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CAUSE AND CONSEQUENCE IN AMERICAN POLITICS



Cause and Consequence in American Politics

JOHN J. COLEMAN

University of Wisconsin-Madison



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About the Authors



JOHN J. COLEMAN is a professor and chair of the Political Science Department at the University of Wisconsin, Madison. Professor Coleman is the author or co-editor of six books, including Party Decline in America: Policy, Politics, and the Fiscal State (Princeton University Press, 1996). His articles on political parties, elections, public knowledge, Congress and the presidency, divided government, campaign finance, and American political development have appeared in the American Political Science Review, American Journal of Political Science, Journal of Politics, and Studies in American Political Development, among other journals. His current research includes projects on campaign finance and party accountability in elections.



KENNETH M. GOLDSTEIN is a professor of political science at the University of Wisconsin, Madison. He is the author of Interest Groups, Lobbying, and Participation in America (Cambridge University Press, 1999) and Campaign Advertising and American Democracy (Temple University Press, 2007) as well as over 30 refereed journal articles and book chapters on political communication, voter turnout, campaign finance, survey methodology, Israeli politics, presidential elections, and news coverage of health issues. Professor Goldstein is a consultant for the ABC News Elections Unit and a member of their election-night decision team. He has worked on network election-night coverage in every U.S. federal election since 1988.



WILLIAM G. HOWELL is the Sydney Stein Professor in American Politics at the University of Chicago. He holds appointments in the Harris School of Public Policy, the Department of Political Science, and the College. He has written widely on separation of powers issues and American political institutions, especially the presidency. His recent research examines the relationships between war and presidential power. He is the co-author (with Jon Pevehouse) of While Dangers Gather: Congressional Checks on Presidential War Powers (Princeton University Press, 2007), author of Power Without Persuasion: The Politics of

Direct Presidential Action (Princeton University Press, 2003), co-author (with Paul Peterson) of The Education Gap: Vouchers and Urban Schools (Brookings Institution Press, 2002), co-editor (with George Edwards) of The Oxford Handbook on the American Presidency (Oxford University Press, 2009), and editor of Besieged: School Boards and the Future of Education Politics (Brookings Institution Press, 2005). His research has appeared in such journals as International Organization, American Political Science Review, American Journal of Political Science, and Journal of Politics, as well as in numerous edited volumes.

Preface

The talking heads populating cable news channels make numerous claims and predictions on a daily or even an hourly basis. Consider the discussion about the Tea Party movement during the 2010 mid-term elections. Some pundits claimed that Tea Party supporters were the driving force that enabled Republicans to take control of the U.S. House of Representatives in November 2010 and win important Senate victories in places like Wisconsin and Pennsylvania. Others thought that the Tea Party movement doomed GOP chances of winning the Senate because of the impact the movement had in nominating candidates like Christine O'Donnell, Sharron Angle, and Ken Buck—all of whom lost winnable races for the Republicans. Some pundits claimed that the Supreme Court's decision in Citizens United v. FEC allowed corporate money to buy the 2010 election for business interests, while others said the electoral forces strongly favored major Republican gains regardless of the Citizens United decision. Although plenty of pundits were able to "predict" the Republican victory in 2010 after it happened, or explain Barack Obama's march to the presidency in 2008 after he was elected, the fact of the matter is that the answers and predictions of the "chattering class" are often wrong.

Why? Because many of us—not just talking heads—often attempt to explain events in our political world by oversimplifying and making causal connections where there are none. Too often, explanations flow from our own political viewpoints or the need to explain something quickly. Although such answers make for good television debates and effective headlines, they fail to give us the understanding of the political world that we need to make informed decisions and demand real accountability from our political leaders.

Political scientists, on the other hand, see the world differently. We believe that there are rarely simple answers and that sorting out fact from fiction and the news from the noise can be a challenge. We gather and analyze evidence. We evaluate research and interpret arguments. We use the tools of political science to go beyond simplistic answers in a quest to explain and provide real understanding of politics and government.

We wrote *Cause and Consequence in American Politics* because it was our sense that political scientists are often wary of bringing to bear the full force of our research into our teaching. Our goal is to give students and those interested in politics the critical thinking tools that will empower them to make sense of the political world themselves. We are also "political junkies," and we pull the examples we use in this book right from the real world of politics to convey our own excitement about the political world that we hope readers will share.

What we attempt to do in the following pages is shake away any notions that "the book is closed" on American politics. Rather, we present the study of American politics and government as a dynamic field full of interesting questions, controversies, and puzzles, for which we provide the analytical tools and perspectives—the ways of thinking—needed to explore, evaluate, and solve. To that end, throughout the text, we emphasize the importance of understanding the causal factors behind political developments, and we help readers distinguish between correlation (when something is related to or associated with something else) and causation. In every chapter we cover the strategies that political scientists use—and the challenges they face—in answering political questions.

