



LOUIS SCHUBERT  
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# **THE *IRONY* OF DEMOCRACY**

AN UNCOMMON INTRODUCTION TO AMERICAN POLITICS

SEVENTEENTH EDITION



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Louis Schubert

Thomas R. Dye

Harmon Zeigler, Late



Australia • Brazil • Japan • Korea • Mexico • Singapore • Spain • United Kingdom • United States

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# TO THE STUDENT

By assigning you this book, your instructor wants to do more than teach you the basics of government in the United States. Your instructor wants you to think. This book has a bit of attitude and a central theme: Only a tiny number of people make the decisions that shape our lives, and, despite the elaborate rituals of parties, elections, and interest-group activity, the vast majority have little direct influence over these decisions. This approach is called *elite theory*. Your instructor may not believe completely in this theory but may instead believe that many groups of people share power in the United States, that competition is widespread, that we have checks against the abuse of power, and that the individual citizen can personally affect the course of national events by voting, supporting political parties, and joining interest groups. That theory, widely known as *pluralism*, characterizes virtually every U.S. government textbook now in print—except this one. Your instructor, whether personally agreeing with the elitist or with the pluralist perspective, is challenging you to confront our arguments. He or she wants you to deal critically with some troubling questions about democracy in the United States.

It is far easier to teach the basics of government in the United States—the constitutional powers of the president, Congress, and courts; parties and elections; the key cases decided by the Supreme Court; and so on—than to tackle the question, “How democratic is U.S. society?” It is easier to teach the “facts” of the political system than to search for the explanations. Although this book does not ignore such facts, its primary purpose is to present them to you through the critical lens of elite theory—to help you understand why government and politics work as they do.

*The Irony of Democracy* is not some polemic or even necessarily “antiestablishment.” This book challenges the prevailing pluralistic view of democracy in the United States, but it neither condemns nor endorses the reality of political life. Governance by a small, homogeneous elite is subject to favorable or unfavorable interpretation, according to one’s personal values. Readers are free to decide for

themselves whether we as a society should preserve, reform, or restructure the political system described in these pages. If this book encourages thought about this question, we see it as a success.

*The Irony of Democracy* is neither a conservative nor a liberal textbook. It does not apologize for elite rule or seek to defend U.S. institutions or any of the nation's leaders. On the contrary, we are critical of politicians, bureaucrats, corporate chieftains, media moguls, lobbyists, and special interests. But we do not advocate fruitless nostrums promising "power to the people" or "citizen movements" that are themselves led by elites with their own self-interests. We note that partisans are happy with the parts of the book that describe their opponents, but unhappy when the same gaze is cast on those they favor. Tough!

*The Irony of Democracy* is indeed an endorsement of the most fundamental democratic values—individual dignity, limited government, freedom of expression and dissent, equality of opportunity, private property, and due process of law. Our elitist theory of democracy is not an attack on democratic government but rather an effort to understand the realities of politics in a democracy. We hope that this book, whether you like it or not, makes you think and helps you on your path in learning about this country.

# TO THE INSTRUCTOR

This 17th edition of *The Irony of Democracy* has two aims: to keep its vigorous classic elite theory approach and to reflect an ever-changing politics. This new edition unapologetically continues to assert that to understand democracy in the United States it is necessary to understand the elites who run the nation. There may be a near-universal acceptance of pluralist ideology in U.S. political science and government texts; that Noble Lie of the empowered masses certainly contains significant truth, but *The Irony of Democracy* unrepentantly remains an elitist introduction to U.S. government. Elite theory is used as an analytic model for critically understanding and explaining U.S. politics; it is not presented as a normative prescription for the nation. The discomfort caused by this approach in instructors or students stems from its being grounded in fact and observation of reality, not in partisanship or idealism.

Few today still believe that government is run for the benefit of the people. Most see the political system as run by a few big interests for their own benefit, leaving the average person forgotten behind. This reality brings us no pleasure. Over the course of the 45 years of this text's publication, the situation has only gotten worse. Our elite theory of democracy also recognizes the potential for danger in mass movements and intolerant demagogues. Mass ignorance and apathy do not inspire much hope that "the people" will somehow suddenly gain some newfound commitment to the hard work of democracy. The irony of democracy in the United States is that somehow democracy survives despite and possibly because of these conditions.

