

include Social Security, federal interstate highways, and funding for local public schools. As we discuss throughout this text, however, the proper scope of government is a source of much disagreement and debate among Americans and their elected representatives.

Securing the Blessings of Liberty

Americans enjoy a wide range of liberties and opportunities to prosper. They are able to criticize the government and to petition it when they disagree with its policies or have a grievance. People can act as they wish so long as their actions don't infringe on the rights of others. This freedom to criticize and to petition is perhaps the best way to "secure the Blessings of Liberty."

THE CHANGING AMERICAN PEOPLE

1.3 Analyze the changing characteristics of the American public.

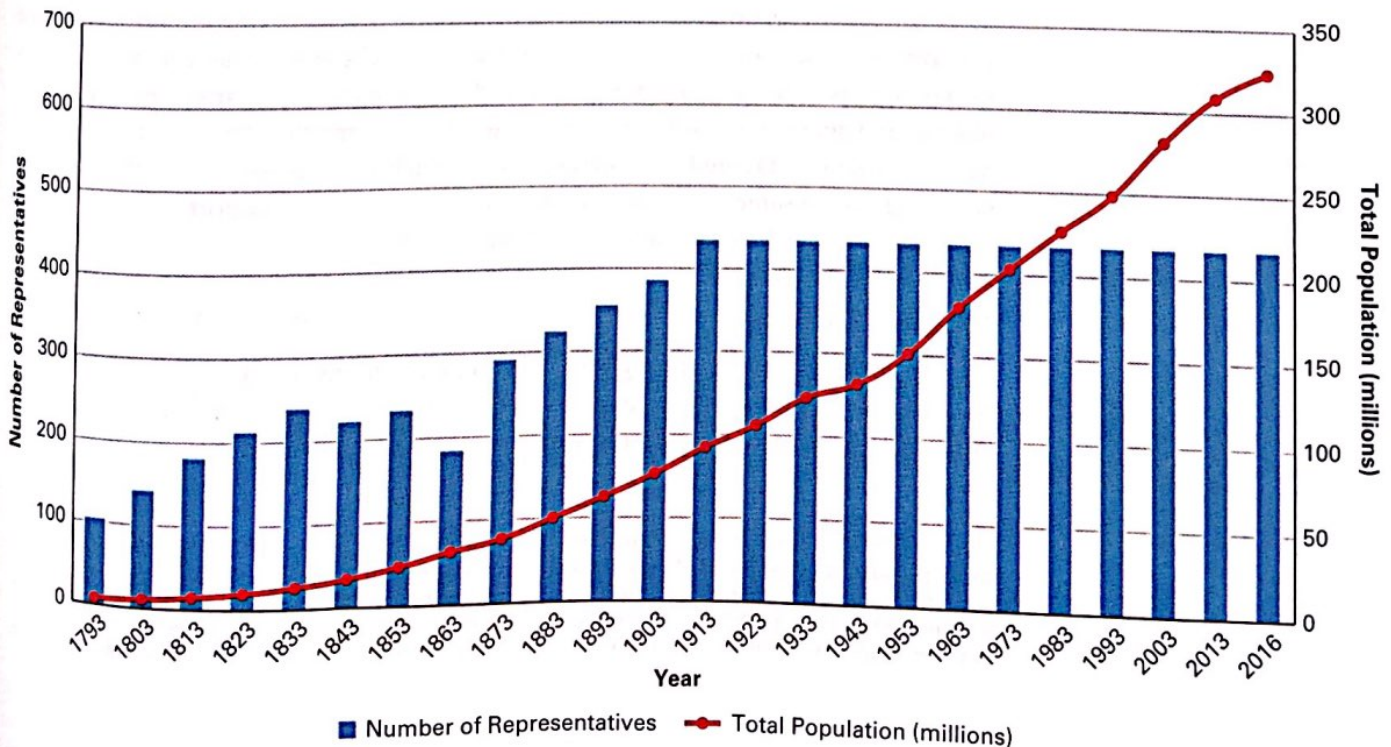
One year after ratification of the U.S. Constitution, fewer than 4 million people lived in the thirteen states. Most of those people shared a single language and a Protestant-Christian heritage, and those who voted were white male property owners. The Constitution mandated that the number of members of the House of Representatives should not exceed one for every 30,000 people and set the size of the first House at sixty-five members.

As the nation grew westward, hundreds of thousands of new immigrants came to America, often in waves, fleeing war or famine or simply in search of a better life. Although the geographic size of the United States has remained stable since the addition of Alaska and Hawaii as states in 1959, the population has grown to over 323 million inhabitants. As a result of this population growth, most people today feel far removed from the national government and their elected representatives (see Figure 1.4).