Thinking analytically not only helps in a variety of educational and professional settings, but it also produces thoughtful citizens who are interested in participating in politics. Plenty of civics classes and well-meaning organizations preach participation for the sake of participation, but we think that participation is more likely when people have the confidence to take part in American politics. Part of that confidence can come from knowing the basics of politics in America and how to argue and analyze. We hope those who read this book will come away being able to think and view their world critically, as social scientists do and as truly educated citizens must.

The starting point for this book is our introductory text, Understanding American Politics and Government. In Cause and Consequence in American Politics, however, we focus, on the most essential causal questions facing political scientists and the key tools that readers need to analyze American politics. As a result, the book is considerably shorter, and some of the themes, topics, and examples from *Understanding* American Politics and Government receive less emphasis here. In addition, Cause and Consequence in American Politics is written in a style designed to appeal to students and others who are interested in learning more about American politics without resorting to large, standard textbooks.

An Emphasis on Causal Questions

From the very first chapter, Cause and Consequence in American Politics trains students to distinguish between the concepts of correlation and causation as they examine political phenomena, helping them become better critical thinkers and more thoughtful citizens.

Each chapter opens with a **vignette** designed to draw readers into the chapter's subject matter. These stories will pique students' interest and begin to suggest some of the causal questions one might ask regarding the chapter's topic.

Marginal **Thinking Causally** icons are used throughout to highlight discussions in which particular causal questions are explored. The icons are accompanied by questions that prompt students to actively consider causal relationships.

The How Do We Know? feature in every chapter poses provocative political questions and then demonstrates the techniques political scientists use to answer them. Each box provides context for-and underscores the importance of-the question, highlights the means and challenges of answering it, includes Thinking Critically questions, and ends with a Bottom Line summary on what conclusions social scientists have reached.

Thinking Causally Why would a political party seem to downplay the concerns of some members of its coalition, when it knows it needs the votes of these coalition

members to win?

are in two different worlds politically or have political differences that are modest in degree. If the country is n the eyes of many Americans, politics in the United States has become nasty, bitter, and rife with conpolarized, then political success will depend on highly charged mobilization based on strong rhetoric. If the flict. In 2008, presidential candidates Barack Obama country is not, then success will depend more on moand John McCain both criticized the nature of political bilizing the support of those whose views are relatively debate in the United States, with Obama deriding it moderate. Party differences might also influence one's as "do-anything, say-anything, divisive politics" and appraisal of the health of American democracy. Some McCain labeling it as "mindless, paralyzing rancor.

HOW DO WE KNOW?

Is America Polarized?

Both for citizens and for politicians looking to influence the policy process, it matters whether Americans

"Two Americas," the "50/50 nation," "red and blue

America," and "culture war" are labels said to define current American politics.56 Is America polarized? How

> Television election result maps in 2000 and 2004 showing the country divided sharply into regions of Republicar

citizens might consider different viewpoints to be the

lifeblood of a healthy democracy. Others might see

high degrees of partisan conflict as an obstacle to

solving problems and a blot on democracy.

(continues)

Cultural Perspectives

Chapter 2 sets the stage for the book's attention to how American **political culture**—the prizing of individualism, democracy, liberty, respect for property, and religious rights—influences our politics and government. Students will learn how these beliefs are balanced against each other, how they are defined and change, and how they compete and coexist with other beliefs. Values and beliefs motivate participants

Case Study

Getting to Know Voters, One by One

One feature of the party machine praised by political scientists was its tight connection with voters. The machine was, in part, a social service or welfare agency. In exchange for providing help, the machine sought votes. It knew its voters.

Party organizations today also try to know their voters, but they do not have the deep personal connection with voters that the machine did. Nor do they provide social services. However, through microtarget-

ing, they try to understand voters one by one to target messages to each. The hope is to persuade the undecided to support the party's candidate and to motivate the already decided to get out to vote.³⁴

Microtargeting consists of building huge databases of information about voters. For each potential voter, party workers enter hundreds of bits of information, ranaing from

neighborhood characteristics available from the U.S. Census to consumer characteristics, such as purchasing habits, brand of car owned, television networks watched, magazine subscriptions, gun ownership, sports preferred, type of musical preference, and much more. Phone or direct contact from a party staffer or volunteer—known as party canvassing—might extract some additional information for the database. Canvassing is one of the main ways young people become involved in party activity.

