

13e American Government

Institutions & Policies

Brief Version



James Q. Wilson

John J. Dilulio, Jr.

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Government**  
**Institutions & Policies**

**Brief Version**

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*Australia • Brazil • Mexico • Singapore • United Kingdom • United States*

**American Government: Institutions  
and Policies, Thirteenth Edition  
Brief Version**

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Meena Bose, Matthew Levendusky**

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# Letter to Instructors

Dear American Government Instructor:

We wrote *American Government: Institutions and Policies, Brief Version* 13e not only to explain to students how the federal government works, but to clarify how its institutions have developed over time and describe their effects on public policy. Within this distinguishing framework we explain the history of Congress, the presidency, the judiciary, and the bureaucracy, because the politics we see today are different from those of a few decades ago. Likewise, we explain how public opinion, elections, interest groups, and the media shape and contribute to policy, and how that influence has evolved over time.

*American Government: Institutions and Policies, Brief Version*, 13e is written around certain key ideas—the U.S. Constitution, America’s adversarial political culture, and a commitment to freedom and limited government—that help students understand not only American government, but the reasons why the government in this country is different from those in other democracies. This book is an attempt to explain and give the historical and practical reasons for these differences.

## New to This Edition

As always, the book is thoroughly revised to excite students’ interest about the latest in American politics and to encourage critical thinking. Updates reflect the latest scholarship and current events, including 2015 Supreme Court rulings on gay marriage and health care; the 2014 and 2016 elections; ongoing debates about the federal budget, immigration, taxes, and other key issues in American politics; and foreign-policy decisions on Iran, Russia, and Syria. Reworked Learning Objectives open, organize, and close each chapter, serving as a road map to key concepts and helping students assess their comprehension. Each chapter now contains a “Constitutional Connections” box to help students connect the topic to the nation’s founding. More visual aids are included throughout, including infographics in the appendix, new figures, and a striking new design.

We are also excited that Matthew S. Levendusky of the University of Pennsylvania joins us as a new coauthor. Matt’s expertise in areas including political polarization and the mass media, public opinion, and campaigns and elections has been a great asset to this edition.

## Instructor Companion Site

The Instructor Companion Site is an all-in-one multimedia online resource for class preparation, presentation, and testing. Accessible through Cengage.com with your faculty account, you will find available for download: book-specific Microsoft PowerPoint presentations, a Test Bank compatible with multiple learning management systems, and an Instructor’s Manual.

The Test Bank—Cengage Learning Testing Powered by Cognero—offers Blackboard, Moodle, Desire2Learn, Canvas and Angel formats, and contains learning objective-specific multiple-choice and essay questions for each chapter. Import the test bank into your LMS to edit, manage, or write your own questions, and to create tests.

The Instructor’s Manual contains chapter-specific learning objectives, an outline, key terms with definitions, and a chapter summary. Additionally, the Instructor’s Manual features a critical-thinking question, lecture launching suggestion, and an in-class activity for each learning objective.

The Microsoft PowerPoint presentations are ready-to-use, visual outlines of each chapter. These presentations are customized easily for your lectures. All content can be accessed through cengage.com, with your faculty account.



We hope this book helps your students grapple with the fundamental questions of American government, and understand who governs and to what ends. And we hope it inspires them to continue engaging with the exciting, dynamic world of American politics.

Sincerely,

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# Letter To Students

Dear Student:

Welcome to *American Government: Institutions and Policies, Brief Version, 13e*! We wrote this textbook to help you grapple with two of the fundamental questions of American government and politics: who governs, and to what ends? The textbook will help you to answer these questions, and to better understand how the structure of American government determines the policies that we see. The material we include—from Learning Objectives to features such as Constitutional Connections—will help you master key concepts and topics, and apply them from the classroom to everyday political life.

- **Learning Objectives** open and close each chapter, serving as a road map to the book's key concepts and helping you to assess your understanding.
- **Now and Then** chapter-opening vignettes explore a particular topic in the past and in the present, reinforcing the historical emphasis of the text and applying these experiences to the world around you today.
- **Constitutional Connections** features raise analytical issues from the constitutional debates that remain relevant today.
- **Landmark Cases** provide brief descriptions of important Supreme Court cases.
- **How We Compare** features show how other nations around the world structure their governments and policies, and ask you to think about the consequences of these differences with American democracy.
- **To Learn More** sections close each chapter with carefully selected Web resources and classic and contemporary suggested readings to further assist you in learning about American politics.

We hope all of these resources help you to master the material in the course and gain a richer understanding of American government and democracy. We also hope that this textbook encourages you to continue your intellectual journey in American politics, and that understanding how the political process functions will inspire you to become involved in some way. How will you shape who governs, and to what ends?

Sincerely,

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James Q. Wilson most recently taught at Boston College and Pepperdine University. He was Professor Emeritus of Management and Public Administration at the University of California Los Angeles and was previously Shattuck Professor of Government at Harvard University. He had written more than a dozen books on the subjects of public policy, bureaucracy, and political philosophy. Dr. Wilson was president of the American Political Science Association (APSA), and he is the only political scientist to win three of the four lifetime achievement awards presented by the APSA. He received the Presidential Medal of Freedom, the nation's highest civilian award, in 2003. Dr. Wilson passed away in March 2012 after battling cancer. His work helped shape the field of political science in the United States. His many years of service to his *American Government* book remain evident on every page and will continue for many editions to come.