This book has provided a framework to understand U.S. politics for over four decades. It has seen many political events and eras come and go: the war in Vietnam, Watergate, Carter-era malaise, the collapse of communism, the rise of globalization, a balanced federal budget for four years, the influx of once-unimaginable amounts of money into campaigns, mass death from terrorism, and

wars in Iraq and Afghanistan. Still, the basic analytic model of staying focused on those in power remains critically necessary.

Politics is a living thing. Politics changes often, sometimes daily. Every chapter, every section in this new edition reflects the newest examples and manifestations of the core concepts of this text. Each chapter in this new edition has seen updating and improvement. It reflects the input of reviewers and hundreds of students. Each chapter has a new section, “For Further Thought,” to highlight potential areas to engage in critical thinking and directly engage critical thinking learning outcome requirements. Chapter 1, the introduction to elite theory, has a clearer presentation of the relationship between elite theory and pluralism. Chapter 2, concerning the Founders, clarifies their connections to the classical liberal and classical conservative traditions from which they drew. Chapter 3 follows the evolution of U.S. elites, starting with Hamilton’s financial vision for the new nation up through a new section on today’s technology elites. Chapter 4, on the masses, focuses on positive developments in tolerance over recent decades, while still recognizing the dominance of apathy and ignorance.

The media chapter, Chapter 5, has been revised to reflect the reality of current technology. Students can now publish to global audiences online with their cell phones (regrettably sometimes even during class), something that once required vast resources. The integration of social media into politics is discussed in this new edition. There is also specific new coverage of the relationship between the Obama Administration and press freedom. Chapter 6, on elections and political parties, continues the necessary focus on money in campaigns and includes recent developments in political spending. Speaking of money, Chapter 7 focuses on organized interests and their activities, such as lobbying and funding campaigns to attempt to influence the political elites. A new Focus section on billionaire activists named Steyer and Koch has been added.

The core chapters on political institutions have been updated to reflect a divided Congress, the Obama Administration, and new Supreme Court rulings including Justices Sotomayor and Kagan. The sections on lawmaking focus more on the “Kill Bill” reality to reflect that Congress is far better at preventing laws than making them. The continuing diversification of Congress is also covered. Chapter 9 gives a new perspective on Obama’s first six years in office, in both domestic and foreign policy. A new section on Obama and executive power has been added. Chapter 11 reflects the increased role of the bureaucracy in the political system in a time of a significantly larger government with some vastly greater roles, such as ObamaCare. Material addressing the IRS scandal has also been included here. Chapter 12, on federalism, has been revised to better address the tension between the federal and state governments over the health care law and other matters.

Civil rights, Chapter 13, showcases the continual diversification of the elite in both politics and the economy, including the roles of Hispanic-Americans, Asian-Americans, multiracial persons, and gays and lesbians, as well as updated coverage of African-Americans elites.

The last chapter, “The United States as Global Elite,” deals with the fact that the United States holds an unprecedented position in the world. It still leads economically and militarily, but questions the cost of functioning as hegemon and

“global cop.” This chapter covers the reassessment of role of the United States in the world political system in the post–Iraq War period. There is updated coverage of current security threats, a new section on cybersecurity, and a resurgent Al Qaeda.

We believe that the strength of this textbook comes from its honest presentation of the world as it is, not as one may wish it. Punches are not pulled, awkward areas are not avoided, and credit is given where it is due even if it is a difficult fit with the central elite theory theme. The text does not talk down to students. The Epilogue does not end the book with a warm, fuzzy feeling, but rather gives students some blunt advice on how to preserve democratic values in an elitist system and maybe in the process keep themselves from being rolled over by the elites. We are not concerned if students like this book, but we do hope they find it interesting and have some good arguments engaging with it. Our goal is to help you make them think. For the instructor, whether you agree with the basic elite theory approach or not, we hope this text helps get your pedagogical juices flowing and that it makes your classroom experience more enjoyable and rewarding through keeping you and your students intellectually and perhaps emotionally engaged in the wonderful world of U.S. politics.

*Louis Schubert*  
*Thomas R. Dye*  
*Harmon Zeigler, Late*





# ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

We thank the reviewers who provided useful comments and suggestions for the seventeenth edition as well as those instructors who have adopted the text and taken the time to send us corrections, additions, and comments. In particular, we thank our students for engaging with the book and for giving us their thoughts and comments for its continual improvement. We thank Melanie Ortanez, our research assistant. Our deepest thanks go to our family members who went without a parent or spouse while work was performed, making this new edition updated and improved.



