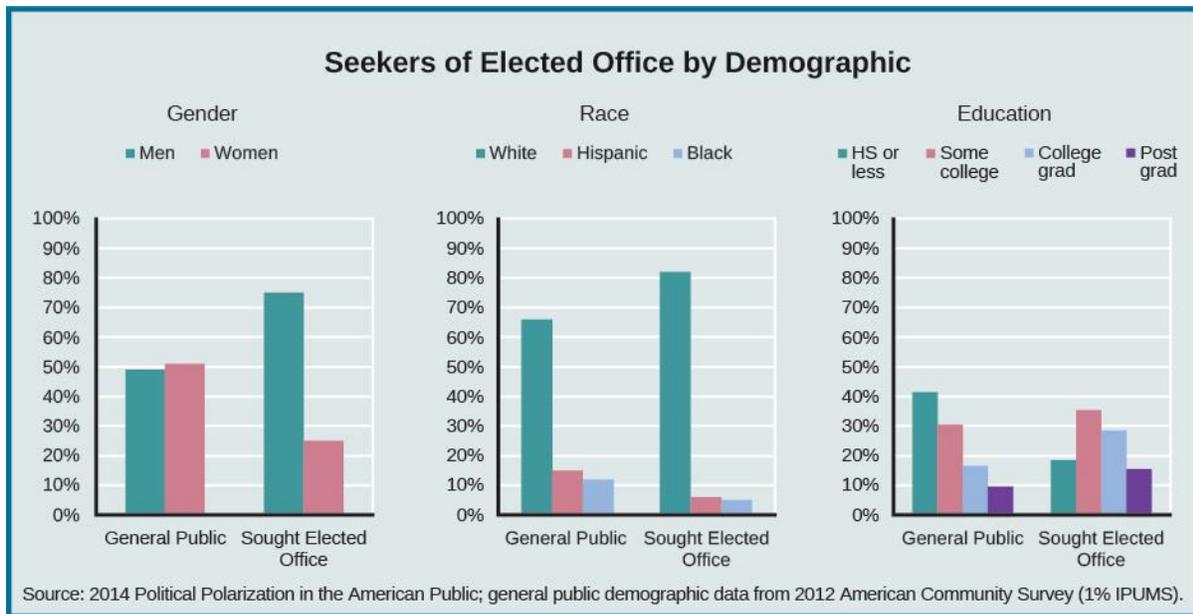


Figure 9.11 Those who seek elected office do not generally reflect the demographics of the general public: They are often disproportionately White men who are more educated than the overall U.S. population.

Another factor for potential candidates is whether the seat they are considering is competitive or open. A *competitive seat* describes a race where a challenger runs against the incumbent—the current office holder. An *open seat* is one whose incumbent is not running for reelection. Incumbents who run for reelection are very likely to win for a number of reasons, which are discussed later in this chapter. In fact, in the U.S. Congress, 95 percent of representatives and 82 percent of senators were reelected in 2014.⁷³ But when an incumbent retires, the seat is open and more candidates will run for that seat.

Many potential candidates will also decline to run if their opponent has a lot of money in a campaign war chest. *War chests* are campaign accounts registered with the Federal Election Commission, and candidates are allowed to keep earlier donations if they intend to run for office again. Incumbents and candidates trying to move from one office to another very often have money in their war chests. Those with early money are hard to beat because they have an easier time showing they are a viable candidate (one likely to win). They can woo potential donors, which brings in more donations and strengthens the campaign. A challenger who does not have money, name recognition, or another way to appear viable will have fewer campaign donations and will be less competitive against the incumbent.

CAMPAIGN FINANCE LAWS

In the 2020 presidential election cycle, candidates for all parties raised a total of 5.7 billion dollars for campaigns. Congressional candidates raised \$8.7 billion.⁷⁴ The amount raised by political action committees (PACs), which are organizations created to raise and spend money to influence politics and contribute to candidates' campaigns, was approximately \$2.7 billion.⁷⁵

How does the government monitor the vast amounts of money that are now a part of the election process?

The history of campaign finance monitoring has its roots in a federal law written in 1867, which prohibited government employees from asking Naval Yard employees for donations.⁷⁶ In 1896, the Republican Party spent about \$16 million overall, which includes William McKinley's \$6–7 million campaign expenses.⁷⁷ This raised enough eyebrows that several key politicians, including Theodore Roosevelt, took note. After becoming president in 1901, Roosevelt pushed Congress to look for political corruption and influence in government and elections.⁷⁸ Shortly after, the Tillman Act (1907) was passed by Congress, which prohibited corporations from contributing money to candidates running in federal elections. Other congressional acts followed, limiting how much money individuals could contribute to candidates, how candidates could spend contributions, and what information would be disclosed to the public.⁷⁹

While these laws intended to create transparency in campaign funding, government did not have the power to stop the high levels of money entering elections, and little was done to enforce the laws. In 1971, Congress again tried to fix the situation by passing the Federal Election Campaign Act (FECA), which outlined how candidates would report all contributions and expenditures related to their campaigns. The FECA also created rules governing the way organizations and companies could contribute to federal campaigns, which allowed for the creation of political action committees.⁸⁰ Finally, a 1974 amendment to the act created the Federal Election Commission (FEC), which operates independently of government and enforces the elections laws.

While some portions of the FECA were ruled unconstitutional by the courts in *Buckley v. Valeo* (1976), such as limits on personal spending on campaigns by candidates not using federal money, the FEC began enforcing campaign finance laws in 1976.⁸¹ Even with the new laws and the FEC, money continued to flow into elections. By using loopholes in the laws, political parties and political action committees donated large sums of money to candidates, and new reforms were soon needed. Senators John McCain (R-AZ) and Russ Feingold (former D-WI) cosponsored the Bipartisan Campaign Reform Act of 2002 (BCRA), also referred to as the McCain–Feingold Act. McCain–Feingold restricts the amount of money given to political parties, which had become a way for companies and PACs to exert influence. It placed limits on total contributions to political parties, prohibited coordination between candidates and PAC campaigns, and required candidates to include personal endorsements on their political ads. It also limited advertisements run by unions and corporations thirty days before a primary election and sixty days before a general election.⁸²

Soon after the passage of the McCain–Feingold Act, the FEC's enforcement of the law spurred court cases challenging it. The first, *McConnell v. Federal Election Commission* (2003), resulted in the Supreme Court's upholding the act's restrictions on how candidates and parties could spend campaign contributions. But later court challenges led to the removal of limits on personal spending and ended the ban on ads run by interest groups in the days leading up to an election.⁸³ In 2010, the Supreme Court's ruling on *Citizens United v. Federal Election*

Commission led to the removal of spending limits on corporations. Justices in the majority argued that the BCRA violated a corporation's free speech rights.⁸⁴

The court ruling also allowed corporations to place unlimited money into super PACs, or Independent Expenditure-Only Committees. These organizations cannot contribute directly to a candidate, nor can they strategize with a candidate's campaign. They can, however, raise and spend as much money as they please to support or attack a candidate, including running advertisements and hosting events.⁸⁵ In 2020, the Senate Leadership Fund, a conservative super PAC, spent \$293.7 million supporting conservative candidates while the Senate Majority PAC spent \$230.4 million supporting liberal candidates. The total expenditure by super PACs alone was \$2.13 billion in the 2020 election.⁸⁶ In 2012, the super PAC "Restore Our Future" raised \$153 million and spent \$142 million supporting conservative candidates, including Mitt Romney. "Priorities USA Action" raised \$79 million and spent \$65 million supporting liberal candidates, including Barack Obama. The total expenditure by super PACs alone was \$609 million in the 2012 election and \$345 million in the 2014 congressional elections.⁸⁷

Several limits on campaign contributions have been upheld by the courts and remain in place. Individuals may contribute up to \$2,900 per candidate per election. This means a teacher living in Nebraska may contribute \$2,900 to a candidate for their campaign to become to the Democratic presidential nominee, and if that candidate becomes the nominee, the teacher may contribute another \$2,900 to their general election campaign. Individuals may also give \$5,000 to political action committees and \$36,500 to a national party committee. PACs that contribute to more than one candidate are permitted to contribute \$5,000 per candidate per election, and up to \$15,000 to a national party. PACs created to give money to only one candidate are limited to only \$2,900 per candidate, however ([Figure 9.12](#)).⁸⁸ The amounts are adjusted every two years, based on inflation. These limits are intended to create a more equal playing field for the candidates, so that candidates must raise their campaign funds from a broad pool of contributors.

CONTRIBUTION LIMITS FOR 2021–2022 FEDERAL ELECTIONS					
DONORS	RECIPIENTS				
	Candidate Committee	PAC ¹ (SSF and Nonconnected)	State/District/Local Party Committee	National Party Committee	Additional National Party Committee Accounts ²
Individual	\$2,900* per election	\$5,000 per year	\$10,000 per year (combined)	\$36,500* per year	\$109,500* per account, per year
Candidate Committee	\$2,000 per election	\$5,000 per year	Unlimited Transfers	Unlimited Transfers	
PAC-Multicandidate	\$5,000 per election	\$5,000 per year	\$5,000 per year (combined)	\$15,000 per year	\$45,000 per account, per year
PAC-Nonmulticandidate	\$2,900 per election	\$5,000 per year	\$10,000 per year (combined)	\$36,500* per year	\$109,500* per account, per year
State/District/Local Party Committee	\$5,000 per election (combined)	\$5,000 per election (combined)	Unlimited Transfers		
National Party Committee	\$5,000 per election ³	\$5,000 per year			

*- Indexed for inflation in odd-numbered years.

¹ "PAC" here refers to a committee that makes contributions to other federal political committees. Independent-expenditure-only political committees (sometimes called "super PACs") may accept unlimited contributions, including from corporations and labor organizations.

² The limits in this column apply to a national party committee's accounts for: (i) the presidential nominating convention; (ii) election recounts and contests and other legal proceedings; and (iii) national party headquarters buildings. A party's national committee, Senate campaign committee and House campaign committee are each considered separate national party committees with separate limits. Only a national party committee, not the parties' national congressional campaign committees, may have an account for the presidential nominating convention.

³ Additionally, a national party committee and its Senatorial campaign committee may contribute up to \$51,200 combined per campaign to each Senate candidate.

Source: Federal Election Commission. "Contribution Limits for 2021–2022 Federal Elections." January, 2021.

Figure 9.12 The Federal Election Commission has strict federal election guidelines on who can contribute, to whom, and how much.

NOMINATION STAGE

Although the Constitution explains how candidates for national office are elected, it is silent on how those candidates are nominated. Political parties have taken on the role of promoting nominees for offices, such as the presidency and seats in the Senate and the House of Representatives. Because there are no national guidelines, there is much variation in the nomination process. States pass election laws and regulations, choose the selection method for party nominees, and schedule the election, but the process also greatly depends on the candidates and the political parties.

States, through their legislatures, often influence the nomination method by paying for an election to help parties identify the nominee the voters prefer. Many states fund elections because they can hold several nomination races at once. In 2020, many voters had to choose a

presidential nominee, U.S. Senate nominee, House of Representatives nominee, and state-level legislature nominee for their parties.

The most common method of picking a party nominee for state, local, and presidential contests is the primary. Party members use a ballot to indicate which candidate they desire for the party nominee. Despite the ease of voting using a ballot, primary elections have a number of rules and variations that can still cause confusion for citizens. In a closed primary, only members of the political party selecting nominees may vote. A registered Green Party member, for example, is not allowed to vote in the Republican or Democratic primary. Parties prefer this method, because it ensures the nominee is picked by voters who legitimately support the party. An open primary allows all voters to vote. In this system, a Green Party member is allowed to pick either a Democratic or Republican ballot when voting.

For state-level office nominations, or the nomination of a U.S. Senator or House member, some states use the top-two primary method. A top-two primary, sometimes called a jungle primary, pits all candidates against each other, regardless of party affiliation. The two candidates with the most votes become the final candidates for the general election. Thus, two candidates from the same party could run against each other in the general election. In one California congressional district, for example, four Democrats and two Republicans all ran against one another in the June 2012 primary. The two Republicans received the most votes, so they ran against one another in the general election in November.⁸⁹ In 2016, thirty-four candidates filed to run to replace Senator Barbara Boxer (D-CA). In the end, two Democratic women of color emerged to compete head-to-head in the general election. California attorney general Kamala Harris eventually won the seat on Election Day, helping to quadruple the number of women of color in the U.S. Senate overnight. She subsequently ran for vice president in 2020 on the Democratic ticket and now serves in that capacity. More often than not, however, the top-two system is used in state-level elections for non-partisan elections, in which none of the candidates are allowed to declare a political party.

In general, parties do not like nominating methods that allow non-party members to participate in the selection of party nominees. In 2000, the Supreme Court heard a case brought by the California Democratic Party, the California Republican Party, and the California Libertarian Party.⁹⁰ The parties argued that they had a right to determine who associated with the party and who participated in choosing the party nominee. The Supreme Court agreed, limiting the states' choices for nomination methods to closed and open primaries.

Despite the common use of the primary system, at least six states (Alaska, Colorado, Hawaii, Idaho, Iowa, and Nevada) regularly use caucuses for presidential, state, and local-level nominations. A caucus is a meeting of party members in which nominees are selected informally. Caucuses are less expensive than primaries because they rely on voting methods such as dropping marbles in a jar, placing names in a hat, standing under a sign bearing the candidate's name, or taking a voice vote. Volunteers record the votes and no poll workers need to be trained or compensated. The party members at the caucus also help select delegates, who represent their choice at the party's state- or national-level nominating convention.

The Iowa Democratic Caucus is well-known for its spirited nature. The party’s voters are asked to align themselves into preference groups, which often means standing in a room or part of a room that has been designated for the candidate of choice. The voters then get to argue and discuss the candidates, sometimes in a very animated and forceful manner. After a set time, party members are allowed to realign before the final count is taken. The caucus leader then determines how many members support each candidate, which determines how many delegates each candidate will receive.

The caucus has its proponents and opponents. Many argue that it is more interesting than the primary and brings out more sophisticated voters, who then benefit from the chance to debate the strengths and weaknesses of the candidates. The caucus system is also more transparent than ballots. The local party members get to see the election outcome and pick the delegates who will represent them at the national convention. There is less of a possibility for deception or dishonesty. Opponents point out that caucuses take two to three hours and are intimidating to less experienced voters. These factors, they argue, lead to lower voter turnout. And they have a point—voter turnout for a caucus is generally 20 percent lower than for a primary.⁹¹

Regardless of which nominating system the states and parties choose, states must also determine which day they wish to hold their nomination. When the nominations are for state-level office, such as governor, the state legislatures receive little to no input from the national political parties. In presidential election years, however, the national political parties pressure most states to hold their primaries or caucuses in March or later. Only Iowa, New Hampshire, and South Carolina are given express permission by the national parties to hold presidential primaries or caucuses in January or February ([Figure 9.13](#)). Both political parties protect the three states’ status as the first states to host caucuses and primaries, due to tradition and the relative ease of campaigning in these smaller states.



(a)



(b)

Figure 9.13 Presidential candidates often spend a significant amount of time campaigning in states with early caucuses or primaries. In September 2015, Senator Bernie Sanders (a), a candidate for the Democratic nomination, speaks at the Amherst Democrats BBQ in Amherst, New Hampshire. In July 2015, John Ellis “Jeb” Bush (b), former Republican governor of Florida, greets the public at the Fourth of July parade in Merrimack, New Hampshire. (credit a, b: modification of work by Marc Nozell)

Other states, especially large states like California, Florida, Michigan, and Wisconsin, often are frustrated that they must wait to hold their presidential primary elections later in the season. Their frustration is reasonable: candidates who do poorly in the first few primaries often drop out entirely, leaving fewer candidates to run in caucuses and primaries held in February and later. In 2008, California, New York, and several other states disregarded the national party's guidelines and scheduled their primaries the first week of February. In response, Florida and Michigan moved their primaries to January and many other states moved forward to March. This was not the first time states participated in *frontloading* and scheduled the majority of the primaries and caucuses at the beginning of the primary season. It was, however, one of the worst occurrences. States have been frontloading since the 1976 presidential election, with the problem becoming more severe in the 1992 election and later.⁹²

Political parties allot delegates to their national nominating conventions based on the number of registered party voters in each state. California, the state with the most Democrats, sent 494 delegates to the 2020 Democratic National Convention, while Wyoming, with far fewer Democrats, sent only 14 delegates.⁹³ When the national political parties want to prevent states from frontloading, or doing anything else they deem detrimental, they can change the state's delegate count, which in essence increases or reduces the state's say in who becomes the presidential nominee. In 1996, the Republicans offered bonus delegates to states that held their primaries and caucuses later in the nominating season.⁹⁴ In 2008, the national parties ruled that only Iowa, South Carolina, and New Hampshire could hold primaries or caucuses in January. Both parties also reduced the number of delegates from Michigan and Florida as punishment for those states' holding early primaries.⁹⁵ Despite these efforts, candidates in 2008 had a very difficult time campaigning during the tight window caused by frontloading.

One of the criticisms of the modern nominating system is that parties today have less influence over who becomes their nominee. In the era of party "bosses," candidates who hoped to run for president needed the blessing and support of party leadership and a strong connection with the party's values. Now, anyone can run for a party's nomination. The candidates with enough money to campaign the longest, gaining media attention, momentum, and voter support are more likely to become the nominee than candidates without these attributes, regardless of what the party leadership wants.

This new reality has dramatically increased the number of politically inexperienced candidates running for national office. In 2012, for example, eleven candidates ran multistate campaigns for the Republican nomination. Dozens more had their names on one or two state ballots. With a long list of challengers, candidates must find more ways to stand out, leading them to espouse extreme positions or display high levels of charisma. Add to this that primary and caucus voters are often more extreme in their political beliefs, and it is easy to see why fewer moderates become party nominees. The 2016 primary campaign by President Donald Trump shows that grabbing the media's attention with fiery partisan rhetoric can get a campaign started strong. This does not guarantee a candidate will make it through the primaries, however. In 2020, the most moderate of the front-runners (Joe Biden) won the Democratic nomination.

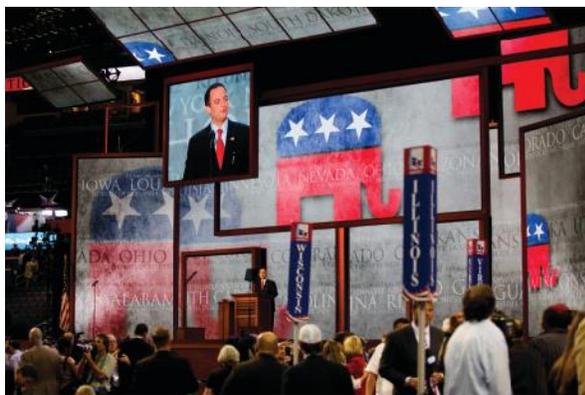
Link to Learning

Take a look at [Campaigns & Elections](#) to see what hopeful candidates are reading.

CONVENTION SEASON

Once it is clear who the parties' nominees will be, presidential and gubernatorial campaigns enter a quiet period. Candidates run fewer ads and concentrate on raising funds for the fall. This is a crucial time because lack of money can harm their chances. The media spends much of the summer keeping track of the fundraising totals while the political parties plan their conventions. State parties host state-level conventions during gubernatorial elections, while national parties host national conventions during presidential election years.

Party conventions are typically held between June and September, with state-level conventions earlier in the summer and national conventions later. Conventions normally last four to five days, with days devoted to platform discussion and planning and nights reserved for speeches ([Figure 9.14](#)). Local media covers the speeches given at state-level conventions, showing speeches given by the party nominees for governor and lieutenant governor, and perhaps important guests or the state's U.S. senators. The national media covers the Democratic and Republican conventions during presidential election years, mainly showing the speeches. Some cable networks broadcast delegate voting and voting on party platforms. Members of the candidate's family and important party members generally speak during the first few days of a national convention, with the vice presidential nominee speaking on the next-to-last night and the presidential candidate on the final night. The two chosen candidates then hit the campaign trail for the general election. The party with the incumbent president holds the later convention, so in 2016, the Democrats held their convention after the Republicans. In 2020, with the COVID-19 pandemic raging, both major parties modified their conventions to involve fewer people. The Republicans had some in-person gatherings, but mostly met virtually, while the Democrats were almost entirely virtual.⁹⁶



(a)



(b)

Figure 9.14 Reince Priebus, chairman of the Republican National Committee, opens the Republican National Convention in Tampa, Florida, on August 28, 2012 (a). Pageantry and symbolism, such as the flag motifs and political buttons shown on this Wisconsin attendee's hat

(b), reign supreme during national conventions. (credit a, b: modification of work by Mallory Benedict/PBS NewsHour)

There are rarely surprises at the modern convention. Thanks to party rules, the nominee for each party is generally already clear. In 2008, John McCain had locked up the Republican nomination in March by having enough delegates, while in 2012, President Obama was an unchallenged incumbent and hence people knew he would be the nominee. In 2016, both apparent nominees (Democrat Hillary Clinton and Republican Donald Trump) faced primary opponents who stayed in the race even when the nominations were effectively sewn up—Democrat Bernie Sanders and Republican Ted Cruz—though no “convention surprise” took place. The naming of the vice president is generally not a surprise either. Even if a presidential nominee tries to keep it a secret, the news often leaks out before the party convention or official announcement. In 2004, the media announced John Edwards was John Kerry’s running mate. The Kerry campaign had not made a formal announcement, but an amateur photographer had taken a picture of Edwards’ name being added to the candidate’s plane and posted it to an aviation message board. In 2020, strong rumors circulated about Senator Kamala Harris (D-CA) being tapped for the ticket, with confirmation of that choice coming days later.⁹⁷

Despite the lack of surprises, there are several reasons to host traditional conventions. First, the parties require that the delegates officially cast their ballots. Delegates from each state come to the national party convention to publicly state who their state’s voters selected as the nominee.

Second, delegates will bring state-level concerns and issues to the national convention for discussion, while local-level delegates bring concerns and issues to state-level conventions. This list of issues that concern local party members, like limiting abortions in a state or removing restrictions on gun ownership, are called *planks*, and they will be discussed and voted upon by the delegates and party leadership at the convention. Just as wood planks make a platform, issues important to the party and party delegates make up the party platform. The parties take the cohesive list of issues and concerns and frame the election around the platform. Candidates will try to keep to the platform when campaigning, and outside groups that support them, such as super PACs, may also try to keep to these issues.

Third, conventions are covered by most news networks and cable programs. This helps the party nominee get positive attention while surrounded by loyal delegates, family members, friends, and colleagues. For presidential candidates, this positivity often leads to a bump in popularity, so the candidate gets a small increase in favorability. If a candidate does not get the bump, however, the campaign manager has to evaluate whether the candidate is connecting well with the voters or is out of step with the party faithful. In 2004, John Kerry spent the Democratic convention talking about getting U.S. troops out of the war in Iraq and increasing spending at home. Yet after his patriotic and positive convention, Gallup recorded no convention bump and the voters did not appear more likely to vote for him.

GENERAL ELECTIONS AND ELECTION DAY

The general election campaign period occurs between mid-August and early November. These elections are simpler than primaries and conventions, because there are only two major party candidates and a few minor party candidates. About 50 percent of voters will make their decisions based on party membership, so the candidates will focus on winning over independent voters and visiting states where the election is close.⁹⁸ In 2016, both candidates sensed shifts in the electorate that led them to visit states that were not recently battleground states. Clinton visited Republican stronghold Arizona as Latino voter interest surged. Defying conventional campaign movements, Trump spent many hours over the last days of the campaign in the Democratic Rust Belt states, namely Michigan and Wisconsin. President Trump ended up winning both states and industrial Pennsylvania by narrow margins, allowing him to achieve a comfortable majority in the Electoral College. In 2020, during the COVID-19 pandemic, the two major-party nominees adopted very different approaches. In seeking re-election, President Trump eschewed CDC recommendations for social distancing and held large in-person rallies, while Joe Biden made fewer public appearances, which were largely carried to audiences virtually.⁹⁹

Debates are an important element of the general election season, allowing voters to see candidates answer questions on policy and prior decisions. While most voters think only of presidential debates, the general election season sees many debates. In a number of states, candidates for governor are expected to participate in televised debates, as are candidates running for the U.S. Senate. Debates not only give voters a chance to hear answers, but also to see how candidates hold up under stress. Because television and the Internet make it possible to stream footage to a wide audience, modern campaign managers understand the importance of a debate ([Figure 9.15](#)).



Figure 9.15 Sailors on the USS *McCampbell*, based out of Yokosuka, Japan, watch the first presidential debate between President Barack Obama and former Massachusetts governor Mitt Romney on October 4, 2012.

In 1960, the first televised presidential debate showed that answering questions well is not the only way to impress voters. Senator John F. Kennedy, the Democratic nominee, and Vice

President Richard Nixon, the Republican nominee, prepared in slightly different ways for their first of four debates. Although both studied answers to possible questions, Kennedy also worked on the delivery of his answers, including accent, tone, facial displays, and body movements, as well as overall appearance. Nixon, however, was ill in the days before the debate and appeared sweaty and gaunt. He also chose not to wear makeup, a decision that left his pale, unshaven face vulnerable.¹⁰⁰ Interestingly, while people who watched the debate thought Kennedy won, those listening on radio saw the debate as more of a draw.

Insider Perspective

Inside the Debate

Debating an opponent in front of sixty million television voters is intimidating. Most presidential candidates spend days, if not weeks, preparing. Newspapers and cable news programs proclaim winners and losers, and debates can change the tide of a campaign. Yet, Paul Begala, a strategist with Bill Clinton's 1992 campaign, saw debates differently.

In one of his columns for CNN, Begala recommends that candidates relax and have a little fun. Debates are relatively easy, he says, more like a scripted program than an interview that puts candidates on the spot. They can memorize answers and deliver them convincingly, making sure they hit their mark. Second, a candidate needs a clear message explaining why the voters should pick them. Is the candidate a needed change? Or the only experienced candidate? If the candidate's debate answers reinforce this message, the voters will remember. Third, candidates should be humorous, witty, and comfortable with their knowledge. Trying to be too formal or cramming information at the last minute will cause the candidate to be awkward or get overwhelmed. Finally, a candidate is always on camera. Making faces, sighing at an opponent, or simply making a mistake gives the media something to discuss and can cause a loss. In essence, Begala argues that if candidates wish to do well, preparation and confidence are key factors.¹⁰¹

Is Begala's advice good? Why or why not? What positives or negatives would make a candidate's debate performance stand out for you as a voter?

While debates are not just about a candidate's looks, most debate rules contain language that prevents candidates from artificially enhancing their physical qualities. For example, prior rules have prohibited shoes that increase a candidate's height, banned prosthetic devices that change a candidate's physical appearance, and limited camera angles to prevent unflattering side and back shots. Candidates and their campaign managers are aware that visuals matter.

Debates are generally over by the end of October, just in time for Election Day. Beginning with the election of 1792, presidential elections were to be held in the thirty-four days prior to the "first Wednesday in December."¹⁰² In 1845, Congress passed legislation that moved the presidential Election Day to the first Tuesday after the first Monday in November, and in 1872, elections for the House of Representatives were also moved to that same Tuesday.¹⁰³ The United States was then an agricultural country, and because a number of states restricted voting to property-owning males over twenty-one, farmers made up nearly 74 percent of voters.¹⁰⁴ The tradition of Election Day to fall in November allowed time for the lucrative fall

harvest to be brought in and the farming season to end. And, while not all members of government were of the same religion, many wanted to ensure that voters were not kept from the polls by a weekend religious observance. Finally, business and mercantile concerns often closed their books on the first of the month. Rather than let accounting get in the way of voting, the bill's language forces Election Day to fall between the second and eighth of the month.

THE ELECTORAL COLLEGE

Once the voters have cast ballots in November and all the election season madness comes to a close, races for governors and local representatives may be over, but the constitutional process of electing a president has only begun. The electors of the Electoral College travel to their respective state capitols and cast their votes in mid-December, often by signing a certificate recording their vote. In most cases, electors cast their ballots for the candidate who won the majority of votes in their state. The states then forward the certificates to the U.S. Senate.

The number of [Electoral College](#) votes granted to each state equals the total number of representatives and senators that state has in the U.S. Congress or, in the case of Washington, DC, as many electors as it would have if it were a state. The number of representatives may fluctuate based on state population, which is determined every ten years by the U.S. Census, mandated by Article I, Section 2, of the Constitution. However, since the Permanent Apportionment Act of 1929, the total number of representatives in Congress has been fixed at 435. Accordingly, for the 2024 presidential election, there will be a total of 538 electors in the Electoral College, and a majority of 270 electoral votes is required to win the presidency.

Once the electoral votes have been read by the president of the Senate (i.e., the vice president of the United States) during a special joint session of Congress in January, the presidential candidate who received the majority of electoral votes is officially named president. Should a tie occur, the sitting House of Representatives elects the president, with each state receiving one vote. While this rarely occurs, both the 1800 and the 1824 elections were decided by the House of Representatives. As election night 2016 played out after the polls closed, one such scenario was in play for a tie. However, the states that Hillary Clinton needed to make that tie were lost narrowly to Trump. Had the tie occurred, the Republican House would have likely selected Trump as president anyway. As Election Day 2020 neared, the context favored Biden, yet it was still possible that Trump might narrowly win key battleground states and find a way to win the Electoral College. This did not occur, as Biden won the popular vote and the Electoral College decisively. Still, based on the erroneous assumption that the election had been stolen, thousands of Trump supporters stormed the U.S. Capitol building to prevent the House and Senate from completing a final tabulation of Biden's victory. The bloody attempted insurrection did not succeed, however, and the votes were finalized in the early overnight hours of January 7th with Vice President Mike Pence presiding.

As political parties became stronger and the Progressive Era's influence shaped politics from the 1890s to the 1920s, states began to allow state parties rather than legislators to nominate a slate of electors. Electors cannot be elected officials nor can they work for the federal government. Since the Republican and Democratic parties choose faithful party members who

have worked hard for their candidates, the modern system decreases the chance they will vote differently from the state’s voters.

There is no guarantee of this, however. Occasionally there are examples of *faithless electors*. In 2000, the majority of the District of Columbia’s voters cast ballots for Al Gore, and all three electoral votes should have been cast for him. Yet one of the electors cast a blank ballot, denying Gore a precious electoral vote, reportedly to contest the unequal representation of the District in the Electoral College. In 2004, one of the Minnesota electors voted for John Edwards, the vice presidential nominee, to be president (Figure 9.16) and misspelled the candidate’s last name in the process. Some believe this was a result of confusion rather than a political statement. In the 2016 election, after a campaign to encourage faithless electors in the wake of what some viewed as controversial results, there were seven faithless electors: four in the state of Washington, two in Texas, and one in Hawaii. The electors’ names and votes are publicly available on the electoral certificates, which are scanned and documented by the National Archives and easily available for viewing online.

PRESIDENTIAL ELECTOR CERTIFICATE OF VOTE

We, the undersigned, duly elected and qualified as electors for the President and Vice-President of the United States of America for the respective terms beginning on the twentieth day of January, 2005 in and for the State of Minnesota, do hereby certify that the following are two distinct lists, one of the votes for President and the other of the votes for Vice-President, so cast as aforesaid:

PERSONS VOTED FOR PRESIDENT	NUMBER OF VOTES
JOHN KERRY	9
JOHN EDWARDS	1
PERSONS VOTED FOR VICE-PRESIDENT	NUMBER OF VOTES
JOHN EDWARDS	10

In Testimony whereof, and as required by the Twelfth Amendment to the Constitution of the United States, we have hereunto set our hands on the first Monday after the second Wednesday in December 2004, being the thirtieth day of this month.

Signature of Elector	Signature of Elector
Sonja Berg	Lil Ortendahl
Vi Grooms-Alban	Everett Pettiford
Matthew Little	Jean Schiebel
Michael Meurers	Frank Simon
Tim O'Brien	Chandler Harrison Stevens



(a)

(b)

Figure 9.16 In 2004, Minnesota had an error or faithless voter when one elector cast a vote for John Edwards for president (a). On July 8, 2004, presidential candidate John Kerry and his running mate John Edwards arrive for a campaign rally in Fort Lauderdale, Florida (b). (credit b: modification of work by Richard Block)

In forty-eight states and the District of Columbia, the candidate who wins the most votes in November receives all the state’s electoral votes, and only the electors from that party will vote. This is often called the winner-take-all system. In two states, Nebraska and Maine, the electoral votes are divided. The candidate who wins the state gets two electoral votes, but the winner of each congressional district also receives an electoral vote. In 2008, for example, Republican John McCain won two congressional districts and the majority of the voters across

the state of Nebraska, earning him four electoral votes from Nebraska. Obama won in one congressional district and earned one electoral vote from Nebraska.¹⁰⁵ In 2020, Republican Donald Trump won one congressional district in Maine, and therefore one electoral vote, even though Joe Biden won the state overall, receiving a total of three electoral votes from Maine. This Electoral College voting method is referred to as the district system.

MIDTERM ELECTIONS

Presidential elections garner the most attention from the media and political elites. Yet they are not the only important elections. The even-numbered years between presidential years, like 2014 and 2018, are reserved for congressional elections—sometimes referred to as midterm elections because they are in the middle of the president’s term. Midterm elections are held because all members of the House of Representatives and one-third of the senators come up for reelection every two years.

During a presidential election year, members of Congress often experience the coattail effect, which gives members of a popular presidential candidate’s party an increase in popularity and raises their odds of retaining office. During a midterm election year, however, the president’s party often is blamed for the president’s actions or inaction. Representatives and senators from the sitting president’s party are more likely to lose their seats during a midterm election year. Many recent congressional realignments, in which the House or Senate changed from Democratic to Republican control, occurred because of this reverse-coattail effect during midterm elections. The most recent example is the 2018 election, in which control of the House returned to the Democratic Party after eight years of Republican control.

9.4 Campaigns and Voting

Learning Objectives

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

- Compare campaign methods for elections
- Identify strategies campaign managers use to reach voters
- Analyze the factors that typically affect a voter’s decision

Campaign managers know that to win an election, they must do two things: reach voters with their candidate’s information and get voters to show up at the polls. To accomplish these goals, candidates and their campaigns will often try to target those most likely to vote. Unfortunately, these voters change from election to election and sometimes from year to year. Primary and caucus voters are different from voters who vote only during presidential general elections. Some years see an increase in younger voters turning out to vote. Elections are unpredictable, and campaigns must adapt to be effective.

FUNDRAISING

Even with a carefully planned and orchestrated presidential run, early fundraising is vital for candidates. Money helps them win, and the ability to raise money identifies those who are

viable. In fact, the more money a candidate raises, the more they will continue to raise. EMILY's List, a political action group, was founded on this principle; its name is an acronym for "Early Money Is Like Yeast" (it makes the dough rise). This group helps progressive women candidates gain early campaign contributions, which in turn helps them get further donations ([Figure 9.17](#)).

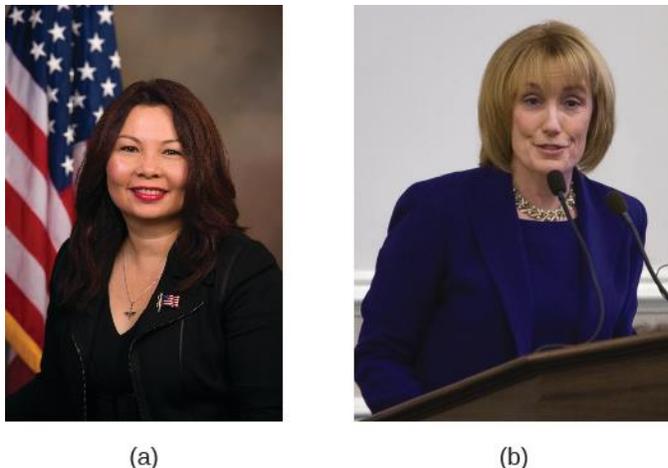


Figure 9.17 EMILY's List candidates include members of Congress, such as Tammy Duckworth (D-IL) (a), and governors, such as Maggie Hassan (b) of New Hampshire, who both ran for U.S. Senate, and won, in 2016. (credit b: modification of work by Roger H. Goun)

Early in the 2016 election season, several Republican candidates had fundraised well ahead of their opponents. Jeb Bush, and Ted Cruz were the top fundraisers by July 2015, with Cruz reporting \$14 million and Bush with \$11 million in contributions. In comparison, Bobby Jindal and George Pataki (who both dropped out relatively early) each reported less than \$1 million in contributions during the same period. Bush later reported over \$100 million in contributions, while the other Republican candidates continued to report lower contributions. Media stories about Bush's fundraising discussed his powerful financial networking, while coverage of the other candidates focused on their lack of money. Donald Trump, the eventual Republican nominee and president, showed a comparatively low fundraising amount in the primary phase as he enjoyed much free press coverage because of his notoriety. He also flirted with the idea of being an entirely self-funded candidate.

The Democratic field in 2020 was crowded, before winnowing down to a handful of contenders early in March, when most dropped out, leaving only Senator Bernie Sanders and former Vice President Joseph Biden. Those who dropped out were former New York City mayor Michael Bloomberg, Pete Buttigieg, former congresswoman Tulsi Gabbard, Senator Amy Klobuchar, and Senator Elizabeth Warren. The March cash-on-hand amounts of these candidates were respectively \$11,179,565; \$6,011,814; \$640,210; \$2,281,636; and \$4,534,180. Sanders later dropped out of the race on April 8 with \$16,176,082 left in his campaign coffers, leaving Biden to sail to the nomination.¹⁰⁶

COMPARING PRIMARY AND GENERAL CAMPAIGNS

Although candidates have the same goal for primary and general elections, which is to win, these elections are very different from each other and require a very different set of strategies. Primary elections are more difficult for the voter. There are more candidates vying to become their party's nominee, and party identification is not a useful cue because each party has many candidates rather than just one. In the 2016 presidential election, Republican voters in the early primaries were presented with a number of options, including Mike Huckabee, Donald Trump, Jeb Bush, Ted Cruz, Marco Rubio, John Kasich, Chris Christie, Carly Fiorina, Ben Carson, and more. (Huckabee, Christie, and Fiorina dropped out relatively early.) In 2020, Democrats had to decide between Joe Biden, Bernie Sanders, Kamala Harris, Pete Buttigieg, Michael Bloomberg, Cory Booker, Amy Klobuchar, and Elizabeth Warren. Voters must find more information about each candidate to decide which is closest to their preferred issue positions. Due to time limitations, voters may not research all the candidates. Nor will all the candidates get enough media or debate time to reach the voters. These issues make campaigning in a primary election difficult, so campaign managers tailor their strategy.

First, name recognition is extremely important. Voters are unlikely to cast a vote for an unknown. Some candidates, like Hillary Clinton and Jeb Bush in 2016 or Joe Biden and Bernie Sanders in 2020, have held or are related to someone who held national office, but most candidates will be governors, senators, or local politicians who are less well-known nationally. Barack Obama was a junior senator from Illinois and Bill Clinton was a governor from Arkansas prior to running for president. Voters across the country had little information about them, and both candidates needed media time to become known. While well-known candidates have longer records that can be attacked by the opposition, they also have an easier time raising campaign funds because their odds of winning are better. Newer candidates face the challenge of proving themselves during the short primary season and are more likely to lose. In 2016, both eventual party nominees had massive name recognition. Hillary Clinton enjoyed notoriety from having been First Lady, a U.S. senator from New York, and secretary of state. Donald Trump had name recognition from being an iconic real estate tycoon with Trump buildings all over the world plus a reality TV star via shows like *The Apprentice*. In 2020, Democratic nominee Joe Biden had name recognition for having served in the U.S. Senate for many years and for serving two terms as vice president to President Barack Obama.

