Introduction to American Government and Policy John A. Straayer Robert D. Wrinkle

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### Preface

There are two enormously important reasons for knowing something about American government and politics. First of all, it is critical for the long-run health of our republic that we have an informed and politically active citizenry. As the histories of autocracy so vividly show, uninformed and sheeplike populations may be easily controlled by self-aggrandizing and self-perpetuating elites. The resultant state of affairs is seldom pleasant. On the other hand, where decision makers feel compelled to respond to their constituents, and where both leaders and followers know what is going on and care about collective decisions, the benefits of government are much more widely and fairly distributed. This does not mean that political influence and the benefits of public policy are equally distributed in America, for they are not. But the worst excesses of elitism are tempered, and the values of democracy are more fully realized when there is broad citizen understanding and interest in government.

Second, it is very useful from the self-interest standpoint of each citizen to know how his or her government works. Decisions relative to zoning, the draft, tax systems, and hundreds of other areas of authoritative public policy affect our environment, our income, and our life. It is all but impossible to have an impact on decisions such as these without knowing how they are made, who makes them, when they are made, and why.

Part two of the book contains revised materials from the authors' American Government, Policy, and Non-Decisions, and a few additional sections borrow materials first published in John A. Straayer's American State and Local Government.

We would like to thank several people for their indispensable assistance in the preparation of this manuscript. Judy Straayer had coffee ready by 4:00 A.M. every morning for months and Dottie Wrinkle endured a cross-continental trip in the midst of the project. Suzie Curry, Phil Foss, and Roy Meek provided Professor Straayer with an ideal and essential working environment throughout the summer of 1974. Fred Kinne and Linda Gambaiani of Charles E. Merrill made author-publisher relations a delight. And without the fantastic efforts of Judy Funk, the expeditious production of this book simply would not have been possible.

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### PART ONE

## American Government

#### Introduction

The first eight chapters of this book describe the structure and processes of American governments — the anatomy and physiology as some have termed it. The later chapters are devoted to an examination of the output of the political system in several major policy areas.

Governmental institutions and procedures exist by necessity, in some form, in all organized societies. They may vary greatly from one situation to another, of course, and in all probability any given set of institutions and procedures will change through time. Some institutions and procedures will be "formal" in that they are established by, and operate according to, the law; in the United States, boards, commissions, units of local government, bureaus, agencies, and courts are examples. Others may originate informally, although they too may be affected by the law; examples here would include political parties and interest groups. Governmental institutions and procedures are important to society and are of interest to students of politics in that they are needed to provide public services and attack public problems, and their shapes and modes of operation can have a profound effect on who gets what, when, how, and at what cost.

The institutions and procedures employed for collective decision making in the American political system are many and varied, are the product of both historical circumstance and purposeful design, and have been significantly influenced by a concern to establish and maintain

#### 4 American Government

democracy. The most salient features include federalism, separation of powers, bicameralism, widespread bureaucratization, and metropolitan atomization. The most important forces involved in the design of these institutions include the early need for colonial unity, the fear of centralized authority, and a rampant technology as well as some purposeful implementation of democratic values.

As will become apparent, many of the major institutional features of the American system have at least one common characteristic—they fragment and disperse decision-making power. This dispersion of power, in turn, has at least two results. First, dispersion has what many would consider the positive impact of making it difficult for any single individual or group to gain control of the decision process and manipulate large numbers of public choices in its own narrow interest. But a second result of power dispersion, a result more often condemned than applauded, is the extreme difficulty of coordinated attacks upon such public problems as housing, air and water pollution, mass transit, and others. Literally thousands of American decision-making centers yield policies and programs which are often uncoordinated or even in conflict.

