American Federal Government

Chapter 1 Notes

**America in the 21st Century**

Defining Politics and Government

* Government is America’s/humanities oldest and most universal institution
* Defining politics begins with the assumption that social conflict is inevitable
  + (i.e. disagreements over social priorities)
* Resolving these conflicts is the essence of politics
  + Harold Lasswell: “who gets what, when, and how”

Government and Authority

* Government is the individuals and institutions that make society’s rules and possesses the power and authority to enforce those rules
* Governments have 3 essential purposes
  + Resolve conflicts
  + Provide public services
  + Defend the nation and its culture

Resolving Conflict

* Disputes over distribution of natural resources (like land) are common, thus the need for government is apparent
* Government have power, or the ability to influence behaviors of others
* Also have authority, or the ability to use power that is legally and morally accepted
  + Both of these are central in government’s ability to make and enforce laws

Providing Public Services

* Public services, or services essential to people that they cannot do themselves
* Services for all and services for some:
  + Some public services are provided equally to all citizens
    - i.e. National defense, domestic law enforcement, etc.
  + Some services only provided to citizens in need
    - i.e. Health and welfare benefits
      * Note: everyone still pays taxes for these services, even if they don’t receive them
* Managing the Economy:
  + Biggest national government focus since 2008, after the stock market crash and subsequent recession
  + Government should protect against negative effects of recession (unemployment and inflation/deflation)

Defending the Nation and its Culture

* National security is a big expense and priority, with many institutes set in place to aid
  + i.e. the Military, CIA, NSA, etc.
* Foreign policy is the sole propriety of the federal government, not state-level
* All of this also attempts to preserve American culture

Government Systems

* Undemocratic Systems:
  + Autocracy – the power and authority in the hands of a single person
    - Monarchy, or government by king or queen, emperor, tsar or tsarina
      * Inherit powers
      * Absolute monarchs common historically
      * Divine Right Theory – god gave royals a lot of power
      * Constitutional monarchs – common today (Britain)
    - Dictatorship, or government where absolute power is in hands of individual or group without support by tradition
      * Communist China
      * Totalitarian, person controls every aspect of government and society (think Hitler)
* Democratic Systems:
  + The Athenian model of direct democracy
    - Democracy is ruler by the people
    - Direct democracy is where people participate directly in government decisions
      * Practiced in Athens
  + Direct Democracy Today
    - Direct democracy is nearly impossible toady
    - Ballot proposal is modern form of direct democracy
      * Referendum – legislatures send ballots proposals to voters
      * Initiative – Question placed on ballot through signatures, not legislatures
      * Recall – initiative to recall an elected official immediately
  + Representative Democracy
    - Will of majority expressed through smaller elected individuals and groups
    - Republic is a representative democracy with no king or queen. Almost the same as democracy
      * Presidential democracy – Law-making and law enforcing branches separate but equal
      * Parliamentary democracy – both branches united
* Other Forms of Government:
  + Aristocracy – rule by the best, usually old and noble families
  + Plutocracy – rule by the wealthy
  + Theocracy – Rule by deity, or god

American Democracy

* British Legacy
  + Limited Government
    - Magna Carta first established idea of limited government and basis for future constitutions
  + English Bill of Rights
    - Further extended concept of limited government
      * King/Queen couldn’t interfere with parliament elections
      * King/Queen had to have parliament approval to levy taxes or maintain an army
      * King/Queen must rule with consent of parliamentary representatives
    - Social Contracts and Natural Rights
      * Social contract is voluntary agreement among individuals to creat government and give government adequate power to secure mutual protection and welfare for all
      * Natural rights to life, liberty, and property
* Principles of American Democracy
  + Equality in voting
  + Individual freedom
  + Equal protection of the law
  + Majority rule and minority rights
  + Voluntary consent to be governed
* American Political Values
  + - Political culture – set of ideas, values, and attitudes about government held by a nation 🡪 Declaration of Independence
  + Liberty
    - Freedom of individuals to believe, act, and express themselves as they choose, as long as it doesn’t infringe on rights of other individuals in the society
  + Equality
    - Concept that all people are entitles to equal protection under the law
  + Property
    - Right to private ownership of materialistic and/or personal things/assets
      * Capitalism – America’s economic system based on private ownership of wealth-producing property. Think private corporations
* Political Values and divided electorate
  + 2006 = democrats in power of congress
  + 2008 = people think democrats failed to fix economic problems
  + 2010 = republicans take congress
  + Tea party movement – grassroots conservative movement opposing big government and taxes, rejects political compromise
* Political Values in a Changing Society
  + Race and Ethnicity
    - Multiple races in U.S. People threatened by immigration
  + An Older Society
    - Future years = more retired people than now, which makes SS, welfare, and Medicare difficult

American Political Ideology

* Conservatisms:
  + Limited role for national government in helping individuals and in economics, support for traditional values
  + Conservative movement – 1950’s-60’s developed modern conservatism
* Liberalism (Progressivism):
  + Advocacy of active government, like government intervention to improve welfare of individuals and protect civil rights
  + Moderates = middle ground people
* Beyond Conservatism and Liberalism:
  + Socialism = far left. Rare in U.S.
  + Libertarianism = far right. Government does hardly anything