4.1 Introduction
4.2 Political Culture: Who Are We?
4.3 Political Socialization: How We Become Political Creatures
4.4 Political Participation: Getting Involved
4.5 Young and Old, Men and Women
4.6 Black and White, Rich and Poor
4.7 I Couldn’t Care Less!
4.8 Why Vote?
4.9 How Can I Decide?
4.10 A Look Ahead: Apathy, Efficacy, and the Media

Chapter Review
Key Terms
Resource Sites
Notes
4.1 Introduction

Are you an American?

Easy question, right? If you were born in or live legally in this country, your answer is probably “sure” (otherwise, it’s probably “no”). Still, if you are an American, when you think about your identity, is “American” qualified with something else?

Irish American?

African American?

Italian American?

Chinese American?

Cuban American?

German American?

Native American?

Vietnamese American?

Mexican American?

Those qualifiers tell us about where we came from. Many people think of themselves as Americans while simultaneously seeing themselves in terms of their heritage. This says a lot about the richness of the American identity, and helps explain why American politics can be so complex.

On one hand, Americans are many different people with deep roots in a variety of diverse, sometimes conflicting traditions. On the other, Americans share a common set of values, attitudes and beliefs, which together form an American political culture. Those values tend to be about “buying in” to the idea of America and how it operates, which is essential in order for the United States to function as a nation.

We saw in Chapter 3 just how much disagreement there is in America on specific issues of policy. At the same time, there’s a lot of agreement on how to set up the political rules of the game. A basic accord supplies the framework for American political culture. It encompasses things like:

• Acceptance of representative democracy and capitalism as superior political and economic arrangements
• Acceptance of the rule of law for resolving disputes and determining political winners and losers
• Belief in compromise with others as a way of achieving objectives
• Agreement on the rules for electing representatives
• Approval of the fundamental choice of liberty and opportunity over equal outcomes (which we talked about in Chapter 1)

These bedrock qualities of the American political culture help to maintain the legitimacy of the system. If they seem obvious to you, to the point where you find yourself thinking, “Who wouldn’t agree with these things?,” then you are deeply enmeshed in American political culture. In practice, there is no reason to believe people will automatically accept these positions, and individuals in many other cultures do not. That most Americans would accept these points without thinking about it addresses how political culture works: It is composed of principles that are so fundamental as to be almost invisible.

Accepting this broad framework doesn’t imply that everyone agrees with the specific choices made in America on matters of policy—far from it, as we saw in Chapter 3. But it does mean that there’s a sense of acceptance and even pride in the American system that is a basic part of the identity of many Americans, regardless of their origin. You might even say that without that acceptance, Americans wouldn’t have the means for working through the many political differences that arise. It’s the same way in other countries,
too, even if the particulars of other political cultures are different (see Global Topics: Political Culture in Comparative Perspective).

In this chapter, we’re going to explore American political culture in order to get a sense of who Americans are and how American political culture affects politics. Then, we’ll move from the collective portrait of a diverse nation to political socialization, the processes that shape our individual awareness of and relationship to politics. Finally, we’ll put these general observations together with the individual ones when we look at how political culture and political socialization relate to participation in the political arena in ways large and small.

GLOBAL TOPICS

Political Culture in Comparative Perspective

The American political culture is so universally accepted that when we talk about it, you may just think we’re stating the obvious. That’s not uncommon for something that’s part of a core identity—it seems obvious because it’s so deeply ingrained. This tends to make it difficult to imagine that the political cultures of other nations may look quite different because of the human tendency to believe that others fundamentally think like we do and want what we want. Because of this, American political culture may be best understood in a comparative perspective, in which we’re open to the possibility that people in other nations have a different relationship to their government and to what constitutes acceptable political action.

Have you ever heard someone say that something is “un-American,” like “it’s un-American not to reward someone for hard work”? Now try to imagine someone saying something is “un-Canadian” or “un-Vietnamese.” Most likely, you’ll never hear anything like that because thinking about one’s nation in terms apart from others is not a part of all political cultures. That’s not to say that people of other nations do not notice cultural differences, but they don’t necessarily define and describe themselves in terms of those differences. In the United States, though, it’s probably not necessary to explain what it means for something to be un-American because, as vague as that phrase is, for many Americans, it encompasses a set of ideas associated with what it means to be an American. In that respect, it is both a part of the political culture and a way of reflecting that culture to others.

Political culture may be understood as the product of a nation’s formative political experiences—whether a nation has a long history of democracy or repression or corruption or incompetent leadership. In the early 1960s, researchers Gabriel Almond and Sidney Verba wrote a pioneering study comparing political cultures of different nations, taking into account these historical differences. In The Civic Culture, they attempt to explain differences in the levels of political attachment by people in different nations, and identify the characteristics that motivate people to political action.

They found mid-twentieth century Italy to be an alienated political culture, where people had low levels of national pride and lacked confidence in their ability to influence what government did. Almond and Verba attribute these tendencies to a history fraught with tyranny and ineffective efforts at democratic self-governance. In Mexico, they found a sense of isolation from politics and mistrust of authority mixed with great national pride and aspirations toward democracy. They characterize the German political culture, one generation removed from the trauma of World War II, as one where people are knowledgeable about politics and actively engaged in formal political activity like voting, while feeling detached and cynical about politics. And they see the political culture of England as being highly developed, with engaged, interested citizens who take emotional satisfaction from political participation.

These patterns differ from the political culture of the United States, which Almond and Verba regard as a participant civic culture where, in contrast to the other four nations, people are frequently exposed to political messages, feel obligated to participate in their communities and feel competent to do so, tend to voluntarily join groups in large numbers, get emotionally involved in political campaigns, and take great pride in the political system. Does this description conform to the way you see America? Would describing it any other way seem—un-American?
4.2 Political Culture: Who Are We?

A few years ago, the Institute for Advanced Studies in Culture at the University of Virginia attempted to identify some of the constants in American political culture. They discovered nearly unanimous buy-in among Americans for what they call the “American creed”—ideals about the public life of America. Take a second to see how much you subscribe to the “American creed” by answering the five brief questions in Figure 4.1.

Pretty clearly, Americans overwhelmingly are proud of their country, believe in its goodness and the goodness of its citizens, and even feel that America has a mission to serve as an example for the rest of the world. These elements of political culture may seem abstract, and in one important sense, they are: The nearly universal acceptance of others in theory does not translate into universal tolerance for the practice of people expressing unpopular ideas, as we saw in Section 3.3d, “Tolerance,” in Chapter 3. Political culture is manifested through abstract perceptions about self and nation, rather than through specific attitudes, beliefs, and actions that may be at odds with how many Americans view themselves. This infuses political culture with a generous portion of mythology.

We saw the connection many Americans have to their political culture at work in the public reaction to the terror attacks of September 2001. American flags and American flag stickers blossomed overnight on homes, office buildings, and cars. The near-universal sentiment that we had been attacked was an expression of an attitude about identifying as an American. At that moment, being conservative or liberal didn’t matter, nor did the national origin of one’s ancestors. (One unfortunate and important exception to this involved Americans of the Muslim faith and of Middle Eastern origin, who experienced increased discrimination that reflected the worst elements of the hybrid American culture.)

We saw the contours of our political culture during the Cold War as well, even during times of great unrest as a result of strong differences of opinion about such things as the civil rights movement and the Vietnam War. For a while in the 1960s, the American flag became a symbol adopted by those who supported American policy in Vietnam. Some on the other side of this issue burned the American flag as a way of expressing their views, a manifestation of our cultural acceptance of dissent. We know from Chapter 3 that dissent is something people don’t embrace quite as strongly as the “American creed.” In this regard, everyone may not always accept all cultural values.

Still, even at a moment of great divisions over policy, Americans expressed attitudes and beliefs rooted deep in the political culture. Although at times vocal minorities have advocated the overthrow of the American system, an overwhelming number of Americans—including many who opposed the Vietnam War—continued to feel a patriotic attachment to the American system and rejected the Communist system of the Soviet Union as an inferior alternative.

4.2a Group Membership and Tolerance

The tendency for Americans to join organizations is one characteristic of American political culture that separates it from the political cultures of other nations. Observers of American culture have noted this characteristic for centuries. In 1831, the French nobleman Alexis de Tocqueville spent the better part of a year...
touring the United States, an experience that culminated in publishing his observations in the two-volume work, *Democracy in America*, in 1835 and 1840. In it, he made the observation that America is a nation of joiners, and that through participating in groups with fellow citizens, Americans learned the fundamentals of compromise necessary to a functioning democracy. Tocqueville noted how, “Americans of all ages, all stations in life, and all types of disposition are forever forming associations. There are not only commercial and industrial associations in which all take part, but others of a thousand different types—religious, moral, serious, futile, very general and very limited, immensely large and very minute.” Today, we would call these voluntary groups: civic and religious organizations, political clubs, sports leagues, neighborhood associations, charitable and service organizations, and educational and cultural groups. They need not be expressly political in order to teach how to tolerate and work with others; in fact, most of these groups are not political, and may be devoted to pursuits as recreational and ordinary as intramural sports or playing trumpet in the band or working on the school newspaper.

Recent research confirms what Tocqueville saw over 170 years ago: Americans tend to join groups more frequently and more widely than people in other nations. The more groups we join, the more experience we get in the give-and-take with other people that teaches us how to be tolerant. Therefore, people who join more groups tend to be more tolerant of the rights of others. It is the isolated individual who is likely to be the least tolerant of all.

However, there are indications that over the course of your lifetime, civic engagement has diminished. Historically, there have been peaks and valleys in the degree to which Americans engage in group activities, and evidence suggests that for the past several decades we have been living through one of the valleys. Political scientist Robert D. Putnam writes that over that period, Americans have become increasingly isolated from one another by joining fewer organizations and spending less time with neighbors and friends. As a consequence, Putnam argues that Americans have become detached from the relationships that reinforce basic democratic and civic values. The title of his book, *Bowling Alone*, refers to the disappearance of bowling leagues that once provided a social connection for many people, while providing a visual metaphor for the isolation that characterizes the leisure and work lives of so many people who spend their days living in places where they don’t know their neighbors, working alone in cubicles, commuting alone in cars, and recreating alone in front of the television.

Putnam sees in these trends the loss of social capital—the connections we make with each other when we spend our time in association with others. The value of social capital is in its ability to nurture trusting relationships, through which we learn how to compromise and reciprocate with others. These values are associated with having a rich civic life and stand in sharp contrast to the isolation from one another that, according to Putnam, characterizes our time and makes us feel detached and alienated from each other, our communities, and our government.

To reverse these trends, Putnam advocates the daunting task of creating social capital through renewed civic engagement in all facets of life: promoting family-friendly workplaces; designing communities with common areas that promote socializing with neighbors; encouraging clergy to spark a spiritual awakening that will promote religious tolerance; developing Internet activities that engage people in communities; and participating in social and political activities. For many, this would require changing some of the fundamental patterns of our lives—from turning off the TV to joining groups to spending less time in the car. The benefit
to individuals could be greater personal fulfillment. The benefit to the political culture would be a deeper investment in the bonds that help a republic endure. Demystifying Government: Virtual Civic Engagement considers whether social media might make something like this possible.

4.2b Immigration

Because one component of political culture is the belief that America is an open place accepting of others in need—the idea symbolized by the welcoming torch of the Statue of Liberty—America has been able to incorporate numerous subcultures that immigrant groups have brought with them to this country. This simultaneously makes American government more interesting—and more complicated. It brings texture to the American tapestry while assembling a much wider set of values than those subscribed to by the Anglican males who wrote the Constitution, making governing the country a challenge.

Changes in political culture—and politics—may be anticipated through the changing face of diversity in America. Cultural changes have also been driven in recent years by shifting migration patterns and the growing number of senior citizens in America. Let’s look a little closer at these factors. We’ll examine America’s long history of immigration and the nature of American cultural diversity, recent patterns of geographic mobility, and the aging of America.