A number of very important consequences flow from the kinds of governmental arrangements which we employ. As noted above, the American propensity to fragment authority helps to explain why it is often difficult to attack problems in coordinated fashion. It also explains the use of varied tactics by interest groups, and the structure and operation of our party system. Interests which fail to realize their goals with state governments may turn to the national Congress, the president, or the courts. Groups which get nowhere with the Congress may try to get what they want by resorting to the use of test cases in the courts. The fact that our parties are loose confederations of local, state, and national organizations as well as ad hoc organizations specifically built to support individual candidates is explained in part by federalism and the separation of powers. We often react slowly to problems in the United States because the Congress is a slow-moving body and because the Congress, the president, and the states cannot agree on a policy. Policy which has broad support both among the public and its representatives often fails to see the light of day because powerful committee chairmen can pigeonhole bills, because the president can veto them, and because senators can filibuster.

In short, an understanding of the processes of government and an understanding of the policy which the political system produces requires an understanding of the structure of government. Chapter one of this opening part of the book examines the historical background from which

our system emerged, discusses the evolution of that system, and provides a brief characterization of the democratic norms which govern much of our political behavior. Chapters two through six describe the major institutional components of the system—the three branches of government, bureaucracy, and state and local governments. Finally, chapters seven and eight look at the way in which citizens, both individually and collectively, work through the ballot box, interest groups, and political parties in their efforts to determine who governs, and how.

### **CHAPTER ONE**

# Democratic Values, Constitutional Principles

#### Introduction

The modern American political system is an enormously complex phenomenon. Today there are approximately 80,000 separate units of government in the United States, including the national government, 50 state governments, and nearly 80,000 local governments. Local governments are as diverse as cities, counties, school districts, water districts, and hospital districts. These governments perform a fantastically wide variety of functions. They staff and pay for armies; police our streets; inspect the kitchens of restaurants; collect and re-cycle sewage; pay for research in such areas as the effects of smoking, drug use, and pest control; plan, pave, and patrol roads; house convicts; keep elaborate records of births, deaths, property ownership; and have an almost uncountable list of other functions.

American governments make authoritative decisions. Decisions made by such nongovernmental bodies as families, churches, and professional associations may be very important to their members and can carry such sanctions as expulsion from the group. But they cannot, typically, fine or incarcerate their members for violations of the group's rules and make it stick. If we do not like what one particular church does, we can quit and join another. At some age we can run away or get married if we are fed up with the decisions and behavior of our parents. But we cannot so easily avoid government. Membership in government is not optional unless, of course, one is deported or he emigrates—in which

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case he will probably just switch the dictates of one government for those of another. In other words, we cannot escape government decisions. If we commit murder, obstruct the delivery of the mail, refuse to pay taxes, or insist on driving without a license, we will eventually run headlong into the authoritative nature of governmental decisions. We will pay a fine, or go to jail, or both.

The structure and processes of American governments affect the nature of the legislation passed and the programs adopted and paid for. The jurisdictional fragmentation of metropolitan areas often means widespread duplication of services. The division of authority between the national government and the states leads to variations in levels of law enforcement. The separation of powers often results in stalemate, especially when the branches of government are controlled by different political parties.

Government is big business. In 1974 the national government spent over \$225 billion and employed more than 2.7 million civilians. State and local governments spent over \$150 billion and employed in excess of 10 million persons.

There is more to the American political system and to American politics than just government. Political parties nominate candidates for office, create and advertise political problems and issues, organize the government, and act as watchdogs of the other party or parties. As such, they are a vital part of the system. Special interests, running all the way from such highly organized entities as the American Farm Bureau Federation and the American Medical Association to less well-organized and less intensely political groups as the Sports Riders Association of Colorado (a body which organizes and sanctions motorcycle racing) and thousands of ad hoc groups of citizens who unite, from time to time, all over the country to oppose city proposals to rezone their neighborhoods. These groupings are also important parts of the American political system, for they play vital roles in providing citizen input for governmental decisions. They may suggest legislation, oppose pending legislation, or have something to say about the level of enforcement of laws on the books. They monitor some of the activities of government, contribute to their members' store of political information, and help shape the perceptions and attitudes of their members and of government decision makers.

