

## **Government in America**

### **CHAPTER 1 OVERVIEW AND OUTLINE**

#### **CHAPTER OVERVIEW**

##### **INTRODUCTION**

Politics and government matter—that is the single most important message of this book. Despite the fact that government substantially affects each of our lives, youth today are especially apathetic about politics and government. Whether because they feel they can't make a difference, the political system is corrupt, or they just don't care, young Americans are clearly apathetic about public affairs. And while political apathy isn't restricted to young people, a tremendous gap has opened up between the young (defined as under age 25) and the elderly (defined as over 65) on measures of political interest, knowledge, and participation. The goal of *Government in America* is to assist students in becoming well-informed citizens by providing information and developing critical analytical skills.

##### **GOVERNMENT AND POLITICS**

This chapter introduces the fundamental concepts of government, politics, and public policy, and defines the ways in which the three are interrelated. Government consists of those *institutions that make authoritative public policies for society* as a whole. Regardless of how their leaders assume office, all governments have certain functions in common: they maintain national defense, provide public goods, use police powers to maintain order, furnish public services, socialize the young into the political culture, and collect taxes to pay for the services they provide. Part of what government does is provide public goods, services that can be shared by everyone and cannot be denied to anyone.

Throughout *Government in America*, two fundamental questions about governing serve as themes: *How should we govern?* and *What should government do?* The chapters that follow acquaint students with the history of American democracy and ask important questions about the current state of democracy in the United States. One goal of the authors of *Government in America* is to familiarize students with the different ways to approach and answer these questions.

Politics determines whom we select as our governmental leaders and what policies they pursue. Political scientists still use the classic definition of politics offered by Harold D. Lasswell: "*Who gets what, when, and how.*" The media usually focus on the *who* of politics. *What* refers to the substance of politics and government—benefits, such as medical care for the elderly, and burdens, such as new taxes. *How* people participate in politics is important, too. People *engage in politics* for a variety of reasons, and all of their activities in politics are collectively called political participation.

##### **THE POLICYMAKING SYSTEM**

A policymaking system is a set of institutions and activities that link together government, politics, and public policy. In a democratic society, parties, elections, interest groups, and the media are key linkage institutions between the preferences of citizens and the government's policy agenda. When people confront government officials with problems they expect them to solve, they are trying to influence the government's policy agenda. A government's policy agenda changes frequently: if public officials want to get elected, they must pay attention to the problems that concern the voters.

People, of course, do not always agree on what government should do. Indeed, one group's concerns and interests are often at odds with those of another group. A political issue is the result of people disagreeing about a problem or about the public policy needed to fix it.

Three policymaking institutions—Congress, the presidency, and the courts,—stand at the *core* of the political system. They make policies concerning some of the issues on the policy agenda. Translating people's desires into public policy is crucial to the workings of democracy. Public policy is a choice that government makes in response to some issue on its agenda. Public policy includes all of the decisions *and nondecisions* of government: policymakers can establish a policy by doing *something* or by doing *nothing*, as can be seen by the government's original response of "inaction" to the AIDS crisis.

Policy impacts are the effects that policy has on people and on society's problems. The analysis of policy impacts carries the policymaking system *back to its point of origin* (often called *feedback*). Even when government decides NOT to do anything, this decision has an impact on people.

## DEMOCRACY

Resounding demands for democracy have recently been heard in many corners of the world. In his famous Gettysburg Address, Abraham Lincoln referred to democracy as "*government of the people, by the people, and for the people.*" Although Lincoln's definition imparts great emotional impact, such a definition is subject to many different interpretations. For example, what do we mean by "*people*"? No democracy permits government by literally every person in society. Throughout this textbook, the authors define democracy as *a means of selecting policymakers and of organizing government so that policy represents and responds to the public's preferences.*

Traditional democratic theory rests upon several principles that specify how a democratic government makes its decisions. Democratic theorist Robert Dahl lists five criteria that are essential for "an ideal democratic process": equality in voting, effective participation, enlightened understanding, citizen control of the agenda, and inclusion, which means that government must include (and extend rights to) all those subject to its laws.

Democracies must also practice majority rule and preserve minority rights. The relationship between the few leaders and the many followers is one of representation. *The*

*closer the correspondence between representatives and their electoral majority, the closer the approximation to democracy.* Theories of American democracy are essentially theories about who has power and influence. This chapter focuses on three contemporary theories of American democracy. Pluralist theory contends that many centers of influence compete for power and control over public policy, with no one group or set of groups dominating. Pluralists view bargaining and compromise as essential ingredients in our democracy. In sharp contrast to pluralist theory, elite and class theory contends that society is divided along class lines and that an upper-class elite rules. Wealth is seen as the basis of power, and a few powerful Americans are the policymakers. Hyperpluralism is "pluralism gone sour." Hyperpluralists contend that the existence of too many influential groups actually makes it impossible for government to act. When politicians try to placate every group, the result is confusing, contradictory, and muddled policy (or no policy at all). Both hyperpluralist theory and elite and class theory suggest that the public interest is rarely translated into public policy.

