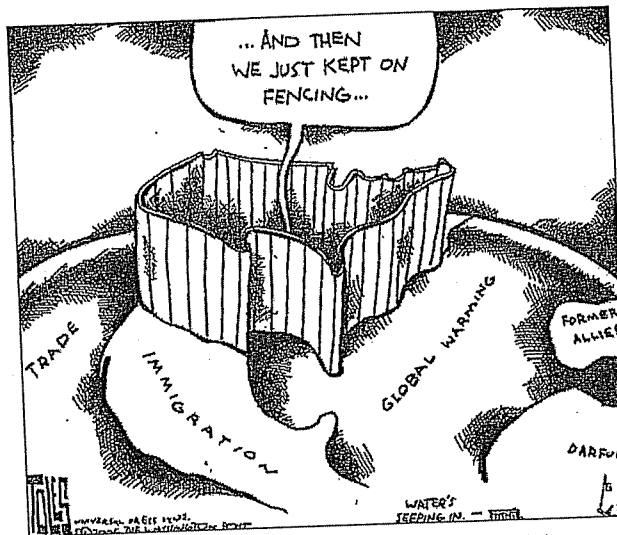


from U.S.-owned businesses. The United States also provides grants and loans to allies to further U.S. strategic and foreign policy objectives or for humanitarian reasons.

The United States has slowly, and grudgingly, adapted to a world where it can no longer simply assert its central role. Thus, the U.S. government and, more slowly, the American people have seen their problems and needs from a global perspective. The separation of powers between the executive and legislative branches, and the local constituencies of members of Congress, ensures continuing resistance to this new international role (see The Global Connection: Arizona SB 1070 and U.S. relations with Mexico).

Summary

The role of the United States in regulating the domestic economy and shaping the international economy may be tested in coming years in a manner that has not been seen since the formation of the multilateral organizations after World War II. The strength of the U.S. economy is increasingly determined by decisions of multinational corporations that are able to transfer capital and production across national boundaries with little control by governments and international actors. As the domestic U.S. economy is increasingly shaped by these international forces, U.S. citizens will demand economic stability from their government. The U.S. government was designed to be weak, so it will not be able to respond easily. The seeming lack of response will strengthen calls by some to isolate the United States from the regulation of the international economy. If these voices become dominant, the United States may find itself at odds with the international organizations that it helped create and that promote U.S. trade internationally.



"The decision to build a fence along parts of the U.S. border with Mexico appeared to many as a metaphor for the barriers that the United States was establishing with other nations in other policy arenas."

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THE GLOBAL CONNECTION

Arizona SB 1070 and U.S. Relations with Mexico

Many issues divide the United States and Mexico: trade disputes, migration, drug smuggling and violence, and gun smuggling among others. In 2010, Arizona added to this list. Reflecting popular concerns over Congress's failure to reform immigration, it passed a law requiring police to verify the legal immigration status of people arrested or detained by the police. The law, SB 1070, also criminalized giving assistance to an unauthorized alien, such as allowing a unauthorized immigrant family member to live in your home.

Many in the United States were concerned by these requirements. Under the Constitution, regulation of immigration is an enumerated power of the federal government. Aside from this constitutional concern, many raised con-

cerns of racial profiling. Would police in Arizona verify the legal status of all people detained or just of those who were Latino or Asian American? Mexico also objected to SB 1070. Mexico officially protested that its nationals will be subject to harassment in Arizona.

Arizona's enactment of the law made it more difficult for the U.S. government to negotiate with Mexico on issues of joint importance. SB 1070 demonstrates the inherent difficulty in a federalist system for the making of foreign policy. The U.S. government opposes SB 1070 as strongly as does Mexico (it has sued in federal court to have it ruled unconstitutional), but it cannot control the actions of Arizona or any other state to pass legislation that can muddy bi-national relations.

3

SECTION

GOVERNANCE AND POLICY-MAKING

Focus Questions

What powers does the Constitution give to U.S. presidents and how have twentieth-century presidents been able to expand these powers?

What are the constitutional and structural strengths and weaknesses of the federal judiciary in the United States?

How can citizens influence the policy-making process in the United States?

Organization of the State

The U.S. Constitution was drafted in 1787 and ratified the following year. The Constitution established a central government that was independent of the states but left the states most of their pre-existing powers (particularly police powers and public safety). Although it had limited powers, the new U.S. government exercised powers over commerce and foreign policy that were denied to the states.

The Constitution has been amended twenty-seven times since 1787. The first ten of these amendments (ratified in 1791) make up the Bill of Rights, the set of protections of individual rights that were a necessary compromise to ensure that the Constitution was ratified. The remaining seventeen amendments have extended democratic election practices and changed procedural deficiencies in the original Constitution that came to be perceived as inconsistent with democratic practice. Examples of amendments to extend democratic election practices are the extension of the vote to women and to citizens between the ages of eighteen and twenty (the Nineteenth and Twenty-Sixth Amendments, respectively) or the prohibition of poll taxes, a tax that had to be paid before an individual could vote (the Twenty-Fourth Amendment). Changes to procedural deficiencies included linking presidential and vice-presidential candidates on a single ticket, replacing a system where the candidate with the most votes in the Electoral College won the presidency and the second-place candidate won the vice-presidency (the Twelfth Amendment), and establishing procedures to replace a president who becomes incapacitated (the Twenty-Fifth Amendment).

Each amendment requires three-quarters of the states to agree to the change. Although the Constitution allows states to initiate amendments, all twenty-seven have resulted from amendments initially ratified by Congress. When Congress initiates an amendment to the Constitution, two-thirds of the members of the House and the Senate must vote in favor of the amendment before it is sent to the states. States set their own procedures for ratifying constitutional amendments.

Understanding two principles is necessary to understand American constitutional government: federalism and separation of powers.⁸ Federalism is the division of authority between multiple levels of government: in the United States, between the federal and state governments. Separation of powers is an effort to set government against itself by vesting separate branches with independent powers so that any one branch cannot permanently dominate the others.

These two characteristics of American government—federalism and separation of powers—were necessary compromises to guarantee the ratification of the Constitution. They are more than compromises, however. They reflect a conscious desire by the constitutional framers to limit the federal government's ability to control citizens' lives. To limit what they perceived as an inevitable tyranny of majorities over numerical minorities, the framers designed a system that set each part of government against all the other parts. Each branch of the federal government could limit the independent action of the other two branches, and the federal government and the states could limit each other.

Federalism and separation of powers have a consequence that could not be fully anticipated by the framers of the Constitution: U.S. government is designed to be inefficient. Because each part of government is set against all others, policy-making is difficult. No single leader or branch of government can unequivocally dominate policy-making as the prime minister can in a parliamentary system. Although a consensus across branches of government can sometimes appear in times of national challenge, such as in the period immediately after the September 11 attacks, this commonality of purpose quickly dissolves as each branch of government seeks to protect its prerogatives and position in the policy-making process.

Federalism establishes multiple sovereigns. A citizen of the United States is simultaneously a national citizen and a citizen of one of the states. Each citizen has responsibilities to each of these sovereigns and can be held accountable to the laws of each. Over the nation's history, the balance of power has shifted, with the federal government gaining power relative to the states, but to this day, states remain responsible for many parts of citizens' lives and act in these areas independently of the federal government.

Many powers traditionally reserved to the states have shifted to the federal government. The most rapid of these shifts occurred during the New Deal, when the federal government tapped its commerce regulation powers to create a wide range of programs to address the economic and social needs of the people. In part, the current court challenges to national health insurance focus on the questions of federalism: whether Congress has the authority to mandate individual health coverage and to require the states to establish insurance pools for their residents who cannot buy insurance from private insurers under Congress's authority to regulate interstate commerce.

The second organizing principle of American government is separation of powers. Each of the three branches of the federal government—the executive, the legislative (see Section 4), and the judiciary—shares in the responsibilities of governing and has some oversight over the other branches. In order to enact a law, for example, Congress must pass the law, and the president must sign it. The president can block the action of Congress by vetoing the law. Congress can override the president's veto through a two-thirds vote in both houses of Congress. The courts can review the constitutionality of laws passed by Congress and signed by the president. Congress and the states acting in unison can reverse a Supreme Court ruling on the constitutionality of a law by passing a constitutional amendment by two-thirds votes in each house that is subsequently ratified by three-quarters of the states. The Senate must ratify senior appointments to the executive branch, including members of the cabinet, as well as federal judges. The president nominates these judges, and Congress sets their salaries and much of their jurisdiction (except in constitutional matters). In sum, separation of powers allows each branch to limit the others and prevents any one branch from carrying out its responsibilities without the others' cooperation. It also allows for the phenomenon of divided government in which different political parties control the executive and legislative branches of government. This complexity encourages an ongoing competition for political power.