## John J. Dilulio, Jr.

John J. Dilulio, Jr. is a Professor of Political Science at the University of Pennsylvania and has won each of Penn's most prestigious teaching awards. He was previously Professor of Politics and Public Affairs at Princeton University. Dr. Dilulio received his Ph.D. in Political Science from Harvard University. He has been a senior fellow and directed research programs at several leading think tanks, including the Brookings Institution, and has won awards from the Association of Public Policy Analysis and Management, the APSA, and other bodies. Dr. Dilulio has advised presidential candidates in both parties, served on bipartisan government reform commissions, and worked as a senior staff member in the White House.

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Matthew S. Levendusky is Associate Professor of Political Science at the University of Pennsylvania. He received his Ph.D. from Stanford University (2006). Dr. Levendusky teaches courses in public opinion, campaigns and elections, policymaking, and political polarization. He has written two books on political polarization and the mass media, both published with the University of Chicago Press.

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## CHAPTER 1

# The Study of American Government

### LEARNING OBJECTIVES

- 1-1** Explain how politics drives democracy.
- 1-2** Discuss five views of how political power is distributed in the United States.
- 1-3** Explain why “who governs?” and “to what ends?” are fundamental questions in American politics.
- 1-4** Summarize the key concepts for classifying the politics of different policy issues.

**issue** A conflict, real or apparent, between the interests, ideas, or beliefs of different citizens.

**politics** The activity by which an issue is agitated or settled.

Today, Americans and their elected leaders are hotly debating the federal government's fiscal responsibilities, for both spending and taxation.

Some things never change.

## THEN

In 1786, a committee of Congress reported that since the Articles of Confederation were

adopted in 1781, the state governments had paid only about one-seventh of the monies requisitioned by the federal government. The federal government was broke and sinking deeper into debt, including debt owed to foreign governments. Several states had financial crises, too.

In 1788, the proposed Constitution's chief architect, James Madison, argued that while the federal government needed its own "power of taxation" and "collectors of revenue," its overall powers would remain "few and defined" and its taxing power would be used sparingly.<sup>1</sup> In reply, critics of the proposed Constitution—including the famous patriot Patrick Henry—mocked Madison's view and predicted that if the Constitution were ratified, there would over time be "an immense increase of taxes" spent by an ever-growing federal government.<sup>2</sup>

## NOW

The federal budget initially proposed for 2016 called for spending almost \$4 trillion, with close to a \$500 billion deficit (i.e., spending nearly half a trillion more than projected government revenues). An expected national debt of more than \$19 trillion, much of it borrowed from foreign nations, was projected to balloon to \$26 trillion by 2025. Projected interest on the national debt in 2016 would be nearly \$300 billion, and was expected to triple by 2025.<sup>3</sup>

The Budget Control Act of 2011 had called for long-term deficit reduction, but when the White House and Congress could not reach agreement in 2013, automatic spending cuts—known as "sequestration"—went into effect, and the federal government even shut down for 16 days in October 2013. The two branches ultimately produced the Bipartisan Budget Act of 2013, but could not find common ground on questions about long-term revenue and spending goals.

So, in the 1780s, as in the 2010s, nearly everyone agreed that government's finances were a huge mess and that bold action was required, and soon; but in each case, then and now, there was no consensus about what action to take, or when.

## 1-1 Politics and Democracy

This might seem odd. After all, it may appear that the government's financial problems, including big budget deficits and revenue shortfalls, could be solved by simple arithmetic: either spend and borrow less, or tax more, or both. But now ask: Spend or borrow less for what, and raise taxes on whom, when, how, and by how much?

For example, should we cut the defense budget but continue to fund health care programs, or the reverse? Or should we keep defense and health care funding at current levels, but reduce spending on environmental protection or homeland security? Should we perhaps increase taxes on the wealthy (define *wealthy*) and cut taxes for the middle class (define *middle class*), or ... what?

Then, as now, the fundamental government finance problems were *political*, not mathematical. People disagreed not only over how much the federal government should tax and spend, but also over whether it should involve itself at all in various endeavors. For example, in 2011, the federal government nearly shut down—not mainly over disagreements between the two parties about how much needed to be cut from the federal budget (in the end, the agreed-to cuts totaled \$38.5 billion), but primarily over whether any federal funding at all should go to certain relatively small-budget federal health, environmental, and other programs.

Fights over taxes and government finances; battles over abortion, school prayer, and gay rights; disputes about where to store nuclear waste; competing plans on immigration, international trade, welfare reform, environmental protection, or gun control; and contention surrounding a new health care proposal. Some of these matters are mainly about money and economic interests. Others are more about ideas and personal beliefs. Some people care a lot about at least some of these matters; others seem to care little or not at all.