It’s probably not overstating things to say that America is a place where just about everybody comes from somewhere else. Even the Native American civilizations that European settlers encountered when they came

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**DEMYSTIFYING GOVERNMENT**

*Virtual Civic Engagement*

There is intriguing evidence that one impetus for renewed civic engagement may be found on the Internet, as people turn to websites that actually encourage them to turn off the computer and meet in person.

A premier example of this is meetup.com, a service designed to allow people to find others online who share their interests and arrange in-person get-togethers. People looking to reach out to others can go to meetup.com and search the database of topics until they find what they’re looking for. Topics cover the range of civic and personal interests that Putnam identified as central to community life: books, films, games, health, music, pets, hobbies, work and politics—everything from Audi owners to ferret lovers. You can scan today’s list of groups by going to http://www.meetup.com/find/.

Site users can join an existing group or suggest a topic for the purpose of attracting others with the same interest. When a topic attracts enough people in the same geographic area, members vote on a time and a place for a meeting and get together in person, typically in an informal location like a bar, café—or bowling alley. Meetup.com brings together people with the same interests who otherwise might not find each other, but the interaction takes place off line, in the community.

Meetup.com was created with social activities in mind, but it unexpectedly developed an important political function in 2003, as supporters of Democratic presidential hopeful Governor Howard Dean began using the website to organize on behalf of their candidate. The official campaign rapidly recognized the value of meetup.com for national grassroots organizing, and in early 2003, placed a direct link to meetup.com on the candidate’s website. Shortly thereafter, Dean’s meetup numbers started to soar, growing from several hundred in January to over 65,000 in July, to better than 180,000 before Dean ended his presidential bid the following February.

The first Wednesday of every month became the designated day for Dean meetups, at which thousands of volunteers at hundreds of locations across America would gather in small groups to plan strategy for the Dean campaign. The Dean website trumpeted this activity as the first true grassroots presidential campaign of the Internet era, and attributed the sharp rise in Dean’s profile during 2003 to the high degree of interest the candidate generated through meetup.com. As a civic matter, meetup.com became the vehicle by which people who were previously detached from or passive about politics could get involved in a presidential campaign—many for the first time in their lives. It foreshadowed the online-driven civic engagement that would become the hallmark of Barack Obama’s 2008 presidential campaign, offering a tantalizing glimpse of how the Internet could bring people together in the real world to work for a political cause—a far cry from the couch-potato politics of passive observation and detachment offered by television.
to North America were likely populated by individuals whose origins may be traced to Asia, and to a long walk over what thousands of years ago was a land bridge across the Bering Straits between Alaska and Russia.

Between 1820 and 2000, a total of 66 million immigrants came to the United States, changing the tenor of American life. Of these, better than half (58 percent or 38,460,000) came from Europe. Much of the immigration from Europe came in waves, starting with British and Irish immigrants in the early to mid-nineteenth century, German immigrants following the Civil War, and immigrants from Eastern Europe in the first decades of the twentieth century.

One of the first waves of immigration came from the British Isles, especially Ireland. Between 1830 and 1860, almost 2 million Irish immigrants came to America, representing 40 percent of all immigrants to the United States during that period. Almost another 1.5 million arrived between 1860 and 1890. Many Irish immigrants were Catholic, adding a religious mix to what had been an overwhelmingly Protestant nation.

Germany was the next big departure point. Between 1850 and 1900, following the initial wave of Irish immigrants, a large group of German immigrants came to the United States. The peak was in the 1880s, when 1,450,000 German immigrants represented more than 25 percent of all immigrants during that time. A large influx of immigrants from the Scandinavian countries overlapped the wave of German immigrants. Over 1.5 million Scandinavians, many of them Norwegians and Swedes, came to America between 1870 and 1910.

The turn of the twentieth century witnessed a large influx of Italian immigrants—over 3 million between 1900 and 1920—representing 20 percent of all immigrants during that time. The same period was a peak time for Eastern European immigrants. Three million Russians arrived between 1890 and 1920, 1.2 million Hungarians arrived between 1900 and 1920, and 250,000 Poles arrived during the 1920s. This wave of immigration included a large number of Jews, Russian Orthodox, and other non-Protestants. Notice how as time passed, European immigration moved clockwise, from western to central to eastern Europe (see Figure 4.2).

European immigration tells only part of the story, though. More recently, America has become home to large numbers of new immigrants from different parts of the globe. Specifically:

- Almost three-quarters (72 percent) of the total immigration to the United States from Mexico and the Caribbean has happened since 1970.
- Sixty-two percent of the total immigration to the United States from Asia has happened since 1980.
- Slightly more than three-quarters (77 percent) of the total immigration to the United States from Africa has happened since 1980.
- Slightly more than one-third (34 percent) of the total immigration to the United States from Central and South America has happened since 1990.
The “Know-Nothing” movement showed how tolerance can be sorely tested when some people feel threatened by large-scale changes to their way of life. This regrettable chapter in American history has been repeated several times, as people with different religious practices, skin colors, and native languages came to America and, by virtue of their numbers, modified the cultural and political landscape. Jews arrived in large numbers in the early twentieth century to widespread anti-Semitism. The wave of German immigrants was subsiding around World War I, but American involvement in the war generated public hostility to immigrants of German descent. During the 1990s, the most recent wave of American immigrants produced a “close-the-borders” backlash aimed at Latinos, an attitude that’s still present in some corners of our immigration debate.

Apart from the psychological component of adjusting to people who may look different or speak and act in an unfamiliar way, periods of widespread immigration invariably put a strain on the resources that government must provide to its swelling population. This poses a material problem for the government and a political problem for elected officials. It’s why anti-immigration dictates found a sympathetic audience among those Californians who felt their pocketbooks were being stretched to provide for the needs of a flood of immigrants, many of whom had snuck into California through the Mexican border.

Turn over this picture, however, and you’ll find the beneficial side of immigration. People from different cultures bring variety to everything from the arts to politics, adding richness to the things people consider uniquely American. Individuals willingly coming to the United States tend to embrace the “American creed,” which provides a common sense of self-identification. Many immigrants—even from vastly different political cultures—instinctively subscribe to key elements of the American approach to government and society. For instance, Irish immigrants who came to America to escape poverty accepted the idea of opportunity as an
avenue toward self-betterment. Contemporary immigrants from Cuba who came to America to escape the repression of the Castro regime fiercely embrace the American values of liberty and limited government.

Every generation of immigrants brought with them the myth of the American dream, that their children would find a better life despite the hardships and discrimination that might await them. However glorified this myth may be, to a certain extent, Americans have eventually accepted groups that in their day were derided as dangerously threatening to the established social order. History suggests this may eventually be the fate of the groups some contemporary Americans find threatening.

4.2c Diversity

With immigration comes variety. Just look at the 2000 Census. The Constitution requires that a census be taken every ten years, in which everyone in the country is supposed to be counted. The census says a lot about the composition of the United States, and tells us how it has changed since the last census was taken a decade ago. Demysifying Government: Slipping through the Cracks tells why an accurate census is so important.

Figures from the 2000 Census confirm the story of America’s immigrant past and present. Although about seven in ten Americans is a non-Hispanic white, roughly one in eight is African American, slightly less than one in eight is of Hispanic origin, and one in 25 is Asian American. Also, just as immigrant groups have traditionally settled in specific states or regions, the Census reveals that the South, Southwest, and portions

DEMYSTIFYING GOVERNMENT

Slipping through the Cracks

As you can probably imagine, it’s impossible to count everybody in a nation as vast as the United States. Some people live in remote areas; others are homeless; many others simply elude the reach of census takers. In fact, the Census Bureau estimates that in 1990, about four million people were missed—amounting to 1.6 percent of the population.

This probably doesn’t sound like a big deal unless you’re really compulsive about record keeping, but from a political perspective, it’s huge. Real resources ride on the outcome of the census—big dollars and real power. Some policies provide for federal money to be allocated to states based on population, so states where a disproportionate percentage of the population was undercounted will lose funds they would otherwise be eligible for, while still having to provide for the undercounted people. When we talk about Congress in Chapter 9, we’ll see that the census is used to determine which states will gain or lose seats in the House of Representatives, so states where a disproportionate percentage of the population was undercounted will lose representation to which they’re entitled.

Compounding the political tension is the fact that all population groups are not undercounted equally, with minority group members far more likely to be overlooked. The Census Bureau estimates that in 1990, 0.9 percent of the white population eluded census takers, compared with 4.4 percent of African Americans and 5 percent of Hispanics. So, members of these groups—not just states—lost out on federal funds and representation in Congress because they were not fully counted.

It turns out that there’s a remedy for this disparity, but it’s highly controversial. The Census Bureau can estimate the true population using statistical methods, correcting the errors produced by the actual head count.

This possibility generated a huge political battle in the days leading up to the 2000 Census. Because the underrepresented minority groups tend to disproportionately support candidates of the Democratic Party, any statistical adjustment to the census would favor Democrats, probably resulting in the creation of more congressional districts favorable to Democratic candidates. Not surprisingly, Republicans ferociously opposed the statistical estimate, claiming it would amount to a mere guess at the true population—a far cry from the hard numbers required by the Constitution. They argued that even a flawed head count was better than an estimated count, and closer to what the nation’s founders had in mind. In 1999, the Supreme Court put its stamp on this reasoning, claiming that using estimated figures for determining congressional representation was unconstitutional.

But the matter of sampling did not go away. In 2009, President Obama appointed Robert Groves, a statistical sampling expert, to head the census bureau. Groves had been an advocate of sampling during the 2000 census, and some congressional Republicans feared he would rekindle the sampling conflict in advance of the 2010 census, a concern Groves put to rest at his confirmation hearing by asserting he would not use the methodology.
of the Northeast are the most diverse regions of the country. The Latino population is largest in California, Texas, Florida, New York, and New Jersey. The Asian American population is concentrated in California. African Americans are most numerous in the states of the deep South and in the large industrial states of the East and Midwest. In contrast, northern New England and the Great Plains and Rocky Mountain states tend to have the highest percentage of white residents.

If diversity influences politics, then it should be pretty easy to imagine that national politics is far from a singular phenomenon. Although political activity is about much more than racial or ethnic identification, it still stands to reason that states and regions with greater diversity are likely to voice different concerns and interests than states and regions with less diversity. The politics of New York is different than the politics of Idaho in part because of the different groups that settled there.

Some of these differences go back to the distinctions between liberals and conservatives that we talked about in Chapter 3, although this too can be oversimplified. You can review the concepts of liberalism and conservatism in the Demystifying Government box below.

For instance, we mentioned that African Americans are more likely to express the liberal position supporting government activity in economic and social matters—adding a liberal bent to politics in regions with large African American communities. Not every minority group has liberal inclinations, though. Older Cuban Americans, for instance, can be quite conservative politically, lending a conservative quality to regions with large Cuban American communities, like southern Florida.

Probably the biggest story in the 2000 and 2010 Census is the emerging majority of minority groups, so to speak. Those figures we were just talking about from the year 2000 are simply a snapshot of America at a given time. It’s also possible to look at trends in immigration patterns and birth rates, and try to estimate what

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**DEMYSTIFYING GOVERNMENT**

**Review: Liberalism and Conservatism**

**Liberals**: An ideology that advocates the use of government power to address economic and social problems, like unemployment and environmental protection, while limiting government involvement in moral matters like abortion rights and prayer in public schools.

**Conservatives**: An ideology that advocates limits on government power to address economic and social problems, relying instead on economic markets and individual initiative to address problems like health care and education, while promoting government involvement in moral matters to, for instance, minimize or eliminate abortions or permit prayer in public schools.

**Liberalism**: In its broadest sense endorses an active role for government in addressing social and economic problems, and a more limited role for government in refereeing matters involving personal or moral values.

