

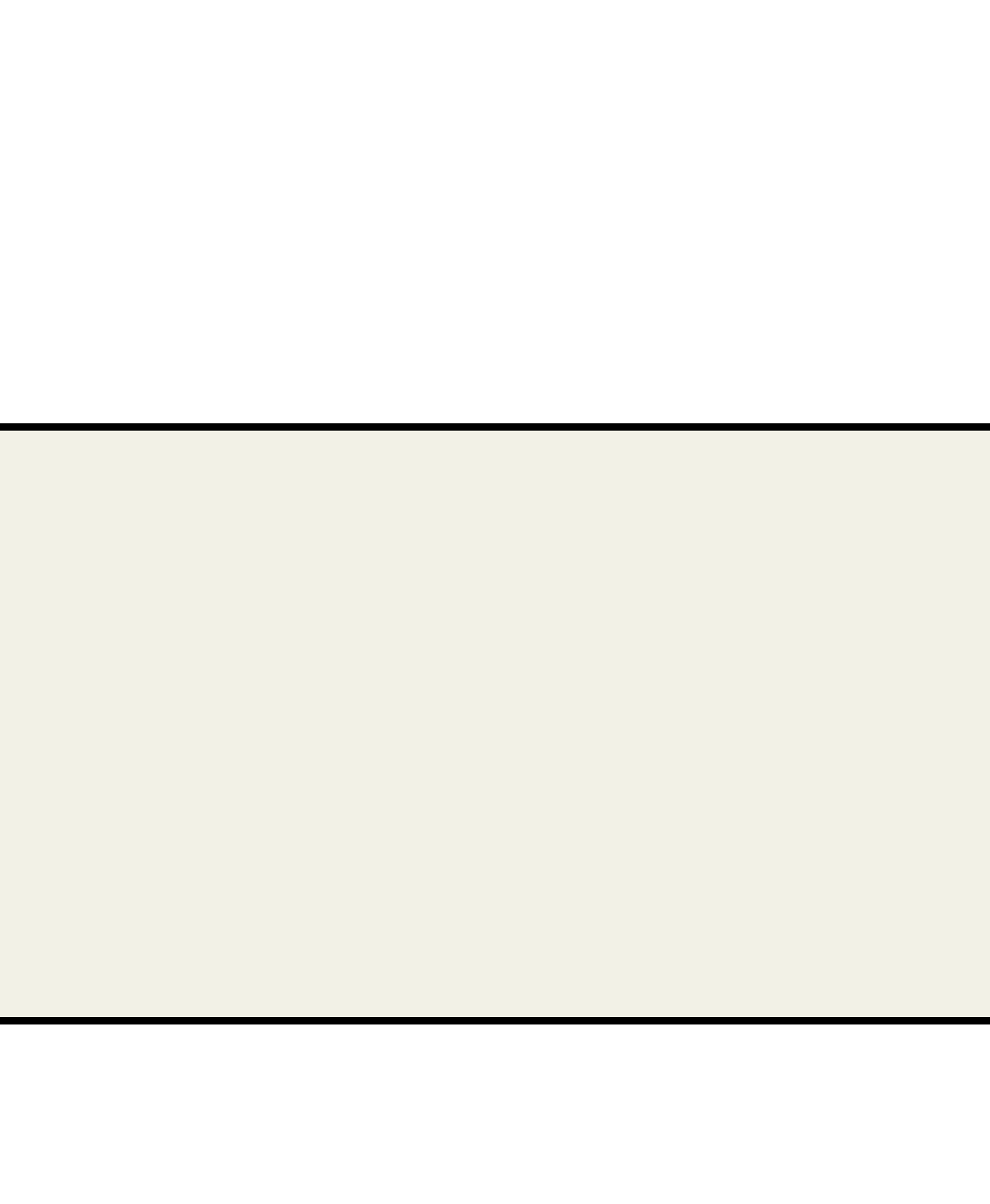
THE AMERICAN POLITICAL SYSTEM

Core
Second
Edition

KEN
KOLLMAN



**THE AMERICAN
POLITICAL SYSTEM**
Second Core Edition



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Second Core Edition, 2014 Election Update

Ken Kollman

University of Michigan



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This book is dedicated to

**Anne M. and Anne C.
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PREFACE

A common impression is that students entering colleges and universities today do not care about politics or are uninformed, when in fact, many students, even before they arrive at college, are awash in details about politics, public opinion, and international events. They regularly encounter information or opinions about the political world, whether online; through traditional media, personal conversations, and public speeches; or within their clubs and other associations.

