

TWELFTH EDITION

THE LOGIC OF AMERICAN POLITICS



SAMUEL KERNELL
GARY C. JACOBSON
THAD KOUSSER
LYNN VAVRECK
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The Logic of American Politics

12th Edition

To Dianne, Kate, Jeff, and Julie

The following dedication to James Madison is from the oldest American government textbook we have found: William Alexander Duer's Outlines of the Constitutional Jurisprudence of the United States, published in 1833.

To you, Sir, as the surviving member of the august assembly that framed the Constitution, and of the illustrious triumvirate who, in vindicating it from the objections of its first assailants, succeeded in recommending it to the adoption of their country; to you, who, in discharging the highest duties of its administration, proved the stability and excellence of the Constitution, in war as well as in peace, and determined the experiment in favor of republican institutions and the right of self-government; to you, who in your retirement, raised a warning voice against those heresies in the construction of that Constitution which for a moment threatened to impair it; to you, Sir, as alone amongst the earliest and the latest of its defenders,—this brief exposition of the organization and principles of the National Government, intended especially for the instruction of our American youth, is most respectfully, and, in reference to your public services, most properly inscribed.

Columbia College, N.Y.

August 1st, 1833.

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12th Edition

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PREFACE

For the first time since Grover Cleveland did so in 1892, a presidential candidate who lost reelection, won in a second attempt. Donald Trump’s second White House victory and the Republicans’ ability to hold the Senate and House during the 2024 election cycle highlights the seeming *illogic* of American politics. In short, over the past eight years, America’s politics appears to be in tumult—elections are closer than ever, turning on tens of thousands of votes in a few states, and the parties are taking turns winning the White House and Congress. While these outcomes may look capricious—and illogical—what you’ll read in the pages to come suggests a logic that takes a keen eye to appreciate. It is a logic you will appreciate at the end of this course.

Obviously, assessment of the extraordinary 2024 election is a major topic of **Chapter 11**’s coverage of voting and elections. Sizing up Biden’s term and what we may expect in the second Trump term occupies much of the attention of **Chapter 7** on the presidency. In both, we seek to square the Trump-Biden-Trump years with the stable systematic forces at work in both elections and governance. This mission pervades every other chapter as well. We close **Chapter 2** (“The Constitution”) by considering whether the separation of powers, as envisioned by the constitution, still functions as intended. In a world where presidents issue executive orders instead of working with Congress to achieve goals—and where the Supreme Court is willing to forgo precedent—how well do checks and balances work? **Chapter 3**’s coverage of federalism explores whether states have become the place to experiment with policy—and what it means for states to have different policies on rights like access to abortion and reproductive care, on gun rights, on marijuana legalization, and on immigration enforcement. **Chapter 4** reports on the ongoing tribulations on two fronts: policing practices when dealing with minority groups and the still-unresolved Deferred Action for Childhood Arrivals (DACA) policy affecting several hundred thousand children brought into the country illegally. This chapter also considers the Supreme Court’s intervention in the fight over rights for LGBTQ+ people. **Chapter 5** considers the Court’s sharp move to the right on issues of civil liberties and delves into its 2022 decision that overturned *Roe v. Wade* and, perhaps more importantly, the manner in which it has eschewed its use of precedent to decide cases it hears (which we also discuss in Chapter 9). **Chapter 6** explores new challenges to congressional leadership in a period of extraordinary partisan polarization among the mass electorate.

Chapter 8 provides new coverage on how congress and the presidents seek to shape the bureaucracy—and to control what Donald Trump has termed the “deep state”—in an era of deep polarization. **Chapter 9** finds the federal judiciary giving new meaning to activism in which an increasing number of district judges in the states weigh in on national policy by issuing national injunctions, again lining up consistently with the preferences of the party of the

president who appointed them. It also considers the Supreme Court's 2022 term decisions that suggest justices may no longer be bound by precedent and its 2024 decisions that fundamentally changed the relationship between executive agencies and federal courts. **Chapter 10** takes a close look at public opinion, paying particular attention to issues on which it has changed over the last several decades but also to issues on which opinion has been remarkably stable even in times of heightened polarization on some issues. **Chapter 12** notes the increasingly important role of political parties in shaping American politics and highlights the central function of parties: to make it easier for candidates to get votes and easier for voters to make choices.

Chapter 13 describes what an interest group represents today, addresses the question of whether these groups bias political outcomes, and shows how the basis of their power has shifted in modern politics. **Chapter 14** addresses the ever-changing role of the media in American politics. In this edition, we pay less attention to how people consume news and more attention to what they consume as news—and how much they trust their sources.. And in **Chapter 15**, we use the logic of politics to explain the policy logic and political actions behind issues ranging from slowing global climate change to shutting down the government.

One of the themes of *The Logic of American Politics* is that, alongside the outsized personalities that inhabit Washington, DC, and the idiosyncratic events that appear to drive it, systematic forces remain at work. The book's goal is to help students understand these forces and to see how they shape the choices of political leaders today. We want to help readers discern the rationale embedded in the extraordinary and complex array of American political institutions and practices. To accomplish this goal, we analyze political institutions and practices as (imperfect) solutions to problems facing people who need to act collectively. We highlight recurring obstacles to collective action in various contexts to illuminate the diverse institutional means that American politicians have created to overcome them. These obstacles include the conflict over values and interests, the difficulty of aggregating individual preferences into collective decisions, the need for coordination, and the threat of reneging implicit in every collective undertaking. Stable political communities strengthen their capacity to act collectively and reduce the costs of doing so by fashioning appropriate institutions. These institutions feature majority and plurality rules and procedures that convert votes into representation, delegate authority to agents, and permit some institutional actors to propose courses of action while allocating to others the right to veto proposals. Throughout the book we emphasize the strategic dimension of political action, from the Framers' trade-offs in crafting the Constitution to the efforts of contemporary officeholders to shape policy, so students can understand current institutions as the products of political conflicts, as well as the venues for resolving them.

New challenges pose fresh problems for collective action for which current institutions may seem inadequate. The institutions created to deal with the challenges of collective action at one historical moment can continue to shape politics long after those challenges have receded. Therefore, we pay a good deal of attention to the historical development of political institutions, a narrative that reveals politicians and citizens grappling intellectually, as well as politically, with their collective action problems and discovering the institutional means to resolve them—even in these polarized and divisive times.

This book is the product of our more than 50 years of teaching American politics in a way that seeks to go beyond the basics. In addition to introducing students to descriptive facts and fundamental principles, we have sought to help them cultivate an ability to analyze and understand American politics for themselves. Each of us is variously associated with the rational choice school of understanding political behavior, yet over time our research and teaching have benefited from many of its insights, especially those familiarly referred to as “the new institutionalism.” We have found these insights helpful in making sense of American politics in terms that students can grasp intuitively. Having absorbed these ideas into our own scholarly thinking, we employ them here to help students understand what the American political system looks like and why it has assumed its present shape.

