CHAPTER

1

The Study of American Government

What Is Political Power?

What Is Democracy?

Is Representative Democracy Best?

How Is Power Distributed?

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WHO GOVERNS?

1. **How is political power actually distributed in America?**
2. **What explains major political change?**

TO WHAT ENDS?

1. **What value or values matter most in American democracy?**
2. **Are trade-offs among political purposes inevitable?**

After the 9/11 terrorist attacks on the United States, it took the national government many years to implement just a fraction of the bipartisan homeland security policies and programs that nearly everybody favored (such as deploying super-high-tech bomb-detection devices at airports and tightening security for cargo ships, among numerous others). Indeed, a half-decade after the attacks, the failure to act expeditiously on national directives to reinforce vulnerable-to-attack levees and dams figured in the devastation wrought when Hurricanes Katrina and Rita struck the Gulf Coast.

What was behind these historic failures? The answer, you may be surprised to learn, is the same thing that was behind the government's historic achievements in reducing poverty among the elderly, building the interstate highway system, improving public health, and rebuilding war-torn Europe. The answer is that sometimes things get done even when disunity reigns and power is divided between the parties.

The answer, in a word, is politics.

Politics exists in part because people normally differ about two things: who should govern, and the ends toward which they should work.

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 may also 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—are essentially private matters on which government touches but slightly. But in a larger and longer perspective government makes a substantial difference. Consider: 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 21 percent of their incomes. Or consider: 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. Such restrictions have been almost 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 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 chiefly devoted 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 shall 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. We shall see that power and purpose are inextricably intertwined.

★ What Is Political 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. Some claim it is exercised in subtle ways that may not be evident even to the participants, as when the president's junior speechwriters, reflecting their own evolving views, adopt a new tone when writing for their boss about controversial social issues like abortion. The speechwriters may not think they are using power—after all, they are the president's subordinates and may rarely see him face-to-face. But if the president lets their words exit his mouth in public, they have used power.

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.*

Power is found in all human relationships, but we shall be concerned here only with power as it is used to affect who will hold government office and how government will behave. This fails to take into account many important things. If a corporation closes a factory in a small town where it was the major employer, it is using power in ways that affect deeply the lives of people. When a university refuses to admit a student or a medical society refuses to license a would-be physician, it is also using power. But to explain how all these things happen would be tantamount to explaining how society as a whole, and in all its particulars, operates. We limit our view here to government, and chiefly to the American federal government. However, we shall repeatedly pay special attention to how things once thought to be "private" matters become "public"—that is, how they manage to become objects of governmental action. Indeed, 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 governmental agenda. In the 1950s the federal government would have displayed no interest in a factory closing its doors, a university refusing an applicant, or a profession not accrediting a member. Now government actions can and do affect all these things.

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 that is 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 will 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 that a person has political authority if his or her right to act in a certain way is conferred by

Government's Greatest Achievements: A Top Ten List

Based on a survey of 450 history and political science professors and an analysis of over 500 public statutes, here is one list of the government's top ten post-1950 achievements.

10. Promoted financial security in retirement
9. Reduced the federal budget deficit
8. Increased access to health care for older Americans
7. Strengthened the nation's highway system
6. Ensured safe food and drinking water
5. Reduced workplace discrimination
4. Reduced disease
3. Promoted equal access to public accommodations
2. Expanded the right to vote
1. Rebuilt Europe after World War II

As you read this book and study American government, ponder what might be on the top ten list for the first quarter of the twenty-first century.

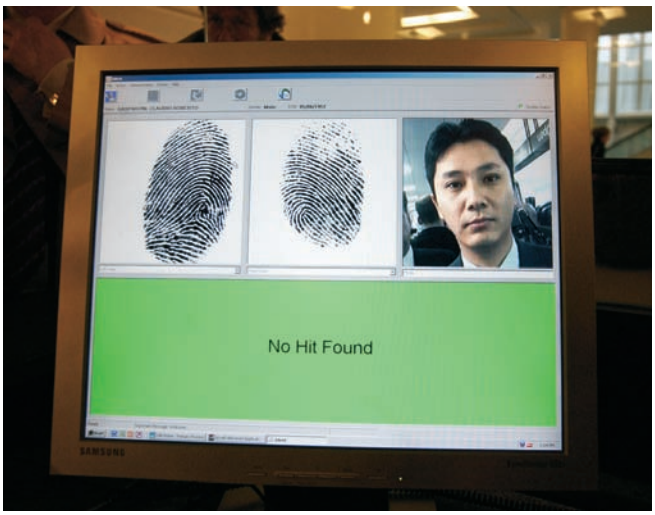
Source: Adapted from Paul C. Light, "Government's Greatest Achievements of the Past Half Century," Reform Watch Brief #2, Brookings Institution, Washington, D.C., November 2000. Reprinted by permission of the Brookings Institution.