Consider the conflicting—and often negative and misleading—messages about the American political system that are broadcast widely and likely to reach the typical student in the United States. Even brief attention to the news or other political programming might lead one to believe some subset of the following: Politicians are venal and corrupt. Lobbyists are venal and corrupt. Congress cannot get anything done. The government meddles too much in the economy and/or in people's lives. The federal government cannot close a military base, reform a bureaucracy, or coordinate relief efforts effectively. The government does not promote jobs effectively enough. No politician wanting to keep his or her job would ever want to raise taxes. Americans' taxes are outrageously high. The Social Security program is going broke. The government spends too much beyond its budget. Political parties get in the way of effective compromise. The Supreme Court is out of touch with public opinion. Interest groups essentially bribe politicians.

Students may try to make sense of the American political system, but understanding can be elusive. The challenge of getting an accurate, coherent picture of American politics is exacerbated by the enormity of the American political system. The bombardment of information about a broad range of topics across different institutions and levels of government may give the impression of incoherence or disorder. The political system can look chaotic, random, and complex, making useful understanding nearly impossible.

What students entering introductory courses often lack is a coherent intellectual framework and set of logical concepts with which they can make sense of political information. I wrote this book to provide such a framework, and this

second edition sharpens the original framework even more. My goal is to give a clear introduction to the core facts about American government and an intellectual toolkit to navigate the extraordinarily complex political system in the United States. I want my students to be able to take that toolkit with them after the course, and I hope readers of this book will too. The tools in this book can help students understand the political issues and information that they encounter throughout their lives—in the news, as well as in their own experiences.

Analytical Tools for Understanding American Politics

This textbook conveys the core theoretical insights and analytical tools from modern political science and applies them to the American political system. Political science is a diverse discipline, so this textbook focuses on three core insights:

1. People face recurrent collective dilemmas and principal–agent problems.
2. Political institutions, including those in the United States, are intended to solve collective dilemmas and principal–agent problems.
3. The specific details of those institutions affect how costs and benefits are allocated in society. In other words, institutional details matter for who gets what in society.

After learning about this core and studying various kinds of collective dilemmas and principal–agent problems, students can make better sense of the major topics in American politics. For example, as they learn about Congress in Chapter 5, they can consider the institutional features of congressional elections—including the use of primary elections and legislative action such as agenda-control by the Rules Committee in the House—with a keen eye on how those features are intended to (but do not always) successfully solve social dilemmas. Students learn the consequences of having specific institutions in place in Congress, such as which states will benefit when the filibuster is used on spending bills. They can make sense of why members of Congress are typically re-elected even when a large majority of Americans are unhappy with Congress as a whole. Or how internal congressional politics affects bargaining between the two chambers and between Congress and the president. In every chapter, the analytical tools from Chapter 1 are used to provide insights into the topic at hand.

A Problem-Oriented Approach

Each chapter starts with a puzzle, illustrated through a story about American politics, then uses the concepts and information in the chapter to help “solve” it. Chapter 1, for example, uses the story of the ongoing budget battles between Democratic and Republican party leaders, and asks how the two parties can consistently fail to solve long-term problems. A majority of Americans

complain simultaneously about high deficits, their tax burdens, and not enough government spending on programs like education and infrastructure. At first, the situation does not appear to make sense. If deficits are caused by the government spending more than it collects in taxes, increased spending and lower taxes will increase the deficit. So it seems illogical that majorities support both maintaining current levels of spending and retaining existing tax rates, instead of raising more revenue from taxes. Only by further exploring the issue using concepts such as free riding, public goods, and collective dilemmas does the budget conflict (and the public's reaction) begin to make sense.

These types of puzzles motivate not only what follows in the chapters but also the priorities of political science researchers. The book reflects some of the best contemporary scholarship with rich citations, reference lists, and carefully annotated sources for the charts and tables. Students will find the information accessible, accurate, and clearly specified.