Regardless of which theory is most convincing, there are a number of continuing challenges to democracy: increased technical expertise, limited participation in government, escalating campaign costs, and diverse political interests. Traditional democratic theory holds that ordinary citizens have the good sense to reach political judgments and that government has the capacity to act upon those judgments. However, it has become increasingly difficult to make knowledgeable decisions as human knowledge has expanded. There is evidence that Americans actually know very little about policy decisions or about who their leaders are. Today, the elite are likely to be those who command knowledge—the experts. Many observers also worry about the close connection between money and politics. Candidates have become increasingly dependent on Political Action Committees (PACs) to fund their campaigns. Critics charge that PACs have undue influence on members of Congress when it comes to the issues that the PACs care about.

The rapid rate of change of politics over the last three decades makes it more difficult for government to respond to demands. Some feel that this can lead to inefficient government that cannot adequately respond to challenges. The large number and diversity of interest groups coupled with the decentralized nature of government makes it easy to prevent policy formulation and implementation, a condition known as policy gridlock. Throughout *Government in America* students will be asked to evaluate American democracy.

Are people knowledgeable about matters of public policy? Do they apply what knowledge they have to their voting choices? Are American elections designed to facilitate public participation? Does the interest group system allow for all points of view to be heard, or do significant biases give advantages to particular groups? Do political parties provide voters with clear choices, or do they intentionally obscure their stands on issues in order to get as many votes as possible? If there are choices, do the media help citizens understand them? Is the Congress representative of American society, and is it capable of reacting to changing times? Does the president look after the general welfare of the public, or has the office become too focused on the interests of the elite?

## THE SCOPE OF GOVERNMENT IN AMERICA

One goal of *Government in America* is to familiarize the student with different ways to approach and answer the crucial questions that the authors raise. In particular, the text focuses on one of the most important questions facing modern American democracy: *Is the scope of government too broad, too narrow, or just about right?*

Our governments (national, state, and local) spend about 29 percent of the gross domestic product. Our national government spends more than \$2.3 trillion annually, employs nearly two million people, and owns one-third of the land in the United States. How does the American national government spend \$2.3 trillion a year? National defense takes about one-sixth of the federal budget. Social Security consumes more than one-fifth of the budget. Medicare requires a little over one-tenth of the budget. The federal government helps fund highway and airport construction, police departments, school districts, and other state and local functions.

Most of the money in the federal budget goes to individuals or to state and local governments. If viewed in a comparative perspective, we find that *the United States devotes a smaller percentage of its resources to government* than do other economically developed nations. Moreover, the tax burden on Americans is also small, when compared to other democratic nations. American individualism, which *developed from the desires of immigrants* to escape government oppression and from the *existence of a western frontier* with little government, helps account for the relatively small scope of government in America.

## CHAPTER OUTLINE

### I. POLITICS AND GOVERNMENT MATTER

A. Many Americans—especially young people—are apathetic about politics and government.

1. A tremendous gap has opened up between the young (defined as under age 25) and the elderly (defined as over 65) on measures of political interest, knowledge, and participation.

B. It is the authors' hope that after reading this book, you will be convinced that paying attention to politics and government is important.

1. Government has a substantial impact on the lives of all of us.  
2. We have the opportunity to have a substantial impact on government.

### II. GOVERNMENT

A. Government.

1. Government consists of those institutions that *make authoritative public policies* for society as a whole.

2. Four key institutions make policy at the national level: Congress, President, the Courts, and the federal administrative agencies (bureaucracy).

B. This chapter raises *two fundamental questions about governing that will serve as themes for the text.*

1. *How* should we govern?
2. *What* should government do?

C. What governments do.

1. Regardless of how they assumed power, *all governments have certain functions in common.*
  - a. Governments maintain national defense.
  - b. Governments provide public goods—things that everyone can share, such as clean air.
  - c. Governments have police powers to provide order—as when Chinese security forces crushed the student protest in Tiananmen Square in 1989 and when the National Guard was called in to restore order in Los Angeles after the 1992 Rodney King verdict.
  - d. Governments provide public services—such as schools and libraries.
  - e. Governments socialize the young into the political culture—typically through practices such as reciting the Pledge of Allegiance in daily exercises at public schools.
  - f. Governments collect taxes to pay for the services they provide.

### III. POLITICS

A. Politics determines whom we select as governmental leaders and what policies they pursue.

1. Harold D. Lasswell defined politics as "*who gets what, when, and how.*"

B. Political participation refers to the ways in which people get involved in politics.

C. Single-issue groups are interest groups whose members will vote on a single issue, such as pro-life and pro-choice groups that ignore a politician's stand on everything except abortion.

### IV. THE POLICYMAKING SYSTEM

A. A policymaking system is a set of institutions and activities that link together government, politics, and public policy.

1. In a democratic society, parties, elections, interest groups, and the media are key linkage institutions between the preferences of citizens and the government's policy agenda.
2. The end product of government and politics is public policy. When people confront government officials with problems they expect them to solve, they are trying to influence the government's policy agenda.
3. A political issue arises when people disagree about a problem or about a public policy choice.
4. The end product of government and politics is public policy.
5. Policymakers stand at the core of the political system, working within the three policymaking institutions established by the U.S. Constitution: the Congress, the presidency, and the courts.

