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Politics is not some mysterious process engaged in by faraway people we will never meet. It is not something that happens “out there” and then impacts us, as if we were so many oblivious ducks, paddling passively around in our pond, targets of hunters we neither recognize nor understand. Politics is simply the way we decide who gets power and influence in a world where there is not enough power for all of us to have as much as we’d like. As a famous political scientist, Harold Laswell, once defined it, politics is who gets what and how they get it. That sums it up neatly.

Most of our political wrangling is about trying to get rules that treat us or people like us favorably. Rules are incredibly important because they can help to determine who will win or lose future power struggles.

An essential element of power is having the ability to tell the controlling political narrative about who should have power, how it should be used, and to what end. Telling a political narrative, or a story about power, that other people buy into can give you enormous authority over them.

It can seem like a pretty grizzly activity sometimes, but consider this: politics is what saves us from being like the other animals on the planet. It gives us ways to solve disputes over power without resorting to violence. Instead, we have options of bargaining, cooperating, collaborating, and compromising. Or even bribing and arm twisting and threatening to pull out of the process. We can turn to violence, and of course we do at times, but the key point is—we don’t have to!

By the time you finish reading this chapter, you will be able to:

1. Define politics, government, and economics
2. Compare the varieties of political and economic systems and explain how they help us understand the differences among nations, including the United States
3. Identify and discuss the ideas that underlie the U.S. political system and that bring us together
4. Identify and discuss the ideas that divide us despite our being bound by a common culture
5. Explain how narratives can perpetuate particular ideas about politics and economics and how living in a mediated world helps to construct those narratives
6. Describe the narratives about citizenship that provide the context in which we navigate politics in the United States
Politics: the way we decide who gets power and influence in a world where there is not enough power for all of us to have as much as we’d like

Rules: political directives that help to determine who will win or lose future power struggles

Political narrative: a story that is used to persuade others about the nature of power, who should have it, and how it should be used

Government: a system or an organization for exercising authority over a body of people

Authority: power that people consider legitimate, that they have consented or agreed to
controlled by the individuals who live under it and that has processes in place so that individuals can challenge the government if they feel it has overreached its authority.

The types of governments or political systems range from most government power/least individual power to least government power/most individual power:

# Authoritarian governments are governments where the rulers have all the power and the rules don’t allow the people who live under those rules to have any power at all. The people who live under authoritarian governments are called subjects because they are simply subject to the will of the rulers. They have no power of their own to fight back.

# Non-authoritarian governments are governments where the rules regulate the people’s behaviors in some respects (outlawing murder, theft, and running red lights, for instance) but allow them considerable freedom in others. The individuals who live under these governments are called citizens because government doesn’t have all the power over them—they retain some power or rights that government cannot take away and that they can use to push back against an encroaching government. Non-authoritarian governments can be democracies or constitutional monarchies or other arrangements where the power of the leaders over the people is limited in some respect.

# Democracy is a special case of non-authoritarian government because here the citizens have considerable power to make the rules that govern them (based on a theory called popular sovereignty). The degree of that power may vary. In small democracies, citizens may make every decision that affects them. In large ones, they may only

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authoritarian governments: political systems in which the rulers have all the power and the rules don’t allow the people who live under them to have any power at all

subjects: people who are bound to the will of the rulers and who have no power of their own to push back on an abusive government

non-authoritarian governments: political systems in which the rules regulate people’s behaviors in some respects but allow them considerable freedom in others

citizens: individuals who live under non-authoritarian governments

democracy: a type of non-authoritarian government wherein citizens have considerable power to make the rules that govern them

popular sovereignty: the concept that the citizens are the ultimate source of political power
choose representatives who exercise power on their behalf. The point is that, in a democracy, collective decisions are made by counting individual preferences about what citizens believe to be best.

Anarchy is no government at all. Individuals are free to do as they wish. The absence of laws means that organizing and transferring power is difficult, if not impossible. We don’t have any lasting real-life examples of this type of government.

We can arrange these systems on a continuum ranging from government power to individual power (see Figure 1.1).

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**anarchy**: no government at all; a system in which individuals are free to do as they wish
Power and influence are not the only scarce resources we have disputes over, of course. We also fight over gold and treasure and Maseratis—that is, material stuff. The process for deciding who gets the material resources and how they get them is called economics.

Like politics, economics can also offer us an alternative to a life of violence and mayhem. If we decide to allow an economic system to make decisions about who gets how much stuff, then we will have a narrative to justify the things we have managed to claim as our own. There will be an agreed-upon distributive system that provides predictability and a story about who deserves what.

**TWO SIDES OF THE SAME COIN?** Politics and economics are closely related. As you can imagine, the more power you have, the easier it will be to push a narrative that gives you more stuff. The more stuff you have, the more power will come with it. It is impossible to study politics divorced from economics. The language that follows shows how entangled the two are.

Like political systems, economic systems can also vary depending on whether they rely on government power or individual choices to make decisions about the distribution of material goods. Kinds of economic systems include

- **Socialism.** Socialist systems are economic systems in which the government (a single ruler, a party, or some other empowered group) decides what to produce and who should get the products. Usually in a socialist system the state or the government owns the utilities, the factories, and other essential property (or, perhaps, all the property). Government may decide that the goods produced should be distributed equally or according to need or only to a valued elite—the point is that who gets the goods is a political decision.

**A QUICK HEADS-UP ON USAGE!** Socialism and communism can mean similar things. If you hear references to communism, it may mean something close to what we’ve described here. To simplify, we’ll just go with the term socialism in this book.

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**economics:** the process for deciding who gets the material resources and how they get them

**socialism:** an economic system in which the government (a single ruler, a party, or some other empowered group) decides what to produce and who should get the products
Mixed economies. Mixed economies are based on modified forms of capitalism, an economic system that relies on the market to make decisions about who should have what material goods. The market is based on the decisions of multiple individuals about what to buy or sell, creating different levels of demand and supply. When the demand for something increases, so does its cost until more of it is produced. If production keeps up until the good floods the market and demand is insufficient to buy all that’s been produced, then the price decreases. As with democracy, in mixed economies, the fundamental decision-makers are individuals rather than the government. Also, as in a democracy, individuals may decide they want the government to step in and regulate behaviors that they think are not in the public interest. It is the type and degree of regulation that determines what kind of mixed economy it is.

