**10.1 Purpose of Elections**

The United States uses elections to choose its leaders. Voting is the most basic form of political participation and is assumed to be a basic right in a democracy. However, elections are important for other reasons as well. In the United States, elections serve three basic functions:

Through elections, American voters offer their tacit acceptance of the constitutional tradition. Elections also provide for the peaceful transfer of power and are the basis of democratic expression.

They provide an essential basis for democratic expression.

They provide for a peaceful transfer of power.

They allow citizens, as a political community, to offer their tacit acceptance of the American constitutional tradition. By voting, citizens reaffirm their commitment to the social contract that the Constitution represents.

**Democratic Expression**

People express themselves in a democracy by casting ballots either in person or by mail. Casting a vote allows them to express their preferences, which is an extension of human agency. When people vote for candidates who currently hold office, they affirm their support for the current government, and when they vote against those who currently hold office, they register their opposition to that same government.

Citizens achieve the greatest state of democratic expression when they can control the circumstances affecting their lives. In the political world, people control their circumstances by electing the government that will make decisions on their behalf. Elections are the vehicles by which the people achieve their political voice.

**Peaceful Transfer of Power**

Americans may take a peaceful transfer of power for granted, but this is actually one of the unique features of the American legacy. When the Framers of the Constitution constructed the American political system, they wanted to ensure peaceful transfers of power. A peaceful transfer of power—that is, using the ballot box rather than the barrel of a gun—represented a serious break from past experience. The election of 1800 illustrates this point. John Adams, George Washington’s vice president, who also was a Federalist, was elected president in 1796 after Washington opted not to seek a third term. Thomas Jefferson, the lead author of the U.S. Declaration of Independence who strongly opposed the centralized federal structure, lost to Adams in 1796. Jefferson became Adams’s vice president because the original Constitution (since changed with the 12th Amendment in 1804) extended the vice presidency to the person who received the second-highest number of electoral votes in the presidential election. Adams ran for reelection in 1800, and Jefferson ran for president a second time. This time, Jefferson won. The peaceful, though not apolitical, transfer of power that resulted from this election, from the nation’s first two presidents, both Federalists, to Jefferson, a Democratic-Republican, reflected the Framers’ aspirations.

Among the precedents that George Washington set as the first president was his personal choice not to seek more than two terms in office. Until the 22nd Amendment was ratified in 1951, the Constitution did not expressly prohibit presidents from serving two terms even though only one president (Franklin Delano Roosevelt) served more than two terms before the 22nd Amendment was ratified. Washington’s action paved the way for the election of his replacement and the tradition of peaceful transfer of power in the United States. Because Americans can trust that power will be peacefully transferred, they do not have to resort to violence to change the government.

**Tacit Acceptance of American Constitutional Tradition**

The U.S. Constitution is in many respects a social contract between the government and the people, but it was entered into by a generation of people from whom current Americans are far removed. Thomas Jefferson thought it would be a good idea if every generation held a constitutional convention so that each could choose the governing arrangements that would best meet its needs. But because Americans choose their government through periodic elections, they do not really need to convene new constitutional conventions. Elections enable them to offer their tacit consent, or implied agreement, to the basic social contract of the Constitution. By freely participating in the political process through elections, Americans agree to the political arrangements that govern them. Elections, then, in a very broad sense fulfill a public support function.

Of course, the public support function rests on the same assumptions of trust that the peaceful transfer of power does. Only because the people trust that the government in power will respect their wishes can elections represent this tacit acceptance. After all, if citizens participate in the political process by voting, rather than seeking to overthrow it through rioting and rebellion, it must follow that they are basically happy and accept the legitimacy of the system. But if it can no longer govern effectively, the government loses its legitimacy.

**10.2 Public Participation**

Although a majority of the country may be eligible to vote, not everyone does. On one level, because elections are critical to democracy, many regard voting as a civic obligation, similar to jury duty. But on another level, freedom to participate in the democratic process also means the freedom not to participate.

**Age and Voting Behavior**

The age of the voter is often an indication of voting behavior. One of the biggest changes in American politics in the last decades is the political activism of the elderly. Young voters are much less likely to vote than older people, which is certainly a change from the activism of baby boomers.

The United States does not mandate participation in elections. It also has one of the lowest rates of voter participation compared with other representative democracies. If a group of people chooses not to vote and the government then pursues policies that this group does not like, do these people have a reasonable basis to complain?

Are politicians obligated to represent all the people, or only those who vote? In theory, all citizens have a legitimate claim to be represented by elected officials. In reality, however, politicians tend to represent only those who vote. Of course, the larger question is what it means to talk about the importance of voting if people fail to exercise this basic right. Another issue is that—given the long-fought battle for civil rights, of which voting was most prominent—if large segments of the population opt not to vote, what was the point of fighting for the right in the first place?

**Who Votes?**

American citizens age 18 or older are eligible to vote, but the “typical voter” usually falls into a particular set of demographic categories. For example, various studies have shown that a person’s position in society based on economic class or education, or socioeconomic status, is a key determinant of who votes. Those with a higher socioeconomic status are more likely to vote than those with a lower socioeconomic status are.

Older people are more likely to vote than younger people are, women are slightly more likely to vote than men are, and Whites are more likely to vote than members of racial or ethnic minority groups are. Further, those with a strong political ideology, often assumed from their families, religious groups, or other social influences, are more likely to vote than those without a strong ideology, religious commitment, or social connection are.

**Reasons for Nonvoting**

The electorate consists of those who are eligible to vote, whether they vote or not. Voter turnout during presidential elections usually falls between 50% and 60% and is even lower during midterm congressional elections. This means that at least 40% of the electorate chooses not to participate. Why is this the case?

**The Requirement to Register**

All but one state requires that eligible voters be registered in order to vote. Voter registration has proven to be a barrier to voting. Supporters of mandatory registration argue that registration is a safeguard against fraud. Yet registration can be burdensome because it requires that forms be completed and submitted to the local supervisor of elections in advance of an election. Of the 49 states requiring that voters register, half require registration between 15 and 30 days in advance, while the other half require registration between 0 (Election Day registration) and 14 days before Election Day. Federal law prohibits states from requiring registration beyond 30 days before Election Day. While voter registration may be inconvenient, it helps emphasize the importance of voting and assumes that responsible citizens will complete the process.

Many argue that one response to low voter turnout is to take additional steps to ease access to registration. After passage of the National Voter Registration Act (NVRA) in 1993, various states implemented a motor-voter process, which allows people to register to vote when they register their cars with the state Department of Motor Vehicles or apply for or renew a driver’s license. (Of course, for those who do not drive, this may not be helpful.) The NVRA also allowed people to register by mail or when applying for various social services.

One purpose of voter registration is to prevent fraud. However, registration is often considered a barrier to voting because it requires individuals to fill out and submit a form by a state-mandated deadline.

**The Disillusionment of Poor Voters**

Low-income people are less likely to vote for various reasons. These reasons may include the inconvenience and potentially lost wages to take time off to go to the polls, believing that voting will not affect the political process, or believing that elected officials do not understand their situation. Low-income people may believe that electing candidates who promise to enact economic and social programs that benefit lower-income groups will have little bearing on their lives. This belief may stem from the broker party nature of the system. Additionally, powerful interest groups enjoy advantages over individuals who are not organized.

When people opt out of the system because they believe it does not represent their interests well, their concerns become a self-fulfilling prophecy. Many politicians believe that there is no point in campaigning in areas or neighborhoods with high percentages of nonvoters. As noted in the last chapter, running for office is very expensive. Candidates must make strategic decisions about where to allocate their resources. They are more likely to spend their time and money in neighborhoods that are known to have relatively high turnout and are less likely to pay much attention to low-turnout populations.

**Constitutional Bases for Expanding Suffrage**

Voting eligibility is addressed in just a few places in the Constitution. The first is the 15th Amendment ratified in 1870, which states that a citizen cannot be denied the right to vote by the national government or any of the states on the basis of race, color, or previous condition of servitude. This amendment provided the constitutional basis for newly freed slaves to be eligible to vote after the Civil War. Next is the 19th Amendment, ratified in 1920, which says that citizens cannot be denied the right to vote on account of sex. This amendment granted women the right to vote.

The 23rd Amendment, ratified in 1961, extended the right to vote for president to residents of the District of Columbia (Washington, D.C.). Before the amendment was ratified, Electoral College votes were given only to states, and because Washington, D.C. is a district and not a state, D.C. residents could not vote for the president. The 23rd Amendment gave to Washington, D.C. the same number of Electoral College votes as the smallest state. As each state is guaranteed a minimum of three Electoral College votes, the District of Columbia was guaranteed three Electoral College votes as well.

Suffragettes stand in front of the Woman Suffrage headquarters in Cleveland, Ohio, in 1912. The 19th Amendment, which gave women the right to vote, was ratified in 1920.

The 24th Amendment, ratified in 1964, states that the right to vote in national elections cannot be denied for failing to pay a poll tax. The 24th Amendment was proposed and ratified in response to Southern states that were using such taxes to disqualify poor Blacks from voting. Finally, the 26th Amendment, ratified in 1971, lowered the legal voting age to 18. While some states allowed those over 18 to vote, other states required a minimum age of 21.

Voter eligibility is otherwise assumed to be a matter of states’ rights. States have enjoyed the power to determine who is eligible to vote while also handling their voter registration. States began eliminating property qualifications in the 1820s, and it was the Southern states that targeted voting barriers toward African Americans. The women’s suffrage movement originally began as a grassroots movement on a state-by-state basis, with Wyoming being the first state to allow women to vote in state and local elections, in 1893.

The constitutional amendments that expanded suffrage, federal legislation such as the 1965 Voting Rights Act, and key U.S. Supreme Court cases each removed voting barriers that were erected by the states. In fact, the Voting Rights Act prohibited states from imposing any “voting qualification or prerequisite to voting, or standard, practice, or procedure . . . to deny or abridge the right of any citizen of the United States to vote on account of race or color.” It was Congress’s specific intention to outlaw the practice of requiring otherwise qualified voters to pass literacy tests to register to vote, which had been another method, in addition to poll taxes, by which Southern states denied African Americans the right to vote.

**Increasing the Voter Rolls**

Both parties seek to increase their election chances by increasing their registration numbers. In recent years, both parties have sought to find new voters among the Latino population. For example, when Republican President George W. Bush campaigned for office, he prided himself on being able to speak fluent Spanish in an attempt to increase Latino support for Republican candidates.

**10.3 Types of Elections**

**Maintaining Elections**

A maintaining election is one in which the majority party, which holds power, such as the majority party in Congress, continues to hold power following an election. This type of election requires a continuation of party loyalty among the party-in-the-electorate, which assumes that voters will remain loyal to their party by voting for candidates sharing their party label.