# RESOURCES

## Instructor Companion Website

- ISBN: 9781305074664
- This Instructor Companion Website is an all-in-one multimedia online resource for class preparation, presentation, and testing. Accessible through [www.cengage.com/login](http://www.cengage.com/login) with your faculty account, you will find the following available for download: book-specific Microsoft® PowerPoint® presentations; a Test Bank in Microsoft® Word; an Instructor Manual; Microsoft® PowerPoint® Image Slides; and a JPEG Image Library.
- The Instructor's Manual contains chapter summaries, critical thinking questions, lecture launching suggestions, and in-class activities for each chapter. The Microsoft® PowerPoint® presentations are ready-to-use, visual outlines of each chapter. These presentations are easily customized for your lectures and offered along with chapter-specific Microsoft® PowerPoint® Image Slides and JPEG Image Libraries.

## Student Companion Website

- ISBN: 9781305074675
- This free companion website for *The Irony of Democracy* is accessible through [cengagebrain.com](http://cengagebrain.com) and allows students access to chapter-specific interactive learning tools including flashcards, glossaries, and more.



## CourseReader 0-30: American Government

- Printed Access Card ISBN: 9781111479954
- Instant Access Code ISBN: 9781111479978
- INSTRUCTOR DESCRIPTION: COURSEREADER: AMERICAN GOVERNMENT allows you to create your reader, your way, in just minutes. This affordable, fully customizable online reader provides access to thousands

of permissions-cleared readings, articles, primary sources, and audio and video selections from the regularly-updated Gale research library database. This easy-to-use solution allows you to search for and select just the material you want for your courses. Each selection opens with a descriptive introduction to provide context, and concludes with critical-thinking and multiple-choice questions to reinforce key points. COURSEREADER is loaded with convenient tools like highlighting, printing, note-taking, and downloadable PDFs and MP3 audio files for each reading. COURSEREADER is the perfect complement to any Political Science course. It can be bundled with your current textbook, sold alone, or integrated into your learning management system. COURSEREADER 0-30 allows access to up to 30 selections in the reader. Please contact your Cengage sales representative for details.

**Election 2014: An American Government Supplement**

- ISBN: 9781305500181
- Written by John Clark and Brian Schaffner, this booklet addresses the 2014 congressional and gubernatorial elections, with real-time analysis and references.

*Government is always government by the few, whether in the name of the few, the one, or the many.*

—Harold Lasswell

# THE IRONY OF DEMOCRACY

CHAPTER

# I

Elites—not masses—govern the United States. Life in U.S. democracy, as in all societies, is shaped by a tiny fraction of the population. Major political, economic, and social decisions are made by this elite minority, not by the masses of people.

**Elites** are the few who have power; the masses are the many who do not. Power is deciding who gets what, when, and how. Power is meaningful participation in the decisions that shape our lives. The **masses** are the many whose lives are shaped by institutions, events, and leaders over which they have little direct control. Political scientist Harold Lasswell wrote, “The division of society into elite and mass is universal,” and even in a democracy “a few exercise a relatively great weight of power, and the many exercise comparatively little.”<sup>1</sup>

**Elite theory**, or elitism, is an approach to describing society focusing on the few with power, their values, their behavior, and their demographics. Elite theory is not a normative endorsement of elite rule, nor is it an automatic dismissal of it. Elites are not necessarily conspiracies to oppress and exploit the masses. On the contrary, they may be deeply concerned with the welfare of the masses. This is especially true in democracies. Membership in the elite increasingly is open to ambitious and talented individuals from the masses, exemplified by leaders such as Barack Obama and Bill Gates, though it sometimes may still appear a closed group. Elites may compete with each other, or they may largely agree over the direction of domestic and foreign policy. Elites may be responsive to the demands of the masses and influenced by the outcomes of elections or public demands, or they may be unresponsive to mass movements and unaffected by elections. Still, whether elites are public-minded or self-serving, open or closed, competitive or consensual, unified or pluralistic, responsive or unresponsive, it is elites and not the masses that govern the modern nation. *How* elites rule is a separate discussion from the fact that they always do rule.