Democratic socialism and social democracy are, as their names suggest, mixed economies that are a hybrid of democracy and socialism and that span the central divide in Figure 1.2. They are different from the pure socialist economy we just discussed because they combine socialist ideals that empower government with a commitment to the political principle of popular sovereignty and the economic principle of market capitalism that empowers individuals. The difference is that democratic socialists want to achieve socialism through the democratic process, and social democrats are happy to keep the capitalist economy as long as they use the democratic process to attain some of the goals a socialist economy is supposed to produce (like more equality).

Socialism hybrids in theory, and often in practice, try to keep checks on government power to avoid the descent into authoritarianism that plagues most socialist experiments. They generally hold that there is a preferred distribution of stuff that requires prioritizing political goals over the market but that democracy is worth preserving as well.

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mixed economies: economic systems based on modified forms of capitalism

capitalism: an economic system that relies on the market to make decisions about who should have material goods

market: the collective decisions of multiple individuals about what to buy or sell, creating different levels of demand and supply

democratic socialism: a mixed economy in which the democratic process is used to achieve socialism

social democracy: a mixed economy that is committed to market capitalism but that uses the democratic process to attain some of the goals a socialist economy is supposed to produce (like more equality)
PAY ATTENTION! When people claim to endorse a hybrid of democracy and socialism, note which word is the noun and which is the modifier. The noun will tell you where the true commitment lies. Democratic socialists prioritize the results of a socialist economy; social democrats prioritize the democratic process over economic outcomes.

Regulated capitalism is also a hybrid system, but, unlike the socialist hybrids, it does not often prioritize political and social goals—like reducing inequality or redressing power inequities—as much as it does economic health. Since the market's well-being is usually the priority, regulated capitalism enlists government action to that purpose—to limit the formation of monopolies that restrict competition, for instance, or to avoid wild swings that can happen when the market is uncontrolled. Some systems of regulated capitalism may also promote social goals that limit the market somewhat: higher taxation to fund old age pensions, tuition breaks for college, or universal health care, to name a few, but generally not at the expense of market growth or stability.

SEEING BEYOND THE BLURRY LINES. The dividing line between some of the socialism hybrids and regulated capitalism is not always crisp, as one may seem to blend into the other. The distinction to pay attention to is how much political control of the economy the system supports, and to what end. The judgment about what regulations are a legitimate use of government can be the subject of major political debates in democratic countries with mixed economies.

Laissez-faire capitalism. Laissez-faire capitalism (from a French expression meaning essentially “let it—that is, the market—alone”) is what you have when a commitment to capitalism is untempered by any political considerations at all. Laissez-faire capitalism can be subject to wild swings up and down. Some people like to speculate in that environment, but it turns out most people with money want a little bit more stability and predictability when they invest. Governments also find it costly and difficult to deal with the public catastrophes that can result from market crashes (the Great Depression of the 1930s, for instance, or the Great Recession beginning in 2008). Consequently, as with anarchy, laissez-faire systems exist in theory but are problematic in practice. Most capitalist systems find themselves with some sort of mixed economy.

regulated capitalism: a market system in which the government intervenes to protect rights

laissez-faire capitalism: a form of capitalism wherein there are no restrictions on the market at all
We can also arrange these economic systems on a continuum of more government power over economic decision making to more individual power over economic decision making, as in Figure 1.2.

As you can see, all the mixed economies and laissez-faire capitalism are on the side of more individual power, even though in those systems government might regulate the economy to achieve social goals, like using taxation to provide benefits for the disadvantaged or to provide universal education.

**1.2 POLITICAL-ECONOMIC SYSTEMS**

The advantage of looking at political and economic systems the way we laid them out in the preceding section is that it allows us to understand just how they are different from and similar to each other. And because all nations have a way to manage the distribution of power and material goods, we can layer the two figures from that section on top of each other to create a model that will help us understand the political economic systems of most countries.
Keep in mind that models are just that—they are not detailed depictions of reality. Instead, they focus on key attributes in order to show relationships or structure. *Models are just tools to help us understand.*

So, take a look at Figure 1.3. Here we have placed the vertical axis of politics (ranging from more individual control of how people live on the top to more government control toward the bottom) over the horizontal axis of economics (ranging from more individual control of how goods are distributed on the right to more government control on the left). This creates four quadrants where we can place almost any political economic system in the world (and some that have been dreamed of but have never been realized in the world at all).
Think about the kinds of systems that fit into each of these quadrants:

# Capitalist democracy. The upper right quadrant includes countries with the most individual control over both political and economic life. These countries have democratic governments and capitalist economies (including democratic socialist economies), although they may be found in different parts of the quadrant depending on how much social and economic regulation they endorse.

The United States is in this quadrant, as are the countries of western Europe (although many European countries that are willing to regulate the economy to achieve democratic socialist goals, such as less poverty or a narrower gap between rich and poor, are on the leftward edge of the quadrant). Japan is also in this quadrant, as are India, Mexico, Canada, and many other nations that value individual choices over a heavy government hand.

# Totalitarianism. Look diagonally from the capitalist democracies and you find totalitarianism. Totalitarian systems have authoritarian governments that tell people how to live and socialist economic systems where the government also decides who gets what material goods. Governments, not individuals, make the important decisions about power, influence, gold, and treasure.

Countries that fit in here are North Korea and the former Soviet Union. These systems are hard to maintain (witness the demise of the Soviet Union) because they need to keep their populations isolated from the rest of the world lest they be tempted by the freedom and material plenty that exist in richer, capitalist countries.

# Authoritarian capitalism. Countries in the lower right quadrant are some of the most interesting. These governments may pretend to have elections, but the electoral process is essentially a sham. Individuals are subjects—they have no rights to push back against a government that might determine how many children they can have or how they dress or grow their hair. They have no legal recourse or

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**capitalist democracy**: a political-economic system that grants the most individual control over both political and economic life

**totalitarianism**: a system that combines authoritarian government with a socialist economic system wherein the government makes all the decisions about power, influence, and money

**authoritarian capitalism**: a system in which the authoritarian government has strong control over how individuals may live their lives, but individuals do have some market freedom
rights of due process if they are convicted of a crime. As far as how individuals live their lives, authoritarian government is the decider. But increasingly, these governments are choosing to let their subjects have some market freedom. Recognizing that global power is economic power, they take advantage of individual entrepreneurship to help drive their national economic engines.

