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# AMERICAN GOVERNMENT

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Walter E. Volkomer

EDITION

# AMERICAN GOVERNMENT

WALTER E. VOLKOMER

*Hunter College of the City University of New York*

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# AMERICAN GOVERNMENT





# Preface

It was early in a new century and a new millennium. I was working on the revisions of the tenth edition of this textbook on American government. My thoughts turned to the political system of the United States one hundred years ago. How did it compare with the system that operated at the start of the twenty-first century? Had we improved American democracy in the past hundred years?

A detailed examination of these questions would require the production of a book-length manuscript and I was faced with publishing deadlines for this volume. But I have put together a few thoughts on the state of American democracy then and now. My overall conclusion is that despite some weaknesses in our present system, our political system is markedly improved and far more democratic today than it was a hundred years ago. Consider the following facts.

In 1900, African Americans in the South lived in a segregated society. Separation of the races existed in both the private and public spheres. Private companies and individuals were free to discriminate and government laws required racial segregation in all public facilities from schools and parks to bathrooms and drinking fountains. The entire system of segregation was given legal sanction by the 1896 decision of the United States Supreme Court in *Plessy v. Ferguson*. This case held that government could require the separation of the races so long as the facilities provided to each group were equal. In reality, “separate but equal” meant separation but not equality for black Americans. It was only with the 1954 Supreme Court case of *Brown v. Board of Education* and the enactment of the Civil Rights Act of 1964 that racial segregation was gradually brought to an end in this country.

Voting rights in the United States were also restricted in 1900. Despite the Fifteenth Amendment to the Constitution that protected African Americans from being denied the right to vote because of their race, very few voted in the American South. Devious legal schemes, intimidation, and violence kept most African Americans from voting in this region of the nation. It was not until after the passage of the Voting Rights Act of 1965 that blacks were freely able to vote in the South.

Similarly, few women voted in the United States at the beginning of the twentieth century. Although women had been granted the right to vote in a number of states, no constitutional provision existed to bar the states from denying them the right to vote. That changed in 1920 with the adoption of the Nineteenth Amendment. In the decades since this change occurred, more and more women have participated in American politics. Indeed, in recent presidential elections, more women have voted than men.

In 1900, United States senators were chosen by the state legislatures. Most often this meant that a few influential state political leaders made these important

decisions. In 1913, the Seventeenth Amendment to the Constitution was adopted, making United States senators popularly elected by the voters in each state.

Finally, in 1900, there was little in the way of social legislation to protect Americans when they became unemployed, disabled, ill, or when they retired. They were forced to depend on relatives or on charity provided by churches and other private organizations. The country did not even have child labor laws to protect children from working long hours in factories and mines. Although some European countries had established social security systems by 1900—Germany, for example—it was not until 1935 that the United States adopted legislation that established the Social Security retirement system. Later in the same decade, Congress also enacted laws that established the maximum number of hours a person could work each week, created a minimum wage, outlawed child labor, and formulated a program of unemployment insurance. And it was not until the 1960s that Congress passed legislation that provided government programs of medical care for the elderly and the poor.

The fact that in the twentieth century the United States eliminated much of the blight of racial and gender discrimination and created a safety net of social legislation does not mean that we have solved all of our problems. Much remains to be done to eliminate the remaining traces of discrimination in our society. Further, perhaps 30 percent of the people living in the United States do not have any medical insurance. We are a rich nation that should be able to provide health protection for all of our citizens.

To enumerate two problems—discrimination and the lack of medical insurance for many people—that have not yet been solved is not to suggest that there are no other difficulties confronting the nation in this new century. The economic gap between rich and poor that exists in the United States today is not a healthy condition for our democracy. Other shortcomings in our society exist that have not yet been identified. Their discovery is the work of coming generations, including the generation that is currently attending America's colleges and universities.

In writing each edition of this textbook I have always attempted to keep students in the forefront of my thinking. It has been my goal to write a book that is both readable and interesting to undergraduates. Without these qualities, there is small hope that its readers will develop a concern for this nation's governmental system and its public problems. Although I have attempted to interest students in American government, I have never been willing to lower the intellectual level of the book below what I believe to be appropriate for an introductory college level course.

I would like to thank Professor Cynthia A. Roberts, a colleague of mine in the Political Science Department of Hunter College, for providing invaluable help to me in the writing of the chapter on foreign affairs. My work has also been aided by the contributions of the Prentice Hall reviewers who offered suggestions for improving the quality of the book: Janet Campbell, Mt. Hood Community College; Paul Goren, Arizona State University; Thomas Keating, Arizona State University; E. Terrence Jones, University of Missouri-St. Louis; David Steiniche, Missouri Western State College; Robert Ballinger, South Texas Community College; Joanna L. Briganti, Monroe County Community College; Jennifer B. Clark, South Texas Community College; Chris Bourdouvalis, Augusta State University; Steven J. Shone, South Texas Community College; and Ann Kelleher, Pacific Lutheran University. Needless to say, I assume all responsibility for any errors of fact that might be present in this textbook.

WALTER E. VOLKOMER

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