Second, visibility is crucial when a candidate is one in a long parade of faces. Given that voters will want to find quick, useful information about each, candidates will try to get the media's attention and pick up momentum. Media attention is especially important for newer candidates. Most voters assume a candidate's website and other campaign material will be skewed, showing only the most positive information. The media, on the other hand, are generally considered more reliable and unbiased than a candidate's campaign materials, so voters turn to news networks and journalists to pick up information about the candidates' histories and issue positions. Candidates are aware of voters' preference for quick information and news and try to get interviews or news coverage for themselves. Candidates also benefit from news coverage that is longer and cheaper than campaign ads.

For all these reasons, campaign ads in primary elections rarely mention political parties and instead focus on issue positions or name recognition. Many of the best primary ads help the voters identify issue positions they have in common with the candidate. In 2008, for example, Hillary Clinton ran a holiday ad in which she was seen wrapping presents. Each present had a card with an issue position listed, such as “bring back the troops” or “universal pre-kindergarten.” In a similar, more humorous vein, Mike Huckabee gained name recognition and issue placement with his 2008 primary ad. The “HuckChuck” spot had Chuck Norris repeat Huckabee’s name several times while listing the candidate’s issue positions. Norris’s line, “Mike Huckabee wants to put the IRS out of business,” was one of many statements that repeatedly used Huckabee’s name, increasing voters’ recognition of it. While neither of these candidates won the nomination, the ads were viewed by millions and were successful as primary ads.

By the general election, each party has only one candidate, and campaign ads must accomplish a different goal with different voters. Because most party-affiliated voters will cast a ballot for their party’s candidate, the campaigns must try to reach the independent and undecided, as well as try to convince their party members to get out and vote. Some ads will focus on issue and policy positions, comparing the two main party candidates. Other ads will remind party loyalists why it is important to vote. President Lyndon B. Johnson used the infamous “Daisy Girl” ad, which cut from a little girl counting daisy petals to an atomic bomb being dropped, to explain why voters needed to turn out and vote for him. If the voters stayed home, Johnson implied, his opponent, Republican Barry Goldwater, might start an atomic war. The ad aired once as a paid ad on NBC before it was pulled, but the footage appeared on other news stations as newscasters discussed the controversy over it.¹⁰⁷ More recently, in the 2020 campaign, Joe Biden used the “What Happens Now” ad to extol Biden’s background in managing crises in contrast to President Trump’s mismanagement of the COVID-19 pandemic.¹⁰⁸

Part of the reason Johnson’s campaign ad worked is that more voters turn out for a general election than for other elections. These additional voters are often less ideological and more independent, making them harder to target but possible to win over. They are also less likely to complete a lot of research on the candidates, so campaigns often try to create emotion-based negative ads. While negative ads may decrease voter turnout by making voters more cynical about politics and the election, voters watch and remember them.¹⁰⁹

Another source of negative ads is from groups outside the campaigns. Sometimes, shadow campaigns, run by political action committees and other organizations without the coordination or guidance of candidates, also use negative ads to reach voters. Even before the *Citizens United* decision allowed corporations and interest groups to run ads supporting candidates, shadow campaigns existed. In 2004, the Swift Boat Veterans for Truth organization ran ads attacking John Kerry’s military service record, and MoveOn attacked George W. Bush’s decision to commit to the wars in Afghanistan and Iraq. In 2020, super PACs poured more than \$2.3 billion into supporting candidates.¹¹⁰

Link to Learning

Want to know how much money federal candidates and PACs are raising? Visit the Campaign Finance Disclosure Portal at the [Federal Election Commission](https://www.fec.gov/) website.

General campaigns also try to get voters to the polls in closely contested states. In 2004, realizing that it would be difficult to convince Ohio Democrats to vote Republican, George W. Bush's campaign focused on getting the state's Republican voters to the polls. The volunteers walked through precincts and knocked on Republican doors to raise interest in Bush and the election. Volunteers also called Republican and former Republican households to remind them when and where to vote.¹¹¹ The strategy worked, and it reminded future campaigns that an organized effort to get out the vote is still a viable way to win an election.

TECHNOLOGY

Campaigns have always been expensive. Also, they have sometimes been negative and nasty. The 1828 "Coffin Handbill" that John Quincy Adams ran, for instance, listed the names and circumstances of the executions his opponent Andrew Jackson had ordered (Figure 9.18). This was in addition to gossip and verbal attacks against Jackson's wife, who had accidentally committed bigamy when she married him without a proper divorce. Campaigns and candidates have not become more amicable in the years since then.



Figure 9.18 The infamous "Coffin Handbill" used by John Quincy Adams against Andrew Jackson in the 1828 presidential election.

Once television became a fixture in homes, campaign advertising moved to the airwaves. Television allowed candidates to connect with the voters through video, allowing them to appeal directly to and connect emotionally with voters. While Adlai Stevenson and Dwight D. Eisenhower were the first to use television in their 1952 and 1956 campaigns, the ads were more like jingles with images. Stevenson’s “Let’s Not Forget the Farmer” ad had a catchy tune, but its animated images were not serious and contributed little to the message. The “Eisenhower Answers America” spots allowed Eisenhower to answer policy questions, but his answers were glib rather than helpful.

John Kennedy’s campaign was the first to use images to show voters that the candidate was the choice for everyone. His ad, “Kennedy,” combined the jingle “Kennedy for me” and photographs of a diverse population dealing with life in the United States.

Link to Learning

The [Museum of the Moving Image](#) has collected presidential campaign ads from 1952 through today, including the “Kennedy for Me” spot mentioned above. Take a look and see how candidates have created ads to get the voters’ attention and votes over time.

Over time, however, ads became more negative and manipulative. In reaction, the Bipartisan Campaign Reform Act of 2002, or McCain–Feingold, included a requirement that candidates stand by their ad and include a recorded statement within the ad stating that they approved the message. Although ads, especially those run by super PACs, continue to be negative, candidates can no longer dodge responsibility for them.

Candidates are also frequently using interviews on late night television to get messages out. Soft news, or infotainment, is a new type of news that combines entertainment and information. Shows like *The Daily Show* and *Last Week Tonight* make the news humorous or satirical while helping viewers become more educated about the events around the nation and the world.¹¹² In 2008, Huckabee, Obama, and McCain visited popular programs like *The Daily Show*, *The Colbert Report*, and *Late Night with Conan O’Brien* to target informed voters in the under-45 age bracket. The candidates were able to show their funny sides and appear like average Americans, while talking a bit about their policy preferences. By fall of 2015, *The Late Show with Stephen Colbert* had already interviewed most of the potential presidential candidates, including Hillary Clinton, Bernie Sanders, Jeb Bush, Ted Cruz, and Donald Trump.

The Internet has given candidates a new platform and a new way to target voters. In the 2000 election, campaigns moved online and created websites to distribute information. They also began using search engine results to target voters with ads. In 2004, Democratic candidate Howard Dean used the Internet to reach out to potential donors. Rather than host expensive dinners to raise funds, his campaign posted footage on his website of the candidate eating a turkey sandwich. The gimmick brought over \$200,000 in campaign donations and reiterated Dean’s commitment to be a down-to-earth candidate.

Candidates also use social media, such as Facebook, Twitter, and YouTube, to interact with supporters and get the attention of younger voters. While internet websites continue to proliferate in political campaigns, the advent of social media has taken the influence of internet

information and communications to a new level. Candidates use social media, such as Facebook, Twitter, and YouTube, to interact with supporters and get the attention of young voters. More importantly, social media has become an incredibly important avenue through which citizens talk to each other about politics, sharing positions, memes and jabs to their chosen networks of contacts and friends. The possibility of misinformation and bias in that setting led Facebook and Twitter to begin to monitor for untruths, in some cases deleting the social media accounts of violators, including President Trump.

VOTER DECISION MAKING

When citizens do vote, how do they make their decisions? The election environment is complex and most voters don't have time to research everything about the candidates and issues. Yet they will need to make a fully rational assessment of the choices for an elected office. To meet this goal, they tend to take shortcuts.

One popular shortcut is simply to vote using party affiliation. Many political scientists consider party-line voting to be rational behavior because citizens register for parties based upon either position preference or socialization. Similarly, candidates align with parties based upon their issue positions. A Democrat who votes for a Democrat is very likely selecting the candidate closest to the voter's personal ideology. While party identification is a voting cue, it also makes for a logical decision.

Citizens also use party identification to make decisions via straight-ticket voting—choosing every Republican or Democratic Party member on the ballot. In some states, such as Texas or Michigan, selecting one box at the top of the ballot gives a single party all the votes on the ballot ([Figure 9.19](#)). Straight-ticket voting does cause problems in states that include non-partisan positions on the ballot. In Michigan, for example, the top of the ballot (presidential, gubernatorial, senatorial and representative seats) will be partisan, and a straight-ticket vote will give a vote to all the candidates in the selected party. But the middle or bottom of the ballot includes seats for local offices or judicial seats, which are non-partisan. These offices would receive no vote, because the straight-ticket votes go only to partisan seats. In 2010, actors from the former political drama *The West Wing* came together to create an advertisement for Mary McCormack's sister Bridget, who was running for a non-partisan seat on the Michigan Supreme Court. The ad reminded straight-ticket voters to cast a ballot for the court seats as well; otherwise, they would miss an important election. McCormack won the seat.

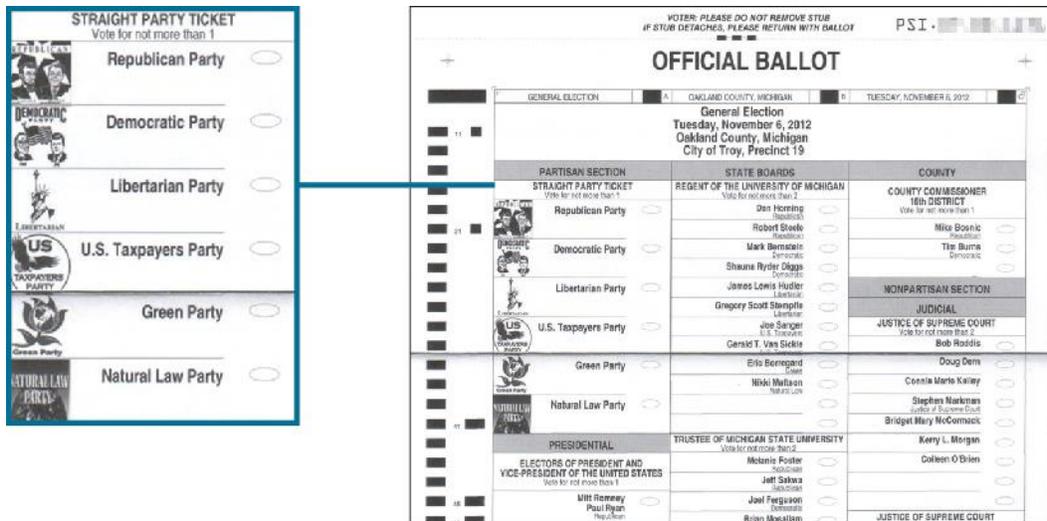


Figure 9.19 Voters in Michigan can use straight-ticket voting. To fill out their ballot, they select one box at the top to give a single party all the votes on the ballot.

Straight-ticket voting does have the advantage of reducing ballot fatigue. Ballot fatigue occurs when someone votes only for the top or important ballot positions, such as president or governor, and stops voting rather than continue to the bottom of a long ballot. In 2012, for example, 70 percent of registered voters in Colorado cast a ballot for the presidential seat, yet only 54 percent voted yes or no on retaining Nathan B. Coats for the state supreme court.¹¹³

Voters make decisions based upon candidates' physical characteristics, such as attractiveness or facial features.¹¹⁴ They may also vote based on gender or race, because they assume the elected official will make policy decisions based on a demographic shared with the voters. Candidates are very aware of voters' focus on these non-political traits. In 2008, a sizable portion of the electorate wanted to vote for either Hillary Clinton or Barack Obama because they offered new demographics—either the first woman or the first Black president. Demographics hurt John McCain that year, because many people believed that at 71 he was too old to be president.¹¹⁵ Hillary Clinton faced this situation again in 2016 as she became the first woman nominee from a major party. In essence, attractiveness can make a candidate appear more competent, which in turn can help him or her ultimately win.¹¹⁶ The 2020 election had a bit of everything. While the two major party nominees were older White men, as was the last-standing Democrat other than Biden, Bernie Sanders, (older even than McCain was in 2008), there were many diverse candidates of different ages who ran for the Democratic nomination. Three women, all U.S. senators, ran serious and competitive campaigns: Elizabeth Warren, Amy Klobuchar, and Kamala Harris (who was tapped for vice president). Representative Tulsi Gabbard (D-HI) ran as well. In terms of race and ethnicity, Harris is of Black and South Asian descent, Senator Cory Booker is Black, former HUD Secretary Julián Castro is Latino, and Tulsi Gabbard and entrepreneur Andrew Yang are of Asian-American/Pacific Islander descent.

Aside from party identification and demographics, voters will also look at issues or the economy when making a decision. For some single-issue voters, a candidate's stance on abortion rights will be a major factor, while other voters may look at the candidates' beliefs on the Second

Amendment and gun control. Single-issue voting may not require much more effort by the voter than simply using party identification; however, many voters are likely to seek out a candidate's position on a multitude of issues before making a decision. They will use the information they find in several ways.

Retrospective voting occurs when the voter looks at the candidate's past actions and the past economic climate and makes a decision only using these factors. This behavior may occur during economic downturns or after political scandals, when voters hold politicians accountable and do not wish to give the representative a second chance. *Pocketbook voting* occurs when voters look at their personal finances and circumstances to decide how to vote. Someone having a harder time finding employment or seeing investments suffer during a particular candidate or party's control of government will vote for a different candidate or party than the incumbent. *Prospective voting* occurs when the voter applies information about a candidate's past behavior to decide how the candidate will act in the future. For example, will the candidate's voting record or actions help the economy and better prepare the candidate to be president during an economic downturn? The challenge of this voting method is that the voters must use a lot of information, which might be conflicting or unrelated, to make an educated guess about how the candidate will perform in the future. Voters do appear to rely on prospective and retrospective voting more often than on pocketbook voting.

In some cases, a voter may cast a ballot strategically. In these cases, a person may vote for a second- or third-choice candidate, either because the preferred candidate cannot win or in the hope of preventing another candidate from winning. This type of voting is likely to happen when there are multiple candidates for one position or multiple parties running for one seat.¹¹⁷ In Florida and Oregon, for example, Green Party voters (who tend to be liberal) may choose to vote for a Democrat if the Democrat might otherwise lose to a Republican. Similarly, in Georgia, while a Libertarian may be the preferred candidate, the voter would rather have the Republican candidate win over the Democrat and will vote accordingly.¹¹⁸

One other way voters make decisions is through incumbency. In essence, this is retrospective voting, but it requires little of the voter. In congressional and local elections, incumbents win reelection up to 90 percent of the time, a result called the incumbency advantage. What contributes to this advantage and often persuades competent challengers not to run? First, incumbents have name recognition and voting records. The media is more likely to interview them because they have advertised their name over several elections and have voted on legislation affecting the state or district. Incumbents also have won election before, which increases the odds that political action committees and interest groups will give them money; most interest groups will not give money to a candidate destined to lose.

Incumbents also have franking privileges, which allows them a limited amount of free mail to communicate with the voters in their district. While these mailings may not be sent in the days leading up to an election—sixty days for a senator and ninety days for a House member—congressional representatives are able to build a free relationship with voters through them.¹¹⁹ Moreover, incumbents have exiting campaign organizations, while challengers must build new

organizations from the ground up. Lastly, incumbents have more money in their war chests than most challengers.

Another incumbent advantage is gerrymandering, the drawing of district lines to guarantee a desired electoral outcome. Every ten years, following the U.S. Census, the number of House of Representatives members allotted to each state is determined based on a state's population. If a state gains or loses seats in the House, the state must redraw districts to ensure each district has an equal number of citizens. States may also choose to redraw these districts at other times and for other reasons.¹²⁰ If the district is drawn to ensure that it includes a majority of Democratic or Republican Party members within its boundaries, for instance, then candidates from those parties will have an advantage.

Gerrymandering helps local legislative candidates and members of the House of Representatives, who win reelection over 90 percent of the time. Senators and presidents do not benefit from gerrymandering because they are not running in a district. Presidents and senators win states, so they benefit only from war chests and name recognition. This is one reason why senators running in 2020, for example, won reelection only 84 percent of the time, while the U.S. House rate was 95 percent.¹²¹

Link to Learning

Since 1960, the [American National Election Studies](#) has been asking a random sample of voters a battery of questions about how they voted. The data are available at the Inter-university Consortium for Political and Social Research at the University of Michigan.

9.5 Direct Democracy

Learning Objectives

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

- Identify the different forms of and reasons for direct democracy
- Summarize the steps needed to place initiatives on a ballot
- Explain why some policies are made by elected representatives and others by voters

The majority of elections in the United States are held to facilitate indirect democracy. Elections allow the people to pick representatives to serve in government and make decisions on the citizens' behalf. Representatives pass laws, implement taxes, and carry out decisions. Although direct democracy had been used in some of the colonies, the framers of the Constitution granted voters no legislative or executive powers, because they feared the masses would make poor decisions and be susceptible to whims. During the Progressive Era, however, governments began granting citizens more direct political power. States that formed and joined the United States after the Civil War often assigned their citizens some methods of directly implementing laws or removing corrupt politicians. Citizens now use these powers at the ballot to change laws and direct public policy in their states.

DIRECT DEMOCRACY DEFINED

Direct democracy occurs when policy questions go directly to the voters for a decision. These decisions include funding, budgets, candidate removal, candidate approval, policy changes, and constitutional amendments. Not all states allow direct democracy, nor does the United States government.

Direct democracy takes many forms. It may occur locally or statewide. Local direct democracy allows citizens to propose and pass laws that affect local towns or counties. Towns in Massachusetts, for example, may choose to use town meetings, which is a meeting comprised of the town's eligible voters, to make decisions on budgets, salaries, and local laws.¹²²

Link to Learning

To learn more about what type of direct democracy is practiced in your state, visit the University of Southern California's [Initiative & Referendum Institute](#). This site also allows you to look up initiatives and measures that have appeared on state ballots.

Statewide direct democracy allows citizens to propose and pass laws that affect state constitutions, state budgets, and more. Most states in the western half of the country allow citizens all forms of direct democracy, while most states on the eastern and southern regions allow few or none of these forms ([Figure 9.20](#)). States that joined the United States after the Civil War are more likely to have direct democracy, possibly due to the influence of Progressives during the late 1800s and early 1900s. Progressives believed citizens should be more active in government and democracy, a hallmark of direct democracy.

Initiative and Popular Referendum Provisions by State, 2021

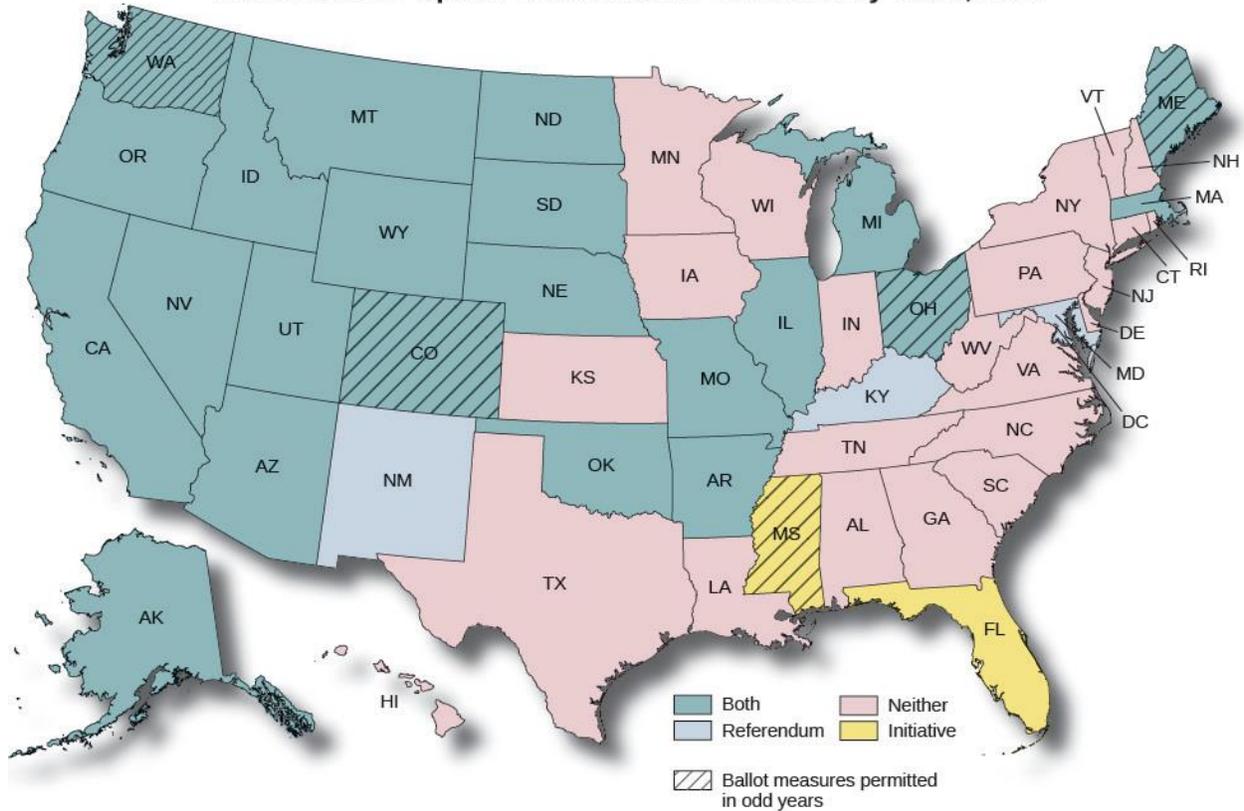


Figure 9.20 This map shows which states allow citizens to place laws and amendments on the ballot for voter approval or repeal.

There are three forms of direct democracy used in the United States. A referendum asks citizens to confirm or repeal a decision made by the government. A legislative referendum occurs when a legislature passes a law or a series of constitutional amendments and presents them to the voters to ratify with a yes or no vote. A judicial appointment to a state supreme court may require voters to confirm whether the judge should remain on the bench. Popular referendums occur when citizens petition to place a referendum on a ballot to repeal legislation enacted by their state government. This form of direct democracy gives citizens a limited amount of power, but it does not allow them to overhaul policy or circumvent the government.

The most common form of direct democracy is the initiative, or proposition. An initiative is normally a law or constitutional amendment proposed and passed by the citizens of a state. Initiatives completely bypass the legislatures and governor, but they are subject to review by the state courts if they are not consistent with the state or national constitution. The process to pass an initiative is not easy and varies from state to state. Most states require that a petitioner or the organizers supporting an initiative file paperwork with the state and include the proposed text of the initiative. This allows the state or local office to determine whether the measure is legal, as well as estimate the cost of implementing it. This approval may come at the beginning of the process or after organizers have collected signatures. The initiative may be

reviewed by the state attorney general, as in Oregon’s procedures, or by another state official or office. In Utah, the lieutenant governor reviews measures to ensure they are constitutional.

Next, organizers gather registered voters’ signatures on a petition. The number of signatures required is often a percentage of the number of votes from a past election. In California, for example, the required numbers are 5 percent (law) and 8 percent (amendment) of the votes in the last gubernatorial election. This means through 2022, it will take 623,212 signatures to place a law on the ballot and 997,139 to place a constitutional amendment on the ballot.¹²³

Once the petition has enough signatures from registered voters, it is approved by a state agency or the secretary of state for placement on the ballot. Signatures are verified by the state or a county elections office to ensure the signatures are valid. If the petition is approved, the initiative is then placed on the next ballot, and the organization campaigns to voters.

While the process is relatively clear, each step can take a lot of time and effort. First, most states place a time limit on the signature collection period. Organizations may have only 150 days to collect signatures, as in California, or as long as two years, as in Arizona. For larger states, the time limit may pose a dilemma if the organization is trying to collect more than 500,000 signatures from registered voters. Second, the state may limit who may circulate the petition and collect signatures. Some states, like Colorado, restrict what a signature collector may earn, while Oregon bans payments to signature-collecting groups. And the minimum number of signatures required affects the number of ballot measures. California had twelve ballot measures on the 2020 general election ballot, because the state requires fewer signatures to get a constitutional amendment or initiative on the ballot than in a state like Oklahoma, where the number of required signatures is higher. In Oklahoma, the required numbers are almost double those of California—8 percent (law) and 15 percent (amendment) of the votes in the last gubernatorial election. California voters may also have an equally high number of local ballot initiatives. For example, a San Francisco voter in the 2016 election had a total of forty-two ballot measures to consider, seventeen at the state level and twenty-five at the city and county level.

Another consideration is that, as we’ve seen, voters in primaries are more ideological and more likely to research the issues. Measures that are complex or require a lot of research, such as a lend-lease bond or changes in the state’s eminent-domain language, may do better on a primary ballot. Measures that deal with social policy, such as laws preventing animal cruelty, may do better on a general election ballot, when more of the general population comes out to vote. Proponents for the amendments or laws will take this into consideration as they plan.

Finally, the recall is one of the more unusual forms of direct democracy; it allows voters to decide whether to remove a government official from office. All states have ways to remove officials, but removal by voters is less common. The recall of California Governor Gray Davis in 2003 and his replacement by Arnold Schwarzenegger is perhaps one of the more famous such recalls. The 2012 attempt by voters in Wisconsin to recall Governor Scott Walker shows how contentious and expensive a recall can be. Walker spent over \$60 million in the election to retain his seat.¹²⁴

POLICYMAKING THROUGH DIRECT DEMOCRACY

Politicians are often unwilling to wade into highly political waters if they fear it will harm their chances for reelection. When a legislature refuses to act or change current policy, initiatives allow citizens to take part in the policy process and end the impasse. In Colorado, Amendment 64 allowed the recreational use of marijuana by adults, despite concerns that state law would then conflict with national law. Colorado and Washington's legalization of recreational marijuana use started a trend, leading to more states adopting similar laws.

Finding a Middle Ground

Too Much Democracy?

How much direct democracy is too much? When citizens want one policy direction and government prefers another, who should prevail?

Consider recent laws and decisions about marijuana. California was the first state to allow the use of medical marijuana, after the passage of Proposition 215 in 1996. Just a few years later, however, in *Gonzales v. Raich* (2005), the Supreme Court ruled that the U.S. government had the authority to criminalize the use of marijuana. In 2009, Attorney General Eric Holder said the federal government would not seek to prosecute patients using marijuana medically, citing limited resources and other priorities. Perhaps emboldened by the national government's stance, Colorado voters approved recreational marijuana use in 2012. Since then, other states have followed. Forty-two states and the District of Columbia now have laws in place that legalize the use of marijuana to varying degrees. In a number of these cases, the decision was made by voters through initiatives and direct democracy ([Figure 9.21](#)).

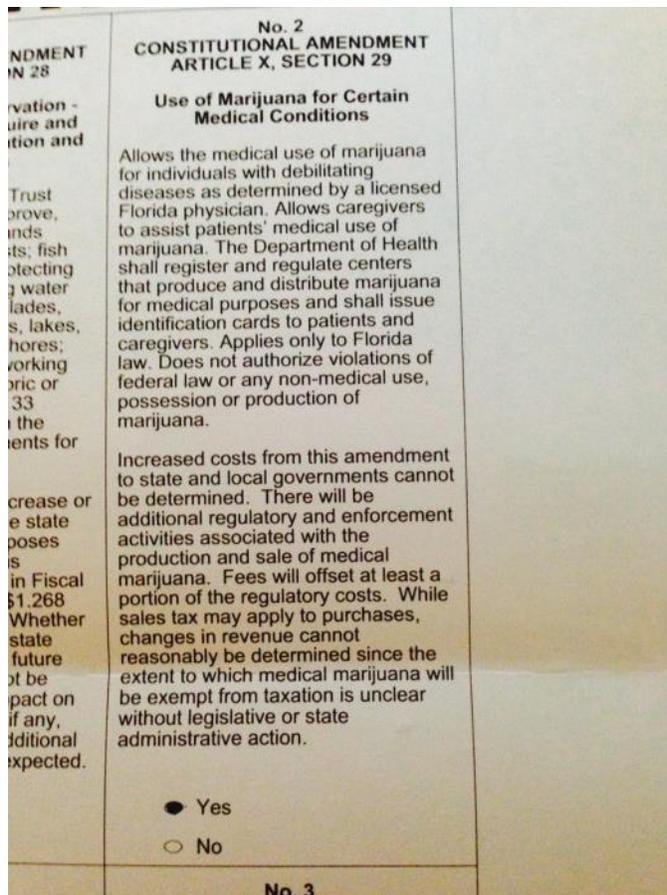


Figure 9.21 Caption: In 2014, Florida voters considered a proposed amendment to the Florida constitution that would allow doctors to recommend the use of marijuana for patient use. The ballot initiative received 58 percent of the vote, just short of the 60 percent required to pass in Florida.

So where is the problem? First, while citizens of these states believe smoking or consuming marijuana should be legal, the U.S. government does not. The Controlled Substances Act (CSA), passed by Congress in 1970, declares marijuana a dangerous drug and makes its sale a prosecutable act. And despite Holder's statement, a 2013 memo by James Cole, the deputy attorney general, reminded states that marijuana use is still illegal.¹²⁵ But the federal government cannot enforce the CSA on its own; it relies on the states' help. And while Congress has decided not to prosecute patients using marijuana for medical reasons, it has not waived the Justice Department's right to prosecute recreational use.¹²⁶

Direct democracy has placed the states and its citizens in an interesting position. States have a legal obligation to enforce state laws and the state constitution, yet they also must follow the laws of the United States. Citizens who use marijuana legally in their state are not using it legally in their country. This leads many to question whether direct democracy gives citizens too much power.

Is it a good idea to give citizens the power to pass laws? Or should this power be subjected to checks and balances, as legislative bills are? Why or why not?

Direct democracy has drawbacks, however. One is that it requires more of voters. Instead of voting based on party, the voter is expected to read and become informed to make smart decisions. Initiatives can fundamentally change a constitution or raise taxes. Recalls remove politicians from office. These are not small decisions. Most citizens, however, do not have the time to perform a lot of research before voting. Given the high number of measures on some ballots, this may explain why many citizens simply skip ballot measures they do not understand. Direct democracy ballot items regularly earn fewer votes than the choice of a governor or president.

When citizens rely on television ads, initiative titles, or advice from others in determining how to vote, they can become confused and make the wrong decisions. In 2008, Californians voted on Proposition 8, titled “Eliminates Rights of Same-Sex Couples to Marry.” A yes vote meant a voter wanted to define marriage as only between a woman and man. Even though the information was clear and the law was one of the shortest in memory, many voters were confused. Some thought of the amendment as the same-sex marriage amendment. In short, some people voted *for* the initiative because they thought they were voting *for* same-sex marriage. Others voted against it because they were against same-sex marriage.¹²⁷

Direct democracy also opens the door to special interests funding personal projects. Any group can create an organization to spearhead an initiative or referendum. And because the cost of collecting signatures can be high in many states, signature collection may be backed by interest groups or wealthy individuals wishing to use the initiative to pass pet projects. The 2003 recall of California governor Gray Davis faced difficulties during the signature collection phase, but \$2 million in donations by Representative Darrell Issa (R-CA) helped the organization attain nearly one million signatures.¹²⁸ Many commentators argued that this example showed direct democracy is not always a process by the people, but rather a process used by the wealthy and business.



Figure 10.1 The families of the 2012 presidential candidates joined in the festivities at the Democratic National Convention in Charlotte, North Carolina, (left) and the Republican National Convention in Tampa, Florida (right). In 2020, the COVID-19 pandemic prevented both the Democrats and the Republicans from staging traditional nominating conventions. (credit right: modification of work by “PBS NewsHour”/Flickr)

Introduction

In 2012, Barack Obama accepted his second nomination to lead the Democratic Party into the presidential election ([Figure 10.1](#)). During his first term, he had been attacked by pundits for his failure to convince congressional Republicans to work with him. Despite that, he was wildly popular in his own party, and voters reelected him by a comfortable margin. His second term seemed to go no better, however, with disagreements between the parties resulting in government shutdowns and the threat of credit defaults. Yet just a few decades ago, then-president Dwight D. Eisenhower was criticized for failing to create a clear vision for his Republican Party, and Congress was lampooned for what was deemed a lack of real conflict over important issues. Political parties, it seems, can never get it right—they are either too polarizing or too noncommittal.

While people love to criticize political parties, the reality is that the modern political system could not exist without them. This chapter will explore why the party system may be the most important component of any true democracy. What are political parties? Why do they form, and why has the United States typically had only two? Why have political parties become so highly structured? Finally, why does it seem that parties today are more polarized than they have been in the past?

10.1 What Are Parties and How Did They Form?

Learning Objectives

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

- Describe political parties and what they do
- Differentiate political parties from interest groups
- Explain how U.S. political parties formed

At some point, most of us have found ourselves part of a group trying to solve a problem, like picking a restaurant or movie to attend, or completing a big project at school or work. Members of the group probably had various opinions about what should be done. Some may have even refused to help make the decision or to follow it once it had been made. Still others may have been willing to follow along but were less interested in contributing to a workable solution. Because of this disagreement, at some point, someone in the group had to find a way to make a decision, negotiate a compromise, and ultimately do the work needed for the group to accomplish its goals.

This kind of collective action problem is very common in societies, as groups and entire societies try to solve problems or distribute scarce resources. In modern U.S. politics, such problems are usually solved by two important types of organizations: interest groups and political parties. There are many interest groups, all with opinions about what should be done and a desire to influence policy. Because they are usually not officially affiliated with any political party, they generally have no trouble working with either of the major parties. But at some point, a society must find a way of taking all these opinions and turning them into solutions to real problems. That is where political parties come in. Essentially, political parties are groups of people with similar interests who work together to create and implement policies. They do this by gaining control over the government by winning elections. Party platforms guide members of Congress in drafting legislation. Parties guide proposed laws through Congress and inform party members how they should vote on important issues. Political parties also nominate candidates to run for state government, Congress, and the presidency. Finally, they coordinate political campaigns and mobilize voters.

POLITICAL PARTIES AS UNIQUE ORGANIZATIONS

In *Federalist* No. 10, written in the late eighteenth century, James Madison noted that the formation of self-interested groups, which he called factions, was inevitable in any society, as individuals started to work together to protect themselves from the government. Interest groups and political parties are two of the most easily identified forms of factions in the United States. These groups are similar in that they are both mediating institutions responsible for communicating public preferences to the government. They are not themselves government institutions in a formal sense. Neither is directly mentioned in the U.S. Constitution nor do they have any real, legal authority to influence policy. But whereas interest groups often work indirectly to influence our leaders, political parties are organizations that try to directly influence public policy through its members who seek to win and hold public office. Parties accomplish this by identifying and aligning sets of issues that are important to voters in the hopes of gaining support during elections; their positions on these critical issues are often presented in documents known as a party platform ([Figure 10.2](#)), which is adopted at each party's presidential nominating convention every four years. If successful, a party can create a large enough electoral coalition to gain control of the government. Once in power, the party is

then able to deliver, to its voters and elites, the policy preferences they choose by electing its partisans to the government. In this respect, parties provide choices to the electorate, something they are doing that is in such sharp contrast to their opposition.

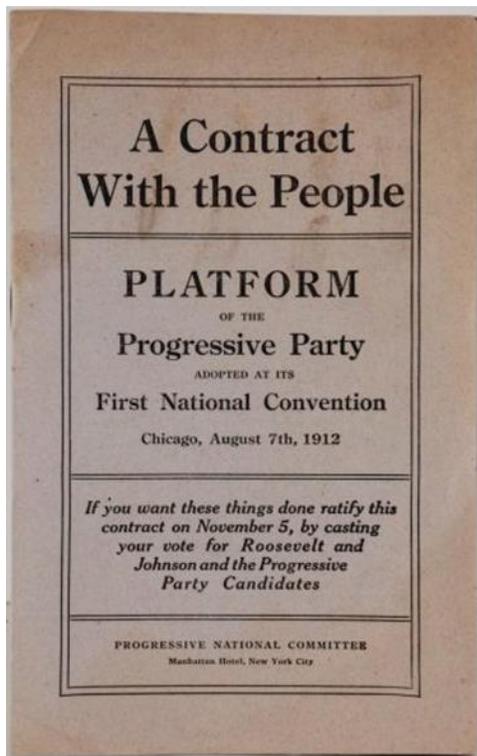


Figure 10.2 The party platform adopted at the first national convention of the Progressive Party in 1912. Among other items, this platform called for disclosure requirements for campaign contributions, an eight-hour workday, a federal income tax, and women’s suffrage.

Link to Learning

You can read the full platform of the [Republican Party](#) and the [Democratic Party](#) at their respective websites.

Winning elections and implementing policy would be hard enough in simple political systems, but in a country as complex as the United States, political parties must take on great responsibilities to win elections and coordinate behavior across the many local, state, and national governing bodies. Indeed, political differences between states and local areas can contribute much complexity. If a party stakes out issue positions on which few people agree and therefore builds too narrow a coalition of voter support, that party may find itself marginalized. But if the party takes too broad a position on issues, it might find itself in a situation where the members of the party disagree with one another, making it difficult to pass legislation, even if the party can secure victory.

It should come as no surprise that the story of U.S. political parties largely mirrors the story of the United States itself. The United States has seen sweeping changes to its size, its relative power, and its social and demographic composition. These changes have been mirrored by the

political parties as they have sought to shift their coalitions to establish and maintain power across the nation and as party leadership has changed. As you will learn later, this also means that the structure and behavior of modern parties largely parallel the social, demographic, and geographic divisions within the United States today. To understand how this has happened, we look at the origins of the U.S. party system.

HOW POLITICAL PARTIES FORMED

National political parties as we understand them today did not really exist in the United States during the early years of the republic. Most politics during the time of the nation's founding were local in nature and based on elite politics, limited suffrage (or the ability to vote in elections), and property ownership. Residents of the various colonies, and later of the various states, were far more interested in events in their state legislatures than in those occurring at the national level or later in the nation's capital. To the extent that national issues did exist, they were largely limited to collective security efforts to deal with external rivals, such as the British or the French, and with perceived internal threats, such as conflicts with Native Americans.

Soon after the United States emerged from the Revolutionary War, however, a rift began to emerge between two groups that had very different views about the future direction of U.S. politics. Thus, from the very beginning of its history, the United States has had a system of government dominated by two different philosophies. Federalists, who were largely responsible for drafting and ratifying the U.S. Constitution, generally favored the idea of a stronger, more centralized republic that had greater control over regulating the economy.¹ Anti-Federalists preferred a more confederate system built on state equality and autonomy.² The Federalist faction, led by Alexander Hamilton, largely dominated the government in the years immediately after the Constitution was ratified. Included in the Federalists was President George Washington, who was initially against the existence of parties in the United States. When Washington decided to exit politics and leave office, he warned of the potential negative effects of parties in his farewell address to the nation, including their potentially divisive nature and the fact that they might not always focus on the common good but rather on partisan ends. However, members of each faction quickly realized that they had a vested interest not only in nominating and electing a president who shared their views, but also in winning other elections. Two loosely affiliated party coalitions, known as the Federalists and the Democratic-Republicans, soon emerged. The Federalists succeeded in electing their first leader, John Adams, to the presidency in 1796, only to see the Democratic-Republicans gain victory under Thomas Jefferson four years later in 1800.