Some authoritarian capitalist states have evolved from totalitarian systems (like Russia and China), and others were structured that way from the start. Singapore has an authoritarian government (at one time chewing gum was illegal because people threw their gum on the ground and defiled public spaces) but also has a thriving capitalist economy and tourist trade.

In 1994, eighteen-year-old American Michael Fay was convicted of spray painting cars in Singapore. He was arrested and sentenced to be caned. American claims that his punishment was “cruel and unusual” left Singaporean authorities unmoved since they have no bill of rights that meaningfully limits government action. President Bill Clinton’s administration was able to intervene to get the sentence somewhat reduced, but the example shows dramatically what it can be like to be in a thriving capitalist economy that doesn’t recognize civil liberties.

Note, however, that the evolution can go both ways. Democratic capitalist countries can turn in an authoritarian direction, often through populist or socialist movements led by strong, charismatic figures. We see that today in Venezuela, the Philippines, Turkey, and Brazil. In recent years, movements that feed on a sense of grievance in the population are also picking up steam in Europe and the United States.

Marxist utopia. The upper left quadrant is tough to describe because there are no real-life examples of countries that have a non-authoritarian (democratic) government, where free citizens determine how they will live their lives, and an economy that rejects a capitalist market. The closest we can come to imagining this type of system is probably the society the German theorist Karl Marx thought would emerge after workers had overthrown capitalism in a revolution (an event he thought was inevitable but that so far has not happened).

**MARXISM, TL;DR VERSION.** Marx thought that the economic strife inherent in capitalism was at the root of all social conflict, so destroying capitalism would also remove the need for a coercive state to regulate conflict. The revolution would cause the state to wither away, leaving individuals to live their lives freely. Individuals would participate in the production process according to their ability and receive goods according to their need.
Like so many rosy places of imaginary perfection, this one has never survived in the bright sunlight of reality despite the promises of political theorists, party leaders, and political candidates. The promises of democratic socialists to maintain democratic values within a socialist economy have never worked out well for those endorsing democracy.

1.3 AMERICAN POLITICAL CULTURE

Our increasingly media-rich culture gives us many opportunities to hear and participate in political debates, both civil and not so civil. Sometimes it seems like we don’t agree on a single thing. But, ironically, it is only because we do agree on some fundamentals that those disagreements can even take place.

Political culture is a set of shared ideas, values, and beliefs that define the role and limitations of government and people’s relationship to that government. Because these ideas and values are shared, they pull people together, making them into a single political unit. Here are four things to know about political culture:

# Political culture is woven together from political narratives. It is not identical to political narratives, however; political narratives can both unite people and divide them.

# Political culture is intangible and unspoken. It is hard to get your hands around it or to find the language with which to discuss it. It is especially difficult to be aware of your own political culture. Like the semi-facetious question of whether fish know they are in water, it is interesting to ask whether people recognize their own political cultures if they have never been exposed to another. People who have not traveled or met many people from other countries are more likely to think that the beliefs we share are objective reality, not just one set of many optional sets of narratives.

# Political culture is easiest to see when you can step outside of it. Like those fish, it is hard for us to be aware of our environment when we are immersed in it and it’s all we have ever known. Unlike fish, we

**political culture**: a set of shared ideas, values, and beliefs that define the role and limitations of government and people’s relationship to that government and that, therefore, bind people into a single political unit.
have the ability to transport ourselves out of our environment to get perspective. That is one reason we created the world systems graphic we explored earlier (see Figure 1.3). It allows us to understand our system in relation to others as a first step to understanding the culture that holds the system together.

Political culture gives us as Americans (and people of other countries) a common set of assumptions about the world and a common political language within which we can disagree. And boy, do we disagree! Remember that to say that Americans share a political culture is not to say that we agree on everything.

What does American political culture look like? We know from the world systems graphic (see Figure 1.3) that our political culture is found in the upper right quadrant of that figure—defined by a preference for more individual control (that is, less government regulation) of how people live their lives and how they distribute material goods. That means Americans are democratic capitalists whose values are the same Enlightenment values of classical liberalism (which we discuss in the next section).

Within that quadrant there is a fair amount of variation. We said, for instance, that many industrialized cultures, especially democratic socialist ones, endorse more regulation to bring about valued social goods like a basic standard of living, guaranteed health care, or more equality. For instance, although universal access to health care is an accepted policy in almost all capitalist democracies, it is controversial in the United States. Here are the fundamentals on which Americans seem to have reached a national consensus:

- **Limited government**: this goes all the way back to the founding
- **Individualism**: an emphasis on individual rights rather than on the collective whole
- **Freedom, equality, and representative democracy**: core values defined in a context of the American commitment to minimal government coercion, so that . . .

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**limited government**: the Enlightenment idea that the power of government should be restricted to allow for maximum individual freedom

**individualism**: a political cultural emphasis on individual rights rather than on the collective whole

**freedom**: in American political culture, defined as individual independence from government

**equality**: in American political culture, defined as forms of political fairness that require minimal government intervention
• Freedom becomes freedom from government. That is different, for instance, from some other democratic capitalist countries whose citizens view their freedom as flowing from a strong government that provides basics like medical care and higher education. This gives citizens a level of financial freedom that allows them to focus their time and money elsewhere.

• Equality becomes equality before the law; one person, one vote; and equal opportunity—all forms of equality that require minimal government intervention. Americans tend to reject notions of equality like those realized by affirmative action, in which government steps in to create more actual equality of life chances.

• Representative democracy is a decision-making process by which individuals register their preferences for their representatives (and the policies they promise). Democratic capitalism cannot exist without a commitment to a form of democratic choice by individuals.

A WORD OF WARNING! The thing about political cultures is that they are foundational but not eternal. Consensus on the basic elements can weaken, and without a common culture it is hard, if not impossible, to maintain national unity. For instance, once a substantial number of colonial Americans had begun to see themselves as a separate people and developed a distinctly American political culture, union with the British was hard to maintain. Not all Americans shared the desire to break from England, but eventually the cultural, political, and economic forces prevailed and they severed their ties.

Political culture is a gift: it gives Americans the ability to disagree, within bounds, but also the ability to be united when necessary. The challenge is to make sure that differences among citizens do not become so extreme that the political culture can no longer contain them.