Democracy is government “by the people,” but the responsibility for the survival of democracy rests on the shoulders of elites. This is the **irony of democracy**: Elites

must govern wisely if government “by the people” is to survive. If the survival of the U.S. system depended on an active, informed, and enlightened citizenry, then democracy in the United States would have disappeared long ago, for the masses normally are apathetic and ill-informed about politics and public policy, and they exhibit a surprisingly weak commitment to democratic values—individual dignity, equality of opportunity, the right to dissent, freedom of speech and press, religious toleration, and due process of law. Fortunately for these values and for U.S. democracy, the masses do not lead; they follow. They respond to the attitudes, proposals, and behavior of elites. The abolition of slavery, civil rights for minorities, and religious freedom did not arise because of mass demand—elites led the United States to these important places.

Although the symbols of U.S. politics are drawn from democratic political thought, we can often better understand the reality of U.S. politics from the viewpoint of elite theory. The questions posed by elite theory are the vital questions of politics: Who governs the United States? What are the roles of elites and masses in U.S. politics? How do people acquire power? What is the relationship between economic and political power? How open and accessible are elite ranks? How do U.S. elites change over time? How widely is power shared in the United States? How much real competition takes place among elites? What is the basis of elite consensus? How do elites and masses differ? How responsive are elites to mass sentiments? How much influence do masses have over policies decided by elites?

This book, *The Irony of Democracy*, explains U.S. political life using elite theory. It presents evidence from U.S. political history and contemporary political science describing and explaining how elites function in a modern democratic society. But before we examine U.S. politics, we must understand more about elite theory, democracy, and pluralism.

## THE MEANING OF ELITE THEORY

The central idea of elite theory is that all societies are divided into two classes: the few who govern and the many who are governed. Italian political scientist Gaetano Mosca expressed this basic concept as follows:

In all societies—from societies that are very underdeveloped and have largely attained the dawnings of civilization, down to the most advanced and powerful societies—two classes of people appear—a class that rules and a class that is ruled. The first class, always the less numerous, performs all of the political functions, monopolizes power, and enjoys the advantages that power brings, whereas the second, the more numerous class, is directed and controlled by the first, in a manner that is now more or less legal, now more or less arbitrary and violent.<sup>2</sup>

Elites are not a product particular to capitalism or socialism or industrialization or technological development. They govern all societies—democracies and dictatorships, capitalist and socialist, monarchies and theocracies, developing and industrialized. All societies generate leaders, and leaders acquire a stake in preserving the organization and their position in it. This motive gives them a perspective different from that of the organization’s members. That an elite is inevitable in any social organization is known in political science as the **Iron Law of Oligarchy**.

French political scientist Roberto Michels stated this thesis: “He who says organization, says oligarchy.”<sup>3</sup> The “law” holds true for all sizes of organizations, whether families, clubs, religious congregations, unions, businesses, or society as a whole. In all these, there are the few who hold power and the many who do not.

Elite theory also asserts that the few who govern are not typical of the masses who are governed. Elites by definition control resources: power, wealth, education, prestige, status, skills of leadership, information, knowledge of political processes, ability to communicate, and organization. Elites in the United States are drawn disproportionately from wealthy, educated, prestigiously employed, and socially prominent elements of society. This has historically meant that these elites were overwhelmingly European-American (or white), Anglo-Saxon, Protestant, and male, although it is clear today that the demographic diversity of the elite is changing significantly. Elites come disproportionately from society’s increasingly diverse upper classes, those whose families already network with leaders of economic, professional, and governmental institutions.

Elitism, however, does not necessarily bar individuals of the lower or middle classes from rising to the top. In a democracy, upward mobility is encouraged—the system needs “fresh blood.” The term for persons of nonelite origins entering the ranks of the elite is **circulation of elites**, and it is essential for the stability of the elite system. Openness in the system siphons off potentially revolutionary leadership from the lower classes; moreover, an elite system is strengthened when talented and ambitious individuals from the masses enter governing circles. However, social stability requires that movement from nonelite to elite positions be a slow, continuous assimilation rather than a rapid or revolutionary change. Only those nonelites who have demonstrated their commitment to the elite system itself and to the system’s political and economic values can be admitted to the ruling class.

