CHAPTER 1

**The Study of American Government**

#  LEARNING OBJECTIVES

1. Explain how politics drives democracy.
2. Discuss five views of how political power is distributed in the United States.
3. Explain why “who governs?” and “to what ends?” are fundamental questions in American politics.
4. Summarize the key concepts for classifying the politics of different policy issues.

#  OVERVIEW

Politics is a complicated topic and there are many factors to keep in mind when discussing the government, forming opinions, and making voting decisions. This text aims to provide the background information to assist you in developing your political beliefs.

**Issues** are the raw materials of politics. In order to understand **politics** we must understand the issues, how all parties see the issues, and the different forms issues come in. We must also understand what we mean when we talk about politics; i.e., the activity by which an

issue is agitated or settled.

The American government has formal **authority**, which means the right to exercise power is vested in a governmental office. American politicians and the American government have **legitimacy** because their **power** is conferred by a law or by a state or national constitution.

How do Americans view democracy? How is democracy defined in America? **Democracy**

has two meanings: Aristotle’s definition (participatory democracy) and **representative**

**democracy** (how democracy operates in most nations). To understand the Constitution and American politics, we must first understand the intent of the Founding Fathers.

***Distribution of Power.*** Representative democracy is viewed by scholars in five different ways:

* **Class view** (Karl Marx). This view has been condensed to its current interpretation that government is dominated by capitalists.
* **Power elite view** (C. Wright Mills). This view holds that government is dominated by a few top leaders, most of whom are outside government.
* **Bureaucratic view** (Max Weber). This view states that government is dominated by appointed officials.
* **Pluralist view** (David B. Truman). This is the view that competition among all or most affected interests shapes policy.
* **Creedal passion view** (Samuel P. Huntington). This view argues that morally impassioned elites drive important political changes.

***Who governs and to what ends?*** Knowing who governs, and what they stand for, provides

insight into political decisions (what will be done to and for us). Knowing to what ends gives us an idea of how government affects our lives.

Politics consists of addressing the many issues our country faces on a daily basis; this is known as the **political agenda.**

The political agenda is affected by:

* shared political values,
* the weight of custom and tradition,
* the impact of events, and
* terms of debate.

The political agenda is impacted by:

* the behavior of groups,
* the workings of institutions,
* the media,
* and the action of state governments.

We can attempt to understand how the government handles a given issue by examining the **costs** and **benefits** of the proposed policy. The *perception* of costs and benefits has a marked effect on politics: political conflict will take one form when people think industries pay the costs and another form when they think consumers pay. People also take into account not only who benefits but also whether it is legitimate for that group to benefit.

A simple theory of politics arises from the observation that costs and benefits are each either (1) widely distributed over a large group of people, or (2) narrowly concentrated to a small group. The four different permutations within this framework result in four different types of politics:

* **Majoritarian.** Almost everyone benefits and almost everybody pays.
* **Interest group.** One small group benefits and another small group pays.
* **Client.** One small group benefits and almost everybody pays.
* **Entrepreneurial.** Almost everybody benefits and a small group pays.

These types of politics provide us with some perspective as to how the cost benefit analysis of a governmental policy is interpreted by different schools of thought.

All of the items discussed in the text aim to give us insight into how preferences are formed, which helps us understand why those who wield power are able to do so; simply put, why we elect who we do.

We should take into account that a well-educated opinion of our government’s institutions and interests can only be formed after examining the behavior of elected officials toward a

variety of issues. In order to form this educated opinion we must not only look at the current behavior of our government, but also history, tradition, and belief.

#  CHAPTER OUTLINE

* 1. **Politics and Democracy**
     1. **Power, Authority, and Legitimacy**
     2. **Defining Democracy**
  2. **Political Power in America: Five Views**
  3. **Who Governs? To What Ends?**
     1. **Expanding the Political Agenda**
        1. Groups
        2. Government Institutions
        3. Media
        4. Action by the States
  4. **The Politics of Different Issues**
     1. **Four Types of Politics**
        1. Majoritarian Politics: Distributed Benefits, Distributed Costs
        2. Interest Group Politics: Concentrated Benefits, Concentrated Costs
        3. Client Politics: Concentrated Benefits, Distributed Costs
        4. Entrepreneurial Politics: Distributed Benefits, Concentrated Costs
        5. Policy Dynamics: Inside/Outside the Box
  5. **Understanding Politics**

 TEACHING TOOLS

LEARNING OBJECTIVE 1: EXPLAIN HOW POLITICS DRIVES DEMOCRACY.

***Critical Thinking Question***

Which is more effective, direct, or representative democracy? Why?

***In-Class Activity***

Divide the class into teams. Select one current budgetary issue (such as education v. defense spending) and debate.

## Lecture Launcher

Should corporations be run as democracies? Why or why not? How would politics affect decisions?

### LEARNING OBJECTIVE 2: DISCUSS FIVE VIEWS OF HOW POLITICAL POWER

IS DISTRIBUTED IN THE UNITED STATES.

***Critical Thinking Question***

How has social media “leveled the playing field” in American politics?

## In-Class Activity

Divide the class into four groups. Each group creates a grassroots organization that will assert political power in America. Explain how your group will attain power.

## Lecture Launcher

How much does financial influence affect a politician’s ability to achieve higher levels of power in America? Defend your answer.

