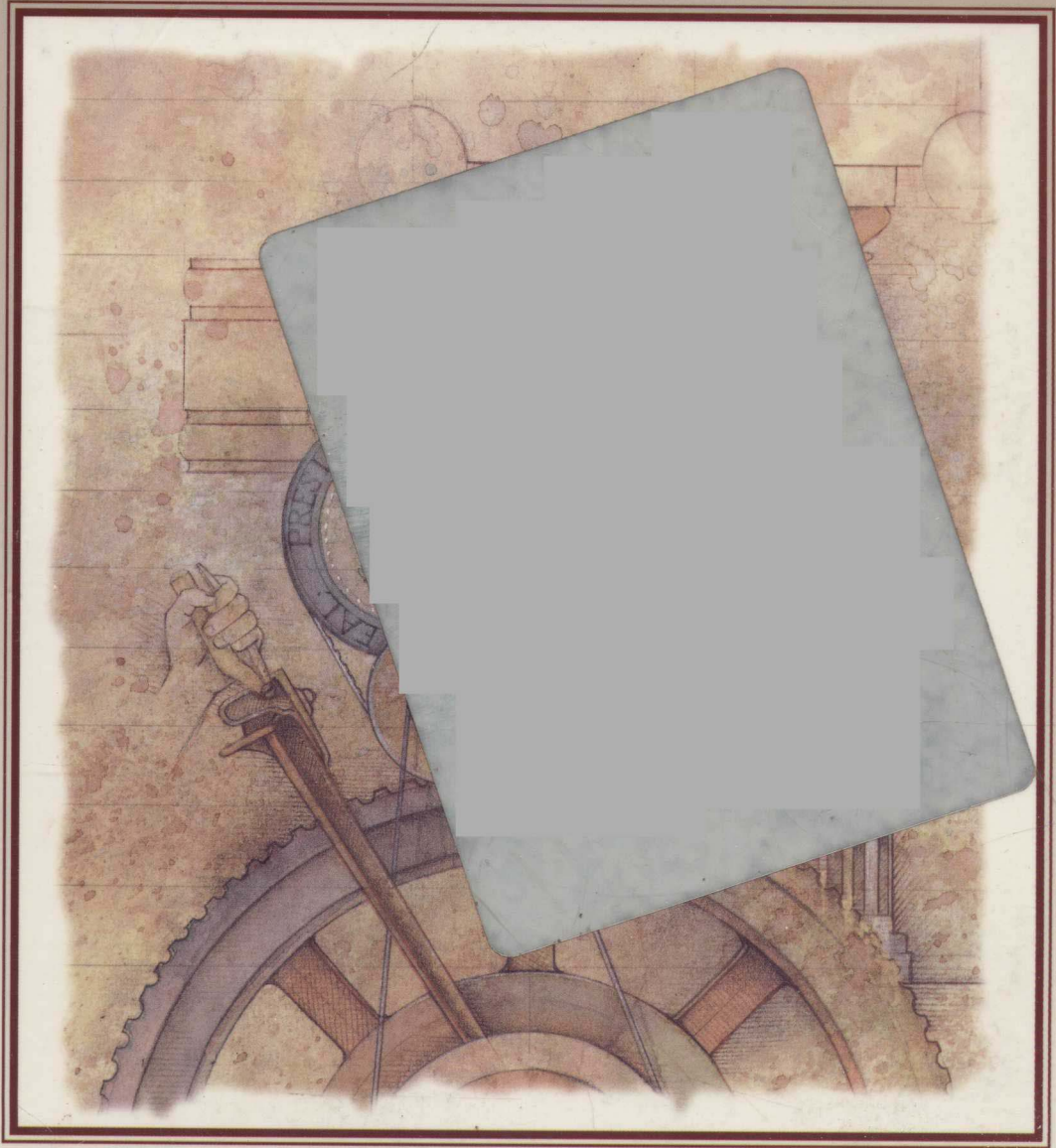


# THE AMERICAN POLITICAL SYSTEM

★ *An Owner's Manual* ★



JOSEPH MELUSKY

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JOSEPH A. MELUSKY

SAINT FRANCIS COLLEGE (PA)



Boston Burr Ridge, IL Dubuque, IA Madison, WI New York San Francisco St. Louis  
Bangkok Bogotá Caracas Lisbon London Madrid  
Mexico City Milan New Delhi Seoul Singapore Sydney Taipei Toronto

THE AMERICAN POLITICAL SYSTEM: AN OWNER'S MANUAL

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This book is printed on acid-free paper.