Insights through Comparison

To gain insights into how specific institutional details matter, each chapter includes an “In Comparison” section that describes features of the American system as they compare to those in other countries. Students will read about research findings on the consequences of having different institutions and social circumstances in other countries. For example, a section in Chapter 4 explores how France and the United States differ over the interpretation of the separation of church and state. A section in Chapter 13 looks at the differences between simple plurality and proportional electoral systems, and the research connecting those institutional details to certain political and policy outcomes. Sections in other chapters provide data and analysis comparing the United States to other countries on political participation, party systems, public opinion, and constitutional design. While instructors often do not have time to cover comparative material, the comparisons made in this textbook will help students understand the American system better by highlighting the impact of certain kinds of institutions.

Pedagogical Features

This textbook uses innovative pedagogy to help students grasp important concepts and master basic factual material. In each chapter, the following features reinforce the information in the chapter text.

Interests, Institutions, and Outcomes features in every chapter provide students with real-world examples of how institutions work on collective dilemmas to foster specific outcomes. These can serve as models for students' own analysis or as prompts for classroom discussion. Examples include:

- How state and federal policy around marijuana use may differ (Chapter 3: Federalism)
- How the Democrats used budget reconciliation to pass the Affordable Care Act (Chapter 5: Congress)
- The effect of *Citizens United* on campaigns (Chapter 13: Elections and Campaigns)

Know the Facts boxes give the nuts and bolts of American government without cluttering the text with excessive details on features that are relatively straightforward. Using clear tables and outlines, these boxes cover basic factual information that every student taking an American government course should know.

Historical Path boxes highlight important events in history that students should be familiar with, helping them to put these events in historical context and see the long-term trends.

A rich art program includes tables and figures that are an integral part of each chapter, carefully chosen photos that illustrate key points, and marginal definitions of key terms.

New in the Second Edition

In preparing this second edition, I was attentive to the feedback I received from professors who have used the textbook in their courses and from students in my own course. As discussed above, the new Interests, Institutions, and Outcomes feature offers additional material with which students can apply the core concepts from the book, while new opening stories and contemporary examples keep the text fresh and compelling. As an example, Chapter 3 (Federalism) opens with a story about states' attempts (as in Arizona) to adopt immigration laws that may be at odds with federal policy. It poses the puzzle of why, in general, centralization has prevailed in conflicts between the national government and the states.

All chapters have new citations with contemporary scholarship, refreshed "Further Reading" lists, and updated data for charts and tables wherever possible. Finally, professors and students asked for more examples of contemporary real-world events that illustrate the concepts in the book. The Interests, Institutions, and Outcomes feature and the puzzle examples based on real-world events provide both students and professors with plenty of material for lectures, discussions, test questions, and paper topics.

Support Materials for Students and Instructors

This textbook is accompanied by an extensive set of resources developed specifically for instructors and students to use with *The American Political System*.

Coursepacks Available at no cost to professors or students, Norton coursepacks for online or hybrid courses are available in a variety of formats, including all versions of Blackboard and WebCT. Content includes review material, chapter quizzes, and video exercises.

Instructor's Resource Disc

- *PowerPoints*: Written by Sarah Treul (University of North Carolina—Chapel Hill), these PowerPoint slides feature concise text slides, helpful notes and suggestions for instructors, all the figures and photos from the text, and researcher videos.
- *Researcher Videos*: Prominent political scientists talk about the chapter-opening puzzles in the text.
- *Art Files*: All figures, tables, and photos are available in JPEG and PowerPoint formats.

Instructor's Manual Written by Brian Fife (Indiana University—Purdue University, Fort Wayne), the Instructor's Manual includes chapter outlines, lecture ideas, teaching suggestions, in-class activities based on the researcher videos and suggested web activities, supplementary readings, and in-class and home work assignments.

Test Bank Written by John Lovett, Chelsea Phillips, Tamar Malloy, and Nicholas Howard (University of North Carolina—Chapel Hill), the Test Bank includes multiple-choice, true/false, and essay questions for every chapter, all labeled for question type, difficulty, and concept. Available in the following formats: print, CD-ROM, PDF, RTF, Blackboard, WebCT, ANGEL, Desire2Learn, Moodle, and ExamView Assessment Suite.

Ebook An affordable and convenient alternative, Norton ebooks retain the content and design of the print book and allow students to highlight and take notes with ease, print chapters as needed, and search the text for references. Norton ebooks are available online and as downloadable PDFs.

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Ken Kollman

**THE AMERICAN
POLITICAL SYSTEM**
Second Core Edition



**HOW ABOUT INSTEAD OF
RAISING THE DEBT CEILING,
WE LOWER TERM LIMITS?**

VOTE THE BUMS OUT!