The Executive

The Presidency

The American presidency has grown dramatically in power since the nation's first days. The president, who is indirectly elected, serves a fixed four-year term and is limited to two terms by a constitutional amendment ratified in 1951. The president is both head of state and head of government.

Through much of U.S. political history, the president was not at the center of the federal government. Quite the contrary: The Constitution established Congress as the central branch of government and relegated the president to a much more poorly defined role whose primary responsibilities are administering programs designed and funded by Congress. Even now, the structural weaknesses of the presidency remain. The president must receive ongoing support from Congress to implement his agenda. But the president cannot control Congress except to the degree that public opinion (and, to a much lesser degree, party loyalty) encourages members of Congress to support the president. U.S. presidents are far weaker than prime ministers in parliamentary systems; they can, however, stay in office long after they have lost popular support.

The president is the commander-in-chief of the military and may grant pardons, make treaties (with the approval of two-thirds of the Senate), and make senior appointments to the executive branch and to judicial posts (again with the Senate's concurrence). The president is required to provide an annual state of the union report to Congress and may call Congress into session. Finally, the president manages the bureaucracy, which at the time of the Constitution's ratification was small but has subsequently grown in size and responsibility. In terms of formal powers, the president is far weaker than Congress.

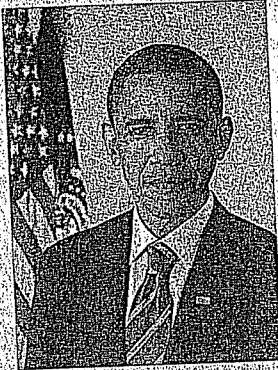
With one exception, presidents until the turn of the twentieth century did not add considerably to the delegated powers. The exception was Abraham Lincoln, who dominated Congress during the Civil War. His example was one that twentieth-century presidents followed. He became a national leader and was able to establish his own power base directly in the citizenry. Lincoln realized that each member of Congress depended on a local constituency (a district or state), and he labeled their activities as being local or sectional. Lincoln created a national power base for the presidency by presenting himself as the only national political leader, an important position during the Civil War. He had an advantage in being commander-in-chief during wartime; however, the foundation of his power was not the military but his connection to the people.

In the twentieth century, presidents discovered that they had a previously untapped resource. Beginning with Theodore Roosevelt, twentieth-century presidents used the office of the president as a bully pulpit to speak to the nation and propose public policies that met national needs. No member of Congress or the Senate could claim a similar national constituency.

Later in the twentieth century, presidents found a new power. As the role of the federal government expanded, they managed a much larger federal bureaucracy that provided goods and services used by nearly all citizens. Thus, a program like Social Security connects almost all citizens to the executive branch. Beginning with the New Deal, presidents proposed programs that expanded the federal bureaucracy and, consequently, the connection between the people and the president. Some of the Congressional opposition to the 2010 national health insurance bill focused on the creation of another program that linked the individual welfare of all Americans to a program administered by the Executive Branch.

Finally, twentieth-century presidents learned another important lesson from the experience of Abraham Lincoln. The president has an authority over the military that places the office at the center of policy-making in military and international affairs. Thus, in the period from World War II to the collapse of the Soviet Union, the presidency gained strength from the widely perceived need for a single decision-maker.




PROFILE
Barack Obama

Source: Official White House Photo by Pete Souza

Barack Obama's 2008 election to the presidency surprised many observers of U.S. society and politics. Obama self-identifies as, and is understood to be, African American in a society that has persistently discriminated against blacks. Many observers felt that this would prevent many white Americans from supporting his candidacy. In the end, the majority of white voters did oppose Obama, but his victory was

sealed by strong support from African Americans, Latinos, and Asian Americans. Obama's African roots come from his father, who migrated to the United States as a student in the early 1960s, which makes him unique on another dimension. No previous President is the child of an immigrant to the United States.

Obama's preparation for his candidacy and for the presidency included service as a community organizer and later as a civil rights attorney. On many other dimensions, Obama shared characteristics with people recently elected to the presidency. He is trained as a lawyer,

is married, and held elective office at the time of his candidacy.

President Obama began his administration facing greater challenges than most of his predecessors. The United States was engaged in two ground wars abroad as well as the war on terrorism. Obama's resources to address these international challenges were limited by a collapse in the global economy that worsened in the months before his election. A collapse in the financial services sector spurred a recession that more than doubled unemployment rates and the federal deficit. Personal bankruptcies and home foreclosures grew to new record levels.

During his first two years in office, President Obama had a resource that few of his predecessors did—sizeable Democratic majorities in the Senate and House of Representatives. The result was an ambitious agenda that saw the passage of more major pieces of legislation than any president since Lyndon Johnson had been able to pass, including: the national health care bill, two economic stimulus bills to help the nation recover from the recession, a bill to regulate the financial services industry, ratification of an arms control treaty with Russia, the end of the military's restrictions on gay and lesbian service members, civil rights legislation focusing on the workplace, and the confirmation of two Supreme Court justices, one of whom was the first Latino on the high court.

Although the presidency gained powers in the twentieth century, the office remains structurally weak relative to Congress. Presidential power is particularly undercut by the norm of divided government: Presidents have little power over Congresses controlled by the other party. Since Congress retains the power to appropriate funds, the president must ultimately yield to its will on the design and implementation of policy.

Until the election of Barack Obama in November 2008, all presidents had been white men. All but one (John F. Kennedy) have been Protestant. While being a former general was once a stepping-stone to the presidency, in today's politics having served as a governor works to a candidate's advantage. Despite a common assumption, only four vice presidents have been elected to the presidency immediately at the end of their terms. It is more common for vice presidents to move to the presidency on the death (or, in one case, the resignation) of the president.

The Cabinet and the Bureaucracy

To manage the U.S. government, the president appoints (and the Senate confirms) senior administrators to key executive branch departments. The chief officers at each of the core departments make up the president's cabinet. These senior officers include heads of prominent departments such as the secretary of state, the attorney general,

and the secretary of defense, as well as lesser-known officials such as the secretary of veterans affairs. The U.S. cabinet has no legal standing, and presidents frequently use it only at a symbolic level. The president is also free to extend membership to other senior appointed officials (such as the U.S. ambassador to the United Nations), so the number of cabinet members fluctuates from administration to administration.

The senior officers of the executive branch agencies manage a workforce of approximately 2.1 million civilian civil servants (the bureaucracy). Although formally part of the executive branch, the bureaucracy must also be responsive to Congress. Under certain circumstances, it operates independently of both elective branches and, rarely, under the direction of the courts. The presidential appointees who lead the federal agencies establish broad policy objectives and propose budgets that can expand or contract the responsibilities of executive-branch offices. Congress must approve these budgets, and it uses this financial oversight to encourage bureaucrats to behave as their congressional monitors wish. Although the size of the federal bureaucracy had been in steady decline since the early 1980s, the new federal military and security responsibilities established after the September 11 attacks reversed this trend.

Arguably, the inability of either Congress or the president to control the bureaucracy fully should give it some independence. But the bureaucracy as a rule does not have the resources to collect information and shape the laws that guide its operations. Interest groups have steadily filled this informational role, but the information comes at a cost. Bureaucracies often develop symbiotic relations with the interests that they should be regulating. The interest groups have more access to Congress and can shape the operations of the regulatory agencies. These **iron triangle relationships** (among a private interest group, a congressional committee or subcommittee overseeing the policy in question, and a federal agency implementing the policy) often exclude new players who represent alternative views on how policies should be implemented. Without an independent source of authority, the bureaucracy must depend on both the elected branches and also on interest groups.

iron triangle relationships

A term coined by students of American politics to refer to the relationships of mutual support formed by particular government agencies, members of congressional committees or subcommittees, and interest groups in various policy areas.

Other State Institutions

Besides the presidency and the Congress (see Section 4), several other institutions are central to the operation of U.S. government: the military, national security agencies, the judiciary, and state and local governments.

The Military

The U.S. Army, Navy, Marine Corps, Coast Guard, and Air Force include approximately 1.4 million active-duty personnel plus an additional 1.3 million reserve and national guard troops. The president is commander-in-chief of the U.S. military, but on a day-to-day basis, U.S. forces serve under the command of a nonpolitical officer corps.

Because of the unique geographic resources of the United States, the military has had to dedicate few of its resources to defending U.S. territory. Beginning with the new U.S. geopolitical role after World War II, the military was given new responsibilities to support U.S. multilateral and regional defense agreements.

The United States increasingly looks to its allies to support U.S. military objectives abroad. In preparation for war with Iraq, U.S. military leaders designed an invasion force of 130,000, with 100,000 ground troops and the remainder in support positions abroad. These 100,000 U.S. military ground troops were supported by at least 15,000 British ground troops. They were supplemented by approximately

160,000 contractors.⁹ International forces in Afghanistan in 2010 numbered 140,000 with 90,000 from the U.S. and the remainder from 36 other countries.