Regardless, all such matters and countless others have this in common: each is an **issue**, defined as a conflict, real or apparent, between the interests, ideas, or beliefs of different citizens.<sup>4</sup>

An issue may be more apparent than real. For example, people might fight over two tax plans that, despite superficial differences, would actually distribute tax burdens on different groups in exactly the same way. Or an issue may be as real as it seems to the conflicting parties, as, for example, it is in matters that pose clear-cut choices (e.g., high tariffs or no tariffs; abortion legal in all cases or illegal in all cases).

And an issue might be more about conflicts over means than over ends. For example, on health care reform or other issues, legislators who are in the same party and have similar ideological leanings (like a group of liberal Democrats, or a group of conservative Republicans) might agree on objectives but still wrangle bitterly with each other over different means of achieving their goals. Or, they might agree on both ends and means but differ over priorities (which goals to pursue first), timing (when to proceed), or tactics (how to proceed).

Whatever form issues take, they are the raw materials of politics. By **politics** we mean "the activity—negotiation, argument, discussion, application of force, persuasion, etc.—by which an issue is agitated or settled."<sup>5</sup> There are many different ways that any given issue can be agitated (brought to attention, stimulate conflict) or settled (brought to an accommodation, stimulate consensus). And there are many different ways that government can agitate or settle, foster or frustrate political conflict.

As you begin this textbook, this is a good time to ask yourself which issues matter to you. Do you care a lot, a little, or not at all about economic issues, social issues, or issues involving foreign policy or military affairs? Do you follow any ongoing debates on issues such as tightening gun control laws, expanding health care insurance, regulating immigration, or funding antipoverty programs?

As you will learn in Part II of this textbook, some citizens are quite issue-oriented and politically active. They vote and try to influence others to vote likewise; they join political campaigns or give money to candidates; they stay informed about diverse issues, sign petitions, advocate for new laws, or communicate with elected leaders; and more.

But such politically attentive and engaged citizens are the exception to the rule, most especially among young adult citizens under age 30. According to many experts, ever more young Americans are closer to being “political dropouts” than they are to being “engaged citizens”—a fact that is made no less troubling by similar trends in the United Kingdom, Canada, Scandinavia, and elsewhere.<sup>6</sup> Many high school and college students believe getting “involved in our democracy” means volunteering for community service, but not voting.<sup>7</sup> Most young Americans do not regularly read or closely follow political news; most know little about how government works and exhibit no “regular interest in politics.”<sup>8</sup> In response to such concerns, various analysts and study commissions have made proposals ranging from compulsory voting to enhanced “civic education” in high schools.<sup>9</sup>

The fact that you are reading this textbook tells us that you probably have some interest in American politics and government. Our goal is to develop, enliven, and inform that interest by examining concepts, interests, and institutions in American politics from a historical perspective as well as through current policy debates.

## Power, Authority, and Legitimacy

Politics, and the processes by which issues are normally agitated or settled, involves the exercise of power. By **power**, we mean the ability of one person to get another person to act in accordance with the first person’s intentions. Sometimes an exercise of power is obvious, as when the president tells the Air Force that it cannot build a new bomber, or orders soldiers into combat in a foreign land. Other times an exercise of power is subtle, as when the president’s junior speechwriters, reflecting their own evolving views, adopt a new tone when writing about controversial issues such as education policy. The speechwriters may not think they are using power—after all, they are the president’s subordinates and may see their boss face to face infrequently. But if the president speaks the phrases that they craft, then they have used power.

Power is found in all human relationships, but we are concerned here only with power as it is used to affect who will hold government office and how government will behave. We limit our view here to government, and chiefly to the American federal government. However, we pay special attention repeatedly to how things once thought to be “private” matters become “public”—that is, how they manage

to become objects of governmental action. Indeed, as we discuss more later, one of the most striking transformations of American politics has been the extent to which, in recent decades, almost every aspect of human life has found its way onto the political agenda.

People who exercise political power may or may not have the authority to do so. By **authority** we mean the right to use power. The exercise of rightful power—that is, of authority—is ordinarily easier than the exercise of power not supported by any persuasive claim of right. We accept decisions, often without question, if they are made by people who we believe have the right to make them; we may bow to naked power because we cannot resist it, but by our recalcitrance or our resentment we put the users of naked power to greater trouble than the wielders of authority. In this book, we on occasion speak of “formal authority.” By this we mean that the right to exercise power is vested in a governmental office. A president, a senator, and a federal judge have formal authority to take certain actions.

What makes power rightful varies from time to time and from country to country. In the United States, we usually say a person has political authority if his or her right to act in a certain way is conferred by a law or by a state or national constitution. But what makes a law or constitution a source of right? That is the question of **legitimacy**. In the United States, the Constitution today is widely, if not unanimously, accepted as a source of legitimate authority, but that was not always the case.

## Defining Democracy

On one matter, virtually all Americans seem to agree: no exercise of political power by government at any level is legitimate if it is not in some sense democratic.

