

Introduction

This book is an introduction to American politics and government. Its objective is not to convince readers that a particular political position is “best.” It does not celebrate the virtues of capitalism or socialism, the **unfettered** free market or a **government guided** economy. Nor does this book argue that taxes are too high or too low, abortion is right or wrong, social welfare policies are too generous or too stingy, or government is too big or too small. This book is not designed to create more liberals or conservatives or capitalists or socialists.

Its task is to examine the American political system and to stimulate informed critical thinking about politics and government.

The two fundamental goals of this book are (1) to explain why understanding politics and government is crucial to **being an engaged citizen** in our complex society, and (2) to clarify how the actions of politicians and the consequences of governmental decisions affect people’s lives. The book highlights the importance of ideas and economic concerns in the resolution of political issues. Toward this end, **every chapter contains** one or more of the following special feature boxes: “Politics and Economics,” “Politics and Ideas,” and “Contemporary Controversies.”

What Is Politics?

What exactly is politics? For many people the word evokes negative feelings. “It’s just politics,” people say when they don’t like a decision that’s been made or when a friend loses out on a job promotion. The very mention of the word often conjures up the picture of a smooth-talking “wheeler-dealer” who uses cash to influence votes or a corrupt officeholder who exploits his or her position for financial gain. However, politics is not all graft and kickbacks. Despite much of the current disillusionment with the political process, politics can be an honorable and noble profession. At its best, it is a moral activity reconciling social and economic differences and constructing a way of governing society without chaos, tyranny, or undue violence.¹

The ancient Greek philosopher Aristotle once called politics the “master science.” He did not mean that politics explained all the mysteries of human life and nature. Rather, Aristotle meant that politics provided the means by which a community of people with differing views and interests could strive for collective survival and advancement. The drama of the American Civil War illustrates the importance of politics as a means of resolving differences without resorting to violence. All societies inevitably have differences; the issue is



► Politics is better described as a “necessary science,” as its purpose is to allow for a community of people with differing views and interests to strive for collective survival and advancement. (*iStockphoto*)

how a society copes with those differences. In this sense, politics is better described as the “necessary science.”

With over 300 million people, the American nation is diverse. Some people are white, and some are African American. Some Americans were born in other countries, and some have an American ancestry that dates back centuries. Some are religious fundamentalists and others liberal humanists. Some are young, paying Social Security taxes; and some are old, receiving Social Security benefits. Some earn high incomes, and others have little or no income at all. Some live in fashionable town houses or suburbs, and others live in blighted inner cities or on declining farms. Some make their living in high-tech industries, and others in traditional smokestack industries.

The point need not be belabored. America is a complex, multicultural society in which consensus is often difficult to achieve. Different groups want different things and have different values. Such differences are at the root of the political process. In its best-known and most straightforward definition, **politics** is the study of “who gets what, when, and how.”² Put another way, politics is the process of peacefully reconciling social and economic differences.

politics

The process of peacefully reconciling social and economic differences

Politics and Economics

Many of the conflicts that arise in a society—who has and who has not, who gives and who gets, who gains and who loses—are economic in their origins or their manifestations. Because money and material resources are limited and because human wants and demands are almost limitless, the need to make choices about spending money and using scarce resources becomes inevitable. Many of government’s decisions are economic in nature because they affect the production, distribution, and consumption of wealth.

Even though our national government spends **about** \$3.8 trillion annually, it still does not have enough capital to satisfy all the demands and expectations placed on it. Every year the president and Congress wrestle over the budget. Should we increase the funding for military operations or spend more on Medicare coverage? Not all programs can be funded to the complete satisfaction of their supporters, nor will everyone agree on who should provide the tax revenue to pay for them.

Politicians must make these choices under the pressure of people who clamor to advance their own interests. The elderly are likely to press for increases in Social Security, while the young are more likely to be interested in higher student aid grants and loans for college expenses. Steel and autoworkers may favor quotas on foreign imports. Farmers who depend on the export market may fear such quotas because foreign governments might retaliate against our agricultural products. Of course, not everyone takes predictable positions on every issue, nor is everyone motivated entirely by economic self-interest. Some of the wealthy are willing to pay higher taxes to help the poor, and some of the poor oppose higher social welfare spending. In general, when economic or occupational consequences are at stake, most people press for programs that serve their self-interests. Politicians must resolve the resulting conflicts.

