CHAPTER 1

The Study of American

Government

* Learning Objectives

1. What is meant by “politics”?
2. Can you give two definitions of “*democracy*”?
3. How is political power actually distributed in America?
4. What is the “political agenda” and why has it expanded?
5. How can you classify and explain the politics of different issues?

* SUMMARY OVERVIEW

Politics is a complicated topic and there are many factors to keep in mind when discussing the government, forming opinions, and making voting decisions. This text aims to provide the background information to assist you in developing your political beliefs.

**Issues** are the raw materials of politics. In order to understand **politics** we must understand the issues, how all parties see the issues, and the different forms issues come in. We must also understand what we mean when we talk about politics; i.e., the activity by which an issue is agitated or settled.

The American government has formal **authority;** i.e., the right to exercise power is vested in a governmental office. American politicians and the American government have **legitimacy** because their **power** is conferred by a law or by a state or national constitution.

How do Americans view democracy? How is democracy defined in America? **Democracy** has two meanings: Aristotle’s definition (participatory democracy) and **representative democracy** (how democracy operates in most nations). To understand the Constitution and American politics we must first understand the intent of the Founding Fathers.

***Distribution of Power.*** Representative democracy is viewed by scholars in five different ways:

* **Class View** (Karl Marx). This view has been condensed to its current interpretation that government is dominated by capitalists.
* **Power Elite View** (C. Wright Mills). This view holds that government is dominated by a few top leaders, most of whom are outside government.
* **Bureaucratic View** (Max Weber). This view states that government is dominated by appointed officials.
* **Pluralist View** (David B. Truman). This is the view that competition among all or most affected interests shapes policy.
* **Creedal Passion View** (Samuel P. Huntington). This view argues that morally impassioned elites drive important political changes.

***Who governs and to what ends?*** Knowing who governs, and what they stand for, provides insight into political decisions (what will be done to and for us). Knowing to what ends gives us an idea of how government affects our lives.

Politics consists of addressing the many issues our country faces on a daily basis; this is known as the **political agenda.** The political agenda is affected by:

* shared political values,
* the weight of custom and tradition,
* the impact of events, and
* changes in the way political elites think and talk about politics.

The political agenda is impacted by:

* the behavior of groups,
* the workings of institutions,
* the media,
* and the action of state governments.

We can attempt to understand how the government handles a given issue by examining the costs and benefits of the proposed policy. **Costs** and **benefits** can be reviewed based on the perception of costs and benefits that affect politics and whether or not it is legitimate for that group to benefit. This cost and benefit analysis toward government policies provides us with a “simple theory of politics.”

Another aspect of government is the four different types of politics:

* **Majoritarian.**  Almost everyone benefits and almost everyone pays.
* **Interest group.** One small group benefits and another small group pays.
* **Client.**  One small group benefits and almost everyone pays.
* **Entrepreneurial.** Almost everyone benefits and a small group pays the cost.

These types of politics provide us with some perspective as to how the cost benefit analysis of a governmental policy is interpreted by different schools of thought.

All of the items discussed in the text aim to give us insight into how preferences are formed, which helps us understand why those who wield power are able to do so; simply put, why we elect who we do.

We should take into account that a well-educated opinion of our government’s institutions and interests can only be formed after examining the behavior of elected officials toward a variety of issues. In order to form this educated opinion we must not only look at the current behavior of our government, but also history, tradition, and belief.

* Chapter Outline

1. **Issues and Politics**
2. **Power, Authority, and Legitimacy**
3. **What Is Democracy?**
4. **Political Power in America: Five Views**
5. **Who Governs—and to What Ends?**
6. **Expanding the Political Agenda**
7. Groups
8. Government Institutions
9. Media
10. Action by the States
11. **The Politics of Different Issues**
12. **Four Types of Politics**
13. Majoritarian Politics: Distributed Benefits, Distributed Costs
14. Interest Group Politics: Concentrated Benefits, Concentrated Costs
15. Client Politics: Concentrated Benefits, Distributed Costs
16. Entrepreneurial Politics: Distributed Benefits, Concentrated Costs
17. Policy Dynamics: Inside/Outside the Box
18. **Understanding Politics**

* TEACHING TOOLS

## Learning Objective 1: What is meant by “politics”?

***Critical Thinking Question***

How has the definition of *politics* changed since the Founding Fathers began creating the Constitution (Philadelphia Convention)? Has American politics improved since this time? Explain your answer.

***In-Class Activity***

How does politics affect this course? Should government play such a part in society? Start with the smaller venue of the classroom and then have students expand the discussion.

