
# WE THE PEOPLE

## AN INTRODUCTION TO AMERICAN POLITICS

**SHORTER THIRD EDITION**

Benjamin Ginsberg • Theodore J. Lowi • Margaret Weir

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**SHORTER THIRD EDITION**

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# We the People

## An Introduction to American Politics

SHORTER THIRD EDITION

To

*Sandy, Cindy, and Alex Ginsberg*

*Angele, Anna, and Jason Lowi*

*Nicholas Ziegler*

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# Preface

*We the People* is a milestone in a collaboration that began between Theodore J. Lowi and Benjamin Ginsberg twenty years ago. The first result of that collaboration, *American Government: Freedom and Power,* was first published in 1990. With its most recent edition, we and the publishers feel warranted in expressing satisfaction that its historical/institutional method has been confirmed by its reception among the teachers who have adopted it and the students who have read it.

But unlike political leaders, textbooks should not try to be all things to all people. Endurance is most often ensured by recognition of one's limitations. Lowi and Ginsberg increasingly came to feel that *American Government* needed a sibling to address a number of themes and problems that have become much more central to American politics since *American Government* was conceived in the early 1980s. For a good text should be both timeless and timely: It should present principles whose value goes beyond the immediate events of the day. At the same time, however, it should present students with the principles they need to help elevate their understanding of contemporary events.

We viewed this process as a challenge rather than as a chore. The first step Lowi and Ginsberg took to meet the challenge of developing a new text was to invite a third author to join the enterprise: Margaret Weir, an expert on social policy in the United States and Europe. Weir brought with her a strong background in urban politics as well as the benefit of several years of teaching experience at Harvard and the University of California at Berkeley, where she now teaches.

From the start, the three of us agreed that this younger sibling would be titled *We the People* and would focus on three sets of issues. The first of these is the question of who is and who is not part of the American political community. This question has been the source of enormous conflict throughout American history and has become salient once again as events at home and throughout the world have brightened the light of democracy, exposing for everyone to see the unreasonable restrictions on who are "we the people," how should "we the people" be defined, and what powers, rights, and obligations "we the people" should have. Although the United States has so far experienced comparatively little conflict over the basic institutions and

practices of government, and although our institutions have evolved in a roughly democratic direction, the struggle over the scope and inclusiveness of the American political process has often been a bitter one, and neither the struggle nor the bitterness is over.

The original American political community consisted of a rather limited group of white male property holders. Over the ensuing two centuries, "we the people" became a larger and more inclusive body as a result of such forces as the abolitionist movement, the women's suffrage movement, and the civil rights movement. This expansion of the political community was marked by enormous conflicts involving questions of race, gender, social class, and religious identity. Today, these conflicts continue in the form of struggles over such issues as affirmative action, welfare reform, abortion, the gender gap, the political mobilization of religious groups, and the rise and fall of minority voting districts. These themes are raised in Chapter 2 of *We the People* and are explored further throughout the book.

But regardless of our country's spotty record, one American feature has been and remains the envy of the entire world: Expansion of our political community *has* taken place, and it has happened without having to create new institutions, rules, or procedures. Our democracy is no crustacean that has to shed its structure as it grows.

The second set of issues that we focus on concerns American political values. The American nation is defined not only by its form of government but also by a set of shared beliefs and values, the most basic of which are liberty, equality, and democracy. Although these can be located in antiquity, Americans gave them new vitality and credibility in our founding documents—the Declaration of Independence and the Constitution, which transformed ancient and abstract principles into operating structures and rules for the new Republic. Although the path has deviated and wrong turns have been taken, the general direction of America has been one worthy of pride—a pride we authors share with virtually all of the American people. But our job as authors is to recognize the gap between ideals and realities and to treat the gap honestly so that our students come to understand that a good citizen is a critical citizen, one whose obedience is not unconditional. Liberty, equality, and democracy are concepts that link all the chapters of our book. They are also criteria against which to measure and to judge all aspects of governmental and political performance.

Finally, *We the People* addresses a pedagogical question: Why should Americans be engaged with government and politics at all? For the entire first century and more of American history under the Constitution, Americans were relatively heavily involved in political life, as activists or as active spectators. Politics was a kind of entertainment, a defining aspect of community life. Politics in America was interesting even to those who had not yet been made full members of the political community. As the size of all governments, especially the national government, began to grow after World War I, Americans by all appearances still took their politics seriously, and the scope of their interest seemed to expand from campaigns and elections into public policy issues keeping pace with the expansion of government and of government programs.

During the 1960s and 1970s, American students were heavily engaged with politics, many seeing it, quite realistically, as a matter of life and death. Even during the early 1980s, when *American Government: Freedom and Power* was being planned, it was our assumption that political engagement needed guidance—but that it was *there* to be guided. It hardly seemed necessary to explain to students why they should take politics seriously, as observers as well as activists.

But the involvement of the American people in political life has been declining, and students have been increasingly willing to ask why they should be interested in politics at all. We are deeply troubled by this trend and committed this book to its reversal. Our chapters are introduced by discussions that show where students fit into the materials to be addressed by that chapter and why they should take a personal, indeed selfish, interest in the outcomes of government. For example, our discussion of the media opens with the issues of press freedom faced by college newspapers. Our chapter on civil rights begins with an evaluation of affirmative action programs in college admissions. The opening pages of our discussion of federalism deal with interstate differences that affect college students. Our hope is to make politics interesting to students by demonstrating that their interests are at stake—that their forebears were correct in viewing politics as a matter of life and death.