1.4 AMERICAN POLITICAL IDEOLOGIES

Of course, within the cultural framework of the United States there is plenty of room for disagreement. How limited should government be? How much government regulation should be allowed? How much individualism should citizens endorse? Should government have any role in providing for collective goals? If a majority of citizens have strongly held ideas (religious, ethical, or moral) that they believe everyone should hold, should those ideas be enshrined in government policy, or should government allow the maximum
range for individual conscience? How much freedom, equality, and representative democracy should people have, and what should government’s role be in guaranteeing it?

The disagreements that citizens have about those sorts of questions are about the boundaries and meaning of the shared political culture. We call the competing narratives we create to explain those disagreements ideologies.

The traditional ideological division in the United States (as in many industrial countries) has been on the left-right economic dimension, with conservatives on the right calling for less regulation of the economy (lower taxes, freer trade, and more competition, to name a few) and liberals on the left calling for more government regulation (like government enforced retirement savings, social welfare programs, universal health care, and free preschool programs).

Over the past century, that economic dimension emerged as the most salient because, in the years after the Great Depression of the 1930s, just making a living was the major concern for most people.

Starting in the 1960s and 1970s, however, other noneconomic issues started to motivate voters—issues like racial desegregation; civil rights; women’s rights, including reproductive rights; prayer in schools; and crime reduction.

These issues split Americans along a political dimension much like the vertical line we considered earlier, with some Americans saying that government should allow the maximum freedom for all people, regardless of race, gender, religion, or sexual orientation, and others saying it was government’s job to enforce a proper social order defined by their beliefs.

When you combine the horizontal, economic ideological dimension with the vertical, political ideological dimension, you get four ideological categories that are important for understanding American politics today, as illustrated in Figure 1.4:

- **ideologies**: competing narratives that explain various political disagreements
- **conservatives**: Americans on the political right who believe in less regulation of the economy
- **liberals**: Americans on the political left who believe in greater government regulation of the economy
Let’s take a closer look at each of these:

**Economic conservatives.** These are the people who believe in the narrative that the government that governs best, governs least. They have a fundamental distrust in the government’s ability to solve complex problems (President Ronald Reagan once said that the scariest words in the English language were “I am from the government...

**economic conservatives:** Americans who favor a strictly procedural government role in the economy and the social order.
and I’m here to help”) and a deep faith in individual ingenuity to do so. They favor getting government out of the boardroom (economic decisions) and out of the bedroom (decisions of personal morality).

In terms of policy, economic conservatives are close to being libertarians (those who believe in minimal government) when it comes to social issues. Consequently, many favor policies like gun rights, reproductive rights, civil rights, end-of-life decisions, and legalized marijuana. They are equally libertarian when it comes to economic issues. Although they generally endorse taxation to provide basic police security and military defense, they are more likely to believe that government should leave many of the other things it currently does (collecting and doling out Social Security and health care benefits, road building, managing the penal system, space exploration, etc.) to the private sector. They are pro-immigration to add to the pool of workers and entrepreneurs. Most want only as much regulation of the economy as it would take to keep competition fair and the market from tanking.

Although economic conservatives generally don’t love government, they embrace the protections in the Constitution and the democratic process as a check on government power. If they fail to win an election, they believe in “good loserism”—waiting to fight again another day rather than trying to change the rules or discredit or subvert the process in order to create a more favorable political environment for themselves.

**HUH? GOOD LOSERISM? IS THAT EVEN A THING?** Well, maybe not. But while few people use this exact phrase, the idea of good loserism helps us articulate an essential narrative of democratic governance. Democracies depend on some people winning and others losing—and the survival of democracies depends on the losers consenting to their loss, having confidence that a loss today does not mean a loss forever and that another chance to win is around the corner. Trust in the rules of the game and a willingness to accept the loss is essential to the compromise and cooperation valued by the founders and required by the Constitution.

Since the rules of the game in the United States tend to favor the wealthy and powerful even when they lose an election, good loserism doesn’t entail a lot of sacrifice or risk for many economic conservatives, but it still has stabilizing implications for American democracy.

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**libertarians**: Americans who favor a minimal government role in any sphere

**good loserism**: the willingness to accept a political loss with the confidence that a win will eventually follow, rather than trying to change the rules or delegitimate the process
Economic liberals. The economic liberal narrative is also founded on the notion that citizens should be able to decide how to live their lives. Where it diverges from the story told by economic conservatives is, first, in seeing citizens not just as individuals but as members of groups, some of which are often not treated equitably by society, and, second, in believing some government action may be necessary for all people to reach their full potential. As you would guess, economic liberals don’t trust the government much more than economic conservatives do. They see it as heavy machinery that can be used wisely or foolishly, to be operated with care, and not while under the influence of strong emotion.

Thus, economic liberals favor an expansion of civil rights protections—the elimination of racism and the expansion of immigration, women’s rights, and gay rights. That means they oppose restrictions on voting rights, penal codes that disproportionately jail people of color, and constitutional amendments prohibiting reproductive rights or marriage equality. Economic liberals are very libertarian when it comes to whether individuals get to call their own shots, but their narrative says that for individuals to reach their potential, they might need a boost from the government.

Consequently, economic liberals favor economic policies to provide a basic standard of living to all individuals. They support Social Security, Medicare (health care for the elderly), and universal health care, although they disagree on the form it ought to take. They believe in free college education or at least in requiring favorable terms for student loans. They support free lunch programs, free preschools, and free prenatal care to be sure kids from all backgrounds get a good start in life. They are pro-immigration and pro-diversity for its own sake, because they think it makes the United States a more culturally rich country. They support environmental regulation and using government to provide infrastructure (roads, bridges, dams) to improve life and to provide jobs.

Even though they embrace government action to further their goals, economic liberals, like economic conservatives, practice good loserism, prioritizing the Constitution and the democratic process over their policy preferences. That results in a “two-steps-forward, one-step-back” type of incremental policy change, as the founders had hoped, rather than revolutionary change that could be a shock to the system. Accepting that sometimes they will lose means that it may take economic liberals several runs through the electoral cycle to accomplish their policy goals. They are okay with that.

economic liberals: Americans who favor an expanded government role in the economy but a limited role in the social order
## Social conservatives

Social conservatives are usually economically conservative but are often not as far to the right on that continuum as economic conservatives. Many support Social Security and Medicare and even the Affordable Care Act ("Obamacare"), but they often see the proper allocation of those resources as having to do with "deservingness," where they believe that some people have rightly earned those benefits and others have taken advantage of the system unfairly. What distinguishes these folks from most other Americans is that their narratives put a priority on government preserving a traditional social order. They see government playing a strong role in creating and enforcing laws that curtail social behaviors they view as "abnormal" or corrosive to society and in reinforcing the standing of those they consider to be righteous.

