

OVERVIEW

There are two major questions about government: Who governs? To what ends? This book will focus on the first question and will encourage students to develop their own answers to the second question.

Democratic theory recognizes that the answer to the question “Who governs?” is more complicated than “the people.” Participatory democracy has been a reality in only a limited number of cases.

Representative democracy gives rise to political elites. Elite theorists have given at least four answers to the question of “who governs?”

Marxist: Those who own the means of production, controlling the economic system, will control the government.

Power Elitist: A few top leaders, drawn from the major sectors of the United States polity, will make all important decisions.

Bureaucratic: Appointed civil servants control the government, without consulting the public.

Pluralist: Competition among affected interests shapes public policy decision making.

In order to choose among these theories or to devise new ones, one must examine the kinds of issues that do (and do not) get taken up by the political system and consider how they are resolved by the system. It is not enough merely to describe governmental institutions and processes.

Distinguishing different types of democracies is a very important part of this study. The Framers of the Constitution intended the United States to be a representative democracy in which the power to make decisions would be determined by a free and competitive struggle for the citizens’ votes.

CHAPTER OUTLINE

I. Introduction

- Who governs? To what ends? (THEME A: THE NATURE OF POLITICAL POWER AND AUTHORITY)
 - Politics exists because people having differing opinions on two great questions.
 - Who governs: those who govern will affect us.
 - To what ends: tells how government affects Americans’ lives.
 - The text focuses on who governs and, in answering this question, looks at how the government makes decisions on a variety of issues.

II. What Is Political Power?

- *Power*: the ability of one person to cause another person to act in accordance with the first person’s intentions.
 - May be obvious: President sends soldiers into combat.
 - May be subtle: President’s junior speechwriters take a new tone when writing about a controversial issue.
- Text’s concern: Power as it is used; how it affects who will hold government office and how government will behave

- Authority: The right to use power; not all who exercise political power have authority to do so.
- Legitimacy: What makes a law or constitution a source of right?
- Struggles over what makes authority legitimate constitute much of U.S. history
- It is necessary for government to be in some sense “democratic” in the United States today in order to be perceived as legitimate

III. What Is Democracy? (THEME B: THEORIES OF DEMOCRACY)

- Describes at least two different political systems:
 - Direct or Participatory Democracy (Aristotelian “rule of the many”)
 - Fourth-century B.C.E. Greek city-state, practiced by free adult male property owners
 - New England town meeting
 - Representative Democracy or Elitist Theory of Democracy
 - Defined by Schumpeter: Acquisition of power by leaders via competitive elections
 - Justifications
- Direct democracy is impractical for reasons of time, expertise, and so on.
- The people make unwise decisions based on fleeting emotions.

IV. Is Representative Democracy Best?

- The text uses the term *democracy* to refer to representative democracy.
 - The Constitution does not contain the word *democracy* but “republican form of government” (meaning representative democracy).
 - Representative democracy requires leadership competition if system is to work—requires meaningful choice for voters, free communication, and so on.
- Framers favored representative democracy
 - Government would mediate, not mirror, popular views.
 - Framers viewed people as lacking knowledge and susceptible to manipulation.
 - Framers’ goal: To minimize the abuse of power by a tyrannical majority or by officeholders
- Founders were influenced by philosophers.
 - Aristotle defined democracy as the rule by the many.
 - Democracy is subject to decay into oligarchy (rule by the rich) or tyranny (rule by a despot).
 - Prevention of these extreme outcomes is achieved by the creation of a fusion of elements from democracy and oligarchy.
- John Locke, seventeenth-century English philosopher and writer, had a profound influence on the Framers.
 - According to Locke, people exist in a state of nature where they focus on finding food and on self preservation.
 - People want government as a means of owning property (farms) that will lead to an increase in food supply.
 - Differs from Thomas Hobbes, a rival English philosopher, who favored an all-powerful government.
 - According to Hobbes, people live in a state of “war against all.” Only a powerful government could prevent civil war.
 - Locke disagreed, believing that people can peacefully coexist if they own their own land (farms).

- Locke argued that government should be based on the consent of the governed, managed through majority rule.
- Additional protection would be based on separation of powers, with separate legislative and executive branches.

V. How Is Political Power Distributed?

- Focus on actual distribution of power within American representative democracy
- Majoritarian politics
 - Leaders constrained to follow wishes of the people very closely
 - Applies when issues are simple and clear
- Elitism
 - Rule by identifiable group of persons who possess a disproportionate share of political power
 - Comes into play when circumstances do not permit majoritarian decision making
 - Descriptions of four political elites
 - *Class view* began with Marxism: Founded by Karl Marx; argued that governments were dominated by business owners (the bourgeoisie) until replaced by revolution of workers (the proletariat). This view has been refined, with emphasis on the power of the rich and multinational corporations.
 - *Power Elite theory*: States that American democracy is dominated by a combination of business leaders, top military officials, labor unit leaders, mass media executives, and heads of a few special interest groups.
 - *Bureaucratic view*: First set forth by Max Weber; argues that power is mainly in the hands of appointed officials, who exercise power through their control of information, mastery of written records and detail of legislation, and the implementation of policies
 - *Pluralist view*: Has no single intellectual parent; argues that political resources are broadly shared. No single elite has control of enough power to dominate the political process.

VI. Is Democracy Driven by Self-Interest?

- All elite theories of politics may lead to the cynical view that politics is simply a self-seeking enterprise in which everyone is out for political gain.
- Policy outcomes do not necessarily reflect their authors' motives.
- Self-interest is an incomplete guide to decision making. (Tocqueville's argument: Americans are more interested in justifying theory of self-interest than in honoring their own disinterested actions.)
 - Peoples' actions on 9/11 clearly demonstrated this.
 - Many of the most important events in U.S. history (including the Revolutionary War and the civil rights battles of the 1950s and 1960s) were led by people who risked much against long odds.

VII. What Explains Political Change?

- Historical perspective makes it difficult to accept any simple explanations of political change.
- Changes in elite and mass beliefs about what government is supposed to do have resulted in changes in the character of government.

- The growth of federal power in 1932 and the effort to cut it back beginning in 1981 have no simple explanation.
 - Foreign policy has swung between isolationism and strong internationalism.
- Politics is about defining the public interest, not just “Who gets what?”

VIII. The Nature of Politics

- Often we have only partial or contingent answers.
- Must understand how preferences are formed: Preferences and shared understandings are the underlying basis of most power.
- Political power cannot be equated with laws on the books.
- Sweeping claims should be avoided; judgments about institutions and interests can only be made after observing a wide range of behaviors.