

# THE IRONY OF DEMOCRACY

7th Edition

**An Uncommon Introduction  
to American Politics**

**DYE ★ ZEIGLER**

# THE IRONY OF DEMOCRACY

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7th Edition

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## TO THE STUDENT

In asking you to read this book, your instructor wants to do more than teach about "the nuts and bolts" of American government, for this book has a "theme": only a tiny handful of people make decisions that shape the lives of all of us and, despite the elaborate rituals of parties, elections, and interest group activity, we have little direct influence over these decisions. This theme is widely known as *elitism*. Your instructor may not believe completely in this theory but may instead believe that many groups of people share power in America, that competition is widespread, that we have checks against the abuse of power, and that the individual citizen can personally affect the course of national events by voting, supporting political parties, and joining interest groups. This theory, widely known as *pluralism*, characterizes virtually every American government textbook now in print—except this one. Your instructor, whether personally agreeing with the "elitist" or with the "pluralist" perspective, is challenging you to confront our arguments and to deal directly with some troubling questions about democracy in America.

It is far easier to teach "the nuts and bolts" of American government—the constitutional powers of the president, Congress, and courts; the function of parties and interest groups; the key cases decided by the Supreme Court; and so on—than to tackle the question, "How democratic is American society?" It is easier to teach the "facts" of American government than to search for their explanations. Although this book does not ignore such facts, its primary purpose is to interpret them—to help you understand *why* American government works as *it does*.

Pluralism portrays the American political process as competition, bargaining, and compromise among a multitude of interest groups vying for the rewards distributed by the political system. Anyone who wants such rewards can effectively gain them only by joining (or organizing) such a group. Moreover, pluralists argue, most individuals are members of more than one kind of organized group. Thus they believe the multiplicity of such groups and the overlap of their memberships are insurance against one group's eventual emergence as a dominant elite.

Although pluralists highly value individual dignity, they nevertheless accept giant concentrations of power as inevitable in a modern, industrial, urban society. Realizing that the individual is no match for giant corporate bureaucracy, pluralists hope that countervailing centers of power will balance each other and thereby protect individuals from abuse. Through organized groups and coalitions of groups (parties), individuals gain access to the political system and ensure that government is held responsible. Pluralism contends that the American system is open and accessible

to the extent that any interest of a significant portion of the populace can find expression through one or more groups.

Elitist theory, on the other hand, contends that all organizations are subject to the rule of a small minority of their membership and that the backgrounds and values of all these leaders tend to be similar—so similar, in fact, that they constitute an American sociopolitical elite. The members of this elite determine the society's values and control its resources. They act as much—if not more—on their elite identities as they do on their specific group attachments. Thus rather than viewing organized groups as a balance of power, elitists see organized interest groups as platforms of power from which the elite effectively governs the nation. These leaders accommodate each other more than they compete. They share a basic consensus about preserving the system essentially as it is, and members of their groups do not really hold them accountable. Members have little or nothing to say about policy decision. In fact, leaders influence followers far more than followers influence leaders. These assertions conflict with pluralist beliefs.

A generation or more of Americans have been educated in the pluralist tradition. We do not claim that they have been educated poorly (if for no other reason than that we are among them); nor do we argue that pluralism is either “wrong” or “dead,” for clearly it contains much of value and commands many perceptive adherents. Thus we did not write this book to “attack the pluralists.” Our primary concern is to make available to students and teachers of political science an introductory analysis of American politics that is not based on pluralist theory.

*The Irony of Democracy* explains American political life by an elitist theory of democracy. In organizing historical and social science evidence from the American political system, we have sacrificed some breadth of coverage to present a coherent exposition of the elitist theory. You will find encyclopedic presentations of the “facts” of American government elsewhere. Nor do we present a “balanced,” or theoretically eclectic, view of American politics. Students can find democratic-pluralist interpretations of American politics everywhere.

*The Irony of Democracy* is not necessarily “antiestablishment.” This book challenges the prevailing pluralistic view of democracy in America, but it neither condemns nor endorses American political life. America's governance by a small, homogeneous elite is subject to favorable or unfavorable interpretation according to one's personal values. Each reader is free to decide whether we as a society should preserve, reform, or restructure the political system described in these pages.