APPROACH

Our emphasis on the primacy of institutions extends well beyond collecting and processing the preferences of citizens and politicians. In that institutions may structure the choices available to voters and their leaders, we view them as indispensable in explaining public opinion and the strategic behavior of the political organizations that seek to influence and mobilize these preferences. We therefore have adopted a somewhat unorthodox structure for the book. We cover the rules of the game and the formal institutions of government before discussing the “input” side of the political process—public opinion, elections, parties, and interest groups—because we emphasize the way rules and institutions structure the actions and choices of citizens and politicians alike.

The introduction offers ideas and concepts employed throughout the text. They can be classified under two broad categories: *collective action problems* and *institutional design concepts*. Both sets of ideas have deeply informed each chapter’s argument. Because this is an introduction to American politics, rather than to political theory, we have intentionally sublimated the analytic ideas in favor of enlisting them to explicate real politics. Along with traditional concepts that remain indispensable to understanding American politics—such as representation, majority rule, and separation of powers—we introduce students to a number of ideas from economics that political scientists have found increasingly useful for exploring American politics. These include the focal points of coordination, prisoner’s dilemma, free riding, tragedy of the commons, transaction costs, principal–agent relations, and public goods.

ORGANIZATION OF THE BOOK

The substantive chapters are arranged in four parts.

Part I covers the foundational elements of American politics: the Constitution, federalism, civil rights, and civil liberties. The chapters that cover these topics give students an understanding of the political origins and development of the basic structure and rules of the national polity.

Part II examines the major formal institutions of national government: Congress, the presidency, the bureaucracy, and the federal judiciary. These chapters reveal how the politics and logic of their development have shaped their current organizational features, practices, and relations with one another.

Part III analyzes the institutions that link citizens with government officials, again in terms of their historical development, political logic, and present-day operations. Chapters in this section are devoted to public opinion; voting, campaigns, and elections; political parties; interest groups; and the news media.

Part IV features a concluding chapter that evaluates American policymaking through the lens of our collective action framework. Through five vignettes that span policies from health care reform to global climate change, this chapter uses the concepts covered throughout the book to yield insights into the sources of policy problems, point to possible solutions, and explain why agreement on those solutions is often difficult to achieve. Equipped with this understanding of the logic of policymaking, students can apply the same logic underlying these examples to other policy challenges, from immigration reform to pork barrel spending and U.S. disputes with other nations. Students come away from the chapter and the book as a whole with the tools needed to think in new ways about how American government works.

INSTRUCTIONAL FEATURES

The Logic of American Politics includes special features designed to engage students' attention and to help them think analytically about the subject.

- Learning objectives and key thematic questions at the beginning of each chapter preview important themes and set the tone for critical thinking.
- Each chapter opens with a story from the real world of politics that introduces one or more of the central issues to be explored in that chapter.
- In addition, important terms and concepts throughout the text appear in boldface the first time they are defined. These key terms are listed at the end of each chapter, with page references to their explanations, and are defined in a glossary at the back of the book.
- The **Logic of Politics** boxes explain the logical rationale or implications of some institutional features presented in the text.
- Another set of boxes, **Strategy and Choice**, explores how politicians use institutions and respond to the incentives that institutions provide in pursuing their personal or constituencies' interests.

- In addition to examining the logic of the policymaking process in our concluding chapter, we continue to cover public policy where it is most relevant to the discussion, incorporating policy issues throughout the book. **Politics to Policy** boxes explain how policies reflect the underlying political rationale of the institutions that produce them.
- To encourage students to continue their studies of American politics beyond the pages of this volume, we have included annotated reading lists at the end of each chapter.

DIGITAL RESOURCES

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A NOTE TO STUDENTS

PLAN OF THE BOOK

Our analysis of the logic of American politics begins in Chapter 1 with an introduction to the analytical concepts we draw on throughout the text. Although these concepts are straightforward and intuitive, we do not expect you to understand them fully until they have been applied in later chapters. The rest of the text is arranged in four main parts.

Part I looks at the foundational elements of the political system that are especially relevant to understanding modern American politics. It begins with the constitutional system (Chapter 2, “The Constitution”) and then moves on to the relations between the national government and the states (Chapter 3, “Federalism”); the evolution of civil rights and the definition of citizenship (Chapter 4, “Civil Rights”); and the establishment of civil liberties, such as freedom of speech and religion (Chapter 5, “Civil Liberties”). A recurring theme of Part I is *nationalization*, the gradual shift of authority from state and local governments to the national government.

Part II examines the four basic institutions of America’s national government: Congress (Chapter 6), the presidency (Chapter 7), the bureaucracy (Chapter 8), and the federal judiciary (Chapter 9). The development of effective, resourceful institutions at the national level has made it possible for modern-day politicians to tackle problems that in an earlier time they would have been helpless to solve. We explain how all four institutions have evolved along the paths initiated and confined by the Constitution in response to the forces of nationalization and other social and economic changes.

Part III surveys the institutions that keep citizens informed about what their representatives are doing and enable them to influence their elected officials through voting and other forms of participation. Chapter 10, “Public Opinion,” explores the nature of modern political communication by focusing on the ins and outs of mass public opinion. Chapter 11, “Voting, Campaigns, and Elections,” examines the ways in which candidates’ strategies and voters’ preferences interact at the polls to produce national leaders and, on occasion, create mandates for policies. The Constitution mentions neither political parties nor interest groups, and the Framers were deeply suspicious of both. But they are vital to helping citizens make sense of politics and pursue political goals effectively. In Chapter 12, “Political Parties,” and Chapter 13, “Interest Groups,” we explain how and why parties and interest groups have flourished as intermediaries between citizens and government officials. President Woodrow Wilson once aptly observed that “news is the atmosphere of politics.” Chapter 14 looks at the news media both as channels of communication from elected leaders to their constituents and as independent sources of information about the leaders’ performance. The chapter also considers the implications of the rise of the Internet in coordinating the collective efforts of unorganized publics.

Part IV, which consists of Chapter 15, concludes our inquiry by evaluating American public policymaking through the lens of our collective action framework to discern the logic of the policymaking process.

SPECIAL FEATURES

This book contains several special features designed to help you grasp the logic of American politics. Because these features, including the substantive captions, play an integral role in the presentation and discussion, *you should read them with as much care as you do the text.*

- At the outset of each chapter are key questions that preview important themes and, we hope, will pique your curiosity.
- Within each chapter, thematic boxes labeled **Logic of Politics** consider more fully the logical rationale and implications of certain features of government design introduced in the core text.
- Another set of boxes, **Strategy and Choice**, focuses on the sometimes imaginative ways politicians enlist institutions to advance their agendas and their constituents' goals.
- A third set of thematic boxes, **Politics to Policy**, treats some of the public policy issues that have sprung forth from the political process.
- Additional boxes, tables, figures, photographs, and other visuals clarify and enliven the text.
- To encourage you to pursue more information on topics you find particularly interesting, we have included annotated lists of suggested readings at the end of each chapter.

