Politics in America can be improved is the optimistic side to this book. The other side is that the Constitution may be too difficult to change in order to respond to the pressures that have come with 200 years. The U.S. political structure is stressed because the style of the Constitution suits the state of communications in the time of its designers.

The Founding Fathers favored constitutional rules that economized on the costs of democratic decision-making. In their time the costs of an informed citizenry and political participation were formidable. If political decisions were costless, we might not opt for representative democracy over direct democracy. After all, not everyone is a legislator because there is more to life than political discourse and voting.

Changes in the feasibility of sending and receiving political information have fundamentally changed the relationship between citizens and elected representatives. This change, in turn, has spurred many adjustments that we will trace throughout national and state politics in the U.S. We limit ourselves in this book to the study of the forces of technological change on the democratic system. Telecommunications and its impact on the performance of the American political process is the specific subject to be analyzed. Yet, even this aspect of politics is far too broad for one study, if the study is to go into analytical depth. We will close the lens of our analysis tighter and focus on a very small segment of technological innovations, namely, the innovation of televising legislatures. We will examine, for example, how live legislative television has changed voter behavior in national and state elections.

The ancient Greeks contended that democracy would not survive once there were too many citizens to fit on the Acropolis. The ability of the governed to listen to their leader speak was thought to be critical for their political system. The way that citizens learn about and keep track of their legislators is a pivotal issue in the performance of democratic government. The Founding Fathers had this issue firmly in mind as they designed the architecture of the United States Constitution. The function they valued most was control of political power, and
this function depended on an informed citizenry. As with the ancient Greeks, the Founding Fathers recognized that democratic institutions are related to society’s ability to communicate.

Television is the electronic Acropolis. It has enlarged the audience that can observe and listen to legislators at work. What comes with the expanded audience of the electronic Acropolis are new opportunities for control. Unfortunately, not all of the opportunities are positive from the standpoint of protecting individual liberty. New telecommunications technologies also create new opportunities for manipulation and political abuse.

In any case, we have no interest in rolling back the clock on technology. We seek to uncover lessons about the impact of technology on the democratic process that may guide our future thinking. With this in mind, our analysis is potentially useful, even though we rule out the idea of going back to the state of non-televised legislatures. Our intent is not to stuff technology back in the box.

The broader point is that technological innovations applied to politics, such as televising legislatures, can make existing “constitutional” rules obsolete and call for new ones. In short, solutions to problems generated by new technology in politics do not necessarily require resistance to change, but rather, understanding and adapting to change.

Institutions matter. To the follower of public choice theory, this two-word sentence is practically a motto. In this book we use public choice theory to examine institutions and the political effects of information technology. In an age where innovations in the technology of telecommunications are broad-ranging, our narrow interest in studying televised legislatures would hardly seem to raise an eyebrow. A part of the public choice tradition, however, is to squint and study society’s institutions closely, even those that seem, on the surface, to be inconsequential. Measures of the impact of televising legislatures on the performance of American politics, the empirical objective of this book, are found through the public choice vision.

Public choice theorists usually begin with the working behavioral postulate of self-interest. This abstraction is simply that the politician, not unlike the businessman or consumer, takes self-interest into account in making decisions. It is natural for the public choice economist to question new institutions in terms of how the self-interests of individuals, or groups of individuals, are affected by them.

For example, how has televising legislatures affected the reelection prospects for incumbents? It is easy to understand why incumbents will be reluctant to adopt rules that make them more vulnerable. One of the specific questions that motivated this book is whether cameras in the legislative chambers are the equivalent of “free” advertising for incumbent candidates. Are the broadcasts, in