Conflicts over the nation's debt limit, taxes, and spending priorities seem to exemplify chaos and contradictions in American politics. When we look deeper, however, we begin to see the often predictable ways that American political institutions shape debates about current events and the policy outcomes that ensue.

1

INTRODUCTION



The workings of American government and politics often seem puzzling. How can basic concepts in political science help us to understand the complexities and apparent contradictions of the American political system?

In recent years, the United States national government experienced one budgetary crisis after another. Every time a major decision loomed between 2011 and 2014 over the government's budget and borrowing capacity (its "debt ceiling," as it is known), there was a deadline that provoked grandstanding among political adversaries, threats of economic doom, and intense negotiations among politicians going long into the morning hours. Government officials and commentators used stark words and phrases to describe the consequences of the government's actions, or inactions, in dealing with the basic disagreement between the two major political parties over the budget. If leaders of the two political parties did not come to an agreement over taxes and spending, the government might fall off a "fiscal cliff," funding for many government programs would be subject to "sequestration" (i.e., mandatory budget cuts), or the government might default on its debt obligations.

The disagreements between the parties were not petty or trivial, but instead reflected fundamental differences over policy goals and society outcomes. Leaders of both parties recognized that large, increasing deficit spending could not continue indefinitely. In general, Democrats, led by President Obama and majority leaders in the Senate (until 2015), sought mild cuts to government spending and increased taxes on the wealthy. Republicans, led by majority leaders in the House of Representatives, sought deep cuts to government spending and no tax increases on anyone. Compromises were hard fought, and when they came they followed bitter negotiations, blame in both directions, and a general feeling that nobody won. Many problems were put off until later, and the essential decisions over how to ensure sustainable government budgets were postponed.

OUTLINE

- Understanding American Politics
- Collective Dilemmas and the Need for Government
- Types of Collective Dilemmas
- Principal–Agent Problems
- Designing Institutions
- Types of Government Institutions
- Analyzing Politics and Government

In general, Americans do not like to pay taxes. It has never been popular for politicians of either major party to call for an increase in taxes. Aversion to taxes has deep historical antecedents and is ingrained in the American political culture. The War of Independence was sparked by rebellions against British taxation. Periodic tax revolts by citizens groups, especially in states like California in the late twentieth century, have made American politicians wary of raising taxes, even when more tax revenues are needed to pay for popular programs and balance government budgets. This is in spite of the fact that the United States ranks near the bottom among industrialized democracies in the tax burden imposed on citizens and corporations.

At the same time, however, Americans ask a lot of their government. Not only do they want it to educate children, preserve public order, provide health care for the elderly and poor, regulate products and services, build roads and bridges, and provide student loans for college, they also want the government to protect the United States and its interests abroad. Moreover, most Americans prefer government to operate on a balanced budget, spending no more than it collects in taxes and other revenue.

The expectations Americans have for their government often seem incompatible with their dislike of taxes. Politicians commonly complain that the American people want the government to do more than what they are willing to pay. During the crises between 2011 and 2014, many Republicans and some Democrats in Congress expressed misgivings that failure to agree on permanent solutions would increase the budget deficit so much that it would harm the economic future for the next few generations. The deficit was high because of years of low tax revenues from slow growth following the 2009 recession and the huge government spending to stimulate the economy. Meanwhile, the United States was still paying off the costs of expensive wars in Afghanistan and Iraq from the previous decade. Then, in fall 2013, in hopes of delaying or eliminating President Obama's signature health care reform policies, the House of Representatives refused to pass legislation funding the government. This led to a lengthy government shutdown with federal offices closed and employees furloughed. The Republican leaders in the House had drawn the line and were willing to risk the ire of many Americans to get their way on the budget.

Nearly every national leader of both parties agreed that coming to settlement on the budget was necessary, but had different opinions about what that settlement should look like. Most Americans say in surveys that they are in favor of lower taxes in general, higher taxes on the wealthy, and a balanced budget. At the same time, they do not favor cutting certain popular, yet enormously expensive, government programs such as Social Security and Medicare.

The conflicts over the budget seem puzzling and even frustrating when described this way: Why can't they just come to an agreement on a long-term solution? But it is not unexpected or mysterious, given how social scientists think about political systems and institutions. In this chapter, and throughout this book, we will ask—and answer—the question: How can basic concepts in political science help us to understand the complexities and apparent contradictions of the American political system?