HOW TO READ THE GRAPHS

A picture is worth a thousand words. You may think this book is too long as it is, but it would be a lot longer if we couldn't use figures and graphs to show you important relationships. Figures tell stories, and if we have a figure in a chapter it is because the story it tells is important to your understanding or thinking about the concepts in the chapter. Don't skip the figures! They are an important element in really understanding what we're talking about.

Because figures are so important to learning, imagination, and discovery, it is important you are comfortable interpreting them and feel at home looking at data presented visually.

Before we get started with substantive material, we wanted to make sure you know how to evaluate the figures we use.

There are several types of figures. We use a few repeatedly:

- **Bar graphs** show numbers that are *independent* of each other. Examples might include things like the number of people who preferred each of the presidential candidates in the last election.
- **Line graphs** show you how numbers have *changed over time*. They are used when you have data that are connected, and to show trends, for example, average support for the president in each month of the year.
- **Cartesian graphs** or **scatter plots** have numbers on both axes, which therefore allow you to see *how changes in one thing affect another*. For example, we may want to show how changes in consumer sentiment are related to changes in presidential approval.

The first step in reading any figure or graph is understanding what you are looking at.

- The place to start is with the axes. Graphs generally have two axes, the lines that run across the bottom of the figure and typically up the left side.
- The line along the bottom is called the horizontal or x-axis, and the line up the side is called the vertical or y-axis. (An easy way to remember which one is which is to think of the letter *Y* and its stem extending down the vertical axis line.)
- Both axes can contain either numbers or categories of things. They generally start with the lowest value at the origin of the axes (the place where both lines meet, the bottom left corner of the figure). The numbers or categories typically increase (if they are cardinal in nature) as you move to the right on the horizontal axis and up on the vertical axis.
- A good figure has labels on both axes to help the reader interpret the data. A good figure also starts and ends at reasonable numbers. Checking the axes is an important first step in reading a figure. They answer the questions, what is the purpose of this figure and how will it show me the data?
- The data in figures are often presented as lines, markers (like dots), or bars. In scatter plots, which show the relationship between what is on the horizontal and vertical axes, figures often contain a line across the diagonal at forty-five degrees. This line is called the forty-five-degree line. It is helpful especially if the axes of the figure take on the same values. In this case, the forty-five-degree line represents the cases (the dots) where the values on the horizontal axis match the values on the vertical axis *exactly*. Dots on the line are exact matches. Dots off the line are not—specifically, those above the line are cases in which values are higher on the y-axis than on the x-axis, and dots below the line are the opposite.

- In addition to these important elements on the graph, the information around the figure is also important. Good figures have a title that tells you exactly what the story in the figure is. Figures should also give you a time frame for the data they present and a note that tells you the source of the data shown and when it was collected.

Practice interpreting a few graphs so you will be ready to think about the figures in the chapters to come!

ONE MORE THING

Politics, like every significant human endeavor, becomes more intriguing the more deeply it is explored and understood. Our book aims to give you not only a strong basic foundation for understanding political life in the present-day United States but also a glimpse of how intellectually enjoyable it can be to grapple with its puzzles and paradoxes.



Protesters swarm Capitol building where pro-Trump supporters rioted and breached the Capitol.

lev radin/Alamy Stock Photo

1

THE LOGIC OF AMERICAN POLITICS

CHAPTER OBJECTIVES

- 1.1** Summarize the importance of institutional design in governance.
- 1.2** Discuss the role of a constitution in establishing the rules and procedures that government institutions must follow for collective agreement.
- 1.3** Identify different types of collective action problems.
- 1.4** Explain the costs of collective action.
- 1.5** Describe the different ways that representative government works.
- 1.6** Discuss the similarities and differences between private, public, and collective goods.

American politics is in a difficult period. We watch politicians in Washington, DC, struggle and mostly fail to pass legislation dealing with problems which, virtually everyone agrees, badly need fixing. Voters are quick to criticize the dysfunctional government in Washington, but they continue to elect representatives who vow to undo the other party's policies. Once the Affordable Care Act (also known as "Obamacare") was passed in 2010, its cancellation became a major priority of Republican candidates for the next dozen years. Increasingly, Democratic and Republican politicians don't just promote their solutions as preferable for the country, they reject the other side's ideas as dangerous and even unpatriotic.

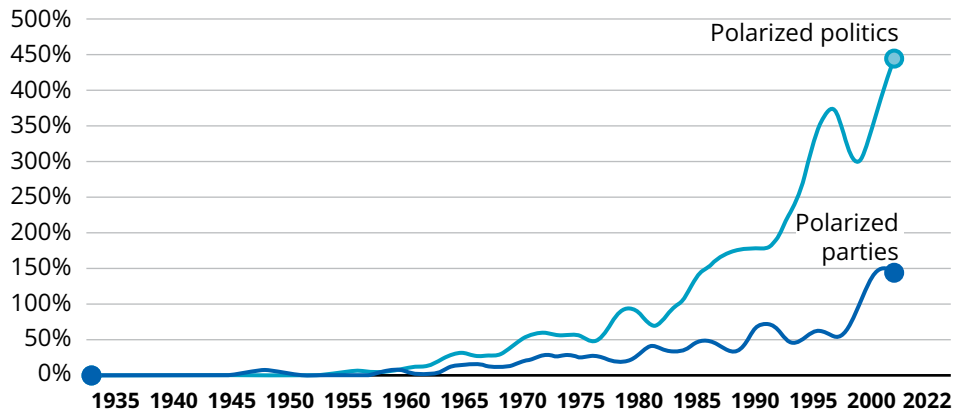
This more virulent strain of partisan debate occurs across a broad range of issues. Immigration, abortion rights, climate change, racial inclusiveness, and transgender rights generate the most heated rhetoric, but hardly any issue is immune. Even electric vehicles have become a flash point for separating the parties. Conservative critics have attacked the tax subsidy for purchases of electric cars and trucks, labeling them as toys for wealthy, bicoastal liberals. Midwestern car dealers worry that they don't know whether they should even mention the electric car sitting over in the corner when prospective customers walk through the door shopping for a new car.

Objective, easily observed facts are viewed through a partisan lens. Whether inflation is tame or rampant varies across individuals according to their party identification. Was the 2020 presidential election stolen, as Trump has claimed and all the dozens of federal judges who took up the lawsuits have disagreed? Most Republican respondents to national opinion surveys consistently agree with their party leader's false claim, while almost no Democratic respondents do. After Biden's debate with Trump in early 2024, most election surveys showed Democrats believed Biden was fit to serve another term, while a large majority of independents and almost all Republicans questioned the president's mental fitness for another four years in the White House.