Liberals advocate government activism (which in a practical sense translates into spending money on government programs) for such social issues as environmental protection, health and child care, urban decay, education and drug addiction, and for such economic issues as welfare and Social Security. In this regard, liberals seek to use the power of government to assist those in need (for instance, through welfare and drug programs) and to compensate for the inequities (like unequal access to health care) or consequences (like air and water pollution) of the economic marketplace.

At the same time, liberals typically believe government should stay out of matters that they consider to be of a moral nature. Consequently, liberals may oppose using government power to limit abortion rights, impose the death penalty, or require prayer in public schools (however, they may be quite comfortable engaging the government to protect abortion rights and defend against school prayer). Liberals may also favor gun control laws, limits on military spending, and tax laws that benefit lower-income people.

**Conservatism**: Applies different principles to arrive at mirror-image positions. In its broadest sense, conservatism values the power of the marketplace to address economic concerns and individual initiative to confront social problems, therefore advocating a limited role for government power in economic and social matters. Contemporary conservatism for many years has accepted the reality of America’s social welfare programs (although some of today’s conservatives have spoken about the need to privatize or eliminate social programs), but conservatives tend to be suspicious of government programs that are not subjected to what they regard as the beneficial self-correcting forces of the marketplace, and that therefore take money out of taxpayer’s pockets that could be put toward free enterprise.

Consequently, conservatives advocate less involvement in (and less money for) government programs on environmental protection, health and childcare, urban issues, education, and drug addiction. They regard welfare as a program that can undermine individual initiative, and have been successful in recent years in restructuring government welfare benefits to orient the program toward getting people to find jobs. Conservatives, like liberals, embrace Social Security, but are more likely to be interested in making it a market-oriented program.
America will look like in the years ahead. The Census Bureau has developed a projection like this, and you can see the results in Figure 4.4.

Keep in mind that this is an estimate based on current trends, and that if immigration or birth rates should change, the estimates could be off. Nonetheless, the most notable thing about the projection is that during your lifetime, the white majority that has always characterized this country will become a numerical minority. By the year 2060, non-Hispanic whites are projected to dip below the 50 percent mark in total population, remaining the largest group in America but shrinking from a majority to a plurality of the population, as Hispanics, African Americans, and Asian Americans will together constitute a numerical majority of Americans.

For a nation that’s always seen itself as primarily Anglican, these changes promise to create an entirely different identity—one with potentially profound political implications. The questions are speculative, but interesting, even if the answers are unknowable. What would it mean for whites to be just another minority under these new circumstances? Would whites see themselves as a minority? As the largest minority? Or still as a majority? Would they continue to control a disproportionate amount of economic resources by virtue of having been a majority group for so long? Would greater diversity in the population translate into greater diversity among elected representatives, and if so, what might that mean for the direction of our politics?

### 4.2d Migration

In addition to being an immigrant nation, America has always been a mobile nation. As large numbers of people move around within the United States, politics is inevitably affected. Once an agrarian country centered on rural concerns, America was redefined by industrialization, which brought about massive movement toward urban centers in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries. With urban development, political attention turned to urban issues like transportation, sanitation, labor laws, and a host of matters that were irrelevant in an earlier time.

In recent decades, there have been two politically meaningful population shifts: regionally from the old industrial cities of the Midwest and Northeast to the South and Southwest, and nationally from cities to suburbs.

The regional shift is evident when you compare where people lived in 1920 with where they lived in 1960 and 2000. Ninety-odd years ago, the most populous states were in the industrial centers of the Midwest and Northeast that in recent years have been dubbed the “Rust Belt” region, after the aging industries of twentieth-century America that were once their crowning jewels. By 1960, the move to warmer “Sun Belt” states had already begun, and by 2000, America’s center of gravity had shifted to the South and West. Figure 4.5, which is best viewed online, illustrates these population shifts.

The ascendency of conservative national politics coincided with this migration. Through the 1960s, heavily populated industrial centers were the engine of liberal politics, a key base of political support for presidents.
like Franklin Roosevelt and Lyndon Johnson who, as we noted in Chapter 2, presided over a large expansion in the role of the federal government. These regions lost political clout as they lost population to the Sun Belt states, which traditionally have been more socially and economically conservative.

Now it’s easy to overstate the relationship between population shifts and changes in political currents—there’s a lot more to it than where people move, as we’ll see as we go along. For instance, liberal presidents like Roosevelt and Johnson drew support from outside their base in the Rust Belt. And, in recent years, immigration patterns have started to eclipse the effects of domestic migration, as an influx of more liberal Latino voters has softened the conservative leanings of the Sun Belt and made several Western and Southwestern states fertile ground for Democrats. Still, as people move, congressional districts move with them, and national officials take notice of where the votes are.

The other meaningful migration in recent years has been the steady nationwide exodus of city dwellers to ever-expanding rings of suburbs. The urban exodus began after World War II, and by 2000, a country that originated as a rural nation and experienced urban migration in the twentieth century had become suburbanized. A glimpse of the nation at night, with lights radiating out from core cities, communicates a sense of how America’s population spreads out for miles from downtown.

When we think of suburbs, we tend to think of affluence, and it is true that part of the motivation for the post-war migration from inner cities by people with resources was to escape growing urban decay. Today’s suburbs are more complex than this; some older suburbs have predominantly working class neighborhoods, and in some places, suburbs are starting to become ethnically diverse.

Traditionally more conservative than residents of urban areas, suburbanites today are a politically complex lot. In the 1996 election, for instance, political analysts made a lot out of the phenomenon of “soccer moms”—suburban women with young kids (whom they shuttled to soccer games, hence the name). These voters tended to be social moderates who were attracted in large numbers to the policies of President Clinton, permitting the Democratic president to make inroads through conservative suburban areas. In 2004, those same analysts labeled these voters “security moms” concerned with terrorism, who were more likely...
to support President Bush. By 2008, the suburbs had become a rich source of votes for Barack Obama and his message of inclusive “post-partisan” politics.

The politics of affluence does play a role in some urban-suburban issues, however, like education. Public schools in many states are supported with property taxes, meaning affluent suburban communities of private dwellings are able to collect more money to spend on education. This can create wide disparities in the educational opportunities available to urban and suburban schoolchildren, an arrangement that challenges the American notion of equality of opportunity but that, nonetheless, will be defended by suburbanites who benefit from it. As we will see in Section 4.6, “Black and White, Rich and Poor,” with more resources at their disposal than residents of poorer urban neighborhoods, affluent suburbanites have an advantage should they wish to defend the status quo against efforts to fund public schools more equitably.

4.2e Age

If you had been born 50 years earlier, the sight of someone over 100 years old would have been highly unusual. Today, it isn’t surprising if you know or are related to someone who reached the century mark, and U.S. Census Bureau projections indicate the longevity trend should continue. Add to this the huge number of people in the aging baby boom generation—all those people who were born in the twenty years following the end of World War II—and you have the makings for age to be a key political divide in the years ahead.

In 2000, the U.S. Census Bureau reported that people 65 years or older composed 12.4 percent of the population. Among these, 1.5 percent or 4.2 million were 85 years or older. As these figures increase, the swelling ranks of seniors is bound to put pressure on a Social Security system that was not designed to handle the burden it will face when you’re approaching middle age and will have to support it.8

As the large Baby Boom generation ages, we’re seeing increased political attention paid to health care matters, both routine and extraordinary. Skepticism about proposed changes in health care policy among older voters was one of the largest roadblocks to President Obama’s efforts to overhaul the health care system in 2009. With Baby Boomers reaching the point where they face the need for expanded medical resources, more Americans require medical assistance in their advanced years, a heated political debate has emerged over the question of how much government will be asked to do to defray the those costs, especially for those who cannot afford medical services or prescription drugs. And, we’re witnessing an intense ethical debate over emerging medical technologies like cloning and performing research using stem cells from human embryos—research that has the potential to advance treatments for diseases like Alzheimer’s that affect people later in life but that, by its very nature, raises controversial questions about what constitutes life itself.

4.3 Political Socialization: How We Become Political Creatures

How do we become political creatures? That may be a strange question to ask after spending so much energy in Chapter 3 talking about how many of us simply aren’t political creatures. The fact is, though, that while we
are often not very political by choice, we’re still exposed to a multitude of political influences, starting from the time we’re very young, through the process of political socialization.

Take a minute and think back. Try to identify your earliest political memory—the first time in your life that you can remember being aware of a politician or a political event. It can be about an election, a national event—anything where a political figure was involved.

Chances are, the event you remembered took place when you were between six and ten years old, around the time kids begin to open up to the larger world. And chances are also that it involved the president. For most kids, the president is the first political figure we’re aware of, our gateway to appreciating politics. Of course, when kids become aware of the president, it’s in the simple way you would expect kids to process information. They really don’t understand what the president does, even as they recognize that he is someone important. In other words, young kids will have a limited cognitive or factual understanding of the president. Instead, their relationship to the president will be highly affective or emotional.\(^9\)

Initial impressions of the president are that he is powerful and good. This was the case in 1958, when presidential scholar Fred Greenstein examined the impressions of President Eisenhower held by fourth through eighth graders,\(^10\) and it was the case in 2000 when Greenstein’s study was replicated on the same age groups with respect to impressions of President Clinton.\(^11\) With the exception of eighth graders in the 2000 study, kids in 1958 and 2000 ranked the president as more important than a host of authority figures they knew firsthand, including teachers, principals, doctors, police officers, and religious leaders.\(^12\) In both years, kids were inclined to view the president in positive terms as well, although the 2000 study reveals a tendency for today’s generation to hold less positive views overall than kids did in the late 1950s.

This could be the result of greater negative media coverage of the president, or of kids having access to the Internet at a young age, where they are exposed to a wider variety of political messages. The 2000 study revealed that 81 percent of fourth through eighth graders use the Internet, changing patterns of socialization by accelerating exposure to adult political messages.\(^13\) It has long been the case that as kids age, they abandon the generally positive affect toward political leaders that characterizes early socialization, precisely because age exposes us to a more adult appreciation of the political world and, with it, a less childlike view of politicians. Attitudes like cynicism that we discussed in Chapter 3 traditionally develop during adolescence when a more complex understanding of politics sets in.

Political socialization doesn’t just happen passively as we age, though. There are forces that act on us, shaping the way we become political as we venture beyond our childhood homes. These agents of socialization are many and varied, and they work on us from birth through early adulthood because political socialization is a process that plays out over a long period of time. There are several important agents of socialization, starting with our parents and siblings in our home as we grow up, continuing with our friends as we get older, our teachers in school, our coworkers when we get a job, and the media throughout our lives.

### 4.3a Family and Friends

Maybe you heard your parents talking about Bill Clinton’s involvement with Monica Lewinsky, or about whether they thought the president should be impeached for his actions. Perhaps you have older sisters or brothers who were involved in a cause and liked to talk about it. If your parents voted, maybe they took you to the polls when you were very young. Or you may remember them talking about the price of gas or food or how high taxes are, and blaming it on one politician or another.

It doesn’t take much for kids to learn about politics from parents and siblings. The home can be a laboratory for young kids, who absorb an awful lot of information just from the tone of their parents’ voices and from what their parents say about political figures and issues. Kids don’t even have to be involved in the conversation; they’re pretty good at putting together what they hear to figure out how the world works—or, at least, how the world works based on the way it looks at home. Because kids interact heavily with their families, and because families are where kids figure out who they are by the way others relate to them, parents and siblings are considered a primary agent of socialization.\(^14\)

One’s childhood home is the place where people experience early life socialization. It’s where we internalize a set of values about how the world works that will structure our relationship to politics as we age. From their parents and families, young children learn messages about authority, order, trust, tolerance, cooperation, and
obedience. If you grew up in a home with strict parents, you likely internalized different values than if you grew up in a permissive home.