This type of election is a maintaining election because the allegiance of the voters has not changed, probably because the nation is not facing a major crisis or, if facing a crisis, voters believe that the government in place and the party in power are handling it well. A maintaining election, then, is about preserving the status quo. A pattern of maintaining elections may result in representatives becoming complacent. If the majority party in government can rely on long-standing party loyalty among the electorate, it may not feel the need to be as close to the people as it would if the races were more competitive.

**Deviating Elections**

A deviating election occurs when short-term forces overtake long-term party loyalties. Voters cast their ballots for the party out of power, the minority party, displacing the majority party from power. While voters may support the party to which they do not belong in this election and maybe the next, these voters remain loyal to their party. They maintain their allegiance to their party even though they feel compelled to vote for the other party due to short-term forces, such as candidates and issues, that change with each election (either because different candidates and issues get shifted or because the magnitude of certain issues changes). The result is seen as a temporary deviation from the norm because the expectation is that, once the crisis is over, the former majority party will be returned to power.

**Reinstating Elections**

The return to power of a former majority party following a deviating election is called a reinstating election. A reinstating election brings a return to the status quo. It also verifies that whatever forces resulted in the deviation were short lived. Because the political landscape remains unchanged, reinstating elections have much in common with maintaining and deviating elections. Each represents relative stability in the composition of both the party-in-the-electorate and the party-in-the-government, with the electorate generally voting on the basis of traditional party loyalties. Some may argue that the election of 2008, in which Democrat Barack Obama was elected, was a reinstating election after Republican President George W. Bush’s two terms. Bush’s election in 2000, in which he won the Electoral College vote but lost the popular vote to Democratic Vice President Al Gore, deviated from the two previous Democratic presidential victories in 1992 and 1996.

**Realigning Elections**

A realigning election produces a major change in the composition of the party-in-the-government following a massive shift in the party-in-the-electorate. Voters abandon longtime party loyalties and shift their allegiance from the majority party to the minority party, which results in the minority party becoming the new majority party. As V. O. Key, Jr. (1955, 1959) saw it, a realigning election is a critical election because it represents a massive and durable shift in party loyalty that results in a long-term change in characteristics of the electorate and the composition of government. For an election to be considered critical, the voter realignment must be both sharp and durable. To be sharp, voter participation is relatively high, making it clear that whatever divisions within the electorate existed prior to the election have been fundamentally altered. The realignment must also occur at all levels of government.

For a realignment to be durable, the new electoral composition must persist over time. To measure the sharpness of the shift, an issue or a set of issues that would cause voters to make a monumental change would be essential. It would be extremely difficult to examine a single election isolated from its larger political context to determine durability. A momentous event, such as a war or a deep recession, that reorders the political landscape in ways not seen before is required.

Key argued that for there to be such a massive shift in one election, there would have to be a significant cleavage, or division, among the electorate. The people might argue, for example, over whether the government should provide universal health care; cleavage may be said to exist between conservatives who espouse individual liberty and limited government and liberals who support greater equality and more active government. If times are good and most people are confident about their economic future, perhaps the majority party that supports health care reform will remain in power. But a deep recession resulting in high unemployment and increased anxiety can cause the existing division to become more pronounced.

Key also recognized that there have been few instances in American history when voters switched allegiance in a single election. Key expanded his concept of critical elections to include gradual shifts over a long period. A given election might represent a phase in a long-term process of declining group solidarity. The critical election, then, might represent the culmination of this process. In the critical election, voters abandon their party and switch allegiance to the other major party. Students of critical elections suggest that they occur every 30 years or so.

**Consequences of Realignment**

The most profound consequence of realignment is a change in the party-in-the-government, which in turn often means a significant change in policy direction. Had the electorate been pleased with the direction of the country and the policies that it was pursuing prior to the election, there would not have been a realignment.

**Examples of Realignment**

The election of 1932, which occurred after the Great Depression hit, was an example of a realigning election because the Republicans lost the majority control of both houses of Congress to the Democrats, which occurred for nearly all elections until 1994. Democrat Franklin Roosevelt unseated incumbent Republican President Herbert Hoover, while many state houses changed to Democratic rule. All of the presidents elected from 1860 until 1932, with two exceptions, were Republican. Because of the depths of the Great Depression, Franklin Roosevelt came to office backed by an electoral coalition that included ethnic and religious minorities, blue-collar workers, and union members, as well as the traditional Southern states. This new coalition would remain the base of the Democratic Party until the late 1960s.

The 1968 presidential election, won by Richard Nixon, has been called a realigning election.

Yet suggesting that a particular election was a critical election because realignment occurred is to be retrospective. It does not necessarily mean that one can predict future elections based on what happened in the past. As an example, consider that political commentator Kevin Phillips wrote The Emerging Republican Majority in 1969 in an attempt to analyze the 1968 election. According to Phillips (1969), Richard Nixon’s election was the beginning of an electoral realignment because more people were moving to the suburbs and these suburban communities were voting Republican. Beginning with Nixon, the Republicans held the presidency from 1980 to 1988 and 2000 to 2008. Not only did suburban communities shift Republican, so too did many Southern states, because they were upset that Democratic President Lyndon Johnson signed the Voting Rights Act of 1965, which took power away from the Democratic-dominated Southern states in managing elections. Because the base of the Democratic Party had been concentrated in the cities, Phillips reasoned, the party would not be able to hold its majority if the demographics changed to favor suburbia. If Phillips was correct in saying that 1968 was the beginning of a realignment, that would mean that the 1976 election of Democrat Jimmy Carter was a deviation while the 1980 election of Republican Ronald Reagan was the reinstatement. Carter may have won because of deep divisions over Watergate. Carter’s opponent, incumbent President Gerald Ford, had been Nixon’s vice president. After Ford ascended to the presidency following Nixon’s resignation, he had pardoned Nixon for Nixon’s involvement in the Watergate scandal.

If 1968 was not a realigning election, then it was a deviating election, with 1976 serving as a reinstating election, while the realignment would have happened in 1980. Nixon won in 1968 in a close election amid deep divisions over the Vietnam War and the sense that there was too much lawlessness in the Democratic Party, as evidenced by the violence at the 1968 Democratic Party convention in Chicago. Ultimately, the answer to whether an election was a critical election is a matter of interpretation.

**Primaries and Caucuses**

Presidential elections begin at the state level through a series of primaries and caucuses. Since the 1960s, states have increasingly adopted primary elections far more than caucuses as a means to select candidates. Most primaries are either open primaries or closed primaries. Most states hold closed primaries, where only registered party members may vote in that party’s primary. In open primaries, by contrast, registered voters, no matter their party registration, or no party registration, may vote in one, but not both, party primaries.

Another way of selecting candidates is through the caucus system. Caucuses tend to be found in smaller states (such as Iowa) and require a greater time investment from the voters than casting a ballot. In a caucus, voters report to their polling station, in which each candidate has an area. Voters then go to the area of their preferred candidate, but voters in other areas, that is, supporters of other candidates, can challenge the preferences of others. This often leads to a general discussion of why one candidate is preferable to another. At the end of the night, support in each area in each precinct is tallied up and delegates are apportioned on the basis of the percentage of support that each candidate received.

One key benefit to the caucus system is that participants must be familiar with candidates’ issue positions so that they can intelligently defend their choices. Yet state-level caucuses tend to demonstrate low turnout because they require more commitment from voters. As a consequence, the outcomes may not be entirely representative of the state electorate because only party activists tend to participate. Three fourths of the states use primaries for presidential nominations.

**10.4 The Role of Public Opinion in Elections**

The outcome of an election often reflects the tide of public opinion. As U.S. Senator Barack Obama defeated U.S. Senator John McCain in 2008, the electoral outcome can be said to reflect various factors linked to public opinion toward Obama, McCain, the incumbent president and his party, various issues, partisanship, a combination of these, or something else. Public opinion also plays a key role in elections because candidates utilize pollsters to gauge public opinion throughout the election season. Still, as much as we talk about the importance of public opinion in democracy, it is not always easy to gauge.

**Defining Public Opinion: Values, Ideology, and Attitudes**

Public opinion generally encompasses values, political ideology, and attitudes. Values represent deep-rooted goals, aspirations, and ideals that shape an individual’s perceptions of political issues. As an example, most Americans believe in freedom as a fundamental American value. Though we may all define it differently, most people aspire to live freely.

Differences over the meaning of freedom involve political ideology. As a matter of ideology, one might think that personal freedom is maximized when government is limited in its function. A limited government would mean little regulation, low taxes, and very few social programs. Such an ideology is often referred to as conservative. The political ideology that values government support for disadvantaged populations or during periods of hardship is considered liberal or progressive. An attitude is a specific view about a particular issue, personality, or event that is shaped by ideology.

Values, political ideology, and attitudes may be affected by various factors, including socioeconomic status, family background, and one’s political environment.

**Measuring Public Opinion Through Polling**

The easiest way to measure public opinion is through surveys. Analysts, candidates, and officeholders routinely conduct polls to get a sense of public attitudes toward particular issues.

Polls conducted using scientific techniques are more accurate than those that are not. Scientific polls take a random sample of the population such that each person in the sample has an equal chance of being selected. A poll of registered Democratic activists is not a valid sample of the public because the respondents may be more ideological than the public and, thus, not represent the public’s views on government and issues.

The most famous case of polling inaccuracy was the 1948 election, where pollsters prematurely predicted Thomas Dewey’s defeat of President Harry Truman. Truman is shown here holding up an erroneous headline from a newspaper that went to press early on election night.

Today, most people have phones, which was not true in the 1940s. Sampling from the telephone book would not produce a sample representing the public. In the early days of polling, there were some significant inaccuracies. The most famous case was the 1948 election, where pollsters predicted Thomas Dewey’s defeat of President Harry Truman. Dewey went to bed thinking that he had won, only to find out that he had lost.

**Forces That Shape Values and Ideology**

Individuals develop their values and ideology through agents of socialization, which are the institutions and influences that help shape one’s basic political worldview. Four important agencies of socialization are the family, social groups, education, and prevailing political conditions.

The most important agent of socialization is the family. For example, children take on the ideology and other public perspectives of their parents, while family socioeconomic status might also affect one’s political ideology and values.

The second most important agent of socialization is education. Educated persons might think critically and be more open to competing ideas, while someone whose education focuses on reinforcing core values without questioning them will likely take on those same ideological approaches.