That wasn’t always the prevailing view. In 1787, as the Framers drafted the Constitution, Alexander Hamilton worried that the new government he helped create might be too democratic, while George Mason, who refused to sign the Constitution, worried that it was not democratic enough. Today, however, almost everyone believes that democratic government is the only proper kind. Most people believe that American government is democratic; some believe that other institutions of public life—schools, universities, corporations, trade unions, churches—also should be run on democratic principles if they are to be legitimate; and some insist that promoting democracy abroad ought to be a primary purpose of U.S. foreign policy.

**Democracy** is a word with at least two different meanings. First, the term *democracy* is used to describe those regimes that come as close as possible to Aristotle’s

**power** The ability of one person to get another person to act in accordance with the first person’s intentions.

**authority** The right to use power.

**legitimacy** Political authority conferred by law or by a state or national constitution.

**democracy** The rule of the many.



**direct or participatory democracy**

A government in which all or most citizens participate directly.

**representative democracy**

A government in which leaders make decisions by winning a competitive struggle for the popular vote.

definition—the “rule of the many.”<sup>10</sup> A government is democratic if all, or most, of its citizens participate directly in either holding office or making policy. This often is called **direct or participatory democracy**. In Aristotle’s time—Greece in the 4th century B.C.—such a government was possible. The Greek city-state, or *polis*, was quite small, and within it citizenship was extended to all free adult male property holders. (Slaves, women, minors, and those without property

were excluded from participation in government.) In more recent times, the New England town meeting approximates the Aristotelian ideal. In such a meeting, the adult citizens of a community gather once or twice a year to vote directly on all major issues and expenditures of the town. As towns have become larger and issues more complicated, many town governments have abandoned the pure town meeting in favor of either the representative town meeting (in which a large number of elected representatives, perhaps 200–300, meet to vote on town affairs) or representative government (in which a small number of elected city councilors make decisions).

The second definition of *democracy* is the principle of governance of most nations that are called democratic. It was most concisely stated by economist Joseph Schumpeter: “The democratic method is that institutional arrangement for arriving at political decisions in which individuals [i.e., leaders] acquire the power to decide by means of a competitive struggle for the people’s vote.”<sup>11</sup> Sometimes this method is called, approvingly, **representative democracy**; at other times it is referred to, disapprovingly, as the elitist theory of democracy. It is justified by two arguments. First, it is impractical, owing to limits of time, information, energy, interest, and expertise, for the public at large to decide on public policy, but it is not impractical to expect them to make reasonable choices among competing leadership groups. Second, some people (including, as we shall see in the next chapter, many of the Framers of the Constitution) believe direct democracy is likely to lead to bad decisions because people often decide large issues on the basis of fleeting passions and in response to popular demagogues. This concern about direct democracy persists today, as evidenced by the statements of leaders who disagree with voter decisions. For example, voters in many states have rejected referenda that would have increased public funding for private schools. Politicians who oppose the defeated referenda speak approvingly of the “will of the people,” but politicians who favor them speak disdainfully of “mass misunderstanding.”

Whenever we refer to that form of democracy involving the direct participation of all or most citizens, we use the term *direct or participatory democracy*. Whenever the word *democracy* is used alone in this book, it will have the meaning Schumpeter gave it. Schumpeter’s definition usefully

implies basic benchmarks that enable us to judge the extent to which any given political system is democratic.<sup>12</sup> A political system is *nondemocratic* to the extent that it denies equal voting rights to part of its society and severely limits (or outright prohibits) “the civil and political freedoms to speak, publish, assemble, and organize,”<sup>13</sup> all of which are necessary to a truly “competitive struggle for the people’s vote.” A partial list of nondemocratic political systems would include absolute monarchies, empires, military dictatorships, authoritarian systems, and totalitarian states.<sup>14</sup>

Scholars of comparative politics and government have much to teach about how different types of political systems—democratic and nondemocratic—arise, persist, and change. For our present purposes, however, it is most important to understand that America itself was once far less democratic than it is today and that it was so not by accident but by design. As we discuss in the next chapter, the men who wrote the Constitution did not use the word *democracy* in that document. They wrote instead of a “republican form of government,” but by that they meant what we call “representative democracy.” And, as we emphasize when discussing civil liberties and civil rights (see Chapters 4 and 5), and again when discussing political participation (see Chapter 8), the United States was not born as a full-fledged representative democracy. And for all the progress of the past half-century or so, the nation’s representative democratic character is still very much a work in progress.

For any representative democracy to work, there must, of course, be an opportunity for genuine leadership competition. This requires in turn that individuals and parties be able to run for office; that communications (through speeches or the press, in meetings, and on the Internet) be free; and that the voters perceive that a meaningful choice exists. But what, exactly, constitutes a “meaningful choice”? How many offices should be elective and how many appointive? How many candidates or parties can exist before the choices become hopelessly confused? Where will the money come from to finance electoral campaigns? There are many answers to such questions. In some European democracies, for example, very few offices—often just those in the national or local



**IMAGE 1-1** Immigration reform advocates organize a rally to build popular support for their cause.

legislature—are elective, and much of the money for campaigning for these offices comes from the government. In the United States, many offices—executive and judicial as well as legislative—are elective, and most of the money the candidates use for campaigning comes from industry, labor unions, and private individuals.

