

1.1: Introducing Government in America

Objectives

1. Describe the key functions of government and explain why they matter.
2. Define the various aspects of politics.
3. Assess how citizens can have an impact on public policy and how policies can impact people.
4. List the key principles of democracy, theories regarding how it works in practice, and challenges it faces today.
5. Explain the debate in America over the proper scope of government Citizen Engagement.

An interactive or media element has been excluded from this version of the text. You can view it online here: <http://pb.libretexts.org/sf/?p=40>

Read

- [American Government Chapter 1](#)
- Supplemental Reading: [Review The Arizona Constitution; Sections 1 and 2](#)

Chapter Summary

Politics and government matter – that is the single most important message of the text. 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 the text is to assist students in becoming well-informed citizens by providing information and developing critical analytical skills.

Government in 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, American Government two fundamental questions about governing serve as themes: How should we govern? 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.

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 Citizen Engagement. Voting is only one form of 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 non-decisions of government: policymakers can establish a policy by doing something or by doing nothing, as can be seen in 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* (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 the 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 to 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. Some scholars believe elitism is on the rise in the United States, especially due to the administrations of Ronald Reagan and George W. Bush. 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 in 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 address 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.

Five elements of American political culture support, shape, and define its democracy. These components are quite important to the immigrant nation of the United States—which has fewer unifying nationalistic characteristics and a shorter historical memory than most other countries.

The first element is liberty—one of Jefferson’s inalienable rights. Americans are supportive of civil liberties and personal freedom. The second is egalitarianism, which is more of an evolutionary process than an absolute. Americans tend to support equality of opportunity, and the struggle for equality continues. American social equality has promoted increasing political equality. The third is individualism, which developed in part from the desires of immigrants to escape government oppression and from the existence of a western frontier with little government. The fourth is laissez-faire economics. The American government taxes and regulates less than most countries at its equivalent level of development. The fifth is populism—the “of the people” in Lincoln’s famous description of democracy. The common, ordinary citizens are idealized in American politics, and both liberals and conservatives claim to be their protectors.

Scholars debate whether there is a “cultural war” afoot in America. Some argue that different interpretations of our core political culture have polarized Americans into opposing camps. Others argue that American citizens are fundamentally centrist and tolerant.

Common Goods

The text discusses the basics of goods that are distributed in the United States. In Fig. 1.3 these goods are further defined in four categories. The four basic political influences put on these goods is outlined demonstrating the complexity of the relationship between goods and services and governance. This complexity has only increased over time, and puts significant pressure on both the US and Arizona Constitution.

Citizen Engagement

The text asks the question if fewer people are engaged in American Politics. This idea of engagement includes many behaviors from citizens voting regularly to participating in a political movement. The overall assertion is that citizen engagement is in the decline, but students should remember that this is an assertion that requires study to decide if you agree or not to the assertion.

Assignments

Discussion

The role of community college students and citizen engagement is clearly a focus of study in the first chapter of the text. What concrete steps should the college take to advocate for citizen engagement? What are the advantages and disadvantages of the college taking a stance on this important issue?

In the next ten years which type of goods outlined in figure 1.3 is the most important to our federal government? Which is the most important to our state government?

Select the **Module 1 Discussion** link to post your response to the topic.

Quiz

- Module 1 Quiz

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