



LOUIS SCHUBERT
THOMAS R. DYE
HARMON ZEIGLER

THE *IRONY* OF DEMOCRACY

AN UNCOMMON INTRODUCTION TO AMERICAN POLITICS

SEVENTEENTH EDITION

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An Uncommon Introduction to American Politics

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Louis Schubert

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Harmon Zeigler, Late



***The Irony of Democracy: An Uncommon
Introduction to American Politics,
Seventeenth Edition***

Louis Schubert, Thomas R. Dye,
Harmon Zeigler (Late)

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Content Developer: Michael B. Kopf,
S4Carlisle Publishing Services
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TO THE STUDENT

By assigning you this book, your instructor wants to do more than teach you the basics of government in the United States. Your instructor wants you to think. This book has a bit of attitude and a central theme: Only a tiny number of people make the decisions that shape our lives, and, despite the elaborate rituals of parties, elections, and interest-group activity, the vast majority have little direct influence over these decisions. This approach is called *elite theory*. Your instructor may not believe completely in this theory but may instead believe that many groups of people share power in the United States, 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. That theory, widely known as *pluralism*, characterizes virtually every U.S. 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. He or she wants you to deal critically with some troubling questions about democracy in the United States.

It is far easier to teach the basics of government in the United States—the constitutional powers of the president, Congress, and courts; parties and elections; the key cases decided by the Supreme Court; and so on—than to tackle the question, “How democratic is U.S. society?” It is easier to teach the “facts” of the political system than to search for the explanations. Although this book does not ignore such facts, its primary purpose is to present them to you through the critical lens of elite theory—to help you understand why government and politics work as they do.

The Irony of Democracy is not some polemic or even necessarily “antiestablishment.” This book challenges the prevailing pluralistic view of democracy in the United States, but it neither condemns nor endorses the reality of political life. Governance by a small, homogeneous elite is subject to favorable or unfavorable interpretation, according to one’s personal values. Readers are free to decide for

themselves whether we as a society should preserve, reform, or restructure the political system described in these pages. If this book encourages thought about this question, we see it as a success.

The Irony of Democracy is neither a conservative nor a liberal textbook. It does not apologize for elite rule or seek to defend U.S. institutions or any of the nation's leaders. On the contrary, we are critical of politicians, bureaucrats, corporate chieftains, media moguls, lobbyists, and special interests. But we do not advocate fruitless nostrums promising "power to the people" or "citizen movements" that are themselves led by elites with their own self-interests. We note that partisans are happy with the parts of the book that describe their opponents, but unhappy when the same gaze is cast on those they favor. Tough!

The Irony of Democracy is indeed an endorsement of the most fundamental democratic values—individual dignity, limited government, freedom of expression and dissent, equality of opportunity, private property, and due process of law. Our elitist theory of democracy is not an attack on democratic government but rather an effort to understand the realities of politics in a democracy. We hope that this book, whether you like it or not, makes you think and helps you on your path in learning about this country.

TO THE INSTRUCTOR

This 17th edition of *The Irony of Democracy* has two aims: to keep its vigorous classic elite theory approach and to reflect an ever-changing politics. This new edition unapologetically continues to assert that to understand democracy in the United States it is necessary to understand the elites who run the nation. There may be a near-universal acceptance of pluralist ideology in U.S. political science and government texts; that Noble Lie of the empowered masses certainly contains significant truth, but *The Irony of Democracy* unrepentantly remains an elitist introduction to U.S. government. Elite theory is used as an analytic model for critically understanding and explaining U.S. politics; it is not presented as a normative prescription for the nation. The discomfort caused by this approach in instructors or students stems from its being grounded in fact and observation of reality, not in partisanship or idealism.

Few today still believe that government is run for the benefit of the people. Most see the political system as run by a few big interests for their own benefit, leaving the average person forgotten behind. This reality brings us no pleasure. Over the course of the 45 years of this text's publication, the situation has only gotten worse. Our elite theory of democracy also recognizes the potential for danger in mass movements and intolerant demagogues. Mass ignorance and apathy do not inspire much hope that "the people" will somehow suddenly gain some newfound commitment to the hard work of democracy. The irony of democracy in the United States is that somehow democracy survives despite and possibly because of these conditions.

