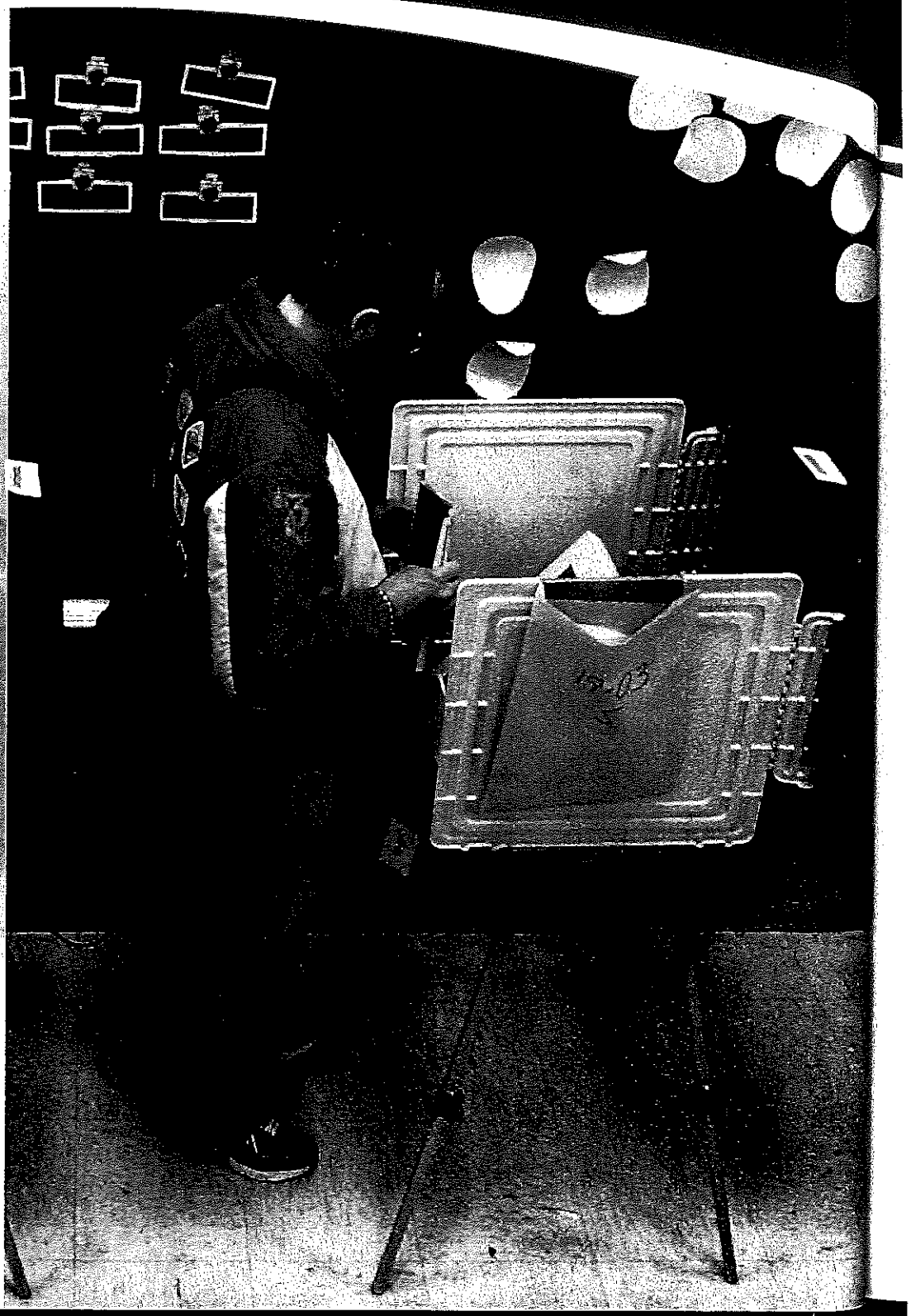
CHAPTER

2 Majoritarian or Pluralist Democracy?

CHAPTER TOPICS



AP Photo/Manuel Balce Ceneta

"I won."

That is what President Barack Obama said to congressional leaders gathered at the White House just three days after he was sworn into office.[1] The topics at hand were competing philosophies for repairing the American economy, which was in the throes of a deep recession marked by historically high unemployment: A total of 2.6 million jobs had been lost in 2008. Not only had the collapse of the real estate market and the broad economic downturn led to Obama's decisive victory over Republican John McCain a few months earlier, but also the Democrats made strong gains in the congressional elections and were in firm control of both the House and Senate. Republicans and Democrats were united on only one thing: something should be done to stimulate the economy and to prevent it from declining further.

The Republican leaders stood fast for their party's philosophy of small government and low taxes, recommending that the stimulus package emphasize tax cuts and tax incentives. As Republican House leader John Boehner put it, "Government can't solve this problem."[2] The Democrats had a different view. In their mind tax cuts would have to be massive to work, and that would require cutting government programs or adding commensurate tax increases back after the economy recovered (and tax increases are never popular). The Democrats supported direct government spending on public works like roads and bridges, thus putting some unemployed immediately to work. Along with infrastructure support, the plan included large payments to the states to help them avoid laying off employees since state tax revenues cratered in the wake of the recession. A small tax cut for low- and middle-income workers was also part of the package.

Which philosophy is better? There is no conclusive answer among economists, but in a sense, that underlying question is academic; as Obama pointed out, he and the congressional Democrats won the election. Their philosophy would carry the day. When the House of Representatives voted on the stimulus plan, not a single Republican supported it while almost all the Democrats voted in favor. The Senate vote followed along party lines as well, with just three Republican senators crossing over to back the plan.[3]

On the surface it seemed like democracy had worked its will as the majority had spoken. Yet beneath the surface of the Democratic plan, another dynamic was at work. The overall package appropriated $787 billion to be spent to try to reverse the downward spiral of the recession. But as Congress was formulating the specifics of the spending plan, there was a vast array of choices as to exactly what the money would be spent on. Interest groups (organizations that advocate before government) lobbied Congress furiously for their own priorities. Business was especially active as different industries pushed legislators to support spending or create tax breaks that would help that particular industry. During the time Congress was developing the stimulus plan, a vice president of the National Association of Manufacturers said, "We see opportunity at every junction."[4] Interest groups went into high feeding-frenzy mode. Some got what they wanted; others were disappointed. Representatives and senators listened to the many voices from different parts

of the American economy and then made their choices. The vote in 2008 faded into the background as legislators negotiated among themselves with an eye on which types of businesses and nonprofits in their districts or states would gain under alternative proposals.

These actions illustrate very different models of government. Should Congress follow the president, who won a majority of the vote, in interpreting his stimulus package as what the people want? Or is majority opinion a blunt and imprecise instrument, and should closer consideration be given to the rich and diverse constituencies that form our body politic? These questions bring us to the broader question: What is democratic government?

The Theory of Democratic Government

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The origins of democratic theory lie in ancient Greek political thought. Greek philosophers classified governments according to the number of citizens involved in the process. Imagine a continuum running from rule by one person, through rule by a few, to rule by many.

At one extreme is an **autocracy**, in which one individual has the power to make all important decisions. The concentration of power in the hands of one person (usually a monarch) was a more common form of government in earlier historical periods, although some countries are still ruled autocratically. North Korea under Kim Jong-il is an example.

Oligarchy puts government power in the hands of an elite. At one time, the nobility or the major landowners commonly ruled as an aristocracy. Today, military leaders are often the rulers in countries governed by an oligarchy.

At the other extreme of the continuum is **democracy**, which means "rule by the people." Most scholars believe that the United States, Britain, France, and other countries in Western Europe are genuine democracies. Critics contend that these countries only appear to be democracies: although they hold free elections, they are actually run by wealthy business elites, out for their own benefit. Nevertheless, most people today agree that governments should be democratic.

autocracy
A system of government in which the power to govern is concentrated in the hands of one individual.

