A NEW KIND OF INTRODUCTION TO AMERICAN POLITICS

IN AN ERA when American government has taken on extraordinary policy responsibilities, you may be particularly focused on how American government and politics work. To help you with that inquiry this volume mixes challenge and enjoyment. The "challenge" part is in the academic selections—about 90 percent of the book comes from political science and the rest from law and sociology. The "enjoyment" part comes from a political scientist/author grabbing you by the lapels and saying, "Hey, *you*: Look at this part of American politics and the puzzles it presents, and look at how I clarified them for you." The authors, speaking as specialists, effectively treat you as perfectly competent to understand their specialty—and to learn comprehensively about American politics through reading them.

In other words you will survey American politics differently than most people do. The standard way to conduct an overview of American politics is through a textbook, which typically features attractive visual extras—pictures of the American Founding's philosophical forebears, such as John Locke (whose portrait Thomas Jefferson hung at Monticello), the great presidents and Supreme Court justices, views of the Capitol, and the like. The Constitution and the Declaration are reproduced in the book (though you can easily find them on-line). A textbook will have a "big theme" and gesture here and there to a controversy or two.

But a standard textbook of course hides the vital fact that most of what we know about American politics comes from the hard work of political science. With this book you are going to get the basics, rest assured. Every contribution covers several fundamentals, artfully and rigorously. But you'll also get much more than the basics. In fact, you'll become something of a political scientist yourself (if you are not one already).

"But *wait just a minute*," some of you might be thinking, "that's really not what I signed up for." "Okay—that's a valid rejoinder," I respond (imagine me speaking in soothing, laid-back tones). Seriously, here's what I'm going to do next: give you a crash "minicourse" in political science. I think you'll look forward to what this book has to offer after you hear me out. And if you happen to be a political scientist already, you will find this refresher quite useful. What comes next is an essential introduction to the articles in this volume.

WHAT DO POLITICAL SCIENTISTS DO?

What do political scientists do? They study power and its uses, good and bad.

Consider such processes and outcomes as the allocation of government benefits and burdens, the mobilization of votes, the focusing of public attention on some issues and not on others, the celebration by public officials and citizens of things that their countries hold dear, and the identification of national enemies real and imagined. They are all accomplished by ordinary (and extraordinary) people trying to make these processes and outcomes happen. In each of these cases there is some causal relationship between, on the one hand, the people who have preferences

about some real-world outcome and the outcome itself. It is there, in that causal relationship, that one finds power.

When one looks closely, one sees that the source of the power to realize preferences lies in some *resource(s)* available to the people who have the preferences. In the case of a presidential election that results in a Democrat going to the White House, for example, Democratic voters had the power to translate their preferences for a Democratic victory into that outcome largely because they, as voters, formed part of a distribution of partisan allegiances among the states in the Electoral College that was large enough, on election day, to generate a Democratic winner.

Very often, then, political scientists try to figure out which resources are decisive, and under what conditions. They try, too, to figure out where the resources came from and how likely they will continue to be available to people who have preferences for a political outcome.

With me so far? By now it should be clear that I am using "power" differently from how it is more commonly used. Power often stands in for subterfuge, coercion, and intimidation. These are real elements of politics, and they are not attractive. Living in places like Belarus, North Korea, or Zimbabwe—where power is concentrated in the hands of thuggish or totalitarian despots—is hard. But political science is about studying power in its several forms, the disturbing *and* the creative manifestations.

To take another instance, power can involve someone or some people focusing the attention of citizens on an issue that they are glad to consider, once they do so. A person who writes an op-ed for the *New York Times* or the *Wall Street Journal* about a fresh plan for trading carbon emissions is exercising influence. Same goes for someone who blogs well about a political campaign or American policy toward the Middle East. She or he is deploying such political resources as imagination, access to fresh facts, and skill in writing.

Power can also be about setting things up right, or trying to. The Founders exercised power—their patriotism, the cogency of their ideas, their social influence, their reputations, their linkages to each other in informal networks across the thirteen states, their resources for publicity—when they met in Philadelphia in 1787 to challenge the viability of the Articles of Confederation and to propose the alternative charter that we still have, the Constitution.

This reader thus directs you to consider *both* aspects of power, aspects that cause some unease and aspects that inspire admiration. It asks you to think subtly about the various influence mechanisms in American democracy.

The selections also will suggest, over and over, that there are no simple generalizations about power in American politics. There is no ruling elite, for instance—some set of people who *really* run the country. The American political system is just too complex for that idea to be convincing, except as a matter of paranoia or theology.