Such early learning is very important as it sets the stage for the continuing socialization of our later years, when we develop a mature sense of our political selves. By no means does this suggest that we become a carbon copy of our parents—far from it. In fact, for all the power of the family to socialize us to politics, you can probably think of many ways you’re different from your parents politically. At the very least, you probably hold different positions on many political issues.

Instead, the strongest relationship between parents and kids tends to be on the general level of party identification, or the political party you identify yourself with. You could think of party identification as being socialized much like religious identification. In other words, chances are you identify with the same religious group as your parents. At the same time, you may hold different attitudes about the nature or importance of religious worship, or about some of the specific positions of your religious group. This is analogous to holding the same party identification as your parents but disagreeing on particular political issues.

One major study on how effectively party identification is socialized showed that six in ten children had the same partisanship as their parents when both parents had the same partisanship—both were Republicans or both were Democrats. While this is a large percentage—much larger than anything else that’s socialized from parent to child—it also means that four in ten children whose parents share a partisan attachment end up identifying with a different party or not identifying with any party. Furthermore, not every child comes from a home where the parents share partisanship. You can pretty much flip a coin to determine the partisanship of kids who come from homes where their parents do not have the same party identification because they are equally likely to be Democrats or Republicans.

From childhood through college and beyond, friendship groups rival the family as an important socializing agent, taking on a central role in political socialization during adolescence. Because peer groups are interpersonal, they are a primary agent of political socialization. But, unlike our families, we get to choose our friends. As teens and even now, we may look for friends who help us fit in at school. If we do, we look for friends who are a lot like us. This means that for many people, peers reinforce rather than challenge existing political beliefs—to the extent that politics enters into friendships at all.

As we get older and the initial influence of family socialization fades, we may be more open to a broader spectrum of opinion in our friendships. If this happens, peers can actually challenge our earlier political learning and serve as an agent for change. This typically does not happen while we’re still young, though.

### 4.3b Schools and the Media

It’s pretty obvious that a lot of formal learning about politics happens in school. After all, it’s happening right now. And it starts in preschool, where we begin to learn about the president and about holidays commemorating political figures. In this regard, schools are an excellent source of political information and a fairly direct agent of political socialization.

Perhaps the strongest contribution of schools to political socialization is a bit less obvious. If you grew up in the United States, do you remember what your kindergarten classroom looked like? Was there a flag over the chalkboard? Did you pledge allegiance every morning, to one nation, “invisible?” Was the room decorated...
in paper cutouts of turkeys and Pilgrims in November, Lincoln and Washington in February, or were there paper ballots with the names of real candidates on Election Day? Exposure to political symbols and engaging in patriotic rituals works to develop a national identity, making the classroom a subtle but important source of political socialization.

How thoroughly do the schools act as an agent of socialization? Not as thoroughly as family and friends, with whom we are engaged in close interpersonal relationships. Although schooling can give us a basic civic education, for many kids the amount of political learning that occurs in secondary school is limited—you probably remember from Chapter 3 that levels of political knowledge tend to be low among adults. Also, while kindergartners may be taken by stories of how George Washington could not tell a lie, we saw in Chapter 3 that adults are more cynical about politicians, meaning that attitudes learned in school eventually change, beginning in adolescence when we start to see the political world as a complex place.

For these reasons, we may think of school as a secondary agent of socialization. Schools matter to our political development, but not as much as parents, siblings, and peers, with whom we have strong and regular interpersonal relationships.

The same may be said of the media, even though common sense may tell us that the media exert a strong influence on our development by virtue of how pervasive the Internet, television, radio, and newspapers are in our daily life. Like schools, the media can be a source of political learning. As we’ll see in Chapter 5, we live in an information environment so cluttered with noise that it’s often hard to make good judgments about what’s factual and what’s simply opinion. This limits the ability of the mass media to serve as a reliable source of political information.

The media are also surprisingly limited in their ability to shape our political attitudes. The primary reason for this is media messages are impersonal, and have trouble competing with family and friends. We’re more likely to pay attention to or believe media messages that reinforce our existing attitudes, while ignoring others—a phenomenon called selective exposure. We may even unconsciously filter out messages that don’t conform to our prevailing attitudes, through a process called selective perception. Between consciously being uninterested in messages that conflict with our attitudes and unconsciously filtering messages that conflict with our attitudes, the way we use the media puts the brakes on its effectiveness as a socializing agent.

The media are not without effect, however. They may have a socializing influence through their ability to set the boundaries of what we’re aware of politically, determining the issues and people we think about. This process is called agenda setting. It can be a powerful effect in the sense that things that are not on our agenda will have no place in public political discussion, making them less likely to be considered for political action. The power of agenda setting is limited, though, to influencing what’s on our mind. Remember, agenda setting is different from generating opinions—we’re not saying that the media have the kind of reach into our lives necessary to formulate opinions on our behalf.

Agenda setting influences what we think about, rather than the attitudes and opinions we hold about the things on our mind. If you find yourself talking to your friends about terrorism or global warming or other topics you know about because they’re in the news, you could say that the media helped place those topics on your personal agenda. Your attitudes and opinions about these topics are less likely to be shaped by the media—although we will see that when television commentators consistently portray a politician or an issue in a particular light, our thinking tends to follow from what they say. That, too, is covered in Chapter 5—so stay tuned.

### 4.3c Other Influences on Political Socialization

Not everyone is socialized under the same circumstances, which means there may be sharp differences among us in the way we come to understand the political world, even though we will all be exposed to the same agents of socialization. African Americans and women, for instance, have for a long time been socialized differently than whites and men.

Generations of African Americans have had to contend with a political system that produced obstacles to participation, and have had to face the dilemma of how to become socialized to a system that was in some important respects unwelcoming.
Studies indicate that as early as grade school young girls begin to react to messages that suggest they should be less interested in political life than young boys, despite demonstrating greater proficiency with language and greater maturity than boys of the same age.\textsuperscript{20}

These varying experiences with political socialization help explain why some African Americans may feel conflicted about embracing the shared experiences of American political culture that we talked about earlier, or why, despite recent gains, women remain disproportionately underrepresented in elected offices with respect to their numbers in the population. They may also help explain why it is possible for us to talk about patterns of public opinion that are distinct to African Americans and women. In the aggregate, African Americans are much more likely to support government solutions to social problems and Democratic candidates for public office than the population as a whole. The tendency for women to hold more liberal positions on social issues than men may also have its origins in the different ways men and women are socialized.

The things that happen when you're young and as you reach adulthood can also shape the way you're socialized to politics. Imagine that you were born into a home that was hit hard by the Great Depression, where food and money were scarce and you had to live from day to day with what little you could find. Perhaps your grandparents or your great-grandparents came of age in an environment like this. It's not too difficult to imagine that the development of their political attitudes could have been driven by issues of scarcity, and perhaps an attachment to government assistance to help mitigate the painful effects of poverty.

Maybe your parents had to contend with the Vietnam War when they were younger. Perhaps they had to confront a decision about whether to go to Vietnam or to resist the draft—a common experience for young people in the middle and late 1960s and early 1970s. Perhaps they were influenced by counterculture demonstrations against the war, which were politically and socially anti-establishment in nature. Intense social experiences like these can have as great an impact as the Depression on shaping the relationship an entire generation develops toward politics. Such generational effects on political socialization help explain why large groups of people, like the "Baby Boomers" born in the twenty years after World War II, move through life with a commonly held set of political and social attitudes developed from their formative experiences.\textsuperscript{21}

At the same time, where you are in life can interact with how you respond to the formative political events of your generation and alter the way you relate to politics as you age. Baby Boomers like Bill Clinton, who protested the system when in their twenties, were hardly radical in their approach to government when their turn came to run things twenty years later. Maybe you have strong ideals right now about what you hope to do with your life, or how you can contribute to society. That wouldn't be unusual because many people have strong ideals when they're in college, and are really open to the idea of social change.

That's not to suggest you won't have strong ideals twenty years from now—the last thing you need is someone twenty-five years older than you telling you that you're going to outgrow idealism—far from it! You may instead find your idealism living side by side with a growing sense of pragmatism. Life cycle effects studied in older people point to the emergence of a kind of practical outlook on things when people acquire jobs, families, and the other trappings of middle age. As you might expect, the older we get, the less open we become to political and social changes. Still, it will be interesting to see how life cycle effects compete with generational effects as the Baby Boom generation ages, to see if generational influences remain strong into old age. How hard is it to imagine grandparent Boomers taking their kids and grandkids to see an octogenarian Mick Jagger in concert?

### 4.4 Political Participation: Getting Involved

Fresh from the process of childhood political socialization, armed with a sense of our political selves, we can go forward into the adult world of politics and participate in a variety of political activities.

Or not.

Truth is, while some people are heavily engaged in politics, it's not all that unusual to find people whose participation is limited to voting—or less. Just like the civic activities we discussed in Section 4.2a, “Group Membership and Tolerance,” involvement in political activities is less than it was a generation ago, with particularly sharp declines in the percentage of people who engage in the most widespread political activity, voting.

To many people, political participation only means voting. However, it can be a lot more than going to the polls. If you take a look at Figure 4.6, you'll find a list of eight different ways we can participate in politics.
Take a second and think about which of these activities you’ve done in the last year. This should begin to give you a sense of just how much—or how little—Americans get involved politically beyond the voting booth.

### 4.4a Conventional Participation

According to the United States Elections Project, almost 57% of eligible voters cast a ballot in the high-profile, hotly contested 2008 election, in which both major political parties offered a fresh alternative for president, and in which one-third of the Senate and the entire House of Representatives was up for grabs. During “midterm” elections—the elections that fall during the middle of a presidential term in which congressional and gubernatorial seats are the biggest draw—turnout is typically much lower. In 2010, it was under 38%.

That's roughly comparable to the percentage of Americans who claim they talk about politics from time to time, perhaps with the intent of influencing others. Talk may not be cheap, but it is relatively inexpensive compared to other forms of participation, and as the amount of effort involved in an activity increases, the number of people engaged in that activity predictably declines. So it is that only about one in five of Americans will call or send a letter or email to an elected official on an issue they feel strongly about.

Only one in ten will wear a campaign button, put a bumper sticker on their car, or display a sign in front of their house in support of a political candidate. Fewer will contribute money to a political candidate or volunteer time to work for a candidate or a political party. Only one in twenty will attend political meetings or campaign rallies.

### Figure 4.6

**Percentage of People Who Claim to Participate in Eight Types of Political Activities**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Activity</th>
<th>Percent</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Vote</td>
<td>55</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Talk Politics</td>
<td>40</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Contact Officials</td>
<td>30</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Wear Buttons</td>
<td>20</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Give Money</td>
<td>15</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Work for Candidate</td>
<td>10</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Political Meetings</td>
<td>5</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Protest</td>
<td>2</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

### 4.4b Unconventional Participation

Even fewer will get involved in less conventional forms of political participation, like engaging in a protest or demonstration, even though American history is replete with examples of protest activity. From the Boston Tea Party prior to the Revolution to Shays’s Rebellion during the period of the Articles of Confederation, small but intensely committed groups of dissenters have sought to bring about political change through acts of defiance.

In the spring of 2009, individuals opposed to the spending policies of the new Obama administration organized a protest inspired by the Boston Tea Party. Playing on the historical symbolism of colonial-era rebellion, they organized on the Internet to mail tea bags to their elected representatives and the president along with notes explaining the nature of their concerns. Then, on April 15—tax day—they held rallies in cities across the country to protest what they viewed as the intrusive nature of big government.

Within months, they had shaped their own identity as the “Tea Party,” and they continued to assert their influence during the 2010 elections, albeit through a more conventional form of protest. In a number of Republican Senate primaries in states as far-ranging as Delaware, Florida, Kentucky, Nevada, and Alaska,
so-called “Tea Party” insurgents upended candidates with institutional party support. A similar phenomenon occurred in a number of Republican primaries for House seats.