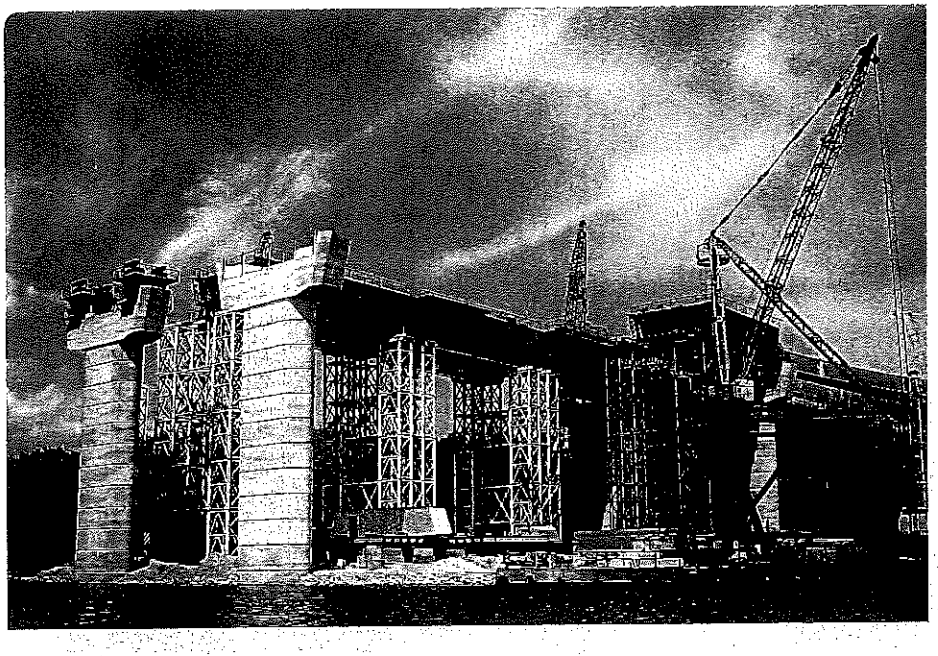
oligarchy
A system of government in which power is concentrated in the hands of a few people.

democracy
A system of government in which, in theory, the people rule, either directly or indirectly.

The Meaning and Symbolism of Democracy

Americans have a simple answer to the question, "Who should govern?" It is "The people." Unfortunately, this answer is too simple. It fails to define who *the people* are. Should we include young children? Recent immigrants? Illegal aliens? This answer also fails to tell us how the people should do the governing. Should they be assembled in a stadium? Vote by mail? Choose others to govern for them? We need to take a closer look at what "government by the people" really means.

The word *democracy* originated in Greek writings around the fifth century B.C. *Demos* referred to the common people, the masses; *kratos* meant "power."



A Bridge to Prosperity?

A prime reason why a majority of voters chose Barack Obama is that they wanted him to fix the economy. Voters were less clear on what solution to our economic woes Obama should pursue. The administration pushed through a large economic stimulus package that allocated a considerable sum for highway and bridge construction and repair. Overall the stimulus package helped to pull the country out of its recession. It has not been sufficient, however, to generate enough growth in jobs, and unemployment remains high.

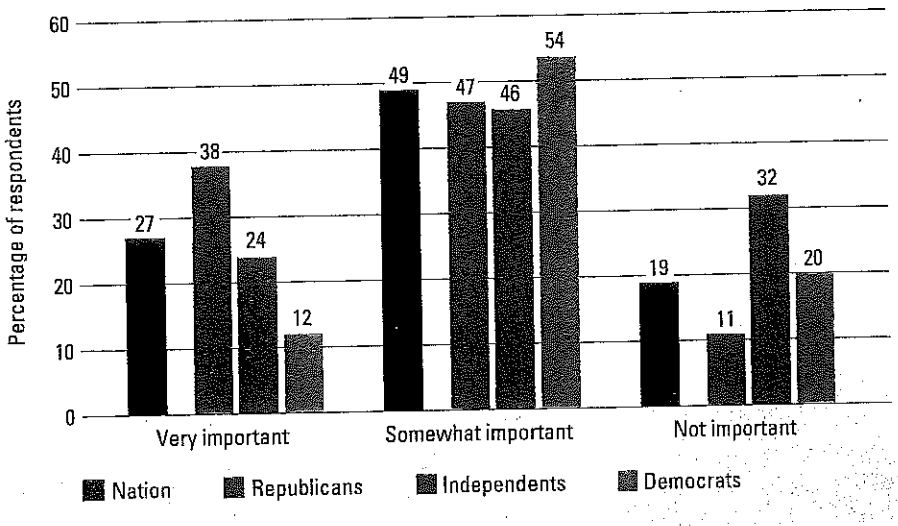
(mammy, 2010/Used under license from Shutterstock.com)

The ancient Greeks were afraid of democracy—rule by rank-and-file citizens. That fear is evident in the term *demagogue*. We use that term today to refer to a politician who appeals to and often deceives the masses by manipulating their emotions and prejudices.

Many centuries after the Greeks defined democracy, the idea still carried the connotation of mob rule. When George Washington was president, opponents of a new political party disparagingly called it a *democratic* party. No one would do that in politics today. In fact, the term has become so popular that the names of more than 20 percent of the world's political parties contain some variation of the word *democracy*.[5] But although nearly all Americans in a 2004 survey (94 percent) regarded democracy as "the best form of government," less than 30 percent wanted the United States to promote democracy to other countries as a foreign policy goal (see Figure 2.1).[6] Americans reflexively support democracy as the best form of government but are less certain of what democracy entails or of alternative models of democracy.

There are two major schools of thought about what constitutes democracy. The first believes democracy is a form of government. It emphasizes the procedures that enable the people to govern: meeting to discuss issues, voting in elections, running for public office. The second sees democracy in the substance of government policies, in freedom of religion and the provision for human needs.[7] The procedural approach focuses on how decisions are made; the substantive approach is concerned with what government does.

FIGURE 2.1 Public Support for U.S. Policy of Promoting Democracy Abroad



Some presidents, such as Woodrow Wilson and George W. Bush, have made promoting democracy abroad a major foreign policy objective of their administrations. Americans, however, show some caution in this regard, with only about a quarter of respondents in a poll saying they believe it is "very important" for this country to help "bring a democracy form of government to other nations."

Source: PIPA/Knowledge Networks and Chicago Council on Foreign Relations Poll, "Americans on Democratization and U.S. Foreign Policy," 15–21 September 2005. Copyright © 2005 PIPA. Reproduced by permission.

The Procedural View of Democracy

Procedural democratic theory sets forth principles that describe how government should make decisions. The principles address three distinct questions:

1. *Who* should participate in decision making?
2. *How much* should each participant's vote count?
3. *How many* votes are needed to reach a decision?

According to procedural democratic theory, all adults should participate in government decision making; everyone within the boundaries of the political community should be allowed to vote. If some people, such as recent immigrants, are prohibited from participating, they are excluded only for practical or political reasons. The theory of democracy itself does not exclude any adults from participation. We refer to this principle as **universal participation.**

How much should each participant's vote count? According to procedural theory, all votes should be counted *equally*. This is the principle of **political equality.**

Note that universal participation and political equality are two distinct principles. It is not enough for everyone to participate in a decision; all votes must carry equal weight. President Abraham Lincoln reportedly once took a vote among his cabinet members and found that they all opposed his position on an issue. He summarized the vote and the decision this way: "Seven noes, one aye—the ayes have it."[8] Everyone participated, but Lincoln's vote counted more than all the others combined. (No one ever said that presidents have to run their cabinets democratically.)

procedural democratic theory
A view of democracy as being embodied in a decision-making process that involves universal participation, political equality, majority rule, and responsiveness.

universal participation
The concept that everyone in a democracy should participate in governmental decision making.

political equality
Equality in political decision making: one vote per person, with all votes counted equally.