For those people who believe strongly that their vision of how people should live their lives reflects absolute truth, it is not unreasonable that they would want to put that vision into law. Social conservatives include several groups who feel that way about their world view. Traditionally, evangelical Christians have believed that the United States is a Judeo-Christian nation (as opposed to one embracing multiple religious traditions, just one of which is Judeo-Christian) and that its laws should flow from that tradition. Consistent with this perspective are the views that abortion and birth control should be outlawed, prayer should be allowed in school, and marriage equality should not be the law of the land.

Non-Christian social conservatives can also have concrete ideas about the way people should live. Those who believe that society has a natural hierarchy where some groups are naturally at the top of the heap—whether that group is men, whites, or some other group or combination of groups—believe there is a particular order, often one that existed in the past (that’s what makes it conservative), that the law should promote.

## Social liberals

Social liberals or *progressives* (although some economic liberals also refer to themselves as progressive) also have a tendency to believe they have truth on their side. They believe not

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**social conservatives**: Americans who endorse limited government control of the economy but considerable government intervention to realize a traditional social order; based on religious values and hierarchy rather than equality

**social liberals**: Americans who favor greater control of the economy and the social order to bring about greater equality and to regulate the effects of progress

**progressives**: economic liberals who believe in a stronger role for the state in creating equality
only in a stronger role for government to create social change but also in restructuring the system so that there is no advantage to those who have wealth. This is not the incremental change economic liberals are willing to accept as the price of doing business in the United States, but a more revolutionary philosophy that says that incremental change will never be enough and that those who advocate it are part of the problem for supporting a classist, unfair system. They often see their political enemies in all three of the other ideologies we have discussed.

Social liberals want to see the entire private health care system, including private health insurance, eliminated and replaced with a government-run system that holds costs down and prevents what they see as unacceptable profiteering. They want taxes on wealth and changes in the economic system that produces huge disparities in income. They want college tuition to be free for all Americans, regardless of income, which requires drastic reform of the higher education system. They want climate change addressed immediately, regardless of the cost.

Like social conservatives, social liberals do not always raise the Constitution over their policy goals. The essential tenet of social liberals is that the system is rigged to produce unfair economic, and thus political, outcomes. To fix that requires radical system change, which does not bode well for the Constitution’s implicit endorsement of slow incremental policy making. Also like social conservatives, social liberals have concrete ideas about what they think is right, but they are aware that they face considerable democratic opposition to bringing those ideas to life. Because their numbers are small, good loserism holds few attractions to social liberals. More often they blame losses on a rigged system or unfair behavior on the part of their opponents rather than on their inability to attract majority support. But in rejecting democratic outcomes, they are closing in on authoritarian impulses that, like those of social conservatives, run counter to American political culture.

Although they can be very vocal, people in this quadrant have so far been a relatively small slice of Americans overall. If you think about it, a country whose culture is in the upper right quadrant (capitalist democracies defined by limited government control over individual lives and the economy) is less likely to have a lot of ideological commitment to a narrative that endorses stronger government responsibility for both. The social liberal quadrant doesn’t grab a lot of adherents because it pushes the limits of Americans’ limited-government, individualistic political culture.
TRUTH VS. DEMOCRACY? Remember that both social conservatives and social liberals fall in the lower two quadrants—that is, in less democratic, more authoritarian ideological categories where individuals exercise less control over their life choices. Individual choice through the democratic process and the framework of the Constitution is less important to people whose beliefs fall in this quadrant than is following a leader who promises to promote their views on the social order. Especially because they feel they have truth on their side, they may feel obligated to refuse to compromise with their opponents, and are less likely to be good losers, two trends that do not strengthen democracy. Another reason that social conservatives, in particular, may be less committed to democratic processes over their policy goals is that they are a shrinking demographic in this country. As their numbers decline, they face the real possibility that they will lose in a majority-rule decision. As such, good loserism may be costly for them because they are not at all sure that a loss today will be followed by a win tomorrow. Both groups are quick to declare that the system is rigged or that the process is corrupt if it doesn’t seem to produce the result they favor, and both have favored redesigning electoral laws to give them political wins when they command less than majority support.

Despite our in-depth look at American ideologies, most Americans are closer to the middle of the ideological scheme than they are to the extremes of any of the four quadrants. They may be socially liberal on some issues, economically conservative on others. Politics is not equally salient, or relevant, to everyone’s lives, so lots of people just ignore it until an election rolls around. It is true that in recent years Americans have gotten more tribal—more likely to want to hang out with other people who share their views—but for many people these categories are just not personally relevant in policy terms.

In Chapter 7, on political parties and interest groups, we talk about where these groups fall along the contemporary political spectrum in the United States and how they got there. Here is the short version: At least since the Great Depression, Republicans have traditionally been the party of economic conservatives. Economic liberals were Democrats, the party of President Franklin Roosevelt, whose “New Deal” launched massive new social programs and projects to get the economy on its feet. Plenty of social conservatives followed Roosevelt into the New Deal, but in the 1960s and 1970s, when the Democrats became the party of civil rights under Lyndon Johnson, southern social conservatives split off to the Republican Party.

Today the Republican Party is an uneasy alliance of economic conservatives and the social conservatives who were initially invited in by economic conservatives to shore up their numbers but who ultimately came to shape the party in their own image, culminating with the election of Donald Trump as president. The Democrats are having an identity crisis of their own as the

(Continued on page 26)
With apologies to The Who—one of the all-time great rock bands of the 20th century—these Gen Gap! features in each chapter are talkin’ ’bout your generation.

Why? Because opinions about public issues are distinctly and measurably different among members of different generations—that is, people who were born within the same general time period and share life experiences that help shape their political views. Knowing how different generations think about political issues gives us insight into why certain people are likely to vote the way they do, why politicians make different kinds of policy appeals to different groups, and even what the future of American politics might look like.

Knowing how your own generation experiences American politics can help place your own values and opinions among your peers.