FIGURE 1.4 HOW DOES POPULATION CORRELATE WITH REPRESENTATION?

The population of the United States has grown dramatically since the nation's founding. Larger geographic area, immigration, and living longer have contributed to this trend. The size of the House of Representatives, however, has not kept pace with this expansion.

SOURCE: U.S. Census Bureau Population Projections, www.census.gov.



Racial and Ethnic Composition

The American population, originally settled by immigrants, has changed constantly as new people arrived from various regions—Western Europeans fleeing religious persecution in the 1600s to early 1700s; slaves brought in chains from Africa in the mid to late 1700s; Chinese laborers arriving in California to work on the railroads following the Gold Rush in 1848; Irish Catholics settling in the Northeast to escape the potato famine in the 1850s; Northern and Eastern Europeans from the 1880s to 1910s; and, most recently, South and Southeast Asians, Cubans, and Mexicans, among others. Today, almost 15 percent of Americans can be classified as immigrants.

Immigration has led to significant alterations in American racial and ethnic composition. The balance in America has changed dramatically over the past fifty years, with the proportion of Hispanics* overtaking African Americans as the second largest racial or ethnic group. The Asian American population, moreover, is now the fastest growing minority group in the United States. The majority of babies born in the United States are now members of a minority group, a fact that will have a significant impact not only on the demographics of the American polity but also on how America “looks.”

In states such as California, Hawaii, New Mexico, and Texas, members of minority groups already are the majority of residents. Nevada, Maryland, and Georgia are soon to follow. In a generation, minorities are likely to be the majority in America.

Aging

Just as the racial and ethnic composition of the American population is shifting, so too is the average age. “For decades, the U.S. was described as a nation of the young because the number of persons under the age of twenty greatly outnumber[ed] those sixty-five and older,” but this is no longer the case.¹ Because of changes in patterns of fertility, life expectancy, and immigration, the nation’s age profile has altered drastically. At the founding of the United States, the average life expectancy was thirty-five years; today, it is nearly eighty years, although studies show that whites aged 45 to 54 have experienced a 22 percent increase in death rates, making them the only group to experience declines in longevity. Explanations include rapidly rising suicide rates and illnesses and deaths related to drug addiction and alcohol abuse.² Whites in other democracies are not part of this trend.

An aging population places a host of costly demands on the government. An aging America also imposes a great financial burden on working Americans, whose proportion in the population is rapidly declining. These changes could potentially pit younger people against older people and result in dramatic cuts in benefits to the elderly and increased taxes for younger workers. Moreover, the elderly often vote against programs favored by younger voters, such as increases to public education spending. At the same time, younger voters are less likely to support issues important to seniors, such as Medicare and Social Security benefits.

Religious Beliefs

As we have discussed throughout this chapter, many of the first settlers came to America to pursue their religious beliefs free from governmental intervention. Although these early immigrants were members of a number of different churches,

*In this text, we have made the decision to refer to those of Spanish, Latin American, Mexican, Cuban, and Puerto Rican descent as Hispanic instead of Latino/a. Although this label is not accepted universally by the community it describes, Hispanic is the term used by the U.S. government when reporting federal data. In addition, a 2008 survey sponsored by the Pew Charitable Trusts found that 36 percent of those who responded preferred the term Hispanic,

nearly all identified with Christian sects. Moreover, they viewed the Indians' belief systems, which included multiple gods, to be savage and unholy. Records exist of early Jewish colonists as well as Muslims from Africa brought to the New World as slaves, but the numbers of early Americans practicing these faiths were small in comparison to Christian settlers.³ Thus, references to Christianity and Christian values permeate American social and political systems.

While many citizens view the United States as a Christian nation, a great number of religious groups—including Jews, Buddhists, Hindus, and Muslims—have established roots in this country. With this growth have come different political and social demands. For example, some American Jews continually work to ensure that America's policies in the Middle East favor Israel, while some Muslims demand more support for a Palestinian state.

Regional Growth and Expansion

Regional sectionalism emerged almost immediately in the United States. Settlers from the Virginia Colony southward largely focused on commerce. Those seeking various forms of religious freedom populated many of the settlements from the mid-Atlantic and Northeast. That search for religious freedom also came with puritanical values, so that New England evolved differently from the South in many aspects of culture.

Sectional differences continued to emerge as the United States developed into a major industrial nation and waves of immigrants with various religious traditions and customs entered the country, often settling in areas where other immigrants from their homeland already lived. For example, thousands of Scandinavians flocked to Minnesota, and many Irish settled in the urban centers of the Northeast, as did many Italians and Jews. All brought with them unique views about numerous issues and varying demands on government as well as different ideas about the role of government. Subsequent generations have often handed down these political views, and many regional differences continue to affect public opinion today.