Many of the traditional responsibilities of the military, such as support of troops and specialized technical activities, have been transferred to reserve units and to private firms who work under contract to the Defense Department. Reserve troops are now called to active duty more frequently. They have been required to serve multiple long-term commitments in Iraq and Afghanistan and have been prohibited from leaving the reserves at the end of their commitments.

The repeated deployment of troops since the beginning of the U.S. military presence in Afghanistan has led to concerns that the U.S. military is stretched too thin and could not respond if the U.S. faced a new military challenge.

With the increased expectations for the military came increased reliance on defense technologies. U.S. nuclear weapons, intelligence technologies, and space-based defense technologies, as well as the maintenance of conventional weaponry and troop support, have significantly raised the cost of maintaining the military. This has led to ongoing national debates about the cost of the military and whether defense resources should go to technology or for troops. Industries have emerged to provide goods and services to the military. Proposals to cut defense spending often face opposition from these industries.

National Security Agencies

The September 11, 2001, attacks focused the attention of policy-makers on domestic security. Agencies with responsibility in this area had been dispersed throughout the federal government. They were now concentrated in the Department of Homeland Security under a single cabinet secretary. Although it took somewhat longer, intelligence-gathering agencies were placed under the administrative control of a director of national intelligence. Funding for domestic security and international intelligence gathering increased by approximately one-third.

Legislation passed in the months after September 11, 2001, also subjected U.S. citizens and permanent residents to greater levels of government scrutiny and to potential violations of civil rights. The Bush administration asserted (and the courts rejected) a position that suspected terrorists could be seized and held indefinitely, without charges.

The Judiciary

Of the three branches of federal government, the courts are the most poorly defined in the Constitution. Initially, it was unclear what check the courts had on other branches of government. Equally important, the courts were quite dependent on the president, who appointed judges, and on Congress, which approved the nomination of judges and set the jurisdictional authority of the courts.

In 1803, the Supreme Court established the foundation for a more substantial role in federal policy-making. It ruled in *Marbury v. Madison* that the courts inherently had the right to review the constitutionality of the laws. This ruling, though used rarely in the nineteenth century, gave the judiciary a central place in the system of **checks and balances**.

Even with the power of judicial review, the judicial branch remained weaker than the other branches. In addition to Congress's ability to establish court jurisdiction in nonconstitutional cases and the president's ability to fill the courts with people of his choosing, the courts have other weaknesses. They must rely on the executive branch

Marbury v. Madison

The 1803 U.S. Supreme Court ruling that the federal courts inherently had the authority to review the constitutionality of laws passed by Congress and signed by the president. The ruling, initially used sparingly, placed the courts centrally in the system of checks and balances.

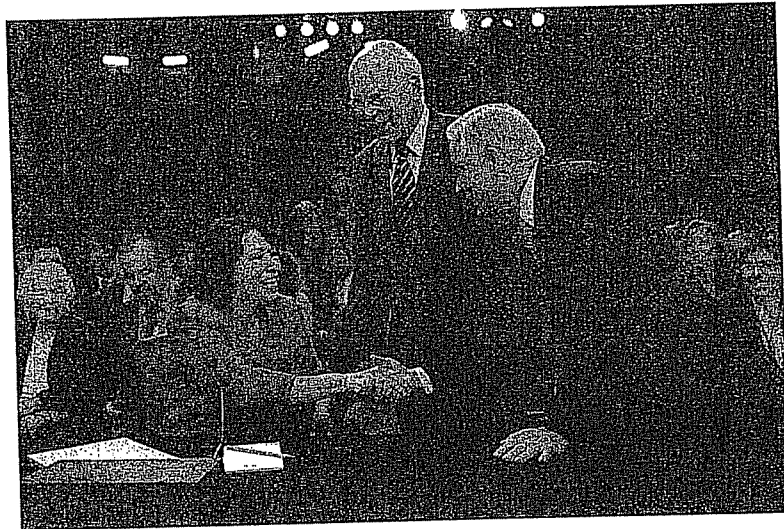
checks and balances

A governmental system of divided authority in which coequal branches can restrain each other's actions. For example, the U.S. president must sign legislation passed by Congress for it to become law. If the president vetoes a bill, Congress can override that veto by a two-thirds vote of the Senate and the House of Representatives.

to enforce their decisions. Enforcement proves particularly difficult when a court's rulings are not in line with public opinion, such as when the courts ruled that busing should be used as a tool to accomplish racial integration in the schools. The courts' own rules have also limited their powers. Traditionally, the courts limit standing—the ability to bring suits—to individuals who saw their rights directly challenged by a law, policy, or action of government.

Beginning in the second half of the twentieth century, the federal courts gained power relative to the other branches of government. In part, this came from expanding the rules of standing so that groups as well as individuals could challenge laws, policies, or government actions and by maintaining longer jurisdiction over cases as a tool to establish limited enforcement abilities. The courts also gained relative power because of the expansion of federal regulatory policy. Unclear laws and regulations, often requiring technical expertise to implement, placed the courts at the center of many policy debates. The courts have also gained power because they became a venue for individuals and groups whose interests were neglected by the democratically elected institutions but who could make claims based on constitutional guarantees of civil rights or civil liberties. African Americans, for example, received favorable rulings from federal courts before Congress and the president responded to their demands. Since the September 11 attacks, the executive branch and majorities in Congress showed that they were willing to limit individual rights in a search for collective security. Courts—including the Supreme Court—have been more cautious.

The power of the courts ultimately rest with their ability to persuade the citizenry that their procedures are fair and their judgments are based on the Constitution and the law. This may become more difficult in the future as the courts and particularly the Supreme Court have moved steadily to the ideological right. Analysis in 2010, at the time of the retirement of long-time Justice John Paul Stevens, demonstrated that each of the current nine justices is more conservative than his or her predecessor on the Court and that majority opinions have become more conservative, on average, than under any of the three previous chief justices. With the courts increasingly involved in contentious national issues, the Senate has taken its role in reviewing appointments more seriously and has slowed the confirmation of appointees, leaving some judicial circuits severely short of judges.



AP Photo/J. Scott Applewhite

Supreme Court nominee Sonia Sotomayor prepares to testify before the Senate Judiciary Committee as part of her confirmation process.

The steady increase in judicial power in the twentieth century should not obscure the fundamental weaknesses of the courts relative to the elected branches. The courts are more dependent on the elected branches than the elected branches are on them.

Subnational Government

State governments serve as an important part of government in the United States. Their responsibilities include providing services to people more directly than does the federal government. Most important among these is education, which has always been a state and local responsibility in the United States.

States and localities are able to experiment with new policies. If a policy fails in a single state, the cost is much lower than if the entire country had undertaken a new policy that eventually failed. Successes in one state, however, can be copied in others or nationally.

In addition to state governments, citizens pay taxes to, and receive services from, local governments that include counties, cities, and districts for special services such as water and fire protection, and townships. These local entities have a different relationship to the states, however, than do states to the federal government. The local entities are statutory creations of the state and can be altered or eliminated by the state (and are not a form of federalism).

Local governments provide many of the direct services that the citizenry receives from the government. Because states and localities have different resources (often based on local property taxes) and different visions of the responsibilities of government, people in the United States may receive vastly different versions of the same government service, depending simply on where they live. Education provides an example. Property tax-poor areas may spend only a few thousand dollars per year educating students, while property tax-rich areas may spend \$15,000 to \$20,000 per student.

The Policy-Making Process

Because of separation of powers and constitutional limits on each branch of government, the federal policy-making process has no clear starting or ending point. Instead, citizens and organized interests have multiple points of entry and can fight outcomes through multiple points of attack. Without centralization, policies often conflict with each other. The United States, for example, subsidizes tobacco cultivation but seeks to hamper tobacco companies from selling cigarettes through high taxes, health warnings, and limits on advertising. Federalism further complicates policy-making. Each state sets policy in many areas, and states often have contradictory policies. In sum, policy advocates have many venues in which to propose new policies or to change existing policies: congressional committees, individual members of Congress, executive branch regulatory agencies, state governments, and, in some states, direct ballot initiatives.

With so many entrance points, there are equally many points at which policies can be blocked. Once Congress passes a law, executive branch agencies must issue regulations to explain specifically how the law will be implemented. Subtle changes can be inserted as part of this process. On controversial issues, senior political appointees set policy for the writing of regulations.

Furthermore, people or interest groups that feel disadvantaged by the regulations can fight regulations in the courts. They also can contest the law itself, if they

can find a way to claim that the law is unconstitutional or conflicts with another law or with state government responsibilities. Once a policy is in place, it can be opposed or undermined by creating a competing policy in another agency or at the state level.