In the face of scarcity, this task is difficult. Not all people will be **satisfied**; and few, if any, will be satisfied completely. Politics produces decisions that are almost guaranteed to be imperfect. Although the American system leaves most decisions about economics to the marketplace, it has never considered economic liberty an absolute right. Nor has America practiced any pure form of **capitalism**, an economic system based on private ownership of property and free economic competition among individuals and businesses. Minimum wage laws, child labor laws, and environmental regulations are a few examples of government restrictions on the functioning of the marketplace. From the beginning of the nation, government has provided certain infrastructural services (schools, roads, hospitals) in order for capitalism to flourish. Since President Franklin D. Roosevelt's New Deal in the 1930s, the government has provided benefits for the elderly, the poor, and the unemployed. The American experience, particularly early in the twenty-first century, has been witness to a strong central government that complements, coexists with, and regulates an economy largely in private hands. In the United States, economic and political **powers** have historically been **divided; however**, the line is always fluid and often hotly contested.



(AP Wide World photo)

The genius of the American political experience comes from our ability, with the notable exception of the Civil War, to compromise claims and resolve differences without wrenching the system apart. As the country grows more complex and diverse, the challenge becomes more formidable.

Politics and Ideas

Money and its uses have a magnetic attraction. Even if the supply of money were infinite (which it clearly is not), conflict would still be present. The political system is continually buffeted by debates over issues in which money and economic goods may be involved, but in which they do not play a central role. Such debates focus



► Debates about **LGBT rights are controversial**. Here, protesters handcuff themselves to the fence outside the White House in Washington during a protest for **gay rights**. The group demanded that President Obama keep his promise to repeal the 'Don't Ask, Don't Tell' policy. **This policy was repealed in December 2010.** (AP Wide World photo)

ideology

A set of ideas concerning the proper political and economic system under which people should live

phy and obscenity, and the teaching of evolution and sex education in the public schools.

Opposition to the sums of money spent on public health insurance programs, therefore, comes not just from the people who are concerned about the costs but also from those who believe that mandating health coverage is an inappropriate role for the government. Likewise, others call for increased government aid to the homeless because they believe providing such aid is the humane thing to do.

No amount of money can bring people together on these issues, which involve fundamentally different views about what is right and just. In these matters, as in economic issues, politicians must get people to settle for less than their ideal in this imperfect world. Politicians are the brokers of the claims we make and the values we insist on. Politics becomes the art of reaching compromises when none seem possible.

Why Government?

government

The political and administrative organization of a state, nation, or locality

People often use the words politics and government interchangeably. Politics is a process, **however**; and **government** is the set of organizations within which much of that process takes place.

Why government? What is its purpose? No better answer to that question can be found than in the Preamble to the Constitution of the United States. In 1787, the framers summarized the answer in one sentence:

We the people of the United States, in Order to form a more perfect Union, establish justice, insure domestic Tranquility, provide for the common defense, promote the general Welfare, and secure the Blessings of Liberty to ourselves and our Posterity, do ordain and establish this CONSTITUTION for the United States of America.

on the question of which political ideas and values should be reflected in a nation's laws and political institutions. In other words, many political disputes are ideological in origin. **Ideology**, used interchangeably in this book with the term *political ideas*, refers to the kind of government people think they should have. Ideology may also include ideas about the economic system. The prevailing political ideas have a lot to do with shaping the kind of life Americans enjoy, and ideological differences among Americans spark many political controversies.

For example, should abortion be allowed or banned? What pro-choice groups see as the constitutional right of women to control their own bodies, pro-life groups see as the murder of innocents. Other examples of disputes over values include debates about **LGBT³ rights**, the necessity and morality of capital punishment, the censorship of pornography and obscenity, and the teaching of evolution and sex education in the public schools.

“To Establish Justice, Insure Domestic Tranquility, ... and Secure the Blessings of Liberty”

Thomas Hobbes

Seventeenth-century English political philosopher who wrote about the basis of sovereignty residing in a social contract

Government is essential to civilization. Restraint and decency among people are necessary prerequisites of a civilized society. To government falls the task of trying to ensure such behaviors. “Taxes,” Justice Oliver Wendell Holmes (1902–1932)* wrote, “are what we pay for civilized society.”⁴ The English philosopher **Thomas Hobbes** wrote that in the absence of “the sovereign” or government, life among individuals would be “solitary, poor, nasty, brutish, and short.”

Sovereign power is essential for protecting people from one another, by force if necessary. If people attempt to kill one another or steal from one another or assault one another, government must intervene. If it does not, civilization is simply not possible. People could not enjoy the fundamental pleasures of life—a walk in the park, a baseball game, a concert—if their physical well being were constantly threatened by others

whose violent acts went unhindered or unpunished. Although anarchists would disagree, government is essential to human liberty.

Yet government cannot by itself guarantee civil behavior. Civilization is a precious and fragile state of human existence that must be continually buttressed by the supporting values and beliefs of individuals in a society. Hobbes saw civilization as a thin veneer, beneath which surged a boiling caldron of human impulses.