GETTING HELP

The second thing to know about political science, besides its focus on the complex uses of influence and power, is that it cannot analyze politics all by itself. *It needs help*—specifically from disciplines that, like political science, require getting accurate information about people and their interactions with each other. Political science is shameless about putting these other disciplines to use.

Economics is today the most important of the allied disciplines that help political scientists study power and its uses. Economists focus on individual responses to material incentives. Adopting the concept of incentives, and adapting it to the terrain of politics, political scientists often try to figure out what parts of governmental processes create behavioral if not precisely material incentives for public officials and for citizens.

What does this mean? Political scientists think, for instance, that constitutional rules that allow legislators to gain reelection indefinitely—until they are defeated, die in office, or retire in order to lead a less stressful or more lucrative life—will create incentives for them to blanket their districts with literature about themselves and to do that at public expense. They don't do that anymore, partly because political scientists publicized the practice. But the general point holds: If you are going to have a career, you want to make sure that you don't get pushed out of your career track.

So today, members of Congress (through what are often called "earmarks") make sure that some public money somehow goes to schools, colleges, hospitals, and companies in their districts or states—and that they can claim credit for this. This sort of thing isn't new, really. In the nineteenth century, many members of Congress provided free seed to farmers in their states or districts.¹

This all sounds terribly self-serving. But political scientists also think that the reelection incentive that leads to shameless self-promotion and earmarks in federal appropriations encourages careerist politicians to do something else with their careers besides just managing their election prospects and handing out goodies. After a while, they get pretty good at getting reelected. What do career politicians do then? They specialize. In fact they started specializing when they got to Congress and asked for their committee assignments. They therefore acquire very detailed knowledge about policy and governance.

On balance, then, the operation of the reelection incentive fosters the voter selection of representatives who aren't making it up as they go along and who have the kind of self-discipline and commitment to hard work that any professional career requires. What *this* means, in turn, is that *our* power as citizens to elect a competent government is somewhat enhanced. This doesn't come free—and earmarks are the most visible price we pay. Consider, though, that earmarks add up to, oh, about 1–2 percent of total federal outlays—and while many are wasteful (you may have heard of bridges or roads that have been built to go nowhere at all, or to benefit expensive residential developments or resorts), the vast majority of earmarks are *not* wasteful. The actual social cost of congressional careerism is really very, very small.²

¹ For an introduction to earmarking, see Robert Porter and Sam Walsh, "Earmarks in the Federal Budget Process," Briefing Paper No. 16, May 1, 2006, briefing papers on federal budget policy, prepared by Harvard Law School students under the supervision of Professor Howell E. Jackson, available at http://www.law.harvard.edu/faculty/hjackson/budget.php, accessed 20 June 2008. For a succinct blog entry on the subject, link to: http://www.brendan-nyhan.com/blog/2008/09/gail-collins -vs.html. As for seed distribution—describing the Congressional Free Seed Distribution Program, Daniel Carpenter writes "Congressional free seed distribution was the dominant agricultural program of the late nineteenth century." Daniel P. Carpenter, *The Forging of Bureaucratic Autonomy: Reputations, Networks, and Policy Innovation in Executive Agencies, 1862-1928* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2001), p. 183.

² Porter and Walsh, "Earmarks in the Federal Budget Process," p. 19.

As you can see, borrowing from economics can help political science. But it is not the only allied discipline that helps political scientists. Sociologists study class and status; anthropologists study myths, symbols, and rituals. These concepts, too, are available to political scientists as they puzzle over power—who has it and how it is used.

Take the local police bureaucracies. African American and many Latino citizens have mixed feelings about the police because for a very long time the police were used by white politicians to intimidate minority citizens. Sociology sorts that out, since it emphasizes enduring social divisions and their effects on government. Whites long desired racial hierarchy, and they used government to scare people of color into staying down in the hierarchy. This isn't ancient history either. Countless African Americans have been pulled over in their cars for "d-w-b"—driving while black.

On the whole, however, most American citizens trust most government agencies and agents. That's a bit of a puzzle. You and I simply don't have a lot of *direct* influence on a bureaucracy—say the Environmental Protection Agency or the FBI. We would in fact seem utterly powerless against them. Oddly, the people in such agencies seem to behave every day as if we actually do have a lot of influence over them. They perform their jobs creditably day in and day out; they rarely think about ripping off the taxpayers, and even more rarely actually do so; they very seldom gang up on a vulnerable small-business owner, say, to shake him or her down for money or free goods. Why?