People are also socialized by the types of social groups, such as interest groups or churches, to which they belong. A social group is an important reinforcement because people are interacting with others who share their values. Finally, political values and ideology are often affected by prevailing political and economic conditions.

**Cleavages in Public Opinion**

It is tempting to talk about American public opinion as though there is one unified public. But public opinion is characterized by deep divisions across worldviews and the political ideologies on which those worldviews are based. Factors affecting these cleavages include occupation, race, religion, and socioeconomic status.

Individuals in higher-paying occupations may view tax policy differently from how individuals in lower-paying occupations do. Similarly, as average incomes tend to be higher among Republicans, there is often more opposition to new or increased taxes among Republicans compared with Democrats. Democrats, whose average income is lower than that of Republicans, may be more likely to favor increased or new taxes as a means of promoting welfare and other forms of support for lower-income groups.

While occupation may account for varying policy attitudes, it may not be as important in explaining other political attitudes. Race is an important variable that affects policy views. Affirmative action, for instance, divides public opinion along racial lines. Blacks tend to support affirmative action programs, while Whites tend to oppose affirmative action due to concerns about reverse discrimination. Still, such cleavages are not absolute. More affluent Whites tend to support affirmative action, while many successful Blacks oppose it because they believe that it stigmatizes them. At the same time, partisanship affects support for affirmative action, as Democrats more strongly support affirmative action on the grounds that it promotes equal opportunity, while Republicans tend to oppose affirmative action because they believe that it limits individual opportunities for success.

Religion is also an important source of cleavage. Catholics and evangelical Christians tend to oppose abortion and same-sex marriage, which may affect vote choice. Evangelical Christians favor school prayer more than other religious groups do. Meanwhile, Jews tend to oppose school prayer and often see it as a threat to First Amendment religious protections.

**11.1 Defining Public Policy**

Public policy can be defined as a plan of action that reflects the collective will of the political community. Political scientist Deborah Stone (2002) has defined public policy as communities trying to achieve something as communities. In this vein, public policy represents the collective will of communities and, as such, is very democratic. Stone offers two models: the polis and the market.

Town hall meetings are examples of a polis, a political community that gathers to make decisions based on the collective will of the people.

The polis, a term that comes from ancient Athenian democracy, is the political community, and it assumes both collective will and collective effort. The market, however, is an arena in which individuals pursue their objectives and make exchanges. The market begins with individuals and assumes no goals, preferences, or intentions other than those held by individuals. Social and economic rights, as well as political ones, are defined by membership in a community. What makes a collection of individuals a community is not only a matter of specifying who is in and who is out, but also a matter of mutual understanding among members. It is the sharing of burdens and bounty that holds people together. The objective in the polis is to pursue the public interest, but how the public interest is defined is often a matter of politics. One approach is to define the public interest as the summation of individual interests, which may be consistent with a traditional understanding of liberalism, defined in Chapter 1. Another approach is to say that there is a transcendent public interest, which is more consistent with republicanism, also discussed in Chapter 1. In the polis, there must be cooperation. The polis is therefore defined in the following way: a community—maybe even multiple communities—with ideas, images, will, and effort quite apart from individual goals and behavior. There is indeed a public interest. What typically makes an issue a policy issue rather than an individual one is that it seeks to address common problems.

**Goals of Public Policy**

On the basis of this definition of public policy, the goals of policy would be whatever the community seeks to achieve, so long as it is arrived at in a democratic fashion. Stone, for instance, has suggested that policy in the United States is guided by four basic goals: equity, efficiency, security, and liberty.

**Equity**

Equity can be a difficult term to define because it is often relative. If goods are to be distributed, it should be on the basis of needs, rather than with each person receiving the exact same benefit. A larger family, then, should receive more public assistance than a family of two. In this vein, equity has more to do with fairness than with equality. To achieve equality, each would receive the exact same share regardless of need. If those in less need should receive something while those in greater need do not receive enough, that would strike many as being unfair.

**Efficiency**

Efficiency is often defined as getting more output for fewer inputs. In the marketplace, it often amounts to maximizing profits while minimizing costs. Markets are often presumed to be more efficient than the polis because transactions are based on price. A policy that distributes goods to a group of people, even for noble reasons, may be deemed inefficient if it raises the costs of goods and services in the marketplace through the imposition of a tax. At issue for policy is the most efficient distribution or allocation of resources. Here, the question is how the most can be distributed at the least cost.

**Security**

Security often refers to feeling secure in one’s person. At a minimum, it entails physical security, which is to be free from bodily harm. Since the government became more active, beginning in the 1930s in the wake of the Great Depression, the definition of security has been broadened to include economic security.

**Liberty**

Liberty is a term used often in the United States because it represents a core American value. In American public policy, there is a presumption in favor of individuals’ liberty unless the exercise of that liberty would cause harm to one’s self or to others. Recall from Chapter 1 John Stuart Mill’s famous definition of liberty and the ensuing “harm” principle in On Liberty (1859/1956):

The sole end for which mankind are warranted, individually or collectively, in interfering with the liberty of action of any of their number is self-protection. . . . The only purpose for which power can be rightfully exercised over any member of a civilized community, against his will, is to prevent harm to others.

Mill’s harm principle has been the basis for governmental intervention. Because there is a presumption in favor of individual liberty, the result has often been reactive public policy—policy in response to a specific problem—rather than proactive public policy—policy intended to prevent problems in the future.

**Policy Process**

The public policy process in the United States could be thought of in very linear terms, as described in. However, constructing policy in response to a problem is not like following the owner’s manual for a car. It is not a matter of simply following the flow chart. Each step in the process is a political process unto itself. For each group whose interests are served by defining goals in response to a problem, there will be another group whose interests are served by not defining a problem at all. Because not all people may agree that a problem exists or on what the goals ought to be, political contests emerge between different groups and interests in every step of the process.

Even constructing a policy around the goals of equity, efficiency, security, and liberty often entails balancing the tradeoffs between them, and this balancing is political. On one level, all policy seeks to attain at least one, if not all, of these goals. However, each goal in and of itself is difficult to achieve because not everyone in a political community, especially one as large and diverse as the United States, may be in agreement over how these concepts are defined. In fact, defining and taking ownership of these terms shapes American politics. Moreover, definition affects the distribution of power, which itself is at the core of politics. Policy outcomes often show who received something and what this person or group received, which, in turn, says something about the power of individuals and groups relative to others.

**Agenda Setting**

Detroit, Michigan, once a thriving industrial city, experienced social problems associated with the decline of the automobile industry in the early 2000s. Its economy was affected by this decline, illustrated in this image of a padlocked chain-link fence in front of the former General Motors engine plant.

Because public policy is an inherently political process, the key question is how what might appear to be a problem for one or some becomes what we would otherwise define as a policy problem. What is a problem for Group A may not be a problem for Group B. For legislators to even address an issue, it has to be on the public agenda for discussion, but agenda setting is not an easy process. If a group can succeed in getting an issue on the agenda for public discussion, that group might be said to have power. The group that thinks a problem exists for policy discussion seeks to get it onto the agenda. The group that does not think a problem exists seeks to keep the issue off of the agenda. Still, at the heart of agenda setting is first defining a problem, and second who defines the problem. Problem definition is also critical because it ultimately determines the scope of policy, if there is to be policy at all.

Consider for a moment that a manufacturing plant in upstate New York is about to close. Is the plant closing necessarily a problem? Surely it may be a problem for those who are about to lose their jobs. For those who believe in free markets, however, there is no problem because this is simply the marketplace running its natural course. Still, a question remains: How do those who see it as a problem convince others that it should then be placed on the public policy agenda?

A common way to define a policy problem is to measure it. Numbers move something from singular to plural. As an example, to convey a problem of poverty, someone trying to get the issue on the agenda may want to begin with a story of one family living in poverty so that people can relate. But one family in poverty is not enough to constitute a problem. This person needs to show that there are millions of families like this one to convey a sense of crisis. It is not enough to show that this plant closing in upstate New York is a problem; rather, it needs to be apparent that plants like it throughout the country are closing, affecting millions of workers and others. Still, measurement is subject to interpretation, and hence manipulation. To say that millions are affected suggests that the impact is large. But in a country with more than 300 million people, a few million—perhaps 6 million—is a problem for only 2% of the nation. For those who seek to keep the issue off of the agenda, thinking of only 2% rather than 6 million serves their purpose well: Now the problem is not nearly as large as it appears, and talking in terms of percentages depersonalizes the issue. Percentages do not have human faces; people do.

In defining a problem, it is necessary to mobilize bias—that is, get people to join the conflict. E. E. Schattschneider (1975) defined politics as conflict consisting of two sides: actors, who are actively involved in the conflict, and spectators. Those who want to put the issue on the agenda will mobilize bias—essentially, sell their position to others—and try to socialize the conflict. They will turn those spectators into actors. Those who seek to keep the issue off of the agenda will seek to localize the conflict by attempting to keep the number of actors small and the spectators removed from the conflict. In addition to manipulating numbers, both sides will rely on studies by think tanks and universities and will use the media to their best advantage. At the end of the day, how the agenda is set and by whom says much about who gets what, when, and how (Lasswell, 1936).

**11.2 Policy Politics**

Political scientist James Q. Wilson (1992) described four types of politics surrounding public policy: majoritarian politics, entrepreneurial politics, client politics, and interest-group politics. In each of these types of politics, there are perceived benefits and perceived costs.

**Majoritarian Politics**

Majoritarian politics involves both distributed benefits and distributed costs, which means that the benefits are enjoyed broadly and the costs are widely shared. It often involves making appeals to large blocs of voters and their representatives with the intent of securing a majority. Because the appeal is to the majority, interest groups tend to be absent. Although majoritarian politics can be controversial, controversies tend to be over matters of cost or ideology.

**Interest-Group Politics**

Interest-group politics entails concentrated benefits and concentrated costs. Here, interest groups are heavily involved in the policy process, and the policy that is adopted very much reflects the power of respective interest groups. Plants close all the time, costing many Americans their jobs. Congress passed the Worker Adjustment and Retraining Notification Act (WARN) in the summer of 1988, which mandated that firms employing more than 100 workers give their workers 60 days’ prior notice of intent to close. The benefits are concentrated among those who work for these plants, while the costs are concentrated among their employers. Issues like these are fought out by organized interest groups. Workers’ groups and unions support the interest groups because they will derive benefit, while business groups who will pay the costs oppose them. Each side will also seek ways to mobilize bias.

**Client Politics**

Client politics involves concentrated benefits and distributed costs, which is to say a few derive the benefits while many in fact pay. Because the benefits are concentrated, the group that is expected to receive them now has an incentive to organize and work toward them. At the same time, the costs are so widely distributed that on a per-capita basis they are so small that most individuals will either miss them or be indifferent to them.