Before 2000, one would occasionally hear the criticism that American politics had become too "polarized." But over the past several decades, this adjective has become a familiar rap

against Washington. To see just how much things have changed since this textbook first entered classrooms in 2000, we measured the frequency with which polarization occurred over time. Google has a tool called Ngram Viewer, which anyone can use to check the frequency with which words and phrases appear in published sources. In Figure 1.1 we have plotted a couple of alternative phrases that commonly appear in political rhetoric. While “polarized politics” (and, not shown, “political polarization”) shows up much more frequently, references to “polarized parties” have also increased sharply.

FIGURE 1.1 ■ The Growth of “Polarization” in Describing American Politics: 1933–2022



Source: Google Books Ngram Viewer, <http://books.google.com/ngrams>. Frequency count (as share of all American English text), with smoothing over previous year.

It’s not simply that previously Democratic and Republican politicians didn’t come to blows. They did. From time to time, they always have. Back during the 1930s when the country was mired in the Great Depression, the phrase “Hoover’s Depression” rolled effortlessly off the lips of Democrats. But characterization of Washington as polarized is virtually undetectable, when compared to the present era.

We suspect that its prominence today reflects other aspects of modern partisanship. We mention them here and will examine them in detail in Chapters 10, 11, and 12. First, an individual’s party identification is more closely aligned with his or her ideology today. Back in the 1930s liberals embraced FDR and his New Deal. Traditional Republicans were conservative and had little good to say about the president or his policies. Yet, beyond the core, the Democratic Party relied heavily on the rock-ribbed conservative Solid South for votes both in the Electoral College and in Congress.

Perhaps even more consequential, Democrats enjoyed huge majorities and controlled all the potential veto points. For fourteen years, Democrats controlled the White House, the Senate,

and the House of Representatives. Republicans griped about FDR and the New Deal, and they might have even deplored the state of polarization, but few people paid attention. With Democrats dominating elections throughout the country, polarization wasn't particularly relevant. Early in Roosevelt's presidency all the action was inside the Democratic Party's liberal New Deal wing. Even toward the end of the 1930s, Republicans were weaker in their opposition to the New Deal than were the southern Democrats who were reverting to their conservative views. This explains why, in Figure 1.1, expressions of polarization hardly ever appeared.

Today, by comparison, party support is evenly divided with about a third of voters saying they are Republicans, a third Democrats, and the rest, Independents. Parity dramatically changes the repercussions of party disagreement. In the next chapter, we find the Constitution's Framers designing the national government to give a sizable minority faction or party the wherewithal to defend itself against an insistent majority. They worried that given sufficient power the majority might be tempted to disenfranchise the minority party and prevent it from challenging the majority in future elections. For them, "majority tyranny" was a much more serious prospect than Washington's present-day gridlock. To protect the minority party the Framers installed an array of veto points throughout the policymaking process. Aside from the president's explicit veto of legislation, they effectively endowed the House of Representatives and the Senate with vetoes by requiring both chambers to pass the same identical bill before it is sent to the president to be signed into law. And without saying so explicitly, most delegates to the Constitutional Convention appear from their debates to have assumed that the federal judiciary would have the authority to veto unconstitutional laws and presidential actions. In Chapter 9 we examine the early development of the judicial veto of legislation and presidents' unilateral actions; it's called "judicial review."

Today in Washington, the Framers' handiwork shows up in the frequency with which control of the national government is divided between the political parties. Chapter 8 discusses how divided party control is the chief culprit making it difficult to get anything done in Congress. Beginning with the 91st Congress in 1970 (each Congress lasts for two years), the same party has controlled the presidency and both chambers of Congress in only seven of the most recent twenty-seven congresses (i.e., in only fourteen of the past fifty-four years.)

Exacerbating divided government, many of the Republicans and Democrats voters elected to Congress represent the ideological fringe of their respective parties. This in part reflects the geographical concentration of party support. With the exception of a half dozen or so swing states—neither "red" nor "blue," but "purple"—politicians are typically elected with lopsided margins. In the state of Washington Kamala Harris won the 2024 presidential vote by 18 percentage points. Meanwhile, next door in neighboring Idaho, Donald Trump scored a resounding victory by twice that margin. In the 2024 presidential election cycle, only seven of the fifty states were considered "in play," and hence they received the lion's share of advertising (lucky them!) and candidate visits.⁴ In states with lopsided, polarized majorities, candidates for Congress and state offices encounter their stiffest competition in their party primary instead of the November general election. This gives an advantage to those candidates who are most articulate in espousing their party's

core values and disclaim willingness to compromise with the politicians from the other, wrong-headed party.

Voters in these solidly red and solidly blue states may not like gridlock, but many are more concerned with sending someone who will not compromise their principles than they are with finding a passable solution to a pressing policy problem. This, in turn, sets the stage for conflict in Washington, DC, and leaves few opportunities for compromise. Even on issues where everyone agrees that the current policy is broken, the two parties cannot agree on a solution. Gridlock results. Blame game rhetoric thrives.



Republican



Republican



Republican



Democrat



Democrat



Democrat

Some congressional districts do not hesitate to send and return ideologues to Congress.

Drew Angerer/Getty Images; Win McNamee/Getty Images; Drew Angerer/Getty Images; Andrew Harnik-Pool/Getty Images; Sipa USA/Alamy Stock Photo; Alex Wong/Getty Images; kittimages/iStockPhoto

Reasonable people and cable pundits alike frequently complain that current American politics is dysfunctional. It is difficult to find fault with this assessment. Yet such an outcome is also predictable. America's Constitution provides highly partisan politicians numerous opportunities to prevent the other side from achieving its preferred policies. In truth, assembling effective governing majorities across America's constitutional system has never been easy. Even where polarization is absent, or at least more muted than it is these days, successful

collective action is difficult and rarely available to the majority party. Consider, 340 million people make a collective choice every two and four years. Americans vote in more, and more frequent, elections than do the citizens of nearly every other democracy. Except for the president, representatives are elected within a state or district. Even when a clear majority of the constituents belong to the same political party, their priorities and specific interests may significantly reflect their economies and other local concerns. Even in more placid times, politics is arduous, and during the past half century, as suggested in Figure 1.1, it has been more polarized than placid.

In more formal terms, **politics** is *the process through which individuals and groups seek agreement on a course of common, or collective, action—even as they disagree on the intended goals of that action*.^b Politics matters because each party's success in finding a solution requires the cooperation of others who are looking to solve a different problem. When their goals conflict, cooperation may be costly and difficult to achieve.

Success at politics almost invariably requires bargaining and compromise. Where the issues are simple and the participants know and trust one another, **bargaining** may be all that is needed for the group to reach a collective decision. Generally, success requires bargaining and ends in a compromise, or a settlement in which each side concedes some preferences to secure others.

Those who create government institutions (and the political scientists who study them) tend to regard preferences as “givens”—individuals and groups know what they want—that must be reconciled if they are to agree to some common course of action. Preferences may reflect the individual's economic situation, religious values, ethnic identity, or some other valued interest. We commonly associate preferences with some perception of self-interest, but they need not be so restrictive. Millions of Americans oppose capital punishment, but few of those who do so expect to benefit personally from its ban.