This book has provided a framework to understand U.S. politics for over four decades. It has seen many political events and eras come and go: the war in Vietnam, Watergate, Carter-era malaise, the collapse of communism, the rise of globalization, a balanced federal budget for four years, the influx of once-unimaginable amounts of money into campaigns, mass death from terrorism, and

wars in Iraq and Afghanistan. Still, the basic analytic model of staying focused on those in power remains critically necessary.

Politics is a living thing. Politics changes often, sometimes daily. Every chapter, every section in this new edition reflects the newest examples and manifestations of the core concepts of this text. Each chapter in this new edition has seen updating and improvement. It reflects the input of reviewers and hundreds of students. Each chapter has a new section, “For Further Thought,” to highlight potential areas to engage in critical thinking and directly engage critical thinking learning outcome requirements. Chapter 1, the introduction to elite theory, has a clearer presentation of the relationship between elite theory and pluralism. Chapter 2, concerning the Founders, clarifies their connections to the classical liberal and classical conservative traditions from which they drew. Chapter 3 follows the evolution of U.S. elites, starting with Hamilton’s financial vision for the new nation up through a new section on today’s technology elites. Chapter 4, on the masses, focuses on positive developments in tolerance over recent decades, while still recognizing the dominance of apathy and ignorance.

The media chapter, Chapter 5, has been revised to reflect the reality of current technology. Students can now publish to global audiences online with their cell phones (regrettably sometimes even during class), something that once required vast resources. The integration of social media into politics is discussed in this new edition. There is also specific new coverage of the relationship between the Obama Administration and press freedom. Chapter 6, on elections and political parties, continues the necessary focus on money in campaigns and includes recent developments in political spending. Speaking of money, Chapter 7 focuses on organized interests and their activities, such as lobbying and funding campaigns to attempt to influence the political elites. A new Focus section on billionaire activists named Steyer and Koch has been added.

The core chapters on political institutions have been updated to reflect a divided Congress, the Obama Administration, and new Supreme Court rulings including Justices Sotomayor and Kagan. The sections on lawmaking focus more on the “Kill Bill” reality to reflect that Congress is far better at preventing laws than making them. The continuing diversification of Congress is also covered. Chapter 9 gives a new perspective on Obama’s first six years in office, in both domestic and foreign policy. A new section on Obama and executive power has been added. Chapter 11 reflects the increased role of the bureaucracy in the political system in a time of a significantly larger government with some vastly greater roles, such as ObamaCare. Material addressing the IRS scandal has also been included here. Chapter 12, on federalism, has been revised to better address the tension between the federal and state governments over the health care law and other matters.

Civil rights, Chapter 13, showcases the continual diversification of the elite in both politics and the economy, including the roles of Hispanic-Americans, Asian-Americans, multiracial persons, and gays and lesbians, as well as updated coverage of African-Americans elites.

The last chapter, “The United States as Global Elite,” deals with the fact that the United States holds an unprecedented position in the world. It still leads economically and militarily, but questions the cost of functioning as hegemon and

“global cop.” This chapter covers the reassessment of role of the United States in the world political system in the post–Iraq War period. There is updated coverage of current security threats, a new section on cybersecurity, and a resurgent Al Qaeda.

We believe that the strength of this textbook comes from its honest presentation of the world as it is, not as one may wish it. Punches are not pulled, awkward areas are not avoided, and credit is given where it is due even if it is a difficult fit with the central elite theory theme. The text does not talk down to students. The Epilogue does not end the book with a warm, fuzzy feeling, but rather gives students some blunt advice on how to preserve democratic values in an elitist system and maybe in the process keep themselves from being rolled over by the elites. We are not concerned if students like this book, but we do hope they find it interesting and have some good arguments engaging with it. Our goal is to help you make them think. For the instructor, whether you agree with the basic elite theory approach or not, we hope this text helps get your pedagogical juices flowing and that it makes your classroom experience more enjoyable and rewarding through keeping you and your students intellectually and perhaps emotionally engaged in the wonderful world of U.S. politics.