Some people have argued that the virtues of direct or participatory democracy can and should be reclaimed even in a modern, complex society. This can be done either by allowing individual neighborhoods in big cities to govern themselves (community control) or by requiring those affected by some government program to participate in its formulation (citizen participation). In many states, a measure of direct democracy exists when voters can decide on referendum issues—that is, policy choices that appear on the ballot. The proponents of direct democracy defend it as the only way to ensure that the “will of the people” prevails.

As we discuss in the nearby Constitutional Connections feature, and as we explore more in Chapter 2, the Framers of the Constitution did not think that the “will of the people” was synonymous with the “common interest” or the “public good.” They strongly favored representative democracy over direct democracy, and they believed that elected officials could best ascertain what was in the public interest.

## 1-2 Political Power in America: Five Views

Scholars differ in their interpretations of the American political experience. Where some see a steady march of democracy, others see no such thing. Where some emphasize how voting and other rights have been steadily expanded, others stress how they were denied to so many for so long, and so forth. Short of attempting to reconcile these competing historical interpretations, let us step back now for a moment to our definition of representative democracy and five competing views about how political power has been distributed in America.

*Representative democracy* is defined as any system of government in which leaders are authorized to make decisions—and thereby to wield political power—by winning a competitive struggle for the popular vote. It is obvious then that very different sets of hands can control political power, depending on what kinds of people can become leaders, how the struggle for votes is carried on, how much freedom to act is given to those who win the struggle, and what other sorts of influence (besides the desire for popular approval) affect the leaders’ actions.

The actual distribution of political power in a representative democracy will depend on the composition of the political elites who are involved in the struggles for power and over policy. By **elite**, we mean an identifiable group of persons who possess a disproportionate share of some valued resource—in this case, political power.

There are at least five views about how political power is distributed in America: 1. the **class view** (wealthy capitalists and other economic elites determine most policies); 2. the **power elite view** (a group of business, military, labor union, and elected officials controls most decisions); 3. the **bureaucratic view** (appointed bureaucrats ultimately run everything); 4. the **pluralist view** (representatives of a large number of interest groups are in charge); and 5. the **credal passion view** (morally impassioned elites drive political change).

The first view began with the theories of Karl Marx, who, in the 19th century, argued that governments were dominated by business owners (the “bourgeoisie”) until a revolution replaced them with rule by laborers (the “proletariat”).<sup>15</sup> But strict Marxism has collapsed in most countries. Today, a **class view**, though it may derive inspiration from Marx,

**elite** Persons who possess a disproportionate share of some valued resource, such as money, prestige, or expertise.

**class view** View that the government is dominated by capitalists.



### CONSTITUTIONAL CONNECTIONS

#### Deciding What’s Legitimate

Much of American political history has been a struggle over what constitutes legitimate authority. The Constitutional Convention in 1787 was an effort to see whether a new, more powerful federal government could be made legitimate; the succeeding administrations of George Washington, John Adams, and Thomas Jefferson were in large measure preoccupied with disputes over the kinds of decisions that were legitimate for the federal government to make. The Civil War was a bloody struggle over slavery and the legitimacy of the federal union; the New Deal of Franklin Roosevelt was hotly debated by those who disagreed over whether it was

legitimate for the federal government to intervene deeply in the economy. Not uncommonly, the federal judiciary functions as the ultimate arbiter of what is legitimate in the context of deciding what is or is not constitutional (see Chapter 16). For instance, in 2012, amidst a contentious debate over the legitimacy of the federal health care law that was enacted in 2010, the U.S. Supreme Court decided that the federal government could require individuals to purchase health insurance but could not require states to expand health care benefits for citizens participating in the federal–state program known as Medicaid.

**power elite view** View that the government is dominated by a few top leaders, most of whom are outside of government.

**bureaucratic view** View that the government is dominated by appointed officials.

**pluralist view** View that competition among all affected interests shapes public policy.

**creedal passion view** View that morally impassioned elites drive important political changes.

**bureaucratic view** was first set forth by German scholar Max Weber (1864–1920). He argued that in order to become successful, the modern state puts its affairs in the hands of appointed bureaucrats whose competence is essential to the management of complex affairs.<sup>17</sup> These officials, invisible to most people, have mastered the written records and legislative details of the government and do more than just implement democratic policies; they actually make those policies.

The fourth view holds that political resources—such as money, prestige, expertise, and access to the mass media—have become so widely distributed that no single elite, no social class, no bureaucratic arrangement, can control them. Many 20th-century political scientists, among them David B. Truman, adopted a **pluralist view**.<sup>18</sup> In the United States, they argued, political resources are broadly shared in part because there are so many governmental institutions (cities, states, school boards) and so many rival institutions (legislatures, executives, judges, bureaucrats) that no single group can dominate most, or even much, of the political process.