### LEARNING OBJECTIVE 3: EXPLAIN WHY “WHO GOVERNS?” AND “TO WHAT

ENDS?” ARE FUNDAMENTAL QUESTIONS IN AMERICAN POLITICS.

***Critical Thinking Question***

What government policies have been enacted in your lifetime? Select one and explain how it has impacted your life.

## In-Class Activity

Divide the class into two groups and have each group research, compare, and contrast the 1992 Los Angeles riots with the 2017 violence in Charlottesville. How did the stewardship of Trump change the political agenda?

## Lecture Launcher

What do you think has been the biggest political shift in focus due to a specific leader? Explain.

### LEARNING OBJECTIVE 4: SUMMARIZE THE KEY CONCEPTS FOR

CLASSIFYING THE POLITICS OF DIFFERENT POLICY ISSUES.

***Critical Thinking Question***

What would a majoritarian structure give to you?

## In-Class Activity

Divide class into four groups: majoritarian, interest, client, and entrepreneurial. Which approach is most effective and advantageous in the U.S.? Debate why.

## Lecture Launcher

Which cost approach to politics is most beneficial to you?

 MINDTAP ACTIVITIES

The following activities are located in the MindTap for this chapter and can be used either in the classroom or assigned as homework.

## Watch and Consider: The Study of American Government

In this activity, you will watch a brief video and consider who governs, and to what ends?

## What Would You Do?: Will You Favor or Oppose the Ban on Ballot Initiatives?

How would you decide on an important policy issue related to this chapter? Research the pros and cons of the issue, make your choice, and see how your classmates voted.

## Focus Activities: The Study of American Government

This problem set covers topics related to understanding the United States as a Democratic Republic, including the importance of the rule of law, obligations of U.S. citizenship, pluralism, elitism and majoritarianism, and majoritarian versus pluralist democracy.

## Wrap It Up: Chapter 1 Quiz

This final activity will assess how well you understand the facts, themes, and concepts covered in the chapter.

#  KEY TERMS

**authority** The right to use power.

**benefit** A satisfaction that people believe they will enjoy if a policy is adopted.

**bureaucratic view** View that the government is dominated by appointed officials.

**class view** View that the government is dominated by capitalists.

**client politics** A policy in which one small group benefits and almost everybody pays.

**cost** A burden that people believe they must bear if a policy is adopted.

**creedal passion view** View that morally impassioned elites drive important political

changes.

**democracy** The rule of the many.

**direct or participatory** A government in which all or most citizens participate

**democracy** directly.

**elite** Persons who possess a disproportionate share of some valued resource, such as money, prestige, or expertise.

**entrepreneurial politics** A policy in which almost everybody benefits and a small

group pays.

**interest group politics** A policy in which one small group benefits and another small

group pays.

**issue** A conflict, real or apparent, between the interests, ideas, or beliefs of different citizens.

**legitimacy** Political authority conferred by law or by a state or national constitution.

**log-rolling** A legislator supports a proposal favored by another in return for support of his or hers.

**majoritarian politics** A policy in which almost everybody benefits and almost

everybody pays.

**pluralist view** View that competition among all affected interests shapes

public policy.

**policy entrepreneurs** Activists in or out of government who pull together a political

majority on behalf of unorganized interests.

**political agenda** Issues that people believe require governmental action.

**politics** The activity by which an issue is agitated or settled.

**pork-barrel legislation** Legislation that gives tangible benefits to constituents in

several districts or states in the hope of winning their votes in return.

**power** The ability of one person to get another person to act in accordance with the first person’s intentions.

**power elite view** View that the government is dominated by a few top leaders,

most of whom are outside of government.

**representative democracy** A government in which leaders make decisions by winning a

competitive struggle for the popular vote.

#  INSTRUCTOR RESOURCES

Huntington, Samuel P. *American Politics: The Promise of Disharmony*. Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1981. A fascinating analysis of the American political experience as shaped by recurring “creedal passion” periods.

Marx, Karl, and Friedrich Engels. “The Manifesto of the Communist Party.” In *The Marx-Engels Reader*, 2d ed., edited by Robert C. Tucker. New York: Norton, 1978, 469–500. The classic and historic statement suggesting that government is a mere instrument of the economic elite (wealthy capitalists in the modern world).

Meyerson, Martin, and Edward C. Banfield. *Politics, Planning, and the Public Interest*.

New York: Free Press, 1955. An understanding of issues and politics comparable to the approach adopted in this book.

Schumpeter, Joseph A. *Capitalism, Socialism, and Democracy*. 3d ed. New York: Harper Torchbooks, 1950, chs. 20–23. A lucid statement of the theory of representative democracy and how it differs from participatory democracy.

Truman, David B. *The Governmental Process: Political Interests and Public Opinion*. New York: Knopf, 1951. A pluralist interpretation of American politics.

Weber, Max. *From Max Weber: Essays in Sociology*. Translated and edited by H. H. Gerth and

C. Wright Mills. London: Routledge & Kegan Paul, 1948, ch. 8. A theory of bureaucracy and its power.

Wilson, James Q. *Political Organizations*. New York: Basic Books, 1973. It is from a theory originally developed in this treatise that the four-box model of how to classify and explain the politics of different issues that is presented in this chapter was derived.