Louis Schubert

Thomas R. Dye

Harmon Zeigler, Late

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We thank the reviewers who provided useful comments and suggestions for the seventeenth edition as well as those instructors who have adopted the text and taken the time to send us corrections, additions, and comments. In particular, we thank our students for engaging with the book and for giving us their thoughts and comments for its continual improvement. We thank Melanie Ortanez, our research assistant. Our deepest thanks go to our family members who went without a parent or spouse while work was performed, making this new edition updated and improved.

RESOURCES

Instructor Companion Website

- ISBN: 9781305074664
- This Instructor Companion Website is an all-in-one multimedia online resource for class preparation, presentation, and testing. Accessible through www.cengage.com/login with your faculty account, you will find the following available for download: book-specific Microsoft® PowerPoint® presentations; a Test Bank in Microsoft® Word; an Instructor Manual; Microsoft® PowerPoint® Image Slides; and a JPEG Image Library.
- The Instructor's Manual contains chapter summaries, critical thinking questions, lecture launching suggestions, and in-class activities for each chapter. The Microsoft® PowerPoint® presentations are ready-to-use, visual outlines of each chapter. These presentations are easily customized for your lectures and offered along with chapter-specific Microsoft® PowerPoint® Image Slides and JPEG Image Libraries.

Student Companion Website

- ISBN: 9781305074675
- This free companion website for *The Irony of Democracy* is accessible through cengagebrain.com and allows students access to chapter-specific interactive learning tools including flashcards, glossaries, and more.



CourseReader 0-30: American Government

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Election 2014: An American Government Supplement

- ISBN: 9781305500181
- Written by John Clark and Brian Schaffner, this booklet addresses the 2014 congressional and gubernatorial elections, with real-time analysis and references.

CONTENTS

TO THE STUDENT xvii

TO THE INSTRUCTOR xix

ACKNOWLEDGMENTS xxiii

RESOURCES xxv

CHAPTER 1	The Irony of Democracy	1
	The Meaning of Elite Theory	2
	The Meaning of Democracy	5
	Elites in a Democracy	7
	<i>Issues with Direct Democracy</i>	7
	<i>Representative Democracy and Elites</i>	8
	FOCUS: MASS DISTRUST OF THE U.S. ELITE	9
	<i>Elite Competition as the Basis of Pluralism</i>	10
	The Meaning of Pluralism	11
	How Elitism and Pluralism Differ	12
	Elite and Mass Threats to Democracy	15
	<i>Elite Distemper</i>	15
	<i>Mass Unrest</i>	16
	FOCUS: MASS VIEWS OF ELITE GOVERNANCE	17
	<i>Elite Repression</i>	17

An Elite Theory of Democracy	18
For Further Thought	19
Notes	19

CHAPTER 2	The Elite Consensus of the Founding Fathers: U.S. Political Principles	21
	Elites and Masses in the New Nation	21
	Elite Preferences: Inspiration for a New Constitution	22
	Formation of a National Elite	23
	<i>George Washington's Prestige</i>	25
	<i>The Founders' Governing Experience</i>	25
	<i>The Founders' Education</i>	25
	<i>The Founders' Wealth</i>	26
	<i>The Founders' National View</i>	26
	Elite Consensus in 1787	28
	<i>Protecting Liberty and Property</i>	28
	<i>Government as Contract</i>	29
	<i>Republicanism</i>	29
	<i>Limited Government</i>	30
	<i>Elite Consensus in a World Context</i>	30
	Elite Negotiation: Conciliation and Compromise	30
	<i>Representation Compromise</i>	31
	<i>Slavery Compromises</i>	32
	<i>Trade and Commerce Compromises</i>	33
	<i>Voter Qualification Compromise</i>	33
	The Constitution as Elitist Document	35
	<i>Taxation and the Repayment of Loans</i>	36
	<i>Protecting Money and Credit</i>	36
	<i>Opening Western Land to Speculation</i>	37
	<i>Creating the Military</i>	38
	<i>Protecting against Revolution</i>	38
	Elitism and the Structure of the National Government	39
	<i>National Supremacy</i>	40
	<i>Republicanism in Operation</i>	40
	<i>Separation of Powers and Checks and Balances</i>	42
	<i>Judicial Review</i>	43
	FOCUS: JAMES MADISON: SUPPRESSING MAJORITY "FACTIONS"	44
	Ratification: An Exercise in Elite Political Skills	45
	<i>The Bill of Rights as an Afterthought</i>	45
	The Constitution: An Elitist Interpretation	46
	For Further Thought	47
	Notes	47