Understanding American Politics

This book will deepen your understanding of the elements and operation of the American political system. **Politics** refers to the process of making collective decisions, usually by governments, to allocate public resources and to create and enforce rules for the operation of society. A **political system** is the way a society organizes and manages its politics across various levels of public authority.

The political scientist Harold Lasswell once offered an alternative definition of politics as the struggle over “who gets what, when, [and] how.”¹ This definition is too broad for our purposes because it encompasses virtually any social activity involving the allocation of resources, including activities studied in such fields as economics, sociology, psychology, and anthropology.

Lasswell’s curt definition is, however, valuable in highlighting the fact that politics fundamentally revolves around satisfying people’s needs or wants. These needs or wants can be summarized by saying that people have **preferences** over things that government can potentially provide and they take actions to satisfy those preferences. Generally speaking, people prefer to maximize benefits and minimize costs. Given those preferences, people have ideas about how

politics The process of making collective decisions, usually by governments, to allocate public resources and to create and enforce rules for the operation of society.

political system The way a society organizes and manages its politics across various levels of public authority.

preferences The outcomes or experiences people want or believe they need.



Politics involves the distribution (or redistribution) of goods to satisfy interests. In late 2012, as the “fiscal cliff” political crisis loomed, which entailed heavy spending cuts in many areas, many citizens protested having goods and services that were important to them slashed, including jobs and Medicare benefits.

¹ Harold D. Lasswell, *Politics: Who Gets What, When, How* (New York: Whittlesey House/McGraw-Hill, 1936).

society should be run and expectations about how their own experiences with government actions determine the satisfaction of their preferences. Politics determines the distribution or redistribution of benefits and costs to satisfy those preferences.

It goes without saying that people often do not share the same preferences. One person's costs could be another person's benefits. They can have different interpretations of what is beneficial and what is costly. Nor do people share the same ideas about how society should be run. Politics often involves considerable conflict. It is rare to observe a governmental decision where everyone believes that the government has taken the correct action to satisfy his or her preferences. Much of the time in politics, some people win more benefits and some people pay more costs, and even if everyone wins some benefits, certain people win more than others.

Institutions

In light of people's conflicting preferences and disagreements, there must be means of making collective decisions, of settling on common action. Those decisions happen because of the workings of institutions. Institutions can be broadly defined as constraints on behavior that are usually codified but can also be informally understood by people. In politics, **institutions** are the rules or sets of rules or practices that determine how people make collective decisions. Institutions include the rules and procedures for passing laws, interpreting laws,

institutions Rules or sets of rules or practices that determine how people make collective decisions.

Know the FACTS

Political Institutions

Political institutions include:

- **Branches of government**

Examples: Congress
The president
The federal courts

- **Organizations**

Examples: The Internal Revenue Service
The Rules Committee in the House of Representatives
The electoral college
Political parties
Interest groups

- **Rules and procedures**

Examples: Simple plurality election rules
Separation of powers
Judicial review
Campaign finance laws

enforcing laws, counting votes and electing governments, and appointing government employees, among many other functions. The institutions of government vary across countries, states, and parts of the world, and they can change over time, with important implications for societies. They determine who can legally do what, when, and how, and they affect how the political system distributes benefits and costs among people in society.²

The term *institution* may be confusing because it is abstract and can be used in multiple ways. It can refer to large parts of the government or to specific procedures or organizations. It is sometimes used, for instance, to describe an entire branch of the government, as in referring to the presidency as an institution. Indeed, the three major branches of the U.S. government—the executive (the White House and the presidency), the legislative (Congress), and the judicial (the Supreme Court)—are each important institutions in American politics.

The term *institution*, however, is not always used to refer to a branch of government or a particular level of government. It is also used to refer to procedures for decision making or to organizations that make democracy work. The methods by which people are elected to office, for example—the voting rules, including the electoral college—and the procedures adopted for bargaining between the branches of government are also key institutions of government. The major political parties are considered crucial to the functioning of Congress and of elections, and interest groups play a vital role in determining which policies get chosen. These political organizations are key institutional features of the American political system.

One way to think of a political system is that it comprises a bundle of institutions within which many diverse people pursue the satisfaction of their preferences. The national government in the United States sits atop the American political system, but there is much more to a **federal system** like that of the United States. In federal systems, there are multiple levels of government with independent authority over important areas of policy. Each resident of the country is also affected by the policies of the nearly 90,000 state and local governments. People's lives are changed daily by the regulations and budgets decided upon by city, county, state, and regional governments, and by the day-to-day decisions of governors, mayors, council members, attorneys general, prosecutors, assessors, and comptrollers at lower levels of government.