One of the provisions of the Agricultural Act of 2014 enacted by Congress is the ending of direct payment subsidies that allowed farmers to be paid whether they produced crops or not.

Agricultural price supports are a good example of client politics at work. Since the New Deal, the federal government has been paying farmers to plant less as a way of driving up prices. During the Great Depression, when prices were depressed, this was very important. Even after the Great Depression, the government continued these subsidies because politicians from farm states lobbied for them, and being able to deliver them to farmers ensured that the farmers would vote for them. Meanwhile, the average consumer has often been unaware of how these subsidies affect food costs.

Client politics, which is effectively a way of shoring up political support, could be said to fall into the broad category of pork barrel projects discussed in Chapter 4, in which politicians use earmarks to provide funding for projects in their district. But it is also an example of what economists refer to as rent-seeking, whereby actors in the marketplace seek benefits. Here, political actors are seeking benefits, or constituent support, by delivering something of value to constituents, such as a policy.

**Entrepreneurial Politics**

Entrepreneurial politics involves distributed benefits and concentrated costs. Here, the benefits are expected to be widespread, while costs are expected to be concentrated. Certain types of environmental protections might be a good example. Anti-pollution laws are proposed as ways to improve the health and well-being of all people at the expense of a few: those who pollute, who may be mainly corporations.

These types of policies are often led by policy entrepreneurs—people both inside and outside government who are able to cobble together coalitions of support to attain a legislative majority. Policy entrepreneurs may or may not accurately represent the interests and wishes of the public at large, but they are often able to galvanize the public through the mobilization of bias, if for no other reason than that their arguments appear to be reasonable.

**Lowi’s Typology**

Chapter 1 explored political scientist Theodore Lowi’s (1964) identification of three types of politics: regulatory, redistributive, and distributive. This typology applies to policy as well. With regulatory policy, government is regulating the activities of some in order to protect the interests of others. It is not hard to see how this model is consistent with Wilson’s model of interest-group politics. In redistributive policy, a group receives certain goods, which another group pays for. This can fit into interest-group politics or even entrepreneurial politics if, for example, the wealthy are being overtaxed for the benefit of the broader middle class. And in distributive policy, all groups are getting something as part of the politicians’ desire to seek political rent. This then is consistent with both majoritarian and client politics.

**11.3 Policy Based on Ideology**

Policy in the United States often reflects a particular worldview and tends to be highly ideological. These worldviews certainly reflect a position with regards to the role of government in society. Indeed, the nature of policy—what the response to a problem is, if there is any—makes an effective statement about the appropriate role of government in society. Contemporary American politics and policy might be said to revolve around three different but competing ideological positions: conservative, liberal, and libertarian.

**Conservatism**

People are protesting legislation that Michigan passed that would drop more than 12,000 families from welfare rolls. A public policy conservative may approve of this measure, while a policy liberal may disagree.

Conservatives in the United States place great emphasis on conserving the traditions of the past. They believe that individuals should be free to pursue their interests consistent with their human agency, and that with individual freedom of choice comes personal responsibility. Therefore, when it comes to the marketplace, they do not see much of a role for government, and by extension public policy. Rather, the appropriate role for government is to regulate behavior that is considered harmful. There is no need for policy to assist the poor because the poor are considered to be responsible for their own fate. Their poverty is believed to be due to their own moral defects, not lack of opportunity. Because conservatives believe in moral order, they believe that there is a role for government to regulate individual behavior when it comes to matters that are seen as affecting the traditional family, such as who can get married, and abortion. Otherwise, they believe the role for public policy should be a limited one. Conservatives may see a need for negative public policy from time to time, but never for positive public policy.

**Liberalism**

Contemporary liberals in the United States recognize that there are forces beyond individuals’ control that result in poverty and inequality. Markets, in other words, are not always perfect, and they often fail. Liberals see a need for greater public policy, especially positive public policy, in order to remove barriers caused by discrimination and generations of poverty, which have put some at an unfair advanwtage. Therefore they believe policy is needed to level the playing field in order to ensure equal opportunity for all.

**Libertarianism**

Libertarians in many respects represent an extreme form of liberalism married to extreme conservatism. Individual liberty is considered to be sacred, and therefore the government should be limited in its function to no more than protecting individuals from bodily harm, maintaining law and order, protecting private property, and enforcing contracts, which are considered essential to the operations of a free market economy. The ideal state is the night-watchman state. Other than minimal regulation, there is absolutely no role for positive public policy for the libertarian. Public policy, especially positive public policy, is seen as interfering with individual liberty. The libertarian certainly believes in the conservative’s view of personal responsibility. But the libertarian also shares the liberal’s view of human agency.

**11.4 Economic Policy**

Economic policy might strike some as being ambiguous because it is not clear to all just what it is. From the standpoint of the tensions that exist in American political culture, there is the larger question of whether there should even be a role for economic policy in American society. Still, economic policy has amounted to managing the economy. Government attempts to promote economic growth and stability with low inflation and unemployment rates.

Unemployment rates reached more than 10% after the Great Recession of 2008 and 2009. People could file for unemployment insurance and receive benefits for 6 months.

Full employment has traditionally been defined as containing a certain percentage of those in the labor force not working. These people might be retraining, in school, taking time off to raise children or care for sick parents, or simply between jobs. In other words, there will always be a certain number of people out of work for whatever reason. Still, there are issues with the official definition of unemployment. To be considered officially unemployed, one has to have been looking for work within the previous 4 weeks. A person is categorized as unemployed when he or she officially files for unemployment insurance (UI), but these benefits are typically available for no more than 6 months in most states. Therefore, one could exhaust one’s benefits and no longer be considered officially unemployed, or simply give up and drop out of the labor market. Such a person is neither employed nor unemployed, but technically jobless. Similarly, those who take part-time work because that is all that is available but are still seeking full-time employment are not counted among the unemployed either; they are considered underemployed.

Since the Employment Act of 1946 was enacted, it has been the official policy of the United States to ensure as high a level of employment as would be “practicable.” This act created in the White House the Council of Economic Advisors, whose job it is to monitor the economy and prepare an annual report on it. The president is then responsible for transmitting the annual reports to Congress, with recommendations for how to achieve as high a level of employment as practicable. To this end, government pursues two basic approaches: fiscal policy and monetary policy. Both of these approaches involve pumping more money into the economy during a recession to spur investment, and contracting money during inflation in order to lower prices.

**Fiscal Policy**

Fiscal policy involves enabling individuals to purchase more by lowering tax rates during a recession and increasing taxes during inflation. Inflation occurs when prices for goods and services increase and, as a result, individuals can buy less with the money they have. By lowering taxes, the government essentially gives individuals more to spend, and they can thus demand more goods and services. Then, during inflation, the government may raise taxes, which will lead to less demand for goods and services because individuals will have even less money to spend. The basic problem with fiscal policy, however, is that it generally requires congressional action. While lowering taxes will always be politically popular, raising taxes will never be and may cost members of Congress reelection. Still, there are policies within the fiscal family that Congress often pursues. Often, they are labeled “stimulus” plans because the objective is to stimulate demand for goods and services by increasing the purchasing power of individuals.

**Monetary Policy**

Monetary policy involves making money more available, usually by lowering interest rates, which makes it easier for individuals to obtain money to purchase big-ticket items such as cars and houses and for firms to obtain money to invest, which may create jobs. Then, during inflation, interest rates are raised in order to make money more expensive and more difficult to obtain, thereby leading to less spending and ultimately the lowering of prices.

As a policy tool, monetary policy is usually inferred from the language of the Employment Act of 1946, but it is usually administered by the Board of the Federal Reserve System, often referred to as the Fed. The Fed has two principal tools in its policy toolbox. The first are the reserve requirements, the amount of money that member banks are required to keep on hand. The more banks are required to maintain, the less they have to loan, which results in a higher interest rate, thereby making money more expensive. The second are the discount rates, which are the interest rates the Fed charges to its favorite member banks. The lower the discount rate, the lower overall interest rates will be, thereby making money more available because it is cheaper to obtain. Monetary policy, however, usually involves a tradeoff between employment and inflation. By pumping money into the economy in order to create jobs—raise employment—the inevitable result is usually inflation. But by controlling for the effects of inflation by contracting the money supply, the inevitable result is a slowdown in the economy, thereby leading to higher unemployment.

British economist John Maynard Keynes theorized that, in times of recession, the government should run deficits to boost the economy. His theories were vital to the U.S. economy when it was trying to come out of the Great Depression and all the economic problems that it produced.

**Theories of Economic Management**

With the tools of fiscal and monetary policy at the government’s disposal, is there an ideal way for it to manage the economy? Various economic theories offer prescriptions that the government can espouse to maintain stable economic growth. The two main approaches can be described as Keynesian economics and supply-side economics.

**Keynesian Economics**

John Maynard Keynes (1964) was a British economist in the early part of the 20th century who maintained that unemployment is caused by the absence of demand for goods and services in the aggregate. Keynesian economics suggests that by creating programs that enhance purchasing power, government could stimulate demand for goods and services, thereby leading to an economic recovery. The Keynesian approach embraces the use of fiscal policy and government spending, and critics, including economist Milton Friedman, argued that using monetary policy was a better way of ensuring stability. Using monetary policy may be more desirable because it may be politically neutral, whereby the government is not choosing to spend on one person’s good over another’s. Furthermore, monetary policy is administered by the Fed, which is politically independent: In other words, the Fed is not subject to the political pressures of Congress and can therefore make hard and otherwise unpopular choices.

**Supply-Side Economics**

There is another approach to economic management known as supply-side economics, which is the idea that big tax cuts should go to the rich because they will invest responsibly, thereby creating jobs for those down the income distribution. This is the notion that the benefits filter down from the top to the bottom. Rather than creating large-scale government programs, the goal is to unleash the marketplace by allowing investors to have more of their money to invest. Supply-side economics are often criticized by liberals who maintain that large tax cuts to the wealthy are unfair, as there is no guarantee that those at the bottom will derive any benefit. There is also no guarantee that these investors will invest in new plants and equipment that might create jobs; they may simply invest more in stocks and bonds, which only enhance investors’ portfolios without filtering down to those at the bottom. Further, as less revenue is coming into the treasury, it has the potential to expand the deficit.

**Globalization and Rising Economic Inequality**

Increasingly, economic policy in the United States is forced to grapple with globalization, which is the process of increasing interdependence between nations. In the globalized world, economic crises in other countries have an impact on the economic health of the United States.