Elite values can be reduced to two overarching goals: staying in power and preserving the system. Elite members focus on maintaining or enhancing their position as elite. Elites also share a general consensus about the fundamental norms of the social system. As a group, they agree on the basic rules of the game and on the importance of preserving the political and social system in which they thrive. The system, whatever that system might be, has clearly worked well for them. The stability of the system, even its survival, depends on this consensus by those who have been most successful within the system. Political scientist David Truman wrote that elites have “a special stake in the continuation of the system in which their privileges rest.”<sup>4</sup> However, elite consensus does not prevent elite members from disagreeing or competing with each other for preeminence. But this competition takes place within a narrow range of issues; elites agree on more matters than they disagree on. Disagreement usually occurs over *means* rather than *ends*.

In the United States, the bases of elite consensus are the values of liberal democracy: the sanctity of individual liberty, private property, and limited government. Political historian Richard Hofstadter wrote about U.S. elite struggles:

The fierceness of political struggles has often been misleading; for the range of vision embodied by the primary contestants in the major parties has always been bounded by the horizons of property and enterprise. However much at odds on specific issues, the major political traditions have shared a belief in the rights of property, the philosophy of economic individualism, the value of competition; they have accepted the economic virtues of capitalist culture as necessary qualities of man.<sup>5</sup>

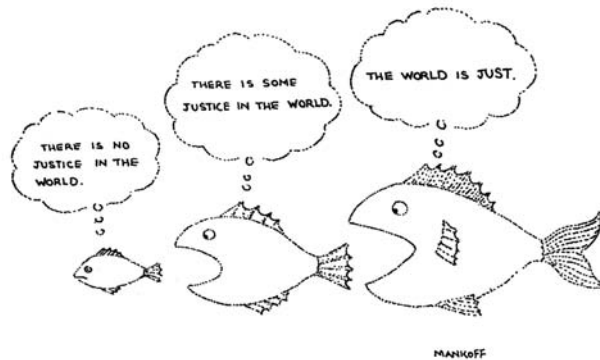
**C. Wright Mills**  
Website devoted to the works of the author of the classic book on elitism in the United States, *The Power Elite* (1956). [www.cwrightmills.org](http://www.cwrightmills.org)

**America’s Most Wealthy**  
Wealth is not always a measure of power. But *Forbes* magazine annually lists the richest people and the sources of their wealth. [www.forbes.com](http://www.forbes.com)

## IN BRIEF

## ELITE THEORY

- Society is divided into the few who have power, called elites, and the many who do not, called masses.
- Elites are not typical of the masses who are governed. Elites are drawn disproportionately from the upper socioeconomic strata of society.
- The movement of nonelites to elite positions is necessary but must be slow and continuous to maintain stability and avoid revolution. Only nonelites who have accepted the basic elite consensus enter governing circles. Elites share a consensus on the basic values of the social system and the preservation of the system. In the United States this means liberal democracy. They disagree only on a narrow range of issues.
- Public policy reflects not the demands of the masses but the prevailing values of the elite. Changes in public policy will be incremental rather than revolutionary.
- Elites may act out of narrow self-serving motives and risk undermining mass support, or they may initiate reforms, curb abuse, and undertake public-regarding programs to preserve the system and their place in it.
- Active elites are subject to relatively little direct influence from the apathetic masses. Elites influence the masses more than the masses influence elites.



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Elites may act out of narrow self-serving interests or enlightened, “public-regarding” motives. Occasionally elites abuse their powers and position and undermine mass confidence in their leadership. This threatens the system and requires a punitive response by other members of the elite, who are more focused on preserving the system. Unethical business executives get fired for violating the rules, politicians are impeached for breaking their oath to uphold the law, and union officials are expelled for corruption.

At other times, elites initiate reforms designed to preserve the system and restore mass support. Elite theory does not necessarily imply that the masses are exploited or repressed, although these abuses are not uncommon, especially outside democracies. Elitism means only that the responsibility for mass welfare rests with elites, not with masses.

Elitism implies that public policy does not reflect demands of “the people” so much as it reflects the interests and values of elites. Changes and innovations in



public policy come as elite values slowly evolve to adapt to new challenges to system stability, often caused by new technologies or external events. However, elite interest in preserving the system means that changes in public policy normally will be *incremental* rather than revolutionary. Public policies are often modified but seldom replaced.