Mopeds and Democracy

Some years ago on picturesque Block Island, off the state of Rhode Island, citizens were buzzed by summer vacationers riding rented mopeds. Denied by their state legislature the right to regulate moped rentals, the citizens voted in a town meeting to secede and join the neighboring state of Connecticut. The Rhode Island legislature grudgingly gave in to the rebellion and granted Block Island the right to restore peace, quiet, and public order.

(© Jack Spratt/The Image Works)

Finally, how many votes are needed to reach a decision? Procedural theory prescribes that a group should decide to do what the majority of its participants (50 percent plus one person) wants to do. This principle is called **majority rule**. (If participants divide over more than two alternatives and none receives a simple majority, the principle usually defaults to *plurality rule*, under which the group does what most participants want.)

A Complication: Direct Versus Indirect Democracy

The three principles of universal participation, political equality, and majority rule are widely recognized as necessary for democratic decision making. Small, simple societies can meet these principles with a direct or **participatory democracy**, in which all members of the group, rather than representatives they elect to govern on their behalf, meet to make decisions, observing political equality and majority rule.[9] The origins of participatory democracy go back to the Greek city-state, where the important decisions of government were made by the adult citizens meeting in an assembly. The people ruled themselves rather than having a small number of notables rule on their behalf. (In Athens, the people who were permitted to attend the assemblies did not include women, slaves, and those whose families had not lived there for generations. Thus, participation was not

majority rule
The principle—basic to procedural democratic theory—that the decision of a group must reflect the preference of more than half of those participating; a simple majority.

participatory democracy
A system of government where rank-and-file citizens rule themselves rather than electing representatives to govern on their behalf.

universal. Still, the Greek city-state represented a dramatic transformation in the theory of government.)[10]

Something close to participatory democracy is practiced in some New England towns, where rank-and-file citizens gather in a town meeting, often just once a year, to make key community decisions together. A town meeting is impractical in large cities, although some cities have incorporated participatory democracy in their decision-making processes by instituting forms of neighborhood government. For example, in Birmingham, Alabama; Dayton, Ohio; Portland, Oregon; and St. Paul, Minnesota, each area of the city is governed by a neighborhood council. The neighborhood councils have authority over zoning and land use questions, and they usually control some funds for the development of projects within their boundaries. All adult residents of a neighborhood may participate in the neighborhood council meetings, and the larger city government respects their decisions.[11] In Chicago, the school system uses participatory democracy. Each school is primarily governed by a parents' council, not by the citywide school board.[12]

Citizens warmly embrace the concept of participatory democracy.[13] Yet in the United States and virtually all other democracies, participatory democracy is rare. Few cities have decentralized their governments and turned power over to their neighborhoods. Participatory democracy is commonly rejected on the grounds that in large, complex societies, we need professional, full-time government officials to study problems, formulate solutions, and administer programs. Also, the assumption is that relatively few people will take part in participatory government. This, in fact, turns out to be the case. In a study of neighborhood councils in the cities mentioned above, only 16.6 percent of residents took part in at least one meeting during a two-year period.[14] In other respects, participatory democracy works rather well on the neighborhood level. Yet even if participatory democracy is appropriate for neighborhoods or small towns, how could it work for the national government? We cannot all gather at the Capitol in Washington to decide defense policy.

New technologies have raised hopes that e-government might facilitate greater public involvement. **E-government** refers to the online communications channels that enable rank-and-file citizens to acquire information and documents as well as to register opinions and complaints to government officials.[15] E-government has made it much easier for citizens to find out about various government programs and services. For example, documents explaining government services in languages other than English can sometimes be found at a city hall website. Some states even permit a person to file a criminal complaint online. In Missouri, for example, the website for the state attorney general includes a form residents can fill out to inform the attorney general that some land site or property owner is violating environmental laws.[16]

E-government
Online communication channels that enable citizens to easily obtain information from government and facilitate the expression of opinions to government officials.

E-government is a long way from e-democracy. So far it has not facilitated greater public deliberation and has expanded public involvement in only marginal ways. Still, it does make it easier to write your congressman

(or state representative, or mayor, or whomever), so it does offer people a quick and convenient way to voice their opinions. Governments at all levels are experimenting with new forms of e-government in the hope that, over time, it will engage citizens more directly in the governmental process.

The framers of the U.S. Constitution had their own conception of democracy. They instituted **representative democracy**, a system in which citizens participate in government by electing public officials to make decisions on their behalf. Elected officials are expected to represent the voters' views and interests—that is, to serve as the agents of the citizenry and act for them.

Within the context of representative democracy, we adhere to the principles of universal participation, political equality, and majority rule to guarantee that elections are democratic. But what happens after the election? The elected representatives might not make the decisions the people would have made had they gathered for the same purpose. To account for this possibility in representative government, procedural theory provides a fourth decision-making principle: **responsiveness**. Elected representatives should respond to public opinion—what the majority of people wants. This does not mean that legislators simply cast their ballots on the basis of whether the people back home want alternative A or alternative B. Issues are not usually so straightforward. Rather, responsiveness means following the general contours of public opinion in formulating complex pieces of legislation.[17] By adding responsiveness to deal with the case of indirect democracy, we have four principles of procedural democracy:

- Universal participation
- Political equality
- Majority rule
- Government responsiveness to public opinion

The Substantive View of Democracy

According to procedural theory, the principle of responsiveness is absolute. The government should do what the majority wants, regardless of what that is. At first, this seems to be a reasonable way to protect the rights of citizens in a representative democracy. But think for a minute. Christians are the vast majority of the U.S. population. Suppose that the Christian majority backs a constitutional amendment to require Bible reading in public schools, that the amendment is passed by Congress, and that it is ratified by the states. From a strictly procedural view, the action would be democratic. But what about freedom of religion? What about the rights of minorities? To limit the government's responsiveness to public opinion, we must look outside procedural democratic theory to substantive democratic theory.

Substantive democratic theory focuses on the *substance* of government policies, not on the procedures followed in making those policies. It argues that in a democratic government, certain principles must be incorporated into government policies. Substantive theorists would reject a law that

representative democracy
A system of government where citizens elect public officials to govern on their behalf.

responsiveness
A decision-making principle, necessitated by representative government, that implies that elected representatives should do what the majority of people wants.

substantive democratic theory
The view that democracy is embodied in the substance of government policies rather than in the policymaking procedure.

requires Bible reading in schools because it would violate a substantive principle, freedom of religion. The core of our substantive principles of democracy is embedded in the Bill of Rights and other amendments to the Constitution.

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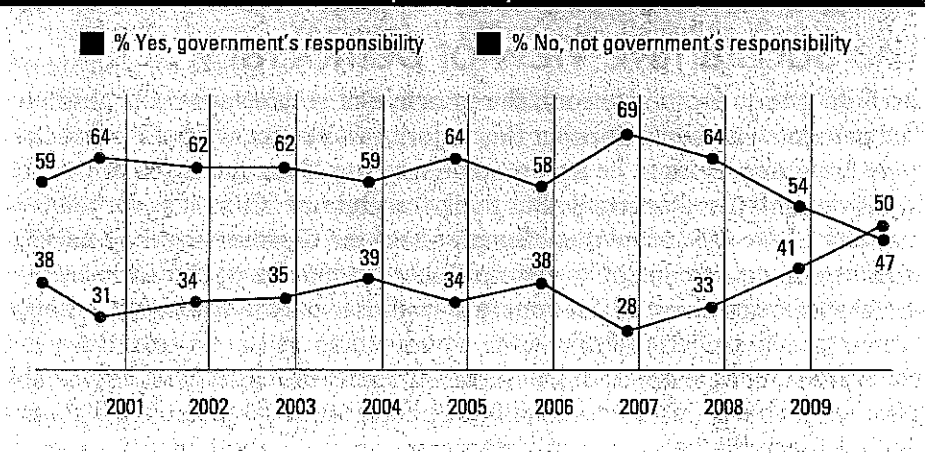
Should the government try to improve the standard of living for all poor Americans? Take IDEAlog's self-test.