## TO THE INSTRUCTOR

The Seventh Edition of *The Irony of Democracy* returns to its classic theme—elitism in a democratic society. Despite the near-universal acceptance of pluralist ideology in American political science and American government textbooks, we remain unrepentant. *The Irony of Democracy* remains an *elitist* introduction to American government.

This is a textbook that will challenge your students to rethink everything they have been taught about American democracy—it is a book of ideas, not just facts.

Elite theory is contrasted to democratic theory throughout the book, in examining the U.S. Constitution, American political history, power structures, public opinion, mass media, elections, parties, interest groups, the presidency, Congress, the bureaucracy, the courts, federalism, and protest movements.

Elite theory is employed as an analytic model for understanding and explaining American politics; it is *not* presented as a recommendation or prescription for America.

In a new epilogue, *Four Views on the Irony of Democracy*, each of the authors presents an individual essay summarizing his *personal* views about American democracy, and Professor Clarence Stone of the University of Maryland defends the democratic process against the obstacles described by elite theory. In an unusual innovation in an American government textbook, scholars from the Soviet Union respond directly to *The Irony of Democracy*. The text was translated into Russian in 1984 and published in Moscow under the title *Democracy for the Elite*. Soviet scholars A.A. Mishin and V.A. Saveljev attack the authors as “bourgeois ideologists . . . who speak frankly about undemocratic political structures” but who “strive to justify the contemporary world of capitalism.” Students can learn for themselves what Soviet scholars think about American government.

The Seventh Edition of this classic text interprets many new and current topics from an elitist perspective: “Only the Faces Change” illustrates the continuation of elite governance through the current Reagan administration, as do sections on “The Conservative Mood” and “Elite Interests in the Reagan Years.” New material on elite institutions—the *New York Times*, Harvard, The Ford Foundation, The Brookings Institution, and the Council on Foreign Relations—is presented in a section entitled “Where to Find the American Establishment.” Special attention is focused on the power and characteristics of the news media elites.

Elections are viewed as very imperfect instruments of public accountability. Voter behavior in the 1980 Reagan–Carter and 1984 Reagan–Mondale presidential elections is closely examined in order to illustrate

"The Myth of the Policy Mandate." We have strengthened and amplified our discourse on campaign finance, and we have devoted more attention to an increasingly momentous topic: realignment (shifts in partisan loyalties) and dealignment (loss of support for either major party). Our interest-group chapter contains examples of two increasingly important phenomena: the inability of groups to represent accurately the views of their members, and the growth of conflict *within* organized groups. We devote more space to political action committees, as they continue to outspend parties in Congressional elections. The presidency chapter offers tentative assessments of a rare occurrence: a two-term presidency. Reagan's early victories and later setbacks are placed within the context of the immediate past, from Camelot, through the Great Society, Vietnam, Watergate, and the decline and fall of the Carter presidency. Our chapter on Congress gives more attention to voting coalitions, especially coalitions that support or oppose the president's programs. New discussions of government tax and spending policies explain elite interest in deficit reduction and elite opposition to genuine tax reform. In our chapter on the politics of protest, we continue to emphasize our belief that, like *all* social movements, the civil rights and women's movements are led largely by upper- and upper-middle-class people. We discuss the role of Jesse Jackson in the black community, the much publicized "gender gap" in women's and men's attitudes, and the family as a political institution, and offer conclusions at variance with popular beliefs.

The Seventh Edition also instructs students in recent political history—the Vietnam War and Watergate. Today's undergraduates were newborns when Cambodia was invaded and Kent State erupted; they were toddlers when Nixon resigned. Yet their high school history courses probably told them very little about these dramatic events. In special sections, "Watergate and the Resignation of a President" and "Vietnam: Elite Failure to Lead," we provide summaries of these important political events and fill a significant void in the education of most of today's undergraduates.

We offer our thanks to the people who reviewed the book in preparation of the Seventh Edition: Peder Hamm, University of Wisconsin, Stout, at Menomonie; Mark Stern, University of Central Florida at Orlando; and John F. Whitney, Lincoln Land Community College, Springfield, Illinois.

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Thomas R. Dye  
Harmon Zeigler

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