Finally, elite theory assumes that the masses are largely passive, apathetic, and ill-informed. Mass sentiments are manipulated by elites more often than elite values are influenced by the sentiments of the masses. More communication between elites and masses flows downward than upward. Masses seldom make decisions about governmental policies through elections or through thoughtful evaluation of political parties' policy alternatives. For the most part, these "democratic" institutions—elections and parties—have only symbolic value: They help tie the masses to the political system by giving them a ritual role to play on Election Day. Elitism contends that the masses have at best only an indirect influence over the decision-making behavior of elites.

Naturally, elite theory is frequently misunderstood in the United States because the prevailing myths and symbols of the U.S. system are drawn from democratic theory rather than elite theory. So let us sum up here what elite theory is *not*. First, elitism is not the colloquial use of the word to denote arrogant persons with a belief in their superiority. Elitism does not mean that those who have power are continually locked in conflict with the masses or that powerholders always achieve their goals at the expense of the public interest. Elitism in a democracy is not a conspiracy to oppress the masses, although that myth is common among extremists on the right and left. Elitism does not imply that powerholders constitute a single impenetrable monolithic body or that they always agree on public issues. Elitism does not pretend that power in society does not shift over time and that new elites do not emerge to compete with old elites. Power need not rest exclusively on the control of economic resources but may rest instead upon other leadership resources—organization, communication, or information. Lastly, elitism does not imply that masses have no impact on the attitudes of elites, only that elites influence masses more than masses influence elites.

## THE MEANING OF DEMOCRACY

While the term "democracy" has been used in different ways throughout history, at its core it refers to popular participation in the allocation of values in a society. (The Greek roots *demos* and *kratos* refer to "people" and "rule," respectively.) The ruled and the rulers are the same. The Founders looked to classical understandings of the concept of democracy, where the term was used by the Greek political philosopher Aristotle<sup>6</sup> as describing a corrupt form of government in which the masses ruled in their self-interest and not in the interest of the country, what James Madison called "the tyranny of the majority." The term *demos* was more a synonym for "mob." The modern term **democracy** conflates its negative original meaning with the positive form of government called **polity** (in Latin *res publica*, or republic). At least some of the ironic gap between the United States as an elite-run political system and the ideals of democracy is in the common misunderstanding of the term "democracy" itself. Chapter 2 will clarify this further.

The underlying value in almost any modern understanding of democracy is individual dignity. Traditionally, democratic theory has valued popular participation in politics as an opportunity for individual self-development through civic virtue: Responsibility for governing our own conduct develops character, self-reliance, intelligence, and moral judgment—in short, dignity. The ancients of Athens and Rome saw political participation as virtuous, or necessary to becoming a good person. The classic democrat would reject even a benevolent despot who could govern in the interest of the masses, as that would deny the opportunity to participate. As the English political philosopher John Stuart Mill asked, “What development can either their thinking or active faculties attain under it?” Thus the argument for citizen participation in public affairs depends not on its policy outcomes but on the belief that it is essential to the full development of human capacities. Ideally, democracy means individual participation in the decisions that affect our lives. Mill argued that people could know truth only by discovering it for themselves.<sup>7</sup>

Procedurally, a republic achieves popular participation through majority rule and respect for the rights of minorities. Self-development presumes self-government, and self-government comes about only by encouraging each individual to contribute to the development of public policy and by resolving conflicts over public policy through majority rule. Minorities who have had the opportunity to influence policy but whose views have not won majority support accept the decisions of majorities because of the fairness and openness of the democratic procedure. In return, majorities permit minorities to attempt openly to win majority support for their views. Freedom of speech and press, freedom to dissent, and freedom to form opposition parties and organizations are essential to ensure meaningful individual participation. This freedom of expression is also critical in ascertaining the majority’s real views.

Classical liberal theory became the modern expression of democratic theory for the Founding Fathers and their European influences. Originally, democratic equality came out of the Biblical idea of humans created in the image of the divine and thus having intrinsic rights and dignity. Human beings, by virtue of their existence, are entitled to life, liberty, and property. A “natural law,” or moral tenet, guarantees every person liberty and the right to property, and this natural law is morally superior to human law. John Locke, the English political philosopher whose writings most influenced the United States’ founding elites, argued that even in a “state of nature”—that is, a world of no governments—an individual possesses inalienable rights to life, liberty, and property. Locke meant that these rights are independent of government; governments do not give them to individuals, and no government may legitimately take them away.<sup>8</sup>