Reconciling disagreement over government action represents a fundamental problem of politics. James Madison played a dominant role in drafting the Constitution, and we repeatedly turn to him for guidance throughout this book. In one of the most memorable and instructive statements justifying the new Constitution to delegates at the state conventions who were deciding whether to ratify it, he explained in *Federalist* No. 10 that the new government must represent and reconcile society's many diverse preferences that are “sown into the nature of man”:

A zeal for different opinions concerning religion, concerning government, and many other points . . . have, in turn, divided mankind into parties, inflamed them with mutual animosity, and rendered them much more disposed to vex and oppress each other than to co-operate for their common good. So strong is this propensity of mankind to fall into mutual animosities, that where no substantial occasion presents itself, the most frivolous and fanciful distinctions have been sufficient to kindle their unfriendly passions and excite their most violent conflicts.

Certainly, Madison's observation appears no less true today than when he wrote it in 1787.



During the Great Depression, when millions of Americans were suddenly impoverished, many critics blamed unfettered capitalism. The National Association of Manufacturers, still a politically active industry association, posted billboards like this one around the country to bolster support for “private enterprise” by associating it with other fundamental preferences.

Courtesy of the Library of Congress Prints & Photographs Division

THE IMPORTANCE OF INSTITUTIONAL DESIGN

As participants and **preferences** in politics multiply and as issues become more complex and divisive, unstructured negotiation rarely yields success. It may simply require too much time and effort. It may require some participants to surrender too much of what they value to win concessions from the other side. In other words, a **compromise** solution simply may not be present. And finally—and this is crucial, because here the careful study of institutional design can make a difference—negotiation may expose each side to too great a risk that the other will not live up to its agreements.

Fear of renegeing may foster mutual suspicions and lead each side to conclude that “politics” will not work. When this occurs, war may become the preferred alternative. The conflict in the 1990s among Serbs, Croats, and Muslims in Bosnia followed such a dynamic. The present-day incarnation of what was once the communist country of Yugoslavia resurrected ancient enmities among people who had lived peacefully as neighbors for decades. In the absence of effective political institutions they could count on to manage potential conflicts, ethnic and religious rivals became trapped in a spiral of mutual suspicion, fear, and hostility. Without a set of rules prescribing a political process for reaching and enforcing collective agreements, they were joining militias and killing one another with shocking brutality within a year. Today, the former Yugoslav states are separate national governments striving to build institutions that replace violence with politics.

Whether at war or simply at odds over the mundane matter of scheduling employee coffee breaks, parties to a conflict benefit from prior agreement on rules and procedures for negotiations.

Indeed, this theme reappears throughout this book: a stable community, whether a club or a nation-state, endures by establishing rules and procedures for promoting successful collective action. In January 1999, when the Senate turned to the impeachment trial of President Bill Clinton, the stage was set for an escalation of the partisan rancor that had marred the same proceedings in the House of Representatives. Yet the Senate managed to perform its constitutional responsibility speedily and with a surprising degree of decorum thanks to an early, closed-door meeting in which all one hundred senators endorsed a resolution that laid out the trial's ground rules. More important, they agreed to give the chamber's Democratic and Republican leaders the right to reject any changes to these rules. Thus members on both sides of the partisan divide could proceed toward a decision without fear that the other side would resort to trickery to get the results it favored. That the Senate would find a way to manage its disagreements is not surprising. Its leaders take pride in finding collegial ways of containing the potential conflicts that daily threaten to disrupt its business.

Reliance on rules and procedures designed to reconcile society's competing preferences is nothing new. In an era of arbitrary kings and aristocrats, republican political theorists understood their value. In a 1656 treatise exploring how institutions might be constructed to allow conflicting interests to find solutions in a more egalitarian way, English political theorist James Harrington described two young girls who were arguing about how to share a single slice of cake. Suddenly one of the girls proposed a rule: "'Divide,' said one to the other, 'and I will choose; or let me divide, and you shall choose.'" At this moment, Harrington stepped away from his story and seemingly shouted to the reader, "My God! These 'silly girls' have discovered the secret of republican institutions."^c With that ingenious rule, both girls were able to pursue their self-interest (the largest possible slice of cake) and yet have the collective decision result in a division both could happily live with.¹ This became, for Harrington, a parable about the virtues of **bicameralism**—a legislature comprised of two chambers with each holding a veto over the other.

More than one hundred years after Harrington's treatise, the Framers of the Constitution spent the entire summer of 1787 in Philadelphia debating what new rules and offices to create for their fledgling government. They were guided by their best guesses about how the alternatives they were contemplating would affect the interests of their states and the preferences of their constituencies (Chapter 2). The result of their efforts, the Constitution, is a collection of rules fundamentally akin to the one discovered by the girls in Harrington's story. (Think about it: both the House of Representatives and the Senate must agree to a bill before it can be sent to the president to be signed into law.)

The events in Philadelphia remind us that however lofty the goal that gives rise to reform, **institutional design** is a product of politics. As a result, institutions may confer advantages on some interests over others. Indeed, sometimes one side, enjoying a temporary advantage, will try to permanently implant its preferences in difficult-to-change rules and procedures. The present-day Department of Education, for example, arose from the former Department of Health, Education, and Welfare in 1977 after newly elected president Jimmy Carter proposed this split as a reward for early support from teacher organizations that had long regarded a separate department as key to their ability to win increased federal funding for schools and teacher training.

The history of this department bears out the wisdom of their strategy. Republican Ronald Reagan followed Carter into the White House with the full intention of returning the education bureaucracy to its former status. But before long the cabinet secretary he appointed to dismantle the department began championing it, as did many Republicans in Congress whose committees oversaw the department's activities and budgets. Nearly four decades later, the Department of Education is entrenched in Washington, and as we found in the introduction, national education policy has become a central issue for politicians from both political parties.

CONSTITUTIONS AND GOVERNMENTS

All organizations are governed by rules and procedures for making and implementing decisions. Within colleges and universities, the student government, the faculty senate, staff associations, academic departments, and, of course, the university itself follow rules and procedures when transacting regular business. Although rules and procedures go by different names (e.g., *constitution*, *bylaw*, *charter*), their purpose is the same: to guide an organization's members in making essentially political decisions, that is, decisions in which the participants initially disagree about what they would like the organization to do.

And what happens when the organization is a nation? Consider the problems: the number of participants is great, the many unsettled issues are complex, and each participant's performance in living up to agreements cannot be easily monitored. Yet, even with their conflicts, entire populations engage in politics every day. Their degree of success depends largely on whether they have developed constitutions and governments that work.

The **constitution** of a nation establishes its governing **institutions** and *the set of rules and procedures these institutions must (and must not) follow to reach and enforce collective agreements*. A constitution may be a highly formal legal document, such as that of the United States, or it may resemble Britain's unwritten constitution, an informal "understanding" based on centuries of precedents and laws. A **government**, then, consists of these institutions and the legally prescribed process for making and enforcing collective agreements. Governments may assume various forms, including a monarchy, a representative democracy, a theocracy (a government of religious leaders), or a dictatorship.