Part of the answer, of course, is to be found by borrowing from economics. With a free press, enterprising reporters have incentives to write shocking stories. The prospect of publicity deters or corrects bureaucratic misbehavior to some degree.

Still, in many countries with a fairly free press, citizens nonetheless find that bureaucrats and public servants take bribes and steal stuff that belongs to ordinary people or the government and then sell it on the side. They abuse their formal power and accumulate material resources and informal power. Yet most (though hardly all) Americans go their entire lives as citizens and never encounter such behavior.

Why? Borrowing from anthropology helps to illuminate the relative overall absence of bureaucratic abuse. Political scientists who study bureaucracies have noticed that effectively motivating people in nonprofit organizations is quite possible—particularly through inculcating *loyalty* to the organization's purposes. This is done, in turn, partly through carefully selecting new hires and charismatic leadership (although that of course is rare), and partly through ritual: ceremonies and activities that bestow honor and esteem within the organization or that accompany career ladders within the organization. Such experiences in turn inspire an organization's people and deepen their affection for the institutions they give their energies to every day.

There are yet other allied disciplines that we borrow from. Psychologists study emotions, rationality, cognitive patterns, and mental illness and health. These preoccupations have in turn helped political science make sense out of an interesting, power-creating phenomenon known as "rally around the flag." If the United States is attacked, as it was on 9/11, the public rushes to support the president—even though one could argue that it instead should rake the president over the coals for not having prevented such a catastrophic attack. In fact, from an economics perspective, "agents" (that is, the people in government) have failed to perform their contract with us, "the principals," to keep us safe. If we were rational, we would

punish them. Yet no one was punished for 9/11—even when it became known that many high public officials, and even the president, were warned of some sort of attack before it happened. In fact, President George W. Bush was reelected by a comfortable margin in the popular vote. This is an instance in which economics doesn't explain what happens; instead, psychology does—and it predicts "rallies," sometimes rallies that last long enough to help with a president's reelection.

Such rallies furthermore change who has power. They increase the influence of a president over Congress and ensure deference from reporters and editors—quite a lot, and for a measurable period of time. Again, psychology can help political scientists study power. Social psychology can explain something that matters in the study of power—the mass (if temporary) delegation of additional power to the president and those who work for him or her.

To sum up, political scientists study power—where it comes from, how it is used. Most of the time the role of power, particularly in democracies, is so innocuous that we refer to it as influence, not power. This is a slight tweak in language that in turn generates a useful shading of the concept of power. Whichever shade we study, however, we need help—and we get a lot of help from allied social sciences.

THEORY AND METHOD

Political science has at least two more parts to it—and you should know about them too before plowing into the selections in this volume. These other two parts of political science are self-conscious inquiry and discussion about both *theory* and *method*.

Theory and method are the two things that tend to make political science somewhat technical. But by thinking about them as you read the selections in this book you will also appreciate the challenging intricacy of American politics. Theory and method are in fact essential to making sense of American democracy.

What is theory? Theory is based on simplifying premises. If you wanted to anthropomorphize it, think of theory as a person yelling, "Pay attention to *this* and *not that*!" Or think of theory as a pair of eyeglasses that allows you to see certain things *very* clearly but simultaneously leaves everything else hazy or blurry because they are, according to theory, not worth worrying about. Political scientists sometimes joke, as well, that theory is like a hammer: Once you believe in a theory, you see nails everywhere to use your theory on.

How would this notion of theory work in connection with studying politics? Recall the point about simplifying premises. You could assume that it is alarmingly easy in politics for people to pointlessly fight with one another over just about anything—unless their institutional environment somehow demanded that they find ways to address big issues that really matter without constantly "defaulting" to bitter division. This would be a theory that states something like the following: People will strike up fruitless conflict in the absence of a well-designed institutional environment, but good institutional design can force productive political interaction among the elected political representatives of an otherwise potentially fractious public. As it turns out, this is the theory enunciated by James Madison, Alexander Hamilton, and John Jay in *Federalist*, the collection of essays that they wrote to persuade voters in the state of New York to ratify the Constitution (and that is today easily available in several paperback editions). In these famous essays, one reads over and over how the institutions that we still have were carefully

designed to elicit enough checking and balancing to simultaneously force national officeholders to start talking with each other in the language of public values and interests, even as they conduct much of their business according to majority rule.