In defining the principles that underlie democratic government—and the policies of that government—most substantive theorists agree on a basic criterion: government policies should guarantee civil liberties (freedom of behavior, such as freedom of religion and freedom of expression) and civil rights (powers or privileges that government may not arbitrarily deny to individuals, such as protection against discrimination in employment and housing). According to this standard, the claim that the United States is a democracy rests on its record of ensuring its citizens these liberties and rights. (We look at how good this record is in Chapters 15 and 16.)

Agreement among substantive theorists breaks down when the discussion moves from civil rights to social rights (adequate health care, quality education, decent housing) and economic rights (private property, steady employment). Ordinary citizens divide on these matters too (see Figure 2.2). Theorists disagree most sharply on whether a government must promote social equality to qualify as a democracy. For example, must a state guarantee unemployment benefits and adequate public housing to be called democratic? Some insist that policies that promote social equality are essential to democratic government. Others restrict the requirements of substantive democracy to policies that safeguard civil liberties and civil rights. Americans differ considerably from the citizens of most other Western democracies in their view of the government's responsibility to provide social policies. In most other Western democracies, there is much more support for the view that jobs and incomes for the unemployed are a right.[18]

FIGURE 2.2 Health Care: Government's Responsibility?



Is health care a right in a democracy like ours? Opinions change over time and, interestingly, support for the position that health care is government's responsibility began to drop before Barack Obama took office. There's a sharp partisan split, with Republicans more antagonistic toward a government role in health care and Democrats more supportive.

Source: Gallup Poll, "More in U.S. Say Health Coverage Is Not Gov't. Responsibility," 13 November 2009. Copyright © 2009 Gallup, Inc. All rights reserved. Reproduced by permission.

A theorist's political ideology tends to explain his or her position on what democracy really requires in substantive policies. Conservative theorists have a narrow view of the scope of democratic government and a narrow view of the social and economic rights guaranteed by that government. Liberal theorists believe that a democratic government should guarantee its citizens a much broader spectrum of social and economic rights. In later chapters, we review important social and economic policies that our government has followed over time. Keep in mind, however, that what the government has done in the past is not necessarily a correct guide to what a democratic government should do.

Procedural Democracy Versus Substantive Democracy

The problem with the substantive view of democracy is that it does not provide clear, precise criteria that allow us to determine whether a government is democratic. It is, in fact, open to unending arguments over which government policies are truly democratic. Substantive theorists are free to promote their pet values—separation of church and state, guaranteed employment, equal rights for women—under the guise of substantive democracy. When Americans are asked to define democracy in their own terms, roughly two-thirds mention freedoms, rights, or liberties. Relatively few describe democracy in terms of the political process or social benefits.[19]

The procedural viewpoint also has a problem. Although it presents specific criteria for democratic government, those criteria can produce undesirable social policies, such as those that prey on minorities. This clashes with **minority rights**, the idea that all citizens are entitled to certain things that cannot be denied by the majority. Opinions proliferate on what those "certain things" are, but nearly everyone in the United States would agree, for example, on freedom of religion. One way to protect minority rights is to limit the principle of majority rule—by requiring a two-thirds majority or some other extraordinary majority for decisions on certain subjects, for example. Another way is to put the issue in the Constitution, beyond the reach of majority rule.

The issue of prayer in school is a good example of the limits on majority rule. No matter how large, majorities in Congress cannot pass a law to permit organized prayer in public schools because the U.S. Supreme Court has determined that the Constitution forbids such a law. The Constitution could be changed so that it would no longer protect religious minorities, but amending the Constitution is a cumbersome process that involves extraordinary majorities. When limits such as these are put on the principle of majority rule, the minority often rules instead.

Clearly, then, procedural democracy and substantive democracy are not always compatible. In choosing one instead of the other, we are also choosing to focus on either procedures or policies. As authors of this text, we favor a compromise. On the whole, we favor the procedural conception of

minority rights
The benefits of government that cannot be denied to any citizen by majority decisions.

democracy because it more closely approaches the classical definition of democracy: "government by the people." And procedural democracy is founded on clear, well-established rules for decision making. But the theory has a serious drawback: it allows a democratic government to enact policies that can violate the substantive principles of democracy. Thus, pure procedural democracy should be diluted so that minority rights and civil liberties are guaranteed as part of the structure of government. If the compromise seems familiar, it is: the approach has been used in the course of American history to balance legitimate minority and majority interests.

Institutional Models of Democracy

A small group can agree to make democratic decisions directly by using the principles of universal participation, political equality, and majority rule. But even the smallest nations have too many citizens to permit participatory democracy at the national level. If nations want democracy, they must achieve it through some form of representative government, electing officials to make decisions.[20] Even then, democratic government is not guaranteed. Governments must have a way to determine what the people want, as well as some way to translate those wants into decisions. In other words, democratic government requires institutional mechanisms—established procedures and organizations—to translate public opinion into government policy (and thus be responsive). Elections, political parties, legislatures, and interest groups (which we discuss in later chapters) are all examples of institutional mechanisms in politics.

Some democratic theorists favor institutions that closely tie government decisions to the desires of the majority of citizens. If most citizens want laws banning the sale of pornography, the government should outlaw pornography. If citizens want more money spent on defense and less on social welfare (or vice versa), the government should act accordingly. For these theorists, the essence of democratic government is majority rule and responsiveness.

Other theorists place less importance on the principles of majority rule and responsiveness. They do not believe in relying heavily on mass opinion; instead, they favor institutions that allow groups of citizens to defend their interests in the public policymaking process. Global warming is a good example. Everyone cares about it, but it is a complex problem with many competing issues at stake. What is critical here is to allow differing interests to participate so that all sides have the opportunity to influence policies as they are developed.

Both schools hold a procedural view of democracy, but they differ in how they interpret "government by the people." We can summarize the theoretical positions by using two alternative models of democracy. As a model, each is a hypothetical plan, a blueprint for achieving democratic government through institutional mechanisms. The majoritarian model values

Now *That's* a Town Meeting

For almost seven hundred years, citizens of Appenzell Inner-Rhodes, the smallest canton (like a township) in Switzerland, have gathered in the town square on the last Sunday in April to make political decisions by raised hands. At a recent meeting, Appenzellers adopted a leash law for dogs, approved updating property files on a computer, chose a new building commissioner, and acted on other public business before adjourning until the next year.

(REUTERS/Arnd Wiegmann)

participation by the people in general; the pluralist model values participation by the people in groups.

The Majoritarian Model of Democracy

The **majoritarian model of democracy** relies on our intuitive, elemental notion of what is fair. It interprets "government by the people" to mean government by the *majority* of the people. The majoritarian model tries to approximate the people's role in a direct democracy within the limitations of representative government. To force the government to respond to public opinion, the majoritarian model depends on several mechanisms that allow the people to participate directly.

The popular election of government officials is the primary mechanism for democratic government in the majoritarian model. Citizens are expected to control their representatives' behavior by choosing wisely in the first place and by reelecting or voting out public officials according to their performance. Elections fulfill the first three principles of procedural democratic theory: universal participation, political equality, and majority rule. The prospect of reelection and the threat of defeat at the polls are expected to motivate public officials to meet the fourth criterion: responsiveness.

Usually we think of elections only as mechanisms for choosing among candidates for public office. Majoritarian theorists also see them as a means for deciding government policies. An election on a policy issue is called a

majoritarian model of democracy
The classical theory of democracy in which government by the people is interpreted as government by the majority of the people.

referendum. When citizens circulate petitions and gather a required minimum number of signatures to put a policy question on a ballot, it is called an *initiative.* Twenty-one states allow their legislatures to put referenda before the voters and give their citizens the right to place initiatives on the ballot. Five other states provide for one mechanism or the other. Eighteen states also allow the *recall* of state officials, a means of forcing a special election for an up or down vote on a sitting governor or state judge. Like initiatives, a specified percentage of registered voters must sign a petition asking that a vote be held. If a recall election is held, a majority vote is necessary to remove the officeholder. Recalls, which are relatively uncommon, were put into state constitutions as a safety valve to enable voters to remove an incumbent who proved to be dishonest or truly incompetent.[21]

Statewide initiatives and referenda have been used to decide a wide variety of important questions, many with national implications. Although they are instruments of majoritarian democracy, initiatives are often sponsored by interest groups trying to mobilize broad-based support for a particular policy. Voters in both California and Maine recently reversed their state legislatures, which had approved same-sex marriage. The referenda returned marriage in those states to heterosexual couples only.