Authority versus Power

The simple observation that governments are composed of institutions actually says a great deal and implies even more. Government institutions consist of **offices** that confer on their occupants specific authority and responsibilities. Rules and procedures prescribe how an institution transacts business and what authority relations will link offices together. **Authority** is the acknowledged right to make a particular decision. Only the president possesses the authority to nominate federal judges. However, a majority of the Senate's membership retains sole authority to confirm these appointments and allow the nominees to take office.

Authority is distinguishable from **power**, a related but broader concept that we employ throughout the book. Power refers to a politician's actual influence over others whose

cooperation is needed to achieve their political goals. An office's authority is an important ingredient, conferring influence—that is, power—to those who enlist it skillfully. For instance, President Trump had the authority to instruct the Department of Homeland Security (DHS) to test alternative prototypes for a new and extended wall at the U.S.–Mexican border. However, he did not appear to have the billions of dollars requisite to actually construct the wall. Appropriations authority rests squarely with Congress—in this instance, a Democratic House of Representatives that had little interest in accommodating the president. But then the administration discovered a provision in a military construction law that authorized presidents to move funds to different projects when “unforeseen” circumstances arise and Congress had not explicitly denied funding for the project. After the Supreme Court decided that the administration's plan fell within its authority, the Trump administration hurriedly transferred \$2.5 billion to the wall project. But the fact that it could muster sufficient funds to construct only four hundred miles of wall, much of it replacing sections of the current wall, reminds us that authority rarely ensures success.

Institutional Durability

Institutions are by no means unchangeable, but they tend to be stable and resist change for several reasons. First, with authority assigned to the office, not to the individual holding the office, established institutions persist well beyond the tenure of the individuals who occupy them. A university remains the same institution even though all of its students, professors, and administrators are eventually replaced. Institutions, therefore, contribute a fundamental continuity and orderliness to collective action. Second, the people affected by institutions make plans on the expectation that current arrangements will remain. Imagine the consternation of those college students who were packing for their Washington internship when the pandemic hit, and they discovered that they would serve distant—in many cases from their bedroom at home. Or consider the anxiety the millions of workers approaching retirement must feel whenever politicians ruminate about changing Social Security.^d

Sometimes institutions are altered to make them perform more efficiently or to accomplish new collective goals. In 1970, an executive reorganization plan consolidated components of five executive departments and agencies into a single independent agency, the Environmental Protection Agency, with a strong mandate and commensurate regulatory authority to protect the environment. By coordinating their actions and centralizing authority, these formerly dispersed agencies could more effectively monitor and regulate polluting industries.

The Political System's Logic

The quality of democracy in modern America reflects the quality of its governing institutions. Embedded in these institutions are certain core values, such as the belief that those entrusted with important government authority must periodically stand before the citizenry in elections. Balanced against this ideal of popular rule is the equally fundamental belief that government must protect certain individual liberties even when a majority of the public insists otherwise.

Throughout this text we find politicians and citizens disagreeing on the precise meaning of these basic beliefs and values as they are applied or redefined to fit modern society.

Also embedded in these institutions—initially by the Framers of the Constitution and later by amendment and two centuries of precedents based on past political practices—is a logic prescribing how members of a community should engage one another politically to identify and pursue their common goals. Although the Framers did not use the vocabulary of modern political science, they intuitively discerned this logic and realized that they must apply it correctly if the “American Experiment” were to succeed.⁶

For us, too, this logic is essential for understanding the behavior of America’s political institutions, the politicians who occupy them, and the citizens who monitor politicians’ actions. To that end, the concepts presented in the remainder of this chapter are the keys to “open up” America’s political institutions and to reveal their underlying logic. We begin with the problems (or one can think of them as puzzles) that confront all attempts at collective action. Many institutional arrangements have been devised over time to solve these problems. Those we examine here are especially important to America’s political system, and the concepts reappear as key issues throughout the book.

COLLECTIVE ACTION PROBLEMS

By virtue of their size and diversity, nations encounter special difficulties in conducting political business. In those nations where citizens participate in decisions through voting and other civic activities, still more complex issues arise. Successful **collective action** challenges a group’s members to figure out what they want to do and how to do it. The former involves comparing preferences and finding a course of action that sufficient numbers of participants agree is preferable to proposed alternatives or to doing nothing. The latter concerns implementation—not just the nuts and bolts of performing some task but reassuring participants that everyone will share the costs (such as taxes) and otherwise live up to agreements.

Even when members basically agree to solve a problem or achieve some other collective goal, there is no guarantee that they will find a solution and implement it. Two fundamental barriers—coordination problems and prisoner’s dilemmas—may block effective collective action. Coordination can be problematic at both stages of collective action—as members decide to undertake a task and subsequently work together to achieve it. **Coordination** in making a joint decision mostly involves members sharing information about their preferences; coordination in undertaking a collective effort involves effectively organizing everyone’s contribution. On this second matter, coordination may become problematic when individual members realize that their contribution may be costly. For instance, individual members may be asked to make a severe contribution such as going to war, and despite their costly effort, the collective effort might fail. Or if it succeeds, it will do so whether they personally contribute or not. Of course, if everyone felt this way, the collective effort would disintegrate.

This fundamental problem introduces a class of issues commonly referred to as the **prisoner’s dilemma**. It refers to a variety of settings in which individuals find themselves personally better off by pursuing their private interests and undermining the collective effort even

when they want it to succeed. Prisoner's dilemmas pervade all of politics, from neighbors petitioning city hall for a stop sign to legislators collaborating to strike budget deals in Congress. These dilemmas especially interest us because the "solution"—that is, having everyone contribute to the collective undertaking—depends heavily on providing the kinds of incentives to individuals that governments are well equipped to do.

Coordination

The size of a group affects its members' ability to coordinate in achieving an agreed-to goal. This is true even when everyone is poised to do their part. They still need to know what their contribution requires them to do. Here, a classical music performance offers an education in the costs of coordinating collective action. During a concert, the members of a string quartet coordinate their individual performances by spending nearly as much time looking at one another as they do their own music. Volume, tempo, and ornamentation must be executed precisely and in tandem. By the end of a successful concert, the effort required is evident on the triumphant musicians' perspiring faces. A symphony orchestra, by contrast, achieves comparable coordination, despite its greater numbers, by retaining one of its members to put aside the musical instrument and take up the conductor's baton. By focusing on the conductor, orchestra members are able to coordinate their playing and produce beautiful music. And at the end of the concert, the conductor is the first one to mop a perspiring brow.