Most (though hardly all) political scientists currently subscribe to a rather different theory—certainly for understanding professional politicians. They use a simple motivational theory borrowed from microeconomics, namely, that people choose to realize their goals "rationally." That is, given constraints on their knowledge (after all, they may be unaware of certain options or not have enough time, energy, or skill to learn about all of them) and given known constraints to realizing their goals (for example, time, money, the rules of the game accepted by all other players), most politicians act strategically to realize their goals. They can make mistakes, of course, but since they are professionals they tend to make relatively few, otherwise they get weeded out of politics and better politicians take their place.

In this view, politicians' ultimate goals are *not* regularly in danger of defaulting to small-minded parochialism. The Founders worried far more than modern political scientists about pettiness and small-mindedness among politicians—not surprisingly, given the need to build a new national government. Now that we have got a successful national government of long standing it is more sensible to assume that professional politicians have quite strong policy goals and little trouble "thinking big," as long as they can stay in office or move up to even more important office. Part of this is due as well to party affiliation, since both national political parties have clear and detailed policy platforms.

In the more modern view, then, the institutional setting that the Founders created for the pursuit of policy goals might invite or induce interbranch deliberation but it *also* creates "costs" for transacting political business with other politicians. The original plan was to force consensus around broad national values—but we now think that that is not the hard part. The hard part is getting anything done. Coalitions have to be assembled in congressional committees, for instance, and controlling the floor in the House or Senate long enough to put together a bill takes an enormous amount of time and energy. Policies have to repeatedly attract majorities in both the Senate and House *and* appeal to the president *and* appear likely to withstand judicial scrutiny, if that occurs, in order for policy ideas to become law.

Institutional structure thus certainly requires that policy proposals and wellcrafted bills encode desirable and attractive values and symbols. But it also generates what economists might call transaction costs. The modern perspective emphasizes trade-offs, frictions, false starts, delays, and the omnipresence of inaction in the face of public needs. The modern resort to economic analysis suggests that there is a certain cost to our fondness for the institutions bequeathed to us by the Founders. Politicians need to take those costs into account when they try to make public policy. We as citizens need to be patient about these costs, since we hardly know what switching to an alternative system would do to the relative predictability of our politics.

What about ordinary citizens? What theory of their behavior and decisionmaking could one adopt? For instance, could one extend the way we think about professional politicians to include them as well? Are *they* rational choosers too? Yes and no, it turns out.

In large groups, ordinary citizens *act* as if they are rational. Thus voters punish presidents for appearing to ruin the economy. (Incidentally, such accountability

places enormous pressure on presidents, particularly first-term presidents, to find some way of credibly taking credit for good economic performance.) But if we move from voters as a whole to individuals, then the basic fact about citizens that immediately comes through is that levels of political knowledge *vary*, both *across groups* that are defined by, for example, levels of education or partisanship, and for individuals *across time*, say over the course of a presidential campaign.

Most of the time most citizens are *inattentive*. Citizen attention is in fact one of the great variables of American politics. Consequently, most citizens fall back on pretty basic predispositions and desires when they think about government. It turns out that the most adopted framework is wanting politics and government to operate *fairly*.

Individual citizens are not, in other words, particularly strategic, in contrast to full-time, careerist politicians or unelected officials running a government agency. In a way, of course, this is perfectly rational: How could any sane citizen think that she or he could, through strategic behavior, nudge the ship of state even a millimeter in one direction or another?

To tally up for the moment, we have two basic theoretical premises on offer for the study of American politics: (1) Politicians are rational and strategic and (2) Busy citizens will fit most issues into a few basic templates or questions, such as, "What's fair?" Notice, by the way, that from these premises we can observe the persistent discontent with politicians among ordinary citizens. Citizens want "fairness" and politicians want careers and policies. Not exactly a marriage made in heaven. But the mismatch is, for better or worse, central to American politics and unlikely to change.

Let's take a couple of more steps as long as we are talking about theory. The next step is pointing out that working premises—such as the two I just sketched—are not cast in stone.

There is in fact a lot of "metatheoretical" activity in political science. By this I mean that there is a constant prowl, as it were, to find something useful from some new quarter of intellectual life. You already have a sense of that from the discussion above concerning the adaptation of economics, psychology, sociology, and anthropology for political analysis.

