

Chapter 1 OUTLINE

I. Elections and Government

- The United States has more elections that select more officials for public offices than any other country on earth.
- Elections for national officials are held every two years, with all 435 members of the U.S. House and one-third of the U.S. Senate up for election. There are also numerous elections for state officials and local officials (including school board members). In fact, in 37 states, such as President George W. Bush's home state of Texas, even judges are elected.
- Since many of these half-million elected officials had to first win a party's nomination, there are even more elections. In addition, some states, like California and Colorado allow voters to vote on laws through referendums, propositions and initiatives and likewise amend their state constitutions.

II. Governmental Power

- In spite of all the voting opportunities Americans have, their governments frustrate many. Citizens believe that government costs too much, delivers too little, and wastes their tax dollars.
- Since government has so much power, it is natural and healthy for Americans to have some suspicion of it.
- Ultimately, government is neutral. It can be used for good or for evil. Often it is a mixture of both. After all, we have a government because men often act out of selfish motives. As James Madison put it, "If men were angels, no government would be necessary." Government is one solution to the inevitability of conflict among people living in the same community.

A. Initiative and Referendum

- According to the Initiative & Referendum Institute at the University of Southern California, anything that appears on the ballot other than a candidate for office is called a ballot measure. Ballot measures are broken down into two separate categories – initiatives and referendums.
- Initiatives are when the citizens, collecting signatures on a petition, place advisory questions, memorials, statutes, or constitutional amendments on the ballot for the citizens to adopt or reject. The vote to adopt or reject is called a referendum.

III. Classic Types of Government

- The type of government people live under makes a difference in the quality of life they experience. Aristotle divided governments into three basic types: government by one person, government by the few, and government by the many.

A. Government by One Person

- There are several names for government by one person: autocracy, monarchy, and despotism, just to name a few.
- Whether or not government by one person is viewed as good or bad depends a great deal on the ruler's motives. Those who rule in the interest of the citizens of the country are viewed as good, while those who rule with merely their own interests in

mind are viewed as bad. Saudi Arabia, Qatar, and Yemen are some countries today that have the latter form of government.

- If the maxim “power corrupts and absolute power corrupts absolutely” is based on fact, citizens would have to trust one person before placing all governing power in his or her hands.

B. Government by the Few

- This type of government is called aristocracy if rulers are selected by heredity, or oligarchy if rulers are determined by wealth, military power, or membership in a political party.
- While aristocracies are rare today, several oligarchies exist. China is one example. Although different groups in an oligarchy can serve as a check on each other (unlike an aristocracy), the centralization of power in such governments still makes them subject to the high probability of corruption.

C. Government by the Many

- Government by the many is called democracy. It takes different forms. One form, direct democracy, is government by all of the people. In another form, representative or indirect democracy, citizens elect representatives who make governing decisions in the name of the people in free and open elections. In the popular model of representative democracy, the voters are aware of the issues, vote prospectively, and thus issue mandates to those winning the elections.
- In the responsible model of representative democracy, citizens play a less active role in making governing decisions. Voters in this model need not be well informed since they merely grant or deny consent at elections, voting retrospectively.
- Critics of the responsible model refer to it as elitist democracy.
- Every real world democracy has both popular and responsible elements. Each tends to resemble one model more than the other.
- Britain is a good example of the responsible model. The United States resembles a popular model, even though the framers included elements of the responsible model in the Constitution of 1787. Because they feared majority tyranny, the framers included checks in the Constitution to contain majorities. Furthermore, each national office was assigned a separate constituency.

IV. Traditional Types of Democracy

A. Direct Democracy

B. Representative Democracy

V. The New American Democracy

- Since the ratification of the Constitution of 1787, American politics has evolved in the direction of greater popular participation. This trend has accelerated dramatically in recent decades.

A. Half-a-Million Elected Officials

B. Nominating Candidates and Deciding Issues

C. The Permanent Campaign

- The new American democracy is marked by the presence of what has been called the “permanent campaign”, a situation where the next election campaign begins as

soon as the last one has ended. Several factors have contributed to the permanent campaign: the separation of election days, the decay of party organizations, the rise of interest groups, the proliferation of primary elections, developments in mass communications, advances in polling techniques and the increasing need for money.

D. Separation of Elections

- A century ago, most officials were elected on the same day, but the trend in the past half-century has been to separate election days. Most Americans now turn out to vote for president at one general election, for governor at another, and for mayor at still another.
- In addition, there are primary elections and initiative and referendum elections. It seems as if there is always an election of some kind approaching.

E. Decay of Party Organizations

- By providing voters with a choice, political parties serve an important democratic function.
- Generally speaking, the Republican Party leans to the right of the ideological spectrum (conservative), while the Democratic Party leans to the left of the ideological spectrum (liberal).
- In the past, these parties were so powerful that their organizations were called “machines.” Today, they can no longer deliver the vote for candidates. Campaigns have become candidate-centered rather than party-centered.