In the United States, no provisions exist for referenda at the federal level. Some other countries do allow policy questions to be put before the public. In a national referendum in 2009, a clear majority of voters in Switzerland voted to ban construction of minarets on any of the country's mosques. (Minarets are the thin spires atop a mosque.) This vote was clearly hostile to the country's small (5 percent) Muslim population. One of the dangers of referenda is the power of the majority to treat a minority in a harsh or intimidating way.[22]

The majoritarian model contends that citizens can control their government if they have adequate mechanisms for popular participation. It also assumes that citizens are knowledgeable about government and politics, that they want to participate in the political process, and that they make rational decisions in voting for their elected representatives.

Critics contend that Americans are not knowledgeable enough for majoritarian democracy to work. They point to research that shows that only 36 percent of a national sample of voters said that they follow news about politics "very closely."[23] Two scholars who have studied citizens' interest in politics conclude that most Americans favor "stealth" democracy, noting, "The kind of government people want is one in which ordinary people do not have to get involved."[24] If most citizens feel that way, then majoritarian democracy is not viable, even with the wonders of modern information technology.

Defenders of majoritarian democracy respond that although individual Americans may have only limited knowledge of or interest in government, the American public as a whole still has coherent and stable opinions on major policy questions. Public opinion does not fluctuate sharply or erratically, and change in the nation's views usually emerges incrementally. People can hold broad if imprecise values that are manifested in the way they vote and in the opinions they express on particular issues.

My Moms Got Married!

After the California Supreme Court ruled that gay marriage was to be allowed in that state, 18,000 same sex couples wed. This included Tori (left) and Kate Kendall, who brought their five-month-old, Zadie, to the ceremony. Five months after the court decision, however, voters passed an initiative (Proposition 8) that banned gay marriage in California. Same sex marriage supporters then took the case to federal court and in August of 2010, a judge overturned the initiative because he believed that it instituted a discriminatory framework that had no "rational basis." Opponents of gay marriage were incensed and argued that the will of the people should be paramount. The case is now on appeal.

(David McNew/Getty Images)

An Alternative Model: Pluralist Democracy

For years, political scientists struggled valiantly to reconcile the majoritarian model of democracy with polls that showed widespread ignorance of politics among the American people. When 40 to 50 percent of the adult population doesn't even bother to vote in presidential elections, our form of democracy seems to be "government by *some* of the people."

The 1950s saw the evolution of an alternative interpretation of democracy, one tailored to the limited knowledge and participation of the real electorate, not an ideal one. It was based on the concept of *pluralism*—that modern society consists of innumerable groups that share economic, religious, ethnic, or cultural interests. Often people with similar interests organize formal groups—the Future Farmers of America, chambers of commerce, and the Rotary Club are examples. Many social groups have little contact with government, but occasionally they find themselves backing or opposing government policies. An organized group that seeks to influence government policy is called an **interest group**. Many

interest group
An organized group of individuals that seeks to influence public policy; also called a *lobby*.

interest groups regularly spend much time and money trying to influence government policy (see Chapter 10). Among them are the International Electrical Workers Union, the American Hospital Association, the Associated Milk Producers, the National Education Association, the National Association of Manufacturers, and the National Organization for Women.

The **pluralist model of democracy** interprets "government by the people" to mean government by people operating through competing interest groups. According to this model, democracy exists when many (plural) organizations operate separately from the government, press their interests on the government, and even challenge the government. Compared with majoritarian thinking, pluralist theory shifts the focus of democratic government from the mass electorate to organized groups. The criterion for democratic government changes from responsiveness to mass public opinion to responsiveness to organized groups of citizens.

The two major mechanisms in a pluralist democracy are interest groups and a decentralized structure of government that provides ready access to public officials and is open to hearing the groups' arguments for or against government policies. In a centralized structure, decisions are made at one point: the top of the hierarchy. The few decision makers at the top are too busy to hear the claims of competing interest groups or consider those claims in making their decisions. But a decentralized, complex government structure offers the access and openness necessary for pluralist democracy. For pluralists, the ideal system is one that divides government authority among numerous institutions with overlapping authority. Under such a system, competing interest groups have alternative points of access for presenting and arguing their claims.

Our Constitution approaches the pluralist ideal in the way it divides authority among the branches of government. When the National Association for the Advancement of Colored People (NAACP) could not get Congress to outlaw segregated schools in the South in the 1950s, it turned to the federal court system, which did what Congress would not. According to the ideal of pluralist democracy, if all opposing interests are allowed to organize and if the system can be kept open so that all substantial claims are heard, the decision will serve the diverse needs of a pluralist society. Countries going through the process of democratization can find the emergence of pluralism a challenge as new groups mean new demands upon government (see "Politics of Global Change: Green Shoots Sprout in the Czech Republic").

Although many scholars have contributed to the model, pluralist democracy is most closely identified with political scientist Robert Dahl. According to Dahl, the fundamental axiom of pluralist democracy is that "instead of a single center of sovereign power there must be multiple centers of power, none of which is or can be wholly sovereign."[25] Some watchwords of pluralist democracy, therefore, are *divided authority, decentralization,* and *open access.*

pluralist model of democracy
An interpretation of democracy in which government by the people is taken to mean government by people operating through competing interest groups.

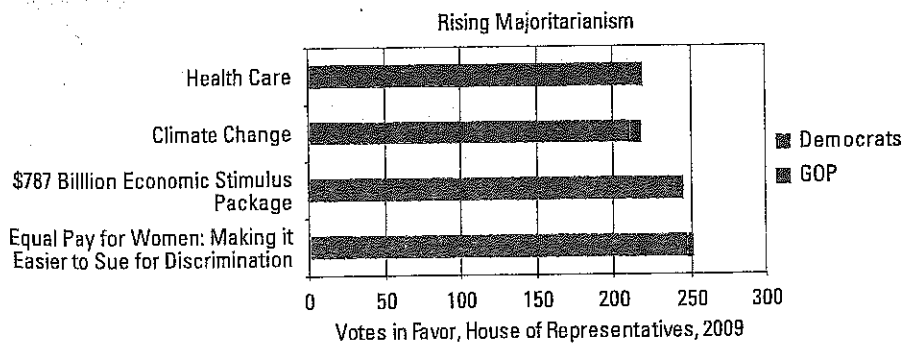
On one level, pluralism is alive and well. As will be demonstrated in Chapter 10, interest groups in Washington are thriving, and the rise of many citizen groups has broadened representation beyond traditional business, labor, and professional groups. But on another level, the involvement of

Americans in their groups is a cause for concern. Political scientist Robert Putnam has documented declining participation in a wide variety of organizations. Americans are less inclined to be active members of civic groups like parent-teacher associations, the League of Women Voters, and the Lions Club. Civic participation is a fundamental part of American democracy because it generates the bonding, or social glue, that helps to generate trust and cooperation in the political system.[26] In short, pluralism is working well in terms of promoting representative democracy because Americans are happy to have their interest groups act on their behalf in Washington or at the state level. At the same time, declining civic participation makes it difficult to enhance instruments of direct democracy at the local level.[27]

The Majoritarian Model Versus the Pluralist Model

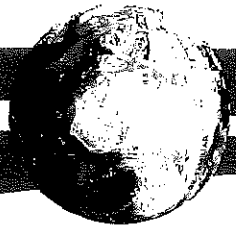
In majoritarian democracy, the mass public—not interest groups—controls government actions. The citizenry must therefore have some understanding of government and be willing to participate in the electoral process. Majoritarian democracy relies on electoral mechanisms that harness the power of the majority to make decisions. Conclusive elections and a centralized structure of government are mechanisms that aid majority rule. Cohesive political parties with well-defined programs also contribute to majoritarian democracy because they offer voters a clear way to distinguish alternative sets of policies. In terms of Congress, American parties are becoming more majoritarian as there is more unity among both Republicans and Democrats (see Figure 2.3).