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.

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 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. In our own day, even many citizens who take the same view on a hot-button question like gay marriage disagree over whether it is legitimate to address the issue through an amendment to the Constitution that bans it nationally or whether the matter ought to be left for each state to decide.

On one thing, however, 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 was hardly always the prevailing view. In 1787, as the Constitution was being debated, Alexander Hamilton worried that the new government he helped create might be too democratic, while George Mason, who refused to sign the

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



To enter the United States, foreigners must now produce a photograph and fingerprints.

An Iraqi woman shows her purple finger indicating that she has voted in 2005, that country's first free election in half a century.

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—should also 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 *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.*

Whether democracy is the best way of governing all institutions and whether promoting democracy either has been or ought to be a major objective of U.S. foreign policy are both worthwhile questions. The former question goes beyond the scope of this book, but we will touch upon the latter question later in the text.

★ What Is Democracy?

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 definition—the "rule of the many."[1] A government is democratic if all, or most, of its citizens participate directly in either holding office or making policy. This is often called **direct or participatory democracy.** In Aristotle's time—Greece in the fourth 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 two or three hundred, 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 the economist Joseph Schumpeter: "The democratic method is that institutional arrangement for arriving at political decisions in which individuals [that is, leaders] acquire the power to decide by means of a competitive struggle for the people's vote."[2] 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 one or both of two arguments: First, it is impractical, owing to limits of time, information, energy, interest, and expertise, for the people to decide on public policy, but it is not impractical to expect them to make reasonable choices among competing leader-

Can a Democracy Fight a War Against Terrorists?

On September 11, 2001, a date that will forevermore be referred to as 9/11, war came to the United States when terrorists crashed four hijacked airliners, filled with passengers, into the two towers of the World Trade Center in New York City, into the Pentagon in Washington, D.C., and into some empty land in Pennsylvania. About three thousand people were killed.

How can a democratic nation respond to a war waged, not by an enemy nation, but by a loose collection of terrorists with cells in many parts of the world? America's new war against terrorism is much more difficult to fight than the one against Nazi Germany and the Japanese warlords in 1941.

- How can we reorganize the military so that it can respond swiftly and effectively against small targets?
- Is it constitutional to try captured terrorists in military tribunals?
- How much new law enforcement authority should be given to police and investigative agencies?
- Should America invade nations that support terrorists?

In the years ahead, these questions will raise profound challenges for American democracy.

Americans felt powerfully connected to their fellow citizens in the immediate aftermath of 9/11.

ship groups. Second, some people (including, as we shall see in the next chapter, many of the Framers of the Constitution) believe that 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 can be seen from the statements of leaders who do not like what voters have decided. For example, in 2000 voters in Michigan overwhelmingly rejected a referendum that would have increased public funding for private schools. Politicians who opposed the defeated referendum spoke approvingly of the "will of the people," but politicians who favored it spoke disdainfully of "mass misunderstanding."

★ Is Representative Democracy Best?

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

For representative government 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 communication (through speeches or the press, and in meetings) be free, and that the voters perceive that a meaningful choice exists. Many questions still remain to be answered. For instance: 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 is more than one answer to such questions. In some European democracies, for example, very few offices—often just those in the national or local 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.