Many political scientists also read deeply in history, for instance. They do this in order to test hunches about motivations and behavior, and how various sorts of common historical events or sequences (for example, formal transfers of power, war, international competition for markets) can affect the motivations and behavior of important or ordinary people. Others read what lawyers say about the same issues (which is why you will find articles from law reviews in the book). Yet others find that they can get a lot from reading the famous (and not so famous) philosophers of politics. These are people like Aristotle, Saint Thomas Aquinas, and Alexis de Tocqueville or W.E.B. DuBois, Jurgen Habermas, Jane Addams, and Simone de Beauvoir—people who have written about and debated how men and women *ought* to behave politically. Reading them helps, in a deep way, with figuring out the enduring questions of what makes people tick in politics.

In a different vein, there is a serious interest emerging among many political scientists in the role of emotions in politics. Here neuroscience is seen as a source of inspiration. There is also, relatedly, interest in genetics. Recently political scientists have seriously asked whether political affiliations have genetic bases, predisposing some people toward becoming Democrats and others toward becoming

Republicans, given the differences between parties that people will observe as they mature emotionally and intellectually during childhood and adolescence.

Now what does all I have said to this point about "theory"—what it is and how it has a tendency to evolve—mean for you? As you read the selections in this book, you might ask yourself: What theoretical premise is implicit or explicit in the selection that I am reading? Each author is working from some perspective that says—for this is what a theory does—"Pay attention to these sorts of things about people and what makes them tick, not those sorts of things that you *could* focus on but that won't really clarify what you are studying." Why does the author seem to have this premise? What part of American politics does it frame and why does it do so usefully or interestingly? To repeat, think about these matters from time to time. You will notice that you will start thinking more synthetically and clearly about current events as you start using theory to make sense of what you learn about public affairs.

There is still "method" to discuss. To test premises about behavior, and to fit them to experiments, observations, and data, political scientists spend a lot of time discussing good measurement of behavior and debating what counts as reliable and replicable information about politics. Happily for them, and you, democratic governments provide copious information about themselves, executive officials answer questions from reporters or legislators, legislatures record their debates and roll calls, and election administrators provide reliable counts of winners and losers of elections. Also, communications systems that are not controlled by public officials allow researchers to contact citizens directly and ask them what they think and why-and citizens answer back without fear. Census data and other statistics, furthermore, are relatively accurate-and corrected when they are shown to be defective. There are no strongly vested interests in these data taking any particular form. Finally, there are no politically incorrect research findings. In principle, both reassuring and disturbing evidence about how the polity is working is welcome, and it is subject to scrutiny by other researchers without fear for the safety of those who do the research, or the scrutiny. Given such conditions for social science research, lots of highly educated people do political science in democracies. Democracy breeds political scientists.

To get useful information out of the political system in which they do their work, American political scientists ask several sorts of questions. Should we interview powerful or ordinary people? How many? Which ones? When? Can we get them to speak candidly if we also feel obliged to make the results available to other scholars on our websites?

Or, should we observe congressional committee hearings? Should we collect lots of newspaper stories and figure out how often something seems to be on the agenda of the newspapers? What will we learn by collecting and analyzing measurable data, such as election results? Once we start to draw inferences, how do we do that *honestly*, so that other people, using the same rules of inference, would get the same results we do?

Given the many opportunities for freely studying, writing about, and discussing American politics, the results of what political scientists discover are inevitably contradictory and ambiguous—and open to correction by better evidence, more elegantly conceived frameworks for analysis, or better math. Political science, like American democratic life, is pragmatic, pluralistic and open-ended. You will notice these qualities immediately as you read the selections in this reader and as you appreciate the varieties of information and techniques for handling information.

DOES POLITICAL SCIENCE ACCUMULATE RELIABLE KNOWLEDGE?

However, at this point you might be worried that there is way too much pluralism in political science. If it is so pluralistic—lots of borrowing from allied social sciences and even law, lots of techniques and data sources, and lots of searching for yet new ways to cross-fertilize the study of politics with some other nonpolitical field of study—then can it really be a *science*? Why is it even called a "science"?

If by science you mean something like molecular biology, then no, it is not a science. If by science you mean rigorous inquiry that accumulates reliable knowledge, then yes, it is a science. The pluralistic nature of political science actually guarantees progress. Since ideas are constantly tested, the ones that hold up are certain to become recognized as enduring insights.