CHAPTER 3	Elites in America	49
	The Evolution of U.S. Elites	50
	Early Elite Consensus: Hamilton's Financial Vision	51
	FOCUS: ELITE ATTITUDES TOWARD MASS GOVERNANCE	52
	The Rise of the West	53
	Elite Cleavage: The Civil War	55
	Rise of the New Industrial Elite	56
	The Progressive Era	57
	The Great Depression and the New Deal	58
	<i>Noblesse Oblige</i>	59
	The Growth of Government: The New Deal to the Cold War	60
	Technology Elites	62
	Globalization	63
	Locating the Elites in the United States	63
	Economic Elites in the United States	63
	<i>Industrial Concentration</i>	64
	<i>Financial Concentration</i>	64
	FOCUS: HEDGE FUNDS	66
	Corporate Elites	67
	<i>Management Power</i>	67
	<i>Interlocking Directorates</i>	68
	Government and Corporate Elites: Revolving Doors	68
	Elite Policy-Making Institutions	69
	FOCUS: GREED IN THE BOARDROOM	70
	<i>Public Policy as Elite Preference</i>	71
	<i>The Foundations and Universities</i>	72
	<i>The Think Tanks</i>	72
	<i>The Media</i>	72
	<i>The Washington Insiders</i>	73
	Power in the United States: An Elitist Interpretation	73
	FOCUS: THE ELITE THINK TANKS	75
	For Further Thought	76
	Notes	76
CHAPTER 4	Masses in the United States	77
	Elite Gains, Mass Stagnation	78
	<i>Stagnating Worker Earnings</i>	78
	<i>Deunionization</i>	79
	Inequality in the United States	81
	<i>Inequality of Wealth</i>	82
	Mass Disaffection from Politics	83

Antidemocratic Attitudes Among the Masses	85
<i>Social Class and Democratic Attitudes</i>	86
<i>Education and Democratic Attitudes</i>	86
<i>Elite Experience and Democratic Attitudes</i>	87
The Growing Tolerance of the Masses	87
Mass Political Ignorance	89
<i>Ignorance</i>	90
FOCUS: MASS CONFIDENCE IN U.S. INSTITUTIONS	90
<i>Phantom Opinions and Inconsistent Opinions</i>	92
<i>Ignorance and Paranoia: Conspiracy Theory</i>	93
Mass Political Apathy	93
The Dangers of Mass Unrest	95
<i>Sources of Mass Unrest</i>	96
FOCUS: POPULAR MOVEMENTS: THE TEA PARTY AND OCCUPY WALL STREET	97
<i>Counterelites</i>	98
<i>Left-Wing Extremism</i>	98
<i>Right-Wing Extremism</i>	98
<i>Single-Issue Extremism</i>	99
Elite Repression	99
<i>Repression and the War on Terrorism</i>	100
<i>A Brief History of Elite Repression</i>	100
How Does Democracy Survive?	101
Mass Conditions: An Elitist Interpretation	101
For Further Thought	102
Notes	103
CHAPTER 5	The Media: Elite–Mass Communication
	105
The News Makers	105
<i>The Myth of the Mirror</i>	106
<i>The Concentration of Media Power</i>	107
<i>Inter-Elite Communication</i>	107
The Media's Political Functions	108
<i>Interpretation</i>	108
Socialization	108
<i>Persuasion</i>	109
<i>Agenda Setting</i>	109
Bashing the United States for Fun and Profit	110
<i>Sex and Violence</i>	111
FOCUS: POLITICAL ENTERTAINMENT	112
<i>Social Costs of Media Content</i>	112
Bias in Television News	112
<i>Divisions Among Mass Audiences</i>	113