Sometimes, protest activities are peaceful but dramatic acts of civil disobedience, like those led by the Reverend Dr. Martin Luther King Jr. against segregationist policies in the South in the 1950s and 1960s. Simple but defiant and courageous acts, like Rosa Parks’ refusal to give up her seat on a bus to a white man in Montgomery, Alabama, in 1955, drew attention to and helped to change unjust laws.

At times, protest activity turns violent. In stark contrast to Dr. King’s peaceful demonstrations, African American neighborhoods in cities across the United States were the site of bloody rioting in the 1960s. In the highly charged atmosphere of the Vietnam War, college campuses across the country became centers of sometimes violent protests. At Kent State University in 1970, police killed four students and wounded nine others during a protest against President Nixon’s decision to escalate the war. The 1960s also witnessed political assassination as a tool of protest, including the murders of President John F. Kennedy, his brother Senator Robert F. Kennedy, and Dr. King.

Public reaction to protest activity is not always supportive, particularly if a protest is noisy or disruptive, and especially if it is violent. Sometimes, protests tap competing values—such as when someone agrees with the cause promoted by the protesters but not their methods. We’ll look at a case where dueling protests created a collision of values in Issue: Vaccine? Animal Rights? You Decide.

4.5 Young and Old, Men and Women

OK, so maybe you looked at the list of activities in Figure 4.6 and thought, “I don’t wear campaign buttons. I don’t give money to political candidates. I’m not into meetings and rallies, and I don’t know anyone who is.” That wouldn’t be very surprising. Not only are these types of political activities not widespread, they’re especially uncommon among young adults. All forms of political participation are—and with good reason.

Think of the things that are on your mind right now or that have been on your mind at one time or another since you started school. Maybe you’re worried about your grades, or how you’re going to pay for your education. Friendships and relationships might take up a lot of your time. You could be preoccupied with where you’re going to live next semester, or maybe you’ve got an issue with a roommate that’s taking a lot of your energy. Perhaps you have some unresolved matters with your family. You could just be thinking about the plans you have for this weekend or for after you stop reading about political participation.

Grades, money, friends, dating, housing, roommates, family, social plans—some or all of these things are typical of what we spend our time thinking about as young adults. That doesn’t leave a lot of time for joining political campaigns, especially if politics feels so much more remote than these other immediate things. For this reason, political analysts questioned whether Barack Obama would suffer during the 2008 presidential campaign, because some of his strongest support came from young people.

After a while, this starts to change for many of us. We graduate from college and find work. Many people find a long-term partner and settle down in an apartment or house that they rent or own. Life takes on a new rhythm, a more settled rhythm conducive to greater political involvement. For some, this newfound appreciation of political engagement is interrupted briefly as the responsibilities of having young children encroach on time available for civic activity. Otherwise, the tendency to participate in politics builds through middle age, as having the time to get involved coincides with having interests to protect—like a family, a job, or a house—and growing responsibilities like loans and an ever-increasing tax bill. We still have a lot going on like when we were younger, but the things we’re doing are more likely to be the sorts of things that lend themselves to political action.

Political participation begins to tail off as we get older and begin to slow down, although senior citizens are among the most politically active of any group when it comes to voting. Even though there is a drop-off in voting after people reach retirement age, the decline is gradual. People in their eighties are still far more likely to vote than people in their twenties!

It has also been the case historically that women have tended to participate less than men. Some of this is no doubt because women were denied the right to vote until 1920. In recent years, women have demonstrated greater political involvement, particularly in the areas of voting and running for elective office. The women’s vote has been especially important in recent years—in fact, if only men voted, Bill Clinton would have lost...
In June 1999, hundreds of gay and lesbian demonstrators belonging to the group ACT UP (AIDS Coalition to Unleash Power) disrupted a Philadelphia fund-raiser by presidential candidate Al Gore. The group, which practices civil disobedience to draw attention to the plight of AIDS sufferers, carried a life-sized marionette of Gore with big drug companies pulling the strings.

Their complaint was that Gore supported legislation backed by pharmaceutical firms making it difficult for impoverished African nations to purchase generic AIDS drugs that were far less expensive than the brand-name drugs produced by American drug companies. This policy, said the protesters, sealed the fate of countless numbers of people with AIDS in order for large sums of money to flow to the drug companies—and from the drug companies to the Gore campaign war chest.

The protesters were not supporting Gore’s opponent. In fact, they were clear that they did not want George W. Bush to become president. But they did want to bring attention to their plight and felt that without dramatic action, the entire issue, to say nothing of the large matter of finding a cure for AIDS, would go unnoticed. In its manual on civil disobedience, ACT UP instructs would-be participants in nonviolence training, how to stage a demonstration, and how to act when you’re arrested and sent to jail.

It’s hard to know how many ACT UP members are also sympathetic to the rights of animals. But another organization, People for the Ethical Treatment of Animals (PETA), has a problem with AIDS activists. PETA objects to the use of animals in AIDS research and stages protests in the attempt to put an end to research that harms or kills animals. In their manual for activists, they make the point that animals, like humans, have rights, and that human use of animals for the purpose of experimentation (or for consumption or clothing) violates those rights.

Like many protest groups, their activities can be passionate and extreme. The Wall Street Journal reported that PETA had engaged in attacks on laboratory facilities at Stanford University where AIDS research with live animals was taking place and had used legal means to slow and at times stop similar research at other sites. They see their work as a matter of life and death.

So do the AIDS activists.

So, the two groups are in conflict. PETA activists would happily leave AIDS research alone if researchers would stop using animals in their experiments. But an AIDS cure is not possible without animal research. For their part, AIDS activists might be sympathetic to PETA objectives if they didn’t feel that people would die in the name of protecting animal rights.

And what of people who voice support for animal rights and an AIDS cure? It’s possible to be sympathetic to both, and it’s not uncommon for celebrities and public figures to endorse both causes. The work of protest groups makes it plain that beneath such verbal proclamations of support lies a disagreement that is deadly in its intensity.

Think about whether you are more sympathetic to the position of the AIDS activists or the animal right’s activists.

AIDS Activists’ Perspective

- The plight of people with AIDS needs to be dramatized so that politicians will take action to save them.
- AIDS victims face a life-or-death struggle.
- AIDS research cannot advance without animal experimentation.
- People should not die in the interest of protecting animal rights.

Animal Rights Activists’ Perspective

- The plight of animals used for research needs to be dramatized so that politicians will take action to save them.
- Animals used for research face a life-or-death struggle.
- AIDS research is not a problem as long as live animals are not sacrificed to the process.
- Animals should not die in the process of researching cures for human diseases.

My Opinion

In practice, do you agree more with the AIDS activists’ perspective or the animal rights activists’ perspective? You should decide how to balance:

- The plight of people with AIDS and the plight of animals used for research.
- The need for animal experimentation in AIDS research and the need to protect the lives of research animals.
- The value that people should not die to protect animal rights and the value that animals should not die to cure human diseases.
the 1992 and 1996 elections. Additionally, women are starting to serve in elected office at a higher rate than ever before. See Demystifying Government: The Rise of Women in Elected Office.

Even in places where women appear to participate less than men, some of the disparity can be understood in terms of differences in education. In fact, how much education you have has a lot to do with how likely it is for you to get involved politically.

If you look at Figure 4.7, you’ll find the percentage of men and women who told the General Social Survey that they engaged in several types of political participation—attending political events, contributing to candidates, and contacting government officials. In each category, you can see that men are slightly more likely to get involved than women, which might lead you to conclude that men participate more than women. But watch what happens to the differences between men and women when you look at their levels of participation in terms of how much education they have. Participation rates rise steadily for men and women as they amass more years of schooling, really shooting up for college grads. As participation rates go up, gender differences shrink or disappear. College-educated women are just as likely as college-educated men to contribute to political campaigns, almost as likely to contact government officials, and somewhat more likely to attend political rallies.

4.6 Black and White, Rich and Poor

If President Obama’s electoral prospects were dependent in part on support from young people, who traditionally participate at lower levels than middle aged and older people, it was equally problematic that he also depended on the engagement of African Americans, who participate in some—but not all—political activities at lower rates than white. There are multiple reasons for this discrepancy, including a legacy of institutional restrictions against African American voting, and a complex relationship among participation, social and economic resources, and psychological factors that adversely affects African Americans. Just as differences in political participation rates between men and women can be explained by education rather than gender differences, participation differences between African Americans and whites defy simple racial explanations.

In 1972, political scientists Sidney Verba and Norman Nie published a ground-breaking study of American political participation, in which they found that a greater share of African Americans are entirely uninvolved politically than their numbers in the population would suggest. At the same time, Verba and Nie found that African Americans vote at about the same rate as whites and are about even with the rest of the population among the small group of people who are highly active politically. In other words, blacks opt out of the political process at a higher rate than whites, but those that are highly involved are about as active and engaged politically as whites.

The fact that we don’t find significant racial differences in voting patterns is noteworthy when you consider the obstacles to voting that African Americans faced in the South until very late in the twentieth century.
Although granted the legal right to vote following the Civil War, it took a century before those rights were more than words on a piece of paper.

The years immediately following the Civil War gave few hints that it would take a century before one-time slaves would be free to embrace the political rights promised to them during Reconstruction. A string of federal acts promised to immediately enfranchise African Americans. In rapid succession:

- The Military Reconstruction Act of 1867 required all southern states to give former slaves the right to vote as a condition of being readmitted to the Union.
- The Fourteenth Amendment, ratified in 1868, extended citizenship to former slaves.
- The Fifteenth Amendment, ratified in 1870, specifically forbade states to deny the vote to someone on the basis of race, color, or the fact that they were once a slave.

Gender differences in participation depend heavily on education. As education levels increase, gender differences disappear in rates of attending political rallies, contributing to political candidates, and contacting public officials.
• The Enforcement Act of 1870 imposed criminal penalties on anyone who would try to deny blacks the right to vote.

• The Force Act of 1871 shifted the right to oversee elections from the states (some of which vehemently resisted black voting rights) to the federal government.

Initially, hundreds of thousands of former slaves flocked to the political process. African Americans voted in large numbers and were elected to offices at all levels of government. However, as Reconstruction ended and federal troops withdrew from the South in the late 1870s, whites who vehemently opposed black involvement in politics did everything they could to lock them out of the process. Using a combination of violence and political tactics, white southerners ruthlessly put an end to black participation. As northern troops departed the region, southern whites employed violent attacks against African Americans as an intimidation tactic designed to keep them from voting. By the 1890s, with whites back in control of state legislatures, many southern states passed a series of laws designed to make it impossible for blacks to vote. These included:

• Literacy tests, which required voters to demonstrate knowledge of the Constitution that might be advanced for you, even if you’ve already read Chapter 2 of this book. Because many African Americans lacked formal education, literacy tests were an effective way to disenfranchise them. (see Demystifying Government: How Well Would You Do on a Literacy Test?)

DEMYSTIFYING GOVERNMENT
How Well Would You Do on a Literacy Test?

For decades, African Americans had to endure hardship and humiliation in order to register to vote. It was not uncommon for voter registration offices to be open only a few days a month, during work hours. White employers who permitted black workers to take time off to register were subject to organized economic retaliation designed to threaten the jobs of African Americans who registered. At the Registrars Office, it was common for local deputies to harass, threaten, and intimidate blacks who tried to register. Information on African American applicants would likely find its way from the registrar to the Ku Klux Klan, which would use violence or the threat of violence against blacks who dared to try to register. If would-be voters actually made it to the literacy test, they faced an exam designed for them to fail. A case in point is the Alabama Literacy Test, which consisted of three parts: a reading of a portion of the Constitution, which the applicant had to interpret orally to the registrar, and two written sections on constitutional, federal, and state law that were evaluated in secrecy by a Board of Registrars. Here are some questions from that test. See if you can answer them:

• If a person charged with treason denies his guilt, how many persons must testify against him before he can be convicted?

• At what time of day on January 20 each four years does the term of the president of the United States end?