Milestone

The "Revolution of 1800": Uniting the Executive Branch under One Party

When the U.S. Constitution was drafted, its authors were certainly aware that political parties existed in other countries (like Great Britain), but they hoped to avoid them in the United States. They felt the importance of states in the U.S. federal structure would make it difficult for national parties to form. They also hoped that having a college of electors vote for the

executive branch, with the top two vote-getters becoming president and vice president, would discourage the formation of parties. Their system worked for the first two presidential elections, when essentially all the electors voted for George Washington to serve as president. But by 1796, the Federalist and Anti-Federalist camps had organized into electoral coalitions. The Anti-Federalists joined with many others active in the process to become known as the Democratic-Republicans. The Federalist John Adams won the Electoral College vote, but his authority was undermined when the vice presidency went to Democratic-Republican Thomas Jefferson, who finished second. Four years later, the Democratic-Republicans managed to avoid this outcome by coordinating the electors to vote for their top two candidates. But when the vote ended in a tie, it was ultimately left to Congress to decide who would be the third president of the United States ([Figure 10.3](#)).



Figure 10.3 Thomas Jefferson almost lost the presidential election of 1800 to his own running mate when a flaw in the design of the Electoral College led to a tie that had to be resolved by Congress.

In an effort to prevent a similar outcome in the future, Congress and the states voted to ratify the Twelfth Amendment, which went into effect in 1804. This amendment changed the rules so that the president and vice president would be selected through separate elections within the Electoral College, and it altered the method that Congress used to fill the offices in the event that no candidate won a majority. The amendment essentially endorsed the new party system and helped prevent future controversies. It also served as an early effort by the two parties to collude to make it harder for an outsider to win the presidency.

Does the process of selecting the executive branch need to be reformed so that the people elect the president and vice president directly, rather than through the Electoral College? Should the people vote separately on each office rather than voting for both at the same time? Explain your reasoning.

Growing regional tensions eroded the Federalist Party's ability to coordinate elites, and it eventually collapsed following its opposition to the War of 1812.³ The Democratic-Republican Party, on the other hand, eventually divided over whether national resources should be focused

on economic and mercantile development, such as tariffs on imported goods and government funding of internal improvements like roads and canals, or on promoting populist issues that would help the “common man,” such as reducing or eliminating state property requirements that had prevented many men from voting.⁴

In the election of 1824, numerous candidates contended for the presidency, all members of the Democratic-Republican Party. Andrew Jackson won more popular votes and more votes in the Electoral College than any other candidate. However, because he did not win the majority (more than half) of the available electoral votes, the election was decided by the House of Representatives, as required by the Twelfth Amendment. The Twelfth Amendment limited the House’s choice to the three candidates with the greatest number of electoral votes. Thus, Andrew Jackson, with 99 electoral votes, found himself in competition with only John Quincy Adams, the second place finisher with 84 electoral votes, and William H. Crawford, who had come in third with 41. The fourth-place finisher, Henry Clay, who was no longer in contention, had won 37 electoral votes. Clay strongly disliked Jackson, and his ideas on government support for tariffs and internal improvements were similar to those of Adams. Clay thus gave his support to Adams, who was chosen on the first ballot. Jackson considered the actions of Clay and Adams, the son of the Federalist president John Adams, to be an unjust triumph of supporters of the elite and referred to it as “the corrupt bargain.”⁵

This marked the beginning of what historians call the Second Party System (the first parties had been the Federalists and the Jeffersonian Republicans), with the splitting of the Democratic-Republicans and the formation of two new political parties. One half, called simply the Democratic Party, was the party of Jackson; it continued to advocate for the common people by championing westward expansion and opposing a national bank. The branch of the Democratic-Republicans that believed that the national government should encourage economic (primarily industrial) development was briefly known as the National Republicans and later became the Whig Party⁶. In the election of 1828, Democrat Andrew Jackson was triumphant. Three times as many people voted in 1828 as had in 1824, and most cast their ballots for him.⁷

The formation of the Democratic Party marked an important shift in U.S. politics. Rather than being built largely to coordinate elite behavior, the Democratic Party worked to organize the electorate by taking advantage of state-level laws that had extended suffrage from male property owners to nearly all White men.⁸ This change marked the birth of what is often considered the first modern political party in any democracy in the world.⁹ It also dramatically changed the way party politics was, and still is, conducted. For one thing, this new party organization was built to include structures that focused on organizing and mobilizing voters for elections at all levels of government. The party also perfected an existing spoils system, in which support for the party during elections was rewarded with jobs in the government bureaucracy after victory.¹⁰ Many of these positions were given to party bosses and their friends. These men were the leaders of political machines, organizations that secured votes for the party’s candidates or supported the party in other ways. Perhaps more importantly, this election-focused organization also sought to maintain power by creating a broader coalition and thereby expanding the range of issues upon which the party was constructed.¹¹

Link to Learning

Each of the two main U.S. political parties today—the [Democrats](#) and the [Republicans](#)—maintains an extensive website with links to its affiliated statewide organizations, which in turn often maintain links to the party's country organizations.

By comparison, here are websites for the [Green Party](#) and the [Libertarian Party](#) that are two other parties in the United States today.

The Democratic Party emphasized personal politics, which focused on building direct relationships with voters rather than on promoting specific issues. This party dominated national politics from Andrew Jackson's presidential victory in 1828 until the mid-1850s, when regional tensions began to threaten the nation's very existence. The growing power of industrialists, who preferred greater national authority, combined with increasing tensions between the northern and southern states over slavery, led to the rise of the Republican Party and its leader Abraham Lincoln in the election of 1860, while the Democratic Party dominated in the South. Like the Democrats, the Republicans also began to utilize a mass approach to party design and organization. Their opposition to the expansion of slavery, and their role in helping to stabilize the Union during Reconstruction, made them the dominant player in national politics for the next several decades.¹²

The Democratic and Republican parties have remained the two dominant players in the U.S. party system since the Civil War (1861–1865). That does not mean, however, that the system has been stagnant. Every political actor and all citizens have the ability to determine for themselves whether one of the two parties meets their needs and provides an appealing set of policy options, or whether another option is preferable.

At various points in the past 170 years, elites and voters have sought to create alternatives to the existing party system. Political parties that are formed as alternatives to the Republican and Democratic parties are known as third parties, or minor parties ([Figure 10.4](#)). In 1892, a third party known as the Populist Party formed in reaction to what its constituents perceived as the domination of U.S. society by big business and a decline in the power of farmers and rural communities. The Populist Party called for the regulation of railroads, an income tax, and the popular election of U.S. senators, who at this time were chosen by state legislatures and not by ordinary voters.¹³ The party's candidate in the 1892 elections, James B. Weaver, did not perform as well as the two main party candidates, and, in the presidential election of 1896, the Populists supported the Democratic candidate William Jennings Bryan. Bryan lost, and the Populists once again nominated their own presidential candidates in 1900, 1904, and 1908. The party disappeared from the national scene after 1908, but its ideas were similar to those of the Progressive Party, a new political party created in 1912.

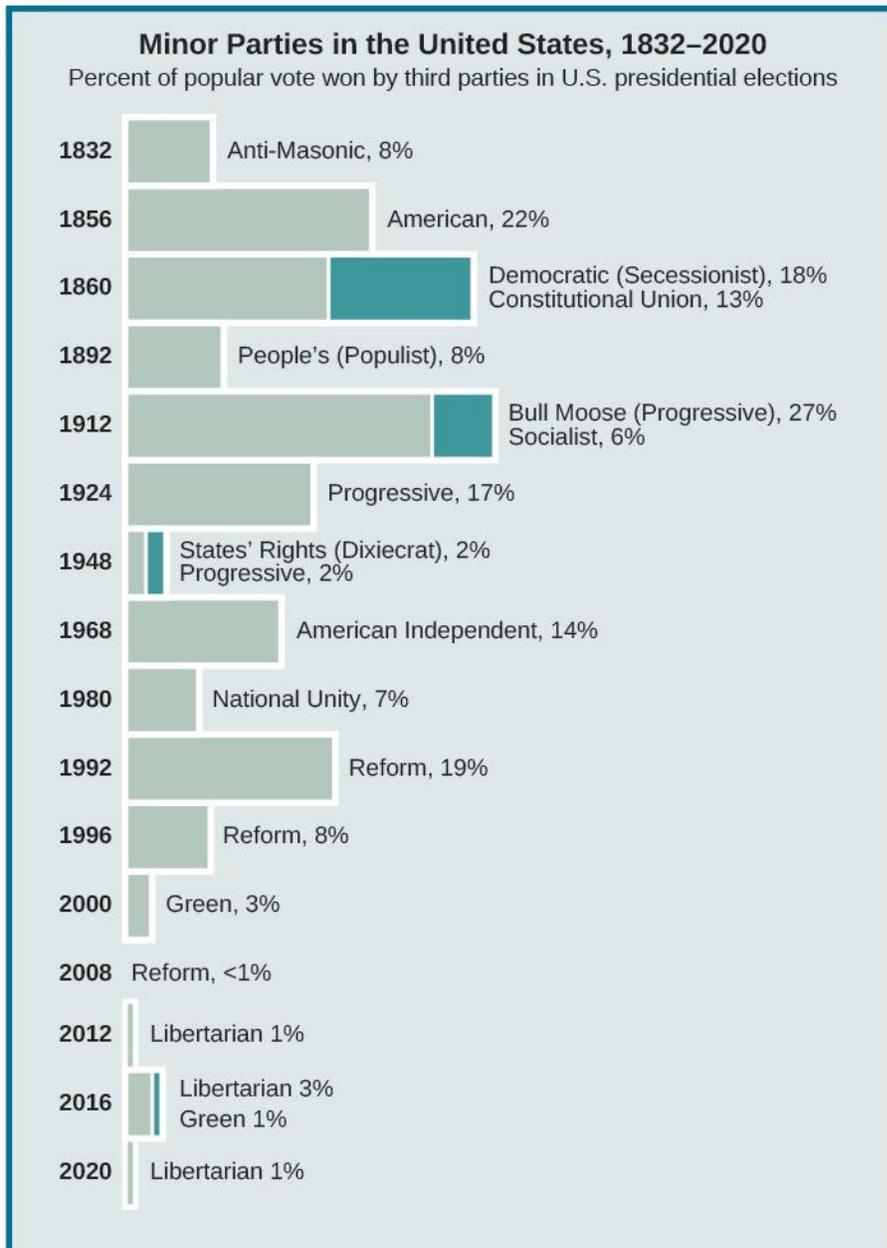


Figure 10.4 Various third parties, also known as minor parties, have appeared in the United States over the years. Some, like the Socialist Party, still exist in one form or another. Others, like the Anti-Masonic Party, which wanted to protect the United States from the influence of the Masonic fraternal order and garnered just under 8 percent of the popular vote in 1832, are gone.

In 1912, former Republican president Theodore Roosevelt attempted to form a third party, known as the Progressive Party, as an alternative to the more business-minded Republicans. The Progressives sought to correct the many problems that had arisen as the United States

transformed itself from a rural, agricultural nation into an increasingly urbanized, industrialized country dominated by big business interests. Among the reforms that the Progressive Party called for in its 1912 platform were women's suffrage, an eight-hour workday, and workers' compensation. The party also favored some of the same reforms as the Populist Party, such as the direct election of U.S. senators and an income tax, although Populists tended to be farmers while the Progressives were from the middle class. In general, Progressives sought to make government more responsive to the will of the people and to end political corruption in government. They wished to break the power of party bosses and political machines, and called upon states to pass laws allowing voters to vote directly on proposed legislation, propose new laws, and recall from office incompetent or corrupt elected officials. The Progressive Party largely disappeared after 1916, and most members returned to the Republican Party.¹⁴ The party enjoyed a brief resurgence in 1924, when Robert "Fighting Bob" La Follette ran unsuccessfully for president under the Progressive banner.

In 1948, two new third parties appeared on the political scene. Henry A. Wallace, a vice president under Franklin Roosevelt, formed a new Progressive Party, which had little in common with the earlier Progressive Party. Wallace favored racial desegregation and believed that the United States should have closer ties to the Soviet Union. Wallace's campaign was a failure, largely because most people believed his policies, including national healthcare, were too much like those of communism, and this party also vanished. The other third party, the States' Rights Democrats, also known as the Dixiecrats, were White, southern Democrats who split from the Democratic Party when Harry Truman, who favored civil rights for African Americans, became the party's nominee for president. The Dixiecrats opposed all attempts by the federal government to end segregation, extend voting rights, prohibit discrimination in employment, or otherwise promote social equality among races.¹⁵ They remained a significant party that threatened Democratic unity throughout the 1950s and 1960s. Other examples of third parties in the United States include the American Independent Party, the Libertarian Party, United We Stand America, the Reform Party, and the Green Party.

None of these alternatives to the two major political parties had much success at the national level, and most are no longer viable parties. All faced the same fate. Formed by charismatic leaders, each championed a relatively narrow set of causes and failed to gain broad support among the electorate. Once their leaders had been defeated or discredited, the party structures that were built to contest elections collapsed. And within a few years, most of their supporters were eventually pulled back into one of the existing parties. To be sure, some of these parties had an electoral impact. For example, the Progressive Party pulled enough votes away from the Republicans to hand the 1912 election to the Democrats. Thus, the third-party rival's principal accomplishment was helping its least-preferred major party win, usually at the short-term expense of the very issue it championed. In the long run, however, many third parties have brought important issues to the attention of the major parties, which then incorporated these issues into their platforms. Understanding why this is the case is an important next step in learning about the issues and strategies of the modern Republican and Democratic parties. In the next section, we look at why the United States has historically been dominated by only two political parties.

10.2 The Two-Party System

Learning Objectives

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

- Describe the effects of winner-take-all elections
- Compare plurality and proportional representation
- Describe the institutional, legal, and social forces that limit the number of parties
- Discuss the concepts of party alignment and realignment

One of the cornerstones of a vibrant democracy is citizens' ability to influence government through voting. In order for that influence to be meaningful, citizens must send clear signals to their leaders about what they wish the government to do. It only makes sense, then, that a democracy will benefit if voters have several clearly differentiated options available to them at the polls on Election Day. Having these options means voters can select a candidate who more closely represents their own preferences on the important issues of the day. It also gives individuals who are considering voting a reason to participate. After all, you are more likely to vote if you care about who wins and who loses. The existence of two major parties, especially in our present era of strong parties, leads to sharp distinctions between the candidates and between the party organizations.

Why do we have two parties? The two-party system came into being because the structure of U.S. elections, with one seat tied to a geographic district, tends to lead to dominance by two major political parties. Even when there are other options on the ballot, most voters understand that minor parties have no real chance of winning even a single office. Hence, they vote for candidates of the two major parties in order to support a potential winner. Of the 535 members of the House and Senate, only a handful identify as something other than Republican or Democrat. Third parties have fared no better in presidential elections. No third-party candidate has ever won the presidency. Some historians or political scientists might consider Abraham Lincoln to have been such a candidate, but in 1860, the Republicans were a major party that had subsumed members of earlier parties, such as the Whig Party, and they were the only major party other than the Democratic Party.

ELECTION RULES AND THE TWO-PARTY SYSTEM

A number of reasons have been suggested to explain why the structure of U.S. elections has resulted in a two-party system. Most of the blame has been placed on the process used to select its representatives. First, most elections at the state and national levels are winner-take-all: The candidate who receives the greatest overall number of votes wins. Winner-take-all elections with one representative elected for one geographic district allow voters to develop a personal relationship with "their" representative to the government. They know exactly whom to blame, or thank, for the actions of that government. But these elections also tend to limit the number of people who run for office. Otherwise-qualified candidates might not stand for election if they feel the incumbent or another candidate has an early advantage in the race. And since voters do not like to waste votes, third parties must convince voters they have a real

chance of winning races before voters will take them seriously. This is a tall order given the vast resources and mobilization tools available to the existing parties, especially if an incumbent is one of the competitors. In turn, the likelihood that third-party challengers will lose an election bid makes it more difficult to raise funds to support later attempts.¹⁶

Winner-take-all systems of electing candidates to office, which exist in several countries other than the United States, require that the winner receive either the majority of votes or a plurality of the votes. U.S. elections are based on plurality voting. Plurality voting, commonly referred to as first-past-the-post, is based on the principle that the individual candidate with the most votes wins, whether or not they gain a majority (51 percent or greater) of the total votes cast. For instance, Abraham Lincoln won the presidency in 1860 even though he clearly lacked majority support given the number of candidates in the race. In 1860, four candidates competed for the presidency: Lincoln, a Republican; two Democrats, one from the northern wing of the party and one from the southern wing; and a member of the newly formed Constitutional Union Party, a southern party that wished to prevent the nation from dividing over the issue of slavery. Votes were split among all four parties, and Lincoln became president with only 40 percent of the vote, not a majority of votes cast but more than any of the other three candidates had received, and enough to give him a majority in the Electoral College, the body that ultimately decides presidential elections. Plurality voting has been justified as the simplest and most cost-effective method for identifying a victor in a democracy. A single election can be held on a single day, and the victor of the competition is easily selected. On the other hand, systems in which people vote for a single candidate in an individual district often cost more money because drawing district lines and registering voters according to district is often expensive and cumbersome.¹⁷

In a system in which individual candidates compete for individual seats representing unique geographic districts, a candidate must receive a fairly large number of votes in order to win. A political party that appeals to only a small percentage of voters will always lose to a party that is more popular.¹⁸ Because second-place (or lower) finishers will receive no reward for their efforts, those parties that do not attract enough supporters to finish first at least some of the time will eventually disappear because their supporters realize they have no hope of achieving success at the polls.¹⁹ The failure of third parties to win and the possibility that they will draw votes away from the party the voter had favored before—resulting in a win for the party the voter liked least—makes people hesitant to vote for the third party's candidates a second time. This has been the fate of all U.S. third parties—the Populist Party, the Progressives, the Dixiecrats, the Reform Party, and others.

In a proportional electoral system, however, parties advertise who is on their candidate list and voters pick a party. Then, legislative seats are doled out to the parties based on the proportion of support each party receives. While the Green Party in the United States might not win a single congressional seat in some years thanks to plurality voting, in a proportional system, it stands a chance to get a few seats in the legislature regardless. For example, assume the Green Party gets 7 percent of the vote. In the United States, 7 percent will never be enough to win a single seat, shutting the Green candidates out of Congress entirely, whereas in a proportional system, the Green Party will get 7 percent of the total number of legislative seats available.

Hence, it could get a foothold for its issues and perhaps increase its support over time. But with plurality voting, it doesn't stand a chance.

Third parties, often born of frustration with the current system, attract supporters from one or both of the existing parties during an election but fail to attract enough votes to win. After the election is over, supporters experience remorse when their least-favorite candidate wins instead. For example, in the 2000 election, Ralph Nader ran for president as the candidate of the Green Party. Nader, a longtime consumer activist concerned with environmental issues and social justice, attracted many votes from people who usually voted for Democratic candidates. This has caused some to claim that Democratic nominee Al Gore lost the 2000 election to Republican George W. Bush, because Nader won Democratic votes in Florida that might otherwise have gone to Gore (Figure 10.5).²⁰



Figure 10.5 Ralph Nader, a longtime consumer advocate and crusader for social justice and the environment, campaigned as an independent in 2008 (a). However, in 2000, he ran for the presidency as the Green Party candidate. He received votes from many Democrats, and some analysts claim Nader's campaign cost Al Gore the presidency—an ironic twist for a politician who would come to be known primarily for his environmental activism, even winning the Nobel Peace Prize in 2007 (b) for his efforts to inform the public about climate change. (credit a: modification of work by "Mely-o"/Flickr"; credit b: modification of work by "kangotraveler"/Flickr)

Abandoning plurality voting, even if the winner-take-all election were kept, would almost certainly increase the number of parties from which voters could choose. The easiest switch would be to a majoritarian voting scheme, in which a candidate wins only if they enjoy the support of a majority of voters. If no candidate wins a majority in the first round of voting, a run-off election is held among the top contenders. Some states conduct their primary elections within the two major political parties in this way.

A second way to increase the number of parties in the U.S. system is to abandon the winner-take-all approach. Rather than allowing voters to pick their representatives directly, many

democracies have chosen to have voters pick their preferred party and allow the party to select the individuals who serve in government. The argument for this method is that it is ultimately the party and not the individual who will influence policy. Under this model of proportional representation, legislative seats are allocated to competing parties based on the total share of votes they receive in the election. As a result, any given election can have multiple winners, and voters who might prefer a smaller party over a major one have a chance to be represented in government (Figure 10.6).

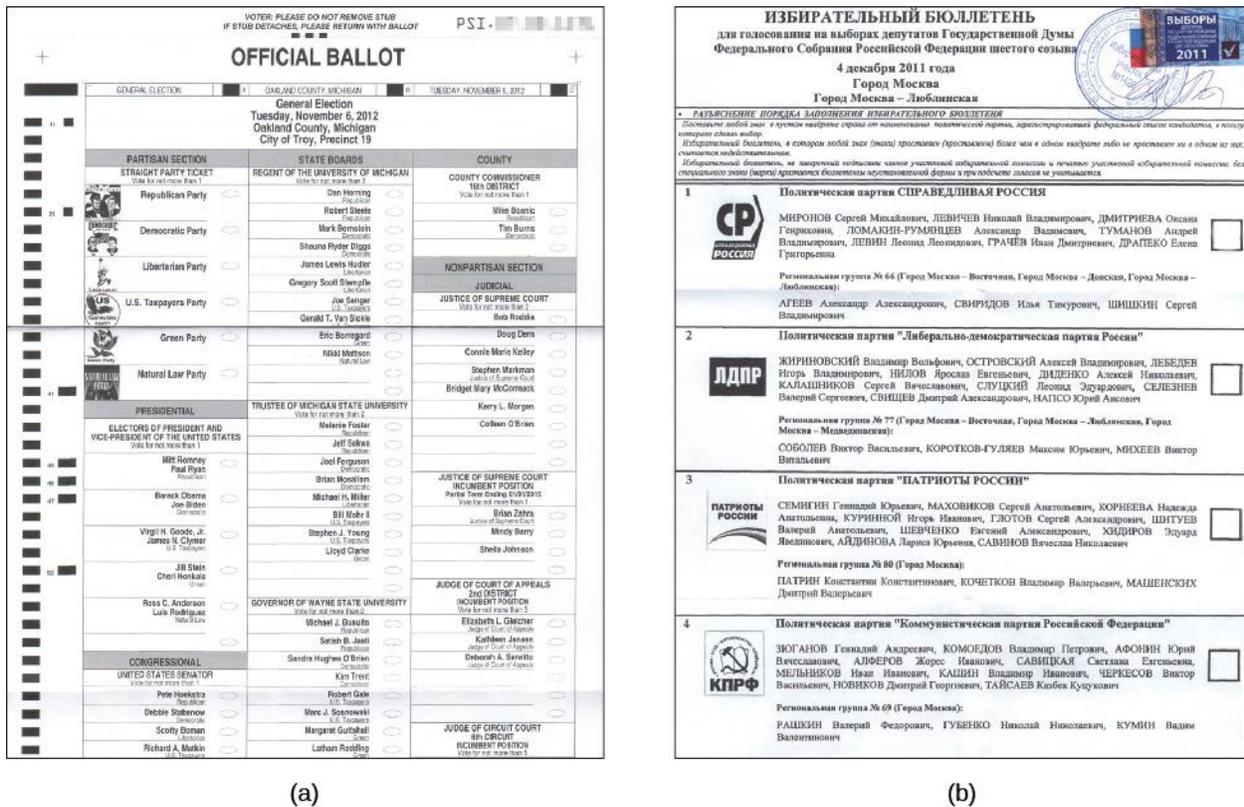


Figure 10.6 While a U.S. ballot (a) for first-past-the-post elections features candidates' names, the ballots of proportional representation countries list the parties. On this Russian ballot (b), the voter is offered a choice of Social Democratic, Nationalist, Socialist, and Communist parties, among others.

One possible way to implement proportional representation in the United States is to allocate legislative seats based on the national level of support for each party's presidential candidate, rather than on the results of individual races. If this method had been used in the 1996 elections, 8 percent of the seats in Congress would have gone to Ross Perot's Reform Party because he won 8 percent of the votes cast. Even though Perot himself lost, his supporters would have been rewarded for their efforts with representatives who had a real voice in government. And Perot's party's chances of survival would have greatly increased.

Electoral rules are probably not the only reason the United States has a two-party system. We need only look at the number of parties in the British or Canadian systems, both of which are winner-take-all plurality systems like that in the United States, to see that it is possible to have

more than two parties while still directly electing representatives. The two-party system is also rooted in U.S. history. The first parties, the Federalists and the Jeffersonian Republicans, disagreed about how much power should be given to the federal government, and differences over other important issues further strengthened this divide. Over time, these parties evolved into others by inheriting, for the most part, the general ideological positions and constituents of their predecessors, but no more than two major parties ever formed. Instead of parties arising based on region or ethnicity, various regions and ethnic groups sought a place in one of the two major parties.

Scholars of voting behavior have also suggested at least three other characteristics of the U.S. system that are likely to influence party outcomes: the Electoral College, demobilized ethnicity, and campaign and election laws. First, the United States has a presidential system in which the winner is selected not directly by the popular vote but indirectly by a group of electors known collectively as the Electoral College. The winner-take-all system also applies in the Electoral College. In all but two states (Maine and Nebraska), the total of the state's electoral votes go to the candidate who wins the plurality of the popular vote in that state. Even if a new, third party is able to win the support of a lot of voters, it must be able to do so in several states in order to win enough electoral votes to have a chance of winning the presidency.²¹

Besides the existence of the Electoral College, political scientist Gary W. Cox has also suggested that the relative prosperity of the United States and the relative unity of its citizens have prevented the formation of "large dissenting groups" that might give support to third parties.²² This is similar to the argument that the United States does not have viable third parties, because none of its regions is dominated by mobilized ethnic minorities that have created political parties in order to defend and to address concerns solely of interest to that ethnic group. Such parties are common in other countries.

Finally, party success is strongly influenced by local election laws. Someone has to write the rules that govern elections, and those rules help to determine outcomes. In the United States, such rules have been written to make it easy for existing parties to secure a spot for their candidates in future elections. But some states create significant burdens for candidates who wish to run as independents or who choose to represent new parties. For example, one common practice is to require a candidate who does not have the support of a major party to ask registered voters to sign a petition. Sometimes, thousands of signatures are required before a candidate's name can be placed on the ballot ([Figure 10.7](#)), but a small third party that does have large numbers of supporters in some states may not be able to secure enough signatures for this to happen.²³



Figure 10.7 Costa Constantinides (right), while campaigning in 2013 to represent the 22nd District on the New York City Council, said, “Few things are more important to a campaign than the petition process to get on the ballot. We were so pumped up to get started that we went out at 12:01 a.m. on June 4 to start collecting signatures right away!” Constantinides won the election later that year. (credit: modification of work by Costa Constantinides)

[Link to Learning](#)

Visit [Fair Vote](#) for a discussion of ballot access laws across the country.

Given the obstacles to the formation of third parties, it is unlikely that serious challenges to the U.S. two-party system will emerge. But this does not mean that we should view it as entirely stable either. The U.S. party system is technically a loose organization of fifty different state parties and has undergone several considerable changes since its initial consolidation after the Civil War. Third-party movements may have played a role in some of these changes, but all resulted in a shifting of party loyalties among the U.S. electorate.

CRITICAL ELECTIONS AND REALIGNMENT

Political parties exist for the purpose of winning elections in order to influence public policy. This requires them to build coalitions across a wide range of voters who share similar preferences. Since most U.S. voters identify as moderates,²⁴ the historical tendency has been for the two parties to compete for “the middle” while also trying to mobilize their more loyal bases. If voters’ preferences remained stable for long periods of time, and if both parties did a good job of competing for their votes, we could expect Republicans and Democrats to be reasonably competitive in any given election. Election outcomes would probably be based on the way voters compared the parties on the most important events of the day rather than on electoral strategy.

There are many reasons we would be wrong in these expectations, however. First, the electorate isn’t entirely stable. Each generation of voters has been a bit different from the last. Over time, the United States has become more socially liberal, especially on topics related to

race and gender, and Millennials—those born between 1981 and 1996 are more liberal than members of older generations.²⁵ The electorate’s economic preferences have changed, and different social groups are likely to become more engaged in politics now than they did in the past. Surveys conducted in 2016, for example, revealed that candidates’ religion is less important to voters than it once was. Also, as young Latinos reach voting age, they seem more inclined to vote than do their parents, which may raise the traditionally low voting rates among this ethnic group.²⁶ Internal population shifts and displacements have also occurred, as various regions have taken their turn experiencing economic growth or stagnation, and as new waves of immigrants have come to U.S. shores.

Additionally, the major parties have not always been unified in their approach to contesting elections. While we think of both Congress and the presidency as national offices, the reality is that congressional elections are sometimes more like local elections. Voters may reflect on their preferences for national policy when deciding whom to send to the Senate or the House of Representatives, but they are very likely to view national policy in the context of its effects on their area, their family, or themselves, not based on what is happening to the country as a whole. For example, while many voters want to reduce the federal budget, those over sixty-five are particularly concerned that no cuts to the Medicare program be made.²⁷ One-third of those polled reported that “senior’s issues” were most important to them when voting for national officeholders.²⁸ If they hope to keep their jobs, elected officials must thus be sensitive to preferences in their home constituencies as well as the preferences of their national party.

Finally, it sometimes happens that over a series of elections, parties may be unable or unwilling to adapt their positions to broader socio-demographic or economic forces. Parties need to be aware when society changes. If leaders refuse to recognize that public opinion has changed, the party is unlikely to win in the next election. For example, people who describe themselves as evangelical Christians are an important Republican constituency; they are also strongly opposed to abortion.²⁹ Thus, even though the majority of U.S. adults believe abortion should be legal in at least some instances, such as when a pregnancy is the result of rape or incest, or threatens the life of the mother, the position of many Republican presidential candidates in 2016 was to oppose abortion in all cases.³⁰ As a result, many women view the Republican Party as unsympathetic to their interests and are more likely to support Democratic candidates.³¹ Similarly (or simultaneously), groups that have felt that the party has served their causes in the past may decide to look elsewhere if they feel their needs are no longer being met. Either way, the party system will be upended as a result of a party realignment, or a shifting of party allegiances within the electorate ([Table 10.1](#)).³²

Periods of Party Dominance and Realignment

Era	Party Systems and Realignments
1796–1824	First Party System: Federalists (urban elites, southern planters, New England) oppose Democratic-Republicans (rural, small farmers and artisans, the South and the West).

1828–1856	Second Party System: Democrats (the South, cities, farmers and artisans, immigrants) oppose Whigs (former Federalists, the North, middle class, native-born Americans).
1860–1892	Third Party System: Republicans (former Whigs plus African Americans) control the presidency. Only one Democrat, Grover Cleveland, is elected president (1884, 1892).
1896–1932	Fourth Party System: Republicans control the presidency. Only one Democrat, Woodrow Wilson, is elected president (1912, 1916). Challenges to major parties are raised by Populists and Progressives.
1932–1964	Fifth Party System. Democrats control the presidency. Only one Republican, Dwight Eisenhower, is elected president (1952, 1956). Major party realignment as African Americans become part of the Democratic coalition.
1964–present	Sixth Party System. No one party controls the presidency. Ongoing realignment as southern White people and many northern members of the working class begin to vote for Republicans. Latino and Asian people immigrate, most of whom vote for Democrats.

Table 10.1 There have been six distinctive periods in U.S. history when new political parties have emerged, control of the presidency has shifted from one party to another, or significant changes in a party's makeup have occurred.

One of the best-known party realignments occurred when Democrats moved to include African Americans and other minorities into their national coalition during the Great Depression. After the Civil War, Republicans, the party of Lincoln, were viewed as the party that had freed the enslaved. Their efforts to provide Black people with greater legal rights earned them the support of African Americans in both the South, where they were newly enfranchised, and the Northeast. When the Democrats, the party of the Confederacy, lost control of the South after the Civil War, Republicans ruled the region. However, the Democrats regained control of the South after the removal of the Union army in 1877. Democrats had largely supported slavery before the Civil War, and they opposed postwar efforts to integrate African Americans into society after they were liberated. In addition, Democrats in the North and Midwest drew their greatest support from labor union members and immigrants who viewed African Americans as competitors for jobs and government resources, and who thus tended to oppose the extension of rights to African Americans as much as their southern counterparts did.³³

While the Democrats' opposition to civil rights may have provided regional advantages in southern or urban elections, it was largely disastrous for national politics. From 1868 to 1931, Democratic candidates won just four of sixteen presidential elections. Two of these victories can be explained as a result of the spoiler effect of the Progressive Party in 1912 and then Woodrow Wilson's reelection during World War I in 1916. This rather-dismal success rate suggested that a change in the governing coalition would be needed if the party were to have a chance at once again becoming a player on the national level.

That change began with the 1932 presidential campaign of Franklin Delano Roosevelt. FDR determined that his best path toward victory was to create a new coalition based not on region or ethnicity, but on the suffering of those hurt the most during the Great Depression. This alignment sought to bring African American voters in as a means of shoring up support in major urban areas and the Midwest, where many southern Black people had migrated in the decades after the Civil War in search of jobs and better education for their children, as well as to avoid many of the legal restrictions placed on them in the South. Roosevelt accomplished this realignment by promising assistance to those hurt most by the Depression, including African Americans.

The strategy worked. Roosevelt won the election with almost 58 percent of the popular vote and 472 Electoral College votes, compared to incumbent Herbert Hoover's 510. The 1932 election is considered an example of a critical election, one that represents a sudden, clear, and long-term shift in voter allegiances. After this election, the political parties were largely identified as being divided by differences in their members' socio-economic status. Those who favor stability of the current political and economic system tend to vote Republican, whereas those who would most benefit from changing the system usually favor Democratic candidates. Based on this alignment, the Democratic Party won the next five consecutive presidential elections and was able to build a political machine that dominated Congress into the 1990s, including holding an uninterrupted majority in the House of Representatives from 1954 until 1994.

The realignment of the parties did have consequences for Democrats. African Americans became an increasingly important part of the Democratic coalition in the 1940s through the 1960s, as the party took steps to support civil rights.³⁴ Most changes were limited to the state level at first, but as civil rights reform moved to the national stage, rifts between northern and southern Democrats began to emerge.³⁵ Southern Democrats became increasingly convinced that national efforts to provide social welfare and encourage racial integration were violating state sovereignty and social norms. By the 1970s, many had begun to shift their allegiance to the Republican Party, whose pro-business wing shared their opposition to the growing encroachment of the national government into what they viewed as state and local matters.³⁶

Almost fifty years after it had begun, the realignment of the two political parties resulted in the flipping of post-Civil War allegiances, with urban areas and the Northeast now solidly Democratic, and the South and rural areas overwhelmingly voting Republican. The result today is a political system that provides Republicans with considerable advantages in rural areas and most parts of the Deep South.³⁷ Democrats dominate urban politics and those parts of the South, known as the Black Belt, where the majority of residents are African American.

10.3 The Shape of Modern Political Parties

Learning Objectives

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

- Differentiate between the party in the electorate and the party organization

- Discuss the importance of voting in a political party organization
- Describe party organization at the county, state, and national levels
- Compare the perspectives of the party in government and the party in the electorate

We have discussed the two major political parties in the United States, how they formed, and some of the smaller parties that have challenged their dominance over time. However, what exactly do political parties do? If the purpose of political parties is to work together to create and implement policies by winning elections, how do they accomplish this task, and who actually participates in the process?

The answer was fairly straightforward in the early days of the republic when parties were little more than electoral coalitions of like-minded, elite politicians. But improvements in strategy and changes in the electorate forced the parties to become far more complex organizations that operate on several levels in the U.S. political arena. Modern political parties consist of three components identified by political scientist V. O. Key: the party in the electorate (the voters); the party organization (which helps to coordinate everything the party does in its quest for office); and the party in office (the office holders). To understand how these various elements work together, we begin by thinking about a key first step in influencing policy in any democracy: winning elections.

THE PARTY-IN-THE-ELECTORATE

A key fact about the U.S. political party system is that it's all about the votes. If voters do not show up to vote for a party's candidates on Election Day, the party has no chance of gaining office and implementing its preferred policies. As we have seen, for much of their history, the two parties have been adapting to changes in the size, composition, and preferences of the U.S. electorate. It only makes sense, then, that parties have found it in their interest to build a permanent and stable presence among the voters. By fostering a sense of loyalty, a party can insulate itself from changes in the system and improve its odds of winning elections. The party-in-the-electorate are those members of the voting public who consider themselves to be part of a political party and/or who consistently prefer the candidates of one party over the other.

What it means to be part of a party depends on where a voter lives and how much they choose to participate in politics. At its most basic level, being a member of the party-in-the-electorate simply means a voter is more likely to voice support for a party. These voters are often called party identifiers, since they usually represent themselves in public as being members of a party, and they may attend some party events or functions. Party identifiers are also more likely to provide financial support for the candidates of their party during election season. This does not mean self-identified Democrats will support *all* the party's positions or candidates, but it does mean that, on the whole, they feel their wants or needs are more likely to be met if the Democratic Party is successful.