- B. Policy impacts are the *effects* policy has on people and on society's problems.
  - 1. Having a policy implies a goal: people who raise a policy issue usually want a policy that *works*.
  - 2. *Translating people's desires into public policy is crucial to the workings of democracy.*

## V. DEMOCRACY

- A. After the Russian Revolution (1917) and particularly when the Soviet Union expanded its sphere of influence throughout Eastern Europe after World War II, U.S. foreign policy was concerned with preventing the spread of communism.
- B. Defining democracy.
  - 1. The writers of the U.S. Constitution were suspicious of democracy.
  - 2. In his Gettysburg Address, Abraham Lincoln defined democracy as "*government of the people, by the people, and for the people.*"
  - 3. The basic definition used throughout the *Government in America* textbook is: *democracy is a means of selecting policymakers and of organizing government so that policy represents and responds to the public's preferences.*
- C. Traditional democratic theory rests upon several principles that specify how a democratic government makes its decisions.
  - 1. Democratic theorist Robert Dahl refers to *five criteria that are essential for "an ideal democratic process"*:
    - a. Equality in voting—the principle of "*one person, one vote*" is basic to democracy.
    - b. Effective participation—political participation must be *representative*.
    - c. Enlightened understanding—*free press and free speech are essential* to civic understanding.
    - d. Citizen control of the agenda—citizens should have the *collective right to control* the government's policy agenda.
    - e. Inclusion—*citizenship* must be open to all within a nation.
  - 2. In addition, democracies must practice majority rule and preserve minority rights.
    - a. The relationship between the *few leaders* and the *many followers* is one of representation: the closer the correspondence between representatives and their electoral majority, the closer the approximation to democracy.
    - b. Most Americans also feel that it is vital to protect minority rights such as freedom of speech.
- D. Three contemporary theories of American democracy.
  - 1. Pluralist theory contends that many centers of influence compete for power and control.
    - a. Groups compete with one another for control over public policy, with no one group or set of groups dominating.
    - b. There are *multiple access points* to our government, with power dispersed among the various branches and levels of government.

- c. *Bargaining and compromise* are essential ingredients of our democracy.
  - d. *Electoral majorities rarely rule*; rather, as Dahl puts it, "all active and legitimate groups in the population can make themselves heard at some crucial stage in the [policymaking] process."
  - e. The *recent increase in interest group activity* is cited by pluralists as evidence for pluralism.
2. Elite and class theory contends that our society (like all societies) is *divided along class lines*.
- a. *An upper-class elite rules*, regardless of governmental organization.
  - b. *Wealth is the basis of class power*: a few powerful Americans are the policymakers.
  - c. *Big business* and its power is at the center of most elite and class theories.
  - d. The Reagan Administration strongly promoted big business.
3. Hyperpluralism is *pluralism gone sour*.
- a. Many groups are so strong that *government is unable to act*.
  - b. There are *too many groups* with access to the different levels and branches of government: these groups have multiple ways to both prevent policies they disagree with and promote those they support.
  - c. When politicians try to placate every group, the result is confusing, contradictory, and muddled policy (or no policy at all).
- E. Challenges to democracy.
1. How can average citizens make decisions about complex issues?
  2. What if citizens know little about their leaders and policy decisions?
  3. Is American democracy too dependent on money?
  4. Does American diversity produce governmental gridlock?
- F. Some key questions about Democracy.
1. Are people knowledgeable about matters of public policy?
  2. Do they apply what knowledge they have to their voting choices?
  3. Are American elections designed to facilitate public participation?
  4. Does the interest group system allow for all points of view to be heard, or do significant biases give advantages to particular groups?
  5. Do political parties provide voters with clear choices, or do they intentionally obscure their stands on issues in order to get as many votes as possible?
  6. If there are choices, do the media help citizens understand them?
  7. Is the Congress representative of American society, and is it capable of reacting to changing times?
  8. Does the president look after the general welfare of the public, or has the office become too focused on the interests of the elite?

## VI. THE SCOPE OF GOVERNMENT IN AMERICA

### A. How active is American government?

1. National, state, and local governments in America collectively spend about one out of every three dollars of our gross domestic product (the value of all goods and services produced annually by the United States).
2. The national government alone spends more than \$1.7 trillion annually, employs five million people, and owns one-third of the land in the United States.

### B. A comparative perspective on the scope and size of government.

1. The government of the United States actually *does less*—and is *small*—compared to the governments of similar countries.
2. The *tax burden* on Americans is also small, compared to other democratic nations.

### C. American individualism is a dominant theme in American political culture.

1. It *developed from immigrants' desire* to escape government oppression.
2. As Louis Hartz points out, it has helped *limit the scope of American government*.
3. *The existence of a western frontier* up until the early twentieth century allowed people to escape government almost entirely; this ethos still infuses American individualism.
4. Individualism remains highly valued in the United States, with the public policy consequences being a strong preference for free markets and limited government.