There is no universal agreement on what the political generations are—the exact years they start and end. Members of the Greatest Generation fought in World War II, the Silent Generation built the country to postwar prosperity, the Baby Boomers were the hippies and the people who hated the hippies, Gen Xers were the ones without a name who came after the Boomers, and the Millennials (most of you probably fit here or in the next group) were the ones born from about 1980 to the mid-1990s. Gen Zers are those of you just picking up where the Millennials left off without a clear identity, except, perhaps, for the distinction that you are the first generation to have lived your whole life with a screen in your hand. The generations as broken down by the Pew Research Center are shown in Table 1.1, and their diversity is illustrated in Figure 1.5.

Who You Are: Generations Defined (by the Pew Research Center)

Take a minute to study Figure 1.6 and think about the differences in political ideology among the various generations over time. One of the reasons the generations have such different opinions is that they live in different worlds. The members of a generation are affected by world events and shifts in society, technology, and the economy that

(Continued)
1.5: THE NATION’S GROWING DIVERSITY REFLECTED IN ITS YOUNGER GENERATIONS

### TABLE IT!

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>GENERATION</th>
<th>BORN</th>
<th>AGE IN 2020</th>
<th>PERCENTAGE OF ADULT POPULATION</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Gen Z</td>
<td>1997–2012</td>
<td>18–23*</td>
<td>5%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Gen X</td>
<td>1965–1980</td>
<td>40–55</td>
<td>26%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Baby Boomers</td>
<td>1946–1964</td>
<td>56–74</td>
<td>29%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Silent Generation and Greatest Generation</td>
<td>1901–1945</td>
<td>75 and older</td>
<td>11%</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

*Refers only to the portion in the adult population.


### FIGURE IT!

% of each generation who are . . .

- **Gen Z**: 52%
- **Millenial**: 56%
- **Gen X**: 61%
- **Boomer**: 72%
- **Silent**: 79%

Chapter 1: Politics and Citizenship

1.6: Political ideology varies across the generations and over time

- Consistently conservative
- Mostly conservative
- Mixed
- Mostly liberal
- Consistently liberal


Notes: Whites, blacks, Asians, and others/multiple races include only non-Hispanics. Hispanics are of any race. Asians include Pacific Islanders. Figures may not add to 100 due to rounding. In these graphs, Silent and Greatest Generation are grouped together.

(Continued)
occur during their lives, especially during childhood. These formative events contribute to a generation’s world view, along with their attitudes, behavior, and lifestyle.

**TAKEAWAYS**

- **America is becoming more diverse.** Whites have gone from making up 79 percent of the Silent Generation to only 52 percent of Gen Z. Generation Z is on track to be the most diverse generation yet. The Pew Research Center projects that by 2065 there will be no single racial or ethnic majority in the United States. How is that likely to change power politics in the United States?

- **Younger generations are increasingly diverse, but less well off financially,** less likely to be married, and less likely to own a home. What does that mean for them down the line?

- Pew projects that **Gen Z and Millennials will be the largest generations in 2019.** How will a country dominated by them differ from one led by Boomers?

- While older generations tend to be more conservative and have shown little ideological change over time, **Gen Xers, Millennials, and Gen Z especially have gotten increasingly more liberal in the past few years.** In what ways might being liberal, an ideology that sees a role for government in improving people’s standards of living, be tied to the diversity and socioeconomic plight of younger Americans? How might it reflect their diversity?

(Continued from page 22)

economic liberals, who have traditionally defined the ideological parameters of the party, fight off what seems like an effort by social liberals who want to redefine the party in their image. Fun times in American politics!

**1.5 POLITICAL NARRATIVES AND THE MEDIA**

This section of the chapter is about the power of narratives, but it is also about the ways we receive them and create them—the channels through which they are disseminated to us and by us. It is about the media through which information passes.

Mediation, from the Latin word for “middle,” is essentially the act of connecting. Think about the word. In law, mediation is the process of introducing a third party into a dispute between two opposing sides to help find a way to bring them together. The mediator is the connector.
In a related way, just as a medium is a person through whom some people try to connect with those who have died, media (the plural of medium) are also channels of communication and connection. Clearly, the integrity of the medium is going to be critical to the trustworthiness of the things we connect to. A scam artist posing as a person with psychic abilities might make money off the desire of grieving people to contact a lost loved one. In just that way, powerful people might tell false narratives that attempt to manipulate the needs of others in order to fulfill their own craving for personal glory.

**ANOTHER WAY TO THINK ABOUT IT.** Imagine water running through a pipe. Maybe the pipe is made of lead, or is rusty, or has leaks. Depending on the integrity of the pipe, the water we get will be toxic, or rust colored, or limited. *In the same way, the narratives and information we get can be altered by the way they are mediated by the channels through which we receive them.*

In every one of the political-economic systems we discussed earlier in this chapter, people with opposing views struggle mightily to promote their narrative about who should have power, how it should be used, and to what end. Controlling the political narrative can give the people doing the controlling a great deal of power over others. Here are some important things to understand about how the relationship between power and narratives works:

### Political narratives can promote democracy, or not.**

Democratic narratives hold that all people have a tale to tell and that their voices are worthy of being heard. Agreement on this narrative is essential for the toleration and mutual respect that supports democracy. When that agreement cannot be formed or it erodes, narratives that promote the power of one group over another can flourish. Even in democratic cultures, the narrative is disseminated and communicated through media that can alter the story itself.

In authoritarian governments, the narrative is not open to debate. The rulers set the narrative and control the flow of information so that it supports their story about why they should have power. Subjects of these governments accept the narrative, either because they haven’t been exposed to alternatives in the absence of free media or communication with the outside world (think North Korea) or out of fear (think Russia). Authoritarian rulers often use punishment to coerce uncooperative subjects into obedience.

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*media:* channels of communication
Political narratives were much easier to control before the print media. Authoritarianism used to be a lot easier to pull off in the Middle Ages and earlier, when few people could read, and maintaining a single narrative about power that enforced a dictator’s rule was relatively simple. For instance, as we see in Chapter 2, the narrative of the divine right of kings kept monarchs in Europe on their thrones by declaring that those rulers were God’s representatives on earth.

Because most people then were illiterate, that narrative was passed to people through select and powerful channels that could shape and influence it. It was mediated by the human equivalent of the pipes we mentioned earlier. Information flowed mostly through medieval clergy and monarchs, the very people who had a vested interest in getting people to believe it.