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. They believed that government should mediate, not mirror, popular views, and that elected officials should represent, not register, majority sentiments. They supposed that most citizens did not have the time, information, interest, and expertise to make reasonable choices among competing policy positions. They suspected that even highly educated people could be manipulated by demagogic leaders who played on their fears and prejudices. They granted that representative democracy often proceeds slowly and prevents sweeping changes in policy, but they cautioned that a government capable of doing great good quickly also can do great harm quickly. They agreed that majority opinion should figure in the enactment of many or most government policies, but they insisted that the protection of civil rights and civil liberties—the right to a fair trial; the freedom of speech, press, and religion; or the right to vote itself—ought never to hinge on a popular vote. Above all, they embraced representative democracy because they saw it as a way of minimizing the chances that power would be abused either by a tyrannical popular majority or by self-serving officeholders.

Clearly, the Framers of the Constitution thought that representative democracy was best, but were they right? Any answer must address two related questions: first, even if the Framers' assumptions about direct democracy being impractical and likely to lead to bad decisions were correct for their time, are they equally correct in ours?; and, second, should American political history be read more nearly to justify or to jettison the Framers' faith that representative democracy would help to protect minority rights and prevent politicians from using public offices for private gains?

The first question asks whether people today have more time, information, energy, interest, and expertise, to gather together for collective decision making than they did when the Constitution was adopted.

This question is a bit tricky. For instance, people today do have unprecedented access to information about everything including government. Lone individuals, grassroots groups, and lobbying organizations all now use that information in ways that plainly affect politics. One measure: in the mid-1990s, Congress still received nearly four times more postal or "snail" mail than electronic or e-mail; but, today, each year Congress receives ten times more e-mail (roughly 200 million messages) than regular mail, and about five times more mail of all kinds than it did just a decade or so ago.[3]

However, has direct, high-tech political networking brought America any closer to direct democracy or increased the citizenry's engagement in or satisfaction with government? Not really. Most people, especially young adults, still do not consume much political news, whether via the Internet, television, or newspapers. Nor, as we will see in Chapter 8, are most people very active in political affairs. Many lawmakers' offices use spam filters to block messages that come from outside their states or districts, and they pay little attention to computer-generated mass mailings, print or electronic.[4] As was true in the pre-Internet

era, today few citizens feel close to government or have great confidence in its leaders.

★ How Is Political Power Distributed?

The second question asks how political power has actually been distributed in America's representative democracy. 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 four 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.

In some cases the leaders will be so sharply constrained by what most people want that the actions of officeholders will follow the preferences of citizens very closely. We shall call such cases examples of *majoritarian politics.* In this case elected officials are the delegates of the people, acting as the people (or a majority of them) would act were the matter put to a popular vote. The issues handled in a majoritarian fashion can be only those that are sufficiently important to command the attention of most citizens, sufficiently clear to elicit an informed opinion from citizens, and sufficiently feasible to address so that what citizens want done can in fact be done.

When circumstances do not permit majoritarian decision-making, then some group of officials will have to act without knowing (and perhaps without caring) exactly what people want. Indeed, even on issues that do evoke a clear opinion from a majority of citizens, the shaping of the details of a policy will reflect the views of those people who are sufficiently motivated to go to the trouble of becoming active participants in policy-making. These active participants usually will be a small, and probably an unrepresentative, minority. Thus the actual distribution of political power, even in a democracy, will depend importantly on the composition of the political elites who are actually involved in the struggles 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 four different schools of thought about political elites and how power has actually been distributed in America's representative democracy: *Marxist, power elite, bureaucratic,* and *pluralist.* The German philosopher Karl Marx (1818–1883) was the founder of modern socialist thought. There are many variants of Marxist ideology. Essentially, however, the **Marxist view** is that government, even if democratic in form, is merely a reflection of underlying economic forces.[5] Marxists hold that in modern societies, two economic classes contend for power—capitalists (business owners or the "bourgeoise") and workers (laborers or the "proletariat"). Whichever class dominates the economy also controls the government, which is, they reckon, nothing more than a piece of machinery designed to express and give legal effect to underlying class interests. In the United States, Marxists maintain, capitalists (especially "big business" and today's "multinational corporations" headquartered in America) have generally dominated the economy and hence the government.

A second theory, closely related to the first, was started by C. Wright Mills, a famous mid-twentieth-century American sociologist. To him, a coalition of three groups—corporate leaders, top military officers, and a handful of elected officials—dominates politics and government.[6] Today, some add to Mills's triumvirate major communications media chiefs, top labor union officials, the heads of various special-interest groups, and others. But the essential **power elite view** is the same: American

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

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

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

democracy is actually dominated by a few top leaders, most of whom are outside of government and enjoy great advantages in wealth, status, or organizational position.