Even in contemporary society the veneer is occasionally pierced. When civil tensions reach a breaking

point, as they did during the chaos surrounding the aftermath of Hurricane Katrina in 2005, antisocial forms of behavior frequently emerge—vandalizing, assaulting, or battering. These threats to civil behavior must be resisted, and it is government that does the resisting.

“To Provide for the Common Defense”

Government must also protect its citizens against threats from other societies or governments. National defense is among the most important and visible functions of government.



► People could not enjoy certain pleasures of life—such as an outdoor music festival—if their physical well being were constantly threatened by others whose violent acts went unhindered or unpunished. (AP Wide World photo)

* Throughout this book, dates in parentheses following the names of presidents and justices of the Supreme Court indicate their years in office.



► People may debate whether the government spends enough or too much on defense, but few will deny that the national government must be capable of defending the nation. (Wikipedia photo)

National security is essential to a society's preservation. The common defense has a long history, as any recounting of the wars in which the nation has engaged over the last two centuries will suggest. One of the principal concerns of the framers of the Constitution in 1787 was the creation of a stronger national government that could grapple more easily with the external threats and dangers of an uncertain world.

People may debate whether the government spends enough or too much on defense, but few will deny that the national government must be capable of defending the nation. Any organization or group calling itself a government that does not have that capability may be a symbol or a wish, but it is not a government.

“To Promote the General Welfare”

Government also exists to organize cooperative public efforts. Although some people believe in the adage “the government that governs least, governs best,” few believe that government should do nothing. Throughout history government has subsidized railroads, constructed dams, protected the wilderness, provided for the needy, established schools, and built space shuttles. Such enterprises are **collective goods**, available for the benefit of all citizens, whether or not they paid taxes to support them. These enterprises are generally too massive for private undertaking. They require a government that can tax and spend on a large scale.

The ideological debate over the size and scope of governmental enterprises has endured since the founding of our nation. Advocates of the **positive state** argue that government should play an active role in providing the goods, services, and conditions for a prosperous and equitable society. Adherents of the **minimalist state** argue that government is too inefficient and should be restricted to producing only such things as national security or a monetary system.

collective goods

Something of value that, by its nature, can be made available only to everybody or not to anyone at all

positive state

A government that helps provide the goods, services, and conditions for a prosperous, equitable society

minimalist state

A government that restricts its activities to providing only goods that the free market cannot produce

What Is Democracy?

It is a basic axiom of American society that a government cannot be accountable merely to itself. The legitimacy of government in America rests on the consent of the governed. The Preamble to the Constitution states, “We the people of the United States ... do ordain and establish this Constitution.” We live in a representative democracy, a system of government in which political authority is vested in the people. The underlying

ideology of a representative democracy supposes that people are capable of controlling their own destiny, selecting their own leaders, and cooperating in creating a peaceful and wholesome society. Alexander Hamilton, a delegate from New York to the Constitutional Convention in 1787, thought the new American nation could answer “the important question whether societies … are really capable or not of establishing good government from reflection and choice, or whether they are forever destined to depend … on accident and force.”⁵

Democratic Values and Goals

democracy

A system of government based on majority rule, protection of minority and individual rights, and the equality of all citizens before the law

What makes a government democratic? **Democracy** requires a system of government based on four precepts: majority rule, protection of the rights of the minority, individual rights, and equality.

1. *Majority rule* expressed in free, periodic elections
2. Full protection of *minority rights* against an irrational or tyrannical majority
3. Protection of *individual rights* to freedom of speech, press, religion, petition, and assembly
4. *Equality* before the law for all citizens, regardless of race, creed, color, gender, national origin, or other immutable characteristics

The four objectives can be reached in different ways. Governments can vary in form and still be labeled democratic. In the United States, the head of state and the head of government are combined in one president, elected by the people. In other lands these roles may be vested in two people.

These four objectives are, to a degree, in conflict with one another. The achievement of one can entail limits on another. Minority rights limit the kinds of laws majorities in Congress or in the state legislatures may pass. Being in control of government in the United States does not give unlimited power to a majority. If, for example, the Republicans lose an election to the Democrats, the latter have no authority to seize the property of the former or to say that Republicans no longer have the right to vote. Nor can members of a majority silence their critics (as much as they might like to) simply because they won an election.