The fifth view maintains that while each of the other four views is correct with respect to how power is distributed on certain issues or during political “business as usual” periods, each also misses how the most important policy decisions and political changes are influenced by morally impassioned elites who are motivated less by economic self-interest than they are by an almost religious zeal to bring government institutions and policies into line with democratic ideals. Samuel P. Huntington articulated this **creedal passion view**, offering the examples of Patrick Henry and the revolutionaries of the 1770s, the advocates of Jackson-style democracy in the

is less dogmatic and emphasizes the power of “the rich” or the leaders of multinational corporations.

The second view ties business leaders together with other elites whose perceived power is of concern to the view’s adherents. These elites may include top military officials, labor union leaders, mass media executives, and the heads of a few special-interest groups. Derived from the work of sociologist C. Wright Mills, this **power elite view** argues that American democracy is dominated by a few top leaders, many of them wealthy or privately powerful, who do not hold elective office.<sup>16</sup>

The third view is that appointed officials run everything despite the efforts of elected officials and the public to control them. The

1820s, the progressive reformers of the early 20th century, and the leaders of the civil rights and antiwar movements in the mid-20th century.<sup>19</sup>

## 1-3 Who Governs? To What Ends?

So, which view is correct? At one level, all are correct, at least in part: Economic class interests, powerful cadres of elites, entrenched bureaucrats, competing pressure groups, and morally impassioned individuals have all at one time or another wielded political power and played a part in shaping our government and its policies.

But, more fundamentally, understanding any political system means being able to give reasonable answers to each of two separate but related questions about it: Who governs, and to what ends?

We want to know the answer to the first question because we believe that those who rule—their personalities and beliefs, their virtues and vices—will affect what they do to and for us. Many people think they already know the answer to the question, and they are prepared to talk and vote on that basis. That is their right, and the opinions they express may be correct.

But they also may be wrong. Indeed, many of these opinions must be wrong because they are in conflict. When asked, “Who governs?” some people will say “the unions” and some will say “big business”; others will say “the politicians,” “the people,” or “the special interests.” Still others will say “Wall Street,” “the military,” “crackpot liberals,” “the media,” “the bureaucrats,” or “white males.” Not all these answers can be correct—at least not all of the time.

The answer to the second question is important because it tells us how government affects our lives. We want to know not only who governs, but what difference it makes who governs. In our day-to-day lives, we may not think government makes much difference at all. In one sense that is right because our most pressing personal concerns—work, play, love, family, health—essentially are private matters on which government touches but slightly. But in a larger and longer perspective, government makes a substantial difference. Consider that in 1935, 96 percent of all American families paid no federal income tax, and for the 4 percent or so who did pay, the average rate was only about 4 percent of their incomes. Today almost all families pay federal payroll taxes, and the average rate is about 20 percent of their incomes. Or consider that in 1960, in many parts of the country, African Americans could ride only in the backs of buses, had to use washrooms and drinking fountains that were labeled “colored,” and could not be served in most public restaurants. While racism remains an important problem, such legal restrictions have largely been eliminated, in large part because of decisions by the federal government.

It is important to bear in mind that we wish to answer two different questions, and not two versions of the same question. You cannot always predict what goals government will establish by knowing only who governs, nor can you



always tell who governs by knowing what activities government undertakes. Most people holding national political office are middle-class, middle-aged, white, Protestant males, but we cannot then conclude that the government will adopt only policies that are to the narrow advantage of the middle class, the middle-aged, whites, Protestants, or men. If we thought that, we would be at a loss to explain why the rich are taxed more heavily than the poor, why the War on Poverty was declared, why constitutional amendments giving rights to African Americans and women passed Congress by large majorities, or why Catholics and Jews have been appointed to so many important governmental posts.

This book is devoted chiefly to answering the question, *who governs*? It is written in the belief that this question cannot be answered without looking at how government makes—or fails to make—decisions about a large variety of concrete issues. Thus, in this book we inspect government policies to see what individuals, groups, and institutions seem to exert the greatest power in the continuous struggle to define the purposes of government.



## HOW WE COMPARE

### Academic Freedom

You are reading a textbook on American government, but how is the freedom to study, teach, or do research protected from undue government interference? And how do European democracies protect academic freedom?

The U.S. Constitution does not mention academic freedom. Rather, in America, the federal and state courts have typically treated academic freedom, at least in tax-supported universities, as “free speech” strongly protected under the First Amendment.

In each of nine European nations, the constitution is silent on academic freedom, but various national laws protect it. In 13 other European nations, academic freedom is protected both by explicit constitutional language and by national legislation. But is academic freedom better protected in these nations than in either the United States or elsewhere in Europe?

Not necessarily. Germany’s constitution states that “research and teaching are free” but subject to “loyalty to the constitution.” Italy’s constitution offers lavish protections for academic freedom, but its national laws severely restrict those same freedoms.

The United Kingdom has no written constitution, but its national laws regarding academic freedom (and university self-governance) are quite restrictive by American standards.

**Source:** Terence Karran, “Freedom in Europe: A Preliminary Analysis,” *Higher Education Policy* 20 (2007): 289–313.

## Expanding the Political Agenda

No matter who governs, the most important decision that affects policymaking is also the least noticed one: deciding what to make policy *about*, or in the language of political science, deciding what belongs on the **political agenda**. The political agenda consists of issues that people believe require governmental action. We take for granted that politics is about certain familiar issues such as taxes, energy, welfare, civil rights, and homeland security. We forget that there is nothing inevitable about having these issues, rather than some other ones, on the nation’s political agenda.