The third theory was shaped by the German scholar, Max Weber (1864–1920), a founder of sociology. To Weber, the dominant social and political reality of modern times was that all institutions, governmental and nongovernmental, have fallen under the control of large bureaucracies whose expertise and competence are essential to the management of contemporary affairs.[7] Capitalists or workers may come to power (as in the Marxist view), or coalitions of well-positioned elites may dominate government and the legislative process (as in the power elite view), but the government they create and the laws they enact will be dominated in either case by bureaucrats who staff and operate the government on a daily basis. This **bureaucratic view** suggests that power is mainly in the hands, not of American democracy's elected representatives, but in those of its appointed officials, career government workers who, though they may be virtually invisible to most average citizens and unknown to most elites, nonetheless exercise vast power by deciding how to translate public laws into administrative actions. In this view, government bureaucrats do not merely implement public policies, they effectively "make" them as suits their own ideas and interests.

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

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

Fourth is the **pluralist view.** It has no single intellectual parent, but it has many followers in contemporary political science and in journalism. Pluralists acknowledge that big businesses, cozy elites, or career bureaucrats may dominate on some issues, but stress that political resources, such as money, prestige, expertise, organizational position, and access to the mass media, are so widely scattered in American society that no single elite has anything like a monopoly on them.[8] Furthermore, pluralists point out, in America, there are so many governmental institutions in which power may be exercised—city, state, and federal governments and, within these, the offices of mayors, managers, legislators, governors, presidents, judges, bureaucrats—that no single group, even if it had many political resources, could dominate most, or even much, of the political process. Instead, many policies are the outcome of a complex pattern of political haggling, innumerable compromises, and shifting alliances. What government does is affected to varying degrees not only by competing groups of elites inside or outside government but by mass public opinion as well.

Pluralists do not go so far as to argue that political resources are distributed equally—that would be tantamount to saying that all decisions are made on a majoritarian basis. But pluralists do maintain that political resources nonetheless remain sufficiently divided among such different kinds of elites (business people, politicians, union leaders, journalists, bureaucrats, professors, environmentalists, lawyers, and whomever else) that all, or almost all, relevant interests have a chance to affect the outcome of decisions. Not only are the elites divided; they are also responsive to their followers' interests, and thus they provide representation to almost all citizens affected by a policy.

★ Is Democracy Driven by Self-Interest?

Of the four views of how political power has been distributed in the United States, the pluralist view does the most to reassure one that America has been, and continues to be, a democracy in more than name only. But the pluralist view, not less than the other three, may lead some people to the cynical conclusion that, whichever view is correct, politics is a self-seeking enterprise in which everybody is out for personal gain. Though there is surely plenty of self-interest among political elites (at least as much as there is among college or high school students!), it does not necessarily follow that the resulting policies will be wholly self-serving. Nor does it follow that democracy itself is driven mainly or solely by people's baser motives or selfish desires.

For one thing, a policy may be good or bad independent of the motives of the person who decided it, just as a product sold on the market may be useful or useless regardless of the profit-seeking or wage-seeking motives of those who produced it. For another thing, the self-interest of individuals is often an incomplete guide to their actions. People must frequently choose between two courses of action, neither of which has an obvious "payoff" to them. We caution against the cynical explanation of politics that Americans seem especially prone to adopt. Alexis de Tocqueville, the French author of a perceptive account of American

life and politics in the early nineteenth century, noticed this trait among us.

> Americans . . . are fond of explaining almost all the actions of their lives by the principle of self-interest rightly understood…. In this respect I think they frequently fail to do themselves justice; for in the United States as well as elsewhere people are sometimes seen to give way to those disinterested and spontaneous impulses that are natural to man; but the Americans seldom admit that they yield to emotions of this kind; they are more anxious to do honor to their philosophy than to themselves.[9]

The belief that people will usually act on the basis of their self-interest, narrowly defined, is a theory to be tested, not an assumption to be made. Sometimes, as happened in New York City on September 11, 2001, elected officials, government workers, and average citizens behave in ways that plainly transcend personal or professional self-interest. There are countless other far less dramatic but still telling examples of people acting publicly in ways that seem anything but self-interested. To understand why people behave as they do, it is not enough to know their incomes or their jobs; one must also know something about their attitudes, their allies, and the temper of the times. In short, political preferences cannot invariably be predicted simply by knowing economic or organizational position.