Supporters of globalization tout it as a sign of progress and often support free trade, reduced government spending, and lower taxes so that the United States can compete better in the global marketplace. Opponents of globalization often want to erect trade barriers in order to protect the domestic economy. Often, in a global economy where goods and capital can easily move across national borders, many U.S. companies flee the United States, where wages are higher, particularly in manufacturing, and relocate to developing nations where wage rates are considerably lower. As a result of globalization, the United States finds itself with a two-tiered economy where at the top of the income distribution are highly educated (skilled) and highly paid workers and at the bottom are poorly educated (unskilled) and poorly paid workers. In between, the middle class that used to exist is no longer.

This has led to another issue very much alive in the current political debate, which is economic inequality and the widening gap between the top and the bottom classes. This drives discussions on the types of policies that ought to be pursued. Should government be spending more on education and training programs so that workers will be better prepared for the new economy? Should government enact barriers to trade? Liberals often argue that government should pursue policies that help workers adjust. Conservatives, however, argue that barriers to free trade should be eliminated and that the responsibility for education and (re)training should be on the workers themselves.

**11.5 Social Policy**

Social policy in the United States often revolves around issues of welfare, including education, health care, and retirement security. It is not always clear what is meant by “welfare,” though, which makes social policy controversial. The preamble to the U.S. Constitution mentions forming a “more perfect union” to promote the general welfare. Yet welfare brings with it multiple meanings tied to physical security, health, and economic security, and different definitions result in different policy approaches. It is often around welfare issues that we see glaring differences among conservatives, liberals, and libertarians.

**Background**

Many of the nation’s social policies are centered on preventing individuals from falling below the poverty level by ensuring that they have income. They include Social Security, unemployment insurance, Medicaid, and other social insurance programs, through which the government protects individuals from economic concerns and risks. In the United States, poverty is defined in terms of an official poverty line developed by the U.S. Department of Agriculture; it is intended to be the minimum level of income a family would need in order to subsist. Consequently, a poor person may live above the poverty line. Individuals lacking job skills will more likely be employed in the low-wage labor market, where wages are insufficient to lift them above the poverty line.

The American welfare state is essentially a bifurcated one whereby insurance is provided to the middle class and public assistance is provided to the poor. The Social Security Act of 1935 contained two essential components: retirement savings for the elderly, which they were entitled to because they paid into it, and public assistance for the poor through Aid to Dependent Children (ADC). Recall from Chapter 3 that ADC was a children’s program, with assistance going to their mothers. During the 1960s, ADC was expanded into what became known as Aid to Families with Dependent Children (AFDC). This bifurcated state essentially reflected a traditional distinction between “worthy” and “unworthy” poor: One school of thought held that poverty is a function of market failure. Poor people have insufficient income because the market failed to provide enough jobs that would enable them to live out of poverty. If one is poor, it is through no fault of one’s own. Another school of thought held that poverty is a function of individual moral character and behavior. People are poor because of a moral defect.

President Franklin D. Roosevelt signed the Social Security Act into effect in 1935. The Act provided the elderly with retirement savings and gave public assistance to the poor.

By some measures, the effect of the bifurcated welfare state was to stigmatize the poor. By other measures, however, many of the poor relief programs (food stamps, Medicaid, and so on) reflected the assumption that poor people needed assistance and that their poverty was not their fault. During the 1960s, as the Civil Rights Movement was fighting for political empowerment, a so-called legislative “War on Poverty” would create various programs aimed at providing more opportunities for poor people. For some, the War on Poverty was the next phase of the ongoing Civil Rights Movement, shifting the focus of African Americans’ struggle from political to economic empowerment. Eventually, though, a political backlash would emerge demanding welfare reform based on the assumption that those collecting public assistance were actually unworthy.

By the 1980s, and into the 1990s, social policy discussions were marked by calls for welfare reform. Critics believed that welfare encouraged individuals to have more children out of wedlock just in order to collect more welfare, and many proposals centered on attempting to force people back into the labor market. Some advocated the complete elimination of welfare. Others argued that welfare recipients should be required to work in exchange for their benefits. This was the idea that welfare should be replaced with workfare. Critics of workfare, however, claimed that workfare programs were akin to slavery. To force recipients to work in exchange for their benefits was essentially punishing them for being poor. Such an approach was considered to be all the more punitive if the recipients were just doing “busy work” and not acquiring real, transferable job skills.

In the summer of 1996, Congress passed the Personal Responsibility and Work Opportunity Reconciliation Act (PRWORA), the most dramatic welfare reform since its inception with the Social Security Act of 1935. The new welfare program imposed cumulative time limits, required recipients to participate in work programs, called for reduced funding for food stamps by $28 billion over a 6-year period, and denied assistance to legal immigrants for at least 5 years. The new law’s most radical aspect was that it put an end to welfare’s entitlement status and its guarantee of national funding and subjected it to the annual appropriations process.

**Health Care**

Kathleen Sebelius, U.S. Secretary of Health and Human Services, testified before the House Energy and Commerce Committee in October 2013. There were failures with the government website created for Affordable Care Act implementation.

In recent years, social policy has been expanded to include health care. Health policy is an issue that has evoked a great deal of emotion in many people. It has certainly been an issue that has affected the key policy goals listed at the beginning of the chapter. The key issues in health care have been access and cost. Until the Affordable Care Act was passed in 2010, the United States did not really have a health care policy like those of many other industrial countries. Britain, for example, has socialized medicine, whereby hospitals are run by the government and doctors and nurses are government employees. Canada, on the other hand, has a single-payer system, whereby every citizen is covered by the state insurance system. Doctors are in private practice, as they are in the United States, and hospitals are also private.

The United States has traditionally had what can be referred to as a health care regime, which is effectively an arrangement between public and private actors for the provision of some common goods. Most Americans get their insurance from their employers. Medicare is government-sponsored health insurance for the elderly, and Medicaid is government-sponsored insurance for the poor. Those who have not received insurance from their employers have often gone uninsured, and the costs of purchasing insurance have been prohibitive. The issue of the uninsured becomes even more acute during a recession, when many lose their insurance when they lose their jobs. Therefore, the limited access becomes a matter of personal economic security. It also becomes a matter of efficiency because when uninsured people get sick and have to go to the hospital, the cost is ultimately picked up by the broader population, especially those who are insured. An increasing number of uninsured people means that those who are insured will be paying higher premiums.

When Medicare was enacted in 1965, it was viewed by many as the first step toward universal health insurance. But there was intense opposition from many groups, including insurance companies, businesses, and the American Medical Association. The result was that Medicare remained a health care program for the elderly. Bill Clinton was elected in 1992 on a platform of health care reform, but his proposal for managed care, which still relied heavily on employers to provide health insurance, went down to defeat. He had convened a panel chaired by his wife, Hillary Rodham Clinton, to draw up a plan. What it produced was 2,000 pages of federal regulation, and it created ample opportunity for those opposed to mount a public relations campaign against it. What resonated with the public was the idea that it would not only limit their freedom of choice, but also result in the rationing of care.

Still, the issue of affordable health care did not disappear, and costs continued to rise. Finally, in 2010, Congress passed, and President Obama signed, the Affordable Care Act (ACA). While the ACA may have increased access to insurance, its rollout was not without problems. First, the government websites were not working, and people could not sign up. Then, many people who had had affordable insurance received cancellation notices from their insurance companies because their policies no longer met federal minimum requirements. With insurance canceled, they were now forced to purchase more expensive insurance. Companies that provided what was referred to as “Cadillac” insurance were to be subject to a tax, all but ensuring their employees would be forced into cheaper plans of less quality. In particular, the individual mandate was challenged in the Supreme Court: Could the government require individuals to purchase something, or was the mandate tantamount to a tax? The Obama administration had always maintained that it was not a tax. In 2012, the Supreme Court held that it was, on the grounds that the penalty for not purchasing insurance was a tax and Congress had the authority to impose taxes.

Three years later, the ACA was again before the U.S. Supreme Court on the basis of more technical if not overly arcane arguments. When Congress set up the law, it had provided for subsidies to be available to qualified individuals who signed up through state exchanges. Many states opposed to the ACA refused to set up these exchanges, so the federal government made these subsidies available to those signed up through the federal exchange. The ACA, however, stipulated that these subsidies were to be available through “state” exchanges and did not mention the federal exchange. A group of states challenged the law on the grounds that these subsidies constituted federal overreach. In a 6–3 decision in June 2015, the Court did not quite see it that way. Although the Court acknowledged that Congress had been sloppy in writing the legislation, it also stated that it did not believe that it had been Congress’s intention to deny subsidies to those living in states that failed to create their own exchanges. Now, it was a foregone conclusion that the ACA was here to stay unless a compositional change in Congress and the White House would result in its repeal.

**Social Policy and Core American Values?**

Given the American political and cultural tradition of individualism, social policy raises a fundamental question: Do Americans have a right to be taken care of? Conservatives often maintain that social insurance and public assistance lead to moral hazard, in which the recipients may be motivated to act differently if they feel protected against harm or loss. Although it is noble to care for the poor, does the receipt of public assistance create a disincentive to work? If individuals can collect money and do nothing, why would they go to work, especially if it is low-wage work? The United States has a tradition of rugged individualism, whereby people rely on themselves and pull themselves up by their own bootstraps. In fact, it is American mythology that if one works hard, one can be self-sufficient and potentially become wealthy. But liberals believe that if people are poor through no fault of their own, then providing assistance and creating opportunities for them can enable them to live their lives with some dignity, which in and of itself is a precondition for human agency. Though this is an ongoing debate, it is important that in American politics the poor have always tended to be stigmatized. In evaluating policy, it is not enough to ask whether it works and whether monetary benefits outweigh monetary costs, but also whether it conforms to American values.

**11.6 Foreign and Defense Policy**

Like all nations, the United States pursues both a foreign policy and a defense policy. Defense policy often involves the strategic use of military force and decisions about the scale of those forces to defend the nation. Defense policy is first and foremost about national security and maintaining secure borders. It can also involve the protection of U.S. interests abroad. Foreign policy, however, is much broader and deals with an array of military, diplomatic, economic, and security exchanges that the United States has with other nations. On leaving office, the first president, George Washington, warned his countrymen against getting involved in foreign entanglements. For most of the nation’s history, the United States could be characterized as isolationist, in that it has sought to isolate itself from the rest of the world. That did not mean the United States did not strive to defend its basic interests.

**Monroe Doctrine**

The Monroe Doctrine, given by President James Monroe in 1823 during his State of the Union address, emphasized that any colonization efforts by Europe in North, Central, or South America would be viewed by the United States as acts of aggression.