The Constitution gives no guidance about the origins and outcomes of policy initiatives. The president must present an annual report to Congress on the state of the nation. This has evolved into an organized set of policy proposals. Without presidential leadership in policy-making, Congress partially filled the void. Enumerated powers in the Constitution direct Congress to take action in specific policy areas, such as establishing a post office or building public roads. Once Congress established committees to increase its efficiency (see Section 4), these committees offered forums for discussion of narrow policy. These committees, however, are not mandated in the Constitution and are changed to reflect the policy needs of each era. Thus, while presidents can propose policies (and implement them), only Congress has the ability to deliberate about policy and pass it into law.

Beginning in the 1970s some federal courts experimented with initiating policy as a way of maintaining jurisdiction in cases brought before them. These efforts, such as court-mandated control over state prison or mental health care systems, spurred much national controversy and caused the judiciary to decline in public opinion. Today, the courts are much more likely to block or reshape policies than to initiate them.

Without any clear starting point, individual citizens have great difficulty when they seek to advocate a new policy. Into this void have come extragovernmental institutions, some with narrow interests and some promoting collective interests. Prominent or wealthy individuals or groups can get Congress's or the president's attention through campaign contributions and other types of influence.

Mediating institutions have also emerged to represent mass interests. Political parties organize citizen demands and channel them to political leaders. The parties balance the needs of various interests in society and come as close as any other group in society to presenting comprehensive policy proposals (often summarized in the parties' platforms). Group-based interests also organize to make narrow demands. Veterans are an early example of a group that made a group-specific demand on federal policy-making. In the twentieth century, as both federal and state governments began to implement more widespread distributive and redistributive policies, more organized interest groups appeared. These interest groups have become the dominant form of mediating institution in U.S. politics (see Section 4). Unlike political parties, however, interest groups represent only a single issue or group of narrowly related issues.

Summary

The twentieth century saw a dramatic increase in the responsibilities of the presidency, the executive branch, and the courts relative to the Congress. Arguably, these changes reflect a fundamental shift in the balance of powers between the branches established in the Constitution. These increases in executive and judicial responsibilities each responded to popular demands for a more expansive government role in U.S. society and a government that protects individual rights. Late in the century, however, many in the electorate challenged this new scope of government. It is this question of the appropriate size and scope of government that animates the ongoing critical juncture in U.S. politics and that explains, in part, the dramatic shift from widespread electoral support for President Obama and the Democrats in 2008 to support for Republicans in 2010 (and likely future equally dramatic shifts in national leadership).

REPRESENTATION AND PARTICIPATION

SECTION 4

The Legislature

Of the three branches in the federal government, the founders envisioned that Congress would be at the center and would be the most powerful. They concentrated the most important powers in it and were most explicit about its responsibilities. For most of the nation's history, their expectations for the powers of Congress have been met.

One of the most important compromises of the Constitutional Convention involved the structure of Congress. States with large populations wanted seats in the national legislature to be allocated based on population. Small states feared they would be at a disadvantage under this system and wanted each state to have equal representation. The compromise was a **bicameral** system with two houses, one allocated by population—the House of Representatives—and the other with equal representation for each state—the Senate. This compromise has remained largely uncontested for the past 200 years despite the growing gap in population between large and small states. The senatorial vote of each resident of Wyoming has sixty-five times the impact of each Californian.

The two legislative bodies are structured differently. The House has 435 members and is designed to be more responsive to the popular will. Terms are short (two years), and the districts are smaller than Senate seats except in the smallest states. The average House seat has approximately 716,000 constituents and will continue to grow. The Senate has 100 members and is designed to be more deliberative, with six-year, staggered terms. Although unlikely, it is possible every two years to vote out an entire House of Representatives; the Senate could see only one-third of its members unseated during any election year.

Membership in the U.S. Congress is slightly more diverse than the people who have held the presidency, although most members of Congress are white male Protestants. In the 112th Congress (2011–2013), approximately 17 percent of officeholders were women, 9 percent were African American, 6 percent were Latino, and 3 percent were Asian American. Most members of Congress, regardless of gender, race, or ethnicity, are highly educated professionals. Law is the most common profession. The Senate is less racially diverse but has a comparable share of women to the House: two Latinos, two Asian Americans, and 17 women served in the Senate in 2011. No African Americans served in the Senate.

The two central powers of Congress are legislation and oversight. For a bill to become law, it must be passed in the same form by both the House and the Senate and signed by the president. Equally important, Congress has the ability to monitor the implementation of laws that it passes. Since it continues to control the appropriation of funds for programs each year, Congress can oversee programs being administered by the executive branch and shape their implementation through allocations of money or by rewriting the law.

Congress has organized itself to increase its efficiency. Discussion and debate take place primarily in committees and subcommittees. The committee system permits each member to specialize in specific areas of public policy. Committees are organized topically, and members often seek to serve on committees that are of particular

Focus Questions

How do Congress's constitutional powers and its organizational structure ensure that it is the most powerful branch of the U.S. government?

Who votes and who doesn't in U.S. politics? Why?

What aspects of the organization and structure of the U.S. government and the electorate diminish the likelihood of the establishment of more than two political parties?

How do U.S. political values manifest themselves in the U.S. Constitution?

bicameral

A legislative body with two houses, such as the U.S. Senate and the U.S. House of Representatives. Just as the U.S. Constitution divides responsibilities between the branches of the federal government and between the federal government and the states, it divides legislative responsibilities between the Senate and the House.

interest to their constituencies—for instance, a member of Congress from a rural area may seek to serve on the Agriculture Committee. All members seek to serve on committees that have broad oversight of a wide range of government activities, such as the Appropriations Committee, through which all spending bills must pass. Specialization allows each member to have some influence while not requiring that she or he know the substance of all facets of government.

For a bill to become law, it must be reviewed by the committee and subcommittee that have responsibility for the substantive area that it covers. When a member proposes a bill, it goes to a committee based on its subject matter and usually never gets any further. In each session, relatively few bills receive hearings before a subcommittee or committee. The House and Senate leadership (the Speaker of the House, the Senate Majority Leader, and committee chairs) are central to deciding which bills receive hearings. If the bill receives support from the committee, it must then be debated by the body as a whole. In the House, this may never occur because that institution has another roadblock: the Rules Committee, which determines what can be debated on the floor and under what terms. Only in the Senate can debate be unlimited (although it can be limited by cloture, a vote of sixty senators to limit debate). These hierarchical structures strengthen the powers granted to the House and the Senate in the Constitution because they allow Congress to act efficiently and to use its powers to investigate federal programs, even though it does not administer them. As a result, Congress places itself at the center of the policy-making process. Although congressional power waned somewhat in the late twentieth century, Congress remains the foremost branch of American government. This specialization and hierarchy ensure that congressional leaders are more central to the design and oversight of policy than are members of European parliaments.

This tension between the constitutional powers of Congress and the national focus on the president as the national leader became evident in the federal government's response to the September 11 attacks. Initially, President Bush shaped the public policy response, including a large emergency appropriation that included financial assistance for New York City, grants and loans to the airlines, an increase in defense and intelligence spending, and military action against Afghanistan. As Bush administration policies evolved and the response came to focus on structural changes in the federal government, however, Congress began to reassert its constitutional prerogatives. Congressional concern about the growth in executive power after September 11 was probably most evident in its reaction to the Bush administration's reorganization of more than fifty federal agencies into the cabinet-level Department of Homeland Security.

Congress also asserted itself to ensure that the National Commission on Terrorist Attacks on the United States, unofficially known as the 9/11 Commission, would be formed, funded, and given sufficient time to conduct its investigation and write its report. Initially, the Bush administration opposed forming such an investigative commission and, once it relented in the face of strong congressional opposition to its position, sought to limit the scope, funding, and longevity of the commission. The commission documented executive branch intelligence-gathering failures and provided the political pressure necessary to force the Bush administration to create a new federal official—the Director of National Intelligence—who would oversee most U.S. intelligence-gathering agencies.

Congressional oversight of presidential leadership in the U.S. response to September 11 and the wars in Afghanistan and Iraq demonstrate that Congress has not yielded as the president gained power. It passed legislation to undermine presidential power and, equally important, applied its authority to investigate federal programs to

weaken the presidency. These investigations of presidents and their senior appointees weaken the connection between the presidency and the people and weaken not just the presidents as individuals, but also the presidency as an office.

Political Parties and the Party System

The roots of two-party politics can be found both in the nation's political culture and in the legal structures that govern elections. The Democrats can trace their origins to the 1800 election, while the Republicans first appeared in 1856. Despite the fact that today's parties have consistently competed against each other, the coalitions that support them (and which they, in turn, serve) have changed continually.

Today, the Republicans depend on a coalition of upper-income voters, social conservatives, small-business owners, residents of rural areas, and evangelical Christians. They receive more support from men than from women and are strongest in the South and the Mountain West.