The complicated mixture of multilayered governments and public institutions in the United States, and the various political organizations, businesses, and social movements that influence those governments and other institutions, form an overwhelmingly complex political system.

We will see in this book that the specific nature of these political institutions matters. It is not enough to explain a political outcome by saying that it occurred because “people wanted it that way.” *How* they make their collective

federal system A political system with multiple levels of government, in which each level has independent authority over some important policy areas.

² Kenneth A. Shepsle, *Analyzing Politics: Rationality, Behavior, and Institutions*, 2nd ed. (New York: Norton, 2010).



An institution can be as big as an entire branch of government, such as Congress, or it can be as specific as a rule for making a particular decision, such as how the Speaker of the House of Representatives is chosen. In 2010, John Boehner was chosen as Speaker through codified rules for electing party leaders.

decisions has consequences. Political outcomes are profoundly shaped by the institutions of government.

Consider the example of the electoral college, an institution that determines which person wins the presidency of the United States. Had the institution for choosing the president been different—in particular, if the presidency were decided purely by which candidate received the most votes—the election of 2000 would have put Al Gore in the White House. Gore won more popular votes than George W. Bush in 2000, but lost the presidency because Bush received more votes in the electoral college. (We will discuss the electoral college in more detail in later chapters.)

In fact, the collection of procedures used to select the president of the United States—the voting rules used by the states, the rules governing the electoral college, the rules the two major parties use to choose their candidates, the tie-breaking rules, and the methods for settling the outcome when it is not determined simply (as in 2000)—constitutes a bundle of institutions with major consequences for determining the winner of the ultimate prize in American politics.

As another example, the institutions described by the U.S. Constitution specify that two senators are to be elected from each state, regardless of population size. Thus, the politics of the Senate are constrained by institutional rules that have had the important effect of giving more representation to people from smaller, more rural states than to those from larger, more urban states. Wyoming, with approximately 570,000 residents, has the same number of senators repre-

senting its citizens as California, with approximately 38 million residents. Consequently, the Senate has traditionally been the unit of the U.S. government that is most prone to ensuring generous benefits for farmers. A central question that this book will help answer is how the institutions of the American political system lead to disparities in the apportionment of benefits and costs among people. These benefits and costs are not equitably distributed throughout the United States, and most scholars point to persistent biases in the system as the source of such disparities.

To begin to make sense of the American political system, let us build from individual behavior to institutional design and collective choices. We start by focusing on the “micro” level of politics—the social dilemmas arising among individuals and organizations that require some level of authority to solve.

Collective Dilemmas and the Need for Government

Suppose you live in a house with several other students and share a kitchen. The kitchen is always a mess, with dirty dishes in the sink, food on the counters and floor, and garbage spilling out of the wastebasket. Moreover, the kitchen needs new equipment, particularly a new refrigerator that the landlord refuses to buy. You and your housemates all agree that you want a clean kitchen and a new refrigerator. Yet despite this understanding, the kitchen remains dirty and no one bothers to buy the refrigerator. Why won't anyone take care of these problems?

Imagine that you get mad enough to do something about the situation. You wake up one morning, clean the kitchen, and buy the refrigerator on your credit card. You ask your housemates to help pay for the refrigerator, but only some pay their share. You wish there were a way to enforce a rule that only those who paid for the refrigerator can use it. Furthermore, you wish there were a rule restricting kitchen use to those who clean it. You cannot, however, enforce these rules, so all of your housemates enjoy the newly cleaned kitchen and the new refrigerator, regardless of their contributions.

Your frustration ultimately leads you to propose rules that determine who has to clean the kitchen and when, and who has to pay for the new equipment. Some housemates object, claiming that they don't mind a dirty kitchen and don't use the refrigerator very often. They propose to leave things as they are. Soon after, the kitchen becomes dirty, and when the need arises to replace a broken microwave oven, no one bothers to buy it. The problems begin to mount once again.³

Even if you haven't faced this precise situation, you have likely encountered similar collective dilemmas with groups of people. A group is challenged by a

³ For a general statement of one version of this problem, see Garrett Hardin, “The Tragedy of the Commons,” *Science* 162 (December 1968): 1243–48.