For example, at one time it was unconstitutional for the federal government to levy income taxes; energy was a non-issue because everyone (or at least everyone who could chop down trees for firewood) had enough; welfare was something for cities and towns to handle; civil rights were supposed to be a matter of private choice rather than government action; “homeland security” was not in the political lexicon, and a huge federal cabinet department by that name was nowhere on the horizon.

Because many people believe that whatever the government now does it ought to continue doing, and because changes in attitudes and the impact of events tend to increase the number of things that government does, the political agenda is always growing larger. Thus, today there are far fewer debates about the legitimacy of a proposed government policy than there were in the 1920s or the 1930s.

Popular views regarding what belongs on the political agenda often are changed by events. During wartime or after a terrorist attack on this country, many people expect the government to do whatever is necessary to win, whether or not such actions are clearly authorized by the

### *political agenda*

Issues that people believe require governmental action.



**IMAGE 1-2** Seeing first responders in action in the immediate aftermath of 9/11, Americans felt powerfully connected to their fellow citizens.

Steve Wood/REX/News.com

Constitution. Economic depressions or deep recessions, such as the ones that began in 1929 and 2007, also lead many people to expect the government to take action. A coal mine disaster leads to an enlarged governmental role in promoting mine safety. A series of airplane hijackings leads to a change in public opinion so great that what once would have been unthinkable—requiring all passengers at airports to be searched before boarding their flights—becomes routine.

But sometimes the government enlarges the political agenda, often dramatically, without any crisis or widespread public demand. This may happen even at a time when the conditions at which a policy is directed are improving. For instance, there was no mass public demand for government action to make automobiles safer before 1966, when a law was passed imposing safety standards on cars. Though the number of auto fatalities (per 100 million miles driven) had gone up slightly just before the law was passed, in the long term, highway deaths had been more or less steadily trending downward.

It is not easy to explain why the government adds new issues to its agenda and adopts new programs when there is little public demand and when, in fact, there has been an improvement in the conditions to which the policies are addressed. In general, the explanation may be found in the behavior of groups, the workings of institutions, the media, and the action of state governments.

## Groups

Many policies are the result of small groups of people enlarging the scope of government by their demands. Sometimes these are organized interests (e.g., corporations or unions); sometimes they are intense but unorganized groups (e.g., urban minorities). The organized groups often work quietly, behind the scenes; the intense, unorganized ones may take their causes to the streets.

For example, organized labor favored a tough federal safety law governing factories and other workplaces, not because it was unaware that factory conditions had been improving, but because the standards by which union leaders and members judged working conditions had risen even faster. As people became better off, conditions that once were thought normal suddenly became intolerable.

## Government Institutions

Among the institutions whose influence on agenda-setting has become especially important are the courts and the bureaucracy. The courts can make decisions that force the hand of the other branches of government. For example, when in 1954 the Supreme Court ordered schools desegregated, Congress and the White House could no longer ignore the issue. Local resistance to implementing the order led President Dwight D. Eisenhower to send troops to Little Rock, Arkansas, despite his dislike for using force against local governments.

Similarly, when the Supreme Court ruled in 1973 that the states could not ban abortions during the first trimester of pregnancy, abortion suddenly became a national political issue. Right-to-life activists campaigned to reverse the

Court's decision or, failing that, to prevent federal funds from being used to pay for abortions. Pro-choice activists fought to prevent the Court from reversing course and to get federal funding for abortions.

In these and many other cases, the courts act like trip wires: When activated, they set off a chain reaction of events that alters the political agenda and creates a new constellation of political forces.

The bureaucracy has acquired a new significance in American politics not simply because of its size or power but also because it is now a source of political innovation. At one time, the federal government *reacted* to events in society and to demands from segments of society; ordinarily it did not itself propose changes and new ideas. Today, the bureaucracy is so large and includes within it so great a variety of experts and advocates, that it has become a *source* of policy proposals as well as an implementer of those that become law.

## Media

National news organizations can either help place new matters on the agenda or publicize those matters placed there by others. There was a close correlation between the political attention given in the Senate to proposals for new safety standards for industry, coal mines, and automobiles and the amount of space devoted to these questions in the pages of *The New York Times*. Newspaper interest in the matter, low before the issue was placed on the agenda, peaked at about the time the bill was passed.<sup>20</sup>

It is hard, of course, to decide which is the cause and which the effect. The press may have stimulated congressional interest in the matter or merely reported on what Congress had already decided to pursue. Nonetheless, the press must choose which of thousands of proposals it will cover. The beliefs of editors and reporters led it to select the safety issue.

## Action by the States

National policy increasingly is being made by the actions of state governments. You may wonder how. After all, a state can only pass laws that affect its own people. Of course, the national government may later adopt ideas pioneered in the states, as it did when Congress passed a “Do Not Call” law to reduce how many phone calls you will get from salespeople while you are trying to eat dinner. The states had taken the lead on this issue.