The Republicans have tried to make inroads in minority communities but have been largely unsuccessful, with the exception of Cuban Americans and some Asian American groups (see Figure 3.5). For Republicans to win Latino (or African American) votes on a wider scale, the party would have to be willing to alienate some core Republican constituencies.

The contemporary Democratic coalition includes urban populations, the elderly, racial and ethnic minorities, workers in export-oriented businesses, unionized labor, and, increasingly, working women. Suburban voters have increasingly joined the Democratic coalition. Today's Democrats are concentrated in the Northeast and on the West Coast. The Democrats have built a steady advantage among women voters.

Democratic partisanship grew steadily over the Bush years and declined slightly in the first two years of the Obama administration. In 2010, Democrats made up 32 percent of the electorate, Republicans 25 percent, and Independents 37 percent. Although the Independents have seen the most growth over the past two decades, they tend to lean reliably toward one party or the other. When these "leaners" are accounted for, the Democrats maintain a slight advantage, though a narrower one—roughly 44 percent to 41 percent in late 2010. Generally, Democrats, who

	1992 Percent	1996 Percent	2000 Percent	2004 Percent	2008 Percent
Whites	49.4	48.3	43.8	41.4	43.9
Blacks	89.2	87.5	91.8	88.9	96.0
Hispanics	70.9	77.4	68.4	56.6	68.9
Asian Americans	36.0	47.3	56.8	56.0	63.9

Note: These calculations exclude votes for candidates other than Democratic and Republican candidates. Each of these elections include many candidates other than the Democrat and Republican. The non-major party candidates who received the most votes in these elections were: Ross Perot in 1992 and 1996, who earned approximately 19 percent and 8 percent of the vote in 1992 and 1996, respectively; and Ralph Nader who won 3 percent and 1 percent of the vote in 2000 and 2004, respectively.

Source: Author's calculations based on *New York Times*, 2008. "Election Results 2008." <http://elections.nytimes.com/2008/results/president/national-exit-polls.html> (accessed February 15, 2010).

FIGURE 3.5 Democratic Party Share of Two-Party Vote, Presidential Elections 1992–2008

are more likely to be poor, less educated, and younger than Republican voters, are less likely to turn out on Election Day, particularly in “off-year” (nonpresidential) elections. After the 2010 election, the Republicans controlled governorships in 29 states, and the Democrats controlled 20. Rhode Island’s Governor is Independent Lincoln Chafee. The Republicans won a majority of members of the House of Representatives in 2010 (242 to 193). Democrats hold the majority in the Senate (53 to 47).

These majorities will likely be in flux for the next several elections. The electorate is much more evenly divided than the U.S. House or the governorships suggest; both saw Democratic gains in 2006 and 2008 and gains for the Republicans in 2010. Of the two parties, the Republicans have a more fragile coalition. Beginning in the 1990s, internal conflicts grew in the Republican Party. Moral conservatives and fiscal conservatives each wanted the party to focus on their interests and jettison the others’ issues as a way of expanding the party’s base of support. In 2010, this division manifested itself in the emergence of the Tea Party activists who sought to move the Republican Party to the right out of concerns that the federal government was spending too much and usurping powers that should be held by the states (see U.S. Connection: The Tea Party).

These party divisions lead to speculation that new parties might emerge. But the political culture of the United States dampens the likelihood that a faction of one of the parties will break off and form a party that competes in election after election. Instead, two coalitional parties are the norm, an unusual pattern among advanced democracies.

U.S. CONNECTION



The Tea Party

The 2010 U.S. elections saw the emergence of a new political movement—the Tea Party. Despite its name, it is a social movement not a party, and largely organizes within the Republican Party. Tea Party activism emerged in response to anger in the electorate over federal government spending and growing federal budget deficits, to Federal Reserve actions to support the banking sector and to keep interest rates low, and to the enactment of the national health care plan and its requirement that all Americans be required to purchase insurance. Tea Party activism is highly decentralized, so there is no single Tea Party, and it rejects centralized leadership.

Various Tea Party organizations and chapters endorsed 129 candidates for the House of Representatives and 9 Senate candidates. In several cases, tea party candidates defeated the preferred candidates of Republican leaders in party primaries. Although the tea party saw some major victories in the U.S. House of Representatives, several of the Tea Party candidates who defeated establishment Republicans in primaries went on to defeat in the general election. Most notable among these were Nevada’s Sharon Angle, Delaware’s Christine O’Donnell, New York’s Carl Paladino, and Colorado’s Ken Buck. Had the mainstream Republicans

been their party’s candidate, it is likely that they would have won. Had all four won, Republicans would have controlled the Senate in 2011.

Today’s Tea Party reflects the latest in a long line of U.S. populist movements that appear in eras when the national government is perceived to be distant and out of touch. Over time, its energy will likely dissipate. Its rejection of formal organization and leadership structures make it difficult to sustain the high levels of citizen involvement seen in the period leading up to the 2010 elections. That said, it will undoubtedly be a force in the 2012 elections. Candidates for the 2012 Republican presidential nomination will need to win support from the activists who have been mobilized by the Tea Party movement and local Tea Party members will challenge incumbent moderate Republicans in party primaries. The outcome of the 2012 elections at the federal and state levels will determine how long the Tea Party movement as an organization will be a part of national political debates. Its organizing principles of reducing the size and scope of the federal government, on the other hand, will likely be part of U.S. political debates for the foreseeable future.

Electoral law reinforces this situation. Most U.S. elections are conducted under a single-member-plurality election system in district-based elections. Single-member district-based elections reward coalitional parties and diminish opportunities for single-issue parties or narrowly focused parties, such as the Green Party or the Tea Party, should it break off from the Republican Party. Broad coalitional parties can contest seats in election after election, while smaller parties in the United States are likely to dissolve after several defeats.

There are more than 600,000 elected offices in the United States. To compete regularly in even a small percentage of these, a party must have a national presence and a national infrastructure. Most third parties fail long before they are able to compete in more than a few hundred races.

Finally, the heterogeneity of the U.S. population and the range of regional needs and interests rewards parties that can form coalitions prior to elections, as does a system with just two political parties. The Constitution-driven inefficiency of the U.S. government would become all the more dramatic if multiple parties (rather than two that must, by their nature, be coalitions) were competing in legislatures to shape outcomes.

Elections

As an example of its commitment to democratic norms, the United States points to the frequency of elections and the range of offices filled through elections. Unlike the case in parliamentary systems, these elections are conducted on a regular schedule: presidential elections every four years, Senate elections every six years, House of Representatives elections every two years. States and localities set the terms of state and local offices, but almost all have fixed terms.

Fundamental to understanding U.S. elections is federalism. States set the rules for conducting elections and for who can participate and how votes are counted. When the country was founded, this authority was almost complete, since the Constitution said little about elections. At the country's founding, most states limited electoral participation to white male landholders. By the 1830s, many states had eliminated the property-holding requirement, in part in response to the emergence of competitive political parties that sought to build membership.

Further expansion of the U.S. electorate required the intervention of the federal government and amendment of the Constitution to reduce state authority in determining voter eligibility. The first of the efforts to nationalize electoral rules was initially a failure. This was the effort to extend the franchise to African Americans after the Civil War through the Fourteenth and Fifteenth Amendments. More successful was the Nineteenth Amendment, ratified in 1920, which extended the vote to women.¹⁰ The Civil War amendments finally had an impact with the passage of the Voting Rights Act (VRA) in 1965, which secured African Americans access to the ballot box. In 1975, Congress extended the VRA to other ethnic and racial groups who had previously seen their right to vote abridged because of their origin or ancestry—Hispanics, Asian Americans, Native Americans, and Alaskan Natives. In 1971, the Twenty-Sixth Amendment gave the vote to all citizens aged eighteen and older.

States continue to regulate individual participation in elections through their control of voter registration. In most advanced democracies, the national government is responsible for voter registration rather than the individual. Individual registration prescreens potential voters to ensure they meet the state's requirements for voting:

residence in the jurisdiction for a set amount of time and, in many states, the absence of felony convictions. While this may appear minimal and necessary to prevent voter fraud such as an individual's voting multiple times in the same election, the requirement to register in advance of the election prevents many from being able to vote.¹¹

There is a second consequence of federalism on U.S. elections: The responsibility for holding elections, deciding which nonfederal offices are filled through elections, and determining how long nonfederal officeholders will serve before again having to be elected is the responsibility of the states and, if the states delegate the power, to localities. Thus, a local office that is elected in one state could be an appointed office in another. Terms for state and local offices, such as governors, vary. Elections are held at different points throughout the year. Finally, federalism shapes elections by delegating to the states responsibilities for determining how votes are collected and how they are counted, even in elections to national office.