Public and private elites constitute vital segments of the political system. Most legislation is formed, defended, and implemented by knowledgeable and specially trained bureaucrats. Government agencies are packed with these bureaucrats and are often the most partisan and

effective lobbies for or against legislation. Similarly, political parties and interest groups are represented by their leaders, and the preferences and behavior of these organizations tend to reflect the values of the leadership. Political influence is not evenly distributed throughout the American citizenry. In almost all policy areas, a small group of individuals will be disproportionately knowledgeable and influential.

In spite of this lack of political equality, however, the rank and file, or masses as we are often called, do play a vital role in the political system. Few Americans have a direct hand in the framing, passage, and administration of public policy, but the mass of voters have a very real impact on the selection and behavior of those who do. Administration policy in regard to the Vietnam war was significantly influenced by the attitudes and behavior of large numbers of irritated and agitated citizens, and the preferences registered by the voters of Arkansas in their ouster of thirty-year Senate veteran William Fulbright in the wake of the Watergate incident are illustrative of the potential and real power of the people.

Changing social and economic conditions, crisis, and disaster may also be included as important influences on the American political system. Riots and destruction in American cities in the late 1960s contributed to enactment of some significant antipoverty legislation. Wartime conditions always trigger increased government employment and spending, and some scientific innovation. Such perceived crises as the Russian orbiting of Sputnik I in 1957 led to vastly increased federal spending for higher education. At the state and local levels, floods often lead to new zoning legislation.

The attitudes of both leaders and followers about the appropriate role of government in society and the proper relationship of decision makers to the voters profoundly affect the way the political system operates. Most people in the United States have internalized the idea that government is supposed to be servant, not master, and that government officials should be held responsible for their actions and accountable to the people. The rising crescendo of complaints and the outrage expressed about the behavior of public officials in the Watergate scandal is testimony to the fact that citizen notions about their own relationship to government affect in an important way the operation of the political system.

So, the American political system is a complex phenomenon. The various facets of the system — citizen attitudes, the governmental structure, political parties and interest groups, and public policy which emerges from the system — will be described and debated throughout

this book. The remainder of this chapter will be devoted to an overview of the development and nature of the democratic values which affect our thought and behavior, and the constitutional principles which underpin the system.

#### **Democratic Values**

In every society public decision making is affected by the prevailing value system — by the images the people have of how public decisions should be made, of how the government should be structured, of how politicians should behave, of how citizens should relate to their government, and of how government and politics in general should operate. Political values condition the expectations which citizens have of their public officials and of their government and the behavior which public officials expect of themselves. In some societies, at some points in time, citizens have expected very little in the way of responsiveness and responsibility from official decision makers; they expected public officials to be arbitrary and capricious in their decision making, to line their own pockets, and to pay little or no attention to public preferences. In other societies, at other points in time, however, citizens have expected government to respond to their desires and to operate in a reasonably honest and effective manner. The widespread public displeasure with the events surrounding the Watergate episode illustrate the fashion in which certain governmental behavior can run afoul of the American political value system — values which do not condone secrecy and attempts to manipulate established and widely accepted decisionmaking practices.

Likewise, the behavior of decision makers has varied greatly over time, some of them structuring their behavior and the operations of government in accordance with popular preferences, and others giving public desire little or no weight. Table 1-1 illustrates some variations in citizen attitudes toward their government in five nations. The extent to which citizens expect equal treatment and feel they should and can be politically active and effective is considerably higher in the United States and Great Britain than in the other three nations studied. Table 1-1 also indicates the extent to which citizens in countries considered to be democratic have internalized the idea that equal treatment by government and an active citizenry are "good."

We can say that the political value system in the United States is essentially democratic in nature. This does not mean that all of the leaders and all of the followers are model democratic citizens. Nor does