Locke believed that a government’s purpose is to protect individual liberty. People form a “social contract” with one another to establish a government to help protect their rights; they tacitly agree to accept government authority to protect life, liberty, and property. Property has been of particular importance in classical liberal theory as it provides economic self-sufficiency, rather than a child-like, feudal dependence on the government. Implicit in the social contract and the democratic notion of freedom is the belief that social control over the individual must be minimal. Classical liberal theory sees government as a major threat to human freedom, and thus governmental authority must be limited. These beliefs call for removing as many

U.S. State Department Bureau of Democracy, Human Rights, and Labor  
Official U.S. government definitions of democracy and individual rights. [www.state.gov/g/drl/](http://www.state.gov/g/drl/)

external restrictions, controls, and regulations on the individual as possible without harming the freedom of other citizens.

Another vital aspect of classical democracy is a belief in the equality of all people. The Declaration of Independence states that “all men are created equal.” Drawing from the Bible, the Founding Fathers believed that all persons had **equality before the law**, regardless of their personal circumstances. A democratic society’s legal system cannot judge a person by social position, economic class, creed, or race. The law should treat all fairly without advantage. Political equality is expressed in the concept of “one person, one vote.”

In the United States, the notion of equality has come to include **equality of opportunity** in many aspects of life: social, educational, economic, and, of course, political. Each person should have a reasonably equal chance to develop his or her capacities to the fullest potential as they see fit. There should be no artificial barriers to the pursuit of happiness or success in life, however each individual may define it. All persons should have the opportunity to make of themselves what they can, to develop their talents and abilities to their fullest, and to be rewarded for their skills, knowledge, initiative, and hard work. Democratic theory has always stressed equality of opportunity over “equality of outcome,” which by seeking conformity of result denies the individual right to choose one’s goals and happiness.

## ELITES IN A DEMOCRACY

Democracy requires popular participation in government. To our nation’s founders, whose classical educations included an ambivalence about the wisdom of democracy, it meant the people would have representation in government. The Founders believed government rests ultimately on the consent of the governed. Their notion of republicanism envisioned decision making by representatives of the people, rather than direct decision making by the people themselves. These elite representatives would be expected to use their prudence and wisdom to make decisions based on what was in the best interests of the masses. The Founders were profoundly skeptical of direct democracy, in which the people initiate and decide policy questions by popular vote. They had read about direct democracy in the ancient Greek city-state of Athens, and they were fearful of the “follies” of democracy. James Madison wrote,

Such democracies have ever been spectacles of turbulence and contention; have ever been found incompatible with personal security of the rights of property and have in general been as short in their lives as they have been violent in their deaths.<sup>9</sup>

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## ISSUES WITH DIRECT DEMOCRACY

Even if it were desirable, mass government is not feasible in a large society. Abraham Lincoln’s rhetorical flourish—“a government of the people, by the people, for the people”—has no real-world meaning. What would “the people” look like if all U.S. citizens were brought together in one place?

Standing shoulder to shoulder in military formation, they would occupy an area of about sixty-six square miles. The logistical problem of bringing 310 million bodies together is trivial, however, compared with the task of bringing about a meeting of

310 million minds. Merely to shake hands with that many people would take a century. How much discussion would it take to form a common opinion? A single round of five-minute speeches would require five thousand years. If only one percent of those present spoke, the assembly would be forced to listen to over two million speeches. People could be born, grow old and die while they waited for the assembly to make one decision.

In other words, an all-American town meeting would be the largest, longest, and most boring and frustrating meeting imaginable. What could such a meeting produce? Total paralysis. What could it do? Nothing.<sup>10</sup>

The U.S. Constitution has no provision for national popular referenda, although many states do have referenda, ballot initiatives, and recall elections.<sup>11</sup> (See Chapter 12.)

## REPRESENTATIVE DEMOCRACY AND ELITES

While majority rule will block threats to democracy by smaller groups, the Founders were equally fearful that unrestrained majorities would threaten liberty and property and abuse minorities and individuals, “the weaker party and the obnoxious individual.” James Madison framed this concern in *Federalist Paper #10* (see Chapter 2). The Founders recognized the warning found in the classical understanding of the term democracy—that government by majority rule can threaten the life, liberty, and property of minorities and individuals. They recognized the notion that a majority must be right simply because it is a majority as logically flawed and historically disapproved. The solution to the practical problem of popular government is rule not by the masses but by the *consent* of the masses through the development of institutions of representation—elections, parties, organized interest groups—as bridges between



“I’m not so sure about this ‘life, liberty and pursuit of happiness’ bit. Whaddya say we look at some polling numbers first?”