One of the most long-standing and dramatic regional differences in the United States is that between the South and the North. During the Constitutional Convention, most Southerners staunchly advocated for a weak national government. The Civil War was later fought in part because of basic philosophical differences about government as well as slavery, which many Northerners opposed. As we know from modern political polling, the South continues to lag behind the rest of the nation in supporting civil rights, while still favoring return of power to the states and downsizing the national government.

The West, too, has always appeared unique compared with the rest of the United States. Populated first by those seeking free land and then by many chasing dreams of gold, the American West has often been characterized as "wild." Its population today is a study in contrasts. Some people have moved there to avoid city life and have an anti-government bias. Other Westerners are attracted to the region's abundant sunshine and natural resources and seek governmental solutions to problems like drought and environmental degradation.

Significant differences in attitude also arise in rural versus urban areas. Those who live in rural areas are much more conservative than those in large cities.⁴ One need only look at a map of the vote distribution in recent presidential elections to see stark differences in candidate appeal. Democratic candidates have carried almost every large city in America; Republicans have carried most rural voters as well as most of America's heartland.⁵

WHAT DOES THE TYPICAL AMERICAN FAMILY LOOK LIKE?

As the demographics of American society change over time, the composition of American families has become increasingly heterogeneous. Here, the characters from the first season of the sitcom *Modern Family* exemplify the age, ethnic, and sexual diversity in families today, making the “typical American family” difficult to describe.



politics

The study of who gets what, when, and how—or how policy decisions are made.

Family and Family Size

In the past, familial gender roles were clearly defined. Women did housework and men worked in the fields. Large families were imperative; children were a source of cheap farm labor. Industrialization and knowledge of birth control methods, however, began to put a dent in the size of American families by the early 1900s. No longer needing children to work for survival of the household, couples began to limit family size.

In 1949, 49 percent of those polled thought that four or more children constituted the “ideal” family size; today, most Americans believe that having no children or two children at most is “best.” In 1940, nine of ten households were traditional family households. Today, 35 percent of children under eighteen live with just one of their parents; the majority of those live with their mother. Moreover, nearly one-third of all households consist of a single person, a trend that reflects, in part, the aging American population and declining marriage rate.⁶ Nearly half of Americans have never been married.

Even the institution of marriage has undergone tremendous change. Since the U.S. Supreme Court’s decision *Obergefell v. Hodges* (2015), same-sex marriage is legal in all states.⁷ These changes in composition of households, lower birthrates, marriage, and the prevalence of single-parent families affect the kinds of demands people place on government. Single-parent families, for example, may be more likely to support government-subsidized day care or after-school programs.

TOWARD REFORM: PEOPLE AND POLITICS

1.4 Characterize changes in Americans’ attitudes toward and expectations of government.

As the American population has changed over time, so has the American political process. **Politics** is the study of who gets what, when, and how—the process by which policy decisions are made. The evolving nature of the American citizenry deeply affects this process. Competing demands often lead to political struggles, which create winners and losers within the system. A loser today, however, may be a winner

tomorrow in the ever-changing world of politics. The political ideologies of those in control of Congress, the executive, and state houses also have a huge impact on who gets what, when, and how.

Nevertheless, shared American values continue to bind citizens together. Many Americans share the common goal of achieving the **American Dream**—an American ideal of a happy and successful life in which education, freedom, and home ownership are core elements. Although manifestations of the American Dream have changed over time, it often includes wealth, a house, a better life for one’s children, and, for some, the opportunity to grow up to be president. Many voters for President **Donald J. Trump** saw the American Dream falling from their or their children’s grasp.

American Dream

An American ideal of a happy, successful life, which often assumes wealth, a house, and a better life for one’s children.

Donald J. Trump

The forty-fifth president, a Republican, elected in 2016; first president elected without prior political or military experience; an experienced businessman.

In roughly the first 150 years of our nation’s history, the federal government had few responsibilities, and citizens had few expectations of it beyond national defense, printing money, and collecting tariffs and taxes. The state governments were generally far more powerful than the federal government in matters affecting the everyday lives of Americans. As the nation and its economy grew in size and complexity, the federal government took on more responsibilities, such as regulating some businesses, providing poverty relief, and inspecting food. With these new roles come greater demands on government.