Yet another reason to resist interpreting American democracy as if it were always and everywhere driven by narrowly self-interested individuals and groups is that many of the most important political happenings in U.S. history—the revolutionary movement of the 1770s and 1780s, the battle for civil rights in the 1950s and 1960s, to name just two—were led against long odds by people who risked much knowing that they might not succeed and suspecting that, even if they did succeed, generations might pass before their efforts truly benefited anyone. As we shall see, self-interest figures mightily in politics, but so do ideas about the common good and public-spirited behavior.

★ What Explains Political Change?

When we see American democracy from the perspective of the past, we will find it hard to accept as generally true any simple interpretation of politics.

People leave their homes after Hurricane Katrina hit New Orleans in August 2005.

Economic interests, powerful elites, entrenched bureaucrats, competing pressure groups, and morally impassioned individuals have all played a part in shaping our government and its policies. But the great shifts in the character of our government—its size, scope, institutional arrangements, and the direction of its policies—have reflected complex and sometimes sudden changes in elite or mass *beliefs* about what government is supposed to do.

In the 1920s it was widely assumed that the federal government would play a small role in our lives. From the 1930s through the 1970s it was generally believed that the federal government would try to solve whatever social or economic problem existed. From 1981 through 1988 the administration of Ronald Reagan sought to reverse that assumption and to cut back on the taxes Washington levied, the money it spent, and the regulations it imposed. It is clear that no simple theory of politics is likely to explain both the growth of federal power after 1932 and the effort to cut back on that power starting in 1981. Every student of politics sooner or later learns that the hardest things to explain are usually the most important ones.

Take the case of foreign affairs. During certain periods in our history we have taken an active interest in the outside world—at the time the nation was founded, when France and England seemed to have it in their power to determine whether or not America would survive as a nation; in the 1840s, when we sought to expand the nation into areas where Mexico and Canada had claims; in the late 1890s, when many leaders believed we had an obligation to acquire an overseas empire in the Caribbean and the Pacific; and

in the period from the 1940s to the 1960s, when we openly accepted the role of the world's police officer. At other times America has looked inward, spurning opportunities for expansion and virtually ignoring events that in other periods would have been a cause for war, or at least mobilization. Today, America seems to be looking outward once again, spurred, on the one side, by unprecedented terrorist attacks against the country and, on the other side, by historic opportunities to make new friends with old foreign foes.

Deep-seated beliefs, major economic developments, and widely shared (or competing) opinions about what constitutes the dominant political problem of the time shape the nature of day-to-day political conflict. What this means is that, in any broad historical or comparative perspective, politics is not just about "who gets what," though that is part of the story. It is about how people, or elites claiming to speak for people, define the public interest. Lest one think that such definitions are mere window dressing, signifying nothing of importance, bear in mind that on occasion men and women have been prepared to fight and die for one definition or another. Suppose you had been alive in 1861. Do you think you would have viewed slavery as a matter of gains and losses, costs and benefits, winners and losers? Some people did. Or do you think you would have been willing to fight to abolish or preserve it? Many others did just that. The differences in these ways of thinking about such an issue are at least as important as how institutions are organized or elections conducted.

★ The Nature of Politics

Ideally, political scientists ought to be able to give clear answers, amply supported by evidence, to the questions we have posed about American democracy, starting with "who governs?" In reality they can (at best) give partial, contingent, and controversial answers. The reason is to be found in the nature of our subject. Unlike economists, who assume that people have more or less stable preferences and can compare ways of satisfying those preferences by looking at the relative prices of various goods and services, political scientists are interested in how preferences are formed, especially for those kinds of services, such as national defense or pollution control, that cannot be evaluated chiefly in terms of monetary costs.

Understanding preferences is vital to understanding power. Who did what in government is not hard to find out, but who wielded power—that is, who made a difference in the outcome and for what reason—is much harder to discover. *Power* is a word that conjures up images of deals, bribes, power plays, and arm-twisting. In fact, most power exists because of shared understanding, common friendships, communal or organizational loyalties, and different degrees of prestige. These are hard to identify and almost impossible to quantify.