FIGURE 2.3 Rising Majoritarianism



For some years now, our two congressional parties have been increasingly polarized. There is less in the way of bipartisanship—parties working together to fashion compromise legislation. Some people believe that this trend is a good thing as voters have a clear choice. Others believe that we do better as a country when our two parties moderate their ideologies and come together to fashion solutions that can bridge the gap between left and right.

Source: Susan Milligan, "Obama Domestic Agenda Largely a One-Party Effort," *Boston Globe*, 17 November 2009.



Politics of Global Change

Green Shoots Sprout in the Czech Republic

These days, the air is a lot cleaner in the Czech Republic. Local environmental groups can surely take some of the credit as they have pushed hard to persuade the government to adopt strict pollution control requirements.

The Czech Republic was born out of the collapse of communism in Eastern Europe during the late 1980s. It used to be part of Czechoslovakia, a country that was formed in 1918 at the end of World War I. Czechoslovakia was a parliamentary democracy until the Nazis invaded the country; then, when the Germans were defeated in World War II, the Soviet Union put a communist regime in power. This authoritarian government directed the economy and placed a heavy emphasis on industrial production, which resulted in an increasing number of factories spewing forth an unhealthy mix of pollutants.

The "Velvet Revolution" toppled the communist regime at the end of 1989, and on January 1, 1993, the separate Czech and Slovak Republics came into being as independent states. The Czech Republic is the western half of the former Czechoslovakia; its current population is roughly 10.5 million citizens.

As democracy emerged in the former communist Eastern European countries, leaders quickly formed political parties and citizens took great pride in exercising their new-found freedom to vote in open, democratic elections. Freedom also meant that for the first time since before the Nazi invasion, Czechs could form real interest groups. As pluralism began to take hold, environmental groups were quickly established, a couple of hundred in just the first year of freedom. Over the years, groups such as Hnutí DUHA (Rainbow Movement), Jihočeské matky (South Bohemian Mothers), and the Czech chapter of Greenpeace have gained notice.

Still, environmentalism has yet to develop as a mass movement in the Czech Republic. Memberships in these organizations are small and environmental protection has not become nearly the priority among citizens that it is in many democracies, including the United States. Various reasons have been offered as explanation for the middling success of the Czech groups. One is that after so many years of deprivation under

Pluralism does not demand much knowledge from citizens in general. It requires specialized knowledge only from groups of citizens, in particular, their leaders. In contrast to majoritarian democracy, pluralist democracy seeks to limit majority action so that interest groups can be heard. It relies on strong interest groups and a decentralized government structure—mechanisms that interfere with majority rule, thereby protecting minority interests. We could even say that pluralism allows minorities to rule.

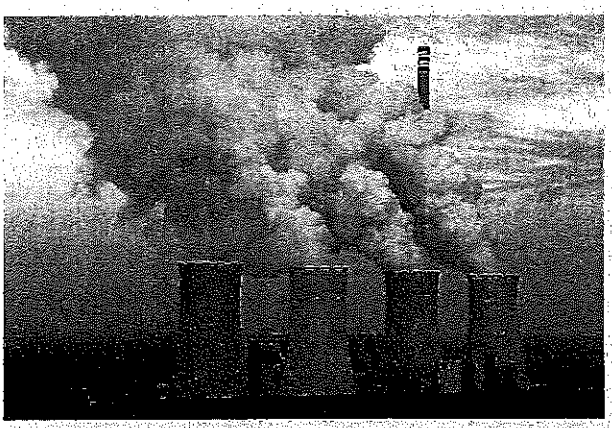
An Undemocratic Model: Elite Theory

elite theory
The view that a small group of people actually makes most of the important government decisions.

If pluralist democracy allows minorities to rule, how does it differ from elite theory—the view that a small group (a minority) makes most important government decisions? According to elite theory, important government decisions are made by an identifiable and stable minority that shares certain characteristics, particularly vast wealth and business connections.[28]

communism, the Czechs are more interested in economic prosperity and the acquisition of consumer goods than in preserving the environment. Another line of thought is that the long rule of the communists, when citizens had virtually no involvement in government, weakened a sense of civic obligation. In crude terms, people had become used to the government handling all problems of society, and it was quite a change to be expected to take responsibility and to pay dues to advocacy groups working on behalf of the environment or other causes.

Nevertheless, the environmental movement has had some success. Perversely, perhaps, respect grew for these groups in the wake of their failure to stop the building of the Temelín nuclear plant. Although the government eventually approved the plant, the environmental groups put energy corporations very much on the defensive. The environmentalists proved to be surprisingly resourceful and demonstrated a high level of expertise in this complicated area of public policy. Increasingly, the government began to treat the groups as collaborators, and these organizations have had significant access to the government's Ministry of Environment. The ministry, in turn, has directed grants to some of these groups, and other funding has come from foundations and from the European Union.



The environmental movement has put down firm roots in the Czech Republic and seems destined to grow as citizens become increasingly concerned about preserving their quality of life and protecting the natural heritage of their country.

Sources: Steven M. Davis, "Building a Movement from Scratch: Environmental Groups in the Czech Republic," *Social Science Journal* 41 (June 2004): 375–392; Thomas E. Shriver and Chris Messer, "Ideological Cleavages and Schism in the Czech Environmental Movement," *Human Ecology Review* 16 (Winter 2009): 161–171; Andreas Beckmann, "A Quiet Revolution," *Central Europe Review* 1, no. 12 (September 13, 1999); Martin Horak, "Environmental Policy Reform in the Post-Communist Czech Republic," *Europe-Asia Studies* 53 (March 2001): 313–327. *Photo:* Pavel Šeplavý/Alamy.

Elite theory argues that these few individuals wield power in America because they control its key financial, communications, industrial, and government institutions. Their power derives from the vast wealth of America's largest corporations and the perceived importance of the continuing success of those corporations to the growth of the economy. An inner circle of top corporate leaders not only provides effective advocates for individual companies and for the interests of capitalism in general but also supplies people for top government jobs, from which they can continue to promote their interests. Elitists might point, for example, to former vice president Dick Cheney. He went from previous work as secretary of defense for President George H. W. Bush to becoming head of Halliburton, a large oil services company, and then back to government, where, as George W. Bush's vice president, he acted as an outspoken proponent of more energy exploration.

According to elite theory, the United States is not a democracy but an oligarchy.[29] Although the voters appear to control the government through

elections, elite theorists argue that the powerful few in society manage to define the issues and constrain the outcomes of government decision making to suit their own interests. Clearly, elite theory describes a government that operates in an undemocratic fashion.

Elite theory appeals to many people, especially those who believe that wealth dominates politics. The theory also provides plausible explanations for specific political decisions. Why, over the years, has the tax code included so many loopholes that favor the wealthy? The answer, claim adherents of elite theory, is that the policymakers never really change; they are all cut from the same cloth. Even when a liberal Democrat like Barack Obama is in the White House, many of the president's top economic policymakers are typically drawn from Wall Street or other financial institutions.