Examining voter records and lists, which are readily available from states, provides information on a voter's turnout history, party registration, and possibly which party primary she or he voted in. Voter visits to the party's website or, for example, its Facebook profile, provide additional information.³⁶ Public opinion data are then merged into the file, allowing data analysts to unearth connections between demographic, consumer, and other information and views on public issues.

These data are then analyzed to produce a specific message tailored to a voter's key interests. The database helps generate sophisticated and narrowly targeted advertising. mailings, phone contact, personal contact and get-out-the-vote drives on behalf of a range of party candidates.36 Analysts compute scores for each individual to estimate his or her likelihood of sup-

gh microtargeting, parties appeal to them. The parties consult individual's key issues might be. likelihood of suporting the party's candidates, so the party can target its outreach efforts

Republicans in 2002 were the first to use microtargeting in a systematic way, and it was a prominent part of the party's campaign effort in 2004. The Republican National Committee, in coordination with the Bush campaign and Republican state and local party organizations, purchased commercial databases that held hordes of information on individuals. The party also purchased or received from

(continues)

in the political process, and they also make some policy paths more likely than others in American politics. When people become involved in and passionate about politics, it is due in large part to their excitement and interest in competing ideas, values, and beliefs.



The **Case Study** in each chapter tells an engaging story about recent major political events. These high-interest, in-depth examples apply the ideas developed in the book to the real world, bringing our political system to life and making abstract concepts concrete. Each Case Study concludes with Thinking Critically questions that help students understand, apply, and synthesize key points.



GETTING OUT THE VOTE Political parties engage in extensive getout-the-vote (GOTV) activities. Urging individuals to vote on Election Day is the culmination of a long and often precisely targeted effort to appeal to voters' key concerns. Through microtargeting, parties appeal to voters on issues of specific interest to them. The parties consult massive databases to discern what an individual's key issues might be.

efficiently.37

Resources in Print and Online

Name of Supplement	Print	CHILLE	Available to	Description
MyClassPrep		•	Instructor	This new resource provides a rich database of figures, photos, videos, simulations, activities, and much more that instructors can use to create their own lecture presentation. For more information visit www.mypoliscilab.com .
Instructor's Manual 0205864694		/	Instructor	Offers chapter overviews, lecture outlines, teaching ideas, discussion topics, and research activities.
Test Bank 0205762549		~	Instructor	Contains over 100 questions per in multiple-choice, true- false, short answer, and essay format. Questions are tied to text Learning Objectives.
MyTest 0205762980		1	Instructor	All questions from the Test Bank can be accessed in this flexible, online test generating software.
PowerPoint Presentation 0205854850		•	Instructor	Slides include a lecture outline of the text, graphics from the book, and quick-check questions for immediate feed- back on student comprehension.
Pearson Political Science Video Program	/		Instructor	Qualified adopters can peruse our list of videos for the American government classroom. Contact your local Pear- son representative for more details.
Classroom Response System (CRS) 0205082289	/		Instructor	A set of lecture questions, organized by American govern- ment topics, for use with "clickers" to garner student opinion and assess comprehension.
You Decide! Current De- bates in American Politics, 2013 Edition 0205251749	/	Marke	Student	This debate-style reader by John Rourke of the University of Connecticut examines provocative issues in American politics by presenting contrasting views of key topics.
Voices of Dissent: Critical Readings in American Politics, Ninth Edition 0205251714	•		Student	This collection of critical essays assembled by William Grover of St. Michaels College and Joseph Peschek of Hamline University goes beyond the debate between mainstream liberalism and conservatism.
Diversity in Contemporary American Politics and Government 0205550363	✓		Student	Edited by David Dulio and John Klemanski of Oakland University and Erin E. O'Brien of Kent State University, this reader examines the significant role that demographic diversity plays in our political outcomes and policy processes.
Writing in Political Science, Fourth Edition 0205617360	1	5 (Z. 1)	Student	This guide, written by Diane Schmidt of California State University, Chico, takes students step by step through all aspects of writing in political science.
Choices: An American Government Database Reader	•		Student	This customizable reader allows instructors to choose from a database of over 300 readings to create a reader that exactly matches their course needs. For more information, go to www.pearsoncustom.com/database/choices.html.
Ten Things That Every American Government Student Should Read 020528969X	,		Student	Edited by Karen O'Connor of American University. We asked American government instructors across the country to vote for the 10 things they believe every student should read. Available at no additional charge when packaged with the text.
American Government: Readings and Cases, Nineteenth Edition 0205116140	/		Student	Edited by Peter Woll of Brandeis University, this longtime best-selling reader provides a strong, balanced blend of classic readings and cases that illustrate and amplify important concepts in American government. Available at a discount when packaged with this text.
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