• If the United States wishes to purchase land for an arsenal and have exclusive legislative authority over it, consent is required from ________.

• Name one area of authority over state militia reserved exclusively to the states.

• The power of granting patents, that is, of securing to investors the exclusive right to their discoveries, is given to the Congress for the purpose of ________.

• In what year did Congress gain the right to prohibit the migration of persons to the states?

As you can see, these questions are challenging (or trivial) even for people with a formal education. They would only humiliate and discourage someone with no education. The combination of legal roadblocks, physical threats, and violence was effective; in many southern counties, the African American registration rate was zero, and it remained this way for decades.

By the way, the answers are: Two persons must testify against someone charged with treason; the president’s term ends at noon on January 20; consent for purchasing land for an arsenal has to come from the legislature; the states have exclusive authority over the appointment of officers to militia; Congress grants patents for the purpose of promoting progress; Congress gained the right to prohibit the migration of persons to the states in 1808. Be honest—how many of these did you get right?
Part 2: Citizenship and Democracy

- **Poll taxes**, which required voters to pay a tax in order to exercise their right to vote. Although the tax was generally nominal, it had the practical effect of disenfranchising countless black voters who were too poor to pay it.

- **Grandfather clauses**, which exempted whites—many of whom were as uneducated as African Americans—from having to take literacy tests or pay poll taxes because they were eligible to vote or were descended from someone who was eligible to vote in 1867—before passage of the Fourteenth Amendment.

- **“White primaries,”** which circumvented the Fifteenth Amendment by keeping African Americans from voting in Democratic Party primaries by declaring the Democratic Party to be a private organization exempt from laws requiring equal participation. In southern states dominated by the Democratic Party, primary winners invariably won elections, and exclusion from primary voting was an effective way to disenfranchise blacks.

These discriminatory laws remained on the books for decades. Although the Supreme Court ruled grandfather clauses unconstitutional in 1915 and “white primaries” unconstitutional in 1944, southern states continued to disenfranchise African Americans until the Supreme Court and Congress actively intervened in the 1960s. By then, African Americans had to overcome the effects of having been locked out of the political process in the South for four generations.

For African Americans who choose not to participate in politics, the underlying causes start with the relationship between race and class. Verba and Nie found that people with higher **socioeconomic status (SES)**—well-educated people with high incomes and high-status jobs—are more likely to have resources that facilitate political participation, and that African Americans are less likely to be represented in the high-SES group. These resources include time, money, and information about politics.

Verba and Nie speculate that there is an intricate relationship between having resources, having the motivation to use them, and getting results. They contend that this relationship explains who is likely to participate and why African Americans are less likely to be represented among political participants. The process works something like that shown in Figure 4.8.

The economic disparity that distinguishes high-SES individuals from low-SES individuals is associated with a psychological divide. People with more resources to use in the political process, a group in which African Americans are less well represented than whites, are more likely to be oriented toward the political process. They’re more likely to be aware of and concerned about the political process, and have a high sense of political **efficacy**, which you may recall from Chapter 3 is the feeling that you can get results if you enter the political arena. This should make sense: If you start out with the necessary tools, you’re more likely to feel you can get the job done. You feel motivated. You participate.

We’ve already talked about how participation is linked to getting results when we said in Chapter 1 that not participating is always a choice but that people who participate are more likely to get results from government. This works to reinforce the psychological drive to participate because when you actually accomplish some-
thing by participating, it's natural to feel like you can get the system to respond to your wishes. You've already done it! To the degree that what people get through participating is tangible, which it often is, participating also works to bolster their supply of political resources that were the catalyst for participating in the first place.

You can probably see how the tangible and psychological rewards that come from participating work to reinforce the tangible and psychological advantages that high-SES individuals start with. So, if African Americans are underrepresented in the high-SES group, they will ultimately be less likely to participate and less likely to believe that participating will make a difference. That's because the process can work in reverse to keep low-SES individuals from wanting to engage in political activity. Low SES means having fewer resources that are useful for participating in politics, which can reinforce the psychological orientation that political participation is a waste of time because the system will not be responsive. This low sense of efficacy discourages participation—and is self-fulfilling.

You can probably also see how participation can reinforce social status, independent of race. With people from higher socioeconomic groups participating more, the political system is going to be more responsive to their interests, which you can probably imagine are different from the interests of people with lower socioeconomic status. For instance, the political interests of unemployed people for job training or unemployment insurance are worlds apart from the concerns of high SES individuals, but the unemployed are not oriented to participate in large numbers in the political process, so they are in a weakened position to make demands on the system. Political officials will be more sensitive to the needs of high-SES individuals, who will be well positioned to reap the rewards of government. For more on the relationship between resources and motivation, see Reinventing Government: Revisiting Resources That Matter.

Let's look a little more closely at the case of the long-term unemployed population, typically low-SES individuals who lack the resources and therefore the motivation to participate politically. If political officials are more sensitive to the needs of people who participate, and unemployed individuals tend not to participate, you could make the case that the political system will not be responsive to their interests, choosing instead to respond to the interests of a smaller group of resource-rich, high-SES individuals. You'd be making an argument in support of an elitist perspective of American government, in which few people with a lot of resources exercise power. This conclusion seems to be supported by the claim that people without many resources and who lack efficacy are unlikely to be able to get political figures to respond to their needs.

On the other hand, we might also observe that government does not ignore the needs of the unemployed. There are unemployment insurance policies, job-training programs, and economic plans during periods of high unemployment designed to lower the unemployment rate. Presidents like to boast about how many new jobs were created under their administration. Why does any of this happen when unemployed people are not likely to participate in the political process in large numbers?

Political scientists who have studied this question claim that other groups will speak for the unemployed in the political system. For instance, unions and civil rights groups, out of self-interest or social justice concerns, may advocate policies that benefit unemployed people. Is this consistent with the pluralist perspective that resources are distributed widely enough for many to wield political power? Is it simply a modification of an elitist argument because unemployed people inadvertently benefit from the convergence of their interests and the interests of a powerful elite? Is it possible that government would respond more quickly or lavish more attention on the needs of the unemployed if they participated in the political process?

4.7 I Couldn’t Care Less!

Maybe you couldn’t care less about who participates and what happens to them. There’s a word for that. It’s called apathy. It’s a word that is widely used in the media and in conversation to describe the way many
people relate—or fail to relate—to politics. Americans are widely perceived to be apathetic as a result of having low levels of political knowledge and involvement. People who are apathetic avoid political participation because they genuinely don’t care about it. (They might want to avoid reading about it, too.)

Or do they? Some research on the topic points to a different conclusion, based on observations of people in social settings who avoided talking about politics. This line of thought suggests that people seem apathetic not so much because they don’t care about what’s going on but because they feel powerless to do anything about it. Big political problems, even those that could affect us directly, are just that—big—and they can leave us feeling overwhelmed.29

In the face of this, and to avoid the social embarrassment that could come from making it appear that we actually believe our opinion might matter or that we could exercise some control over the situation, a lot of people resort to saying “I’m not interested” or “I’m just not paying attention.” They strike an apathetic pose, and they resist political involvement, even on issues that hit home, like rapidly increasing tuition costs, where they’re quite aware that what happens does matter to them.

Doing this takes work. We have to try hard to be apathetic because it’s so natural to care about what happens to us and to those around us. And apathetic periods come in cycles. Maybe your parents grew up during a time when it was cool to be “involved.” There was a great deal of interest in the 2008 election, and record crowds estimated at close to two million people gathered in Washington in January 2009 for President Obama’s inaugural. Under these social circumstances, you might also find that it can be cool to talk about political problems with friends and neighbors, too.

You may have noticed that this section on apathy is a lot shorter than others in the book. Do you care?

4.8 Why Vote?

Bad jokes about apathy aside, when you look at the most commonly engaged form of participation—voting—it’s reasonable to ask why anyone would take the time to do it at all. When you look at what you have to do in order to vote in an election in this country, you might reasonably ask how our turnout can be as high as 57 percent in a presidential election year. Some countries, like Australia, have close to perfect turnout. In these countries, voting is compulsory because it is regarded as an obligation rather than a right. There’s actually a fine for not voting. Under those circumstances, plenty of people manage to find their way to the polls. It doesn’t happen that way in the United States, though, where the process is much more complex and there is no monetary cost to not participating.

First, you have to register to vote. This typically involves satisfying age and residency requirements, although the specifics vary by state. Alabama, for instance, makes you affirm your allegiance to the Constitution and swear that you have no plans to overthrow the legally elected government of the state.

If you live in North Dakota, you have it easy because there’s no registration requirement there—you can just skip to the part where you show up at the polls on Election Day. If you live in any other state, you have to be aware of the need to register, know the registration deadline in order to register in time to vote in the next election (it’s typically a couple of weeks or so before Election Day), and know how to register.30

Until recently, registering to vote in most states involved locating and visiting a state office, like your County Board of Elections. Things got easier with the passage of the National Voter Registration Act of 1993. It’s commonly called the “Motor Voter Act,” because of a provision that makes it possible for you to register to vote when you apply for or renew your driver’s license.

The Motor Voter Act has other provisions, also designed to make registration more convenient. All states except for Minnesota, Wyoming, Wisconsin (and, of course, North Dakota) must accept mail-in registration forms, including a national mail-in voter registration form made available by the Federal Election Commission. Agencies that provide public assistance, like Medicaid and food stamps, or services to people with disabilities, are also required to provide voter registration services. Some states, like California, let you register online, while others let you download application forms off the Internet.

The Motor Voter Act makes registration easier than it used to be—if you know about it. If you’re like many people, though, you didn’t know about it until about a minute ago, unless you stumbled across it when
you got your driver's license. It still requires the expenditure of a valuable resource—time—to complete the registration form, and turnout figures suggest it has not significantly boosted voter turnout.

Also, don’t forget that registering to vote is only the first step in the process. You then need to find and get directions to your polling place—information that will take time to get—and arrange to take time out of your day to vote. Polls open early in the morning in most states, and typically remain open until seven, eight, or nine in the evening, giving people who work the opportunity to vote without taking time away from their jobs. However, this can mean the added inconvenience of having to get up a little earlier or delay an evening activity, and possibly wait in line during these “prime time” hours.

In recent years, some states have made voting a bit easier by keeping the polls open for several days to permit people to vote on their schedule. In 2008, 32 states permitted some form of early voting, where votes were cast (but not counted) before Election Day. Oregon may have the most convenient system of all, as everybody votes by mail. If you live in Oregon, you can mark your ballot in the comfort of home and mail it to the county elections office or place it in a drop box. As long as it’s received by 8 p.m. on Election Day, it counts.

Early voting doesn’t minimize the time involved in voting, but it makes it possible to avoid long lines and work around a busy schedule. Voting by mail alleviates the need to know where your polling place is located. But it still takes resources to vote, and in states that still do it the traditional way, voting can be a pain. It requires work and time, and the sacrifice of something else you might want to be doing, like sleeping or going out or being with your family. It may seem particularly burdensome if you’re one of those low-efficacy Americans who feel the political system is not going to respond to your wishes and interests anyhow. If you believe your vote does not matter, or politicians are all just a bunch of hypocrites, you’re not likely to invest your resources in registering and voting.

So, if voting is such a hassle, why does anyone want to do it? You’ll find a few explanations in Demystifying Government: Why People Vote.

**DEMYSTIFYING GOVERNMENT**

*Why People Vote*

Why do you vote? Some people say:

- Because it’s my obligation to vote
- Because it makes me feel good
- Because I feel that I can influence what’s happening

If you say, “I vote because I feel it’s my obligation to vote,” then you’re expressing a sentiment about **civic responsibility**, the sense that there are certain things we’re obligated to do as citizens of a democracy. Some people feel that the inconvenience of voting is part of the price we pay to maintain privileges like the freedom to speak our mind or to complain when we don’t like something.