Party identifiers make up the majority of the voting public. Gallup, the polling agency, has been collecting data on voter preferences for the past several decades. Its research suggests that historically, over half of American adults have called themselves "Republican" or "Democrat" when asked how they identify themselves politically ([Figure 10.8](#)). Even among self-proclaimed

independents, the overwhelming majority claim to lean in the direction of one party or the other, suggesting they behave as if they identified with a party during elections even if they preferred not to publicly pick a side. Partisan support is so strong that, in a poll conducted from August 5 to August 9, 2015, about 88 percent of respondents said they either identified with or, if they were independents, at least leaned toward one of the major political parties.³⁸ Thus, in a poll conducted in January 2016, even though about 42 percent of respondents said they were independent, this does not mean that they are not, in fact, more likely to favor one party over the other.³⁹

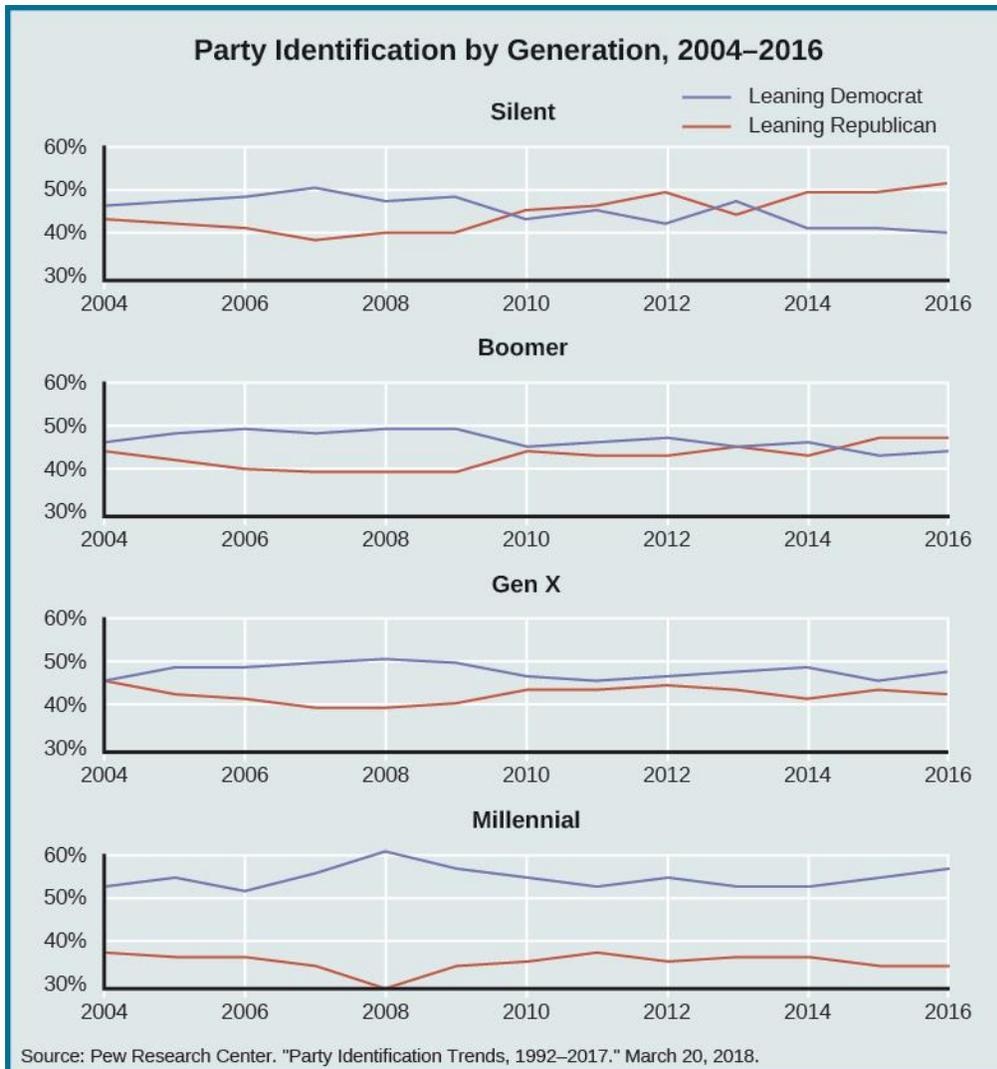


Figure 10.8 As the chart reveals, generation affects party identification. Millennials (born between 1981 and 1996) are more likely to identify as or lean towards the Democratic Party and less likely to favor Republicans than are their Baby Boomer parents and grandparents (born between 1946 and 1964). It is too early to tell whether or not Gen Z (those born from 1997 onward) will continue this trend.

Strictly speaking, party identification is not quite the same thing as party membership. People may call themselves Republicans or Democrats without being registered as a member of the party, and the Republican and Democratic parties do not require individuals to join their formal organization in the same way that parties in some other countries do. Many states require voters to declare a party affiliation before participating in primaries, but primary participation is irregular and infrequent, and a voter may change identities long before changing party registration. For most voters, party identification is informal at best and often matters only in the weeks before an election. It does matter, however, because party identification guides some voters, who may know little about a particular issue or candidate, in casting their ballots. If, for example, someone thinks of themselves as a Republican and always votes Republican, they will not be confused when faced with a candidate, perhaps in a local or county election, whose name is unfamiliar. If the candidate is a Republican, the voter will likely cast a ballot for that candidate.

Party ties can manifest in other ways as well. The actual act of registering to vote and selecting a party reinforces party loyalty. Moreover, while pundits and scholars often deride voters who blindly vote their party, the selection of a party in the first place can be based on issue positions and ideology. In that regard, voting your party on Election Day is not a blind act—it is a shortcut based on issue positions.

THE PARTY ORGANIZATION

A significant subset of American voters views their party identification as something far beyond simply a shortcut to voting. These individuals get more energized by the political process and have chosen to become more active in the life of political parties. They are part of what is known as the party organization. The party organization is the formal structure of the political party, and its active members are responsible for coordinating party behavior and supporting party candidates. It is a vital component of any successful party because it bears most of the responsibility for building and maintaining the party “brand.” It also plays a key role in helping select, and elect, candidates for public office.

Local Organizations

Since winning elections is the first goal of the political party, it makes sense that the formal party organization mirrors the local-state-federal structure of the U.S. political system. While the lowest level of party organization is technically the precinct, many of the operational responsibilities for local elections fall upon the county-level organization. The county-level organization is in many ways the workhorse of the party system, especially around election time. This level of organization frequently takes on many of the most basic responsibilities of a democratic system, including identifying and mobilizing potential voters and donors, identifying and training potential candidates for public office, and recruiting new members for the party. County organizations are also often responsible for finding rank and file members to serve as volunteers on Election Day, either as officials responsible for operating the polls or as monitors responsible for ensuring that elections are conducted honestly and fairly. They may also hold regular meetings to provide members the opportunity to meet potential candidates and

coordinate strategy (Figure 10.9). Of course, all this is voluntary and relies on dedicated party members being willing to pitch in to run the party.

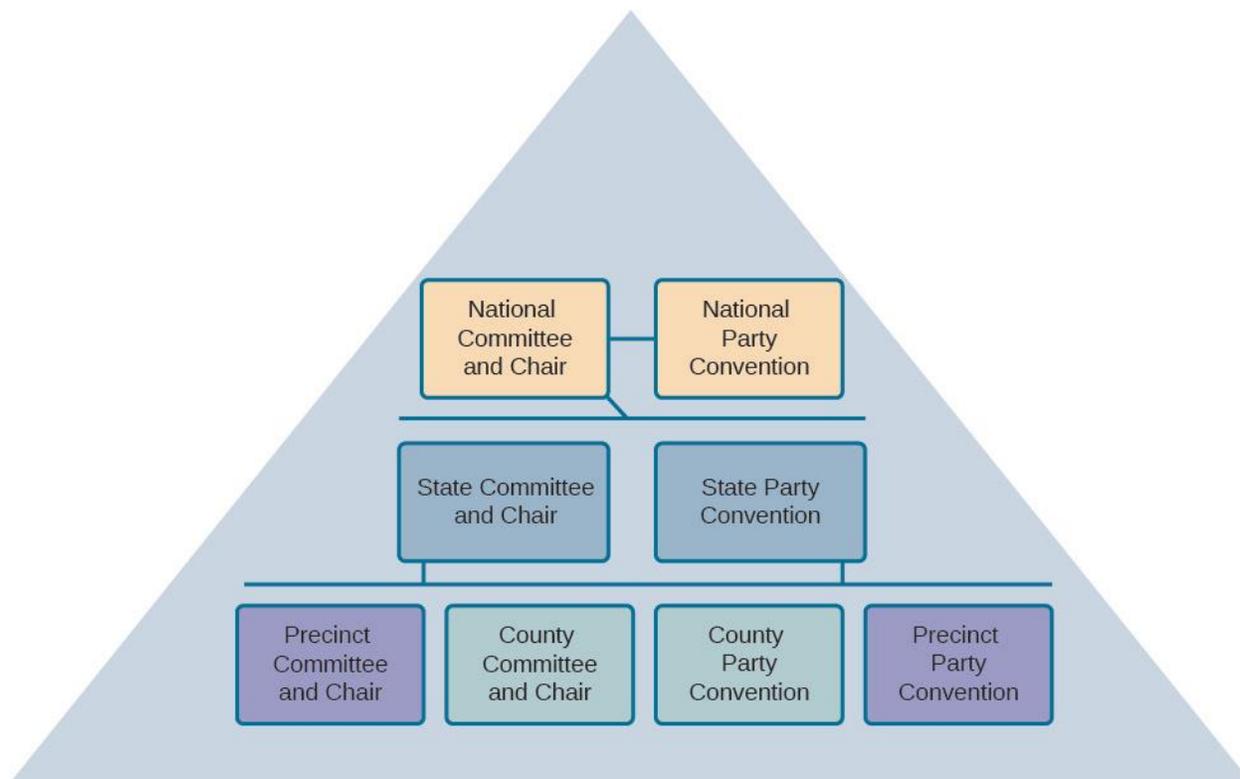


Figure 10.9 Political parties are bottom-up structures, with lower levels often responsible for selecting delegates to higher-level offices or conventions.

State Organizations

Most of the county organizations' formal efforts are devoted to supporting party candidates running for county and city offices. But a fair amount of political power is held by individuals in statewide office or in state-level legislative or judicial bodies. While the county-level offices may be active in these local competitions, most of the coordination for them will take place in the state-level organizations. Like their more local counterparts, state-level organizations are responsible for key party functions, such as statewide candidate recruitment and campaign mobilization. Most of their efforts focus on electing high-ranking officials such as the governor or occupants of other statewide offices (e.g., the state's treasurer or attorney general) as well as candidates to represent the state and its residents in the U.S. Senate and the U.S. House of Representatives. The greater value of state- and national-level offices requires state organizations to take on several key responsibilities in the life of the party.

Link to Learning

Visit the following [Republican](#) and [Democratic](#) sites to see what party organizations look like on the local level. Although these sites are for different parties in different parts of the country, they both inform visitors of local party events, help people volunteer to work for the party, and provide a convenient means of contributing to the party.

First, state-level organizations usually accept greater fundraising responsibilities than do their local counterparts. Statewide races and races for national office have become increasingly expensive in recent years. The average cost of a successful House campaign was \$2.4 million in 2020; for Senate races, it was \$27.2 million.⁴⁰ While individual candidates are responsible for funding and running their own races, it is typically up to the state-level organization to coordinate giving across multiple races and to develop the staffing expertise that these candidates will draw upon at election time.

State organizations are also responsible for creating a sense of unity among members of the state party. Building unity can be very important as the party transitions from sometimes-contentious nomination battles to the all-important general election. The state organization uses several key tools to get its members working together towards a common goal. First, it helps the party's candidates prepare for state primary elections or caucuses that allow voters to choose a nominee to run for public office at either the state or national level. Caucuses are a form of town hall meeting at which voters in a precinct get together to voice their preferences, rather than voting individually throughout the day ([Figure 10.10](#)).



Figure 10.10 Caucus-goers gather at a Democratic precinct caucus on January 3, 2008, in Iowa City, Iowa. Caucuses are held every two years in more than 1650 Iowa precincts.

Second, the state organization is also responsible for drafting a state platform that serves as a policy guide for partisans who are eventually selected to public office. These platforms are usually the result of a negotiation between the various coalitions within the party and are designed to ensure that everyone in the party will receive some benefits if their candidates win the election. Finally, state organizations hold a statewide convention at which delegates from the various county organizations come together to discuss the needs of their areas. The state conventions are also responsible for selecting delegates to the national convention.

National Party Organization

The local and state-level party organizations are the workhorses of the political process. They take on most of the responsibility for party activities and are easily the most active participants in the party formation and electoral processes. They are also largely invisible to most voters.

The average citizen knows very little of the local party's behavior unless there is a phone call or a knock on the door in the days or weeks before an election. The same is largely true of the activities of the state-level party. Typically, the only people who notice are those who are already actively engaged in politics or are being targeted for donations.

But most people are aware of the presence and activity of the national party organizations for several reasons. First, many Americans, especially young people, are more interested in the topics discussed at the national level than at the state or local level. According to John Green of the Ray C. Bliss Institute of Applied Politics, "Local elections tend to be about things like sewers, and roads and police protection—which are not as dramatic an issue as same-sex marriage or global warming or international affairs."⁴¹ Presidential elections and the behavior of the U.S. Congress are also far more likely to make the news broadcasts than the activities of county commissioners, and the national-level party organization is mostly responsible for coordinating the activities of participants at this level. The national party is a fundraising army for presidential candidates and also serves a key role in trying to coordinate and direct the efforts of the House and Senate. For this reason, its leadership is far more likely to become visible to media consumers, whether they intend to vote or not.

A second reason for the prominence of the national organization is that it usually coordinates the grandest spectacles in the life of a political party. Most voters are never aware of the numerous county-level meetings or coordinating activities. Primary elections, one of the most important events to take place at the state level, have a much lower turnout than the nationwide general election. In 2012, for example, only one-third of the eligible voters in New Hampshire voted in the state's primary, one of the earliest and thus most important in the nation; however, 70 percent of eligible voters in the state voted in the general election in November 2012.⁴² People may see or read an occasional story about the meetings of the state committees or convention but pay little attention. But the national conventions, organized and sponsored by the national-level party, can dominate the national discussion for several weeks in late summer, a time when the major media outlets are often searching for news. These conventions are the definition of a media circus at which high-ranking politicians, party elites, and sometimes celebrities, such as actor/director Clint Eastwood ([Figure 10.11](#)), along with individuals many consider to be the future leaders of the party are brought before the public so the party can make its best case for being the one to direct the future of the country.⁴³ National party conventions culminate in the formal nomination of the party nominees for the offices of president and vice president, and they mark the official beginning of the presidential competition between the two parties.

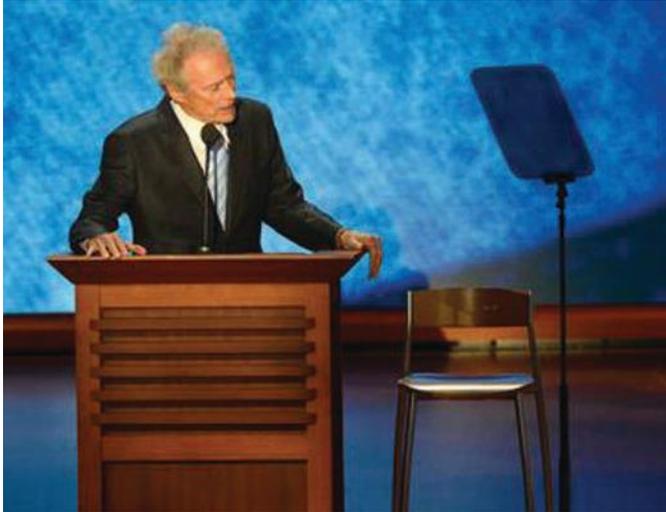


Figure 10.11 In August 2012, Clint Eastwood—actor, director, and former mayor of Carmel-by-the-Sea, California—spoke at the Republican National Convention accompanied by an empty chair representing the Democratic incumbent president Barack Obama.

In the past, national conventions were often the sites of high drama and political intrigue. As late as 1968, the identities of the presidential and/or vice-presidential nominees were still unknown to the general public when the convention opened. It was also common for groups protesting key events and issues of the day to try to raise their profile by using the conventions to gain the media spotlight. National media outlets would provide “gavel to gavel” coverage of the conventions, and the relatively limited number of national broadcast channels meant most viewers were essentially forced to choose between following the conventions or checking out of the media altogether. Much has changed since the 1960s, however, and between 1960 and 2004, viewership of both the Democratic National Convention and the Republican National Convention had declined by half.⁴⁴

National conventions are not the spectacles they once were, and this fact is almost certainly having an impact on the profile of the national party organization. Both parties have come to recognize the value of the convention as a medium through which they can communicate to the average viewer. To ensure that they are viewed in the best possible light, the parties have worked hard to turn the public face of the convention into a highly sanitized, highly orchestrated media event. Speakers are often required to have their speeches prescreened to ensure that they do not deviate from the party line or run the risk of embarrassing the eventual nominee—whose name has often been known by all for several months. And while protests still happen, party organizations have become increasingly adept at keeping protesters away from the convention sites, arguing that safety and security are more important than First Amendment rights to speech and peaceable assembly. For example, protestors were kept behind concrete barriers and fences at the Democratic National Convention in 2004.⁴⁵

With the advent of cable TV news and the growth of internet blogging, the major news outlets have found it unnecessary to provide the same level of coverage they once did. Between 1976 and 1996, ABC and CBS cut their coverage of the nominating conventions from more than fifty

hours to only five. NBC cut its coverage to fewer than five hours.⁴⁶ One reason may be that the outcome of nominating conventions are also typically known in advance, meaning there is no drama. Today, the nominee’s acceptance speech is expected to be no longer than an hour, so it will not take up more than one block of prime-time TV programming.

This is not to say the national conventions are no longer important, or that the national party organizations are becoming less relevant. The conventions, and the organizations that run them, still contribute heavily to a wide range of key decisions in the life of both parties. The national party platform is formally adopted at the convention, as are the key elements of the strategy for contesting the national campaign. And even though the media is paying less attention, key insiders and major donors often use the convention as a way of gauging the strength of the party and its ability to effectively organize and coordinate its members. They are also paying close attention to the rising stars who are given time at the convention’s podium, to see which are able to connect with the party faithful. Most observers credit Barack Obama’s speech at the 2004 Democratic National Convention with bringing him to national prominence.⁴⁷

Insider Perspective

Conventions and Trial Balloons

While both political parties use conventions to help win the current elections, they also use them as a way of elevating local politicians to the national spotlight. This has been particularly true for the Democratic Party. In 1988, the Democrats tapped Arkansas governor Bill Clinton to introduce their nominee Michael Dukakis at the convention. Clinton’s speech was lampooned for its length and lack of focus, but it served to get his name in front of Democratic voters. Four years later, Clinton was able to leverage this national exposure to help his own presidential campaign. The pattern was repeated when Illinois state senator Barack Obama gave the keynote address at the 2004 convention. Although he was only a candidate for the U.S. Senate at the time, his address caught the attention of the Democratic establishment and ultimately led to his emergence as a viable presidential candidate just four years later.



Figure 10.12 Barack Obama rose to national prominence with his “Two Americas” speech at the 2004 Democratic National Convention. Four years later, he accepted the Democratic

nomination for President his convention speech. (Credit: modification of “Barack Obama” by Kelly DeLay/flickr, CC-BY).

Should the media devote more attention to national conventions? Would this help voters choose the candidate they want to vote for?

Link to Learning

Bill Clinton’s lengthy [nomination speech](#) in 1988 was much derided, but served the purpose of providing national exposure to a state governor. Barack Obama’s [inspirational speech](#) at the 2004 national convention resulted in immediate speculation as to his wider political aspirations.

THE PARTY-IN-GOVERNMENT

One of the first challenges facing the party-in-government, or the party identifiers who have been elected or appointed to hold public office, is to achieve their policy goals. The means to do this is chosen in meetings of the two major parties; Republican meetings are called party conferences and Democrat meetings are called party caucuses. Members of each party meet in these closed sessions and discuss what items to place on the legislative agenda and make decisions about which party members should serve on the committees that draft proposed laws. Party members also elect the leaders of their respective parties in the House and the Senate, and their party whips. Leaders serve as party managers and are the highest-ranking members of the party in each chamber of Congress. The party whip ensures that members are present when a piece of legislation is to be voted on and directs them how to vote. The whip is the second-highest ranking member of the party in each chamber. Thus, both the Republicans and the Democrats have a leader and a whip in the House, and a leader and a whip in the Senate. The leader and whip of the party that holds the majority of seats in each house are known as the majority leader and the majority whip. The leader and whip of the party with fewer seats are called the minority leader and the minority whip. The party that controls the majority of seats in the House of Representatives also elects someone to serve as Speaker of the House. People elected to Congress as independents (that is, not members of either the Republican or Democratic parties) must choose a party to conference or caucus with. For example, Senator Bernie Sanders of Vermont, who originally ran for Senate as an independent candidate, caucuses with the Democrats and ran for the presidency as a Democrat. He returned to the Senate in 2017 as an independent.⁴⁸

Link to Learning

The political parties in government must represent their parties and the entire country at the same time. One way they do this is by creating separate governing and party structures in the legislature, even though these are run by the same people. Check out some of the more important leadership organizations and their partisan counterparts in the [House of Representatives](#) and the [Senate](#) leadership.

Get Connected!

Party Organization from the Inside

Interested in a cool summer job? Want to actually make a difference in your community? Consider an internship at the Democratic National Committee (DNC) or Republican National Committee (RNC). Both organizations offer internship programs for college students who want hands-on experience working in community outreach and grassroots organizing. While many internship opportunities are based at the national headquarters in Washington, DC, openings may exist within state party organizations.

Internship positions can be very competitive; most applicants are juniors or seniors with high grade-point averages and strong recommendations from their faculty. Successful applicants get an inside view of government, build a great professional network, and have the opportunity to make a real difference in the lives of their friends and families.

Visit the DNC or RNC website and find out what it takes to be an intern. While there, also check out the state party organization. Is there a local leader you feel you could work for? Are any upcoming events scheduled in your state?

One problem facing the party-in-government relates to the design of the country's political system. The U.S. government is based on a complex principle of separation of powers, with power divided among the executive, legislative, and judiciary branches. The system is further complicated by federalism, which relegates some powers to the states, which also have separation of powers. This complexity creates a number of problems for maintaining party unity. The biggest is that each level and unit of government has different constituencies that the office holder must satisfy. The person elected to the White House is more beholden to the national party organization than are members of the House or Senate, because members of Congress must be reelected by voters in very different states, each with its own state-level and county-level parties.

Some of this complexity is eased for the party that holds the executive branch of government. Executive offices are typically more visible to the voters than the legislature, in no small part because a single person holds the office. Voters are more likely to show up at the polls and vote if they feel strongly about the candidate running for president or governor, but they are also more likely to hold that person accountable for the government's failures.⁴⁹

Members of the legislature from the executive's party are under a great deal of pressure to make the executive look good, because a popular president or governor may be able to help other party members win office. Even so, partisans in the legislature cannot be expected to simply obey the executive's orders. First, legislators may serve a constituency that disagrees with the executive on key matters of policy. If the issue is important enough to voters, as in the case of gun control or abortion rights, an office holder may feel their job will be in jeopardy if they too closely follow the party line, even if that means disagreeing with the executive. A good example occurred when the Civil Rights Act of 1964, which desegregated public accommodations and prohibited discrimination in employment on the basis of race, was introduced in Congress. The bill was supported by Presidents John F. Kennedy and Lyndon

Johnson, both of whom were Democrats. Nevertheless, many Republicans, such as William McCulloch, a conservative representative from Ohio, voted in its favor while many southern Democrats opposed it.⁵⁰

A second challenge is that each house of the legislature has its own leadership and committee structure, and those leaders may not be in total harmony with the president. Key benefits like committee appointments, leadership positions, and money for important projects in their home district may hinge on legislators following the lead of the party. These pressures are particularly acute for the majority party, so named because it controls more than half the seats in one of the two chambers. The Speaker of the House and the Senate majority leader, the majority party's congressional leaders, have significant tools at their disposal to punish party members who defect on a particular vote. Finally, a member of the minority party must occasionally work with the opposition on some issues in order to accomplish any of their constituency's goals. This is especially the case in the Senate, which is a super-majority institution. Sixty votes (of the 100 possible) are required to get anything accomplished, because Senate rules allow individual members to block legislation via holds and filibusters. The only way to block the blocking is to invoke *cloture*, a procedure calling for a vote on an issue, which takes 60 votes.

10.4 Divided Government and Partisan Polarization

Learning Objectives

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

- Discuss the problems and benefits of divided government
- Define party polarization
- List the main explanations for partisan polarization
- Explain the implications of partisan polarization

In 1950, the American Political Science Association's Committee on Political Parties (APSA) published an article offering a criticism of the current party system. The parties, it argued, were too similar. Distinct, cohesive political parties were critical for any well-functioning democracy. First, distinct parties offer voters clear policy choices at election time. Second, cohesive parties could deliver on their agenda, even under conditions of lower bipartisanship. The party that lost the election was also important to democracy because it served as the "loyal opposition" that could keep a check on the excesses of the party in power. Finally, the paper suggested that voters could signal whether they preferred the vision of the current leadership or of the opposition. This signaling would keep both parties accountable to the people and lead to a more effective government, better capable of meeting the country's needs.

But, the APSA article continued, U.S. political parties of the day were lacking in this regard. Rarely did they offer clear and distinct visions of the country's future, and, on the rare occasions they did, they were typically unable to enact major reforms once elected. Indeed, there was so much overlap between the parties when in office that it was difficult for voters to know whom they should hold accountable for bad results. The article concluded by advocating a set of reforms that, if implemented, would lead to more distinct parties and better

government. While this description of the major parties as being too similar may have been accurate in the 1950s; that is no longer the case.⁵¹

THE PROBLEM OF DIVIDED GOVERNMENT

The problem of majority versus minority politics is particularly acute under conditions of divided government. Divided government occurs when one or more houses of the legislature are controlled by the party in opposition to the executive. Unified government occurs when the same party controls the executive and the legislature entirely. Divided government can pose considerable difficulties for both the operations of the party and the government as a whole. It makes fulfilling campaign promises extremely difficult, for instance, since the cooperation (or at least the agreement) of both Congress and the president is typically needed to pass legislation. Furthermore, one party can hardly claim credit for success when the other side has been a credible partner, or when nothing can be accomplished. Party loyalty may be challenged too, because individual politicians might be forced to oppose their own party agenda if it will help their personal reelection bids.

Divided government can also be a threat to government operations, although its full impact remains unclear.⁵² For example, when the divide between the parties is too great, government may shut down. A 1976 dispute between Republican president Gerald Ford and a Democrat-controlled Congress over the issue of funding for certain cabinet departments led to a ten-day shutdown of the government (although the federal government did not cease to function entirely). But beginning in the 1980s, the interpretation that Republican president Ronald Reagan's attorney general gave to a nineteenth-century law required a complete shutdown of federal government operations until a funding issue was resolved ([Figure 10.13](#)).⁵³

Clearly, the parties' willingness to work together and compromise can be a very good thing. However, the past several decades have brought an increased prevalence of divided government. Since 1969, the U.S. electorate has sent the president a Congress of his own party in only seven of twenty-three congressional elections, and during George W. Bush's first administration, the Republican majority was so narrow that a combination of resignations and defections gave the Democrats control before the next election could be held.

Over the short term, however, divided government can make for very contentious politics. A well-functioning government usually requires a certain level of responsiveness on the part of both the executive and the legislative branches. This responsiveness is hard enough if government is unified under one party. During the presidency of Democrat Jimmy Carter (1977–1980), despite the fact that both houses of Congress were controlled by Democratic majorities, the government was shut down on five occasions because of conflict between the executive and legislative branches.⁵⁴ Shutdowns are even more likely when the president and at least one house of Congress are of opposite parties. During the presidency of Ronald Reagan, for example, the federal government shut down eight times; on seven of those occasions, the shutdown was caused by disagreements between Reagan and the Republican-controlled Senate on the one hand and the Democrats in the House on the other, over such issues as spending cuts, abortion rights, and civil rights.⁵⁵ More such disputes and government shutdowns took place during the administrations of George H. W. Bush, Bill Clinton, and Barack Obama, when

different parties controlled Congress and the presidency. The most recent government shutdown, the longest in U.S. history, began in December 2018 under the 115th Congress, when the presidency and both houses were controlled by Republican majorities, but continued into the 116th, which features a Democratically controlled House and a Republican Senate.

For the first few decades of the current pattern of divided government, the threat it posed to the government appears to have been muted by a high degree of bipartisanship, or cooperation through compromise. Many pieces of legislation were passed in the 1960s and 1970s with reasonably high levels of support from both parties. Most members of Congress had relatively moderate voting records, with regional differences within parties that made bipartisanship on many issues more likely.



Figure 10.13 In the early 1980s, Republican president Ronald Reagan (left) and Democratic Speaker of the House Tip O’Neil (right) worked together to pass key pieces of legislation, even though they opposed each other on several issues. (credit: Ronald Reagan Presidential Library & Museum)

For example, until the 1980s, northern and midwestern Republicans were often fairly progressive, supporting racial equality, workers’ rights, and farm subsidies. Southern Democrats were frequently quite socially and racially conservative and were strong supporters of states’ rights. Cross-party cooperation on these issues was fairly frequent. But in the past few decades, the number of moderates in both houses of Congress has declined. This has made it more difficult for party leadership to work together on a range of important issues, and for members of the minority party in Congress to find policy agreement with an opposing party president.

However, beginning in the 1990s, the parties began to diverge and moderates began to disappear in Congress. The era of bipartisanship seems to have ended as the parties now compete bitterly with one another and cross-party socialization or international trips across party lines no longer happen. While this trend tends to be evaluated negatively, there are benefits. Firstly, there are now very distinct choices for the voters. Secondly, the existence of competitive parties and competitive elections is a good sign that democracy is thriving. We may not really want to have one party with a monopoly on political discourse and policymaking, as exists in some U.S. states.

THE IMPLICATIONS OF POLARIZATION

The past thirty years have brought a dramatic change in the relationship between the two parties as fewer conservative Democrats and liberal Republicans have been elected to office. As political moderates, or individuals with ideologies in the middle of the ideological spectrum, leave the political parties at all levels, the parties have grown farther apart ideologically, a result called party polarization. In other words, at least organizationally and in government, Republicans and Democrats have become increasingly dissimilar from one another (Figure 10.14). In the party-in-government, this means fewer members of Congress have mixed voting records; instead they vote far more consistently on issues and are far more likely to side with their party leadership.⁵⁶ It also means a growing number of moderate voters aren't participating in party politics. Either they are becoming independents, or they are participating only in the general election and are therefore not helping select party candidates in primaries.

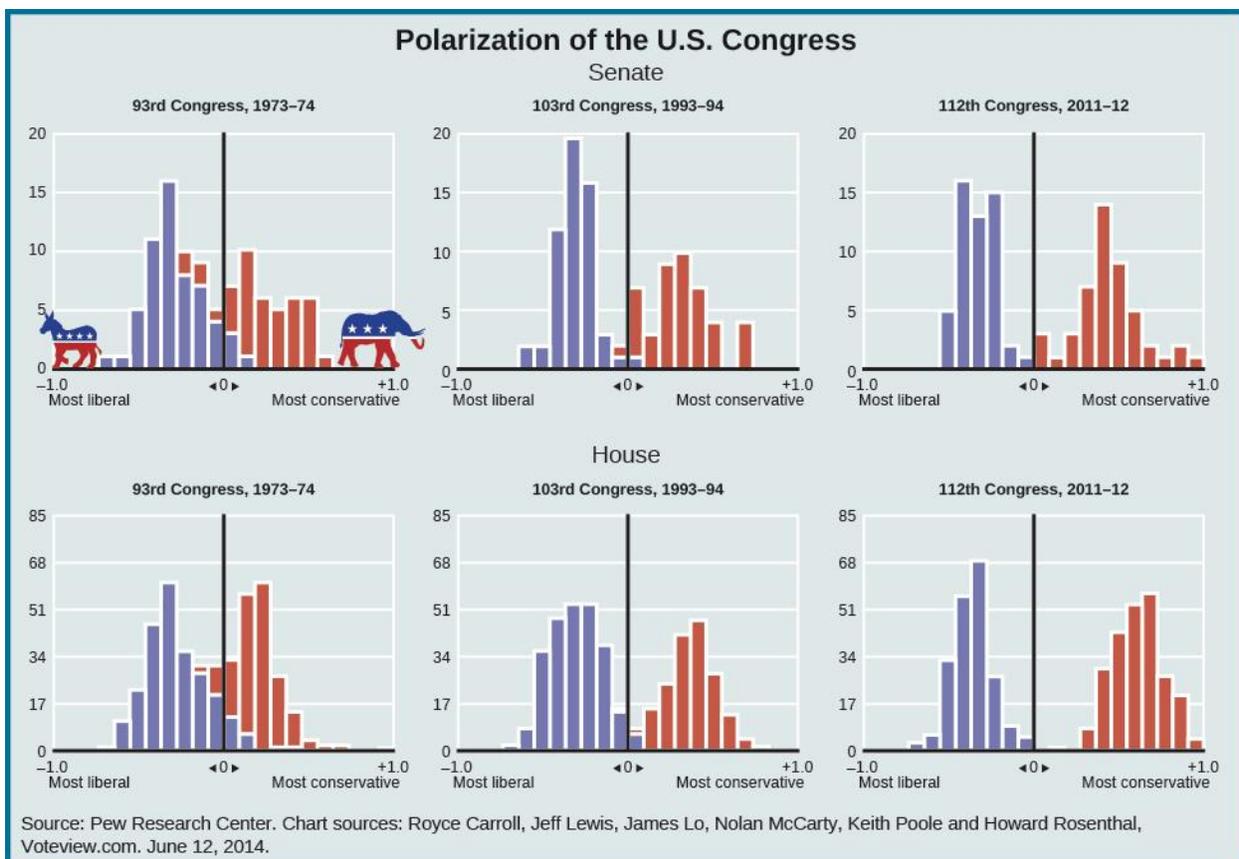


Figure 10.14 The number of moderates has plummeted since 1973 as the median of both parties has moved further away from the political center. These data points suggest that the Republicans have moved more clearly from the center than have Democrats.

What is most interesting about this shift to increasingly polarized parties is that it does not appear to have happened as a result of the structural reforms recommended by APSA. Rather, it has happened because moderate politicians have simply found it harder and harder to win elections. There are many conflicting theories about the causes of polarization, some of which

we discuss below. But whatever its origin, party polarization in the United States does not appear to have had the net positive effects that the APSA committee was hoping for. With the exception of providing voters with more distinct choices, positives of polarization are hard to find. The negative impacts are many. For one thing, rather than reducing interparty conflict, polarization appears to have only amplified it. For example, the Republican Party (or the GOP, standing for Grand Old Party) has historically been a coalition of two key and overlapping factions: pro-business rightists and social conservatives. The GOP has held the coalition of these two groups together by opposing programs designed to redistribute wealth (and advocating small government) while at the same time arguing for laws preferred by conservative Christians. But it was also willing to compromise with pro-business Democrats, often at the expense of social issues, if it meant protecting long-term business interests.

Recently, however, a new voice emerged that allied itself with the Republican Party. Born in part from an older third-party movement known as the Libertarian Party, the Tea Party was more hostile to government and viewed government intervention in all forms, especially taxation and the regulation of business, as a threat to capitalism and democracy. It was less willing to tolerate interventions in the market place, even when they were designed to protect the markets themselves. Although an anti-tax faction within the Republican Party has existed for some time, some factions of the Tea Party movement were also active at the intersection of religious liberty and social issues, especially in opposing such initiatives as same-sex marriage and abortion rights.⁵⁷ The Tea Party argued that government, both directly and by neglect, was threatening the ability of evangelicals to observe their moral obligations, including practices some perceive as endorsing social exclusion.

Although the Tea Party was a movement and not a political party, 86 percent of Tea Party members who voted in 2012 cast their votes for Republicans.⁵⁸ Some members of the Republican Party were closely affiliated with the movement, and before the 2012 elections, Tea Party activist Grover Norquist exacted promises from many Republicans in Congress that they would oppose any bill that sought to raise taxes.⁵⁹ The inflexibility of Tea Party members led to tense floor debates and was ultimately responsible for the 2014 primary defeat of Republican majority leader Eric Cantor and the 2015 resignation of the sitting Speaker of the House John Boehner. In 2015, Chris Christie, John Kasich, Ben Carson, Marco Rubio, and Ted Cruz, all of whom were Republican presidential candidates, signed Norquist's pledge as well ([Figure 10.15](#)).



(a)



(b)

Figure 10.15 Vying for the Republican nomination, 2016 presidential candidates Ted Cruz (a) and John Kasich (b), like many other Republicans, signed a pledge not to raise taxes if elected.

Movements on the left have also arisen. The Occupy Wall Street movement was born of the government's response to the Great Recession of 2008 and its assistance to endangered financial institutions, provided through the Troubled Asset Relief Program, TARP ([Figure 10.16](#)). The Occupy Movement believed the recession was caused by a failure of the government to properly regulate the banking industry. The Occupiers further maintained that the government moved swiftly to protect the banking industry from the worst of the recession but largely failed to protect the average person, thereby worsening the growing economic inequality in the United States.

While the Occupy Movement itself has largely fizzled, the anti-business sentiment to which it gave voice continues within the Democratic Party, and many Democrats have proclaimed their support for the movement and its ideals, if not for its tactics.⁶⁰ Champions of the left wing of the Democratic Party, however, such as former presidential candidate Senator Bernie Sanders and Massachusetts senator Elizabeth Warren, have ensured that the Occupy Movement's calls for more social spending and higher taxes on the wealthy remain a prominent part of the national debate. Their popularity, and the growing visibility of race issues in the United States, have helped sustain the left wing of the Democratic Party. Bernie Sanders' 2016 presidential run made these topics and causes even more salient, especially among younger voters. Several incidents since that time, most notably the murder of George Floyd on May 25, 2020, have caused the Black Lives Matter movement, which began in 2013 after the acquittal of George Zimmerman in the shooting death of Trayvon Martin in April 2012, to expand. Black Lives Matter protests took place in record numbers in 2020.⁶¹



(a)



(b)

Figure 10.16 In the wake of the George Floyd murder in Minneapolis, Black Lives Matter (BLM) protests occurred all across the country. While there was widespread support initially for the movement from both major parties, Republican opinion of BLM subsequently became more critical, while Democrats continued to embrace the movement. The partisan divide came to a head outside the White House in Washington, DC, where massive BLM protests occurred, which were aggressively smacked down by the Trump administration. Democratic mayor Muriel Bowser subsequently authorized the DC Public Works department to paint these massive block letters (a) on 16th Street across Lafayette Park from the White House (b). (credit a: modification of ""Black Lives Matter Plaza" by John Brighenti/Flickr, CC BY; credit b: modification of "In Space, We Can Hear Your Screams" by Steve Jurvetson/Wikimedia Commons, CC BY)

Unfortunately, party factions haven't been the only result of party polarization. By most measures, the U.S. government in general and Congress in particular have become less effective in recent years. Congress has passed fewer pieces of legislation, confirmed fewer appointees, and been less effective at handling the national purse than in recent memory. If we define effectiveness as legislative productivity, the 106th Congress (1999–2000) passed 463 pieces of substantive legislation (not including commemorative legislation, such as bills proclaiming an official doughnut of the United States). The 107th Congress (2000–2001) passed 294 such pieces of legislation. By 2013–2014, the total had fallen to 212.⁶²

Perhaps the clearest sign of Congress' ineffectiveness is that the threat of government shutdown has become a constant. Shutdowns occur when Congress and the president are unable to authorize and appropriate funds before the current budget runs out. This is now an annual problem. Relations between the two parties became so bad that financial markets were sent into turmoil in 2014 when Congress failed to increase the government's line of credit before a key deadline, thus threatening a U.S. government default on its loans. While any particular trend can be the result of multiple factors, the decline of key measures of institutional confidence and trust suggest the negative impact of polarization. Public approval ratings for Congress have been low for decades, typically lower than presidential approval. Congressional approval dipped to single digits in November 2013. Levels early in 2021 were in the mid-30s. However, even then, disapproval was at greater than 60 percent.⁶³ In the wake of the Great Recession, President Obama's average approval rating remained low for several years, despite an overall trend in economic growth since the end of 2008, before he enjoyed an

uptick in support during his final year in office.⁶⁴ Typically, economic conditions are a significant driver of presidential approval, suggesting the negative effect of partisanship on presidential approval.

THE CAUSES OF POLARIZATION

Scholars agree that some degree of polarization is occurring in the United States, even if some contend it is only at the elite level. But they are less certain about exactly why, or how, polarization has become such a mainstay of American politics. Several conflicting theories have been offered. The first and perhaps best argument is that polarization is a party-in-government phenomenon driven by a decades-long sorting of the voting public, or a change in party allegiance in response to shifts in party position.⁶⁵ According to the sorting thesis, before the 1950s, voters were mostly concerned with state-level party positions rather than national party concerns. Since parties are bottom-up institutions, this meant local issues dominated elections; it also meant national-level politicians typically paid more attention to local problems than to national party politics.