Likewise, the command of equality before the law places limits on what a majority may do. Democratic governments may not design election laws so that some people have more votes than others, but the rule that everyone’s vote counts equally does not guarantee everyone the same influence in public affairs. **Residents of US Congressional Districts that have been gerrymandered to be safe for one party may cast a vote just like other citizens but in reality have little to no chance of influencing the outcome.** Citizens with money to contribute to **political campaigns have** more influence than those who have less or who choose not to contribute. Equality before the law is often difficult to achieve in the face of economic **and structural inequalities.** Yet, efforts to achieve equality may involve restraints on

individual liberty. Laws banning certain forms of racial and gender discrimination, thus ensuring equal treatment for employees in the workplace, decrease the liberty of employers to hire and fire whomever they please. In turn, the protection of certain liberties may result in other inequalities. For example, *Westboro Baptist Church's free speech rights sometimes intrude on the right of other to hold graveside services for deceased soldiers.*

So, democracy American-style is not only, in Lincoln's immortal words, "government of the people, by the people, for the people." As we shall see in Chapter 1, American democracy also involves **constitutionalism**—the principle of limiting governmental power by a written charter. Our Constitution restricts the power of the state. It also establishes the basic idea that no official, no matter how high, is above the law. This point is reaffirmed on Inauguration Day each time a president promises to "preserve, protect, and defend the Constitution of the United States."

constitutionalism

The belief in limiting governmental power by a written charter

Making Democracy Work

For a democracy to function effectively, the people and their leaders must be willing to accept compromise and the notion that no one group will get all it desires. They must also accept democratic values and goals such as majority rule and minority rights. For democracy to work, the public must support the process by which agreement is reached. As one political scientist described it, "The American way is by compromise in little bits, by persuasion, by much talk and little bitterness."⁶

Through the avenues of open debate and free elections, those who lose a political battle generally get another opportunity. Minority factions in a democracy are more likely to accept defeat today if they know the way is open for them to become a majority tomorrow.

Why Do Politics and Government Matter?

Although Americans have had political institutions since colonial days, the nature of government in the United States has undergone radical change. Government at all levels—national, state, and local, but especially the national government—plays a much larger role in the life of the average citizen than it did 220 years ago during President Washington's administration, or even 150 years ago during President Lincoln's time.

Today, the national government pervades society, the economy, and the lives of its citizens. Its actions affect people all over the globe. Its \$3.8 trillion budget creates work for over 1.9 million federal **civilian** employees. Governmental involvement is pervasive, regulating products from prescription drugs to toys. It insures banks, protects the air and drinking water, and warns against cigarette smoking.

With so broad a reach, the national government dwarfs every other organization in American society, including huge corporations like ExxonMobil and Microsoft. Everyone who makes money must send some portion of it to the government in the form of taxes. In short, few people can get through a single day without being

touched by the actions of the national government. These actions result from the process called politics. As the chapters that follow show, politics pervades American society, economy, and culture.

CHAPTER REVIEW

Wrapping it up

1. Politics is about the resolution of conflict in society. Conflicts frequently arise over resource allocation and value preferences. Politicians, at their best, find compromises among these issues where none seem available.
2. Government is essential to a civilized society. Its tasks are to ensure a peaceful society, to provide for the national defense, to secure basic freedoms, and to undertake cooperative enterprises for the general welfare.
3. American democracy provides for a government based on the consent of the governed, the protection of individual rights, and the equality of rights before the law. The Constitution, the basic charter of our government, preserves the principle of government under law.
4. In contemporary America, the tasks of government are extensive and varied. The national government spends **about** \$3.8 trillion dollars per year, and its activities pervade society. All Americans are directly affected by the policies and choices of government.

KEY TERMS

TERM	PAGE	TERM	PAGE
capitalism.....	3	ideology	4
collective goods	6	minimalist state	6
constitutionalism.....	8	politics	2
democracy.....	7	positive state	6
government	4	Thomas Hobbes	5

Readings for Further Study

Two classic discussions of politics can be found in Harold Lasswell, *Politics: Who Gets What, When, How* (Whitefish, MT: Literary Licensing, 2011), and Bernard Crick, *In Defense of Politics* (New York: Continuum International, 2001).

Much of the political theory underlying the American political system can be found in philosophical treatises such as *Leviathan* by Thomas Hobbes (New York: Cambridge University Press, 1996), *Two Treatises of Government* by John Locke (New York: Cambridge University Press, 1988), or *The Spirit of the Laws* by Montesquieu (New York: Cambridge University Press, 1989).

Richard Hofstadter, *The American Political Tradition* (New York: Vintage Books, 1989), remains a landmark study in American political history.

A searching examination of American politics in theory and practice can be found in Samuel P. Huntington, *Who Are We? The Challenges to America's National Identity* (New York: Simon and Shuster, 2005).

Notes

1. Bernard Crick, *In Defense of Politics* (New York: Continuum International, 2001), ch. 1.
2. Harold Lasswell, *Politics: Who Gets What, When, How* (Whitefish, MT: Literary Licensing, 2011).
3. LGBT stands for lesbian, gay, bisexual, and transgender and is the most widely used term for describing this community.
4. *Campanio de Tobacos v. Collector*, 275 U.S. 87, 100 (1904).
5. *Federalist*, No. 1.
6. Frank Tannenbaum, “On Certain Characteristics of American Democracy,” *Political Science Quarterly* 60 (1945): 350.