The case of an American president-Woodrow Wilson-illustrates the point. He wrote one of the first Ph.D. dissertations about American politics, at Johns Hopkins University, which he later published as Congressional Government.³ That work strongly emphasized the centrality of congressional committees in American national government, and, by the same token, a need for centralized, integrating mechanisms in national government. Because there were few such mechanisms, or so Wilson believed (because he did not think congressional political parties did the trick), there were few public activities that the ordinary citizen could focus on. Unfortunately, she or he was stuck with party slogans and partisan newspapersand Wilson did not think this was good enough. So, when he became president, Wilson consciously changed how presidents spoke in public. He revived the practice of giving the State of the Union address in person to Congress, and in his first inaugural address, he announced that such speeches should project a "vision" from which to "approach new affairs." Wilson wanted to enrich the experience of citizenship by making the presidency an easy "focal point" for the average person. Later presidents expanded Wilson's innovation-FDR, for instance, with his "fireside chats" on the radio.4

With a little reflection, one can see that Woodrow Wilson's political science ideas about American politics are still quite relevant. Politics and policy *are* hard to follow if you are not involved with them full-time. It *does* help us as citizens when presidents get on television and explain things to us. Yet Wilson's insights are well over one hundred years old, which exemplifies how a smart political scientist can generate lasting ideas—and institute reforms or new practices—that stand the test of time.

To sum up once again, political science is about how people influence one another and why they try to do so in the ways that they do. There are a huge variety of influence mechanisms in American politics, and people use them with a wide array of goals in mind. Making sense of such a buzzing reality—and making sense of the different conceptual traditions and techniques for acquiring evidence about that reality—is what political scientists do, with considerable success in generating enduring insights.

³Woodrow Wilson, *Congressional Government: A Study in American Politics* (Boston and New York: Houghton, Mifflin and Company, 1885).

⁴For a more extended discussion, see Jeffrey K. Tulis, *The Rhetorical Presidency* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1987).

READING WHAT'S INSIDE THIS READER

So let's turn now to what's inside the reader itself. How does it start?

It opens by considering whether there is a "power elite" in American politics—some exclusive club made up of, say, billionaires, generals, and media tycoons who *run everything*. Is there such a network of people who protect one another's interests and make sure that democracy never fundamentally threatens their wealth and power?

According to the American public, the answer is a resounding *yes*. The American National Election Studies (ANES) surveys have documented in detail that most Americans believe that power is very concentrated. Since 1964 the ANES has asked a random sample of Americans the following question: "Would you say that the government is pretty much run by a few big interests looking out for themselves or that it is run for the benefit of all the people?" The answer that "government is pretty much run by a few big interests" has varied from a low of 29 percent (in 1964) to a high of 76 percent (1994), but since 1970 it has never dropped below about 50 percent. Between 1970 and 2004 the "paranoid percentage"—or perhaps it should be more charitably called the "populist percentage"—has averaged 63 percent.⁵

But the possibility of a power elite is just that, as the opening article by Robert Dahl concisely argues. The idea relies so much on positing the existence and significance of mysterious and unobservable processes that it borders on nonsense. Nevertheless, the succeeding article (by Murray Edelman) does cleverly sketch how the people at the top might manipulate symbols in ways that shape what the public thinks.

But wait—it gets more complicated still. If you think about it, there's an awful lot of *discussion* in American public life. As Deborah Stone shows, just about anyone with a lot of time, energy, and skill can get into the business of telling one of Stone's "causal stories," for the simple reason that there are lots of public problems that require—and end up getting—discussion and scrutiny. Hmm...doesn't look so good for the power elite, you would have to concede.

The last piece in the opening section, by Paul Pierson, complicates the power discussion even further. It shows that public policy choices are constantly disrupting and restructuring politics in the United States. If policy does this, then the distribution of power is constantly changing.

The bottom line of the reader's opening section is clear enough. The relative concentration of power is quite indeterminate. American politics is in fact full of activities and processes that make it *complex*. The articles and arguments in the *rest* of the reader therefore *have to* come into the conversation about how American politics works.

That American politics is indeed complex is not entirely accidental, of course. American politics is intricately designed to disperse power. The reader turns, in Section 2, to treating basic features of American politics that *tame* power: constitutionalism and the separation of powers across the presidency, Congress, the Supreme Court, federalism, and the fifty states.

What one sees by the end of Section 2 is that the American polity is institutionally differentiated—in fact, *elaborately* differentiated. Power and conflict are

⁵ See http://www.electionstudies.org/nesguide/toptable/tab5a_2.htm.

tamed and regularized by American institutional design and evolution. This protects freedom: Each of us can get on with our busy lives and have some sense that we control our lives to some degree. America is very much a busy free-enterprise republic—by design.