2 3 4 5 6 7 8 9 0 DOC/DOC 0 9 8 7 6 5 4 3 2 1 0

ISBN 0-697-39592-8

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Compositor: *Shepherd, Inc.*  
Typeface: *10/12 Slimbach Book*  
Printer: *R. R. Donnelley & Sons Company/Crawfordsville, IN*

Cover design: *Gino Cieslik*  
Interior design: *Kay Fulton*  
Cover illustrator: *Kirk Caldwell*  
Photo research: *Toni Michaels Picture Research and Editing*

**Library of Congress Cataloging-in-Publication Data**

Melusky, Joseph Anthony.

The American political system : an owner's manual / Joseph

Melusky.—1<sup>st</sup> ed.

p. cm.

Includes index.

ISBN 0-697-39592-8

1. United States—Politics and government. I. Title.

JK274.M525 2000

320.473—dc21

99-29137

CIP

To my children, Michael and Jessica,  
to my wife, Marie,  
to my mom, Eleanor,  
and to the memory of my dad, George

# Acknowledgements

First, I want to acknowledge my students, whose questions and comments over the years have helped shape this project. Thanks to Linda A. Kline at Saint Francis College for her secretarial assistance.

I also want to express my appreciation to all the reviewers who took the time to read drafts of this work and to offer suggestions. Their recommendations were invaluable.

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Thanks also go to Scott Spoolman, an editor who initially saw promise in this book, and to all the people at McGraw-Hill who worked to make this book a success, including Suzanne Daghlian and Lyn Uhl. Thanks to Toni Michaels for her help in obtaining photos. I would also like to extend my gratitude to the Project Manager, Joyce Watters, Designer, Gino Cieshik and Cover Artist, Kirk Caldwell, who each contributed to the production of the final product. Special thanks are due Hannah Glover, whose attention to detail and editorial assistance were crucial. Finally, thanks to my editor, Monica Eckman for her encouragement and guidance. Her personal commitment to this project made me feel that I was working on something important.

Joseph A. Melusky

# Warranty Message

***Congratulations on being a citizen/owner of the American political system! Your system is covered by a lifetime warranty. However, some routine maintenance is required.***

- Never leave this system unattended. Pay attention to the actions of the public officials who operate the political machinery on your behalf.
- This system requires close supervision. Provide public officials with instructions, notify them of your displeasure, and take corrective measures on election day and at other times if necessary.
- Never use this system while drowsy or while under the influence of drugs or alcohol.
- Use this system only for its intended purposes as described in this manual. Please read this manual carefully for information about how this system operates and how it was designed to operate.
- This system is a democratic one. It will not operate properly if you “unplug” it through neglect. (To paraphrase Benjamin Franklin, “It’s a [democracy], if you can keep it.”)

**Failure to read the owner’s manual  
will result in less-than-satisfactory performance.**

**FAILURE TO SUPPLY ROUTINE MAINTENANCE  
WILL VOID THE WARRANTY.**



# Introduction:

## The Citizen as Sovereign

Democracy is commonly defined as “government by the people.” The Preamble to the United States Constitution begins with the words, “We the people of the United States . . .” Yet **direct** democracy is not feasible in a country as large as the United States. “The people” do not directly participate in their own governance. It is physically impossible for everyone to participate in governmental decision making.<sup>1</sup> An **indirect** democracy or a “**republic**” remains a possibility.

It is fair to say that political elites, not the mass public, operate all political systems. As Harold Lasswell said, “Government is always government by the few.”<sup>2</sup> This condition does not render democracy impossible: “[A] society may be democratic and express itself through a small leadership. The key question turns on **accountability**.”<sup>3</sup> This book examines ways in which the masses hold political leaders accountable and influence them. In the process we will consider the accuracy of describing the American political system as a “democratic” one.