Political scientists have conducted numerous studies designed to test the validity of elite theory, but it has proven to be an exceptionally difficult idea to prove in any conclusive manner. Our government and society are enormous and enormously complex. If there were an elite that controlled American politics, it would have to be rather large as there are many wealthy and well-connected notables. What would be the coordinating mechanism that facilitated control by such an elite? And if such an elite exerted such influence, why wouldn't it be clearly evident?[30] Although not all studies come to the same conclusion, the preponderance of available evidence documenting concrete government decisions on many different issues does not generally support elite theory—at least in the sense that an identifiable ruling elite usually gets its way. Not surprisingly, elite theorists reject this view. They argue that studies of decisions made on individual issues do not adequately test the influence of the power elite. Rather, they contend that much of the elite's power comes from its ability to keep issues off the political agenda. That is, its power derives from its ability to keep people from questioning fundamental assumptions about American capitalism.[31]

Consequently, elite theory remains part of the debate about the nature of American government and is forcefully argued by some severe critics of our political system. Although we do not believe that the scholarly evidence supports elite theory, we do recognize that contemporary American pluralism favors some segments of society over others. On one hand, the poor are chronically unorganized and are not well represented by interest groups. On the other hand, business is very well represented in the political system. As many interest group scholars who reject elite theory have documented, business is better represented than any other sector of the public. Thus, one can endorse pluralist democracy as a more accurate description than elitism in American politics without believing that all groups are equally well represented.

Elite Theory Versus Pluralist Theory

The key difference between elite and pluralist theory lies in the durability of the ruling minority. In contrast to elite theory, pluralist theory does not define government conflict in terms of a minority versus the majority; instead, it sees

many different interests vying with one another in each policy area. In the management of national forests, for example, many interest groups—logging companies, recreational campers, and environmentalists, for example—have joined the political competition. They press their various viewpoints on government through representatives who are well informed about how relevant issues affect group members. According to elite theory, the financial resources of big logging companies ought to win out over the arguments of campers and environmentalists, but this does not always happen.

Pluralist democracy makes a virtue of the struggle between competing interests. It argues for government that accommodates the struggle and channels the result into government action. According to pluralist democracy, the public is best served if the government structure provides access for different groups to press their claims in competition with one another. Note that pluralist democracy does not insist that all groups have equal influence on government decisions. In the political struggle, wealthy, well-organized groups have an inherent advantage over poorer, inadequately organized groups. In fact, unorganized segments of the population may not even get their concerns placed on the agenda for government consideration, which means that what government does not discuss (its "nondecisions") may be as significant as what it does discuss and decide. Indeed, studies of the congressional agenda demonstrate that it is characterized by little in the way of legislation concerned with poor or low-income Americans, while business-related bills are plentiful.[32] This is a critical weakness of pluralism, and critics relentlessly attack the theory because it appears to justify great disparities in levels of political organization and resources among different segments of society.[33] Pluralists contend that as long as all groups are able to participate vigorously in the decision-making process, the process is democratic.

On Tonight's Menu, Lots of Green

Elitist critics of American government point to the advantages that the wealthy have in our political system. The campaign finance system contributes to this belief. This Washington fundraiser gives lobbyists and wealthy donors a chance to mingle with policymakers and remind them who supports them financially.

(Rob Crandall/The Image Works)

The Global Trend Toward Democracy

We have proposed two models of democratic government. The majoritarian model conforms with classical democratic theory for a representative government. According to this model, democracy should be a form of government

that features responsiveness to majority opinion. According to the pluralist model, a government is democratic if it allows minority interests to organize and press their claims on government freely.

No government actually achieves the high degree of responsiveness demanded by the majoritarian model. No government offers complete and equal access to the claims of all competing groups, as is required by an optimally democratic pluralist model. Still, some nations approach these ideals closely enough to be considered practicing democracies.

Establishing Democracies

Whether a political system is "democratic" is not a simple yes-or-no question. Governments can meet some criteria for a procedural democracy (universal participation, political equality, majority rule, and government responsiveness to public opinion) and fail to meet others. They can also differ in the extent to which they support freedom of speech and freedom of association, which create the necessary conditions for the practice of democracy. Various scholars and organizations have developed complicated databases that rate countries on a long list of indicators, providing a means of comparing countries along all criteria.[34] One research institution has found a global trend toward freedom every decade since 1975, though in the past few years there has been a slight drop in the number of democracies.[35] Democratization is a difficult process, and many countries fail completely or succeed only in the short run and lapse into a form of authoritarianism (see Compared with What? Democratization in Africa). One recent comparison of thirty collapsed democracies with thirty-two stable democracies concluded that social cleavages are more likely to cause collapse than the nature of governmental institutions.[36]

One reason that democratization can be so difficult is that ethnic and religious conflict is epidemic. Such conflict complicates efforts to democratize because antagonisms can run so deep that opposing groups do not want to grant political legitimacy to each other. Kenya had been one of Africa's most stable democracies, but widespread rioting ensued there in 2007 after a disputed election. The incumbent party may have engaged in fraud to keep itself in power. The primary cleavage between the incumbent and opposition parties was largely ethnic and tribal in nature, and this added fuel to the fire in the wake of the election. The ongoing protests along with international pressure forced the disputed winner to agree to a coalition government with the main opposition party. The country has continued to struggle, as bitter antagonisms remain.[37]

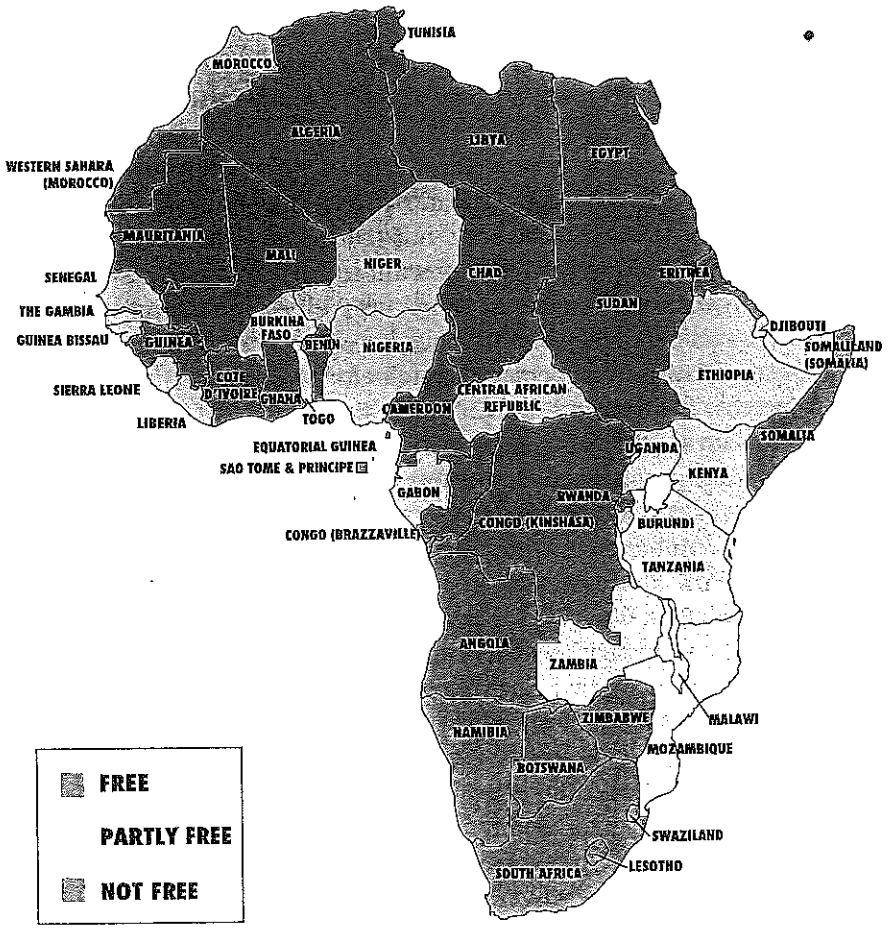
Ethnic and religious rivals are often more interested in achieving a form of government that oppresses their opponents (or, in their minds, maintains order) than in establishing a real democracy. After the United States went to war against the Taliban regime of Afghanistan because of its support of Osama bin Laden, it was faced with rebuilding a country with an enduring history of ethnic and tribal warfare. Even within the largest ethnic group, the Pashtuns (about 50 percent of the population), there was little unity.

democratization
A process of transition as a country attempts to move from an authoritarian form of government to a democratic one.

Compared with What?