What are the consequences of this federalist system of elections? At a minimum, it leads to confusion and burnout among potential voters. Many voters are unaware of elections that are not held on the same schedule as national elections. Others who are aware become overloaded with electoral responsibilities in jurisdictions that have frequent elections and so choose not to vote in local races.

One result of this decentralized system with a legacy of group-based exclusion is that increasing numbers of citizens do not vote. In the late 1800s, for example, turnout in national elections exceeded 80 percent of those eligible to vote, and the poor participated at rates comparable to the rich. By 1996, turnout in the presidential election dropped below 50 percent (returning to 64 percent in the 2008 election). In state and local races, turnouts in the range of 10 to 20 percent are the norm. Perhaps more important, turnout varies dramatically among different groups in society. The poor are less likely to vote than the rich, the young less likely than the old, and the less educated less likely than the more educated.¹² Because blacks and Hispanics are more likely to be young, poor, and have lower levels of formal education, they are less likely to vote than are whites. Hence, political institutions are less likely to hear their demands and respond to their needs.

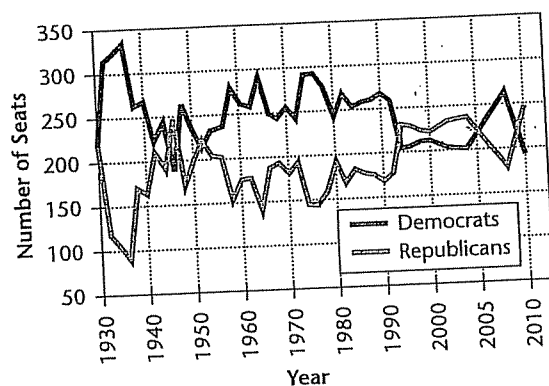


FIGURE 3.6 Party Control of the U.S. House of Representatives, 1930–2010

Source: U.S. House of Representatives, Office of the Clerk. 2011. "Party Divisions of the House of Representatives (1789 to Present)." http://clerk.house.gov/art_history/house_history/partyDiv.html (accessed February 15, 2011).

These class- and age-driven differences in participation are not entirely the result of federalism and variation in the rules for individual participation and the conduct of elections. Declining party competitiveness at the state level also plays a role. Nevertheless, the steady elimination of formal group-based exclusion has been replaced by the marginalization of the majority of some groups, such as Asian Americans and Hispanics. The United States has yet to live up to its democratic ideals.

This declining participation should not obscure the dramatic changes in leadership and issues addressed that result from elections (see Figure 3.6). In 2006, the Democrats regained control of the Senate and House of Representatives and elected the first woman to serve as Speaker of the House (Nancy Pelosi). In 2010, the Republicans gained control of the House as well as many governorships and state house majorities. These Republican majorities in many state governments allowed them to guide redistricting that will determine Congressional and state legislative seats for the remainder of the decade.

Political Culture, Citizenship, and Identity

The United States is a large country with distinct regional cultures, ongoing immigration leading to distinct languages and cultures, class divisions, and a history of denying many Americans their civil rights. Despite these cleavages, the United States has maintained almost from its first days a set of core political values that has served to unify the majority of the citizenry. These values are liberty, equality, and democracy.

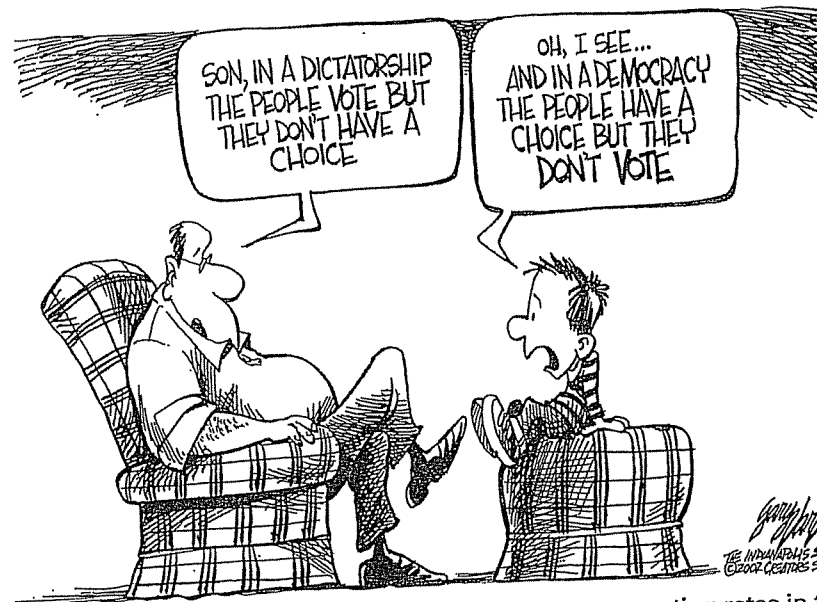
Liberty, as it is used in discussions of U.S. political culture, refers to liberty from restrictions imposed by government. A tangible form of this notion of liberty appears in the Bill of Rights, which provides for the rights of free speech, free assembly, free practice of religion, and the absence of cruel and unusual punishment. Support for liberty takes a second form: support for economic liberty and free enterprise. Property and contract rights are protected at several places in the Constitution. Furthermore, Congress is empowered to regulate commerce.

Clearly, these liberties are not mutually exclusive. But protections of the Bill of Rights often conflict with each other: Economic liberties reward some in the society at the cost of economic opportunities for others. Nevertheless, the idea that citizens should be free to pursue their beliefs and their economic objectives with only limited government interference has been a unifying element in U.S. political culture.

Equality is the second unifying American political value. In the Declaration of Independence, it is "self-evident" that "all men are created equal." Nevertheless, at various times in the nation's history, women, Native Americans, African Americans, Mexican Americans, Chinese Americans, Japanese Americans, and immigrants who had naturalized have been excluded from membership in the polity and, consequently, from access to this equality. But each of the excluded groups, such as African Americans during the civil rights movement, has used the widespread belief in equality to organize and demand that the United States live up to its ideals.

It is important to observe what this belief in equality is not. The equality that has long been sought is equality of opportunity, not equality of result, such as that sought in the communist states. There is support for the notion that people should have an equal opportunity to compete for economic rewards, not that they should end up at the same point.

The final unifying value is representative democracy. Throughout the nation's history, there has been a belief that government is legitimate only to the degree that it reflects the popular will. As with the notion of equality, the pool of citizens whose voices should be heard has changed over time, from white male property holders at the



Despite a steady liberalization of rules on who can vote, voting rates in the United States have declined for the past 100 years.

Source: By permission of Gary Varvel and Creators Syndicate, Inc.

time of the founding to most citizen adults today (convicted felons are excluded from the franchise in many states).

The United States has never had a national religion and, at times in the nation's history, conflicts between Protestants and Catholics have been divisive. In contemporary society, division over religion is more between those for whom religion provides routine guidance in politics and social interactions and those for whom religion is a more private matter that does not shape political activities.

In 2008, 51 percent of U.S. adults were Protestant, 24 percent were Roman Catholic, and 2 percent were Jewish or Mormon. Less than 1 percent were Muslim. Nearly 17 percent of U.S. adults reported no religious preference. Despite the fact that there is no national religion in the United States, religion plays a more central role in U.S. politics than it does in the politics of European democracies. Moral issues—such as abortion and gay rights—guide the votes of a sizeable minority of the population. Many elected leaders are overt in their religiosity to a degree that would not be acceptable in European politics (and would not have been in U.S. politics as recently as twenty-five years ago).

Values are very much at the heart of contemporary political debates. Leaders have marshaled these values throughout the nation's history to reduce potential cleavages in U.S. society. Since the United States cannot look to a common ethnicity of its people (as, for example, Germany can), to a sovereign with a historical tie to the citizenry (as in a monarchy like the United Kingdom), or to a purported common religion or ideology among its citizens (as does Iran or Cuba), the belief in these values has been used to unify the diverse peoples of the United States.¹³

Interests, Social Movements, and Protest

In the United States, political participation has long included activities other than elections and party politics. In the nation's story about its origins, protest proves central; the Revolution was spurred by acts of civil disobedience such as the Boston Tea Party. Similarly, protest and social movements repeatedly forced the United States to live up to its democratic ideals. From the woman's suffrage movement of the nineteenth century to the civil rights movement of the 1950s and 1960s, people defined as being outside the democratic community organized to demand that they be included.

These protest movements have also been able to tap the willingness of Americans to become involved in collective action. This voluntarism and civic involvement have long been identified as stronger in the U.S. democracy than in other advanced democracies.