Elected officials and civil servants. Congresspeople and presidents. Judges and bureaucrats. They do not own the American political system; the American people do. That is to say, *you* do. Public officials work for you. You can retain their services, or you can fire them. You are the ultimate source of all legitimate political authority. In short you are sovereign.

**Sovereignty** refers to “autonomous, absolute political and military power embodied in a ruler or governmental body.”<sup>4</sup> **Popular sovereignty** is a keystone principle in democratic thought. It means that in a democracy, “absolute power” comes from the

### QuotableQuote



*Democracy is the worst system devised by the wit of man, except for all the others.*

—Winston Churchill

### QuotableQuote



*Government is too big and important to be left to the politicians.*

—Chester Bowles

people who permit public officials to operate the machinery of government on their behalf. These sovereign people reserve the right to remove control from public officials who disappoint them. In other words, such officials remain accountable to the public.

## About This Book

The subtitle of this book reflects its emphasis on popular sovereignty and citizenship. If you own an automobile and expect it to operate properly, you should familiarize yourself with the owner's manual. You should understand how the car works and how to maintain it. Of course, you do not have to do all the work yourself. You can hire a mechanic to service your vehicle. But you should know about maintenance schedules, what it means when your oil light goes on, and when to take the car into a service station. If you fail in these responsibilities, you will not have that car for long. Similarly, citizens should learn about their political system. They should pay attention, notice, and take action when "warning lights" go on. This brief book is designed to function as an owner's manual. With any luck, it will be shorter—and more comprehensible—than the owner's manuals accompanying some automobiles.<sup>5</sup>

### Quotable Quote



*The death of democracy is not likely to be an assassination from ambush. It will be a slow extinction from apathy, indifference, and undernourishment.*  
—Robert Hutchins

I hope that this book avoids either a liberal or conservative slant. Reach your own conclusions; don't adopt mine. The book does have a bias, however. Its

premise is that the people should take an interest in political affairs, should keep an eye on public officials, and should participate in their own governance. This premise does not mean that citizens should be unquestioning cheerleaders for the political system. Skepticism is healthy. It does not make any difference to me whether you favor Democrats or Republicans or whether you take liberal or conservative positions on the issues. It matters to all of us, however, that you participate in your own fashion.

In addition to its emphasis on popular sovereignty, this book has several distinctive features. First, the political system is large and potentially confusing. To avoid becoming lost, we need a map. The **systems framework** serves this purpose and is used to organize much of our information. It highlights ways in which parts of the system relate to other parts; ways in which the American political system relates to other political systems; and ways in which the political system relates to economic, social, and other kinds of systems.

Second, this book argues that the rules of the political game are not neutral. They encourage certain outcomes and inhibit others. Rules do not determine all political behavior, but they do matter. If you want to play any game effectively, you should understand the rules. The same is true of the game of politics and its citizen-players. Do not become overly reliant on lawyers and other experts to read the rules for you. We're talking about politics here, not neurosurgery. You certainly can handle this.

Third, this book emphasizes the **theoretical, historical, and constitutional underpinnings** of the American political system. Why? You are not merely studying



current events. Awareness of some of the early controversies and debates that forged this political system can help you place contemporary issues into a broader context. Why does the government act so slowly? Why do we have to pay taxes? Why don't we do more to fight terrorists? Why do we have so many laws? These questions are not new. Earlier generations grappled with them, and future ones will face them too. Experiences and ideas from our past can frame and illuminate our discussions today.