Nor can the distribution of political power be inferred simply by knowing what laws are on the books or what administrative actions have been taken. The enactment of a consumer protection law does not mean that consumers are powerful, any more than the absence of such a law means that corporations are powerful. The passage of such a law could reflect an aroused public opinion, the lobbying of a small group claiming to speak for consumers, the ambitions of a senator, or the intrigues of one business firm seeking to gain a competitive advantage over another. A close analysis of what the law entails and how it was passed and administered is necessary before much of anything can be said.

This book will avoid sweeping claims that we have an "imperial" presidency (or an impotent one), an "obstructionist" Congress (or an innovative one), or "captured" regulatory agencies. Such labels do an injustice to the different roles that presidents, members of Congress, and administrators play in different kinds of issues and in different historical periods.

The view taken in this book is that judgments about institutions and interests can be made only after one has seen how they behave on a variety of important issues or potential issues, such as economic policy, the regulation of business, social welfare, civil rights and liberties, and foreign and military affairs. The policies adopted or blocked, the groups heeded or ignored, the values embraced or rejected—these constitute the raw material out of which one can fashion an answer to the central questions we have asked: Who governs? and To what ends?

The way in which our institutions of government handle social welfare, for example, differs from the way other democratic nations handle it, and it differs as well from the way our own institutions once treated it. The description of our institutions in Part III will therefore include not only an account of how they work today but also a brief historical background on their workings and a comparison with similar institutions in other countries. There is a tendency to assume that how we do things today is the only way

WHAT WOULD YOU DO?

MEMORANDUM

To: *Governor Steve Finore*
From: *Edward Heron, chief policy adviser*
Subject: *Initiative Repeal*
You have supported several successful initiatives (life imprisonment for thrice-convicted violent felons, property tax limits), but you have never publicly stated a view on the initiative itself, and the repeal proposal will probably surface during tomorrow's press briefing.

Legal and Policy Experts Call for a Ban on Ballot Initiatives

December 11 SACRAMENTO, CA

A report released yesterday and signed by more than 100 law and public policy professors statewide urges that the state's constitution be amended to ban legislation by initiative. The initiative allows state voters to place legislative measures directly on the ballot by getting enough signatures. The initiative "has led to disastrous policy decisions on taxes, crime, and other issues," the report declared . . .

Arguments for a ban:

1. Ours is a representative, not a direct, democracy in which voters elect leaders and elected leaders make policy decisions subject to review by the courts.
2. Voters are often neither rational nor respectful of constitutional rights. For example, many people demand both lower taxes and more government services, and polls find that most voters would prohibit people with certain views from speaking and deprive all persons accused of a violent crime from getting out on bail while awaiting trial.
3. Over the past 100 years about 800 statewide ballot initiatives have been passed in 24 states. Rather than giving power to the people, special-interest groups have spent billions of dollars manipulating voters to pass initiatives that enrich or benefit them, not the public at large.

Arguments against a ban:

1. When elected officials fail to respond to persistent public majorities favoring tougher crime measures, lower property taxes, and other popular concerns, direct democracy via the initiative is legitimate, and the courts can still review the law.
2. More Americans than ever have college degrees and easy access to information about public affairs. Studies find that most average citizens are able to figure out which candidates, parties, or advocacy groups come closest to supporting their own economic interests and personal values.
3. All told, the 24 states that passed 35 laws by initiative also passed more than 14,000 laws by the regular legislative process (out of more than 70,000 bills they considered). Studies find that special-interest groups are severely limited in their ability to pass new laws by initiative, while citizens' groups with broad-based public support are behind most initiatives that pass.

Your decision:
Favor ban _____ Oppose ban _____

they could possibly be done. In fact, there are other ways to operate a government based on some measure of popular rule. History, tradition, and belief weigh heavily on all that we do.