But over the past several decades, voters have started identifying more with national-level party politics, and they began to demand their elected representatives become more attentive to national party positions. As a result, they have become more likely to pick parties that consistently represent national ideals, are more consistent in their candidate selection, and are more willing to elect office-holders likely to follow their party's national agenda. One example of the way social change led to party sorting revolves around race.

The Democratic Party returned to national power in the 1930s largely as the result of a coalition among low socio-economic status voters in northern and midwestern cities. These new Democratic voters were religiously and ethnically more diverse than the mostly White, mostly Protestant voters who supported Republicans. But the southern United States (often called the "Solid South") had been largely dominated by Democratic politicians since the Civil War. These politicians agreed with other Democrats on most issues, but they were more evangelical in their religious beliefs and less tolerant on racial matters. The federal nature of the United States meant that Democrats in other parts of the country were free to seek alliances with minorities in their states. But in the South, African Americans were still largely disenfranchised well after Franklin Roosevelt had brought other groups into the Democratic tent.

The Democratic alliance worked relatively well through the 1930s and 1940s when post-Depression politics revolved around supporting farmers and helping the unemployed. But in the late 1950s and early 1960s, social issues became increasingly prominent in national politics. Southern Democrats, who had supported giving the federal government authority for economic redistribution, began to resist calls for those powers to be used to restructure society. Many of these Democrats broke away from the party only to find a home among Republicans, who were willing to help promote smaller national government and greater states' rights.⁶⁶ This shift was largely completed with the rise of the evangelical movement in politics, when it shepherded its supporters away from Jimmy Carter, an evangelical Christian, to Ronald Reagan in the 1980 presidential election.

At the same time social issues were turning the Solid South towards the Republican Party, they were having the opposite effect in the North and West. Moderate Republicans, who had been champions of racial equality since the time of Lincoln, worked with Democrats to achieve social reform. These Republicans found it increasingly difficult to remain in their party as it began to adjust to the growing power of the small government–states’ rights movement. A good example was Senator Arlen Specter, a moderate Republican who represented Pennsylvania and ultimately switched to become a Democrat before the end of his political career.

A second possible culprit in increased polarization is the impact of technology on the public square. Before the 1950s, most people got their news from regional newspapers and local radio stations. While some national programming did exist, most editorial control was in the hands of local publishers and editorial boards. These groups served as a filter of sorts as they tried to meet the demands of local markets.

As described in detail in the media chapter, the advent of television changed that. Television was a powerful tool, with national news and editorial content that provided the same message across the country. All viewers saw the same images of the women’s rights movement and the war in Vietnam. The expansion of news coverage to cable, and the consolidation of local news providers into big corporate conglomerates, amplified this nationalization. Average citizens were just as likely to learn what it meant to be a Republican from a politician in another state as from one in their own, and national news coverage made it much more difficult for politicians to run away from their votes [Figure 10.17](#). The information explosion that followed the heyday of network TV by way of cable, the Internet, and blogs has furthered this nationalization trend.



Figure 10.17 Two examples of congressional representatives who have become polarizing national figures are Liz Cheney (R-WY) (a) and Alexandria Ocasio-Cortez (D-NY) (b). Seemingly cut from a very different mold, with Ocasio-Cortez trying to pull the Democratic Party in Congress to the left, and Cheney the staunch conservative who climbed the party leadership ladder somewhat quietly, both women found themselves on the enemy list of President Donald Trump. AOC took on Trump and his policy positions from the get-go, while Cheney became much more visible with her vote to impeach Trump in the wake of the January 6th insurrection. (credit a: modification of "Liz Cheney official 116th Congress portrait" by US House Office of Photography/Wikimedia Commons, Public Domain; credit b: modification of "Alexandria

Ocasio-Cortez Official Portrait" by Franmarie Metzler, U.S. House Office of Photography/Wikimedia Commons, Public Domain)

A final possible cause for polarization is the increasing sophistication of gerrymandering, or the manipulation of legislative districts in an attempt to favor a particular candidate ([Figure 10.18](#)). According to the gerrymandering thesis, the more moderate or heterogeneous a voting district, the more moderate the politician's behavior once in office. Taking extreme or one-sided positions on a large number of issues would be hazardous for a member who needs to build a diverse electoral coalition. But if the district has been drawn to favor a particular group, it now is necessary for the elected official to serve only the portion of the constituency that dominates.



Figure 10.18 This cartoon, which inspired the term gerrymander, was printed in the *Boston Gazette* on March 26, 1812, after the Massachusetts legislature redistricted the state to favor the party of the sitting governor, Elbridge Gerry.

Gerrymandering is a centuries-old practice. There has always been an incentive for legislative bodies to draw districts in such a way that sitting legislators have the best chance of keeping their jobs. But changes in law and technology have transformed gerrymandering from a crude art into a science. The first advance came with the introduction of the “one-person-one-vote” principle by the U.S. Supreme Court in 1962. Before then, it was common for many states to practice redistricting, or redrawing of their electoral maps, *only* if they gained or lost seats in the U.S. House of Representatives. This can happen once every ten years as a result of a constitutionally mandated reapportionment process, in which the number of House seats given to each state is adjusted to account for population changes.

But if there was no change in the number of seats, there was little incentive to shift district boundaries. After all, if a legislator had won election based on the current map, any change to the map could make losing seats more likely. Even when reapportionment led to new maps, most legislators were more concerned with protecting their own seats than with increasing the number of seats held by their party. As a result, some districts had gone decades without significant adjustment, even as the U.S. population changed from largely rural to largely urban. By the early 1960s, some electoral districts had populations several times greater than those of their more rural neighbors.

However, in its one-person-one-vote decision in *Reynolds v. Simms* (1964), the Supreme Court argued that everyone's vote should count roughly the same regardless of where they lived.⁶⁷ Districts had to be adjusted so they would have roughly equal populations. Several states therefore had to make dramatic changes to their electoral maps during the next two redistricting cycles (1970–1972 and 1980–1982). Map designers, no longer certain how to protect individual party members, changed tactics to try and create safe seats so members of their party could be assured of winning by a comfortable margin. The basic rule of thumb was that designers sought to draw districts in which their preferred party had a 55 percent or better chance of winning a given district, regardless of which candidate the party nominated.

Of course, many early efforts at post-*Reynolds* gerrymandering were crude since map designers had no good way of knowing exactly where partisans lived. At best, designers might have a rough idea of voting patterns between precincts, but they lacked the ability to know voting patterns in individual blocks or neighborhoods. They also had to contend with the inherent mobility of the U.S. population, which meant the most carefully drawn maps could be obsolete just a few years later. Designers were often forced to use crude proxies for party, such as race or the socio-economic status of a neighborhood ([Figure 10.19](#)). Some maps were so crude they were ruled unconstitutionally discriminatory by the courts.

Gerrymandering in Austin, TX, 2003–2015

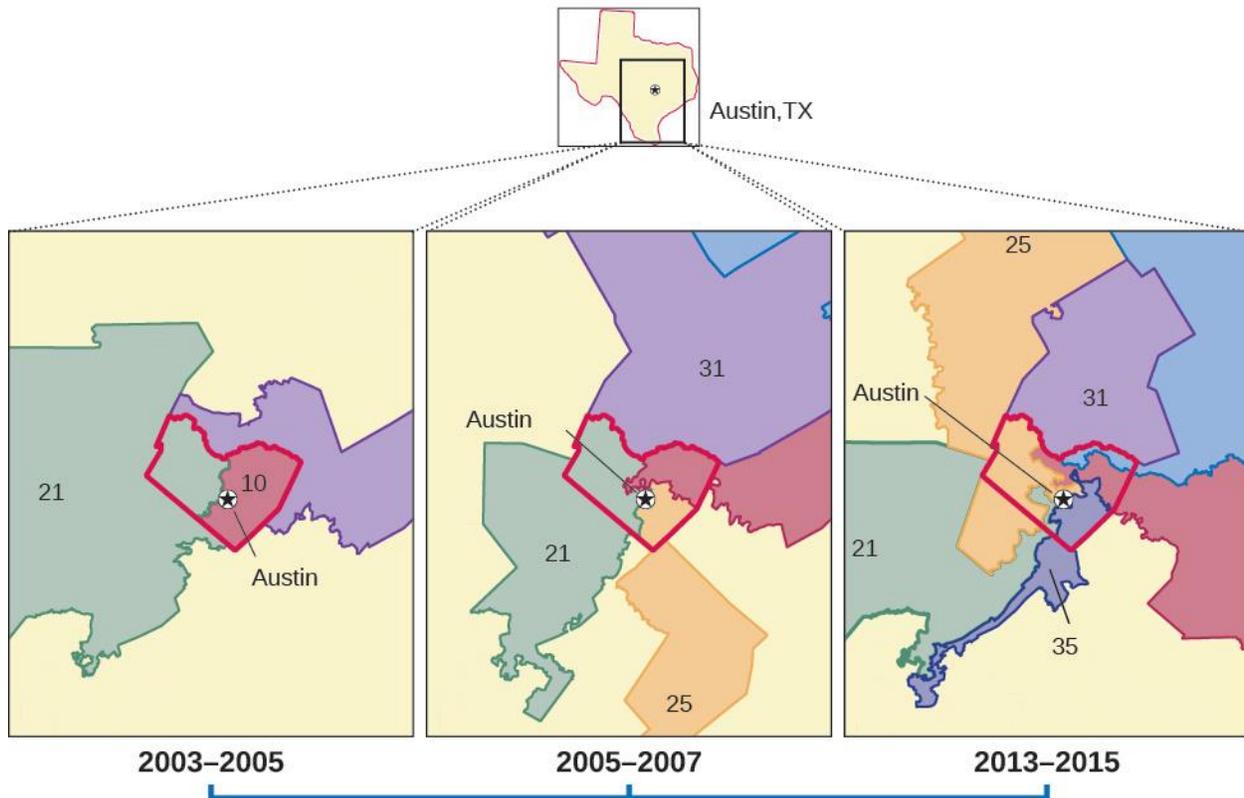


Figure 10.19 Examples of gerrymandering in Texas, where the Republican-controlled legislature redrew House districts to reduce the number of Democratic seats by combining voters in Austin with those near the border, several hundred miles away. Today, Austin is represented by six different congressional representatives.

Proponents of the gerrymandering thesis point out that the decline in the number of moderate voters began during this period of increased redistricting. But it wasn't until later, they argue, that the real effects could be seen. A second advance in redistricting, via computer-aided map making, truly transformed gerrymandering into a science. Refined computing technology, the ability to collect data about potential voters, and the use of advanced algorithms have given map makers a good deal of certainty about where to place district boundaries to best predetermine the outcomes. These factors also provided better predictions about future population shifts, making the effects of gerrymandering more stable over time. Proponents argue that this increased efficiency in map drawing has led to the disappearance of moderates in Congress.

According to political scientist Nolan McCarty, there is little evidence to support the redistricting hypothesis alone. First, he argues, the Senate has become polarized just as the House of Representatives has, but people vote for Senators on a statewide basis. There are no gerrymandered voting districts in elections for senators. Research showing that more partisan candidates first win election to the House before then running successfully for the Senate, however, helps us understand how the Senate can also become partisan.⁶⁸ Furthermore, states

like Wyoming and Vermont, which have only one Representative and thus elect House members on a statewide basis as well, have consistently elected people at the far ends of the ideological spectrum.⁶⁹ Redistricting did contribute to polarization in the House of Representatives, but it took place largely in districts that had undergone significant change.⁷⁰

Furthermore, polarization has been occurring throughout the country, but the use of increasingly polarized district design has not. While some states have seen an increase in these practices, many states were already largely dominated by a single party (such as in the Solid South) but still elected moderate representatives. Some parts of the country have remained closely divided between the two parties, making overt attempts at gerrymandering difficult. But when coupled with the sorting phenomenon discussed above, redistricting probably is contributing to polarization, if only at the margins.

Finding a Middle Ground

The Politics of Redistricting

Voters in a number of states have become so worried about the problem of gerrymandering that they have tried to deny their legislatures the ability to draw district boundaries. The hope is that by taking this power away from whichever party controls the state legislature, voters can ensure more competitive districts and fairer electoral outcomes.

In 2000, voters in Arizona approved a referendum that created an independent state commission responsible for drafting legislative districts. But the Arizona legislature fought back against the creation of the commission, filing a lawsuit that claimed only the legislature had the constitutional right to draw districts. Legislators asked the courts to overturn the popular referendum and end the operation of the redistricting commission. However, the U.S. Supreme Court upheld the authority of the independent commission in a 5–4 decision titled *Arizona State Legislature v. Arizona Independent Redistricting Commission* (2015).⁷¹

Currently, only five states use fully independent commissions—ones that do not include legislators or other elected officials—to draw the lines for both state legislative and congressional districts. These states are Arizona, California, Idaho, Montana, and Washington. In Florida, the League of Women Voters and Common Cause challenged a new voting districts map supported by state Republicans, because they did not believe it fulfilled the requirements of amendments made to the state constitution in 2010 requiring that voting districts not favor any political party or incumbent.⁷²

Do you think redistricting is a partisan issue? Should commissions draw districts instead of legislators? If commissions are given this task, who should serve on them?

Link to Learning

Think you have what it takes to gerrymander a district? Play the [redistricting game](#) and see whether you can find new ways to help out old politicians.



Figure 11.1 A banner at the Oceti Sakowin (Great Sioux Nation) camp at Standing Rock in North Dakota proclaims “Mni Wiconi” (*water is life, or water is alive*). The Great Sioux Nation spearheaded resistance against the Dakota Access Pipeline in defense of nineteenth-century treaties with the U.S. government that gave them sole jurisdiction of the Missouri River. (credit: modification of “mni wiconi banner” by Becker1999/Flickr, CC BY)

Introduction

On August 4, 2016, the Standing Rock Sioux Tribe sued the U.S. Army Corps of Engineers seeking an injunction on the construction of a 1200-mile-long oil pipeline running through four states from North Dakota to Illinois. The tribe argued that building the pipeline near federally governed waters would harm important tribal cultural sites. Protests ensued, which grew in size and effectively blocked the pipeline company from completing its work. The company countersued the tribe. Numerous other actors became involved, including multiple federal judges, two presidents (Obama and Trump), and the governor, who called in the National Guard. While the initial outcome was that the pipeline was halted by the Obama administration, officials in the Trump administration quickly reactivated the project in early 2017. It was completed and is currently in operation. This scenario illustrates well the complexity of public policymaking as it actually occurs and how particular instances of policy can cut across many different domains, including, in this case, the environment, energy policy, tribal sovereignty, and transportation issues.

Each of the individual actors and institutions in the U.S. political system, such as the president, Congress, the courts, interest groups, and the media, gives us an idea of the component parts of the system and their functions. But in the study of public policy, we look at the larger picture and see all the parts working together to produce policy outcomes that ultimately affect citizens and their communities.

What is public policy? How do different areas of policy differ, and what roles do policy analysts and advocates play? What programs does the national government currently provide? And how do budgetary policy and politics operate? This chapter answers these questions and more.

11.1 What Is Public Policy?

Learning Objectives

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

- Explain the concept of public policy
- Discuss examples of public policy in action

It is easy to imagine that when designers engineer a product, like a car, they do so with the intent of satisfying the consumer. But the design of any complicated product must take into account the needs of regulators, transporters, assembly line workers, parts suppliers, and myriad other participants in the manufacture and shipment process. And manufacturers must also be aware that consumer tastes are fickle: A gas-guzzling sports car may appeal to an unmarried twenty-something with no children; but what happens to product satisfaction when gas prices fluctuate, or the individual gets married and has children?

In many ways, the process of designing domestic policy isn't that much different. The government, just like auto companies, needs to ensure that its citizen-consumers have access to an array of goods and services. And just as in auto companies, a wide range of actors is engaged in figuring out how to do it. Sometimes, this process effectively provides policies that benefit citizens. But just as often, the process of policymaking is muddled by the demands of competing interests with different opinions about society's needs or the role that government should play in meeting them. To understand why, we begin by thinking about what we mean by the term "public policy."

PUBLIC POLICY DEFINED

One approach to thinking about public policy is to see it as the broad strategy government uses to do its job. More formally, it is the relatively stable set of purposive governmental actions that address matters of concern to some part of society.¹ This description is useful in that it helps to explain both what public policy is and what it isn't. First, public policy is a guide to legislative action that is more or less fixed for long periods of time, not just short-term fixes or single legislative acts. Policy also doesn't happen by accident, and it is rarely formed simply as the result of the campaign promises of a single elected official, even the president. While elected officials are often important in shaping policy, most policy outcomes are the result of considerable debate, compromise, and refinement that happen over years and are finalized only after input from multiple institutions within government as well as from interest groups and the public.

Consider the example of health care expansion. A follower of politics in the news media may come away thinking the reforms implemented in 2010 were as sudden as they were sweeping, having been developed in the final weeks before they were enacted. The reality is that

expanding health care access had actually been a priority of the Democratic Party for several decades. What may have seemed like a policy developed over a period of months was in fact formed after years of analysis, reflection upon existing policy, and even trial implementation of similar types of programs at the state level. Even before passage of the ACA (2010), which expanded health care coverage to millions, and of the HCERA (2010), more than 50 percent of all health care expenditures in the United States already came from federal government programs such as Medicare and Medicaid. Several House and Senate members from both parties along with First Lady Hillary Clinton had proposed significant expansions in federal health care policy during the Democratic administration of Bill Clinton, providing a number of different options for any eventual health care overhaul.² Much of what became the ACA was drawn from proposals originally developed at the state level, by none other than Obama's 2012 Republican presidential opponent Mitt Romney when he was governor of Massachusetts.³

In addition to being thoughtful and generally stable, public policy deals with issues of concern to some large segment of society, as opposed to matters of interest only to individuals or a small group of people. Governments frequently interact with individual actors like citizens, corporations, or other countries. They may even pass highly specialized pieces of legislation, known as private bills, which confer specific privileges on individual entities. But public policy covers only those issues that are of interest to larger segments of society or that directly or indirectly affect society as a whole. Paying off the loans of a specific individual would not be public policy, but creating a process for loan forgiveness available to certain types of borrowers (such as those who provide a public service by becoming teachers) would certainly rise to the level of public policy.

A final important characteristic of public policy is that it is more than just the actions of government; it also includes the behaviors or outcomes that government action creates. Policy can even be made when government refuses to act in ways that would change the status quo when circumstances or public opinion begin to shift.⁴ For example, much of the debate over gun safety policy in the United States has centered on the unwillingness of Congress to act, even in the face of public opinion that supports some changes to gun policy. In fact, one of the last major changes occurred in 2004, when lawmakers' inaction resulted in the expiration of a piece of legislation known as the Federal Assault Weapons Ban (1994).⁵

PUBLIC POLICY AS OUTCOMES

Governments rarely want to keep their policies a secret. Elected officials want to be able to take credit for the things they have done to help their constituents, and their opponents are all too willing to cast blame when policy initiatives fail. We can therefore think of policy as the formal expression of what elected or appointed officials are trying to accomplish. In passing the HCERA (2010), Congress declared its policy through an act that directed how it would appropriate money. The president can also implement or change policy through an executive order, which offers instructions about how to implement law under the president's discretion ([Figure 11.2](#)). Finally, policy changes can come as a result of court actions or opinions, such as *Brown v. Board of Education of Topeka* (1954), which formally ended school segregation in the United States.⁶



Figure 11.2 President Obama signs a 2009 executive order to accelerate the federal government's recruitment and hiring of returning veterans. Executive orders are an expression of public policy undertaken at the discretion of the president.

Typically, elected and even high-ranking appointed officials lack either the specific expertise or tools needed to successfully create and implement public policy on their own. They turn instead to the vast government bureaucracy to provide policy guidance. For example, when Congress passed the Clean Water Act (1972), it dictated that steps should be taken to improve water quality throughout the country. But it ultimately left it to the bureaucracy to figure out exactly how 'clean' water needed to be. In doing so, Congress provided the Environmental Protection Agency (EPA) with discretion to determine how much pollution is allowed in U.S. waterways.

There is one more way of thinking about policy outcomes: in terms of winners and losers. Almost by definition, public policy promotes certain types of behavior while punishing others. So, the individuals or corporations that a policy favors are most likely to benefit, or win, whereas those the policy ignores or punishes are likely to lose. Even the best-intended policies can have unintended consequences and may even ultimately harm someone, if only those who must pay for the policy through higher taxes. A policy designed to encourage students to go to liberal arts colleges may cause trade school enrollment to decline. Strategies to promote diversity in higher education may make it more difficult for qualified White or male applicants to get accepted into competitive programs. Efforts to clean up drinking water supplies may make companies less competitive and cost employees their livelihood. Even something that seems to help everyone, such as promoting charitable giving through tax incentives, runs the risk of lowering tax revenues from the rich (who contribute a greater share of their income to charity) and shifting tax burdens to the poor (who must spend a higher share of their income to achieve a desired standard of living). And while policy pronouncements and bureaucratic actions are certainly meant to rationalize policy, it is whether a given policy helps or hurts

constituents (or is perceived to do so) that ultimately determines how voters will react toward the government in future elections.

Finding a Middle Ground

The Social Safety Net

During the Great Depression of the 1930s, the United States created a set of policies and programs that constituted a social safety net for the millions who had lost their jobs, their homes, and their savings (Figure 11.3). Under President Franklin Delano Roosevelt, the federal government began programs like the Work Progress Administration and Civilian Conservation Corps to combat unemployment and the Home Owners' Loan Corporation to refinance Depression-related mortgage debts. As the effects of the Depression eased, the government phased out many of these programs. Other programs, like Social Security or the minimum wage, remain an important part of the way the government takes care of the vulnerable members of its population. The federal government has also added further social support programs, like Medicaid, Medicare, and the Special Supplemental Nutrition Program for Women, Infants, and Children, to ensure a baseline or minimal standard of living for all, even in the direst of times.



Figure 11.3 In 1937, during the Great Depression, families in Calipatria, California, waited in line for relief checks, part of the federal government's newly introduced social safety net. (credit: modification of work by the Library of Congress)

In recent decades, however, some have criticized these safety net programs for inefficiency and for incentivizing welfare dependence. They deride “government leeches” who use food stamps to buy lobster or other seemingly inappropriate items. Critics deeply resent the use of taxpayer money to relieve social problems like unemployment and poverty; workers who may themselves be struggling to put food on the table or pay the mortgage feel their hard-earned money should not support other families. “If I can get by without government support,” the reasoning goes, “those welfare families can do the same. Their poverty is not my problem.”

So where should the government draw the line? While there have been some instances of welfare fraud, the welfare reforms of the 1990s have made long-term dependence on the federal government less likely as the welfare safety net was pushed to the states. And with the income gap between the richest and the poorest at its highest level in history, this topic is likely to continue to receive much discussion in the coming years.

Where is the middle ground in the public policy argument over the social safety net? How can the government protect its most vulnerable citizens without placing an undue burden on others?

Link to Learning

Explore [historical data on United States budgets and spending](#) from 1940 to the present from the Office of Management and Budget.

11.2 Categorizing Public Policy

Learning Objectives

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

- Describe the different types of goods in a society
- Identify key public policy domains in the United States
- Compare the different forms of policy and the way they transfer goods within a society

The idea of public policy is by its very nature a politically contentious one. Among the differences between American liberals and conservatives are the policy preferences prevalent in each group. Modern liberals tend to feel very comfortable with the idea of the government shepherding progressive social and economic reforms, believing that these will lead to outcomes more equitable and fair for all members of society. Conservatives, on the other hand, often find government involvement onerous and overreaching. They feel society would function more efficiently if oversight of most “public” matters were returned to the private sphere. Before digging too deeply into a discussion of the nature of public policy in the United States, let us look first at why so many aspects of society come under the umbrella of public policy to begin with.

DIFFERENT TYPES OF GOODS

Think for a minute about what it takes to make people happy and satisfied. As we live our daily lives, we experience a range of physical, psychological, and social needs that must be met in order for us to be happy and productive. At the very least, we require food, water, and shelter. In very basic subsistence societies, people acquire these through farming crops, digging wells, and creating shelter from local materials (see [Figure 11.4](#)). People also need social interaction with others and the ability to secure goods they acquire, lest someone else try to take them. As their tastes become more complex, they may find it advantageous to exchange their items for others; this requires not only a mechanism for barter but also a system of transportation. The more complex these systems are, the greater the range of items people can access to keep them alive and make them happy. However, this increase in possessions also creates a stronger need to secure what they have acquired.



Figure 11.4 This Library of Congress photo shows an early nineteenth-century subsistence farm in West Virginia, which once included crops, livestock, and an orchard. (credit: modification of work by the Library of Congress)

Economists use the term *goods* to describe the range of commodities, services, and systems that help us satisfy our wants or needs. This term can certainly apply to the food you eat or the home you live in, but it can also describe the systems of transportation or public safety used to protect them. Most of the goods you interact with in your daily life are *private goods*, which means that they can be owned by a particular person or group of people, and are excluded from use by others, typically by means of a price. For example, your home or apartment is a private good reserved for your own use because you pay rent or make mortgage payments for the privilege of living there. Further, private goods are finite and can run out if overused, even if only in the short term. The fact that private goods are excludable and finite makes them tradable. A farmer who grows corn, for instance, owns that corn, and since only a finite amount of corn exists, others may want to trade their goods for it if their own food supplies begin to dwindle.

Proponents of free-market economics believe that the market forces of supply and demand, working without any government involvement, are the most effective way for markets to operate. One of the basic principles of free-market economics is that for just about any good that can be privatized, the most efficient means for exchange is the marketplace. A well-functioning market will allow producers of goods to come together with consumers of goods to negotiate a trade. People facilitate trade by creating a currency—a common unit of exchange—so they do not need to carry around everything they may want to trade at all times. As long as there are several providers or sellers of the same good, consumers can negotiate with them to find a price they are willing to pay. As long as there are several buyers for a seller's goods, providers can negotiate with them to find a price buyers are willing to accept. And, the logic goes, if prices begin to rise too much, other sellers will enter the marketplace, offering lower prices.

A second basic principle of free-market economics is that it is largely unnecessary for the government to protect the value of private goods. Farmers who own land used for growing food have a vested interest in protecting their land to ensure its continued production. Business owners must protect the reputation of their business or no one will buy from them. And, to the degree that producers need to ensure the quality of their product or industry, they can accomplish that by creating a group or association that operates outside government control. In short, industries have an interest in self-regulating to protect their own value. According to free-market economics, as long as everything we could ever want or need is a private good, and so long as every member of society has some ability to provide for themselves and their families, public policy regulating the exchange of goods and services is really unnecessary.

Some people in the United States argue that the self-monitoring and self-regulating incentives provided by the existence of private goods mean that sound public policy requires very little government action. Known as libertarians, these individuals believe government almost always operates less efficiently than the private sector (the segment of the economy run for profit and not under government control), and that government actions should therefore be kept to a minimum.

Even as many in the United States recognize the benefits provided by private goods, we have increasingly come to recognize problems with the idea that all social problems can be solved by exclusively private ownership. First, not all goods can be classified as strictly private. Can you really consider the air you breathe to be private? Air is a difficult good to privatize because it is not excludable—everyone can get access to it at all times—and no matter how much of it you breathe, there is still plenty to go around. Geographic regions like forests have environmental, social, recreational, and aesthetic value that cannot easily be reserved for private ownership. Resources like migrating birds or schools of fish may have value if hunted or fished, but they cannot be owned due to their migratory nature. Finally, national security provided by the armed forces protects all citizens and cannot reasonably be reserved for only a few.

These are all examples of what economists call *public goods*, sometimes referred to as collective goods. Unlike private property, they are not excludable and are essentially infinite. Forests, water, and fisheries, however, are a type of public good called *common goods*, which are not excludable but may be finite. The problem with both public and common goods is that since no one owns them, no one has a financial interest in protecting their long-term or future value. Without government regulation, factory owners can feel free to pollute the air or water, since they will have no responsibility for the pollution once the winds or waves carry it somewhere else (see [Figure 11.5](#)). Without government regulation, someone can hunt all the migratory birds or deplete a fishery by taking all the fish, eliminating future breeding stocks that would maintain the population. The situation in which individuals exhaust a common resource by acting in their own immediate self-interest is called the *tragedy of the commons*.



Figure 11.5 Air pollution billows from a power plant before the installation of emission control equipment for the removal of sulfur dioxide and particulate matter. Can you see why uncontrolled pollution is an example of the “tragedy of the commons”?

A second problem with strict adherence to free-market economics is that some goods are too large, or too expensive, for individuals to provide them for themselves. Consider the need for a marketplace: Where does the marketplace come from? How do we get the goods to market? Who provides the roads and bridges? Who patrols the waterways? Who provides security? Who ensures the regulation of the currency? No individual buyer or seller could accomplish this. The very nature of the exchange of private goods requires a system that has some of the openness of public or common goods, but is maintained by either groups of individuals or entire societies.

Economists consider goods like cable TV, cellphone service, and private schools to be toll goods. *Toll goods* are similar to public goods in that they are open to all and theoretically infinite if maintained, but they are paid for or provided by some outside (nongovernment) entity. Many people can make use of them, but only if they can pay the price. The name “toll goods” comes from the fact that, early on, many toll roads were in fact privately owned commodities. Even today, states from Virginia to California have allowed private companies to build public roads in exchange for the right to profit by charging tolls.²

So long as land was plentiful, and most people in the United States lived a largely rural subsistence lifestyle, the difference between private, public, common, and toll goods was mostly academic. But as public lands increasingly became private through sale and settlement, and as industrialization and the rise of mass production allowed monopolies and oligopolies to become more influential, support for public policies regulating private entities grew. By the beginning of the twentieth century, led by the Progressives, the United States had begun to search for ways to govern large businesses that had managed to distort market forces by monopolizing the supply of goods. And, largely as a result of the Great Depression, people wanted ways of developing and protecting public goods that were fairer and more equitable than had existed before. These forces and events led to the increased regulation of public and common goods, and a move for the public sector—the government—to take over of the provision of many toll goods.

CLASSIC TYPES OF POLICY

Public policy, then, ultimately boils down to determining the distribution, allocation, and enjoyment of public, common, and toll goods within a society. While the specifics of policy often depend on the circumstances, two broad questions all policymakers must consider are a) who pays the costs of creating and maintaining the goods, and b) who receives the benefits of the goods? When private goods are bought and sold in a market place, the costs and benefits go to the participants in the transaction. Your landlord benefits from receipt of the rent you pay, and you benefit by having a place to live. But non-private goods like roads, waterways, and national parks are controlled and regulated by someone other than the owners, allowing policymakers to make decisions about who pays and who benefits.

In 1964, Theodore Lowi argued that it was possible to categorize policy based upon the degree to which costs and benefits were concentrated on the few or diffused across the many. One policy category, known as distributive policy, tends to collect payments or resources from many but concentrates direct benefits on relatively few. Highways are often developed through distributive policy. Distributive policy is also common when society feels there is a social benefit to individuals obtaining private goods such as higher education that offer long-term benefits, but the upfront cost may be too high for the average citizen.

One example of the way distributive policy works is the story of the Transcontinental Railroad. In the 1860s, the U.S. government began to recognize the value of building a robust railroad system to move passengers and freight around the country. A particular goal was connecting California and the other western territories acquired during the 1840s war with Mexico to the rest of the country. The problem was that constructing a nationwide railroad system was a costly and risky proposition. To build and support continuous rail lines, private investors would need to gain access to tens of thousands of miles of land, some of which might be owned by private citizens. The solution was to charter two private corporations—the Central Pacific and Union Pacific Railroads—and provide them with resources and land grants to facilitate the construction of the railroads (see [Figure 11.6](#)).⁸ Through these grants, publicly owned land was distributed to private citizens, who could then use it for their own gain. However, a broader public gain was simultaneously being provided in the form of a nationwide transportation network.



Figure 11.6 In an example of distributive policy, the Union Pacific Railroad was given land and resources to help build a national railroad system. Here, its workers construct the Devil's Gate Bridge in Utah in 1869.

The same process operates in the agricultural sector, where various federal programs help farmers and food producers through price supports and crop insurance, among other forms of assistance. These programs help individual farmers and agriculture companies stay afloat and realize consistent profits. They also achieve the broader goal of providing plenty of sustenance for the people of the United States, so that few of us have to “live off the land.”

Milestone

The Hoover Dam: The Federal Effort to Domesticate the Colorado River

As westward expansion led to development of the American Southwest, settlers increasingly realized that they needed a way to control the frequent floods and droughts that made agriculture difficult in the region. As early as 1890, land speculators had tried diverting the Colorado River for this purpose, but it wasn't until 1922 that the U.S. Bureau of Reclamation (then called the Reclamation Service) chose the Black Canyon as a good location for a dam to divert the river. Since it would affect seven states (as well as Mexico), the federal government took the lead on the project, which eventually cost \$49 million and more than one hundred lives. The dam faced significant opposition from members of other states, who felt its massive price tag (almost \$670 million in today's dollars⁹) benefitted only a small group, not the whole nation. However, in 1928, Senator Hiram Johnson and Representative Phil Swing, both Republicans from California, won the day. Congress passed the Boulder Canyon Project Act, authorizing the construction of one of the most ambitious engineering feats in U.S. history. The Hoover Dam ([Figure 11.7](#)), completed in 1935, served the dual purpose of generating hydroelectric power and irrigating two million acres of land from the resulting reservoir (Lake Mead).

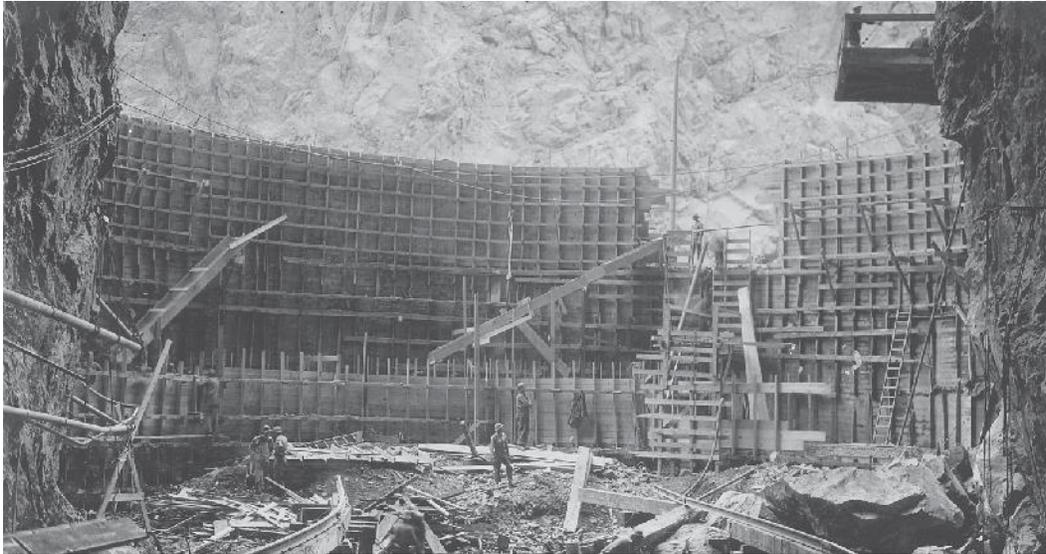


Figure 11.7 Workers construct the Hoover Dam, a distributive policy project, in Nevada in 1932.

Was the construction of the Hoover Dam an effective expression of public policy? Why or why not?

[Link to Learning](#)

Visit this [site](#) to see how the U.S. Bureau of Reclamation (USBR) presented the construction of the Hoover Dam. How would you describe the bureau's perspective?

American Rivers is an advocacy group whose goal is to protect and restore rivers, including the Colorado River. How does this group's view of the [Hoover Dam](#) differ from that of the USBR?

Other examples of distributive policy support citizens' efforts to achieve "the American Dream." American society recognizes the benefits of having citizens who are financially invested in the country's future. Among the best ways to encourage this investment are to ensure that citizens are highly educated and have the ability to acquire high-cost private goods such as homes and businesses. However, very few people have the savings necessary to pay upfront for a college education, a first home purchase, or the start-up costs of a business. To help out, the government has created a range of incentives that everyone in the country pays for through taxes but that directly benefit only the recipients. Examples include grants (such as Pell grants), tax credits and deductions, and subsidized or federally guaranteed loans. Each of these programs aims to achieve a policy outcome. Pell grants exist to help students graduate from college, whereas Federal Housing Administration mortgage loans lead to home ownership. A related distributive project is the effort to bring broadband internet to remote rural areas of the country that have disproportionately felt the negative effects of the digital divide. Such a project is the most ambitious infrastructure initiative since the Rural Electrification Act. Broadband is spreading slowly for now, mostly helped along by rural co-ops. However, multiple

federal agencies are investigating how to help this effort, including the U.S. Department of Agriculture and the Federal Communications Commission.

While distributive policy, according to Lowi, has diffuse costs and concentrated benefits, regulatory policy features the opposite arrangement, with concentrated costs and diffuse benefits. A relatively small number of groups or individuals bear the costs of regulatory policy, but its benefits are expected to be distributed broadly across society. As you might imagine, regulatory policy is most effective for controlling or protecting public or common resources. Among the best-known examples are policies designed to protect public health and safety, and the environment. These regulatory policies prevent manufacturers or businesses from maximizing their profits by excessively polluting the air or water, selling products they know to be harmful, or compromising the health of their employees during production.

In the United States, nationwide calls for a more robust regulatory policy first grew loud around the turn of the twentieth century and the dawn of the Industrial Age. Investigative journalists—called *muckrakers* by politicians and business leaders who were the focus of their investigations—began to expose many of the ways in which manufacturers were abusing the public trust. Although various forms of corruption topped the list of abuses, among the most famous muckraker exposés was *The Jungle*, a 1906 novel by Upton Sinclair that focused on unsanitary working conditions and unsavory business practices in the meat-packing industry.¹⁰ This work and others like it helped to spur the passage of the Pure Food and Drug Act (1906) and ultimately led to the creation of government agencies such as the U.S. Food and Drug Administration (FDA).¹¹ The nation’s experiences during the depression of 1896 and the Great Depression of the 1930s also led to more robust regulatory policies designed to improve the transparency of financial markets and prevent monopolies from forming.

A final type of policy is redistributive policy, so named because it redistributes resources in society from one group to another. That is, according to Lowi, the costs are concentrated and so are the benefits, but different groups bear the costs and enjoy the benefits. Most redistributive policies are intended to have a sort of “Robin Hood” effect; their goal is to transfer income and wealth from one group to another such that everyone enjoys at least a minimal standard of living. Typically, the wealthy and middle class pay into the federal tax base, which then funds need-based programs that support low-income individuals and families. A few examples of redistributive policies are Head Start (education), Pell Grants (higher education), Medicaid (health care), Temporary Assistance for Needy Families (TANF, income support), and food programs like the Supplementary Nutritional Aid Program (SNAP). The government also uses redistribution to incentivize specific behaviors or aid small groups of people. Pell grants to encourage college attendance and tax credits to encourage home ownership are other examples of redistribution.