Fourth, the book is irreverent.<sup>6</sup> It draws heavily from **popular culture** to explain political developments and concepts. Examples are drawn from movies, television, sports, music, comedy, the headlines, and elsewhere. If an anecdote can assist in illustrating a point, I will use it even if its relationship to political science is not immediately apparent. Some of my examples of governmental foul-ups may seem cynical. That is not my intention. My criticisms of political actors are not mean-spirited. I confess to several biases. I have faith in the good sense and common decency of the American people. I also believe that most public officials are dedicated, well-intentioned, and motivated by a desire to serve the public, popular opinion to the contrary notwithstanding. Sometimes we get lazy and pay less attention to political affairs than we should. Sometimes public officials take shortcuts, do selfish things they think they can get away with, and make poor decisions. Sometimes programs that look good on paper fall apart when we try to put them into practice. Pretending that our system is perfect is not wise. There is nothing cynical about acknowledging shortcomings on the part of the system, public officials, and citizens. We have to recognize problems before we can do anything about them. And when we hear that a state road crew paved over a deer instead of moving it, maybe we should just shake our heads and laugh.

Fifth, the book features “**Something to Think About**” boxes. Here I will step back, tap you on the shoulder, direct you to a headline or some other point of interest, and ask you to give it some thought. “**Quotable Quotes**” are sprinkled liberally throughout the text. Quotes are included if they are relevant, insightful, and/or amusing. Key terms and actors are highlighted in **boldface** print.

Sixth, the book includes an appendix that contains some important **documents** and carefully edited selections from the *Federalist Papers*. Exposure to such **primary source materials** gives you a chance to form your own opinions without relying exclusively on some textbook author to tell you “what the framers really meant.”<sup>7</sup>

Finally, this book is designed to provide students in introductory American government courses with a brief, readable, and solid text. It provides nuts-and-bolts information in a straightforward fashion. I hope it will be regarded as a teaching and learning book that students will be comfortable reading and instructors will be confident assigning; it is not meant to be a glossy reference book that sits on students' shelves until the end-of-semester used-book sales.

### QuotableQuote



*What are lawyers really? To me a lawyer is basically the person that knows the rules of the country. We're all throwing the dice, playing the game, moving our pieces around the board, but if there's a problem, the lawyer is the only person that has actually read the inside of the top of the box.*

—Jerry Seinfeld

# A Note to Students

This course is the first political science course for many of you. In most cases it will be your only political science course. Your instructor knows this too. That is precisely why this course is so important and why I hope this book helps you to make sense of the political system.

You will notice that I sometimes write in the first and second person instead of the more customary third person. Why? I am attempting to engage you in a “conversation” by way of the printed page. You will also notice that my treatment of the subject matter is occasionally, to use that word again, irreverent. I hope you will pardon these informalities. If departing from stylistic conventions on occasion helps us to communicate more effectively, let’s do it. There is no regulation in *The Professional Political Scientist’s Handbook* that requires political conversations to be stilted and starched.<sup>8</sup>

# A Note to Instructors

I tried to develop a book that is brief, readable, and solid. I wanted the book to be brief so you could supplement the text with outside readings of your own choosing without making the reading load too burdensome for students. I wanted it to be readable so students would read it (obviously), understand it, and even enjoy it. I wanted it to be solid so you could be confident that your students would gain a sound conceptual foundation from the book. These three objectives necessitated some trade-offs.

My efforts to make the book readable and accessible led to the book’s informal tone and to assorted simplifications. My “systems lite” approach to systems analysis is just one of the more obvious examples.<sup>9</sup> I have tried to keep things relatively simple without making them simplistic.

My attempts to make the book simultaneously brief and solid led to some difficult choices. For example, you will notice the absence of a full chapter on public policy. Although I included “minichapter” for the convenience of instructors who cover this topic in class, I did not include a policy case study. Such case studies can become dated rather quickly, and many instructors prefer to select their own cases anyway. Further, I sometimes consolidated much material into a single chapter. In such cases I relied heavily on extended content endnotes to amplify the text. Brevity is important, but so is accuracy. I leave it to you to decide how much emphasis to place on such elaborations.

# Ancillary Package

Please visit the Internet site devoted to this book, which offers up-to-date and current information, exercises, simulations, a photo gallery, video clips, and an historical speech archive and further resources for students and professors alike, at [www.mhhe.com/melusky](http://www.mhhe.com/melusky). For instructors, there is also a print version of the IM available (007-229307-1) and the McGraw-Hill American Government Video Library series, created by Baker-Losco Multimedia to enhance course lectures and presentations.

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