Following the development of the printing press in 1439, more people gained literacy. Information could be mediated independently of those in power, and competing narratives could grab a foothold. Martin Luther promoted the narrative behind the Protestant Reformation (1517–1648) to weaken the power of the Catholic Church. The European Age of Enlightenment (1685–1815) gave voice to the multiple narratives about power that weakened the hold of the traditional, authoritarian monarch.

Ideas about the free flow of information flourished in 18th-century political narratives of classical liberalism because they limited government power. The narratives that emerged from the Enlightenment emphasized individual rights and non-authoritarianism, a tradition we refer to as classical liberalism. Note that “liberalism” in this context does not mean the same as “liberalism” today. Both liberalism and conservatism today have their roots in the classical liberal tradition produced by Enlightenment thinkers.

One of the key narratives of classical liberalism was a story that said power is derived not from God, but from the consent of the governed. In philosopher John Locke’s version of this narrative, people agreed to enter into a social contract whereby they would

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classical liberalism: an Enlightenment philosophy emphasizing individual freedom and self-rule

social contract: the idea that power is derived not from God but instead comes from and is limited by the consent of the governed, who can revolt against the government they contract with if their rights are not protected (that is, if the contract is not kept)
give up some of their precious natural rights in exchange for the convenience and security government provides. However, they retain enough of those rights to rebel against that government if it fails to protect them. In order for it to work, the social contract requires that people have the freedom to criticize the government (that is, to create counternarratives) and also the protection of the channels through which information and narratives could flow (like a press free of influence by those in power).

The founding political narratives of the United States grew out of the Enlightenment tradition. As we will see in Chapter 2, Thomas Jefferson was clearly influenced by Locke’s work. The Declaration of Independence is itself a founding narrative of the rights of Americans: it tells a story about how the British violated those rights, and it was designed to combat the British narrative that America should remain part of its colonial empire.

At the time of the founding, literacy among average citizens was still very limited. Political elites played a major role in mediating information, but new channels also started to play a part—newspapers, pastors, and independent political actors all began to shape narratives. You can see the American founders’ commitment to the ideal of an independent press to promote those narratives in the fact that they put freedom of the press in the First Amendment to the Constitution.

Though Americans today still largely adhere to the basic governing narrative the founders promoted, the country is now light years removed from their era, when communication was limited by illiteracy and the scarcity of channels through which it could pass.

Consider the timeline in Figure 1.7. It illustrates the development of the media through which we get information, receive narratives, and send out our own information:

KEY POINT! A revolution like the one fought by the Americans against the British would look entirely different in today’s highly mediated culture. But remember, it is because of the revolution they fought and the narrative of a free press that followed (and of course enormous technological development) that the mediated world we live in today is even possible. It is not possible in places like North Korea that isolate their subjects from information, or places like Russia that weaponize social media and kill journalists who are critical of the government.
Unlike the founders, certainly, but even unlike most of the people currently running this country (who are, let’s face it, kind of old), people born in this century are almost all digital natives. They have been born in an era in which not only are most people hooked up to electronic media, but they also live their lives partly in cyberspace as well as in “real space.” For many of us, the lives we live are almost entirely mediated. That is, most of our relationships, our education, our news, our travel, our sustenance, our purchases, our daily activities, our job seeking—our very sense of ourselves—are influenced by, experienced through, or shared via electronic media. If not for Apple, Google, Facebook, and Amazon, how different would our lives be? How much more directly would we need to interact?

**digital natives**: people who have been born in an era in which not only are most people hooked up to electronic media, but they also live their lives partly in cyberspace as well as in “real space”
We conduct our lives through channels that, like the pipe mentioned earlier, may be made of lead, may be rusty, or may be full of holes. When we do an online search, certain links are on top according to the calculations made by the search engine we use. When we shop online, certain products are urged on us (and then haunt our online life). When we travel, certain flights and hotels are flagged, and when we use social media, certain posts appear while others don’t. No one checks very hard to be sure that the information they receive isn’t emerging from the cyber equivalent of lead pipes.

Living mediated lives has all kinds of implications for everyday living and loving and working. The implications we care about here are the political implications for our roles as citizens—the ones to do with how we exercise and are impacted by power. We will be turning to these implications again and again throughout this book.

**Mediated Citizenship**

Being a citizen in a mediated world is just flat-out different from being one in the world in which James Madison wrote the Constitution. It’s the genius of the Constitution that it has been able to navigate the transition successfully, so far.

After the Constitution had been written, so the story goes, a woman accosted Benjamin Franklin as he was leaving the building where the founders were working. “What have you created?” she asked. “A republic, madam, if you can keep it,” he replied.

The mediated world we live in gives us myriad new ways to keep the republic and also some pretty high-tech ways to lose it. That puts a huge burden on us as mediated citizens—as people who are constantly receiving information through channels that can and do shape our political views—and also opens up a world of opportunity.

Among the things we are divided on in this country is what it means to be a citizen. We know what citizens are: they are people who live under a non-authoritarian government that gives them rights to push back against government action and even to overthrow it if it doesn’t protect their rights. Anyone born in the United States is a citizen, as are people born to

**mediated citizens:** people who are constantly receiving information through multiple channels that can and do shape their political views but who also have the ability to use those channels to create their own narratives
Americans living abroad. There are also various ways for those not born here or to American parents to become naturalized citizens if they arrive legally and follow the procedure that the law lays out.

But once you are a citizen, born or naturalized, what is your role? James Madison had ideas about this. He thought people would be so filled with what he called “republican virtue” that they would put country ahead of self. (The term republican here is used in a general sense, to mean a representative form of government, not a particular party.) That is, they would readily put aside their self-interest to advance the public interest. As we will see in Chapter 2, this public-interested citizenship proved not to be the rule, much to Madison’s disappointment. Instead, most people demonstrated self-interested citizenship, trying to use the system to get whatever they could for themselves. This was a dilemma for Madison because he was designing a constitution that depended on the nature of the people being governed.

Today we have that same conflict. There are plenty of people who put country first—who enlist in the armed services, sometimes giving their lives for their nation, or who go into law enforcement or teaching or other lower paying careers because they want to serve. There are people who cheerfully pay their taxes because it’s a privilege to live in a free democracy where you can climb up the ladder of opportunity. Especially in moments of national trouble—when the World Trade Center was attacked in September 2001, for instance—Americans willingly help their fellow citizens.