If you say, “I vote because it makes me feel good,” then you know that you don’t have to make the difference in an election to feel like you’ve made a difference. It’s efficacy again, in a specific form that relates to voting. Some people get a sense of efficacy from voting because they feel like their voice will be included in the mix of voices expressed on Election Day. Also, it can be gratifying to speak up.

If you say, “I vote because it gives me the feeling that I can influence what’s happening,” then you are trying to shape your world. Influence is a different type of feeling than efficacy. Some people feel that voting equals influence, regardless of the outcome of an election. They see voting as a way to shape the future course of politics, either by contributing to a candidate’s winning margin or by making a show of support for the loser.

Because the mathematics of voting makes the likelihood of casting the deciding vote in an election remote, many people vote because of the attitudes they have about living in a democracy. People vote because they feel they should, or because it makes them feel good, or because it gives them the sense that they have a voice in public affairs.

**4.9 How Can I Decide?**

Chances are some people in your class have voted in a real election, others are eligible but have never voted, and still others may be ineligible to vote in the United States because they’re not 18 years old or American citizens. So, to make sure everyone has had a voting experience (or something close to it) before we move on,
let’s take a minute and cast a vote in a hypothetical congressional election. Imagine you’re in a voting booth, staring at the ballot that appears in Figure 4.9. You’re trying to decide how to vote in a congressional race between Republican Leonard Fitzsimmons and Democrat Marjorie Carp. Because you know their names and their party affiliations, you have exactly the same information you would have in a real voting booth. Imagine there are other people in line behind you, so try not to linger too long over your decision.

So, what was your decision? Did you make a choice? Or did you go for the “no vote” option? Maybe you were thinking, “I don’t know any of these people. How can I vote?” And, of course, you don’t know anything about them—which precisely mirrors the situation of many people who cast ballots in real elections. They still manage to vote. Perhaps you did too. Let’s look at how they do it.

### 4.9a Party I.D. Voting

One of the few clues you had to guide you was party affiliation, so if you identify as a Republican, you may have voted for Leonard Fitzsimmons, or if you identify as a Democrat, you may have voted for Marjorie Carp. Even without knowing anything else about these candidates, this is a reasonable thing to do because a simple party label can convey a lot of information. Perhaps you assumed that the Republican candidate is the more conservative of the two. Often, you would be correct. Perhaps you reasoned that you don’t know what Carp’s positions are on issues that matter to you, but if you’re a Democrat, the chances are that she’s closer to your beliefs than Fitzsimmons. That seems like a pretty reasonable assumption as well.

You may even have voted for the candidate who shares your partisanship without even wondering what the candidate stands for, simply because you’re a strong partisan. Remember, party identification is socialized more strongly than political attitudes and beliefs, and if we’re predisposed to thinking of ourselves as Republicans or Democrats, it’s natural to gravitate to a candidate who shares our identification.

So, party identification can help strip away the confusion of an unfamiliar ballot and provide a reasonable guideline for how to vote. It wouldn’t be surprising if many of your classmates voted this way, just as it wouldn’t be surprising to find many Americans voting this way in real elections. In recent years, party identification has been a good way to predict how people will vote.

At the same time, party identification may not be quite as strong as it was many years ago. In 1952, 47 percent of Americans claimed to be Democrats and 28 percent identified themselves as Republicans, according to the American National Election Studies. Half of these called themselves strong partisans. That left one-quarter of the electorate as either independent or apolitical.

Compare that to 2009, when Gallup reported only 35 percent identified themselves as Democrats and 27 percent as Republicans, leaving 38 percent of us as independents or apolitical. Although about one-third of the independents said they “lean” toward the Democratic Party and an equal number “lean” toward the Republican Party, we find that people who identify loosely with a political party are a bit more likely than strong supporters to shop around when they vote.

More independents and fewer strong partisans in the electorate can produce ticket splitting among voters, where people vote for, say, a Democratic candidate for president and a Republican candidate for Congress. This type of voting pattern can generate divided government, where one party controls the White House and the other controls at least one house of Congress, like we saw during twenty-two of the thirty years between 1980 and 2010, and again following the 2010 elections.
4.9b Candidate Characteristics

Did you think about voting for Leonard Fitzsimmons because he has an Irish-sounding name? Maybe you cast your vote for Marjorie Carp because she is the only woman on the ballot. Ethnic and gender identification can be other useful voting shortcuts. In fact, candidates with ethnic sounding names may count on votes from people who will identify with their background. A particularly unusual case of identity voting is discussed in Demystifying Government: The Surprising Success of Victor Morales.

Candidate character, as well as characteristics, may also play a role in voting. Sometimes the character of the candidate— their integrity, or the way they handle their personal or public life— can factor into whether people will vote for them. Bill Clinton is an excellent example of a political figure who conducted his personal life in a way that lost him the respect—and in some cases, the votes— of people who otherwise approved of his performance in office. Another example is South Carolina Governor Mark Sanford. Once considered a possible contender for the 2012 Republican presidential nomination, Sanford’s career ran aground in 2009 when he disappeared for five days without explanation, telling his staff that he was taking personal time to hike the Appalachian Trail. But when he was spotted by a reporter getting off a flight from Argentina, the married governor admitted that he had gone to Buenos Aires to end an affair he was having with a woman he called his “soul mate”. As details of their relationship emerged, and calls for Sanford’s resignation or impeachment grew, he fought hard to retain his office. But Sanford’s national ambitions were effectively destroyed, knowing he could not face a national electorate that would use this incident to evaluate his character.

Of course, these are high-profile cases of politicians in the news. Voting for or against a candidate because of their personal characteristics requires having more information about them than their last name or their party identification, and information can be costly to acquire. This limits the circumstances under which people will find themselves in a position to vote on a candidate’s character.

4.9c Issue Voting

More limited still may be the opportunity to vote on the positions a candidate takes on issues. Issue voting requires satisfying several conditions, which involve having fairly specific information about the candidates...
running for an office and the motivation to use it to determine how you’ll vote. To cast a vote on an issue, you must:

- Have enough awareness of an issue to have a position on it.
- Be aware of where the candidates stand on the issue.
- Differentiate the candidates’ positions on the issues.
- Vote for the candidate whose position is closest to yours.

Take a second and try it. Imagine that our two congressional candidates have announced their position on a hypothetical second stimulus bill similar to the one Congress passed in 2009 providing close to $800 billion to stimulate the economy through a mixture of government spending and tax cuts. Most of the plan entailed spending measures in areas such as education, green energy technology, and highway construction, with about one-third of the spending reserved for individual and business tax cuts. Supporters argued that the program was an inappropriate use of tax dollars—a wasteful give-away to special interests that would dramatically expand the federal budget deficit. In the upcoming election, let’s assume that supporters and opponents are making the same arguments.

Figure 4.10 displays the positions of our two hypothetical congressional candidates. Leonard Fitzsimmons opposes the initiative, saying it’s a huge mistake to believe we can “spend our way out of recession.” Marjorie Carp strongly supports it with some minor reservations, saying “bold action is needed to get the economy on track” while urging more tax breaks and fewer spending projects.

To cast an issue vote, you would vote for a candidate based on this issue, regardless of where he or she stands on all other issues, and regardless of his or her party identification.

Clearly, you’d have to feel pretty strongly about the issue to do this, and some people do feel that strongly about some issues. Perhaps caring deeply would then motivate you to be informed about the issue, but information can be difficult to come by or complicated to wade through for even the most dedicated voter.

When a team of political scientists investigated voters’ decision-making processes in 1956, they found that no more than one-fifth to one-third of voters could satisfy the informational requirements for issue voting.36 A more recent study of this question found that, in 1992 and 1984, more people—on average, better than half—were able to navigate the informational requirements necessary for issue voting on a host of issues including government spending, crime, job policies, the environment, aid to minorities, and women’s rights.37 However, the figure was lower in 1988, 1980, and 1976, jumping around a bit from election to election. This could reflect how the information environment isn’t always the same from issue to issue or from year to year. Some issues are more complex than others and sometimes it’s just harder to differentiate where the candidates stand. In fact, political candidates eager to reach as many voters as possible may intentionally take broad or vague positions, complicating our ability to place ourselves clearly in one camp.

### 4.9d Retrospective Voting

Issue voting is prospective in nature because we’re looking ahead and making judgments about what candidates are likely to do after they’re elected. Some people make decisions about candidates by looking at
the past. When an incumbent is running for reelection, it's fairly typical for voters to view the election as a referendum on his job performance. **Retrospective voting** provides an opportunity for people to look back and evaluate how the official has performed in office to determine whether the incumbent should be retained or replaced.38

We might take any number of things into account when making a retrospective evaluation about an official. The candidate's actions on a particular issue or set of issues could be prominent in our thinking, particularly if it's an issue that affects us personally like the economy, or something the candidate made a big deal about when running for office the last time. We might take character into account when making a retrospective evaluation and ask if the official is worthy of our continued support.

It's hard to know exactly what people will look for, but incumbents assume that voters will be judging their actions and record and try to be prepared as best they can. They can never control the timing of events, though. President Obama no doubt believes voters in 2012 will evaluate his economic record and the actions he took to reform the health care system, two of the biggest issues in the 2008 election. But there is no way to know for certain what else might intervene before he faces the voters again.

In Chapter 3, we saw how in 1991, following the swift and decisive American victory in the Persian Gulf War, President Bush (senior) probably believed he would be judged—and rewarded—for his efforts at putting together an effective war coalition. When a recession hit a year later, he found himself vulnerable to assessments that he wasn’t sympathetic enough to people who were hurt by the downturn or proactive enough to do something to combat it. This type of reaction is not surprising: Historically, presidents are punished if they have the misfortune to preside over bad economic times during an election year.

George W. Bush faced reelection during a time of economic and international uncertainty, when a majority of Americans said they felt the country was going in the wrong direction. Normally, this spells difficulty for an incumbent, and throughout 2004, President Bush ran even with his challenger, Massachusetts senator John Kerry. Although President Bush was reelected, the country remained divided on his performance to the end, handing the president a narrow three-point victory with a slim majority in the Electoral College.

When Al Gore sought the presidency in 2000, he ran as a de facto incumbent. As Bill Clinton's vice president, Gore was in a position to take credit for the prosperity of the Clinton years. Of course, he was also in line to take the blame for the scandals of the Clinton years. Fearful of being seen as too close to Clinton's shortcomings, Gore ran away from his administration's record, never asking voters to give him credit for good economic times. Whether or not this was an error in political judgment will never be known, but it did neutralize a powerful tool that fortunate incumbents have at their disposal when inviting voters to make a retrospective evaluation of their term of office.

### 4.10 A Look Ahead: Apathy, Efficacy, and the Media

Remember a little while back, in Section 4.7, “I Couldn’t Care Less!,” when we were saying that apathy might be about powerlessness? That people may come across as uncaring because problems seem so overwhelming that we might actually feel uneasy suggesting that we believe we can do something about them? It’s possible that the media contribute to this situation.

That’s because the choice to participate in politics is made in a prevailing climate of public opinion, which is influenced by the media. In the 1960s, when getting involved was cool, the prevailing climate of public opinion supported political participation, even activism and protest—some of the less conventional forms of participation we talked about earlier.

The climate was quite different in the 1980s and 1990s, and this was reflected in the way society is was mirrored back to us on television and in newspapers. If those messages preach conformity, it’s possible that we’ll feel reluctance to express ourselves, especially if our opinions differ from the norm. We may be discouraged from talking about politics, from participating in political campaigns, possibly even from voting. We’ll seem and act apathetic, not just because we may feel overwhelmed by the magnitude of the problems we face, but because we’re reacting to a social climate perpetuated by media messages that are unsympathetic to political participation.39 We’re apathetic because we want to fit in.