The challenges to successful coordination increase with size.^f Large groups trying to reach a shared goal might emulate the symphony in designating and following a leader. Members of the House of Representatives and the Senate configure procedures to enable Congress to decide policy for the hundreds of issues presented each session. But to achieve that objective, the 435-member House and the 100-member Senate proceed differently, following a logic reflecting the size of their organizations. The House delegates to a Rules Committee the responsibility for scheduling the flow of legislation onto the floor and setting limits on deliberations and amendments. This important committee becomes the "leader" in setting the body's agenda. The entire House cedes this authority to a committee because coordination is vital if the chamber is to identify and pass the most preferred legislation. By contrast, the smaller Senate functions similarly to a string quartet; it achieves comparable levels of coordination without having to surrender authority to a specialized committee. In the Senate, the same coordination arises from informal discussions among members and party leaders. This explains why society's collective decisions are generally delegated to a small group of professionals, namely **politicians**, who intensively engage one another in structured settings, namely government, to discover mutually attractive collective decisions.

Despite the problems presented by a great number of participants, successful mass coordination occasionally succeeds without delegation to politicians or the presence of institutions that channel individuals' choices. Nowhere is this more evident than every four years, when voters participate in primaries to select their party's nominee for president. Some voters may have strong opinions about the merits of the candidates. Many will be largely indifferent on this score, since all the candidates belong to the voter's party. Democratic primary voters study the campaigns to decide not only whose promises and pledges they personally prefer but even more

importantly which candidate other Democrats appear most excited about. What motivates their choice is finding a candidate who stands the best chance of winning.

In the 2020 Democratic presidential primaries, twenty-three candidates vied for nomination. This left voters wondering which one stood the best chance of defeating President Trump. When someone who performed well in the polls was shown support in a state's primary, that person rose in the national polls. Most stumbled badly, including the initial front-runner, Joe Biden. But when a number of states broke his way during Super Tuesday, the other campaigns essentially collapsed overnight. Biden's Super Tuesday victory may not have persuaded supporters of the other Democratic candidates that Biden's policies were wise. Instead, these voters discerned a bandwagon emerging, one capable of taking them to victory in November. The Super Tuesday results supplied a prominent cue directing them how to pool their collective efforts. Such a cue is called a **focal point**.

Internet-based social networks offer levels of focal point coordination unimaginable in earlier decades. A remarkable example of nearly spontaneously coordinated protest activity occurred in 2006, when a Los Angeles union and church organized a protest march against anti-immigrant legislation under consideration by the House of Representatives. The organizers hoped to arouse twenty thousand participants, but after they persuaded several Spanish-radio DJs to publicize the rally, more than half a million protesters showed up. The size of the turnout amazed everyone, including the organizers, and the crowd quickly overwhelmed the police force. Clearly, there was a pent-up demand needing only a cue as to when and where everyone would appear. Since then, mass demonstrations have become something of the norm. And with the rise of social media, spontaneous demonstrations have become even easier to organize and, consequently, more commonplace. During the 2020 coronavirus pandemic, crowds suddenly showed up in a dozen cities on the same weekend to protest states' pandemic quarantines. These demonstrations were soon eclipsed by even more and larger demonstrations against police brutality, after a police officer's casual murder of George Floyd in Minneapolis in May 2020. By 2024 people were no longer awed by the alacrity and scope of campus demonstrations shortly after Israel's massive bombing campaign against Gaza's cities began.

Each of these examples has a feature in common: they are what economists call "cooperative" games. For the most part, members of the symphony, people seeking ways to demonstrate their displeasure, ordinary voters in presidential primaries, and the like are ready to act but require the direction the focal signal provides. There are exceptions, of course. In 2016, some Republican voters were gung ho for Trump and others were "never Trumpers," but most Republicans piled onto the Trump bandwagon after it became clear that he was the only viable candidate in the race. Those who join protests, whether it embraces the Black Lives Matter movement or the January 6 raid on the Capitol, are looking for a way to express their unhappiness. Organizers send out a signal through social media about when and where to show up; those eager to protest do so.

We now turn to more problematic challenges to collective action—situations in which those being summoned to join a collective undertaking may be motivated to stay on the sidelines even though they fully endorse their group's goals and efforts to achieve them. Notice in the examples considered so far, the coordination problem was simply one of focally supplying

information—when and where would-be protesters should materialize to express their displeasure with the state of the world or presidential primary voters to register support for the candidate who appears to have the best chance of winning in the fall’s general election. Unlike these instances, where only mutual ignorance stood in the way of a cooperative effort, many other attempts at collective action—daresay, most other—face a more serious hurdle to success. In these instances, even those individuals who wholeheartedly agree with the collectivity’s goals and call to action may find a reason to stay on the sidelines. This is when those being called to action sense that they would be better off shirking their contribution and letting others achieve the collectivity’s success. Here too the goals of the collectivity are not at issue. Rather, the problem is a misalignment between the group’s goals and the individual’s private incentives. The many situations in which agreement on a group’s goals are insufficient to ensure a successful effort or even whether it even gets off the ground belong to a class of coordination problems known as prisoner’s dilemma. Unlike scenarios with cooperative coordination, more than a focal signal pointing everyone in the same direction may be required. Overcoming the urge to shirk one’s contribution will frequently require that the group monitor its members’ actions and, where necessary, find a way to induce them to contribute to the collectivity’s success.

The Prisoner’s Dilemma

Since it was first formally introduced in the late 1950s, the prisoner’s dilemma has become one of the most widely used concepts in the social sciences. A casual Google search generated over half a million hits on this phrase, bringing up websites on subjects far afield from political science and economics (where systematic consideration of the concept originated), including psychiatry, evolutionary biology, and even sports. The prisoner’s dilemma depicts a specific tension in social relations, one long intuitively understood by political thinkers. Solving this dilemma fundamentally distinguishes political success and failure and is a cornerstone of our inquiry throughout the text. What precisely is the prisoner’s dilemma, and why is it so important for the study of American politics?

The prisoner’s dilemma arises whenever individuals who ultimately would benefit from cooperating with each other also have a powerful and irresistible incentive to break the agreement and exploit the other side. Only when each party is confident that the other will live up to an agreement can they successfully break out of the dilemma and work to their mutual advantage. A simple example of how this works is the original exercise that gives the prisoner’s dilemma its name. In the movie stills from the 1941 drama *I Wake Up Screaming*, homicide detectives are subjecting screen legends Victor Mature and Betty Grable to the prisoner’s dilemma. Specifically, each murder suspect is being advised to confess and testify against the other, in return for a lighter prison sentence. Deep down Mature and Grable know that the police do not have enough evidence to convict them of murder. All they have to do is stick to their story (i.e., cooperate), and, at worst, they may have to spend six months in jail on a gun possession charge. If both were to confess, each would get a five-year sentence. Each of them is offered a deal: in exchange for a full confession, the “squealer” will get off scot-free, whereas the “fall guy” or “sucker” will be convicted and likely receive a ten-year prison term. In the movie both suspects are isolated in their cells for a few days, with the detectives hinting that their partner is “singing like a canary.” As the days pass, each begins to

recognize the other's character flaws and panics. If Mature squeals, Grable realizes, she must also in order to avoid a ten-year stretch. If, however, she has underestimated his virtues and he holds out, well, that would be unfortunate, but she gains some solace in knowing that her lone confession will be her "get-out-of-jail" card. Of course, Mature, stewing in his cell, reaches the same conclusion. Why this movie presents a genuine dilemma is that *in this setting* confessing offers the best outcome for each suspect, regardless of what the other individual does. So, in the end, they both confess and spend the next five years in the slammer.⁵

So what does this dilemma have to do with American politics? Everything. Every successful political exchange must tacitly solve the prisoner's dilemma. Exchanges occur because each side recognizes that it will be better off with a collective outcome rather than with trying to act alone. Had Mature and Grable somehow managed to stay silent, their cooperation would have shaved all but six months from their five-year terms. And both knew this. Yet neither could be sure the other confederate would stay silent. To get something worthwhile, both sides must typically give up something of value in return. The moral: unless participants in a collective decision can trust each other to abide by their commitments, they will not achieve a mutually profitable exchange.