Perhaps the first major statement of foreign policy regarding European nations was given by President James Monroe in 1823. This statement, which came to be known as the Monroe Doctrine, stated that European efforts to colonize land or interfere in states in North, Central, and South America would be viewed by the United States as acts of aggression requiring U.S. intervention. This particularly applied to Caribbean islands off of U.S. shores. In effect, the United States was making it clear that it would maintain a zone of influence: It would not tolerate European countries’ presence in its backyard, where these countries would then be better positioned to possibly invade the United States.

**American Imperialism**

During the late 1800s into the early 1900s, especially under President Theodore Roosevelt, the United States began to assert itself in Latin American and Caribbean countries. As European nations were colonizing land in Africa, the Middle East, and Asia, the United States, in part as an extension of the Monroe Doctrine, sought to colonize some territories close to home. The principal reason for this was a fear that, if it did not, European countries would move in.

Although the United States sought to be politically isolated from European countries and the rest of the world, it certainly wanted to trade around the world in order to grow its economy. Although the United States did not really enter the imperial realm until 1898 with the Spanish-American War, it was beginning its march to becoming an imperial power in the 1850s.

By the turn of the 20th century, the United States was becoming a world power. It had interests around the world and was particularly interested in securing its market share in China. During the presidency of William McKinley, Secretary of State John Hay initiated what would come to be known as the Open Door Policy, which declared that all nations trading with China should have equal privileges and also opposed the partition of China by foreign powers. Essentially, Hay was demanding that China grant the United States most favored nation status, which held that if Country A (such as China) has a special relationship with Country B (such as Great Britain), then the United States should also have a special relationship with Country A because the United States is an ally of Country B.

In 1904, President Theodore Roosevelt issued the corollary to the Monroe Doctrine, which reasserted American opposition to European intervention in the Western Hemisphere. Roosevelt claimed that the United States had a right to intervene in the domestic affairs of its neighbors if they proved unable to maintain order and national sovereignty on their own. Ostensibly, the corollary was intended to ensure that other powers would not enter into the region, but it did pave the way for the United States to intervene in a number of Caribbean countries, including Cuba, Haiti, and the Dominican Republic. Moreover, the United States was able to consolidate its dominance in the hemisphere with the opening of the Panama Canal in 1914.

When the United States entered World War I in 1917, men were recruited to join the army.

**The Road to Being a Superpower**

When World War I broke out during the summer of 1914, the United States declared its neutrality. But the United States was eventually pulled into the war in 1917 despite President Woodrow Wilson’s best efforts to keep the nation out of it. In 1918, with the end of the war, President Wilson went to Versailles to participate in the treaty negotiation. Wilson sought to create the League of Nations in the belief that, through collective security, it would prevent future wars. The U.S. Senate never ratified the Treaty of Versailles, nor did the United States enter the League of Nations. Rather, the American tradition of isolationism reared its head. Still, the United States emerged from the first world war stronger, as a creditor nation rather than a debtor nation.

Isolationism remained very strong through the next two decades and made it very difficult to get involved in World War II even as Britain and its allies were close to being overrun by the Germans. It was not until the Japanese attacked the United States at Pearl Harbor that the United States finally entered World War II, at the end of 1941. When the war was over, the United States emerged as one of two superpowers, with the Soviet Union emerging as the other. Both the United States and the Soviet Union possessed large nuclear arsenals and could dispatch military forces quickly around the world. In 1947, President Harry Truman issued what came to be known as the Truman Doctrine, which made it clear that it was the intention of the United States to support free peoples who were resisting attempted subjugation by armed minorities or by outside pressures. This doctrine would then inform the U.S. policy of containment, which would represent the United States’ attempt to limit, or contain, Soviet or other Communist influence to where it already existed. Where there was an attempt to spread Communist influence, the United States and its allies, through the North Atlantic Treaty Organization (NATO), would seek to stop it. At the same time, the Soviets also practiced their own version of containment through the Warsaw Pact to stop the spread of Western and democratic values.

**The Return to Isolationism**

The doctrine of containment was also used to justify wars with perceived Soviet surrogates such as North Korea and North Vietnam. However, as the United States continued fighting a seemingly hopeless guerilla war in Vietnam from the 1960s until 1975, Americans essentially began to call for a return to isolationism. The death toll of the Vietnam War was being broadcast into American living rooms across the country. When the Selective Service adopted a lottery system for the draft, which meant that the children of the affluent could no longer be excused from military service because of student deferments, massive protests against the war broke out. Aside from the fact that Americans could not see the value of involvement in foreign entanglements, there was no clear sense of victory, as there had been in World War II, where both Germany and Japan surrendered unconditionally. This only created a sense of self-doubt. Unless it was clear that the United States could be absolutely victorious, Americans preferred that military might be eschewed.

Still, the Cold War continued through the 1980s. The United States and the Soviets still had large stockpiles of nuclear weapons. During the Cold War, U.S. nuclear policy was informed by the principle of mutually assured destruction (MAD), which presumed that neither superpower would be the first to launch a nuclear attack because such an attack would lead to certain destruction. But the principle of MAD also assumed that nation states were rational actors—that they could calculate what was in their best interests and that nuclear war was not because rational beings sought to live. Did this apply to all countries? Do all nations share Western rationality? Nevertheless, there were attempts during the Cold War to negotiate nuclear arms control and reduction treaties.

**The New World Order and Terrorism**

With the collapse of the Soviet Union in 1991, the United States was left as the world’s only superpower with military bases and interests to protect around the world. Among those interests were protecting the flow of oil into the country. When Iraq, under Saddam Hussein, attacked Kuwait in 1990 and was on the doorstep of American ally and major oil producer Saudi Arabia, President George Herbert Walker Bush organized an international coalition to eject Iraq from Kuwait. Coalition forces, however, stopped short of toppling the Saddam Hussein regime.

During the 1990s, U.S. interests around the world fell victim to terrorist attacks, but the country chose to treat these matters as law enforcement issues and not acts of war. When the U.S.S. Cole was attacked while docked in Yemen and the Khobar Towers in Saudi Arabia were bombed, the United States sent over FBI agents to investigate and talked about bringing the perpetrators to justice through arrest and trial.

When, on September 11, 2001, the twin towers of the World Trade Center and the Pentagon were attacked by terrorists flying airplanes into them, killing more than 3,000 Americans, the United States would no longer treat terrorism as a simple law enforcement matter. This was now an act of war. President George W. Bush declared a war on terror and made it clear that the United States would use force against terrorists and those nations that harbored terrorists. Because al-Qaeda, the group responsible for the September 11th attacks, had been training in Afghanistan, the United States felt it was within its rights to declare war on Afghanistan as part of the larger war on terror. Because Saddam Hussein was financing terrorists, even though no link could be established to the September 11th attacks, the United States decided to go to war in Iraq too. This time, the goal was regime change, where the objective would be a change not only in government, but also in the underlying political culture.

With these twin wars in the Middle East came Bush’s doctrine of preemption, which enunciated that the United States would be permitted the use of force to prevent hostile acts (such as those using weapons of mass destruction), even when it was not clear when and where an enemy attack occurred. Moreover, these hostile acts needed to be prevented in order to protect U.S. national interests, which consisted of the constellation of military, economic, and ideological concerns surrounding the nation’s security. It was now deemed to be in the United States’ national interests to engage in nation-building, where the United States would remake other nations, preferably into democracies modeled on the United States.

**12.1 The Evolution of the Media in American Politics**

The notion that the media is an effective mechanism for informing the public about and influencing the public’s relationship with government is not a new one. During the French and Indian War (also called the Seven Years’ War), which took place between 1754 and 1763, a political cartoon composed by Benjamin Franklin (1706–1790) and published in the Pennsylvania Gazette on May 9, 1754 depicted the colonists’ lack of unity. The cartoon, titled “Join, or Die,” represents a snake cut into eight parts with each part representing most of the 13 colonies, as either individual colonies or regions. The cartoon was published to accompany Franklin’s editorial about the fractured experience of the colonies, which contributed to colonists’ collective struggles and desire to support Great Britain in winning the French and Indian War. The cartoon later came to be seen as a call for independence and a symbol of the colonists’ pursuit of freedom during the American Revolutionary War.

“Join, or Die” is a political cartoon created by Benjamin Franklin in 1754 showing the disunity of the colonies and advocating for unity.

Soon after the French and Indian War, the British Parliament enacted the Stamp Act in 1765 to raise revenue to pay for the costs of the war. Requiring a stamp on every piece of printed paper not only added to the cost of doing business but also limited the level of the public’s information about government. Fewer people purchased newspapers because the stamp increased the cost.

One other use of the media during colonial times was as a call to action. In January 1776, Thomas Paine (1737–1809) published Common Sense, which encouraged colonists to seek independence from Great Britain. The pamphlet accused King George III of England of tyranny, challenged his right to hold power over the colonists, and blamed him for treating the colonists unfairly. Paine also wrote that the colonies needed a written constitution with a set of rules that everyone would have to follow and a government that could not abuse its power.

These three examples show how the media affected the colonists and how a free media was a meaningful priority for them. The use of political cartoons to take a point of view as well as advocate a call to action demonstrated the positive effects of a free media, while the Stamp Act showed the colonists how limits on the media affected the flow of information.

**The First Amendment and Freedom of the Press**

Recall that one of the key debates over whether to ratify the U.S. Constitution focused on whether an enumerated bill of rights should be included. Opponents of the proposed Constitution, the Anti-Federalists, thought it was important for the Constitution to include a bill of rights. This listing of specific rights included protections of freedom of the press, among others. The Bill of Rights was eventually added to the U.S. Constitution in 1791, and it included the First Amendment, which reads:

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.

The fact that freedom of the press was included in the first 10 amendments to be added to the U.S. Constitution is evidence of the primacy of a free press.

The First Amendment has since protected the freedom of the press in multiple ways. Freedom of the press has been protected as a news source and as a mechanism for candidates, political parties, interest groups, and advocates to communicate their messages to the people. The media has also served in a hybrid role by taking part in the political process and endorsing candidates, broadcasting campaign debates, taking positions on policy questions, and publishing diverse opinion pieces and columns produced by political elites.

**The Influence of Technology**

Newspapers used to be a main source of news, but the media has evolved to include television, the Internet, and social media for its coverage.

The media is often referred to as the black box between the public and government because the public learns most of its information about government and politics from the media. The image of a black box is fitting; individuals cannot see what is between them and the other side. The public must trust the information that they receive through the media, as they have no real means to verify it. The black box metaphor also works in reverse; government and political entities such as political parties, candidates, and interest groups know that the media is reporting on their activities. Being aware of the media’s presence shapes their behavior. Individuals on both sides of this relationship depend on the media to receive or transmit information.