***Lecture Launcher***

Does politics affect your daily life? How? Should citizens concern themselves with such questions?

## Learning Objective 2: Can you give two definitions of “*democracy*”?

***Critical Thinking Question***

Explain the different forms of democracy presented in the text, then discuss why the Founding Fathers chose the form of democracy they did for the operation of the U. S. Government.

***In-Class Activity***

Debate the decision made by the Founding Fathers that representative democracy is favorable over direct or participatory government as the governing structure of the United States.

***Lecture Launcher***

There are many forms of government around the world; is democracy the best choice? Consider how government affects citizens’ lives.

## Learning Objective 3: How is political power actually distributed in America?

***Critical Thinking Question***

We have discussed five views of political power; explain each of these views and discuss what you feel is the dominant view of political power and why.

***In-Class Activity***

How does your instructor have power over this course? How does this power correlate to the power of the national government?

***Lecture Launcher***

According to *Federalist No. 51*: “You must first enable the government to control the governed, and in the next place oblige it to control itself.” Have contemporary governments upheld the principles as established by the Founding Fathers?

## Learning Objective 4: What is the “political agenda” and why has it expanded?

***Critical Thinking Question***

Discuss whether you feel the government creates the political agenda based on issues brought forth from the people or what they perceive to be issues of the people. Consider what your text says affects the political agenda.

***In-Class Activity***

Create a political agenda for this class. What outside forces affect the agenda and what power do those outside forces have to alter this agenda?

***Lecture Launcher***

Does the current political agenda address items you feel are important to you? Do you feel the government is in tune to its citizens?

## Learning Objective 5: How can you classify and explain the politics of different issues?

***Critical Thinking Question***

Explain how policies are evaluated for implementation by the government. What criteria are used for evaluation? Do you feel this is the best method; why or why not?

***In-Class Activity***

Have the class choose a topic to apply the cost-benefit analysis. Examples could come from their syllabus.

***Lecture Launcher***

Think about how you make a decision in your life; how does your process compare to that of the government?

* + Key Terms

**authority** The right to use power.

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

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

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

**client politics** A policy in which one small group benefits and almost everybody pays.

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

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

**democracy** The rule of the many.

**direct or participatory** A government in which all or most citizens participate

**democracy** directly.

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

**entrepreneurial politics** A policy in which almost everybody benefits and a small

group pays.

**interest group politics** A policy in which one small group benefits and another small group pays.

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

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

**log-rolling** A legislator supports a proposal favored by another in return for support of his or hers.

**majoritarian politics** A policy in which almost everybody benefits and almost everybody pays.

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

**policy entrepreneurs** Activists in or out of government who pull together a political majority on behalf of unorganized interests.

**political agenda** Issues that people believe require governmental action.

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

**pork-barrel legislation** Legislation that gives tangible benefits to constituents in several districts or states in the hope of winning their votes in return.

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

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

**representative democracy** A government in which leaders make decisions by winning a

competitive struggle for the popular vote.

* + INSTRUCTOR RESOURCES

Huntington, Samuel P. *American Politics: The Promise of Disharmony*. Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1981. A fascinating analysis of the American political experience as shaped by recurring “creedal passion” periods.

Marx, Karl, and Friedrich Engels. “The Manifesto of the Communist Party.” In *The Marx-Engels Reader*, 2d ed., edited by Robert C. Tucker. New York: Norton, 1978, 469–500. The classic and historic statement suggesting that government is a mere instrument of the economic elite (wealthy capitalists in the modern world).

Meyerson, Martin, and Edward C. Banfield. *Politics, Planning, and the Public Interest*. New York: Free Press, 1955. An understanding of issues and politics comparable to the approach adopted in this book.

Schumpeter, Joseph A. *Capitalism, Socialism, and Democracy*. 3d ed. New York: Harper Torchbooks, 1950, chs. 20–23. A lucid statement of the theory of representative democracy and how it differs from participatory democracy.

Truman, David B. *The Governmental Process: Political Interests and Public Opinion*. New York: Knopf, 1951. A pluralist interpretation of American politics.

Weber, Max. *From Max Weber: Essays in Sociology*. Translated and edited by H. H. Gerth and C. Wright Mills. London: Routledge & Kegan Paul, 1948, ch. 8. A theory of bureaucracy and its power.

Wilson, James Q. *Political Organizations*. New York: Basic Books, 1973. It is from a theory originally developed in this treatise that the four-box model of how to classify and explain the politics of different issues that is presented in this chapter was derived.