11.3 Policy Arenas

Learning Objectives

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

- Identify the key domestic arenas of public policy
- Describe the major social safety net programs
- List the key agencies responsible for promoting and regulating U.S. business and industry

In practice, public policy consists of specific programs that provide resources to members of society, create regulations that protect U.S. citizens, and attempt to equitably fund the government. We can broadly categorize most policies based on their goals or the sector of society they affect, although many, such as food stamps, serve multiple purposes. Implementing these policies costs hundreds of billions of dollars each year, and understanding the goals of this spending and where the money goes is of vital importance to citizens and students of politics alike.

SOCIAL WELFARE POLICY

The U.S. government began developing a social welfare policy during the Great Depression of the 1930s. By the 1960s, social welfare had become a major function of the federal government—one to which most public policy funds are devoted—and had developed to serve several overlapping functions. First, social welfare policy is designed to ensure some level of equity in a democratic political system based on competitive, free-market economics. During the Great Depression, many politicians came to fear that the high unemployment and low-income levels plaguing society could threaten the stability of democracy, as was happening in European countries like Germany and Italy. The assumption in this thinking is that democratic systems work best when poverty is minimized. In societies operating in survival mode, in contrast, people tend to focus more on short-term problem-solving than on long-term planning. Second, social welfare policy creates an automatic stimulus for a society by building a safety net that can catch members of society who are suffering economic hardship through no fault of their own. For an individual family, this safety net makes the difference between eating and starving; for an entire economy, it could prevent an economic recession from sliding into a broader and more damaging depression.

One of the oldest and largest pieces of social welfare policy is Social Security, which cost the United States about \$845 billion in 2014 alone.¹² These costs are offset by a 12.4 percent payroll tax on all wages up to \$118,500; employers and workers who are not self-employed split the bill for each worker, whereas the self-employed pay their entire share.¹³ Social Security was conceived as a solution to several problems inherent to the Industrial Era economy. First, by the 1920s and 1930s, an increasing number of workers were earning their living through manual or day-wage labor that depended on their ability to engage in physical activity ([Figure 11.8](#)). As their bodies weakened with age or if they were injured, their ability to provide for themselves and their families was compromised. Second, and of particular concern, were urban widows. During their working years, most American women stayed home to raise children and maintain the household while their husbands provided income. Should their husbands die or become injured, these women had no wage-earning skills with which to support themselves or their families.

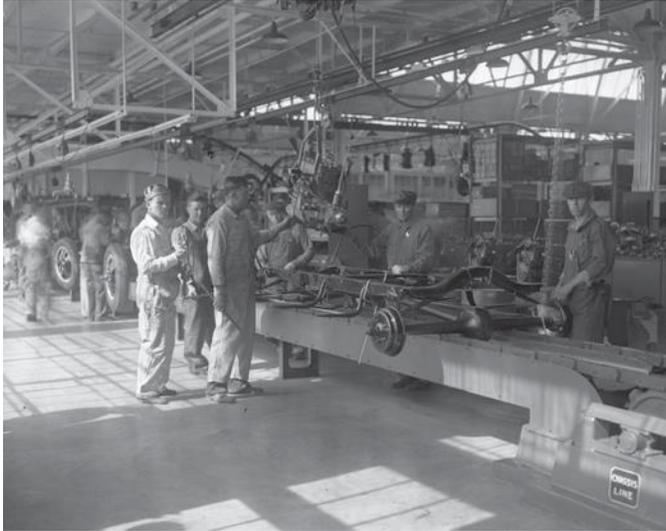


Figure 11.8 In 1930, when this Ford automotive plant opened in Long Beach, California, American workers had few economic protections to rely on if they were injured or could not maintain such physical activity as they aged.

Social Security addresses these concerns with three important tools. First and best known is the retirement benefit. After completing a minimum number of years of work, American workers may claim a form of pension upon reaching retirement age. It is often called an entitlement program since it guarantees benefits to a particular group, and virtually everyone will eventually qualify for the plan given the relatively low requirements for enrollment. The amount of money a worker receives is based loosely on that worker's lifetime earnings. Full retirement age was originally set at sixty-five, although changes in legislation have increased it to sixty-seven for workers born after 1959.¹⁴ A valuable added benefit is that, under certain circumstances, this income may also be claimed by the survivors of qualifying workers, such as spouses and minor children, even if they themselves did not have a wage income.

A second Social Security benefit is a disability payout, which the government distributes to workers who become unable to work due to disability. To qualify, workers must demonstrate that the injury or incapacitation will last at least twelve months. A third and final benefit is Supplemental Security Income, which provides supplemental income to adults or children with considerable disability or to the elderly who fall below an income threshold.

During the George W. Bush administration, Social Security became a highly politicized topic as the Republican Party sought to find a way of preventing what experts predicted would be the impending collapse of the Social Security system (Figure 11.9). In 1950, the ratio of workers paying into the program to beneficiaries receiving payments was 11.5 to 1. In 2020, that number stood at 2.8 to 1, and is expected to fall to 2.3 to 1 by 2035.¹⁵ Most predictions in fact suggest that, due to continuing demographic changes including slower population growth and an aging population, by 2033, the amount of revenue generated from payroll taxes will no longer be sufficient to cover costs. The Bush administration proposed avoiding this by privatizing the program, in effect, taking it out of the government's hands and making individuals' benefits variable instead of defined. The effort ultimately failed, and Social

Security's long-term viability continues to remain uncertain. Numerous other plans for saving the program have been proposed, including raising the retirement age, increasing payroll taxes (especially on the wealthy) by removing the income cap (\$142,800 in 2021), and reducing payouts for wealthier retirees.¹⁶ None of these proposals have been able to gain traction, however.



Figure 11.9 President George W. Bush discusses Social Security in Florida at the outset of his second term in 2005.

While Social Security was designed to provide cash payments to sustain elderly people and some people with disabilities, Medicare and Medicaid were intended to ensure that vulnerable populations have access to health care. Medicare, like Social Security, is an entitlement program funded through payroll taxes. Its purpose is to make sure that senior citizens and retirees have access to low-cost health care they might not otherwise have, because most U.S. citizens get their health insurance through their employers. Medicare provides three major forms of coverage: a guaranteed insurance benefit that helps cover major hospitalization, fee-based supplemental coverage that retirees can use to lower costs for doctor visits and other health expenses, and a prescription drug benefit. Medicare faces many of the same long-term challenges as Social Security, due to the same demographic shifts. Medicare also faces the problem that health care costs are rising significantly faster than inflation. In 2019, Medicare cost the federal government approximately \$796 billion.¹⁷ ¹⁸

Medicaid is a formula-based, health insurance program, which means beneficiaries must demonstrate they fall within a particular income category. Individuals in the Medicaid program receive a fairly comprehensive set of health benefits, although access to health care may be limited because fewer providers accept payments from the program (it pays them less for services than does Medicare). Medicaid differs dramatically from Medicare in that it is partially funded by states, many of which have reduced access to the program by setting the income threshold so low that few people qualify. The ACA (2010) sought to change that by providing more federal money to the states if they agreed to raise minimum income requirements. Twelve states have refused, which has helped to keep the overall costs of Medicaid lower, even though it has also left many people without health coverage they might receive if they lived elsewhere. Total costs for Medicaid in 2020 were about \$627 billion, about \$405 billion of which was paid by the federal government.¹⁹

Collectively, Social Security, Medicare, and Medicaid make up the lion's share of total federal government spending, almost 48 percent in 2019. Several other smaller programs also provide

income support to families. Most of these are formula-based, or means-tested, requiring citizens to meet certain maximum income requirements in order to qualify. A few examples are TANF, SNAP (also called food stamps), the unemployment insurance program, and various housing assistance programs. Collectively, these programs add up to a little over \$361 billion.²⁰

SCIENCE, TECHNOLOGY, AND EDUCATION

After World War II ended, the United States quickly realized that it had to address two problems to secure its fiscal and national security future. The first was that more than ten million servicemen and women needed to be reintegrated into the workforce, and many lacked appreciable work skills. The second problem was that the United States' success in its new conflict with the Soviet Union depended on the rapid development of a new, highly technical military-industrial complex. To confront these challenges, the U.S. government passed several important pieces of legislation to provide education assistance to workers and research dollars to industry. As the needs of American workers and industry have changed, many of these programs have evolved from their original purposes, but they still remain important pieces of the public policy debate.

Much of the nation's science and technology policy benefits its military, for instance, in the form of research and development funding for a range of defense projects. The federal government still promotes research for civilian uses, mostly through the National Science Foundation, the National Institutes of Health, the National Aeronautics and Space Administration (NASA), and the National Oceanic and Atmospheric Administration. Recent debate over these agencies has focused on whether government funding is necessary or if private entities would be better suited. For example, although NASA continues to develop a replacement for the now-defunct U.S. space shuttle program (Figure 11.10), much of its workload is currently being performed by private companies working to develop their own space launch, resupply, and tourism programs.



(a)



(b)

Figure 11.10 The launch of the Perseverance rover, part of NASA's Mars 2020 mission, from Cape Canaveral Air Force Station in Florida on July 30, 2020 (a). SpaceX headquarters in

Hawthorne, California, during the Iridium-4 launch operations in December 2017 (b). Should the private sector fund space exploration programs rather than the government? (credit a: modification of "Mars 2020 Mission, Perseverance Rover Launch" by NASA/mars.nasa.gov, Public Domain; credit b: modification of "Iridium-4 Mission" by Official SpaceX Photos/Wikimedia Commons, CC 0)

The problem of trying to direct and fund the education of a modern U.S. workforce is familiar to many students of American government. Educational systems exist to carry out two distinct and lofty goals. First, they educate and provide opportunity to a learned society of individuals who can together govern society and run communities. Second, our educational institutions provide practical training for students to make a living. Therefore, governments and communities must simultaneously educate young people to be creative and responsible citizens while also providing practical job training programs for the workforces that communities, states, and the country need.

Historically, education has largely been the job of the states. While they have provided a very robust K–12 public education system, the national government has never moved to create an equivalent system of national higher education academies or universities as many other countries have done. As the need to keep the nation competitive with others became more pressing, however, the U.S. government did step in to direct its education dollars toward creating greater equity and ease of access to the existing public and private systems.

The overwhelming portion of the federal government's higher education money is spent on student loans, grants, and work-study programs. Resources are set aside to cover job-retraining programs for individuals who lack private-sector skills or who need to be retrained to meet changes in the economy's demands for the labor force. National policy toward elementary and secondary education programs has typically focused on increasing resources available to school districts for nontraditional programs (such as preschool and special needs), or helping poorer schools stay competitive with wealthier institutions.

BUSINESS STIMULUS AND REGULATION

A final key aspect of domestic policy is the growth and regulation of business. The size and strength of the economy is very important to politicians whose jobs depend on citizens' believing in their own future prosperity. At the same time, people in the United States want to live in a world where they feel safe from unfair or environmentally damaging business practices. These desires have forced the government to perform a delicate balancing act between programs that help grow the economy by providing benefits to the business sector and those that protect consumers, often by curtailing or regulating the business sector.

Two of the largest recipients of government aid to business are agriculture and energy. Both are multi-billion dollar industries concentrated in rural and/or electorally influential states. Because voters are affected by the health of these sectors every time they pay their grocery or utility bill, the U.S. government has chosen to provide significant agriculture and energy subsidies to cover the risks inherent in the unpredictability of the weather and oil exploration. Government subsidies also protect these industries' profitability. These two purposes have

even overlapped in the government’s controversial decision to subsidize the production of ethanol, a fuel source similar to gasoline but generated from corn.

When it comes to regulation, the federal government has created several agencies responsible for providing for everything from worker safety (OSHA, the Occupational Safety and Health Administration), to food safety (FDA), to consumer protection, where the recently created Bureau of Consumer Protection ensures that businesses do not mislead consumers with deceptive or manipulative practices. Another prominent federal agency, the EPA, is charged with ensuring that businesses do not excessively pollute the nation’s air or waterways. A complex array of additional regulatory agencies governs specific industries such as banking and finance, which are detailed later in this chapter.

Link to Learning

The policy areas we’ve described so far fall far short of forming an exhaustive list. This [site](#) contains the major topic categories of substantive policy in U.S. government, according to the Policy Agendas Project. View subcategories by clicking on the major topic categories.

11.4 Policymakers

Learning Objectives

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

- Identify types of policymakers in different issue areas
- Describe the public policy process

Many Americans were concerned when Congress began debating the Affordable Care Act (ACA). As the program took shape, some people felt the changes it proposed were being debated too hastily, would be implemented too quickly, or would summarily give the government control over an important piece of the U.S. economy—the health care industry. Ironically, the government had been heavily engaged in providing health care for decades. More than 50 percent of all health care dollars spent were being spent by the U.S. government well before the ACA was enacted. As you have already learned, Medicare was created decades earlier. Despite protesters’ resistance to government involvement in health care, there is no keeping government out of Medicare; the government IS Medicare.

What many did not realize is that few if any of the proposals that eventually became part of the ACA were original. While the country was worried about problems like terrorism, the economy, and conflicts over LGBTQ rights, armies of individuals were debating the best ways to fix the nation’s health care delivery. Two important but overlapping groups defended their preferred policy changes: policy advocates and policy analysts.

POLICY ADVOCATES

Take a minute to think of a policy change you believe would improve some condition in the United States. Now ask yourself this: “Why do I want to change this policy?” Are you motivated by a desire for justice? Do you feel the policy change would improve your life or that of

members of your community? Is your sense of morality motivating you to change the status quo? Would your profession be helped? Do you feel that changing the policy might raise your status?

Most people have some policy position or issue they would like to see altered (see [Figure 11.11](#)). One of the reasons the news media are so enduring is that citizens have a range of opinions on public policy, and they are very interested in debating how a given change would improve their lives or the country's. But despite their interests, most people do little more than vote or occasionally contribute to a political campaign. A few people, however, become policy advocates by actively working to propose or maintain public policy.



Figure 11.11 In 2010, members of PETA (People for the Ethical Treatment of Animals) demonstrate against a local zoo. As policy advocates, PETA's members often publicize their position on how animals should be treated.

One way to think about policy advocates is to recognize that they hold a normative position on an issue, that is, they have a conviction about what should or ought to be done. The best public policy, in their view, is one that accomplishes a specific goal or outcome. For this reason, advocates often begin with an objective and then try to shape or create proposals that help them accomplish that goal. Facts, evidence, and analysis are important tools for convincing policymakers or the general public of the benefits of their proposals. Private citizens often find themselves in advocacy positions, particularly if they are required to take on leadership roles in their private lives or in their organizations. The most effective advocates are usually hired professionals who form lobbying groups or think tanks to promote their agenda.

A lobbying group that frequently takes on advocacy roles is AARP (formerly the American Association of Retired Persons) ([Figure 11.12](#)). AARP's primary job is to convince the government to provide more public resources and services to senior citizens, often through regulatory or redistributive politics. Chief among its goals are lower health care costs and the safety of Social Security pension payments. These aims put AARP in the Democratic Party's electoral coalition, since Democrats have historically been stronger advocates for Medicare's creation and expansion. In 2002, for instance, Democrats and Republicans were debating a major change to Medicare. The Democratic Party supported expanding Medicare to include

free or low-cost prescription drugs, while the Republicans preferred a plan that would require seniors to purchase drug insurance through a private insurer. The government would subsidize costs, but many seniors would still have substantial out-of-pocket expenses. To the surprise of many, AARP supported the Republican proposal.



Figure 11.12 First Lady Michelle Obama shows her AARP membership card on her fiftieth birthday in January 2014. AARP is a major policy advocate for older people and retirees.

While Democrats argued that their position would have provided a better deal for individuals, AARP reasoned that the Republican plan had a much better chance of passing. The Republicans controlled the House and looked likely to reclaim control of the Senate in the upcoming election. Then-president George W. Bush was a Republican and would almost certainly have vetoed the Democratic approach. AARP's support for the legislation helped shore up support for Republicans in the 2002 midterm election and also help convince a number of moderate Democrats to support the bill (with some changes), which passed despite apparent public disapproval. AARP had done its job as an advocate for seniors by creating a new benefit it hoped could later be expanded, rather than fighting for an extreme position that would have left it with nothing.²¹

Not all policy advocates are as willing to compromise their positions. It is much easier for a group like AARP to compromise over the amount of money seniors will receive, for instance, than it is for an evangelical religious group to compromise over issues like abortion, or for civil rights groups to accept something less than equality. Nor are women's rights groups likely to accept pay inequality as it currently exists. It is easier to compromise over financial issues than over our individual views of morality or social justice.

POLICY ANALYSTS

A second approach to creating public policy is a bit more objective. Rather than starting with what ought to happen and seeking ways to make it so, policy analysts try to identify all the possible choices available to a decision maker and then gauge their impacts if implemented. The goal of the analyst isn't really to encourage the implementation of any of the options; rather, it is to make sure decision makers are fully informed about the implications of the decisions they do make.

Understanding the financial and other costs and benefits of policy choices requires analysts to make strategic guesses about how the public and governmental actors will respond. For example, when policymakers are considering changes to health care policy, one very important question is how many people will participate. If very few people had chosen to take advantage of the new health care plans available under the ACA marketplace, it would have been significantly cheaper than advocates proposed, but it also would have failed to accomplish the key goal of increasing the number of insured. But if people who currently have insurance had dropped it to take advantage of ACA's subsidies, the program's costs would have skyrocketed with very little real benefit to public health. Similarly, had all states chosen to create their own marketplaces, the cost and complexity of ACA's implementation would have been greatly reduced.

Because advocates have an incentive to understate costs and overstate benefits, policy analysis tends to be a highly politicized aspect of government. It is critical for policymakers and voters that policy analysts provide the most accurate analysis possible. A number of independent or semi-independent think tanks have sprung up in Washington, DC, to provide assessments of policy options. Most businesses or trade organizations also employ their own policy-analysis wings to help them understand proposed changes or even offer some of their own. Some of these try to be as impartial as possible. Most, however, have a known bias toward policy advocacy. The Cato Institute, for example, is well known and highly respected policy analysis group that both liberal and conservative politicians have turned to when considering policy options. But the Cato Institute has a known libertarian bias; most of the problems it selects for analysis have the potential for private sector solutions. This means its analysts tend to include the rosier assumptions of economic growth when considering tax cuts and to overestimate the costs of public sector proposals.

Link to Learning

The [RAND Corporation](#) has conducted objective policy analysis for corporate, nonprofit, and government clients since the mid-twentieth century. What are some of the policy areas it has explored?

Both the Congress and the president have tried to reduce the bias in policy analysis by creating their own theoretically nonpartisan policy branches. In Congress, the best known of these is the Congressional Budget Office, or CBO. Authorized in the 1974 Congressional Budget and Impoundment Control Act, the CBO was formally created in 1975 as a way of increasing Congress's independence from the executive branch. The CBO is responsible for scoring the spending or revenue impact of all proposed legislation to assess its net effect on the budget. In

recent years, it has been the CBO's responsibility to provide Congress with guidance on how to best balance the budget (see [Figure 11.13](#)). The formulas that the CBO uses in scoring the budget have become an important part of the policy debate, even as the group has tried to maintain its nonpartisan nature.

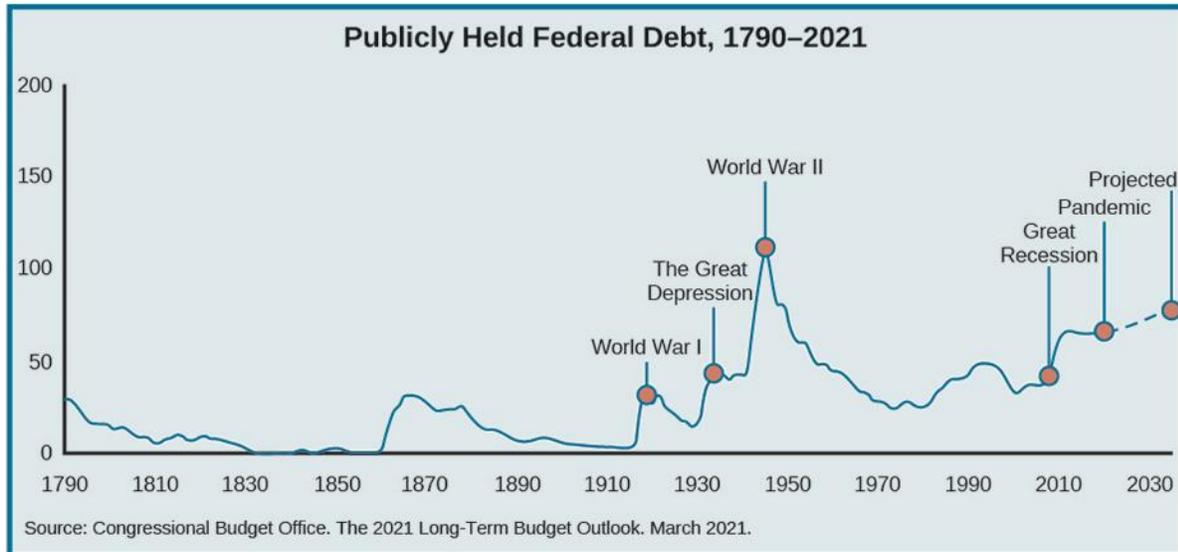


Figure 11.13 The Congressional Budget Office (CBO) is responsible for studying the impact of all proposed legislation to assess its net effect on the budget and tracking federal debt. For example, this 2021 CBO chart shows federal debt held by the public as a percentage of gross domestic product from 1790 through 2021 and projected to 2050.

In the executive branch, each individual department and agency is technically responsible for its own policy analysis. The assumption is that experts in the Federal Communications Commission or the Federal Elections Commission are best equipped to evaluate the impact of various proposals within their policy domain. Law requires that most regulatory changes made by the federal government also include the opportunity for public input so the government can both gauge public opinion and seek outside perspectives.

Executive branch agencies are usually also charged with considering the economic impact of regulatory action, although some agencies have been better at this than others. Critics have frequently singled out the EPA and OSHA for failing to adequately consider the impact of new rules on business. Within the White House itself, the Office of Management and Budget (OMB) was created to “serve the President of the United States in implementing his [or her] vision” of policy. Policy analysis is important to the OMB's function, but as you can imagine, it frequently compromises its objectivity during policy formulation.

[Link to Learning](#)

How do the [OMB](#) and the [CBO](#) compare when it comes to impartiality?

THE POLICY PROCESS

The policy process contains four sequential stages: (1) agenda setting, (2) policy enactment, (3) policy implementation, and (4) evaluation. Given the sheer number of issues already processed by the government, called the continuing agenda, and the large number of new proposals being pushed at any one time, it is typically quite difficult to move a new policy all the way through the process.

Agenda setting is the crucial first stage of the public policy process. Agenda setting has two subphases: problem identification and alternative specification. Problem identification identifies the issues that merit discussion. Not all issues make it onto the governmental agenda because there is only so much attention that government can pay. Thus, one of the more important tasks for a policy advocate is to frame the issue in a compelling way that raises a persuasive dimension or critical need.²² For example, health care reform has been attempted on many occasions over the years. One key to making the topic salient has been to frame it in terms of health care access, highlighting the percentage of people who do not have health insurance.

Alternative specification, the second subphase of agenda setting, considers solutions to fix the difficulty raised in problem identification. For example, government officials may agree in the problem subphase that the increase in childhood obesity presents a societal problem worthy of government attention. However, the solution can be complex, and people who otherwise agree might come into conflict over what the best answer is. Alternatives might range from reinvestment in school physical education programs and health education classes, to taking soda and candy machines out of the schools and requiring good nutrition in school lunches. Agenda setting ends when a given problem has been selected, a solution has been paired with that problem, and the solution goes to the decision makers for a vote. Acid rain, which results from the interaction of rainstorms and thick air pollution, provides another nice illustration of agenda setting and the problems and solutions subphases. Acid rain is a widely recognized problem that did not make it on to the governmental policy agenda until Congress passed the Air Quality Act of 1967, long after environmental groups started asking for laws to regulate pollution.

In the second policy phase, enactment, the elected branches of government typically consider one specific solution to a problem and decide whether to pass it. This stage is the most visible one and usually garners the most press coverage. And yet it is somewhat anticlimatic. By the time a specific policy proposal (a solution) comes out of agenda setting for a yes/no vote, it can be something of a foregone conclusion that it will pass.

Once the policy has been enacted—usually by the legislative and/or executive branches of the government, like Congress or the president at the national level or the legislature or governor of a state—government agencies do the work of actually implementing it. On a national level, policy implementation can be either top-down or bottom-up. In top-down implementation, the federal government dictates the specifics of the policy, and each state implements it the same exact way. In bottom-up implementation, the federal government allows local areas some flexibility to meet their specific challenges and needs.²³

Evaluation, the last stage of the process, should be tied directly to the policy's desired outcomes. Evaluation essentially asks, "How well did this policy do what we designed it to do?" The answers can sometimes be surprising. In one hotly debated case, the United States funded abstinence-only sex education for teens with the goal of reducing teen pregnancy. A 2011 study published in the journal *PLoS One*, however, found that abstinence-only education actually *increased* teen pregnancy rates.²⁴ The most effective policy evaluations are systematic. For example, while a simple plotting of youth drug use data by year seemed to show no effect for the popular Drug Abuse Resistance Education (DARE) program, a more careful evaluation done with a control group that did not receive DARE messaging showed robust effectiveness.²⁵ The information from the evaluation stage can feed back into the other stages, informing future decisions and creating a public policy cycle (Figure 11.14).

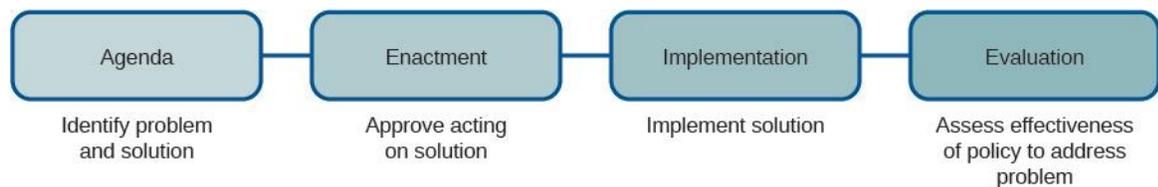


Figure 11.14 Agenda setting, policy enactment, policy implementation, and evaluation are the four steps of the policy process.

11.5 Budgeting and Tax Policy

Learning Objectives

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

- Discuss economic theories that shape U.S. economic policy
- Explain how the government uses fiscal policy tools to maintain a healthy economy
- Analyze the taxing and spending decisions made by Congress and the president
- Discuss the role of the Federal Reserve Board in monetary policy

A country spends, raises, and regulates money in accordance with its values. In all, the federal government's budget for 2020 was \$6.55 trillion. This chapter has provided a brief overview of some of the budget's key areas of expenditure, and thus some insight into modern American values. But these values are only part of the budgeting story. Policymakers make considerable effort to ensure that long-term priorities are protected from the heat of the election cycle and short-term changes in public opinion. The decision to put some policymaking functions out of the reach of Congress also reflects economic philosophies about the best ways to grow, stimulate, and maintain the economy. The role of politics in drafting the annual budget is indeed large, but we should not underestimate the challenges elected officials face as a result of decisions made in the past.

APPROACHES TO THE ECONOMY

Until the 1930s, most policy advocates argued that the best way for the government to interact with the economy was through a hands-off approach formally known as *laissez-faire*

economics. These policymakers believed the key to economic growth and development was the government's allowing private markets to operate efficiently. Proponents of this school of thought believed private investors were better equipped than governments to figure out which sectors of the economy were most likely to grow and which new products were most likely to be successful. They also tended to oppose government efforts to establish quality controls or health and safety standards, believing consumers themselves would punish bad behavior by not trading with poor corporate citizens. Finally, laissez-faire proponents felt that keeping government out of the business of business would create an automatic cycle of economic growth and contraction. Contraction phases in which there is no economic growth for two consecutive quarters, called recessions, would bring business failures and higher unemployment. But this condition, they believed, would correct itself on its own if the government simply allowed the system to operate.

The Great Depression challenged the laissez-faire view, however. When President Franklin Roosevelt came to office in 1933, the United States had already been in the depths of the Great Depression for several years, since the stock market crash of 1929. Roosevelt sought to implement a new approach to economic regulation known as Keynesianism. Named for its developer, the economist John Maynard Keynes, Keynesian economics argues that it is possible for a recession to become so deep, and last for so long, that the typical models of economic collapse and recovery may not work. Keynes suggested that economic growth was closely tied to the ability of individuals to consume goods. It didn't matter how or where investors wanted to invest their money if no one could afford to buy the products they wanted to make. And in periods of extremely high unemployment, wages for newly hired labor would be so low that new workers would be unable to afford the products they produced.

Keynesianism counters this problem by increasing government spending in ways that improve consumption. Some of the proposals Keynes suggested were payments or pension for the unemployed and retired, as well as tax incentives to encourage consumption in the middle class. His reasoning was that these individuals would be most likely to spend the money they received by purchasing more goods, which in turn would encourage production and investment. Keynes argued that the wealthy class of producers and employers had sufficient capital to meet the increased demand of consumers that government incentives would stimulate. Once consumption had increased and capital was flowing again, the government would reduce or eliminate its economic stimulus, and any money it had borrowed to create it could be repaid from higher tax revenues.

Keynesianism dominated U.S. fiscal or spending policy from the 1930s to the 1970s. By the 1970s, however, high inflation began to slow economic growth. There were a number of reasons, including higher oil prices and the costs of fighting the Vietnam War. However, some economists, such as Arthur Laffer, began to argue that the social welfare and high tax policies created in the name of Keynesianism were overstimulating the economy, creating a situation in which demand for products had outstripped investors' willingness to increase production.²⁶ They called for an approach known as supply-side economics, which argues that economic growth is largely a function of the productive capacity of a country. Supply-siders have argued that increased regulation and higher taxes reduce the incentive to invest new money into the

economy, to the point where little growth can occur. They have advocated reducing taxes and regulations to spur economic growth.

MANDATORY SPENDING VS. DISCRETIONARY SPENDING

The desire of Keynesians to create a minimal level of aggregate demand, coupled with a Depression-era preference to promote social welfare policy, led the president and Congress to develop a federal budget with spending divided into two broad categories: mandatory and discretionary (see [Figure 11.15](#)). Of these, mandatory spending is the larger, consisting of about \$4.9 trillion of the 2020 budget, or roughly 71 percent of all federal expenditures.²⁷

The overwhelming portion of mandatory spending is earmarked for entitlement programs guaranteed to those who meet certain qualifications, usually based on age, income, or disability. These programs, discussed above, include Medicare and Medicaid, Social Security, and major income security programs such as unemployment insurance and SNAP. The costs of programs tied to age are relatively easy to estimate and grow largely as a function of the aging of the population. Income and disability payments are a bit more difficult to estimate. They tend to go down during periods of economic recovery and rise when the economy begins to slow down, in precisely the way Keynes suggested. A comparatively small piece of the mandatory spending pie, about 14 percent, is devoted to benefits designated for former federal employees, including military retirement and many Veterans Administration programs.

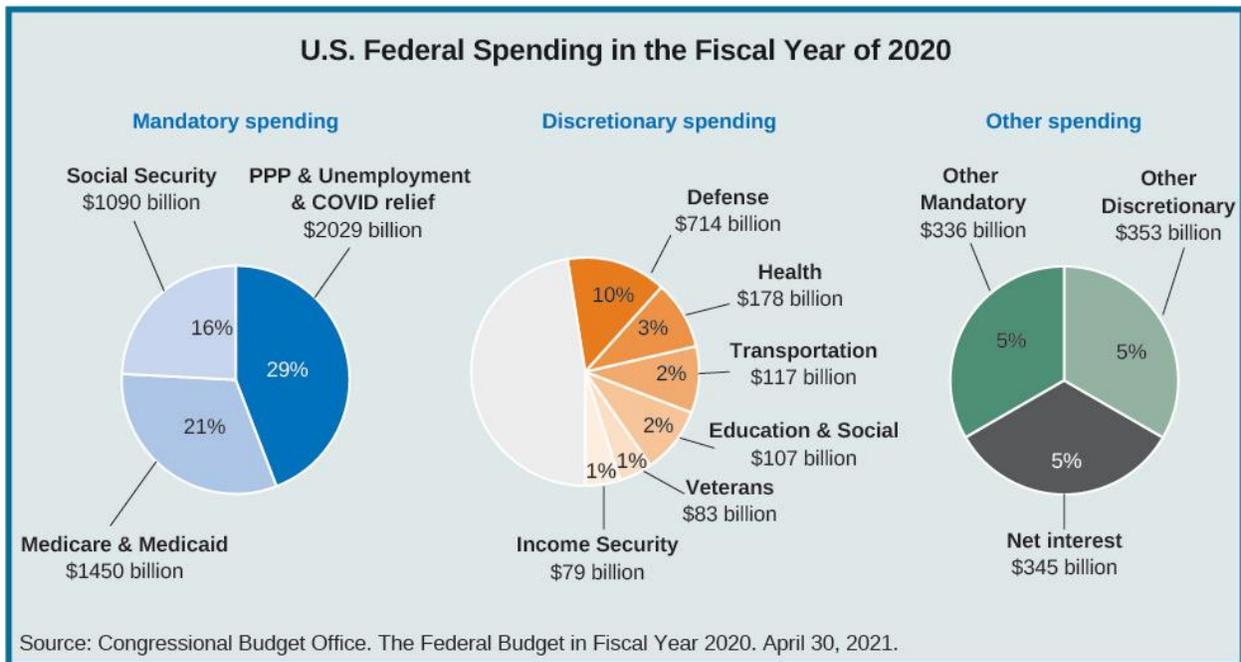


Figure 11.15 This chart of U.S. federal spending for 2020 shows the proportions of mandatory and discretionary spending, about 66 percent and 19 percent, respectively.

Congress is ultimately responsible for setting the formulas for mandatory payouts, but as we saw in the earlier discussion regarding Social Security, major reforms to entitlement formulas are difficult to enact. As a result, the size and growth of mandatory spending in future budgets

are largely a function of previous legislation that set the formulas up in the first place. So long as supporters of particular programs can block changes to the formulas, funding will continue almost on autopilot. Keynesians support this mandatory spending, along with other elements of social welfare policy, because they help maintain a minimal level of consumption that should, in theory, prevent recessions from turning into depressions, which are more severe downturns.

Portions of the budget not devoted to mandatory spending are categorized as discretionary spending because Congress must pass legislation to authorize money to be spent each year. About 50 percent of the approximately \$1.2 trillion set aside for discretionary spending each year pays for most of the operations of government, including employee salaries and the maintenance of federal buildings. It also covers science and technology spending, foreign affairs initiatives, education spending, federally provided transportation costs, and many of the redistributive benefits most people in the United States have come to take for granted.²⁸ The other half of discretionary spending—and the second-largest component of the total budget—is devoted to the military. (Only Social Security is larger.) Defense spending is used to maintain the U.S. military presence at home and abroad, procure and develop new weapons, and cover the cost of any wars or other military engagements in which the United States is currently engaged ([Figure 11.16](#)).



Figure 11.16 The war in Afghanistan, ongoing since 2001, has cost the United States billions of dollars in discretionary military spending authorized by Congress every year. In early 2021, President Joe Biden announced plans to fully withdraw U.S. troops from Afghanistan by September 11, 2021, the twentieth anniversary of the 9/11 attacks.

In theory, the amount of revenue raised by the national government should be equal to these expenses, but with the exception of a brief period from 1998 to 2000, that has not been the case. The economic recovery from the 2007–2009 recession, and budget control efforts implemented in the early 2010s, managed to cut the annual deficit—the amount by which

expenditures are greater than revenues—by more than half by 2015. However, the amount of money the U.S. government needed to borrow to pay its bills in 2016 was still in excess of \$400 billion²⁹. This was in addition to the country’s almost \$19 trillion of total debt—the amount of money the government owes its creditors—at the end of 2015, according to the Department of the Treasury.³⁰ The total debt as of March 2021 is \$22 trillion.

Balancing the budget has been a major goal of both the Republican and Democratic parties for the past several decades, although the parties tend to disagree on the best way to accomplish the task. One frequently offered solution, particularly among supply-side advocates, is to simply cut spending. This has proven to be much easier said than done. If Congress were to try to balance the budget only through discretionary spending, it would need to cut about one-third of spending on programs like defense, higher education, agriculture, police enforcement, transportation, and general government operations. Given the number and popularity of many of these programs, it is difficult to imagine this would be possible. To use spending cuts alone as a way to control the deficit, Congress will almost certainly be required to cut or control the costs of mandatory spending programs like Social Security and Medicare—a radically unpopular step.

TAX POLICY

The other option available for balancing the budget is to increase revenue. All governments must raise revenue in order to operate. The most common way is by applying some sort of tax on residents (or on their behaviors) in exchange for the benefits the government provides (Figure 11.17). As necessary as taxes are, however, they are not without potential downfalls. First, the more money the government collects to cover its costs, the less residents are left with to spend and invest. Second, attempts to raise revenues through taxation may alter the behavior of residents in ways that are counterproductive to the state and the broader economy. Excessively taxing necessary and desirable behaviors like consumption (with a sales tax) or investment (with a capital gains tax) will discourage citizens from engaging in them, potentially slowing economic growth. The goal of tax policy, then, is to determine the most effective way of meeting the nation’s revenue obligations without harming other public policy goals.

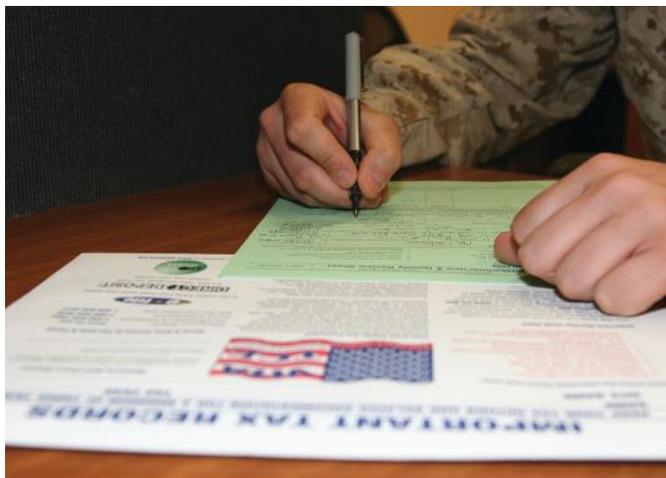


Figure 11.17 A U.S. marine fills out an income tax form. Income taxes in the United States are progressive taxes.

As you would expect, Keynesians and supply-siders disagree about which forms of tax policy are best. Keynesians, with their concern about whether consumers can really stimulate demand, prefer progressive taxes systems that increase the effective tax rate as the taxpayer's income increases. This policy leaves those most likely to spend their money with more money to spend. For example, in 2015, U.S. taxpayers who were married and filing jointly paid a 10 percent tax rate on the first \$18,450 of income, but 15 percent on the next \$56,450 (some income is excluded).³¹ The rate continued to rise, to up to 39.6 percent on any taxable income over \$464,850. Following the passage of the Tax Cuts and Jobs Act of 2017, these tax brackets were shifted. While the lowest bracket remained at a rate of 10 percent, the highest tax rate was reduced from 39.6 to 37 percent. These brackets are somewhat distorted by the range of tax credits, deductions, and incentives the government offers, but the net effect is that the top income earners pay a greater portion of the overall income tax burden than do those at the lowest tax brackets. According to the Pew Research Center, based on tax returns in 2014, 2.7 percent of filers made more than \$250,000. Those 2.7 percent of filers paid 52 percent of the income tax paid.³²

Supply-siders, on the other hand, prefer regressive tax systems, which lower the overall rate as individuals make more money. This does not automatically mean the wealthy pay less than the poor, simply that the percentage of their income they pay in taxes will be lower. Consider, for example, the use of excise taxes on specific goods or services as a source of revenue.³³ Sometimes called “sin taxes” because they tend to be applied to goods like alcohol, tobacco, and gasoline, excise taxes have a regressive quality, since the amount of the good purchased by the consumer, and thus the tax paid, does not increase at the same rate as income. A person who makes \$250,000 per year is likely to purchase more gasoline than a person who makes \$50,000 per year (Figure 11.18). But the higher earner is not likely to purchase *five times more* gasoline, which means the proportion of income paid out in gasoline taxes is less than the proportion for a lower-earning individual.