In this Third Edition, we are freshly dedicated to the goal of getting students to see themselves not only as citizens but as citizens in the Greek ideal, where the opposite of citizen was *idiote*. We recognize at the very outset that politics, like economics, is driven by self-interest, but self-interest includes a commitment to the advancement of one's community as well as to one's purse and property.

This inspired us to use more citizen participation narratives in our teaching, and those successes produced a "Get Involved" section at the conclusion of every chapter. In fact, some of the chapters also begin with case studies on the possibilities of one, a few, or many student-citizens influencing a legislature, an agency, a party, a newspaper, and other such centers of power. It should be added here how often political influence comes from the capacity of dedicated citizens to make a nuisance of themselves—badgering members of Congress, in person or by using the magnificent new citizen-friendly technology of fax, e-mail, and Web. From local consumer and environmental groups to pro-choice and pro-life picketers, nuisance value is an important form of influence—and the measure of that influence is the intensity of complaints you hear from its recipients: the legislators and their staffs. But that's a sign of political health. We didn't elect our representatives to a life of comfort and leisure.

On the other hand, we already knew but have become increasingly aware that student-citizens can see through sentimental or moralistic appeals to participate in politics. Students don't have to know much about politics or society to be aware of the inherent limits of individual efficacy in a Big Society like the United States—or, for that matter, a Big City or on a Big Campus. We'd be laughed out of the classroom if we pulled out the old adage that every citizen can be president, or that the views of every citizen are taken into account in the representative process. "The People" is a collective noun; "we, the individuals"

don't count for much. But that does not diminish the validity of the message we convey in each and every chapter. First, we demonstrate in every chapter that the one and the few *can* count. Moreover, those who doubt this are engaging in a self-fulfilling prophecy; that is, to be *in*active as a result of a pessimistic view of the capacity of citizens is to confirm to the fullest that citizen action cannot count.

But there is a second dimension to our message about participation that must be taken seriously by even the most pessimistic person. This is that inherent in the definition of citizenship itself is the obligation to be enlightened. Self-interest will get you nowhere unless it is enlightened, by knowledge of who you are, what you want, and how you can go about getting it. This is no less true in political life than it is in economic life. Actually, enlightenment is all the more important to effective citizenship precisely because direct political action is not always a practical alternative. Go back once again to Greek antiquity, where politics *was* talk:

> To classical political theory, speech, not sight, is the most political of the faculties. . . . But political speech—and, especially, *listening* to political speech—is a skill and pleasure that must be learned; it demands an extended span of attention, the capacity for critical reflection, and that art of hearing that lets us separate meaning from its disguises. Always difficult, that command of rhetoric is harder to cultivate in a society as supersonic as ours, and the electronic media actually undermine the arts of speech and hearing.[1]

Each citizen must have a third ear, and must listen with that third ear to become the best citizen, which, we repeat, is a critical citizen. Criticism *is* speech in action.

In this Third Edition we have tried all the harder to design every chapter to the fullest extent of our ability to show why everyone must for their own sakes be interested in politics. We have tried in every way possible to provide the context, the background, and the origin of every political issue on the American political agenda. And we have tried to deal with each institution in a way that gives its place in the system but also provides a sense of how the one and the few citizens can gain access to it. And we have included what we call a "Greek chorus"—a new "Student Debate," in which the opposing views of students on current issues are presented, as well as other boxes providing student perspectives, drawn from case studies, polls, campaigns, and news stories. Some of these perspectives are profound; some may seem silly. As with the Greeks, our student chorus illustrates the range of enlightenment. It also demonstrates the potential of the one and the few and the many when knowledge is added to talk. Knowledge and talk are a prelude to action. Enlightenment without action can make a difference. Action without enlightenment can be dangerous. We continue to hope that our book will itself be accepted as a form of enlightened political action. This Third Edition is another chance. It is an advancement toward our goal. We promise to keep trying.

[1]Wilson Carey McWilliams, "The Meaning of the Election," in Gerald Pomper, ed., *The Election of 1988—Reports and Interpretations* (Chatham, NJ: Chatham House Publishers, 1989), p. 183.

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We are more than happy, however, to absolve all these contributors from any flaws, errors, and misjudgments that will inevitably be discovered. We wish the book could be free of all production errors, grammatical errors, misspellings, misquotes, missed citations, etc. From that standpoint, a book ought to try to be perfect. But substantively we have not tried to write a flawless book; we have not tried to write a book to please everyone. We have again tried to write an effective book, a book that cannot be taken lightly. Our goal was not to make every reader a political scientist or a political activist. Our goal was to restore politics as a subject matter of vigorous and enjoyable discourse, recapturing it from the bondage of the thirty-second sound bite and the thirty-page technical briefing. Every person can be knowledgeable because everything about politics is accessible. One does not have to be a television anchorperson to profit from political events. One does not have to be a philosopher to argue about the requisites of democracy, a lawyer to dispute constitutional interpretations, an economist to debate a public policy. We would be very proud if our book contributes in a small way to the restoration of the ancient art of political controversy.

BENJAMIN GINSBERG
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*SEPTEMBER 2000*

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