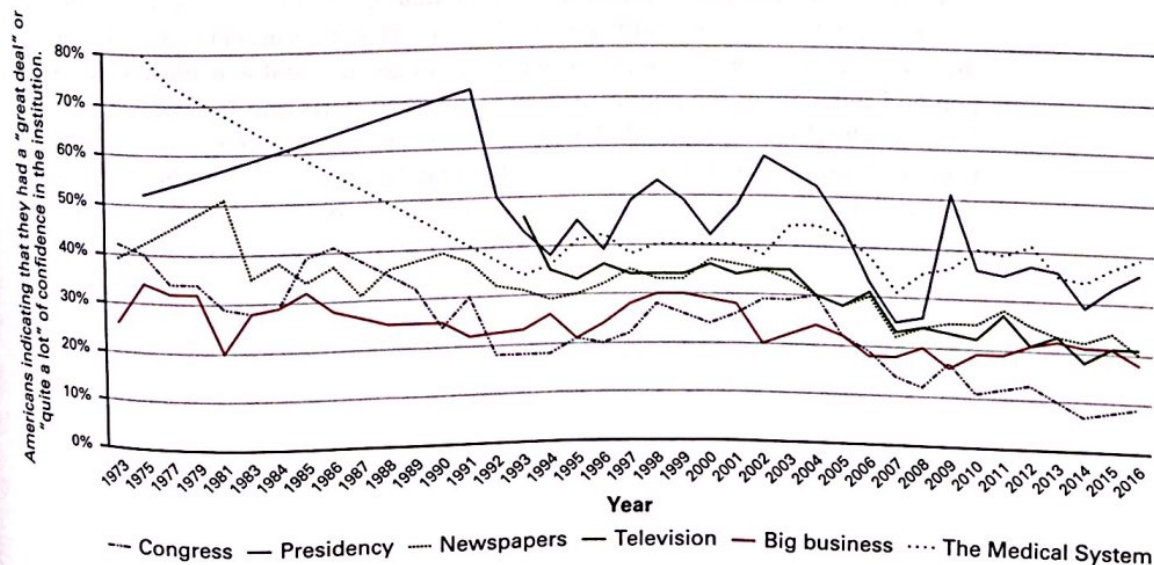
Today, many Americans lack faith in the country’s institutions (see Figure 1.5). These concerns make it even easier for citizens to blame the government for all kinds of woes—personal as well as societal—or to fail to credit it for those things it does well. Many Americans, for example, enjoy a remarkably high standard of living, and much of it is due to governmental programs and protections.

The current frustration and dissatisfaction with politics and government may be just another phase, as the changing American body politic seeks to redefine its ideas about and expectations of government and how to reform it. This process is likely to define politics well into the future, but the individualistic nature of the American system will have long-lasting effects on how to accomplish that redefinition. Many Americans say they want less government, but as they get older, they don’t want

FIGURE 1.5 DO AMERICANS HAVE CONFIDENCE IN AMERICAN INSTITUTIONS?

The line graph below shows the percentages of Americans declaring they have a “great deal” of confidence in American institutions. Note the declining trend of trust in all political institutions, as well as Americans’ record low levels of trust in Congress.

SOURCE: Gallup.



WHAT IS THE ROLE OF AMERICAN GOVERNMENT?

The most important responsibility of American government is to protect its citizens. Thus, despite their disillusionment with the government, citizens in a time of need often turn to political leaders for support. Here, President Barack Obama comforts victims of Superstorm Sandy in New Jersey, just days before the 2012 election.



less Social Security. They want lower taxes and better roads, but they don't want to pay road tolls. They want better education for their children, but lower expenditures on schools. They want greater security at airports, but low fares and quick boarding. Some clearly want less for others but not themselves—a demand that puts politicians in the position of nearly always disappointing some voters.

In this text, we present you with the tools needed to understand how our political system has evolved and to understand changes yet to come. Approaching the study of American government and politics with an open mind should help you become a better citizen. We hope that you learn to ask questions, to comprehend how various issues have come to be important, and to see why a particular law was enacted, how it was implemented, and if it needs reform. We further hope that you will learn not to accept at face value everything you see on the TV news, hear on the radio, or read on social media, especially in the blogosphere and Twitterverse. Work to understand your government, and use your vote and other forms of participation to help ensure that your government works for you.

We recognize that the discourse of politics has changed dramatically, most notably in the unprecedented events surrounding the 2016 presidential election. We hope that Americans will pay increasing attention to our democracy and consider carefully what we want from government. It is easier than ever before to become informed about the political process and to get involved in campaigns and elections. We believe that a thorough understanding of the workings of government will allow you to question and think about the political system—the good parts and the bad—and decide for yourself whether proposed changes and reforms are advantageous or disadvantageous. Equipped with such an understanding, we hope you will become a better informed and more active participant in the political process and remain aware of the possibilities and limitations of government as we enter a period when the Congress and the Executive branch are held by the same political party.