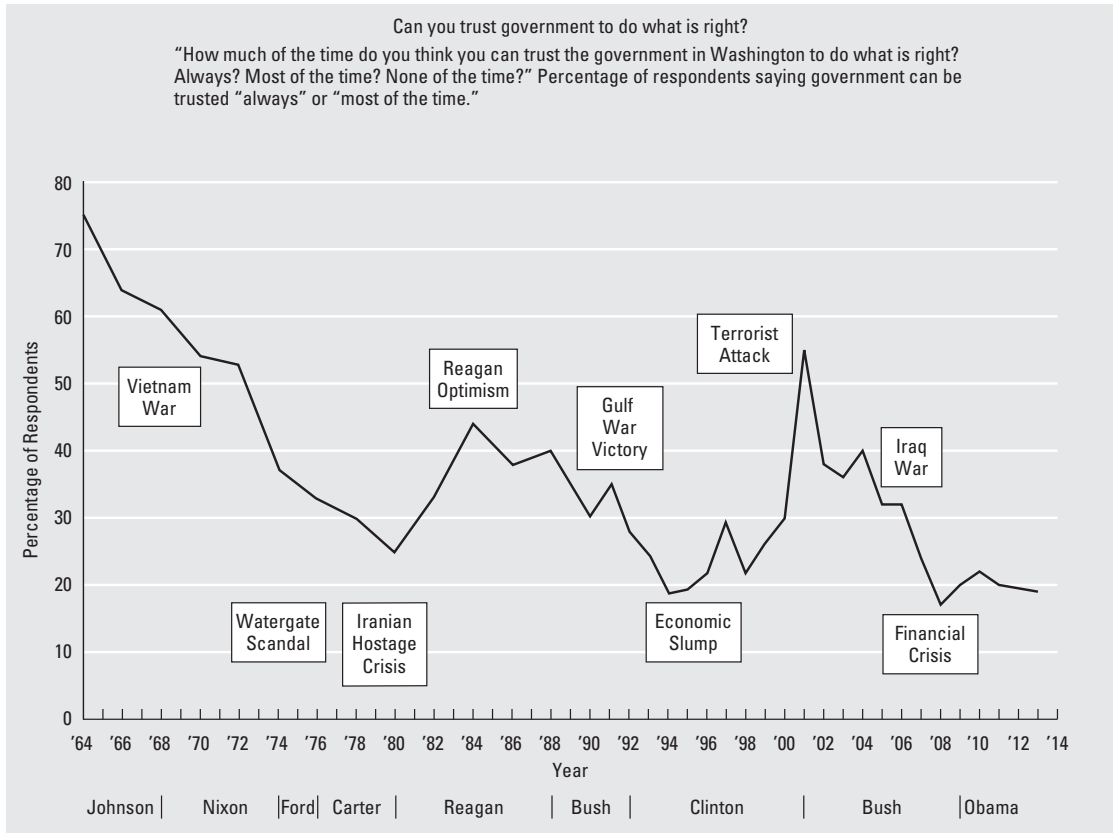
Tim O'Brien/Search id: tobn159/ Cartoonstock.com

**FOCUS**

**MASS DISTRUST OF THE U.S. ELITE**

Do the masses trust U.S. leadership? Public opinion polls show a generally declining willingness of the people to “trust the government in Washington to do what is right” (see figure). Defeat and humiliation in war or foreign affairs undermines mass support for a nation’s leadership, as seen with the Vietnam War, Iran hostage crisis, and Iraq occupation. Economic

troubles lead to lower trust in elites, as seen in the late 1970s, the early 1990s, and the recession and stagnation of 2007–2014. Masses traditionally “rally ’round the flag” when confronted with serious national threats, such as the terrorist attacks of September 11, 2001, when mass trust in government skyrocketed to levels not seen since the 1960s.



**Mass Support for American Government**

Source: Prepared by the authors from National Election Surveys, University of Michigan, data. Data from 1996 onward from various polls reported in The Polling Report, Washington, D.C.