In recent years, however, observers of U.S. politics have noted a decline in civic involvement, a decline that has also appeared in the other advanced democracies. Although social movements remain, they have become much more driven by elites than were their predecessors. At the same time, voluntarism and civic involvement have declined, and the likelihood of participation has followed the patterns of voting, with the more educated, wealthier, and older generally more likely to volunteer and be civically engaged.¹⁴ This decline in civic involvement in U.S. politics has serious long-term implications for society. As civic involvement declines, Americans talk about politics less with their peers and have a lessened sense that they can shape political outcomes. They are less likely to be part of networks that allow for collective political action. Political scientist Robert Putnam has identified this as the "bowling alone" phenomenon in which social capital—the networks of relationships with norms of behavior, trust, and cooperation that increase the likelihood that society will

function effectively—is in decline.¹⁵ Americans traditionally had many social venues, such as bowling leagues, where they had an outlet to talk about politics and, potentially, to organize when they were frustrated with political outcomes. There are fewer of these today (people are busier, have more job responsibilities, and spend more time watching television), and the decline in civic engagement has led to reduced political efficacy and greater frustration with the course of politics.

Protest, of course, remains an option for people who feel neglected by the political order. In 2006, for example, as many as 5 million immigrants, their families, and their supporters took to the streets to protest anti-immigrant legislation in the U.S. House of Representatives. Mass protests such as these, however, are very much the exception. Despite the fact that many in the United States oppose immigration at current levels, the social movement organizations that have formed to promote this cause—most notably the Minuteman organization—have rarely been able to generate much mass participation. National polling indicates that for the population as a whole—who neither joined the street protests nor the militias—immigration is an area of continuing concern. Each of the last three Congresses has sought to reform immigration in a comprehensive manner, but has failed, suggesting that neither the street protests, nor the anti-immigrant militias were of sufficient gravity or organization to pressure Congress into action on immigration.

The decline in social movements and other ways to organize the politically marginalized (such as labor unions), however, has shifted the focus of protest from organized collective actions to more isolated and, often, violent protests (such as the 1995 bombing of the federal building in Oklahoma City or the antiglobalization protests in Seattle in 1999) that fail to build more support for the demands of the people organizing the protest. Militia movements—organizations of individuals willing to take up arms to defend their own notion of U.S. political values and the Constitution, for example—represent the concerns of some in today's society, but few support their activities.

The twentieth century saw the rise of a new form of organized political activity: interest groups. Like political parties and candidates for office, these organizations try to influence the outcome of public policy by influencing policy-makers. They differ, however, in that they are usually organized to influence a single issue or a tightly related group of issues. Also unlike social movements, they rely on money and professional staff rather than on committed volunteers. Interest groups increased in prominence as the federal and state governments increasingly implemented distributive and redistributive policies. Beginning in the 1970s, a specialized form of interest group, the **political action committee (PAC)**, appeared to evade restrictions on corporations and organized labor to make financial contributions to political candidates and political parties.

Interest groups are so numerous in U.S. politics that it is not possible to even venture a guess as to their number. They include national organizations, such as the National Rifle Association, as well as local groups, such as associations of library patrons who seek to influence city council appropriations. They include mass organizations, such as the American Association of Retired Persons, and very narrow interests, such as oil producers seeking to defend tax protections for their industry.

Although interest groups and PACs are now much more common than social movements in U.S. politics, they do not replace one key function traditionally fulfilled by the social movements, which seek to establish accountability between citizens and government. Interest groups by definition protect the needs of a cohesive group in the society and demand that government allocate resources in a way that benefits the interests of that group. They usually include as members people who already receive

political action committee (PAC)

A narrow form of interest group that seeks to influence policy by making contributions to candidates and parties in U.S. politics.

rewards from government or are seeking new benefits. Their membership, then, tends to include more socially, financially, and educationally advantaged members of U.S. society. There is no place in the network of interest groups for individuals who are outside the democratic community or whose voices are ignored by the polity. The key role that social movements and protest have played in U.S. politics is being replaced by a more elite and more government-focused form of political organization.

Summary

The Constitution places the U.S. Congress at the center of U.S. policymaking. To influence its actions, political parties and interest groups mobilize the citizenry to vote in elections and to advocate to officeholders. As the size and scope of government has increased, citizen participation and involvement has diminished. The complexity of policies and multiple points of access discourage many from believing that their voices will be heard. Over time, this frustration leads to a perception that government is “out of control” and dominated by special interests. For the United States to meet its democratic ideals, however, it must find a means to balance the growing complexity of modern governance with the need for regular citizen input into shaping government activities. These new resources to connect government and the governed will need to build on core U.S. political values.

SECTION

UNITED STATES POLITICS IN TRANSITION

Focus Questions

In what ways can effective mediating institutions overcome the roadblocks to governance built into the U.S. Constitution?

How has the U.S. role in global governance and global institutions changed in the period since World War II?

What are the likely ongoing barriers to U.S. integration into the growing network of multinational organizations and interstate relations?

The election of Barack Obama signaled a significant transition for U.S. electoral politics. Had only non-Hispanic whites voted, John McCain would have easily won the presidency. Instead, Obama won large majorities of the African American, Latino, and Asian American votes, and with the 43 percent of the White vote he carried, was elected President. The Senate and House elections in 2008 saw the highest number of minorities elected in U.S. history.

Obama's victory should not, however, obscure the fact that the U.S. electorate has a dramatically lower share of minority participants than does the population as a whole. Latinos, for example made up 15 percent of the population in 2008, but just 7 percent of the electorate; Asian Americans made up 5 percent of the population and 3 percent of the electorate. The gap was narrower for African Americans: 13 percent of the population and 12 percent of the electorate, but 2008 was uniquely significant for the black community.

Without question, some of these gaps will narrow over time. Minority populations tend to be younger, for example, than non-Hispanic whites, and voting increases with age. The minority voting gap, nevertheless, presents an ongoing challenge for the American democracy, one that will likely grow in the short term. The gap is even greater in the states with large minority populations. At the state level, the pool of regular voters is dominated by older upper-income white voters; this population is more resistant to pay for the services needed by many of the minority nonvoters, such as K-12 education, social services, and adult education. Candidates and office holders, however, often speak to the needs of voters over the societal need to ensure that all Americans have access to the resources they need to succeed.

Political Challenges and Changing Agendas

The United States today faces some familiar and some new challenges that result from the nation's new place in the world of states. Primary among the continuing challenges is the need to live up to its own definition of the democratic idea and to balance this goal of representative government elected through mass participation with the divergent economic outcomes that result from its laissez-faire approach to governing the economy. The United States must address these challenges with a system of government that was designed to impede the actions of government and a citizenry that expects much of government but frequently does not trust it to serve popular needs.

The United States has assumed a relatively new role and set of responsibilities in the world of states, at least new as far as the past seventy years; U.S. governing institutions must now respond not just to their own people, but more broadly to an international political order that is increasingly interconnected and seeks rapid responses to international security, political, and economic crises. The institutional arrangements of U.S. government hamper quick responses and increase the likelihood of parochial responses that the rest of the world can hear as isolationism or unilateralism. These institutional arrangements are reinforced by a citizenry that for the most part cares little about foreign policy (except when war threatens), expects quick and often painless solutions to international crises, and has little respect, and sometimes open animosity, for multinational political and economic institutions such as the U.N. and the I.M.F. Despite the citizenry's continued focus on domestic concerns, U.S. jobs and national economic well-being are increasingly connected to international markets and to the willingness of governments and individuals to buy U.S. bonds. Over time, many in the United States may come to resent this economic integration.

Economics is not the only role that the United States plays in the world of states, as has been brought home in the period since the September 11 attacks. Although the citizenry has demonstrated a willingness to pay the financial cost of a global military, it has been much less willing to sacrifice lives. As a result, U.S. leaders must continually balance their military objectives and responsibilities to allies and international organizations with an inability to commit U.S. forces to conflicts that might lead to substantial casualties.

This tension between U.S. reliance on a global economic order among developed nations and a willingness to pursue a unilateral military and defense policy appeared repeatedly after the September 11 attacks. The initial approach of national leaders as well as the citizenry was to pursue military actions against Afghanistan and Iraq alone if necessary. Although alliances formed for each military engagement, this threat of unilateral action made the building of long-term multilateral alliances all the more difficult.

In addition to its economic and military roles, the United States exports its culture and language throughout the world. This process contributes to economic development in the United States; equally important, it places the United States at the center of an increasingly homogenizing international culture. But this process also creates hostility in countries that want to defend their national and local cultures.

The substantial changes in the U.S. connections to the world of states have not been matched by equally dramatic changes in the U.S. role in governing the economy. Laissez-faire governance continues. The United States tolerates income and wealth disparities greater than those of other advanced democracies. Business is less regulated and less taxed in the United States than in other democracies. Few in the polity contest this system of economic regulation.

Since the Great Depression, the United States has seen an expansion of redistributive programs to assist the poor. In the period of divided government, however, the United States has reduced its commitment to assisting the poor and has established time limits for any individual to collect benefits. It seems highly unlikely that the United States will develop targeted programs to assist citizens in need that compare to those of other advanced democracies.