<i>Hollywood Liberals</i>	114
<i>Political Power and the Press</i>	115
Bias and Slander: Freedoms of the Press	115
<i>No Prior Restraint</i>	116
“ <i>Absence of Malice</i> ”	116
Politics and the Internet	117
<i>Skipping the News Media</i>	117
<i>Open Access Internet</i>	118
<i>Social Media</i>	119
Media Campaigns	119
<i>The Decline of Parties</i>	119
<i>The Media as King Makers</i>	120
<i>Image Elections</i>	120
<i>The Media Campaign</i>	120
Media Coverage of Presidential Elections	121
<i>Horse Race Reporting</i>	121
<i>Negative Coverage</i>	122
<i>Shrinking Sound Bites</i>	122
<i>Late-Night Laughs</i>	122
Assessing Media Impact	122
<i>Cognition and Comprehension</i>	123
<i>Attitudes and Values</i>	123
<i>Public Opinion</i>	124
<i>Behavior</i>	124
The Media: An Elitist Interpretation	125
For Further Thought	126
Notes	126

CHAPTER 6	Elections, Parties, and Democracy	129
	The Functions of Elections	130
	<i>Elections Give Legitimacy to Government</i>	130
	<i>Elections Choose People, Not Policy</i>	130
	<i>Elections Provide Protection against Official Abuse</i>	130
	Why People Vote in the United States	131
	<i>The Myth of the Policy-Oriented Voter</i>	131
	<i>Ideology and Voting</i>	132
	<i>Party Voting</i>	133
	<i>The Group Basis of Voting</i>	134
	<i>The Retrospective Basis of Voting</i>	135
	<i>Candidate Image Voting</i>	137
	Political Parties and Elections	138
	<i>Political Parties as Oligarchies</i>	138
	FOCUS: IMAGES OF THE CANDIDATES, 2012	139

<i>Functions of the Political Parties</i>	141
<i>Declining Mass Attachments to Parties</i>	142
<i>The Attraction to the Center</i>	145
Two-Party Politics	146
<i>Why Third Parties Fail</i>	147
<i>Strength of the Two-Party System</i>	148
Primary Elections and the Deterioration of the Parties	149
Money Drives Elections	150
<i>Finding and Feeding the “Fat Cats”</i>	152
FOCUS: DIRTY POLITICS	152
<i>Wealthy Candidates</i>	153
<i>Campaign Finance Reform</i>	153
<i>The Supreme Court and Campaign Finance</i>	154
<i>The Old Loophole: Independent Group Expenditures (527s)</i>	154
<i>The New Loophole: Superpacs</i>	155
Elections, Parties, and Democracy: An Elitist Interpretation	155
For Further Thought	156
Notes	156

CHAPTER 7 Elites and Organized Interests 159

Interest Groups: Pluralist or Elitist?	159
The Elite Bias of Interest Groups	160
<i>Class Bias</i>	160
<i>The Dominance of Business and Union Organizations</i>	161
<i>The Influence of Organized Labor</i>	161
FOCUS: SUPER LOBBY: THE BUSINESS ROUNDTABLE	163
<i>Ideological Groups</i>	164
FOCUS: BILLIONAIRE ACTIVISTS	164
<i>Liberal and Conservative</i>	165
<i>Single-Issue Groups</i>	165
FOCUS: ARE YOU A LIBERAL OR A CONSERVATIVE?	166
<i>Civil Rights Organizations</i>	167
Women’s Groups	167
<i>Gay Rights Groups</i>	167
How Well do Groups Represent Their Members?	167
<i>Large versus Small Organizations</i>	168
<i>Single-Interest versus Traditional Interest Groups</i>	168
FOCUS: SIZE AND REPRESENTATION	169
Lobbying: How Organized Interests Influence Government	170
<i>Access</i>	170
<i>Information</i>	171
FOCUS: LOBBYISTS AND INFLUENCE PEDDLERS	172
<i>Demand</i>	172