Figure 11.18 A gas station shows fuel prices over \$3.00 a gallon in 2005, shortly after Hurricane Katrina disrupted gas production in the Gulf of Mexico. Taxes on gasoline that are based on the quantity purchased are regressive taxes.

Another example of a regressive tax paid by most U.S. workers is the payroll tax that funds Social Security. While workers contribute 7.65 percent of their income to pay for Social Security and their employers pay a matching amount, in 2015, the payroll tax was applied to only the first \$118,500 of income. Individuals who earned more than that, or who made money from other sources like investments, saw their overall tax rate fall as their income increased.

In 2020, the United States raised about \$3.4 trillion in revenue. Income taxes (\$1.61 trillion), payroll taxes on Social Security and Medicare (\$1.31 trillion), and excise taxes (\$87 billion) make up three of the largest sources of revenue for the federal government. When combined with corporate income taxes (\$212 billion), these four tax streams make up about 95 percent of total government revenue. The balance of revenue is split nearly evenly between revenues from the Federal Reserve and a mix of revenues from import tariffs, estate and gift taxes, and various fees or fines paid to the government (Figure 11.19). The Tax Cuts and Jobs Act, which was passed in December 2017 by the Republican-controlled Congress and significantly reduced the income tax rate paid by corporations, has led to a widening budget deficit. November 2018 featured the largest single-month deficit in the history of the country, with \$411 billion in spending and only \$206 billion in receipts, and the annual budget shortfall is approaching \$1 trillion.³⁴

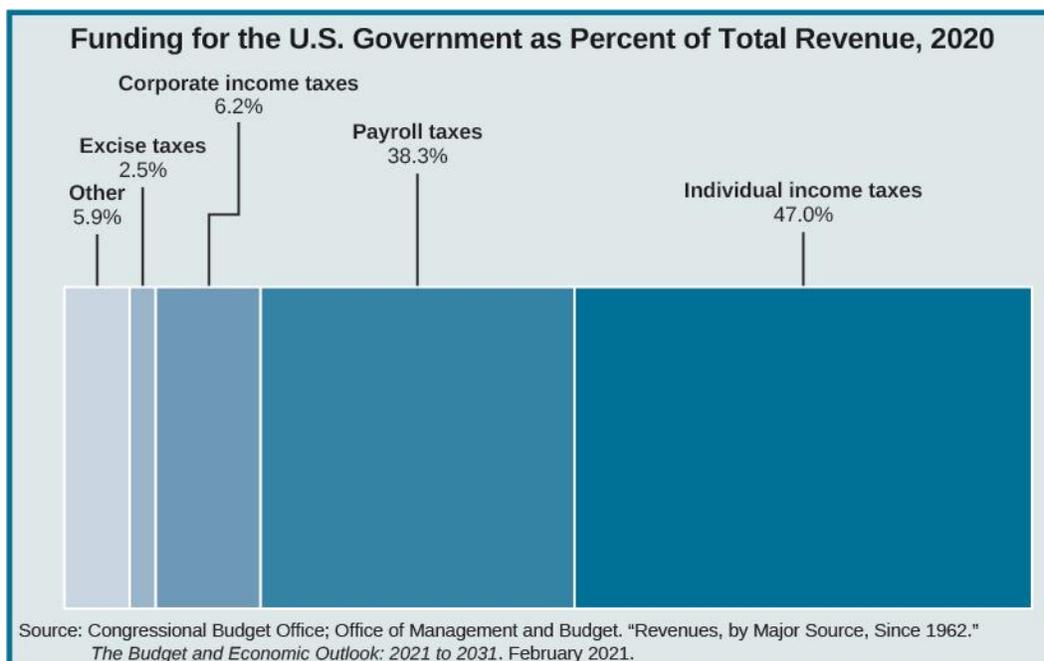


Figure 11.19 The taxes tied to individuals, not businesses, overwhelmingly fund the government.

THE FEDERAL RESERVE BOARD AND INTEREST RATES

Financial panics arise when too many people, worried about the solvency of their investments, try to withdraw their money at the same time. Such panics plagued U.S. banks until 1913 (Figure 11.20), when Congress enacted the Federal Reserve Act. The act established the Federal

Reserve System, also known as the Fed, as the central bank of the United States. The Fed's three original goals to promote were maximum employment, stable prices, and moderate long-term interest rates.³⁵ All of these goals bring stability. The Fed's role is now broader and includes influencing monetary policy (the means by which the nation controls the size and growth of the money supply), supervising and regulating banks, and providing them with financial services like loans.

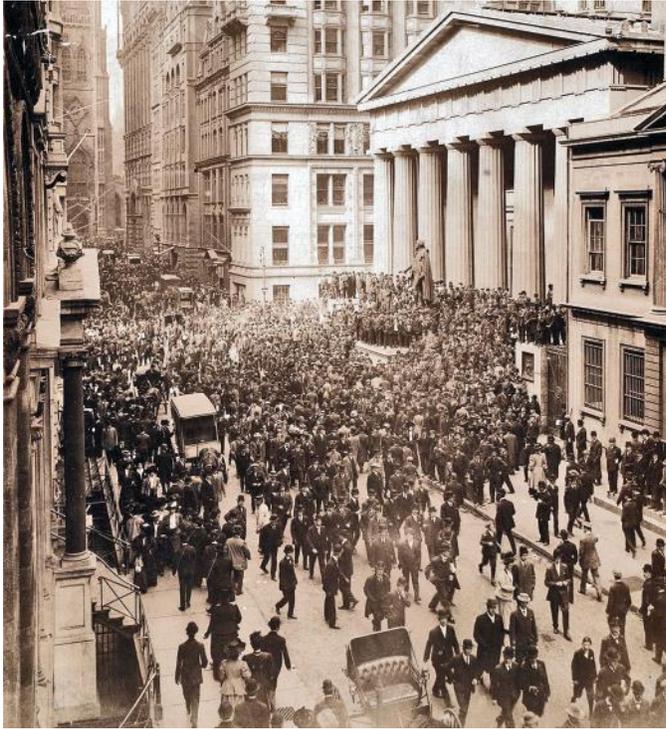


Figure 11.20 Investors crowd Wall Street during the Bankers Panic of 1907.

The Federal Reserve System is overseen by a board of governors, known as the Federal Reserve Board. The president of the United States appoints the seven governors, each of whom serves a fourteen-year term (the terms are staggered). A chair and vice chair lead the board for terms of four years each. The most important work of the board is participating in the Federal Open Market Committee to set monetary policy, like interest rate levels and macroeconomic policy. The board also oversees a network of twelve regional Federal Reserve Banks, each of which serves as a “banker’s bank” for the country’s financial institutions.

Insider Perspective

The Role of the Federal Reserve Chair

If you have read or watched the news for the past several years, perhaps you have heard the names Janet Yellen, Ben Bernanke, or Alan Greenspan. Bernanke, Greenspan, and Yellen are all recent past chairs of the board of governors of the Federal Reserve System; Bernanke, Greenspan, and Yellen (Figure 11.21) are all recent past chairs of the board of governors of the Federal Reserve System; Jerome Powell is the current chair. The role of the Fed chair is one of the most important in the country. By raising or lowering banks’ interest rates, the chair has the

ability reduce inflation or stimulate growth. The Fed's dual mandate is to keep inflation low (under 2 percent) and unemployment low (below 5 percent), but efforts to meet these goals can often lead to contradictory monetary policies.



Figure 11.21 Economist Alan Greenspan (a) was chair of the board of governors of the Federal Reserve System from 1987 to 2006, the second-longest tenure of any chair. Janet Yellen (b) succeeded Ben Bernanke as chair in 2014, after serving as vice chair for four years. Prior to serving on the Federal Reserve Board, Yellen was president and CEO of the Federal Reserve Bank of San Francisco. She was succeeded by Jerome Powell in February 2018 and has been serving as secretary of the Treasury since January 2021.

The Fed, and by extension its chair, have a tremendous responsibility. Many of the economic events of the past five decades, both good and bad, are the results of Fed policies. In the 1970s, double-digit inflation brought the economy almost to a halt, but when Paul Volcker became chair in 1979, he raised interest rates and jump-started the economy. After the stock market crash of 1987, then-chair Alan Greenspan declared, “The Federal Reserve, consistent with its responsibilities as the nation’s central bank, affirmed today its readiness to...support the economic and financial system.”³⁶ His lowering of interest rates led to an unprecedented decade of economic growth through the 1990s. In the 2000s, consistently low interest rates and readily available credit contributed to the sub-prime mortgage boom and subsequent bust, which led to a global economic recession beginning in 2008.

Should the important tasks of the Fed continue to be pursued by unelected appointees like those profiled in this box, or should elected leaders be given the job? Why?

[Link to Learning](#)

Do you think you have what it takes to be chair of the Federal Reserve Board? Play this [game](#) and see how you fare!



Figure 12.1 U.S. president Donald Trump and Russian president Vladimir Putin shake hands for the cameras during the APEC Summit on November 10, 2017 in Da Nang, Vietnam. Whereas previous U.S. presidents were rather aloof with the Russian leader, Trump attempted to befriend Putin during his four years in the White House. President Biden has returned to the prior stance of firmness with Russia. (credit: President of the Russian Federation/www.kremlin.ru)

Introduction

The U.S. government interacts with a large number of international actors, from other governments to private organizations, to fight global problems like terrorism and human trafficking, and to meet many other national foreign policy goals such as encouraging trade and protecting the environment. Sometimes these goals are conflicting. Perhaps because of these realities, the president is in many ways the leader of the foreign policy domain. When the United States wishes to discuss important issues with other nations, the president (or a representative such as the secretary of state) typically does the talking, as when President Donald Trump visited with Russian president Vladimir Putin in 2017 ([Figure 12.1](#)).

But don't let this image mislead you. While the president is the country's foreign policy leader, Congress also has many foreign policy responsibilities, including approving treaties and agreements, allocating funding, making war, and confirming ambassadors. These and various other activities constitute the patchwork quilt that is U.S. foreign policy.

How are foreign and domestic policymaking different, and how are they linked? What are the main foreign policy goals of the United States? How do the president and Congress interact in the foreign policy realm? In what different ways might foreign policy be pursued? This chapter will delve into these and other issues to present an overview U.S. foreign policy.

12.1 Defining Foreign Policy

Learning Objectives

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

- Explain what foreign policy is and how it differs from domestic policy
- Identify the objectives of U.S. foreign policy
- Describe the different types of foreign policy
- Identify the U.S. government's main challenges in the foreign policy realm

When we consider policy as our chapter focus, we are looking broadly at the actions the U.S. government carries out for particular purposes. In the case of foreign policy, that purpose is to manage its relationships with other nations of the world. Another distinction is that policy results from a course of action or a pattern of actions over time, rather than from a single action or decision. For example, U.S. foreign policy with Russia has been forged by several presidents, as well as by cabinet secretaries, House and Senate members, and foreign policy agency bureaucrats. Policy is also purposive, or intended to do something; that is, policymaking is not random. When the United States enters into an international agreement with other countries on aims such as free trade or nuclear disarmament, it does so for specific reasons. With that general definition of policy established, we shall now dig deeper into the specific domain of U.S. foreign policy.

FOREIGN POLICY BASICS

What is foreign policy? We can think of it on several levels, as “the goals that a state’s officials seek to attain abroad, the values that give rise to those objectives, and the means or instruments used to pursue them.”¹ This definition highlights some of the key topics in U.S. foreign policy, such as national goals abroad and the manner in which the United States tries to achieve them. Note too that we distinguish foreign policy, which is externally focused, from domestic policy, which sets strategies internal to the United States, though the two types of policies can become quite intertwined. So, for example, one might talk about Latino politics as a domestic issue when considering educational policies designed to increase the number of Hispanic Americans who attend and graduate from a U.S. college or university.² However, as demonstrated in the primary debates leading up to the 2016 election, Latino politics can quickly become a foreign policy matter when considering topics such as immigration from and foreign trade with countries in Central America and South America ([Figure 12.2](#)).³



Figure 12.2 Domestic issues can sometimes become international ones when it comes to such topics as foreign trade. Here, President George W. Bush shakes hands with legislators and administration officials after signing the Central American Free Trade Agreement (CAFTA) Implementation Act on August 2, 2005.

What are the objectives of U.S. foreign policy? While the goals of a nation's foreign policy are always open to debate and revision, there are nonetheless four main goals to which we can attribute much of what the U.S. government does in the foreign policy realm: (1) the protection of the U.S. and its citizens, (2) the maintenance of access to key resources and markets, (3) the preservation of a balance of power in the world, and (4) the protection of human rights and democracy.

The first goal is the protection of the United States and the lives of its citizens, both while they are in the United States and when they travel abroad. Related to this security goal is the aim of protecting the country's allies, or countries with which the United States is friendly and mutually supportive. In the international sphere, threats and dangers can take several forms, including military threats from other nations or terrorist groups and economic threats from boycotts and high tariffs on trade. An economic sanction occurs when a country or multiple countries suspend trade or other financial relationships with another country in order to signal their displeasure with the behavior of the other country.

In an economic boycott, the United States ceases trade with another country unless or until it changes a policy to which the United States objects. Ceasing trade means U.S. goods cannot be sold in that country and its goods cannot be sold in the United States. For example, in recent years the United States and other countries implemented an economic boycott of Iran as it escalated the development of its nuclear energy program. The recent Iran nuclear deal is a pact in which Iran agrees to halt nuclear development while the United States and six other countries lift economic sanctions to again allow trade with Iran. Barriers to trade also include tariffs, or fees charged for moving goods from one country to another. Protectionist trade policies raise tariffs so that it becomes difficult for imported goods, now more expensive, to compete on price with domestic goods. Free trade agreements seek to reduce these trade barriers.

The second main goal of U.S. foreign policy is to ensure the nation maintains access to key resources and markets across the world. Resources include natural resources, such as oil, and economic resources, including the infusion of foreign capital investment for U.S. domestic infrastructure projects like buildings, bridges, and weapons systems. Of course, access to the international marketplace also means access to goods that American consumers might want, such as Swiss chocolate and Australian wine. U.S. foreign policy also seeks to advance the interests of U.S. business, to both sell domestic products in the international marketplace and support general economic development around the globe (especially in developing countries).

A third main goal is the preservation of a balance of power in the world. A balance of power means no one nation or region is much more powerful militarily than are the countries of the rest of the world. The achievement of a perfect balance of power is probably not possible, but general stability, or predictability in the operation of governments, strong institutions, and the absence of violence within and between nations may be. For much of U.S. history, leaders viewed world stability through the lens of Europe. If the European continent was stable, so too was the world. During the Cold War era that followed World War II, stability was achieved by the existence of dual superpowers, the United States and the Soviet Union, and by the real fear of the nuclear annihilation of which both were capable. Until approximately 1989–1990, advanced industrial democracies aligned themselves behind one of these two superpowers.

Today, in the post–Cold War era, many parts of Europe are politically more free than they were during the years of the Soviet bloc, and there is less fear of nuclear war than when the United States and the Soviet Union had missiles pointed at each other for four straight decades. However, despite the mostly stabilizing presence of the European Union (EU), which now has twenty-eight member countries, several wars have been fought in Eastern Europe and the former Soviet Union. Moreover, the EU itself faces some challenges, including a vote in the United Kingdom to leave the EU, the ongoing controversy about how to resolve the national debt of Greece, and the crisis in Europe created by thousands of refugees from the Middle East.

Carefully planned acts of terrorism in the United States, Asia, and Europe have introduced a new type of enemy into the balance of power equation—nonstate or nongovernmental organizations, such as al-Qaeda and ISIS (or ISIL), consisting of various terrorist cells located in many different countries and across all continents ([Figure 12.3](#)).



Figure 12.3 President Barack Obama, along with French president François Hollande and Paris mayor Anne Hidalgo, place roses on the makeshift memorial in front of the Bataclan concert hall, one of the sites targeted in the Paris terrorist attacks of November 13, 2015.

The fourth main goal of U.S. foreign policy is the protection of human rights and democracy. The payoff of stability that comes from other U.S. foreign policy goals is peace and tranquility. While certainly looking out for its own strategic interests in considering foreign policy strategy, the United States nonetheless attempts to support international peace through many aspects of its foreign policy, such as foreign aid, and through its support of and participation in international organizations such as the United Nations, the North Atlantic Treaty Organization (NATO), and the Organization of American States.

The United Nations (UN) is perhaps the foremost international organization in the world today. The main institutional bodies of the UN are the General Assembly and the Security Council. The General Assembly includes all member nations and admits new members and approves the UN budget by a two-thirds majority. The Security Council includes fifteen countries, five of which are permanent members (including the United States) and ten that are non-permanent and rotate on a five two-year-term basis. The entire membership is bound by decisions of the Security Council, which makes all decisions related to international peace and security. Two other important units of the UN are the International Court of Justice in The Hague (Netherlands) and the UN Secretariat, which includes the Secretary-General of the UN and the UN staff directors and employees.

Milestone

The Creation of the United Nations

One of the unique and challenging aspects of global affairs is the fact that no world-level authority exists to mandate when and how the world's nations interact. After the failed attempt by President Woodrow Wilson and others to formalize a "League of Nations" in the wake of World War I in the 1920s, and on the heels of a worldwide depression that began in 1929, came World War II, history's deadliest military conflict. Now, in the early decades of the

twenty-first century, it is common to think of the September 11 terrorist attacks in 2001 as the big game-changer. Yet while 9/11 was hugely significant in the United States and abroad, World War II was even more so. The December 1941 Japanese attack on Pearl Harbor (Hawaii) was a comparable surprise-style attack that plunged the United States into war.

The scope of the conflict, fought in Europe and the Pacific Ocean, and Hitler's nearly successful attempt to take over Europe entirely, struck fear in minds and hearts. The war brought about a sea change in international relations and governance, from the Marshall Plan to rebuild Europe, to NATO that created a cross-national military shield for Western Europe, to the creation of the UN in 1945, when the representatives of fifty countries met and signed the Charter of the United Nations in San Francisco, California ([Figure 12.4](#)).



Figure 12.4 On June 26, 2015, then-House minority leader Nancy Pelosi (D-CA) joined UN secretary-general Ban Ki-moon, California governor Jerry Brown, and other dignitaries to commemorate the seventieth anniversary of the adoption of the UN Charter in San Francisco. (credit: modification of work by "Nancy Pelosi"/Flickr)

Today, the United Nations, headquartered in New York City, includes 193 of the 195 nations of the world. It is a voluntary association to which member nations pay dues based on the size of their economy. The UN's main purposes are to maintain peace and security, promote human rights and social progress, and develop friendly relationships among nations.

Follow-up activity: In addition to facilitating collective decision-making on world matters, the UN carries out many different programs. Go to the [UN website](#) to find information about three different UN programs that are carried out around the world.

An ongoing question for the United States in waging the war against terrorism is to what degree it should work in concert with the UN to carry out anti-terrorism initiatives around the world in

a multilateral manner, rather than pursuing a “go it alone” strategy of unilateralism. The fact that the U.S. government has such a choice suggests the voluntary nature of the United States (or another country) accepting world-level governance in foreign policy. If the United States truly felt bound by UN opinion regarding the manner in which it carries out its war on terrorism, it would approach the UN Security Council for approval.

Another cross-national organization to which the United States is tied, and that exists to forcefully represent Western allies and in turn forge the peace, is the North Atlantic Treaty Organization (NATO). NATO was formed after World War II as the Cold War between East and West started to emerge. While more militaristic in approach than the United Nations, NATO has the goal of protecting the interests of Europe and the West and the assurance of support and defense from partner nations. However, while it is a strong military coalition, it has not sought to expand and take over other countries. Rather, the peace and stability of Europe are its main goals. NATO initially included only Western European nations and the United States. However, since the end of the Cold War, additional countries from the East, such as Turkey, have entered into the NATO alliance.

Besides participating in the UN and NATO, the United States also distributes hundreds of millions of dollars each year in foreign aid to improve the quality of life of citizens in developing countries. The United States may also forgive the foreign debts of these countries. By definition, developing countries are not modernized in terms of infrastructure and social services and thus suffer from instability. Helping them modernize and develop stable governments is intended as a benefit to them and a prop to the stability of the world. An alternative view of U.S. assistance is that there are more nefarious goals at work, that perhaps it is intended to buy influence in developing countries, secure a position in the region, obtain access to resources, or foster dependence on the United States.

The United States pursues its four main foreign policy goals through several different foreign policy types, or distinct substantive areas of foreign policy in which the United States is engaged. These types are trade, diplomacy, sanctions, military/defense, intelligence, foreign aid, and global environmental policy.

Trade policy is the way the United States interacts with other countries to ease the flow of commerce and goods and services between countries. A country is said to be engaging in protectionism when it does not permit other countries to sell goods and services within its borders, or when it charges them very high tariffs (or import taxes) to do so. At the other end of the spectrum is a free trade approach, in which a country allows the unfettered flow of goods and services between itself and other countries. At times the United States has been free trade-oriented, while at other times it has been protectionist. Perhaps its most free trade-oriented move was the 1991 implementation of the North American Free Trade Agreement (NAFTA). This pact removed trade barriers and other transaction costs levied on goods moving between the United States, Mexico, and Canada.

Critics see a free trade approach as problematic and instead advocate for protectionist policies that shield U.S. companies and their products against cheaper foreign products that might be imported here. One of the more prominent recent examples of protectionist policies occurred

in the steel industry, as U.S. companies in the international steel marketplace struggled with competition from Chinese factories in particular.

The balance of trade is the relationship between a country's inflow and outflow of goods. The United States sells many goods and services around the world, but overall it maintains a trade deficit, in which more goods and services are coming in from other countries than are going out to be sold overseas. The current U.S. trade deficit is \$37.4 billion, which means the value of what the United States imports from other countries is much larger than the value of what it exports to other countries.⁴ This trade deficit has led some to advocate for protectionist trade policies.

For many, foreign policy is synonymous with diplomacy. Diplomacy is the establishment and maintenance of a formal relationship between countries that governs their interactions on matters as diverse as tourism, the taxation of goods they trade, and the landing of planes on each other's runways. While diplomatic relations are not always rosy, when they are operating it does suggest that things are going well between the countries. Diplomatic relations are formalized through the sharing of ambassadors. Ambassadors are country representatives who live and maintain an office (known as an embassy) in the other country. Just as exchanging ambassadors formalizes the bilateral relationship between countries, calling them home signifies the end of the relationship. Diplomacy tends to be the U.S. government's first step when it tries to resolve a conflict with another country.

To illustrate how international relations play out when countries come into conflict, consider what has become known as the Hainan Island incident. In 2001, a U.S. spy plane collided with a Chinese jet fighter near Chinese airspace, where U.S. planes were not authorized to be. The Chinese jet fighter crashed and the pilot died. The U.S. plane made an emergency landing on the island of Hainan. China retrieved the aircraft and captured the U.S. pilots. U.S. ambassadors then attempted to negotiate for their return. These negotiations were slow and ended up involving officials of the president's cabinet, but they ultimately worked. Had they not succeeded, an escalating set of options likely would have included diplomatic sanctions (removal of ambassadors), economic sanctions (such as an embargo on trade and the flow of money between the countries), minor military options (such as establishment of a no-fly zone just outside Chinese airspace), or more significant military options (such as a focused campaign to enter China and get the pilots back). Nonmilitary tools to influence another country, like economic sanctions, are referred to as soft power, while the use of military power is termed hard power.⁵

At the more serious end of the foreign policy decision-making spectrum, and usually as a last resort when diplomacy fails, the U.S. military and defense establishment exists to provide the United States the ability to wage war against other state and nonstate actors. Such war can be offensive, as were the Iraq War in 2003 and the 1989 removal of Panamanian leader Manuel Noriega. Or it can be defensive, as a means to respond to aggression from others, such as the Persian Gulf War in 1991, also known as Operation Desert Storm ([Figure 12.5](#)). The potential for military engagement, and indeed the scattering about the globe of hundreds of U.S. military installations, can also be a potential source of foreign policy strength for the United States. On

the other hand, in the world of diplomacy, such an approach can be seen as imperialistic by other world nations.



Figure 12.5 President George H. W. Bush greets U.S. troops stationed in Saudi Arabia on Thanksgiving Day in 1990. The first troops were deployed there in August 1990, as part of Operation Desert Shield, which was intended to build U.S. military strength in the area in preparation for an eventual military operation.

Intelligence policy is related to defense and includes the overt and covert gathering of information from foreign sources that might be of strategic interest to the United States. The intelligence world, perhaps more than any other area of foreign policy, captures the imagination of the general public. Many books, television shows, and movies entertain us (with varying degrees of accuracy) through stories about U.S. intelligence operations and people.

Foreign aid and global environmental policy are the final two foreign policy types. With both, as with the other types, the United States operates as a strategic actor with its own interests in mind, but here it also acts as an international steward trying to serve the common good. With foreign aid, the United States provides material and economic aid to other countries, especially developing countries, in order to improve their stability and their citizens' quality of life. This type of aid is sometimes called humanitarian aid; in 2013 the U.S. contribution totaled \$32 billion. Military aid is classified under military/defense or national security policy (and totaled \$8 billion in 2013). At \$40 billion the total U.S. foreign aid budget for 2013 was sizeable, though it represented less than 1 percent of the entire federal budget.⁶

Global environmental policy addresses world-level environmental matters such as climate change and global warming, the thinning of the ozone layer, rainforest depletion in areas along the Equator, and ocean pollution and species extinction. The United States' commitment to such issues has varied considerably over the years. For example, the United States was the largest country not to sign the 1997 Kyoto Protocol on greenhouse gas emissions. However, few would argue that the U.S. government has not been a leader on global environmental matters. The Paris Agreement on climate change took effect in late 2016. The pact establishes a framework to prevent further climate change, namely to limit the rise in overall global temperature. The agreement was negotiated during the Obama administration and the U.S.

signed on initially. However, President Trump officially withdrew the U.S. from the pact in November 2020. Early in 2021, the newly elected president, Joe Biden, rejoined the Paris Agreement with a commitment to cut greenhouse gas emissions in half by 2030.⁷

UNIQUE CHALLENGES IN FOREIGN POLICY

U.S. foreign policy is a massive and complex enterprise. What are its unique challenges for the country?

First, there exists no true world-level authority dictating how the nations of the world should relate to one another. If one nation negotiates in bad faith or lies to another, there is no central world-level government authority to sanction that country. This makes diplomacy and international coordination an ongoing bargain as issues evolve and governmental leaders and nations change. Foreign relations are certainly made smoother by the existence of cross-national voluntary associations like the United Nations, the Organization of American States, and the African Union. However, these associations do not have strict enforcement authority over specific nations, unless a group of member nations takes action in some manner (which is ultimately voluntary).

The European Union is the single supranational entity with some real and significant authority over its member nations. Adoption of its common currency, the euro, brings with it concessions from countries on a variety of matters, and the EU's economic and environmental regulations are the strictest in the world. Yet even the EU has enforcement issues, as evidenced by the battle within its ranks to force member Greece to reduce its national debt or the recurring problem of Spain overfishing in the North Atlantic Ocean. The withdrawal of the United Kingdom from the European Union (commonly referred to as Brexit, short for British exit) also points to the struggles that supra-national institutions like the EU can face.

International relations take place in a relatively open venue in which it is seldom clear how to achieve collective action among countries generally or between the United States and specific other nations in particular. When does it make sense to sign a multinational pact and when doesn't it? Is a particular bilateral economic agreement truly as beneficial to the United States as to the other party, or are we giving away too much in the deal? These are open and complicated questions, which the various schools of thought discussed later in the chapter will help us answer.

A second challenge for the United States is the widely differing views among countries about the role of government in people's lives. The government of hardline communist North Korea regulates everything in its people's lives every day. At the other end of the spectrum are countries with little government activity at all, such as parts of the island of New Guinea. In between is a vast array of diverse approaches to governance. Countries like Sweden provide cradle-to-grave human services programs like health care and education that in some parts of India are minimal at best. In Egypt, the nonprofit sector provides many services rather than the government. The United States relishes its tradition of freedom and the principle of limited government, but practice and reality can be somewhat different. In the end, it falls somewhere

in the middle of this continuum because of its focus on law and order, educational and training services, and old-age pensions and health care in the form of Social Security and Medicare.

The challenge of pinpointing the appropriate role of government may sound more like a domestic than a foreign policy matter, and to some degree it is an internal choice about the way government interacts with the people. Yet the internal (or domestic) relationship between a government and its people can often become intertwined with foreign policy. For example, the narrow stance on personal liberty that Iran has taken in recent decades led other countries to impose economic sanctions that crippled the country internally. Some of these sanctions have eased in light of the new nuclear deal with Iran. So the domestic and foreign policy realms are intertwined in terms of what we view as national priorities—whether they consist of nation building abroad or infrastructure building here at home, for example. This latter choice is often described as the “guns versus butter” debate.

A third, and related, unique challenge for the United States in the foreign policy realm is other countries’ varying ideas about the appropriate form of government. These forms range from democracies on one side to various authoritarian (or nondemocratic) forms of government on the other. Relations between the United States and democratic states tend to operate more smoothly, proceeding from the shared core assumption that government’s authority comes from the people. Monarchies and other nondemocratic forms of government do not share this assumption, which can complicate foreign policy discussions immensely. People in the United States often assume that people who live in a nondemocratic country would prefer to live in a democratic one. However, in some regions of the world, such as the Middle East, this does not seem to be the case—people often prefer having stability within a nondemocratic system over changing to a less predictable democratic form of government. Or they may believe in a theocratic form of government. And the United States does have formal relations with some more totalitarian and monarchical governments, such as Saudi Arabia, when it is in U.S. interests to do so.

A fourth challenge is that many new foreign policy issues transcend borders. That is, there are no longer simply friendly states and enemy states. Problems around the world that might affect the United States, such as terrorism, the international slave trade, and climate change, originate with groups and issues that are not country-specific. They are transnational. So, for example, while we can readily name the enemies of the Allied forces in World War II (Germany, Italy, and Japan), the U.S. war against terrorism has been aimed at terrorist groups that do not fit neatly within the borders of any one country with which the United States could quickly interact to solve the problem. Intelligence-gathering and focused military intervention are needed more than traditional diplomatic relations, and relations can become complicated when the United States wants to pursue terrorists within other countries’ borders. An ongoing example is the use of U.S. drone strikes on terrorist targets within the nation of Pakistan, in addition to the 2011 campaign that resulted in the death of Osama bin Laden, the founder of al-Qaeda ([Figure 12.6](#)).



Figure 12.6 President Barack Obama (second from left) with Vice President Joe Biden (far left), Secretary of State Hillary Clinton (second from right), Secretary of Defense Robert Gates (far right), and other national security advisers in the Situation Room of the White House, watching the successful raid on Osama bin Laden’s compound on May 1, 2011.

The fifth and final unique challenge is the varying conditions of the countries in the world and their effect on what is possible in terms of foreign policy and diplomatic relations. Relations between the United States and a stable industrial democracy are going to be easier than between the United States and an unstable developing country being run by a military junta (a group that has taken control of the government by force). Moreover, an unstable country will be more focused on establishing internal stability than on broader world concerns like environmental policy. In fact, developing countries are temporarily exempt from the requirements of certain treaties while they seek to develop stable industrial and governmental frameworks.

Link to Learning

The [Council on Foreign Relations](#) is one of the nation’s oldest organizations that exist to promote thoughtful discussion on U.S. foreign policy.

12.2 Foreign Policy Instruments

Learning Objectives

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

- Describe the outputs of broadly focused U.S. foreign policy
- Describe the outputs of sharply focused U.S. foreign policy
- Analyze the role of Congress in foreign policy

The decisions or outputs of U.S. foreign policy vary from presidential directives about conducting drone strikes to the size of the overall foreign relations budget passed by Congress, and from presidential summits with other heads of state to U.S. views of new policies considered in the UN Security Council. In this section, we consider the outputs of foreign policy produced by the U.S. government, beginning with broadly focused decisions and then discussing more sharply focused strategies. Drawing this distinction brings some clarity to the array of different policy outcomes in foreign policy. Broadly focused decisions typically take longer to formalize, bring in more actors in the United States and abroad, require more resources to carry out, are harder to reverse, and hence tend to have a lasting impact. Sharply focused outputs tend to be processed quickly, are often unilateral moves by the president, have a shorter time horizon, are easier for subsequent decision-makers to reverse, and hence do not usually have so lasting an impact as broadly focused foreign policy outputs.

BROADLY FOCUSED FOREIGN POLICY OUTPUTS

Broadly focused foreign policy outputs not only span multiple topics and organizations, but they also typically require large-scale spending and take longer to implement than sharply focused outputs. In the realm of broadly focused outputs, we will consider public laws, the periodic reauthorization of the foreign policy agencies, the foreign policy budget, international agreements, and the appointment process for new executive officials and ambassadors.

Public Laws

When we talk about new laws enacted by Congress and the president, we are referring to public laws. *Public laws*, sometimes called statutes, are policies that affect more than a single individual. All policies enacted by Congress and the president are public laws, except for a few dozen each year. They differ from *private laws*, which require some sort of action or payment by a specific individual or individuals named in the law.

Many statutes affect what the government can do in the foreign policy realm, including the National Security Act, the Patriot Act, the Homeland Security Act, and the War Powers Resolution. The National Security Act governs the way the government shares and stores information, while the Patriot Act (passed immediately after 9/11) clarifies what the government may do in collecting information about people in the name of protecting the country. The Homeland Security Act of 2002 authorized the creation of a massive new federal agency, the Department of Homeland Security, consolidating powers that had been under the

jurisdiction of several different agencies. Their earlier lack of coordination may have prevented the United States from recognizing warning signs of the 9/11 terrorist attacks.

The War Powers Resolution was passed in 1973 by a congressional override of President Richard Nixon's veto. The bill was Congress's attempt to reassert itself in war-making. Congress has the power to declare war, but it had not formally done so since Japan's 1941 attack on Pearl Harbor brought the United States into World War II. Yet the United States had entered several wars since that time, including in Korea, in Vietnam, and in focused military campaigns such as the failed 1961 Bay of Pigs invasion of Cuba. The War Powers Resolution created a new series of steps to be followed by presidents in waging military conflict with other countries.

Its main feature was a requirement that presidents get approval from Congress to continue any military campaign beyond sixty days. To many, however, the overall effect was actually to strengthen the role of the president in war-making. After all, the law clarified that presidents could act on their own for sixty days before getting authorization from Congress to continue, and many smaller-scale conflicts are over within sixty days. Before the War Powers Resolution, the first approval for war was supposed to come from Congress. In theory, Congress, with its constitutional war powers, could act to reverse the actions of a president once the sixty days have passed. However, a clear disagreement between Congress and the president, especially once an initiative has begun and there is a "rally around the flag" effect, is relatively rare. More likely are tough questions about the campaign to which continuing congressional funding is tied.

Reauthorization

All federal agencies, including those dedicated to foreign policy, face reauthorization every three to five years. If not reauthorized, agencies lose their legal standing and the ability to spend federal funds to carry out programs. Agencies typically are reauthorized, because they coordinate carefully with presidential and congressional staff to get their affairs in order when the time comes. However, the reauthorization requirements do create a regular conversation between the agency and its political principals about how well it is functioning and what could be improved.

The federal budget process is an important annual tradition that affects all areas of foreign policy. The foreign policy and defense budgets are part of the discretionary budget, or the section of the national budget that Congress vets and decides on each year. Foreign policy leaders in the executive and legislative branches must advocate for funding from this budget, and while foreign policy budgets are usually renewed, there are enough proposed changes each year to make things interesting. In addition to new agencies, new cross-national projects are proposed each year to add to infrastructure and increase or improve foreign aid, intelligence, and national security technology.

Agreements

International agreements represent another of the broad-based foreign policy instruments. The United States finds it useful to enter into international agreements with other countries for a

variety of reasons and on a variety of different subjects. These agreements run the gamut from bilateral agreements about tariffs to multinational agreements among dozens of countries about the treatment of prisoners of war. One recent multinational pact was the seven-country Iran Nuclear Agreement in 2015, intended to limit nuclear development in Iran in exchange for the lifting of long-standing economic sanctions on that country ([Figure 12.7](#)).



Figure 12.7 The ministers of foreign affairs and other officials from China, France, Germany, the European Union, Iran, Russia, and the United Kingdom join Secretary of State John Kerry (far right) in April 2015 to announce the framework that would lead to the multinational Iran Nuclear Agreement. (credit: modification of work by the U.S. Department of State)

The format that an international agreement takes has been the point of considerable discussion in recent years. The U.S. Constitution outlines the treaty process in Article II. The president negotiates a treaty, the Senate consents to the treaty by a two-thirds vote, and finally the president ratifies it. Despite that constitutional clarity, today over 90 percent of the international agreements into which the United States enters are not treaties but rather executive agreements.⁸ Executive agreements are negotiated by the president, and in the case of sole executive agreements, they are simultaneously approved by the president as well. On the other hand, congressional-executive agreements, like the North American Free Trade Agreement (NAFTA), are negotiated by the president and then approved by a simple majority of the House and Senate (rather than a two-thirds vote in the Senate as is the case for a treaty). In the key case of *United States v. Pink* (1942), the Supreme Court ruled that executive agreements were legally equivalent to treaties provided they did not alter federal law.⁹ Most executive agreements are not of major importance and do not spark controversy, while some, like the Iran Nuclear Agreement, generate considerable debate. Many in the Senate thought the Iran deal should have been completed as a treaty rather than as a sole executive agreement.

Finding a Middle Ground

Treaty or Executive Agreement?

Should new international agreements into which the United States enters be forged through the Article II treaty process of the U.S. Constitution, or through executive agreements? This question arose again in 2015 as the Iran Nuclear Agreement was being completed. That pact required Iran to halt further nuclear development and agree to nuclear inspections, while the United States and five other signatories lifted long-standing economic sanctions on Iran. The debate over whether the United States should have entered the agreement and whether it should have been a treaty rather than an executive agreement was conducted in the news media and on political comedy shows like *The Daily Show*.

Your view on the form of the pact will depend on how you see executive agreements being employed. Do presidents use them to circumvent the Senate (as the “evasion hypothesis” suggests)? Or are they an efficient tool that saves the Senate Committee on Foreign Relations the work of processing hundreds of agreements each year?

Politicians’ opinions about the form of the Iran Nuclear Agreement fell along party lines. Democrats accepted the president’s decision to use an executive agreement to finalize the pact, which they tended to support. Republicans, who were overwhelmingly against the pact, favored the use of the treaty process, which would have allowed them to vote the deal down. In the end, the president used an executive agreement and the pact was enacted. The downside is that an executive agreement can be reversed by the next president. Treaties are much more difficult to undo because they require a new process to be undertaken in the Senate in order for the president to gain approval.