Distributive programs targeted to the middle class, such as Social Security, Medicare, and college student loans, have also been implemented in the twentieth century. These have much more support among voters and are harder to undermine, even if they challenge traditional laissez-faire approaches. The costs of these programs, however, are putting an increasing long-term burden on the federal budget and, because of deficit spending, on the national economy. There is little political will to deal with these long-term costs. Divided government, with routinely shifting Democratic and Republican majorities adds to this complexity; each party must treat each election as the opportunity to reenter the majority.

The U.S. government faces a challenge to its sense of its own democratic idea that is more dramatic than that faced by other advanced democracies. The 64 percent of the electorate who turned out in 2008 was high by recent standards, but it's not clear that this pattern will continue. Turnout in non-presidential-year elections is even lower: This was approximately 42 percent of registered voters in 2010. Participation is not spread evenly across the population: older, more affluent, and more educated citizens are much more likely to vote than are the young, the less educated, and the poor. Elected representatives are receiving less guidance from a narrower subset of the people.

The breadth of nonelectoral politics is also narrowing. Previous study of the United States found rich networks of community-based organizations, voluntary organizations, and other forms of nonelectoral political activity. Community politics in the United States, however, began to decline in the 1950s (roughly when electoral turnout began to decline) and appears to be at record lows today.

The politics of collective identities has always been central to U.S. politics because the country has been a recipient of large numbers of immigrants through much of its history. Each wave of immigrants has differed from its predecessors in terms of culture and religion. These differences forced the country to redefine itself in order to live up to its democratic idea. The "old" group of each era also perceived the "new" group as a threat to the political values of the nation. Today, Asian and Hispanic immigrants are seen as a challenge by the descendants of European immigrants.

The United States has experienced a long period of sustained high levels of immigration since 1965. The current period of high immigration has seen higher levels of overall immigration than the previous period of sustained high immigration (beginning after the Civil War and extending to the 1920s). Many in Congress today are proposing legislation to further deter undocumented migration, but there have been few proposals to reduce the opportunities for legal immigration.

Without strong political parties, mediating institutions, and nonelectoral community politics, the political integration of these immigrants and their children may stall. The preliminary evidence is that naturalization rates are increasing, but that naturalized citizens vote and participate in other forms of politics at lower levels than comparably situated U.S.-born citizens. If these patterns continue, the United States faces a new risk: Contemporary immigrants and their children may not be represented in the political order, even when these immigrants become U.S. citizens.

In the past, institutional arrangements and mediating institutions could partly overcome the weaknesses of the U.S. constitutional system. Congress dominated

the executive until the New Deal era, after which the president dominated Congress until Watergate. This institutional dominance reflected the framers' intent through the Great Depression and after, at least in terms of the dominance of one branch. It is unclear that the framers envisioned a system where two, and occasionally all three, branches of government would compete for dominance and where the Congress and the presidency would be routinely controlled by different political parties.

Mediating institutions once played a role that they cannot tackle today. Once the political parties formed as mass institutions in the 1830s, they served a necessary role in unifying popular opinion and forcing elite compromise. Today, parties are in decline and have been replaced by a distinct type of mediating institution that does not seek compromise across issues and instead promotes narrow interests. Interest groups connect the citizenry to political institutions, but they only advance a narrow agenda.

The United States faces the same challenges it has always faced, and it is still limited by a governing system that seeks to inhibit government activity. In the past, it has overcome these challenges when citizens participated actively, often working through mediating institutions and mobilizing new groups to active political participation. With citizen participation becoming more selective and mediating institutions less broadly based, the United States will have trouble facing challenges. Because of our central position in the world economy, if we cannot meet our challenges, the whole world will suffer with us.

United States Politics in Comparative Perspective

From the perspective of the study of comparative politics, the United States may well remain an enigma. Its size, wealth, unique experiences with immigration, history of political isolation from the world, and reliance on separation of powers and federalism do not have clear parallels among other advanced democracies. This distinctness comes through perhaps most clearly in the way the United States engages its international political responsibilities. While the president has traditionally directed the scope of U.S. foreign policy, Congress, as it reasserts power relative to the president, will likely play an increasing role. Members of Congress, who represent narrow geographic districts and are more directly connected to mass interests, are less likely to take an internationalist perspective than the president does. When Congress speaks on international issues, it is often with multiple voices, including some that oppose U.S. involvement in multilateral organizations. This conflict over control and direction of foreign policy has increased since the end of the Cold War.

The relationship of the United States to Cuba offers an example. Since the Cuban revolution (1959), the United States has not recognized Cuba and has imposed economic sanctions in an effort to remove Fidel and, now, Raul Castro from power and to encourage economic reforms. Increasingly, however, interests in the United States across the ideological spectrum (agricultural producers, recent Cuban émigrés, the travel and tourism industry, and liberals who never supported the sanctions) have sought to expand opportunities for trade with Cuba. These efforts, however, have been effectively blocked by Cuban American leaders, who raise the prospect of Cuban American voters fleeing a candidate who supports a change in policy, and by Cuban American members of Congress who use leadership positions to slow policy change. In the 112th Congress (2011–2013), Cuban American Ileana Ros-Lehtinen will chair the U.S. House Foreign Affairs Committee. Her position on the committee and in

the Republican leadership makes it unlikely that Congress will approve any change in U.S. economic sanctions on Cuba.

The impact of the constitutionally mandated structural and institutional weaknesses of U.S. government is not limited to the American people. The United States plays a dominant role in the world economy, as well as a central political role in international organizations. Thus, the inefficiencies and multiple entry points into U.S. policy-making shape the ability of the United States to respond to crises and develop coherent long-term policies in conjunction with its allies. In 1998, for example, as the world economy declined, the president, with the support of the chair of the Federal Reserve, proposed that the United States increase its contribution to the IMF by \$18 billion. Congress initially balked at this request for several reasons, none of which were apparent to the U.S. allies. While the power of intransigence and horse trading makes sense to analysts of U.S. politics, analysts abroad cannot so easily understand the seeming failure of the United States to act in a time of crisis. Eventually Congress passed the added IMF appropriation.

In sum, despite its central role in the international economic system and in multilateral organizations, the United States often remains reluctant to embrace fully the international system that it helped shape. This hesitancy appears despite the active role of U.S. economic interests abroad and the importance of international trade to the U.S. economy. The United States does not hesitate to impose its will abroad when it perceives its security threatened, or when it perceives that the rules made by the international organizations undermine its economic or political interests. Thus, despite its central role in the world of states, the United States is sometimes a hesitant leader. The post-9/11 world makes this a much more difficult position to sustain. The challenge of the contemporary era is not states—as it was in the Cold War era—but instead international non-state-based networks. These cannot so easily be controlled through economic dominance and multilateral political alliances. As the United States faces the new challenges of a post-9/11 world, it must again reexamine the degree to which it is willing to act unilaterally and to pay the price for global concern about its occasional unilateralism.

Summary

Throughout its history, the United States has faced and overcome challenges to grow into the world's largest economy and a respected and emulated model for representative democratic political institutions. This need for evolutionary change continues as its own population and the world of states continues to change. Its success in these efforts—what is needed to guarantee its continuing global leadership—depends on its ability to live up to its democratic ideal and ensure that all Americans have equal voice and a sense of efficacy, that their voices will be heard by their leaders.

Chapter Summary

The U.S. democratic model remains a powerful force in the world of nations. It has survived for over two centuries and has adapted to the pressures of an increasingly globalized world. The United States will continue to face many challenges to live up to its own democratic ideals and to serve as an international political and economic leader. Most important among these are the constitutional limits that often impede governmental action and a citizenry that has seen an ongoing decline in civic

engagement in recent years and an increasing frustration with their connections to government.

The outcome of the 2010 elections, however, show that mass organization can significantly change the focus and direction of government. Organization by the Tea Party movement and by the Republican Party in 2010 will likely lead to organization and mobilization on the left that will advocate for positions quite different from those advocated by the winners of many 2010 elections. The constitutional system may slow the influence of this organization on policy-making, but ensures that the citizenry's voice will be heard every two years and that governing institutions will change to reflect changing demands among voters and other organized interests in U.S. society.

Key Terms

federalism	interest groups	regulations
North American Free Trade Agreement (NAFTA)	USA PATRIOT Act	distributive policies
manifest destiny	separation of powers	redistributive policies
Declaration of Independence	single-member-plurality (SMP)	iron triangle relationships
Articles of Confederation	electoral system	<i>Marbury v. Madison</i>
Bill of Rights	free market	checks and balances
social security	laissez-faire	bicameral
property taxes	police powers	political action committee (PAC)
	Federal Reserve Board	

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