At the same time, the day-to-day business of life turns most people inward. Many people care about self and family and friends, but most don’t have the energy or inclination to get beyond that. President John Kennedy challenged his “fellow Americans” to “ask not what your country can do for you but what you can do for your country,” but only a rare few have the time or motivation to take up that challenge.

The world today is not the same world that Madison wrote about or designed a government for. Mediated citizens experience the world through multiple channels of information and interaction. That doesn’t change whether citizens are self-interested or public-interested, but it does give them more opportunities and raise more potential hazards for being both.

naturalized citizens: people who become U.S. citizens through a series of procedures that the law lays out

public-interested citizenship: citizens who put country ahead of self by putting aside their self-interest to advance the public interest

self-interested citizenship: citizens who are focused on their personal lives and use the political system to maximize their interests
Many older Americans who are not digital natives nonetheless experience political life through television or through web surfing and commenting, usually anonymously. This is not always a positive addition to our civil discourse, but they are trying to adapt. You may have grandparents who fit this description. They want to know why you are not on Facebook.

But younger, more media savvy digital natives—Gen Zers, Millennials, Gen Xers, and even some tech-savvy Baby Boomers—not only have access to traditional media, if they choose, but also are accustomed to interacting, conducting friendships and family relationships, and generally attending to the details of their lives through electronic channels. Their digital selves exist in networks of friends and acquaintances who take for granted that they can communicate in seconds. They certainly get their news digitally and increasingly organize, register to vote, enlist in campaigns, and call each other to action that way. We will be following these new patterns of mediated citizenship in the Generation Gap (Gen Gap) features you will find in each chapter.

Hashtag activism, the forming of social movements through viral calls to act politically—whether to march, to boycott, to contact politicians, or to vote—has become common enough that organizers warn that action has to go beyond cyberspace to reach the real world or it will have limited impact. #BlackLivesMatter, #ItGetsBetter, and #NeverAgain are three very different, very viral, very successful ways of using all the channels available to us to call attention to a problem and propose solutions.

An intensely mediated world does not automatically produce public-interested citizens. People can easily remain self-interested in this world. We can custom program our social media to give us only news and information that confirms what we already think. We can live in an information bubble where our narratives get reinforced by everything we see and hear. That makes us more or less sitting ducks for whatever media narrative is directed our way, whether from inside an online media source or from a foreign power that uses social media to influence an election, as the Russians did in 2016. Without opening ourselves up to multiple information and action channels, we can live an unexamined mediated life.

Mediated citizenship also creates enormous opportunities that the founders never dreamed of. Truth to tell, Madison wouldn’t have been all that thrilled about the multiple ways to be political that the mediated citizen...
possesses. For Madison, even public-interested citizens should be seen on
election day but not heard most of the time, precisely because he thought
we would push our own interests and destabilize the system. He was reas-
sured by the fact that it would take days for an express letter trying to cre-
ate a dissenting political organization to reach Georgia from Maine. Our
mediated world has blown that reassuring prospect to smithereens.

Here’s just one example of how mediated citizenship has upset the foun-
ders’ applecart. At a time when basic political norms—the unspoken, unwrit-
ten ideas that support the U.S. Constitution and give structure to democratic
government—are being challenged as never before, millions of high school
students and their supporters recently took to the streets to challenge one
of the richest, most powerful groups in America for control of the national
narrative on gun safety.

As these young people transfer that battle from the street to the ballot box,
they are following in the footsteps of multiple groups who have fought for
their rights in American politics. The U.S. government was not born perfect,
but it has proved over time to be an ideal open to the efforts of its citizens
to perfect it, to become closer to the inspiring image that President Reagan
liked to quote: “the shining city upon a hill.”

Whether you agree with the students’ political activism or not (and there are
many people on both sides of the issue), the fact that high school students
could organize and execute such a movement is a pretty impressive testa-
ment to their own political and digital savviness. It also demonstrates that
despite the founders’ misgivings about popular government, they gave us
a constitutional framework that is strong, adaptable, long lived, and open to
citizen action. It has seen the country through a lot.

As the ability of ordinary citizens to create narratives has grown and as the
media disseminate them widely, we regularly see and have to evaluate or
even participate in these battles about issues that are deeply important to
Americans. Throughout this book we will encounter conflicting narratives
that define some of our greatest divisions. Read these narratives carefully.
Would you frame any of them differently?

Mediated citizens are not just TV-watching couch surfers in their informa-
tion bubbles receiving and passing on narratives from powerful people. We
can be the creators and disseminators of our own narratives, something
that would have terrified the old monarchs comfortably ensconced in their

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*norms*: unspoken, unwritten ideas that support the U.S. Constitution and give
structure to democratic government
divine-right narrative. Even the founders would have been extremely nervous about what the masses might get up to.

As mediated citizens, we have unprecedented access to power, but we are also targets of the use of unprecedented power—attempts to shape our views and control our experiences. That means it is up to us to pay critical attention to what is happening in the world around us.

**Big Think**

1. Can you make a case for authoritarian over democratic values? What would it look like?
2. Explain how government and politics differ.
3. What kinds of things could destroy a political culture, and what would be the result?
4. Considering the political ideologies illustrated in Figure 1.4, do you have a good sense of where your own ideology fits? How would you describe your political beliefs?
5. Put yourself back in time to the years of the founding and imagine how things might have gone if today’s technologies were available to the founders.
6. Have the advances in media made us freer or less free to create our own stories?

**Key Terms**

**CONCEPTS**

- anarchy (p. 5)
- authoritarian capitalism (p. 11)
- authoritarian governments (p. 4)
- authority (p. 3)
- capitalism (p. 7)
- capitalist democracy (p. 11)
- classical liberalism (p. 28)
- democracy (p. 4)
- democratic socialism (p. 7)
- economics (p. 6)
- equality (p. 14)
- freedom (p. 14)
- generations (p. 23)
- good loserism (p. 18)
- government (p. 3)
- hashtag activism (p. 33)
- ideologies (p. 16)
- individualism (p. 14)
- information bubble (p. 33)
- laissez-faire capitalism (p. 8)
- limited government (p. 14)
- market (p. 7)
- media (p. 27)