Democratization in Africa

Democratization is an extremely difficult process because a country trying to move toward such a form of government is vulnerable to those who were advantaged in the previous regime or to those who would like to grab power. The governments of democratizing countries may be fragile, with little support from a population that does not appreciate the challenges and trade-offs that lie before its legislature and bureaucracies. In Africa some countries have successfully achieved significant levels of democracy, but many others have been unable to escape the grips of authoritarianism. Some have become democratic for a period, only to be replaced, often violently, by an authoritarian regime.



Source: Freedom House, "Map of Freedom, 2009," available at http://www.freedomhouse.org/template.cfm?page=363&year=2009.

Tribal and subtribal rivalries divided Pashtuns, and enmity between Pashtuns and other ethnic and linguistic groups such as Tajiks, Uzbeks, and Turkmen presented the United States and its allies with a mosaic of ethnic antagonisms. This ethnic and tribal rivalry has made it especially difficult for a centralized, national government to extend its reach across the country and elicit the support of the population.[38]

The political and economic instability that typically accompanies transitions to democracy makes new democratic governments vulnerable to attack by their opponents. The military will often revolt and take over the government on the ground that progress cannot occur until order is restored. As we noted in Chapter 1, all societies wrestle with the dilemma of choosing between freedom and order. The open political conflict that emerges in a new democracy may not be easily harnessed into a well-functioning government that tolerates opposition.[39] Despite such difficulties, strong forces are pushing authoritarian governments toward democratization. Nations find it difficult to succeed economically in today's world without establishing a market economy, and market economies (that is, capitalism) give people substantial freedoms. There is a strong relationship between economic prosperity and democracy; countries that have free markets tend to protect political freedoms as well.[40] Thus, authoritarian rulers may see economic reforms as a threat to their regime.

The United States has always faced a difficult foreign policy problem determining the degree to which it wants to invest in promoting democracy abroad. It is a noble goal, to be sure, but it may be difficult to impose democracy on a population that does not want it. After many years of violence between insurgents and American troops as well as considerable terrorism inflicted by Iraqis on each other, Iraq has become more stable and has taken important steps toward democracy through elections. Yet this progress came at a terrible cost in lives and in astronomical sums to pay for the American soldiers who have occupied the country since 2003. Americans soured on the war in Iraq and punished the Republicans in the elections of 2006 and 2008. Democrat Barack Obama has found limited support for U.S. military intervention in Afghanistan. Prior to announcing a surge of 30,000 more troops in late 2009, approval of Obama's handling of the war in Afghanistan had fallen to just 35 percent in the polls.[41]

Established democracies are also not free of the destabilizing effects of religious and ethnic conflict. Such countries usually try to cope with such pressures with some form of pluralism so that different groups feel they are being treated fairly by their government. Indeed, majoritarian democracy can be risky where ethnic and religious rivalries endure because a majority faction can use its votes to suppress minorities. Even in stable democracies where ethnic conflict is muted, disillusionment can grow and undermine confidence in the actions of government.[42] India, the world's largest democracy and a burgeoning economic power, is still plagued by periodic religious violence. In 2008 there was a terrible spate of violence directed at the tiny Christian minority in the state of Orissa. Mobs destroyed 1,400 homes,

leaving thousands homeless, and 80 churches and prayer houses were set on fire.[43] More broadly, the tension between the Hindu majority and the significant Muslim minority in India is always palpable and violence occasionally erupts.[44]

American Democracy: More Pluralist Than Majoritarian

It is not idle speculation to ask what kind of democracy is practiced in the United States. The answer can help us understand why our government can be called democratic despite a low level of citizen participation in politics and despite government actions that sometimes run contrary to public opinion.

Throughout this book, we probe to determine how well the United States fits the two alternative models of democracy: majoritarian and pluralist. If our answer is not already apparent, it soon will be. We argue that the political system in the United States rates relatively low according to the majoritarian model of democracy but that it fulfills the pluralist model quite well. Yet the pluralist model is far from a perfect representation of democracy. Its principal drawback is that it favors the well organized, and the poor are the least likely to be members of interest groups. As one advocate of majoritarian democracy once wrote, "The flaw in the pluralist heaven is that the heavenly chorus sings with a strong upper-class accent."[45]

In recent years the parties have become more sharply divided along conservative and liberal dimensions, thus making our system a bit more majoritarian than has traditionally been the case. In particular, the two parties in Congress have become more ideologically homogeneous, thus giving voters a clearer opportunity to select a party more cohesive in its programmatic intent.[46] Yet this step toward majoritarianism has led to widespread criticism that our system of government is becoming too bitterly partisan. That is, as the members of Congress have become more ideological, they seem to have become less inclined to work together to achieve moderate, compromise solutions to the nation's problems. Some critics have also charged that ideological activists, who have mobilized more than moderates, have hijacked the parties and pulled them more sharply toward conservative and liberal extremes.[47] For those uncomfortable with more ideological parties, the continuing strong counterbalance of pluralism is welcome.

Given the survey data that show that the people's trust in American government has fallen over the years, it may seem that pluralist democracy is not serving us very well. Indeed, many Americans describe government and politicians in the harshest terms. Radio talk show hosts like Rush Limbaugh and politicians themselves pile invective on top of insult when they talk about what's wrong with Washington.[48] Compared with citizens in other developed nations, Americans fall in the middle concerning their satisfaction with democracy in the United States. But it's not at all clear that Americans would be more satisfied with another type of democracy.

This evaluation of the pluralist nature of American democracy may not mean much to you now. But you will learn that the pluralist model makes the United States look far more democratic than the majoritarian model would. Eventually, you will have to decide the answers to three questions:

1. Is the pluralist model truly an adequate expression of democracy, or is it a perversion of classical ideals, designed to portray America as democratic when it is not?
2. Does the majoritarian model result in a "better" type of democracy?
3. If it does, could new mechanisms of government be devised to produce a desirable mix of majority rule and minority rights?

Let these questions play in the back of your mind as you read more about the workings of American government in meeting the challenge of democracy.

Summary

Is the United States a democracy? Most scholars believe that it is. But what kind of democracy is it? The answer depends on the definition of *democracy*. Some believe democracy is procedural; they define *democracy* as a form of government in which the people govern through certain institutional mechanisms. Others hold to substantive theory, claiming that a government is democratic if its policies promote civil liberties and rights.

In this book, we emphasize the procedural concept of democracy, distinguishing between direct (participatory) and indirect (representative) democracy. In a participatory democracy, all citizens gather to govern themselves according to the principles of universal participation, political equality, and majority rule. In an indirect democracy, the citizens elect representatives to govern for them. If a representative government is elected mostly in accordance with the three principles just listed and also is usually responsive to public opinion, it qualifies as a democracy.

Procedural democratic theory has produced rival institutional models of democratic government. The classic majoritarian model, which depends on majority votes in elections, assumes that people are knowledgeable about government, want to participate in the political process, and carefully and rationally choose among candidates. But surveys of public opinion and behavior and voter turnout show that this is not the case for most Americans. The pluralist model of democracy, which depends on interest group interaction with government, was devised to accommodate these findings. It argues that democracy in a complex society requires only that government allow private interests to organize and to press their competing claims openly in the political arena. It differs from elite theory—the belief that America is run by a small group of powerful individuals—by arguing that different minorities win on different issues.

In Chapter 1, we discussed three political values: freedom, order, and equality. Here we have described two models of democracy: majoritarian and pluralist. The five concepts are critical to an understanding of American government. The values discussed in this chapter underlie the two questions with which the text began:

- Which is better: to live under a government that allows individuals complete freedom to do whatever they please, or to live under one that enforces strict law and order?

- Which is better: to let all citizens keep the same share of their income, or to tax wealthier people at a higher rate to fund programs for poorer people?

The models of democracy described in this chapter lead to another question:

- Which is better: a government that is highly responsive to public opinion on all matters, or one that responds deliberately to organized groups that argue their cases effectively?

These are enduring questions, and the framers of the Constitution dealt with them too. Their struggle is the appropriate place to begin our analysis of how these competing models of democracy have animated the debate about the nature of our political process.