As technology has evolved, so has the public’s access to information about government through the media. Technological and educational advancements have broadened how the news is consumed and who consumes it. These technological and educational advancements have occurred parallel to advances in political rights. Universal suffrage is now the law of the land and enshrined in the U.S. Constitution through multiple amendments, which means that the percentage of citizens eligible to vote is at its height. Together, this means that the media can now reach far more people and the percentage of those people eligible to vote has never been higher. The implication is that government, political parties, interest groups, and issue advocates must now reach the largest number of people ever in order to accomplish their objectives, and they have the technological means to do so better, faster, and through more methods of communication. The large number and percentage of people who are able to access information about government because of advances in education and literacy also contributes to increases in the number of media consumers and their consumption levels. The opportunities for the media to serve in its role as the black box of American politics have never been greater.

**The Rise of Regulation**

President Bush and Jo Bonner, former U.S. representative for Alabama’s first congressional district, tour the damage done during Hurricane Ivan in Orange Beach, Alabama. The president’s media coverage in this event did not fall under the equal time coverage rule of the FCC.

As technology has advanced, questions have arisen as to whether the press should be free to function without government intervention and regulation. After all, if the government regulates the media, one could argue that it is limiting and shaping what the public learns about government to the government’s own advantage. For instance, the Federal Communications Act of 1934 (FCA) created the Federal Communications Commission (FCC), which regulates radio, television, wire, satellite, and cable communications throughout the United States, including the District of Columbia and U.S. territories. The FCA includes Section 315, the Equal Time Provision, requiring that television and radio stations give candidates seeking the same office the same opportunity to use those stations. Translated into practical terms, this means that stations give candidates seeking the same office reasonably equal news coverage with three key exceptions. First, if one of the candidates is engaged in a bona fide news event, such as an incumbent fulfilling his or her obligations of office, that coverage time is not considered in terms of determining equal time.

An example of this exception took place in 2004. The state of Florida was hit by three intense (Category 4 and 5) hurricanes between August and September 2004. The last of the three hurricanes, Ivan, began at the end of the Republican National Convention. George W. Bush was running for reelection while U.S. Senator John Kerry was seeking to unseat Bush. Both Bush and Kerry traveled to Florida, one of the largest electoral vote states, to survey the hurricane damage. While coverage of Bush did not fall under the Equal Time Provision because he was surveying the damage in his role as president (a bona fide news event), coverage of Kerry, who represented Massachusetts in the U.S. Senate, did fall under the provision because Kerry was spending time in Florida as the Democrats’ nominee.

The second exception is that the media does not need to extend equal time to minor party candidates. Finally, the third exception is that the tone of the coverage does not need to be equal; one competitor may receive mostly positive coverage while another candidate for the same office may receive mostly negative coverage. In addition to the Federal Communications Act, the FCC created the Fairness Doctrine in 1949 to ensure that controversial issues would be presented in a balanced manner. The Fairness Doctrine was eliminated by the FCC in 2011, on the grounds that the Obama administration deemed the doctrine to be “outdated and obsolete.”

Measures of consumer preferences, such as ratings and circulation, also influence the types of stories that the press report on, the amount of time (if on television or radio) or print (if in a newspaper, on an Internet site, or in a news magazine) devoted to any subject or story, or the overall length of the broadcast or printed text in a publication. Because press organizations are themselves private entities, their desire to succeed as corporations influences how they operate. News coverage, including campaign coverage, is no different. Coverage that does not interest the public will result in lower ratings or circulation, which affects the media outlets’ profits. Taken together, this means that media organizations make strategic choices when deciding which aspects of campaigns to cover and how that coverage will take shape.

**12.2 The Media in Political Campaigns**

The media also takes an active role in political campaigns. Freedom of the press extends to election campaigns, where press coverage includes providing information and commentary about the candidates, issues, and political parties. The media also serves as a vehicle for candidates, political parties, interest groups, and even ordinary citizens to convey their messages during election campaigns through advertising. Each role the media plays influences the course that campaigns take, affecting the campaign messages put forward by candidates, interest groups, and political parties; the manner in which these messages are presented; and how the public receives and responds to those messages.

**Providing Information and Commentary**

Because there were so many 2016 Republican presidential candidates, media coverage could not accommodate all of them in the GOP debates. The candidates with lower poll ratings participated in less-publicized debates at earlier times on the same day. This could be considered media bias.

The way that the media covers campaigns can have a strong impact on elections. The nomination process is especially affected by media coverage because primaries often bring out candidates who lack widespread name recognition, especially in open-seat races where there is no incumbent. The media lacks the time to give all candidates equal press coverage. Consequently, the media focuses on those candidates believed to have a serious chance at winning. Critics argue that such practices demonstrate media bias, the idea that the media chooses how news is presented to the public. These practices create a self-fulfilling prophecy where the media pays more attention to “serious” candidates. Voter interest and support then follow. The opposite is also true. If a candidate is portrayed as a loser, it is then more difficult for that candidate to raise money and other forms of support. Lacking financial and volunteer support makes it more difficult to enhance name recognition and voter support.

Regardless, the media provides commentary on all aspects of political campaigns, including the role of the media in political campaigns. One form that such commentary takes is with cartoons that often appear in newspapers on the opinion or the comics pages. It should be noted that those news outlets that perform editorializing functions, such as newspaper editorials, retain free speech and press protections when performing these functions. This means that newspapers may endorse candidates for any office on their editorial pages, but not in any other place. Still, researchers have found that newspapers that endorse candidates tend to extend more positive news coverage toward those candidates that they have endorsed compared with candidates not endorsed by those newspapers.

Scholars have noted that the news focuses far more attention on characteristics about the campaign itself—such as who is ahead or behind in public support, fundraising, or votes (the “horse race” aspects of the campaign)—than it does on information about the candidates themselves or candidate issue positions. One consequence of news organizations’ tendency to focus on horse race aspects of campaigns is that commercials and other campaign messages may end up doing a better job of informing voters about policy positions, helping voters distinguish between candidates, and educating the electorate about candidates compared with the news media. This means that campaign communication is a more essential voter information resource than is campaign-related news coverage.

**Hosting Advertising**

Campaign-related entities pay media outlets to advertise their messages. Unlike news coverage, where the news organizations control what they broadcast, print, or produce, campaign advertising gives candidates, interest groups, and political parties the opportunity to control their messages about themselves and their opponents. Most campaign-related advertising is available where there are the most consumers. There are far more television consumers than there are radio, Internet, newspaper, or news magazine consumers. Thus, far more campaign-related advertising is found on television than in any other medium. Among non-television media, radio and the Internet, including social media (see section 12.4: Media and the Internet), are far more often used as campaign advertising outlets than are newspapers or news magazines. Electronic media draws far more consumers than does print media.

Electronic media enjoys a core advantage for reaching large audiences because these outlets are free to use, provided that one already owns or has access to a television, radio, or computer. Print media must usually be purchased in order to enjoy access, and periodic issues, such as daily, weekly, or monthly publications, render regular purchase or access necessary in order to keep current. As accessing electronic advertising is much easier than accessing print advertising is, it follows that the more readily available media will enjoy higher consumer use and will attract more campaign advertising dollars.

Televised campaign advertising spots were first aired in 1952. The cost and use of television advertising has grown exponentially since then, which has resulted in shorter television spots (and, critics argue, the inclusion of less information and a greater emphasis on entertaining viewers). More recent presidential campaigns have seen television advertisement spots run from 30 to 60 seconds. Large-scale races are often contested using television, which is the most widely used news source in the United States. Television commercials tend to blanket the airwaves during highly contested elections; their short duration means that they are easily broadcast during regular television programming. However, as freedom of the press is not absolute, neither is freedom of the press in campaigns.

Campaign coverage and advertising has been regulated by the federal government since the Federal Communications Act of 1934, discussed earlier. Since then, other laws have been enacted that limit and otherwise regulate campaign coverage and advertising. More recently, the Bipartisan Campaign Reform Act of 2002 (BCRA) placed restrictions on campaign advertising sponsored by interest groups. BCRA bans corporate or union money from being used to pay for broadcast advertising that identifies a federal candidate within 30 days of a primary or nominating convention, or within 60 days of a general election. These restrictions were upheld by the U.S. Supreme Court in McConnell v. Federal Election Commission 540 U.S. 93 (2003).

**12.3 Monitoring and Influencing Government**

Individuals and organizations seeking to influence government will use the media to bring attention to government actions. The media also acts alone to bring attention to government actions, thereby enabling the public to use its First Amendment rights to monitor and influence government. Interest groups form to draw attention to government actions, encourage their members to interact with government and with the press, and raise money to accomplish their political and policy goals.

**The Media as Watchdog**

The Founding Fathers believed that a free media was necessary to monitor government. In fact, in a 1787 letter to Edward Carrington, Thomas Jefferson wrote, “Were it left to me to decide whether we should have a government without newspapers, or newspapers without a government, I should not hesitate a moment to prefer the latter.” Jefferson believed that an independent media was needed to prevent government from abusing its power. Government functioning out of the spotlight might take actions violating the public interest, while a media free to watch and report on government to the people keeps government honest and the public informed. Freedom of the press allows the media to serve in a watchdog role as one means to protect individuals from the government infringing on their rights.

Media independence occurs when the media brings attention to government actions. In bringing attention to the public about government actions, the media informs the public about possible government wrongdoing. Democracies require an independent and free press to add another check and balance on the potential abuse of power. A story in the press about a Cabinet member may catch the attention of members of Congress, leading to oversight hearings into the actions of the executive branch. In this case, the press serves as a watchdog to help keep public officials honest.

Related to the media’s watchdog role is the preponderance of televised campaign debates. The media plays critical roles in these debates. First, because the television networks broadcast the debates (and they are simultaneously broadcast on the radio), they have a say in various debate-related aspects, including the length of the debate (some debates last an hour, while others may last 90 minutes or more), the date that the debates take place, and whether the debates will take place toward the earlier or later part of the evening, which affects viewership in different time zones. It is unlikely that candidates would participate in debates that they were not certain would be broadcast widely. The second role that the media plays in debates is that one or more well-known news media personalities moderate the debates—they write the questions, ask follow-up questions, and oversee the debate as it transpires by ensuring that participants do not go over their allotted time and that candidates have the chance to make rebuttals if they are entitled to do so. That media personalities, and not well-known leaders from other sectors of society, moderate the debates suggests that the public perceives the media as an objective watchdog and is comfortable with the media holding this role.