Which approach do you favor for the Iran Nuclear Agreement, an executive agreement or a treaty? Why?

Link to Learning

Watch [“Under Miner”](#) and [“Start Wars”](#) to see the take of Jon Stewart and *The Daily Show* on the Iran Nuclear Agreement.

Appointments

The last broad type of foreign policy output consists of the foreign policy appointments made when a new president takes office. Typically, when the party in the White House changes, more new appointments are made than when the party does not change, because the incoming president wants to put in place people who share the president's agenda. This has been the case in every presidential transition since 1993, when Republican George H.W. Bush left office and Democrat Bill Clinton took over. The pattern continued in 2001 when Republican George W. Bush became president, and then again with Democrat Barack Obama, Republican Donald Trump, and Democrat Joe Biden.

Most foreign policy–related appointments, such as secretary of state and the various undersecretaries and assistant secretaries, as well as all ambassadors, must be confirmed by a majority vote of the Senate ([Figure 12.8](#)). Presidents seek to nominate people who know the area to which they’re being appointed and who will be loyal to the president rather than to the bureaucracy in which they might work. They also want their nominees to be readily confirmed. As we will see in more detail later in the chapter, an isolationist group of appointees will run the country’s foreign policy agencies very differently than a group that is more internationalist in its outlook. Isolationists might seek to pull back from foreign policy involvement around the globe, while internationalists would go in the other direction, toward more involvement and toward acting in conjunction with other countries.

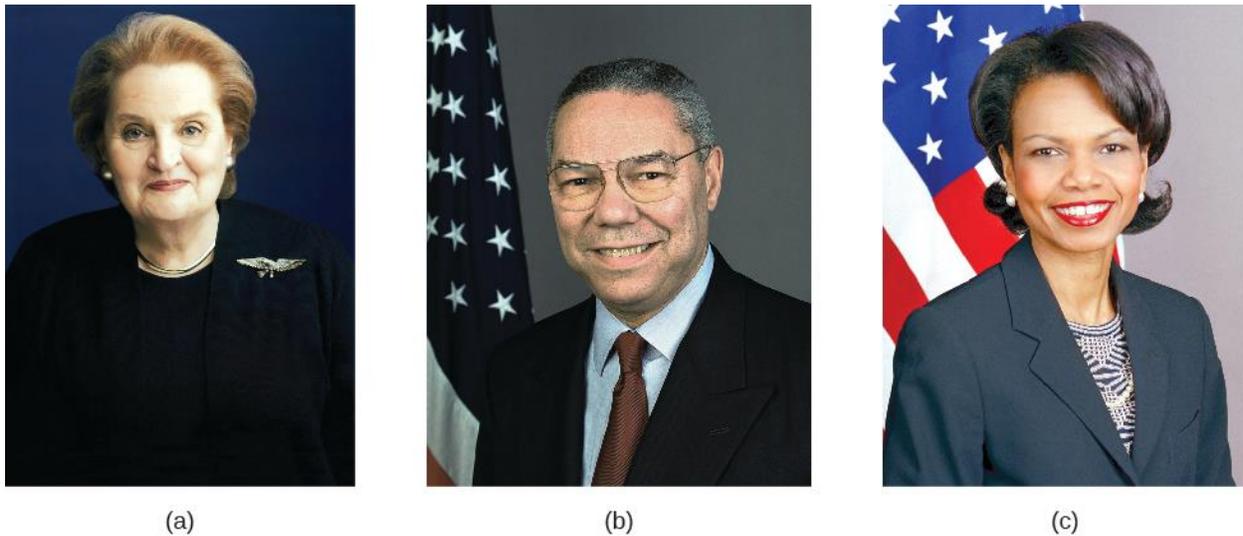


Figure 12.8 Madeleine Albright (a), the first female secretary of state, was nominated by President Bill Clinton and unanimously confirmed by the Senate 99–0. Colin Powell (b), nominated by George W. Bush, was also unanimously confirmed. Condoleezza Rice (c) had a more difficult road, earning thirteen votes against, at the time the most for any secretary of state nominee since Henry Clay in 1825. According to Senator Barbara Boxer (D-CA), senators wanted “to hold Dr. Rice and the Bush administration accountable for their failures in Iraq and in the war on terrorism.”

SHARPLY FOCUSED FOREIGN POLICY OUTPUTS

In addition to the broad-based foreign policy outputs above, which are president-led with some involvement from Congress, many other decisions need to be made. These sharply focused foreign policy outputs tend to be exclusively the province of the president, including the deployment of troops and/or intelligence agents in a crisis, executive summits between the president and other heads of state on targeted matters of foreign policy, presidential use of military force, and emergency funding measures to deal with foreign policy crises. These measures of foreign policy are more quickly enacted and demonstrate the “energy and dispatch” that Alexander Hamilton, writing in the *Federalist Papers*, saw as inherent in the institution of the presidency. Emergency spending does involve Congress through its power of

the purse, but Congress tends to give presidents what they need to deal with emergencies. That said, the framers were consistent in wanting checks and balances sprinkled throughout the Constitution, including in the area of foreign policy and war powers. Hence, Congress has several roles, as discussed at points throughout this chapter.

Perhaps the most famous foreign policy emergency was the Cuban Missile Crisis in 1962. With the Soviet Union placing nuclear missiles in Cuba, just a few hundred miles from Florida, a Cold War standoff with the United States escalated. The Soviets at first denied the existence of the missiles, but U.S. reconnaissance flights proved they were there, gathering photographic evidence that was presented at the UN ([Figure 12.9](#)). The Soviets stood firm, and U.S. foreign policy leaders debated their approach. Some in the military were pushing for aggressive action to take out the missiles and the installation in Cuba, while State Department officials favored a diplomatic route. President John F. Kennedy ended up taking the recommendation of a special committee, and the United States implemented a naval blockade of Cuba that subtly forced the Soviets' hands. The Soviets agreed to remove their Cuban missiles and the United States in turn agreed six months later to remove its missiles from Turkey.



(a)



(b)

Figure 12.9 This low-level U.S. Navy photograph of San Cristobal, Cuba, clearly shows one of the sites built to launch intermediate-range missiles at the United States (a). As the date indicates, it was taken on the last day of the Cuban Missile Crisis. Following the crisis, President Kennedy (far right) met with the reconnaissance pilots who flew the Cuban missions (b). (credit a: modification of work by the National Archives and Record Administration)

[Link to Learning](#)

Listen to [President Kennedy's speech](#) announcing the naval blockade the United States imposed on Cuba, ending the Cuban Missile Crisis of 1962.

Another form of focused foreign policy output is the presidential summit. Often held at the Presidential Retreat at Camp David, Maryland, these meetings bring together the president and one or more other heads of state. Presidents use these types of summits when they and their visitors need to dive deeply into important issues that are not quickly solved. An example is the 1978 summit that led to the Camp David Accords, in which President Jimmy Carter, Egyptian president Anwar El Sadat, and Israeli prime minister Menachem Begin met privately for twelve

days at Camp David negotiating a peace process for the two countries, which had been at odds with each other in the Middle East. Another example is the Malta Summit between President George H. W. Bush and Soviet leader Mikhail Gorbachev, which took place on the island of Malta over two days in December 1989 ([Figure 12.10](#)). The meetings were an important symbol of the end of the Cold War, the Berlin Wall having come down just a few months earlier.



(a)



(b)

Figure 12.10 President Jimmy Carter meets with Egypt’s Anwar El Sadat (left) and Israel’s Menachem Begin (right) at Camp David in 1978 (a). President George H. W. Bush (right) dines with Mikhail Gorbachev (left) at the Malta Summit in 1989 (b). (credit b: modification of work by the National Archives and Records Administration)

Another focused foreign policy output is the military use of force. Since the 1941 Pearl Harbor attacks and the immediate declaration of war by Congress that resulted, all such initial uses of force have been authorized by the president. Congress in many cases has subsequently supported additional military action, but the president has been the instigator. While there has sometimes been criticism, Congress has never acted to reverse presidential action. As discussed above, the War Powers Resolution clarified that the first step in the use of force was the president’s, for the first sixty days. A recent example of the military use of force was the U.S. role in enforcing a no-fly zone over Libya in 2011, which included kinetic strikes—or active engagement of the enemy—to protect anti-government forces on the ground. U.S. fighter jets flew out of Aviano Air Base in northern Italy ([Figure 12.11](#)).



Figure 12.11 One example of a sharply focused foreign policy output is the use of the U.S. military abroad. Here, the Air Force fighter jets used to enforce a 2011 no-fly zone over Libya return to a NATO air base in northeastern Italy. (credit: Tierney P. Wilson)

The final example of a focused foreign policy input is the passage of an emergency funding measure for a specific national security task. Congress tends to pass at least one emergency spending measure per year, which must be signed by the president to take effect, and it often provides funding for domestic disasters. However, at times foreign policy matters drive an emergency spending measure, as was the case right after the 9/11 attacks. In such a case, the president or the administration proposes particular amounts for emergency foreign policy plans.

12.3 Institutional Relations in Foreign Policy

Learning Objectives

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

- Describe the use of shared power in U.S. foreign policymaking
- Explain why presidents lead more in foreign policy than in domestic policy
- Discuss why individual House and Senate members rarely venture into foreign policy
- List the actors who engage in foreign policy

Institutional relationships in foreign policy constitute a paradox. On the one hand, there are aspects of foreign policymaking that necessarily engage multiple branches of government and a multiplicity of actors. Indeed, there is a complexity to foreign policy that is bewildering, in terms of both substance and process. On the other hand, foreign policymaking can sometimes call for nothing more than for the president to make a formal decision, quickly endorsed by the legislative branch. This section will explore the institutional relationships present in U.S. foreign policymaking.

FOREIGN POLICY AND SHARED POWER

While presidents are more empowered by the Constitution in foreign than in domestic policy, they nonetheless must seek approval from Congress on a variety of matters; chief among these is the basic budgetary authority needed to run foreign policy programs. Indeed, most if not all of the foreign policy instruments described earlier in this chapter require interbranch approval to go into effect. Such approval may sometimes be a formality, but it is still important. Even a sole executive agreement often requires subsequent funding from Congress in order to be carried out, and funding calls for majority support from the House and Senate. Presidents lead, to be sure, but they must consult with and engage the Congress on many matters of foreign policy. Presidents must also delegate a great deal in foreign policy to the bureaucratic experts in the foreign policy agencies. Not every operation can be run from the West Wing of the White House.

At bottom, the United States is a separation-of-powers political system with authority divided among executive and legislative branches, including in the foreign policy realm. [Table 12.1](#) shows the formal roles of the president and Congress in conducting foreign policy.

Roles of the President and Congress in Conducting Foreign Policy

Policy Output	Presidential Role	Congressional Role
Public laws	Proposes, signs into law	Proposes, approves for passage
Agency reauthorizations	Proposes, signs into law	Approves for passage
Foreign policy budget	Proposes, signs into law	Authorizes/appropriates for passage
Treaties	Negotiates, ratifies	Senate consents to treaty (two-thirds)
Sole executive agreements	Negotiates, approves	None (unless funding is required)
Congressional-executive agreements	Negotiates	Approves by majority vote
Declaration of war	Proposes	Approves by majority vote
Military use of force	Carries out operations at will (sixty days)	Approves for operations beyond sixty days
Presidential appointments	Nominates candidates	Senate approves by majority vote

Table 12.1

The main lesson of [Table 12.1](#) is that nearly all major outputs of foreign policy require a formal congressional role in order to be carried out. Foreign policy might be done by executive say-so in times of crisis and in the handful of sole executive agreements that actually pertain to major issues (like the Iran Nuclear Agreement). In general, however, a consultative relationship between the branches in foreign policy is the usual result of their constitutional sharing of power. A president who ignores Congress on matters of foreign policy and does not keep them briefed may find later interactions on other matters more difficult. Probably the most extreme version of this potential dynamic occurred during the Eisenhower presidency. When President Dwight D. Eisenhower used too many executive agreements instead of sending key ones to the Senate as treaties, Congress reacted by considering a constitutional amendment (the Bricker Amendment) that would have altered the treaty process as we know it. Eisenhower understood the message and began to send more agreements through the process as treaties.¹⁰

Shared power creates an incentive for the branches to cooperate. Even in the midst of a crisis, such as the Cuban Missile Crisis in 1962, it is common for the president or senior staff to brief congressional leaders in order to keep them up to speed and ensure the country can stand unified on international matters. That said, there are areas of foreign policy where the president has more discretion, such as the operation of intelligence programs, the holding of foreign policy summits, and the mobilization of troops or agents in times of crisis. Moreover,

presidents have more power and influence in foreign policymaking than they do in domestic policymaking. It is to that power that we now turn.

THE TWO PRESIDENCIES THESIS

When the media cover a domestic controversy, such as social unrest or police brutality, reporters consult officials at different levels and in branches of government, as well as think tanks and advocacy groups. In contrast, when an international event occurs, such as a terrorist bombing in Paris or Brussels, the media flock predominately to one actor—the president of the United States—to get the official U.S. position.

In the realm of foreign policy and international relations, the president occupies a leadership spot that is much clearer than in the realm of domestic policy. This dual domestic and international role has been described by the two presidencies thesis. This theory originated with University of California–Berkeley professor Aaron Wildavsky and suggests that there are two distinct presidencies, one for foreign policy and one for domestic policy, and that presidents are more successful in foreign than domestic policy. Let’s look at the reasoning behind this thesis.

The Constitution names the president as the commander-in-chief of the military, the nominating authority for executive officials and ambassadors, and the initial negotiator of foreign agreements and treaties. The president is the agenda-setter for foreign policy and may move unilaterally in some instances. Beyond the Constitution, presidents were also gradually given more authority to enter into international agreements without Senate consent by using the executive agreement. We saw above that the passage of the War Powers Resolution in 1973, though intended as a statute to rein in executive power and reassert Congress as a check on the president, effectively gave presidents two months to wage war however they wish. Given all these powers, we have good reason to expect presidents to have more influence and be more successful in foreign than in domestic policy.

A second reason for the stronger foreign policy presidency has to do with the informal aspects of power. In some eras, Congress will be more willing to allow the president to be a clear leader and speak for the country. For instance, the Cold War between the Eastern bloc countries (led by the Soviet Union) and the West (led by the United States and Western European allies) prompted many to want a single actor to speak for the United States. A willing Congress allowed the president to take the lead because of urgent circumstances ([Figure 12.12](#)). Much of the Cold War also took place when the parties in Congress included more moderates on both sides of the aisle and the environment was less partisan than today. A phrase often heard at that time was, “Partisanship stops at the water’s edge.” This means that foreign policy matters should not be subject to the bitter disagreements seen in party politics.



(a)



(b)

Figure 12.12 President John F. Kennedy gives a speech about freedom in the shadow of the Berlin Wall (a). The wall was erected in 1963 by East Germany to keep its citizens from defecting to West Berlin. On September 14, 2001, President George W. Bush promises justice at the site of the destroyed World Trade Center in New York City (b). Rescue workers responded by chanting “U.S.A., U.S.A.!” (credit a: modification of work by the John F. Kennedy Library)

Does the thesis’s expectation of a more successful foreign policy presidency apply today? While the president still has stronger foreign policy powers than domestic powers, the governing context has changed in two key ways. First, the Cold War ended in 1989 with the demolition of the Berlin Wall, the subsequent disintegration of the Soviet Union, and the eventual opening up of Eastern European territories to independence and democracy. These dramatic changes removed the competitive superpower aspect of the Cold War, in which the United States and the USSR were dueling rivals on the world stage. The absence of the Cold War has led to less of a rally-behind-the-president effect in the area of foreign policy.

Second, beginning in the 1980s and escalating in the 1990s, the Democratic and Republican parties began to become polarized in Congress. The moderate members in each party all but disappeared, while more ideologically motivated candidates began to win election to the House and later the Senate. Hence, the Democrats in Congress became more liberal on average, the Republicans became more conservative, and the moderates from each party, who had been able to work together, were edged out. It became increasingly likely that the party opposite the president in Congress might be more willing to challenge his initiatives, whereas in the past it was rare for the opposition party to publicly stand against the president in foreign policy.

Finally, several analysts have tried applying the two presidencies thesis to contemporary presidential-congressional relationships in foreign policy. Is the two presidencies framework still valid in the more partisan post–Cold War era? The answer is mixed. On the one hand, presidents are more successful on foreign policy votes in the House and Senate, on average, than on domestic policy votes. However, the gap has narrowed. Moreover, analysis has also shown that presidents are opposed more often in Congress, even on the foreign policy votes they win.¹¹ Democratic leaders regularly challenged Republican George W. Bush on the Iraq War and it became common to see the most senior foreign relations committee members of the Republican Party opposing the foreign policy positions of Democratic president Barack

Obama. Such challenging of the president by the opposition party simply didn't happen during the Cold War.

In the Trump administration, there was a distinct shift in foreign policy style. While for some regions, like South America, Trump was content to let the foreign policy bureaucracies proceed as they always had, in certain areas, the president was pivotal in changing the direction of American foreign policy. For example, he stepped away from two key international agreements—the Iran-Nuclear Deal and the Paris climate change accords. Moreover, his actions in Syria were quite unilateral, employing bombing raids unilaterally on two occasions. This approach reflected more of a neoconservative foreign policy approach, similar to Obama's widespread use of drone strikes.

Therefore, it seems presidents no longer enjoy unanimous foreign policy support as they did in the early 1960s. They have to work harder to get a consensus and are more likely to face opposition. Still, because of their formal powers in foreign policy, presidents are overall more successful on foreign policy than on domestic policy.

THE PERSPECTIVE OF HOUSE AND SENATE MEMBERS

Congress is a bicameral legislative institution with 100 senators serving in the Senate and 435 representatives serving in the House. How interested in foreign policy are typical House and Senate members?

While key White House, executive, and legislative leaders monitor and regularly weigh in on foreign policy matters, the fact is that individual representatives and senators do so much less often. Unless there is a foreign policy crisis, legislators in Congress tend to focus on domestic matters, mainly because there is not much to be gained with their constituents by pursuing foreign policy matters.¹² Domestic policy matters resonate more strongly with the voters at home. A sluggish economy, increasing health care costs, and crime matter more to them than U.S. policy toward North Korea, for example. In an open-ended Gallup poll question from early 2021 about the “most important problem” in the United States, fewer than 10 percent of respondents named a foreign policy topic (and most of those respondents mentioned immigration). These results suggest that foreign policy is not at the top of many voters' minds. In the end, legislators must be responsive to constituents in order to be good representatives and to achieve reelection.¹³

However, some House and Senate members do wade into foreign policy matters. First, congressional party leaders in the majority and minority parties speak on behalf of their institution and their party on all types of issues, including foreign policy. Some House and Senate members ask to serve on the foreign policy committees, such as the Senate Committee on Foreign Relations, the House Foreign Affairs Committee, and the two defense committees ([Figure 12.13](#)). These members might have military bases within their districts or states and hence have a constituency reason for being interested in foreign policy. Legislators might also simply have a personal interest in foreign policy matters that drives their engagement in the issue. Finally, they may have ambitions to move into an executive branch position that deals

with foreign policy matters, such as secretary of state or defense, CIA director, or even president.



(a)



(b)

Figure 12.13 Senator Cory Booker (D-NJ) (a) serves on the Senate Committee on Foreign Relations, along with Senator Jim Risch (R-ID) (b), the ranking member.

Get Connected!

Let People Know What You Think!

Most House and Senate members do not engage in foreign policy because there is no electoral benefit to doing so. Thus, when citizens become involved, House members and senators will take notice. Research by John Kingdon on roll-call voting and by Richard Hall on committee participation found that when constituents are activated, their interest becomes salient to a legislator and the legislator will respond.¹⁴

One way you can become active in the foreign policy realm is by writing a letter or e-mail to your House member and/or your two U.S. senators about what you believe the U.S. foreign policy approach in a particular area ought to be. Perhaps you want the United States to work with other countries to protect dolphins from being accidentally trapped in tuna nets. You can also state your position in a letter to the editor of your local newspaper, or post an opinion on the newspaper's website where a related article or op-ed piece appears. You can share links to news coverage on Facebook or Twitter and consider joining a foreign policy interest group such as Greenpeace.

When you engaged in foreign policy discussion as suggested above, what type of response did you receive?

Link to Learning

For more information on the two key congressional committees on U.S. foreign policy, visit the [Senate Committee on Foreign Relations](#) and the [House Foreign Affairs Committee](#) websites.

THE MANY ACTORS IN FOREIGN POLICY

A variety of actors carry out the various and complex activities of U.S. foreign policy: White House staff, executive branch staff, and congressional leaders.

The White House staff members engaged in foreign policy are likely to have very regular contact with the president about their work. The national security advisor heads the president's National Security Council, a group of senior-level staff from multiple foreign policy agencies, and is generally the president's top foreign policy advisor. Also reporting to the president in the White House is the director of the Central Intelligence Agency (CIA). Even more important on intelligence than the CIA director is the director of national intelligence, a position created in the government reorganizations after 9/11, who oversees the entire intelligence community in the U.S. government. The Joint Chiefs of Staff consist of six members, one each from the Army, Navy, Air Force, and Marines, plus a chair and vice chair. The chair of the Joint Chiefs of Staff is the president's top uniformed military officer. In contrast, the secretary of defense is head of the entire Department of Defense but is a nonmilitary civilian. The U.S. trade representative develops and directs the country's international trade agenda. Finally, within the Executive Office of the President, another important foreign policy official is the director of the president's Office of Management and Budget (OMB). The OMB director develops the president's yearly budget proposal, including funding for the foreign policy agencies and foreign aid.

In addition to those who work directly in the White House or Executive Office of the President, several important officials work in the broader executive branch and report to the president in the area of foreign policy. Chief among these is the secretary of state. The secretary of state is the nation's chief diplomat, serves in the president's cabinet, and oversees the Foreign Service. The secretary of defense, who is the civilian (nonmilitary) head of the armed services housed in the Department of Defense, is also a key cabinet member for foreign policy (as mentioned above). A third cabinet secretary, the secretary of homeland security, is critically important in foreign policy, overseeing the massive Department of Homeland Security ([Figure 12.14](#)).

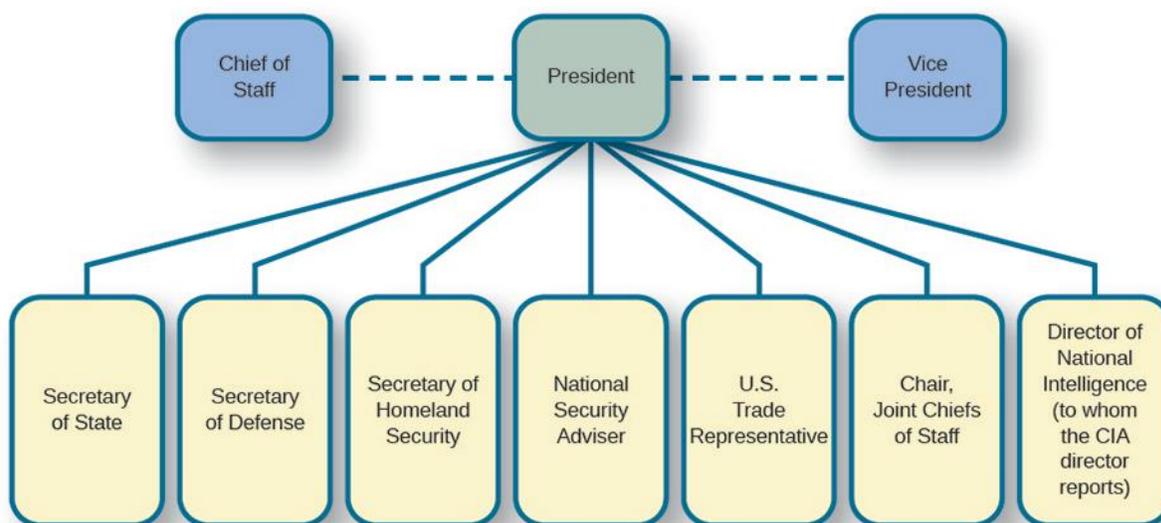


Figure 12.14 In addition to the secretaries of state, defense, and homeland security, numerous officials report to the president in the area of foreign policy.

Insider Perspective

Former Secretary of Defense Robert Gates

Former secretary of defense Robert Gates served under both Republican and Democratic presidents. First Gates rose through the ranks of the CIA to become the director during the George H. W. Bush administration. He then left government to serve as an academic administrator at Texas A&M University in College Station, Texas, where he rose to the position of university president. He was able to win over reluctant faculty and advance the university's position, including increasing the faculty at a time when budgets were in decline in Texas. Then, when Secretary of Defense Donald Rumsfeld resigned, President George W. Bush invited Gates to return to government service as Rumsfeld's replacement. Gates agreed, serving in that capacity for the remainder of the Bush years and then for several years in the Obama administration before retiring from government service a second time ([Figure 12.15](#)). He has generally been seen as thorough, systematic, and fair.



Figure 12.15 In March 2011, then-secretary of defense Robert Gates (left) held talks with Afghan president Hamid Karzai in Kabul, Afghanistan. (credit: Cherie Cullen)

In his memoir, *Duty: Memoirs of a Secretary at War*,¹⁵ Secretary Gates takes issue with the actions of both the presidents for whom he worked, but ultimately he praises them for their service and for upholding the right principles in protecting the United States and U.S. military troops. In this and earlier books, Gates discusses the need to have an overarching plan but says plans cannot be too tight or they will fail when things change in the external environment. After leaving politics, Gates served as president of the Boy Scouts of America, where he presided over the change in policy that allowed openly gay scouts and leaders, an issue with which he had had experience as secretary of defense under President Obama. In that role Gates oversaw the end of the military's "Don't ask, don't tell" policy.¹⁶

What do you think about a cabinet secretary serving presidents from two different political parties? Is this a good idea? Why or why not?

The final group of official key actors in foreign policy are in the U.S. Congress. The Speaker of the House, the House minority leader, and the Senate majority and minority leaders are often

given updates on foreign policy matters by the president or the president’s staff. They are also consulted when the president needs foreign policy support or funding. However, the experts in Congress who are most often called on for their views are the committee chairs and the highest-ranking minority members of the relevant House and Senate committees. In the House, that means the Foreign Affairs Committee and the Committee on Armed Services. In the Senate, the relevant committees are the Committee on Foreign Relations and the Armed Services Committee. These committees hold regular hearings on key foreign policy topics, consider budget authorizations, and debate the future of U.S. foreign policy.

12.4 Approaches to Foreign Policy

Learning Objectives

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

- Explain classic schools of thought on U.S. foreign policy
- Describe contemporary schools of thought on U.S. foreign policy
- Delineate the U.S. foreign policy approach with Russia and China

Frameworks and theories help us make sense of the environment of governance in a complex area like foreign policy. A variety of schools of thought exist about how to approach foreign policy, each with different ideas about what “should” be done. These approaches also vary in terms of what they assume about human nature, how many other countries ought to be involved in U.S. foreign policy, and what the tenor of foreign policymaking ought to be. They help us situate the current U.S. approach to many foreign policy challenges around the world.

CLASSIC APPROACHES

A variety of traditional concepts of foreign policy remain helpful today as we consider the proper role of the United States in, and its approach to, foreign affairs. These include isolationism, the idealism versus realism debate, liberal internationalism, hard versus soft power, and the grand strategy of U.S. foreign policy.

From the end of the Revolutionary War in the late eighteenth century until the early twentieth century, isolationism—whereby a country stays out of foreign entanglements and keeps to itself—was a popular stance in U.S. foreign policy. Among the founders, Thomas Jefferson especially was an advocate of isolationism or non-involvement. He thought that by keeping to itself, the United States stood a better chance of becoming a truly free nation. This fact is full of irony, because Jefferson later served as ambassador to France and president of the United States, both roles that required at least some attention to foreign policy. Still, Jefferson’s ideas had broad support. After all, Europe was where volatile changes were occurring. The new nation was tired of war, and there was no reason for it to be entangled militarily with anyone. Indeed, in his farewell address, President George Washington famously warned against the creation of “entangling alliances.”¹⁷

Despite this legacy, the United States was pulled squarely into world affairs with its entry into World War I. But between the Armistice in 1918 that ended that war and U.S. entry into World

War II in 1941, isolationist sentiment returned, based on the idea that Europe should learn to govern its own affairs. Then, after World War II, the United States engaged the world stage as one of two superpowers and the military leader of Europe and the Pacific. Isolationism never completely went away, but now it operated in the background. Again, Europe seemed to be the center of the problem, while political life in the United States seemed calmer somehow.

The end of the Cold War opened up old wounds as a variety of smaller European countries sought independence and old ethnic conflicts reappeared. Some in the United States felt the country should again be isolationist as the world settled into a new political arrangement, including a vocal senator, Jesse Helms (R-NC), who was against the United States continuing to be the military “policeman” of the world. Helms was famous for opposing nearly all treaties brought to the Senate during his tenure. Congressman Ron Paul (R-TX) and his son Senator Rand Paul (R-KY) were both isolationist candidates for the presidency (in 2008 and 2016, respectively); both thought the United States should retreat from foreign entanglements, spend far less on military and foreign policy, and focus more on domestic issues.

At the other end of the spectrum is liberal internationalism. Liberal internationalism advocates a foreign policy approach in which the United States becomes proactively engaged in world affairs. Its adherents assume that liberal democracies must take the lead in creating a peaceful world by cooperating as a community of nations and creating effective world structures such as the United Nations. To fully understand liberal internationalism, it is helpful to understand the idealist versus realist debate in international relations. Idealists assume the best in others and see it as possible for countries to run the world together, with open diplomacy, freedom of the seas, free trade, and no militaries. Everyone will take care of each other. There is an element of idealism in liberal internationalism, because the United States assumes other countries will also put their best foot forward. A classic example of a liberal internationalist is President Woodrow Wilson, who sought a League of Nations to voluntarily save the world after World War I.

Realists assume that others will act in their own self-interest and hence cannot necessarily be trusted. They want a healthy military and contracts between countries in case others want to wiggle out of their commitments. Realism also has a place in liberal internationalism, because the United States approaches foreign relationships with open eyes and an emphasis on self-preservation.

Soft power, or diplomacy, with which the United States often begins a foreign policy relationship or entanglement, is in line with liberal internationalism and idealism, while hard power, which allows the potential for military force, is the stuff of realism. For example, at first the United States was rather isolationist in its approach to China, assuming it was a developing country of little impact that could safely be ignored. Then President Nixon opened up China as an area for U.S. investment, and an era of open diplomatic relations began in the early 1970s ([Figure 12.16](#)). As China modernized and began to dominate the trade relationship with the United States, many came to see it through a realist lens and to consider whether China’s behavior really warranted its beneficial most-favored-nation trading status.



Figure 12.16 President Nixon and First Lady Patricia Nixon visited the Great Wall on their 1972 trip to China. The Chinese showed them the sights and hosted a banquet for them in the Great Hall of the People. Nixon was the first U.S. president to visit China following the Communist victory in the civil war in 1949. (credit: National Archives and Records Administration)

The final classic idea of foreign policy is the so-called grand strategy—employing all available diplomatic, economic, and military resources to advance the national interest. The grand strategy invokes the possibility of hard power, because it relies on developing clear strategic directions for U.S. foreign policy and the methods to achieve those goals, often with military capability attached. The U.S. foreign policy plan in Europe and Asia after World War II reflects a grand strategy approach. In order to stabilize the world, the United States built military bases in Italy, Germany, Spain, England, Belgium, Japan, Guam, and Korea. It still operates nearly all these, though often under a multinational arrangement such as NATO. These bases help preserve stability on the one hand, and U.S. influence on the other.

MORE RECENT SCHOOLS OF THOUGHTS

Two particular events in foreign policy caused many to change their views about the proper approach to U.S. involvement in world affairs. First, the debacle of U.S. involvement in the civil war in Vietnam in the years leading up to 1973 caused many to rethink the country's traditional containment approach to the Cold War. Containment was the U.S. foreign policy goal of limiting the spread of communism. In Vietnam the United States supported one governing faction within the country (democratic South Vietnam), whereas the Soviet Union supported the opposing governing faction (communist North Vietnam). The U.S. military approach of battlefield engagement did not translate well to the jungles of Vietnam, where “guerilla warfare” predominated.

Skeptics became particularly pessimistic about liberal internationalism given how poorly the conflict in Vietnam had played out. U.S. military forces withdrew from South Vietnam in 1973,

and Saigon, its capital, fell to North Vietnam and the communists eighteen months later. Many of those pessimists then became neoconservatives on foreign policy.

Neoconservatives believe that rather than exercising restraint and always using international organizations as the path to international outcomes, the United States should aggressively use its might to promote its values and ideals around the world. The aggressive use (or threat) of hard power is the core value of neoconservatism. Acting unilaterally is acceptable in this view, as is adopting a preemptive strategy in which the United States intervenes militarily before the enemy can make its move. Preemption is a new idea; the United States has tended to be retaliatory in its use of military force, as in the case of Pearl Harbor at the start of World War II. Examples of neoconservatism in action are the 1980s U.S. campaigns in Central American countries to turn back communism under President Ronald Reagan, the Iraq War of 2003 led by President George W. Bush and his vice president Dick Cheney ([Figure 12.17](#)), and the use of drones as counterterrorism weapons during the Obama administration.



Figure 12.17 Heading to a going-away party for departing defense secretary Donald Rumsfeld in December 2006, former president George W. Bush (left) walks with then-vice president (and former secretary of defense) Dick Cheney (center), the prototypical twenty-first century foreign policy neoconservative. Rumsfeld is on the right. (credit: modification of work by D. Myles Cullen)

Neo-isolationism, like earlier isolationism, advocates keeping free of foreign entanglements. Yet no advanced industrial democracy completely separates itself from the rest of the world. Foreign markets beckon, tourism helps spur economic development at home and abroad, and global environmental challenges require cross-national conversation. In the twenty-first century, neo-isolationism means distancing the United States from the United Nations and other international organizations that get in the way. The strategy of selective engagement—retaining a strong military presence and remaining engaged across the world through alliances and formal installations—is used to protect the national security interests of the United States. However, this strategy also seeks to avoid being the world’s police officer.

The second factor that changed minds about twenty-first century foreign policy is the rise of elusive new enemies who defy traditional designations. Rather than countries, these enemies are terrorist groups such as al-Qaeda and ISIS (or ISIL) that spread across national boundaries. A hybrid approach to U.S. foreign policy that uses multiple schools of thought as circumstances

warrant may thus be the wave of the future. President Obama often took a hybrid approach. In some respects, he was a liberal internationalist seeking to put together broad coalitions to carry out world business. At the same time, his sending teams of troops and drones to take out terrorist targets in other legitimate nation-states without those states' approval fits with a neoconservative approach. Finally, his desire to not be the “world’s police officer” led him to follow a practice of selective engagement.

[Link to Learning](#)

Several interest groups debate what should happen in U.S. foreign policy, many of which are included in this [list](#) compiled by project Vote Smart.

U.S. FOREIGN POLICY IN THE COLD WAR AND WITH CHINA

The foreign policy environment from the end of World War II until the end of the Cold War in 1990 was dominated by a duel of superpowers between the United States and its Western allies on the one hand and the Soviet Union and the communist bloc of countries in the East on the other. Both superpowers developed thousands of weapons of mass destruction and readied for a potential world war to be fought with nuclear weapons. That period was certainly challenging and ominous at times, but it was simpler than the present era. Nations knew what team they were on, and there was generally an incentive to not go to war because it would lead to the unthinkable—the end of the Earth as we know it, or mutually assured destruction. The result of this logic, essentially a standoff between the two powers, is sometime referred to as nuclear deterrence.

When the Soviet Union imploded and the Cold War ended, it was in many ways a victory for the West and for democracy. However, once the bilateral nature of the Cold War was gone, dozens of countries sought independence and old ethnic conflicts emerged in several regions of the world, including Eastern Europe. This new era holds great promise, but it is in many ways more complex than the Cold War. The rise of cross-national terrorist organizations further complicates the equation because the enemy hides within the borders of potentially dozens of countries around the globe. In summary, the United States pursues a variety of topics and goals in different areas of the world in the twenty-first century.

The Soviet Union dissolved into many component parts after the Cold War, including Russia, various former Soviet republics like Georgia and Ukraine, and smaller nation-states in Eastern Europe, such as the Czech Republic. The general approach of the United States has been to encourage the adoption of democracy and economic reforms in these former Eastern bloc countries. Many of them now align with the EU and even with the West’s cross-national military organization, NATO. With freedoms can come conflict, and there has been much of that in these fledgling countries as opposition coalitions debate how the future course should be charted, and by whom. Under President Vladimir Putin, Russia is again trying to strengthen its power on the country’s western border, testing expansionism while invoking Russian nationalism. The United States is adopting a defensive position and trying to prevent the spread of Russian influence. The EU and NATO factor in here from the standpoint of an internationalist approach. U.S.-Russia relations have been frosty since Putin ascended, save for President Trump's efforts to befriend him. President Biden has taken a more emphatic stand with Russia

on issues of wrongdoing and especially questions regarding Russian influence in the 2016 and 2020 elections.

In many ways the more visible future threat to the United States is China, the potential rival superpower of the future. A communist state that has also encouraged much economic development, China has been growing and modernizing for more than thirty years. Its nearly 1.4 billion citizens are stepping onto the world economic stage with other advanced industrial nations. In addition to fueling an explosion of industrial domestic development, public and private Chinese investors have spread their resources to every continent and most countries of the world. Indeed, Chinese investors lend money to the United States government on a regular basis, as U.S. domestic borrowing capacity is pushed to the limit in most years.

Many in the United States are worried by the lack of freedom and human rights in China. During the Tiananmen Square massacre in Beijing on June 4, 1989, thousands of pro-democracy protestors were arrested and many were killed as Chinese authorities fired into the crowd and tanks crushed people who attempted to wall them out. Over one thousand more dissidents were arrested in the following weeks as the Chinese government investigated the planning of the protests in the square. The United States instituted minor sanctions for a time, but President George H. W. Bush chose not to remove the most-favored-nation trading status of this long-time economic partner. Most in the U.S. government, including leaders in both political parties, wish to engage China as an economic partner at the same time that they keep a watchful eye on its increasing influence around the world, especially in developing countries. President Trump, on the other hand, was assertive in Asia, imposing a series of tariffs designed particularly to hit goods imported from China. The relationship with China therefore became quite strained under President Trump, and President Biden has continued to raise tough questions about and take tough stances on China. This souring relationship has negatively impacted U.S. universities where several Confucius Institutes have been shut down.

Elsewhere in Asia, the United States has good relationships with most other countries, especially South Korea and Japan, which have both followed paths the United States favored after World War II. Both countries embraced democracy, market-oriented economies, and the hosting of U.S. military bases to stabilize the region. North Korea, however, is another matter. A closed, communist, totalitarian regime, North Korea has been testing nuclear bombs in recent decades, to the concern of the rest of the world. Here, again, President Trump has been assertive, challenging the North Koreans to come to the bargaining table. It is an open question how much change this assertiveness will achieve, but it is significant that a dialogue has actually begun. Like China many decades earlier, India is a developing country with a large population that is expanding and modernizing. Unlike China, India has embraced democracy, especially at the local level.

Link to Learning

You can plot U.S. government attention to different types of policy matters (including international affairs and foreign aid and its several dozen more focused subtopics) by using the online [trend analysis tool](#) at the Comparative Agendas Project.

