

AP American Government

WILSON, CHAPTER 1

The Study of American Government



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 only been a reality in a limited number of cases. Representative democracy gives rise to an elite. Elite theorists have given at least four answers to the question of “who governs?”:

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 to merely describe governmental institutions and processes.

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

OBJECTIVES

The purpose of this chapter is to give the student a preview of the major questions to be asked throughout the textbook and to introduce key terms. After reading and reviewing the material in this chapter the student should be able to do each of the following:

- List the two basic questions to be asked about government in the United States (or any other nation) and show that they are distinct questions
- Explain what is meant by power, and by political power in particular. Relate the latter to authority, legitimacy, and democracy.
- Distinguish among the two concepts of democracy mentioned in the chapter, explaining in which sense the textbook refers to United States government as democratic.
- Differentiate between majoritarian politics and elitist politics, explaining the four major theories of the latter.
- Explain how political change tends to make political scientists cautious in stating how politics works or what values dominate it.

OUTLINE

- I. Who governs? To what ends?
 - A. Politics exists because people differ about two great questions
 - B. Who governs: those who govern will affect us
 - C. To what ends: tells how government affects our lives

- D. 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?
 - A. Power: the ability of one person to cause another person to act in accordance with the first person's intentions
 - 1. May be obvious: president sends soldiers into combat
 - 2. May be subtle: president's junior speechwriters take a new tone when writing about a controversial issue
 - B. Text's concern: power as it is used to affect who will hold government office and how government will behave
 - C. Authority: the right to use power; not all who exercise political power have authority to do so
 - D. Legitimacy: what makes a law or constitution a source of right
 - E. Struggles over what makes authority legitimate constitute much of U.S. history
 - F. 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? Describes at least two different political systems
 - A. Direct or Participatory Democracy (Aristotelian "rule of the many")
 - 1. Fourth-century B.C.E. Greek city-state, practiced by free adult male property owners
 - 2. New England town meeting
 - B. Representative Democracy or Elitist Theory of Democracy
 - 1. Defined by Schumpeter: acquisition of power by leaders via competitive elections
 - 2. Justifications
 - a) Direct democracy is impractical for reasons of time, expertise, etc.
 - b) The people make unwise decisions based on fleeting emotions
- IV. Is representative democracy best?
 - A. Text uses the term "democracy" to refer to representative democracy
 - 1. Constitution does not contain word "democracy" but "republican form of government" (meaning what we call representative democracy)
 - 2. Representative democracy requires leadership competition if system is to work—requires meaningful choice for voters, free communication, etc.
 - B. Framers favored representative democracy
 - 1. Government would mediate, nor mirror, popular views
 - 2. People were viewed as lacking knowledge and susceptible to manipulation
 - 3. Framers' goal: to minimize the abuse of power by a tyrannical majority or by officeholders
 - C. Were the framers right?
 - 1. Do people today have more time, information, energy, interest and expertise to gather together for collective decision making?
 - 2. Was the Framers' faith that representative democracy would help protect minority rights and prevent corruption misplaced?
- V. How is political power distributed?
 - A. Focus on actual distribution of power within American representative democracy
 - B. Majoritarian politics
 - 1. Leaders constrained to follow wishes of the people very closely
 - 2. Applies when issues are simple and clear
 - C. Elitism
 - 1. Rule by identifiable group of persons who possess a disproportionate share of political power

2. Comes into play when circumstances do not permit majoritarian decision making
 3. Theories of elite decision making
 - a) Marxism: founded by Karl Marx; argues that government is merely a reflection means of production; government is controlled by the dominant social class (the capitalist class in the U.S.)
 - b) Power Elite theory: founded by C. Wright Mills; argues that a power elite, composed of key corporate leaders, military leaders, and political leaders, control and are served by government; the power elite has been expanded to include media chiefs, labor union officials and many others
 - c) Bureaucratic view: founded by Max Weber; argues that power is mainly in the hands of appointed officials who are able to exercise vast power when deciding how public laws are to be turned into administrative actions
 - d) Pluralist view: has no single intellectual parent; argues that no single elite has monopoly on power; hence all elites must bargain and compromise while being responsive to followers
- VI. Is democracy driven by self-interest?
- A. 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
 - B. Policy outcomes do not necessarily reflect their authors' motives
 - C. Self-interest is an incomplete guide to decision-making (de Tocqueville's argument: Americans are more interested in justifying theory of self-interest than in honoring their own disinterested actions)
 1. Peoples' actions on 9/11 clearly demonstrated this
 2. AFL-CIO supported civil rights in the 1960s, without personal or organizational gain
 3. 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?
- A. Historical perspective makes it difficult to accept any simple explanations of political change
 - B. Changes in elite and mass beliefs about what government is supposed to do have resulted in changes in the character of government
 1. The growth of federal power in 1932 and the effort to cut it back beginning in 1981 have no simple explanation
 2. Foreign policy has swung between isolationism and strong internationalism
 - C. Politics is about defining the public interest, not just "Who gets what?"
- VIII. The Nature of Politics
- A. Often we have only partial or contingent answers
 - B. Must understand how preferences are formed: preferences and shared understandings are the underlying basis of most power
 - C. Political power cannot be equated with laws on the books
 - D. Sweeping claims are to be avoided; judgments about institutions and interests can only be made after observing a wide range of behaviors