Do we go too far with this business of pushing politics and government—the search to acquire and use influence—to one side? We are often not aware of it but many of the issues that we *could* be talking about in our politics are simply absent from the public arena or are turned into a matter of regulatory management. The American polity indeed contains many institutions and programs that are not obviously directly politically controlled by anyone.

We often think that politicians constantly dream up ways to take credit for pleasant outcomes. This is what the constant hullabaloo about congressional "earmarks" presumes. In fact, governance and policy are not that simple. They involve trade-offs or doing things that a politician would prefer *not* to be associated with. Accountable politicians might thus rationally assign key governance tasks to experts—say the experts who run the Federal Reserve system—and they might rationally establish "automatic government," which features (for example) the regular, nondiscretionary inflation adjustment of Social Security old-age insurance payments to senior citizens.

Also, American politicians—particularly (but not always) those in the Republican party—like to put as much government as they can into partnerships with the private sector. Much of our social policy is based on such a partnership. Working Americans get health insurance or old-age income insurance through tax credits that invite the companies for which they work to join forces with government to provide health or old-age income insurance.

All of these strategies—the depoliticization of extremely important policy choices, automatic government, and routing social policy through the private sector—have a huge effect on us as citizens. They probably make it harder for us to be attentive citizens. And attention to politics is already fairly hard for American citizens.

This brings us to *public opinion*—what it is, whether it is well-informed, and whether and how it affects policy and government. H. L. Mencken, the great political satirist of Baltimore, once quipped that "democracy is the theory that holds that the common people know what they want, and deserve to get it good and hard."6 But how can America's "common people" possibly "know what they want?" Most adults toil five, six, even seven days a week in commercial, service-sector, and professional jobs. To get to and from work they crawl along in bumper-to-bumper traffic. Perhaps they dutifully listen to political talk radio or National Public Radio-but more likely they are cursing the congestion and flipping channels to find a decent song. Some of the country rides buses and trains, yes-and it is a common sight to see commuters with their noses in a newspaper. But this is a tiny fraction of the citizenry (public transportation is after all a very small part of the country's daily commute). What about after work or on the weekend? Most exhausted adults surely find it difficult to use their free time for civic homework-reading the national news pages, watching Washington's talking heads on Sunday-morning television, logging onto political blogs-when they also have shopping, laundry, and other errands to do.

⁶ H. L. Mencken, *A Mencken Chrestomathy*, edited and annotated by the author (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 1949), p. 622.

In short, on most days of the week, for months at a time, a huge number of Americans are simply unlikely to "know what they want" from politics with any specificity. That translates into quite a bit of ignorance concerning the basic political facts that every citizen should probably know. About half of Americans do not know who exactly the chief justice of the United States Supreme Court is. Most constituents in a congressional district do not know who represents them in the United States House of Representatives. Fewer than half of all Americans appear to know that the first ten amendments to the Constitution compose the Bill of Rights.

In 2001 and 2003 President George W. Bush signed extremely large tax cuts that cost the Treasury about \$1.3 trillion in foregone revenue. Yet about 40 percent of the American public told survey researchers that they had not thought much about these tax cuts.

As the ANES has shown, people freely admit that they have trouble following politics and policy. Between 1952 and 2000, the ANES asked a random sample of respondents if they agreed or disagreed with the following statement: "Sometimes politics and government seem so complicated that a person like me can't really understand what's going on." Over the course of about half a century, the percentage of respondents who agreed with the idea "that a person like me can't really understand what's going on" never dropped below 59 percent—and it averaged 68 percent.⁷

In short, while political involvement by ordinary people is essential to democracy, that requirement runs up against the reality that most of the time most of us are too busy with our lives. "We the people" might better be called "We the part-time citizens." As "part-time citizens" the vast majority of us have *at best* an episodic (though it is also, via elections, a regularly scheduled) role in affecting public decisions. And we seem to recognize that about ourselves, too.

So it makes great sense to carefully consider just how the *linkages* and interactions between politicians and public officials and voters and citizens actually work—and also to explore what ordinary people and citizens bring to the operations of these linkages.