Although political change is not always accompanied by changes in public laws, the policy process is arguably one of the best barometers of changes in who governs. In Chapter 15, we offer a way of classifying and explaining the politics of different policy issues. The model we present there has been developed, refined, and tested over more than two decades (longer than most of our readers have been alive!). Our own students and others have valued it mainly because, they have found, it helps to answer such questions about who governs: How do political issues get on the public agenda in the first place? How, for example, did sexual harassment, which was hardly ever discussed or debated by Congress, burst onto the public agenda? Once on the agenda, how does the politics of issues like income security for older Americans—for example, the politics of Social Security, a program that has been on the federal books since 1935 (see Chapter 19)—change over time? And if, today, one cares about expanding civil liberties (see Chapter 5) or protecting civil rights (see Chapter 6), what political obstacles and opportunities are you likely to face, and what role are public opinion, organized interest groups, the media, the courts, political parties, and other institutions likely to play in frustrating or fostering your particular policy preferences, whatever they might be?

Peek ahead, if you wish, to the book's policy chapters, but understand that the place to begin a search for how power is distributed in national politics and what purposes that power serves is with the founding of the federal government in 1787: the Constitutional Convention and the events leading up to it. Though the decisions of that time were not made by philosophers or professors, the practical men who made them had a philosophic and professorial cast of mind, and thus they left behind a fairly explicit account of what values they sought to protect and what arrangements they thought ought to be made for the allocation of political power.

★ SUMMARY ★

There are two major questions about politics: Who governs? To what ends? This book focuses mainly on answering the first.

Four answers have traditionally been given to the question of who governs.

- The *Marxist*—those who control the economic system will control the political one.
- The *elitist*—a few top leaders, not all of them drawn from business, make the key decisions without reference to popular desires.
- The *bureaucratic*—appointed civil servants run things.
- The *pluralist*—competition among affected interests shapes public policy.

To choose among these theories or to devise new ones requires more than describing governmental institutions and processes. In addition one must examine the kinds of issues that do (or do not) get taken up by the political system and how that system resolves them.

The distinction between different types of democracies is important. The Framers of the Constitution intended that America be a representative democracy in which the power to make decisions is determined by means of a free and competitive struggle for the citizens' votes.

RECONSIDERING WHO GOVERNS?

1. ***How is political power actually distributed in America?***

   Some believe that political power in America is monopolized by wealthy business leaders, by other powerful elites, or by entrenched government bureaucrats. Others believe that political resources such as money, prestige, expertise, organizational position, and access to the mass me-

dia are so widely dispersed in American society, and the governmental institutions and offices in which power may be exercised so numerous and varied, that no single group truly has all or most political power. In this view, political power in America is distributed more or less widely. No one, however, argues that political resources are distributed equally in America.

2. ***What explains major political change?***

   The great shifts in the character of American government—its size, scope, institutional arrangements, and the direction of its policies—have reflected complex and sometimes sudden changes in elite or mass beliefs about what government is supposed to do. For instance, before Franklin Roosevelt's New Deal, most leaders and citizens did not automatically look to the federal government to improve the economy, and many doubted that Washington had any legitimate role to play in managing economic affairs. Today, however, leaders in both political parties assume that Washington must help reduce unemployment, create jobs, and otherwise actively manage the country's economy. The federal government now has policies on street crime, the environment, homeland security, and many other issues that were not on the federal agenda a half-century (or, in the case of homeland security, a mere half-decade) ago.

RECONSIDERING TO WHAT ENDS?

1. ***What value or values matter most in American democracy?***

   The Framers of the Constitution had their vision of American democracy and favored certain values, but neither they nor the Constitution specify what values matter most or how best to make trade-offs among or between competing political ends.

2. ***Are trade-offs among political purposes inevitable?***

   Yes. For instance, the government cannot spend more on health care without spending less on something else we may also desire—college loans, police patrols, or toxic waste cleanups. Nor can it maximize one value or purpose (say respecting the rights of persons suspected or accused of terrorist acts) without minimizing others (like liberty and associated legal rights). And, even if everyone agreed that the same one value—say liberty—was supreme, we could not all exercise it at the same time or to the fullest or just as we pleased without all losing it in the bargain: if everybody is at liberty to shout simultaneously, nobody is at liberty to be heard individually. We often cannot have more of some things we desire without having less of other things we desire, too. That is as true in politics and government, and as true for American democracy, as it is in other parts of life.

SUGGESTED READINGS

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