But there is another way in which state governments can make national policy directly without Congress ever voting on the matter. The attorneys general of states may sue a business firm and settle the suit with an agreement that binds the industry throughout the country.

The effect of one suit was to raise prices for consumers and create a new set of regulations. This is what happened in 1998 with the tobacco agreement negotiated between cigarette companies and some state attorneys general. The companies agreed to raise their prices, pay more than \$240 billion to state governments (to use as they wished) and several billion dollars to private lawyers, and comply with a massive regulatory program. A decade later, the federal government

passed laws that reinforced the states' regulations, culminating in the Family Smoking Prevention Tobacco Control Act of 2009.

## 1-4 The Politics of Different Issues

Once an issue is on the political agenda, its nature affects the kind of politicking that ensues. Some issues provoke intense interest group conflict; others allow one group to prevail almost unchallenged. Some issues involve ideological appeals to broad national constituencies; others involve quiet bargaining in congressional offices. We all know that private groups try to influence government policies; we often forget that the nature of the issues with which government is dealing influences the kinds of groups that become politically active.

One way to understand why government handles a given issue as it does is to examine what appear to be the costs and benefits of the proposed policy. The **cost** is any burden, monetary or nonmonetary, that some people must bear or believe they must bear, if the policy is adopted. The costs of a government spending program are the taxes it entails; the cost of a foreign policy initiative may be the increased chance of having the nation drawn into war.

The **benefit** is any satisfaction, monetary or nonmonetary, that people believe they will enjoy if the policy is adopted. The benefits of a government spending program are the payments, subsidies, or contracts received by some people; the benefits of a foreign policy initiative may include the enhanced security of the nation, the protection of a valued ally, or the vindication of some important principle such as human rights.

Two aspects of these costs and benefits should be borne in mind. First, it is the *perception* of costs and benefits that affects politics. People may think the cost of an auto emissions control system is paid by the manufacturer, when it is actually passed on to the consumer in the form of higher prices and reduced performance. Political conflict over pollution control will take one form when people think that the polluting industries pay the costs and another form when they think that the consumers pay.

Second, people take into account not only who benefits but also whether it is legitimate for that group to benefit. When programs providing financial assistance to women with dependent children were first developed in the early part of the 20th century, they were relatively noncontroversial because people saw the money as going to widows and orphans who deserved such aid. Later on, giving aid to mothers with dependent children became controversial because some people now perceived the recipients not as deserving widows but as irresponsible women who had never married. Whatever the truth of the matter, the program had lost some of its legitimacy because the beneficiaries were no longer seen as "deserving." By the same token, groups once thought undeserving, such as men out of work, were later thought to be entitled to aid, and thus the unemployment compensation program acquired a legitimacy that it once lacked.

Politics is in large measure a process of raising and settling disputes over who *will* benefit or pay for a program and who *ought* to benefit or pay. Because beliefs about the results of a program and the rightness of those results are matters of opinion, it is evident that ideas are at least as important as interests in shaping politics. In recent years, ideas have become especially important with the rise of issues whose consequences are largely intangible, such as abortion, school prayer, and gay rights.

Though perceptions about costs and benefits change, most people most of the time prefer government programs that provide substantial benefits to them at low cost. This rather obvious fact can have important implications for how politics is carried out. In a political system based on some measure of popular rule, public officials have a strong incentive to offer programs that confer—or appear to confer—benefits on people with costs either small in amount, remote in time, or borne by "somebody else." Policies that seem to impose high, immediate costs in return for small or remote benefits will be avoided, enacted with a minimum of publicity, or proposed only in response to a real or apparent crisis.

Ordinarily, no president would propose a policy that would immediately raise the cost of fuel, even if he were convinced that future supplies of oil and gasoline were likely to be exhausted unless higher prices reduced current consumption. But when a crisis occurs, such as the Arab oil cartel's price increases beginning in 1973, it becomes possible for the president to offer such proposals—as did Nixon, Ford, and Carter in varying ways. Even then, however, people are reluctant to bear increased costs, and thus many are led to dispute the president's claim that an emergency actually exists.

### Four Types of Politics

These entirely human responses to the perceived costs and benefits of proposed policies can be organized into a simple theory of politics.<sup>21</sup> It is based on the observation that the costs and benefits of a policy may be *widely distributed* (spread over many, most, or even all citizens) or *narrowly concentrated* (limited to a relatively small number of citizens or to some identifiable, organized group).

For instance, a widely distributed cost would include an income tax, a Social Security tax, or a high rate of crime. A widely distributed benefit might include retirement benefits for all citizens, clean air, national security, or low crime rates. Examples of narrowly concentrated costs include the expenditures by a factory to reduce its pollution, government regulations imposed on doctors and hospitals participating in the Medicare program, or restrictions on freedom of speech imposed on a dissident political group. Examples of narrowly concentrated benefits include subsidies to farmers or merchant ship companies, the enlarged freedom to

**cost** A burden that people believe they must bear if a policy is adopted.

**benefit** A satisfaction that people believe they will enjoy if a policy is adopted.