F. Spread of Primaries

- In most countries, and in the early history of the United States, candidates for office were nominated by party leaders. This system was replaced with primaries, which are elections for selecting a party’s nominee for office.
- After 1968, presidential primaries for selecting delegates to the party’s national conventions took on a new importance due to their proliferation.
- Since all primaries occur before the general election, they shorten the interval between one election and the next.

G. Rise of Mass Communications

- Technological advances in communications have also helped to make campaigns continuous.
- Candidates today have numerous outlets through which to communicate with voters rather than relying on the party. Inexpensive long-distance telephone rates, the proliferation of cable television channels, C-SPAN, radio talk shows, and the Internet’s chat rooms and blogs are all examples.
- Better communications have obliterated the distance that once separated elected officials from the voting public.

H. Profusion of Interest Groups

- The social movements of the sixties and technological developments have resulted in an increase in interest groups. Instead of just a few large business, labor, and agricultural organizations that characterized the decades prior to the sixties, there are now thousands of generally smaller, more narrowly, focused organizations. These groups are sometimes known as “single-issue” interest groups, i.e. “Save the Dolphins,” “Right to Life,” etc.

I. The Proliferation of Polls

- Another explanation for the shift toward a more popular democracy is the advent of polling. While politicians since the early years of the republic have been concerned with public opinion, advances in polling have taken the guess-work out of what the voters are thinking. The media also spend a great deal of time discussing public opinion.
- The result is the advancement of the permanent campaign by making electoral implications visible from the beginning.

J. Rising Cost of Campaigns

- The permanent campaign has greatly increased politicians' need for money, making the quest for money continuous, too. In large states, incumbent governors must raise \$50,000 every week of their term to fund their reelection efforts; for U.S. Senators, the figure is \$15,000 a week (for six years). Likewise, John Kerry's fundraising haul of \$30 million in April of 2004, compared with the Bush campaign's \$15.6 million, marked the second consecutive month in which the Massachusetts senator's receipts exceeded the president's, according to the two campaigns.
- One consequence of this emphasis is more fundraising scandals and repeated calls for reforming the system.

VI. The Power of the Few

- To say that American democracy is moving in a popular direction is not to say that a majority of the people govern.

A. Voter Participation

- The largest turnout is still for presidential elections. In the 1996 presidential election, only about thirty-eight percent of registered voters voted. In the 2000 presidential elections fifty-one percent voted. And in the 2004 presidential elections 59 percent did so.

B. Nominating Candidates

- The voter turnout for primary elections is less than the turnout for general elections.
- Those who vote in primaries are usually more involved, more committed, and more extreme in their issue positions than citizens who do not vote. This causes ideological differences between presidential candidates, which are accentuated during primaries.

C. Single-issue Voters

D. Campaign Resources

- To save on campaign expenses, candidates seek volunteers. To get volunteers, candidates may appeal to single-issue voters. The groups and interests these individuals represent also seem to have an advantage in politics.

E. Uninformed Citizens

- Most people are not that interested or involved in politics. As a result, the multiple opportunities for bias that exist increase the opportunities to manipulate public opinion.

F. Majorities and Elections

- While contributors and single-issue groups may typically have more political influence than others, when the majority is united and determined, the majority often gets its way.
- Even when not united and determined, the public still has latent power due to the fact that politicians know that any issue could suddenly be highlighted by the press, causing the public to respond. They also know that challengers (those who may run against them in an upcoming election) will be informing the public of their actions.
- In short, since leaders are never sure which potential issue will explode, they tend to be cautious in handling all of them.

VII. Should American Democracy Be Reformed?

A. A Pretty Good Government

- In spite of the fact that many people seem to be frustrated by American government, most proposed reforms would move America closer to the popular model of representative democracy, causing more of the same problems.
- Since politicians are always cautious about what the public thinks, popular influence on government may be part of the problem, not the solution.
- First and foremost, politicians want to get elected and then reelected. The simplest way to do this would seem to be to keep constituents happy. Since national politicians represent so many diverse constituents, the result is often what is currently called gridlock.
- Thus, reforms that shift American politics in a still more popular direction may worsen problems rather than improve them.
- Because of this, a few reformers recommend moving back toward a more responsible, less popular democracy.

VIII. The Benefits of an Electoral Democracy: A Pretty Good Government

- One irony of the new American democracy is that while citizens have more opportunities than ever before to influence their government, Americans have been growing increasingly unhappy with it.
- Even when things do not seem that bad, Americans stay frustrated. One explanation might be found in the maxim, “the best is the enemy of the good.” In other words, the wish for perfection in government and politics often makes people unhappy with their government and their leaders.
- If American politics is so bad, why are so many other countries copying our system, and why do we have to guard the borders to keep people out?
- Tyranny still exists in the world. While Americans should not think that their government is blameless because it is not tyrannical, they should be more careful about the standards used in evaluating their political system.
- Only when comparing the United States with other countries do we see that American democracy, despite all its faults, has extraordinary strengths. Comparatively, Americans can vote more, speak out more, and encounter a government that discriminates less and protects them better against foreign aggression.