Media coverage of political events may have an impact on feelings of efficacy as well. From news shows to tabloid talk shows to MTV to Internet websites, we’re bombarded with lots of information about politics and
government, but we don’t have a clear way to make sense of it all. It’s easy to get lost or confused in the free market of messages, where everyone seems to have a point of view and it can be hard to figure out whom to believe. As we’ll see in Chapter 5, even “credible” media sources like network and local news programs play on our fears and doubts, inviting us to anticipate the worst possible outcomes from events or to accept that our political leaders are motivated by the basest instincts. There’s evidence that as television replaced newspapers as our primary source of information, feelings of efficacy began to decline—a pattern that began taking shape more than a generation ago.40

The tone of our political discussion just makes things worse. To call it “discourse” or “debate” risks putting a refined label on political coverage that’s often harsh and shrill. In an environment where there are so many channels that everyone has to yell to get our attention, how can we know what’s truthful, what’s partially truthful, what’s rumor, and what’s totally fabricated? The answer is, very often we don’t have a reliable way of navigating through the noise.

Sometimes, we end up believing things about our public officials that aren’t entirely true. Sometimes, we just turn the noise off altogether. These are both reasonable responses to our twenty-first-century media environment. Neither does much to facilitate feelings of efficacy.

Of course, it’s easy to blame the media for everything from political apathy and inefficacy to why there was no hot water in the shower this morning. The media are so pervasive that they make an easy target, and even though there are places where the media play a critical role in the way the political system operates, it is possible to exaggerate the extent of that role. We’ll be sure to aim carefully as we begin to explore the role the media play in connecting us to—or distancing us from—the political world. That’s the matter we’ll take up next, in Chapter 5.

Chapter Review

American political culture comprises a widely held set of values, attitudes, and beliefs that people have about the United States. It unifies America as a nation despite its great diversity by giving people a sense of an “American creed” that most Americans subscribe to, despite differences about how America should be governed.

Holding these shared values can ease the strain caused by diversity. Throughout history, periods of heavy immigration have typically produced an intolerant reaction, like the anti-Catholic “Know-Nothing” movement of the mid-1800s and, more recently, anti-Latino sentiments. New groups put a strain on resources and bring different customs and traditions that may seem alien and threatening to those who were here before them, although immigrant groups typically embrace American political culture, and over time contribute to the diversity that is one hallmark of that culture.

Changes in our political culture—and our politics—may be anticipated through the changing face of diversity, migration patterns, and the growing number of senior citizens in America. As Asians and Hispanics replace Europeans as the largest immigrant groups, whites are steadily becoming a smaller percentage of the population, and census projections estimate that whites will be a minority by the middle of the twenty-first century.

Political socialization is the process by which we acquire knowledge about politics, along with the attitudes and beliefs that we carry into adulthood. Socialization is a lifelong process facilitated by a series of agents, primary among them our parents, siblings, and friends. Although parents are the most important single agent of political socialization, many parental attitudes and beliefs are not socialized between generations, with party identification the most widely acquired parental characteristic. Secondary agents of socialization include schools and the mass media, which influence political discourse through agenda setting. Political socialization is also affected by the circumstances of our upbringing, with African Americans and women confronting a political environment that has not always embraced their participation; by large-scale events that shape our generation; and by where we are in the life cycle.

There are many ways beyond voting that people participate in politics, like working for a candidate, contacting public officials, contributing money to a campaign, talking about politics, or participating in a protest or an act of civil disobedience. Of these, voting is the most common political activity, although only slightly more than half the eligible voters have participated in recent presidential elections. The likelihood of participating in politics is influenced by age, education, socioeconomic status, and efficacy.
Participation takes effort, and given time and information costs, you can make the case that it’s sensible not to vote. Still, people find the motivation to vote because they feel it is their civic responsibility, they get a sense of efficacy from voting, or they believe that voting gives them some influence over politics. Voting decisions may be based on party identification, attributes of the candidate, issues, or retrospective evaluations of candidate performance.

**Key Terms**

- **affective** Existing in the realm of emotion or feeling.
- **agenda setting** The tendency for topics given great weight by the media to be given equally great weight by those who use the media, such that the people and events considered important by those who determine media coverage will become the people and events that the public considers important.
- **agents of socialization** External influences that shape the way we are socialized to politics, including parents and siblings in the home, friends and coworkers outside the home, and institutions like schools and the media.
- **apathy** A sense of indifference to or lack of interest in politics.
- **census** An accounting or, as Article I Section 2 of the Constitution puts it, an “actual Enumeration” of the residents of the United States, taken every ten years by constitutional decree to assess population growth and population shifts. Census figures are used to determine representation in Congress, as states that lose population between censuses stand to lose House seats to states that gain population.
- **civic responsibility** A sense of duty or obligation to society that some people believe comes along with citizenship.
- **civil disobedience** A peaceful means of protest whereby individuals draw attention to laws they consider unjust by disobeying them and being arrested for their actions.
- **cognitive** A factual awareness or appreciation of someone or something. Cognition implies knowledge and the ability to exercise judgment. This is why we would say that a young child’s understanding of the president is not cognitive because kids’ awareness of the president as an important figure lacks appreciation of what the president does and why he is important.
- **conservatism** An ideology that advocates limits on government power to address economic and social problems, relying instead on economic markets and individual initiative to address problems like health care and education, while promoting government involvement in moral matters to, for instance, minimize or eliminate abortions or permit prayer in public schools.
- **cynicism** A pervasive attitude of mistrust about politics that may lead people to withdraw from political participation.
- **efficacy** The attitude that you can be effectual and effective in your dealings with government.
- **elitism** The theory that government responds to a small, stable, centralized hierarchy of corporate and academic leaders, military chiefs, people who own big media outlets, and members of a permanent government bureaucracy. People who subscribe to this position believe the actions of regular citizens, like voting and joining groups, simply mask the real power exercised by elites.
- **generational effects** Historical influences felt by an entire generation during their formative years, which shape the way they are socialized to politics.
- **issue voting** Choosing a candidate in an election on the basis of his or her proximity to your position on an issue or issues you consider important.
- **“Know-Nothing” movement** An anti-Catholic movement that formed in the 1840s as a reaction to the first large wave of Irish immigration.
- **liberalism** An ideology that advocates the use of government power to address economic and social problems, like unemployment and environmental protection, while limiting government involvement in moral matters like abortion rights and prayer in public schools.
- **life cycle effects** Changes to the way we relate to politics and society that naturally occur during the course of aging, which typically leave us less open to political and social change as we get older.
National Voter Registration Act  Passed in 1993 to simplify and standardize voter registration requirements, the “Motor Voter Act” allows residents of most states to register to vote at the same time as they apply for or renew their driver’s license. It also provides for a standardized, national registration form that can be downloaded from the Internet.

party identification  An individual’s association with a political party. The most common parties Americans identify with are the two major parties, Republican and Democrat. Party identification—also called party I.D.—varies in intensity such that it may be strong or weak. Those who do not identify with any party are typically called independents.

pluralism  The theory that government responds to individuals through their memberships in groups, assuring that government is responsive to a wide range of voices. People who subscribe to this position believe that the wide distribution of resources in society drives the decisions government officials make.

political culture  The common set of attitudes, beliefs, and values that provide the foundation of support for a political system.

political participation  The range of activities people can engage in to influence the political process. While voting is the most commonly performed political act, participation encompasses a host of things—from writing letters to public officials to contributing time or money to a campaign or protesting the actions of government.

political socialization  The process by which we acquire political knowledge, attitudes, and beliefs.

primary agent of socialization  Parents and siblings exert disproportional influence on the political development of children by virtue of the initial influence they have on kids, giving the family a primary role in the process of political socialization.

retrospective voting  Evaluating the past performance of an incumbent to make a judgment about the future—whether the incumbent should be retained or replaced.

secondary agent of socialization  Schools and the media have an effect on political socialization, but the effect is less than from primary agents like the family because we do not form close interpersonal bonds with either institution.

selective exposure  The tendency to pay attention to messages that are consistent with existing attitudes or beliefs, while overlooking messages that conflict with them.

selective perception  An unconscious process by which we filter information that we deem irrelevant, uninteresting, or inconsistent with our attitudes and beliefs, while absorbing information that conforms to our self-perception.

socioeconomic status (SES)  A measure of an individual’s social position based primarily on education, income, and occupation. High socioeconomic status individuals are more likely to have advanced education, high incomes, and occupations that award high status and demand great responsibility, like professional or managerial work. The abbreviation for socioeconomic status is SES.

ticket splitting  Voting for candidates of different parties for different offices, rather than voting a “party line” for all Republicans or all Democrats. Ticket splitting, which has increased in recent years, is a sign of how Americans have been growing independent from political parties.

Resources

You might be interested in examining some of what the following authors have said about the topics we’ve been discussing:


Putnam, Robert D. Bowling Alone: The Collapse and Revival of American Community. New York: Simon and Schuster, 2000. This influential book presents an impressive array of data to support the argument that Americans have become increasingly detached from each other, weakening the civic bonds on which a vital democracy depends.


You may also be interested in looking at this resource site:

If you would like a copy of the national voter registration form, you can find it at http://www.fec.gov/votregis/vr.shtml

Notes

6 Ibid., 18–24.
7 Ibid., 402–414.
8 If you work or have worked, you’ve already started to support the Social Security system. As you age, there will simply be fewer workers contributing to the system and more retirees claiming benefits, so your share of the burden will increase.
12 Eighth-graders in the 2000 group ranked doctors ahead of the president as the most important authority figures.
13 Carter and Teten, “Assessing Changing Views of the President.”
15 Frank Sorauf, Party Politics in America, 2nd ed. (Boston: Little, Brown, 1972), 144.
16 Ibid.
17 Dawson and Prewitt, Political Socialization, 127–142.
21 The term “baby boomers” applies to the generation born during the years 1945–1965, the older members of which came of age during the Vietnam War. See M. Kent Jennings and Richard G. Neimi, Generational Politics (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1982).
24 Material discussed here may be found in greater detail in “Introduction to Federal Voting Rights Laws,” United States Department of Justice, Civil Rights Division, Voting section website. To learn more, go to http://www.justice.gov/crt/.
32 http://www.co.multnomah.or.us/dbcs/elections/election_information/voting_in_oregon.shtml.
34 The NES Guide to Public Opinion and Election Behavior, which may be accessed at http://www.electionstudies.org/. Figures do not sum to 100 percent because of rounding error.
35 Or maybe because you like fish?
Table, Figure and Box Notes


T2 1996 Survey of American Political Culture, University of Virginia Institute for Advanced Studies in Culture (IASC).

T3 Immigration and Naturalization Service Fiscal Year 2000 Statistical Yearbook.

T4 Ibid.

T5 The case was Department of Commerce et al v. United States House of Representatives et al., 98-404 (1999).


T7 Source: U.S. Census Bureau.

T8 Ibid.

T9 Data from 2000 National Election Study. The National Election Studies, Center for Political Studies, University of Michigan. Electronic resources from the NES World Wide Website (www.umich.edu/~nes). Ann Arbor, MI: University of Michigan, Center for Political Studies [producer and distributor], 1995–2000. These materials are based on work supported by the National Science Foundation under Grant Nos.: SBR-9707741, SBR-9317631, SES-9209410, SES-9009379, SES-8808361, SES-8341310, SES-8207580, and SOC77-08885. Any opinions, findings, and conclusions or recommendations expressed in these materials are those of the author(s) and do not necessarily reflect those of the National Science Foundation. Data for percentage who voted from official turnout figures from the 2000 election.


T11 You can access the PETA website at http://www.peta.org/about/.


T13 National Governors Association website at http://www.nga.org/portal/site/nga/menuitem.42b929b1a5b9e4eac3363d10501010a0?vgnextoid=d54c8aaa2ebbff00VgnVCM1000001a01010aRCRD&vgnextfmt=curgov.


T15 Data from 2000 General Social Survey.


T17 To see the complete literacy test, go to http://www.crmvet.org/info/litques.htm.