How do the Matures and Grables shift the outcome from that quadrant, where neither cooperates, to the one where they both do? One solution involves making renegeing and defection very expensive. In some settings this can be achieved informally. For example, politicians who repeatedly make campaign promises that they subsequently fail to act on lose credibility with voters and become vulnerable to defeat in the next election. Once in office, renegeing on an agreement will quickly damage a politician's reputation, and others will refuse to deal with them in the future. Where failure to live up to one's agreements imposes costs down the road, politicians will think twice before doing so.

Another common solution is to create institutions that help parties discover opportunities to profit through cooperation and, most important, guarantee that agreements are honored. Here, government's coercive authority is useful. An anthropologist once reported that two tribes in a remote region of New Guinea lived in a state of continual warfare, to the point



Subjected to the classic prisoner's dilemma interrogation, Victor Mature and Betty Grable turn out to have nothing to confess in the 1941 whodunit *Wake Up Screaming*. Since its introduction in the 1950s, thousands of articles have enlisted this metaphor to explore the fundamental conflict between what is rational behavior for each member of a group and what is in the best interest of the group as a whole.

20th Century Fox/Photofest



Thomas Hobbes, *Leviathan, or The Matter, Forme, & Power of a Commonwealth Ecclesiasticall and Civill* [1651; reprint, Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1958].

that many more men from both tribes had died in battle than from natural causes. The anthropologist summed up their dilemma: “In the absence of any central authority, they are condemned to fight forever . . . since for any group to cease defending itself would be suicidal.” He added that these tribes might “welcome pacification.” One day the distant government in Papua sent a ranger armed with a handgun to establish territorial boundaries between the tribes and rules governing their chance encounters. Suddenly, the decades-long warfare ended. Each side believed the ranger with his single sidearm presented sufficient force to punish any breaches (defection) of the peace agreements, and the now-peaceful neighbors began to use politics—not war—to solve their conflicts.² Members of a society must be able to engage one another politically. Without confidence that agreements will be enforced, the political process quickly unravels. Participants will balk at undertaking mutual obligations they suspect their bargaining partners will not honor.

In his 1651 treatise on the origin and purposes of government, *Leviathan*, political philosopher Thomas Hobbes examined the straits to which society is reduced when its government is unable to enforce collective obligations and agreements. In a famous passage he warned that life would return to “a state of nature . . . solitary, poor, nasty, brutish and short.”³ The mortality rate of the New Guinea tribesmen confirmed Hobbes’s insight. They were not naturally combative; rather, these tribes simply could not trust each other. Thus enforcement succeeded in encouraging cooperation, but not through flaunting overwhelming force or imposing a solution on the contending parties. The ranger’s presence simply rendered any party’s defection costlier than its compliance.

Hopefully, the relevance of the prisoner’s dilemma to American politics is becoming clearer. Virtually every policy the government adopts represents a successful resolution of this dilemma. Constituencies and their representatives cooperate to achieve their separate goals—recall our definition of politics earlier—because institutions have developed to help diverse constituencies discover opportunities for mutual gain through cooperation and, just as important, to deter them from renegeing on their agreements. Like the ranger with a handgun from Papua, America’s political institutions foster collective action by solving the prisoner’s dilemma.

Other issues simply do not offer mutual gains through cooperation. A **zero-sum game** ensues where one party's gain is the other's loss. Elections are a classic zero-sum game. They frequently arise in national politics over controversial issues that cannot be easily compromised. In such instances, politics may break down and give way to force. National policy on rights to abortion frequently becomes just such an issue where irreconcilable preferences seek to control policy. Chapter 4 recounts the most intractable issue of all in American political history—the failure, despite repeated compromise attempts, to come up with a policy on slavery's extension into the territories during the 1850s. This issue was resolved only by the deadliest war of its time.

Even when each side can envision opportunities for mutual gains, American politics is far from failure proof. Everyone agrees that in several decades the Social Security program will be unable to keep up current levels of benefits long before the millennial generation approaches retirement. Both Republicans and Democrats in Washington want to fix it, and from time to time one side will gingerly make an overture to the other. But all of the solutions are costly or otherwise unpopular, either requiring hefty new taxes or curtailing benefits. Both political parties worry that as soon as they offer a tough solution, the other side will exploit it to score points in the next election. Until politicians figure out a way to cooperate and share the blame, Social Security reform will remain the proverbial “third rail” of politics: “Touch it and you are dead.”^h

Free-Rider Problem

A form of the prisoner's dilemma that afflicts large groups is the **free-rider problem**. Whenever an individual's contribution to the success of the collective effort is so small as to seem inconsequential, they will be tempted to free ride—that is, fail to contribute to the group's undertaking while enjoying the benefits of its success. Even those who enthusiastically support the group's goal realize that they can escape fulfilling their obligations. When the motivation to free ride is a serious possibility, several outcomes are possible.

First, it may stymie collective action altogether. Just knowing that the other participants might free ride may dissuade those ready to pony up their share of money or effort from doing so. If many people react this way—and many do—and suspect their neighbors of doing so as well, too few contribute to the collective effort, and, thus, it fails. During Barack Obama's 2008 presidential campaign, “get out the vote” operatives discovered that organizing volunteers into groups of more than ten reduced the group's success in contacting prospective voters. Instead of crusaders making a difference, they felt like “numbers on a spreadsheet.” A lot of them dropped out of the campaign. Having learned this lesson, in 2012 the Obama campaign organized volunteers into smaller teams where they could more easily see their contribution making a difference. As a result, the campaign's voter contact efforts proved more successful.⁴

A second possible outcome arises when the collective undertaking will benefit some participants more than others. So much more, in fact, those who have a comparatively small stake in a successful collective effort realize that they can shirk their contribution without endangering the outcome. This is because one or several other participants will derive so much value that they will absorb the full cost of the undertaking. Such settings are ripe for free riding.

This is the dilemma the United States grappled with unsuccessfully over the years in trying to persuade our NATO partners to contribute their agreed-to resources—2 percent of the