**The Media as Gatekeeper**

Another way that media independence occurs is through the media’s gatekeeper role. When members of the media act as gatekeepers, they decide which information to share with the public. In deciding what the public should know, the media is deciding which stories are appropriate as well as identifying the most appropriate sources to use when reporting a story. The reason that gatekeeping is essential is that the public depends so much on the media for quality information about subjects they would otherwise have little to no access to.

In fact, the public now depends more than ever on the media acting in a gatekeeping role during election campaigns. Journalists engage in fact-checking when candidates make claims about their record or the record of their opponents. The Tampa Bay Times investigates politicians’ claims through a tool called PolitiFact. The truthfulness of politicians’ statements is reported to the public with such labels as “False” and “Pants on Fire” for particularly problematic claims. The Washington Post reports on the truthfulness of politicians’ statements using “Pinocchios,” where the more Pinocchios a politician’s claims are assigned, the worse the lie is. In reporting the results of its research, the media strengthens its gatekeeping role with the public and reinforces to politicians that their claims will be investigated before being reported as factual. The public and government both rely on the media taking its gatekeeping role seriously, because the public’s primary means of learning about government is through the media, and politicians depend on good coverage to earn the public’s trust.

**The Pentagon Papers**

What was so threatening about the Pentagon Papers? Get the story behind the classified documents, including thoughts from Egil "Bud" Krogh, the head of Nixon’s "Plumbers" investigative unit. Krogh was eventually jailed for his role in Watergate.

 Another perspective on the media’s gatekeeping role is linked to whether a story should be reported because of concerns about national security. One well-known instance in which this issue arose was in the “Pentagon Papers” case. The U.S. Supreme Court decided New York Times v. United States in 1971 in response to President Nixon trying to keep the New York Times from publishing classified Defense Department materials that included a study of U.S. activities in Vietnam. President Nixon argued that the Defense Department materials included “classified information,” which justified that the New York Times should exercise “prior restraint” and not publish the Pentagon Papers. In Nixon’s view, national security should take precedence over freedom of the press. The U.S. Supreme Court took the side of the New York Times in a 6–3 decision that the Nixon administration did not justify the need for “prior restraint” in this situation in part because it had failed to properly outline the specific national security concerns and the threat to the safety of American forces that justified limiting the freedom of the press guaranteed in the First Amendment. The U.S. Supreme Court’s opinion in the Pentagon Papers case reinforces the media’s role as gatekeeper in that the decision demonstrates the media’s right to report what it deems worthy of reporting.

The media’s role as gatekeeper focuses on its value to the public in keeping it informed by reporting what it deems important for the public to know, broadcasting and moderating campaign debates, conducting research on claims made by candidates and officeholders, and reporting about government actions even if the government would prefer to operate out of the public eye.

**The Media as Agenda Setter**

The primary way that government officials communicate with the citizenry is through the media. Public officials are well aware that the media is monitoring them and reporting their actions to the public; at the same time, policymakers fully understand that, if they want the public to know and understand their motives and actions, they must use the media for that purpose. The idea that the news media can influence what the public considers important is known as agenda-setting theory.

Government officials manage information for public consumption in how they present issues. Issues about which government officials seek public support may involve those officials using the media for press coverage of their actions. For example, government officials will try to use the media to set the public agenda such that the media prioritizes issues that the government wishes for the public to focus on and presents the information in a way that causes the public to support the government’s position on those issues. An independent media sets the public agenda as to what is important and which aspects of it the public should focus on.

**12.4 Media and the Internet**

Accessing news on the Internet has become increasingly popular in the 21st century.

The media takes many forms. Various forms of more traditional media, including print (newspapers, news magazines) and broadcast (television, radio), have been discussed earlier in this chapter. Over the last generation, there has been a meaningful increase in the use of social and interactive media that has changed the face of American politics. Of particular interest is the preponderance of the Internet in American political life.

The advent of the Internet began sometime in the early 1980s when the U.S. Department of Defense created a computer network whose primary purpose was to link the Pentagon to faraway military bases and defense contractors. Soon after, large research universities joined the network. At that time, its applications were limited. Since then, the Internet has become a multipurpose communication tool. Its value for education, political mobilization, information dissemination, marketing, and social networking has brought the Internet into multiple, far-reaching private and public realms.

The opportunity to disseminate real-time and immediate information updates to Internet consumers has transformed the Internet into a critical, functional link between government and citizens. It is now common for elected officials at the national, state, and local levels to publicize their email addresses on their own or government-sponsored websites. This means that citizens may now contact their elected representatives and other public officials directly. The Internet also serves as a tool for government officials and agencies to share information with their constituents. The Internet has become an established tool of political engagement because it provides a readily available opportunity for communication between citizens and the government.

News organizations now enjoy a regular Internet presence. It is common for both broadcast and print media to have web pages. This means that, long before the next edition of a newspaper is printed (and distributed the following day), and hours before the next scheduled television news broadcast, media organization websites can provide up-to-the minute news updates and, as appropriate, live coverage of news events.

The value of the Internet for political campaigns has changed campaign strategy in critical ways. The Internet is a relatively cheap way to control one’s message, and it is relatively easy to create and maintain a web page. Candidates may publish responses to recent events or opponents’ attacks within minutes of these events, and they can provide links to other Internet sites (such as those of political parties or government institutions), thereby easing navigation among various information sources. Candidates can also provide information updates, such as newly scheduled appearances, and use their Internet sites to show campaign commercials.

**Politics and Social Media**

 Candidates can also carry on virtual conversations using social media, which allows individuals, organizations, businesses, and government offices and officials to create and share content or participate in virtual networks all through the Internet. Examples of social media are websites and phone applications where users can share content and interact with one another. Twitter, an online social networking service, allows users to send and read short messages (called “tweets”) to individuals and groups of persons (“followers”) who share a particular interest, such as a student environmental group. Twitter provides an inexpensive mobilization strategy for political candidates. For example, in 2008, then-U.S. Senator Barack Obama had 100,000 Twitter followers before Election Day. By 2012, President Obama had more than 20 million Twitter followers by Election Day. Also in 2012, the campaign staffs affiliated with both President Obama and Republican presidential nominee Mitt Romney engaged in online “Twitter duels” with the intent of having the media and others read the tweets.

The Internet also eases fundraising for candidates because donors may give to one or several candidates with a few mouse clicks. The low cost associated with maintaining an Internet site, coupled with the relative ease in sending out multiple email messages at little cost, increases exponentially the opportunities for candidates, political parties, and interest groups to ask for financial and volunteer support and get a fast response.

One adjunct to the Internet as a news and information source is web-based logs, or blogs, which are online journals. Blogging has become a popular way for candidates, interest groups, and political parties to share and discuss information. It is not uncommon for news organization websites to have blogs or other mechanisms for news consumers to post their responses to news items and to participate in an online discussion with other interested individuals. Individuals can also create a blog with relative ease. While questions have arisen as to the validity of information found on blogs, they do provide an outlet for political discussions.

Social media enhances opportunities for democratic participation with widely available technologies encouraging interaction among citizens and between citizens and government. Government use of social media to encourage citizen-government interaction has increased steadily, as has public familiarity with these tools. Governments at the local, state, and federal levels now use social media tools to engage citizens in government decision making. Participating governments use these tools to invite public input and enhance two-way communication. Public trust is enhanced when governments demonstrate their efforts to be transparent, accountable, and responsive.

**12.5 The Forms of Media Bias**

The role of the media in presenting information is often not balanced—the media may pre­sent information in a way that favors one perspective (media bias), advocates a clear point of view or action (propaganda), or references or presents images to serve as information shortcuts (symbolism).

Media bias may take several forms. One form of bias involves the information shared with the public. It is impossible for the media to report all information to which the public has no direct connection; thus, the media chooses what to report on and how much information to share about that news item. Another form of media bias focuses on how information is presented to the public. For example, a media story on poverty may show members of a specific race, gender, age, or ethnic group as being impoverished, which may affect how the public reacts to news stories about poverty; people’s perceptions about poverty may be shaped by their opinions about the impoverished persons portrayed in the news story. Bias may also be demonstrated in the importance given to a news item, such as by placing a news story on the front page of a newspaper or by leading with that story on a televised news program.

**Kennedy versus Nixon**

John F. Kennedy was considered the underdog. But the format of the debates prevented direct clash on issues. Performance and image overshadowed content. Kennedy was declared the winner. TV ads used excerpts of the debate.

Propaganda is a way for government and political entities to shape or motivate political action or public opinion. For example, the government may use public information campaigns to bring about certain behaviors, such as during World War I when the federal government sponsored a campaign to encourage the public to buy liberty bonds to fund the war effort.

Symbols provide the public with information shortcuts; they often replace text. Symbols may also bias public opinion and serve as propaganda tools. For example, “U.S.” is often used to represent the “United States.” The “United States” is also often represented as an older White male dressed in clothing with red and white stripes, and white stars on a blue background (the colors, symbols, and patterns of the American flag). This “person,” “Uncle Sam,” is a symbol of patriotism toward the United States and has been used to encourage individuals to fulfill civic responsibilities such as registering for the draft, paying taxes, and voting.

In transmitting information to the public, political entities use the media to shape information that includes bias, symbolism, and propaganda when sharing information with the public. These communication methods influence public opinion and political behavior; how the public learns information affects the public’s reaction.

The press often plays a role in shaping public opinion because what people learn through the media will affect their views on the issues being discussed. Changes in public opinion may result in the public putting pressure on government that it otherwise would not have.

The media is a powerful force in American politics because it decides what it will report and how much time to devote to a particular story. As gatekeepers, newspaper editors and television news producers decide which stories are important. Editorial page editors decide what types of editorials to print. By shaping the agenda, the press can influence public opinion, which in turn can affect election outcomes.

Central to media power is its ability to frame and set an agenda. Framing involves how a particular story is set up and the context in which it is presented. Framing affects how the public interprets political events and results. If news stories involving former President Bill Clinton are introduced with a reminder of his impeachment, the public might consider his presidency more in terms of his impeachment and not in terms of his political accomplishments. Similarly, setting up stories about political candidates with a discussion about the “Tea Party” can affect viewers’ preferences about that candidate.

Priming is another source of media influence. Priming occurs when media coverage affects how the public evaluates political leaders and candidates. For example, priming happens when news content suggests that an audience ought to use specific benchmarks to evaluate a public official’s performance.

Measuring public opinion is important to the electoral process. But it is not always clear. When members of Congress take a position on an issue, they might be responding to public opinion as reported either in polls or in what is being reported in the press. This means that the press also plays an important role in American politics. It can serve to hold public officials accountable by making it clear what the public believes on a given issue. But the press can also influence public opinion by framing the political agenda.