Here the reader looks closely at:

- The scientific survey of public opinion as a democratic institution
- The impact of public opinion on policy and government
- Whether public opinion *can* be well-informed (despite the data concerning the ordinary citizen's sense of bafflement about politics and policy)—and the implications of scientific measurement of voter ignorance for democratic theory
- How sensible the public seems to be when it *does* pay attention to politics and, more generally, whether media politics fundamentally distracts democratic citizens

In addition, the reader treats the role of formally organized groups in political representation. This type of participation occurs *between* elections, and it requires resources. Thus, to use John Mark Hansen's phrase, group membership has a certain political economy. Here, too, you will wish to reread Paul Pierson's article (in Section 1), Kent Weaver's piece (Section 3) on how politicians try to avoid blame, and the piece by Sidney Verba (Section 4), which contrasts participation in groups

⁷ See http://www.electionstudies.org/nesguide/toptable/tab5b_1.htm.

and participation in opinion surveys. These discussions round out Hansen's treatment of what formally organized groups do in American politics.

Then the reader considers:

- Whether the national electoral process ever gets unbalanced or tilted in favor of one party or another (it does not) and why not
- Voter turnout (it is higher than many think—but that may not be good news)
- Whether men and women relate to the electoral process differently (and by implication how voter characteristics mediate their attachment to political parties)
- How we pick the president of the United States
- What elections communicate, or do not communicate, to politicians and to the public at large

After considering these matters, the focus of the reader pivots again toward a related set of readings, this time toward selections that focus on *political parties*. Many people think that they do not like political parties, and think that huge numbers of Americans agree with them by calling themselves "independents." Political scientists disagree; they *love* political parties—they really do. They really do not think that political democracy could work without political parties. They very much like the fact that most people, when pressed by survey researchers, will think of themselves as either a Republican or a Democrat. Political scientists like parties so much because they connect the ordinary citizen to government and politics and consistently and regularly offer them broad policy choices, thereby giving voters a chance to direct and to control government through party competition.

After you have worked through public opinion, groups, voting and elections, and political parties, you will end with *problems*—issues that are not going to go away anytime soon. The first of these is income inequality; the second is immigration. Both problems reframe American politics and democracy.

The piece by Larry Bartels is a chapter from his pathbreaking analysis of how American political processes independently contribute to income inequality. It shows that the party system refracts genuine class conflict—and has the potential to make the people at the top of the income distribution better off over time, while not doing all that much for the people at the bottom.

The piece by Marta Tienda shows that the American political system does a poor job of representing and incorporating immigrants. We now have more legal and undocumented immigrants in the United States than we have had in a century. Immigrants are likely to continue arriving. As Tienda shows, from the perspective of democratic theory these facts pose hard questions about American politics that are here to stay.

"But why does the book end with problems?" you might ask. It's a great country, after all. Why end on a downbeat note?

The answer is: Our politics is a work in progress. It always has been, it always will be. Democracy is not an endowment, or a legacy so secure that our role now, over two hundred years after the Founding, is simply to keep on trucking, as it were. On the contrary, democracy is a constant and collective project for all of us. You know that already, in fact—otherwise you wouldn't have cared enough to pick up this book and read this far.

One last word about the contents of the reader. You will see that there is a short *headnote* for each piece. What I do in these headnotes is explain in some

detail why I picked that particular reading. But the headnotes are not particularly long—I step aside as quickly as I can so that you can dig into the material yourself.

IN CONCLUSION . . .

Let me end this introduction with the following thought: If you read this book carefully, you will develop an enduring desire to follow the recurring operations of American politics. By training you in thinking and reading about American politics in the manner of a political scientist, this reader will leave you better equipped for attentive (and, if you choose, participatory) citizenship. Political scientists of all stripes constantly pay attention to the public sphere—reading blogs, watching the news, reading newspapers, doing simple back-of-the-envelope econometrics to test out hunches. You will, too.

Although most politicians have backgrounds in law, business, or military service, even political scientists get caught up in the public sphere and end up in local, state, and national government. One of the greatest political scientists, Woodrow Wilson, served two terms as president. Ph.D. political scientists have served in the U.S. House and the U.S. Senate. Vice-President Dick Cheney meant to be a Ph.D. political scientist, and did course work toward that end. He even coauthored a still-cited article on Congress, before he discovered his deep interest in governmental service. (Of course, some of you may think that it's too bad he left graduate school!) The point is, you will care more about American politics after working with this book, and you will follow its dynamics far more easily and with greater appreciation.

The same ANES study documenting that most people consider politics and policy confusing also shows that those with college degrees *disagree* that politics is too complicated. The rate of disagreement has ranged from a high of 66 percent in 1956 to a low of 36 percent in 1998, and since 1980 has averaged 47 percent. You're going to be in that 47 percent. You might even come up with some idea (besides the obvious one of making everyone read this book!) for how to kick the figure back up to its earlier level of 66 percent.

Now let's get started.