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Institutions and Interconnections

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Clemson University

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#### **ABOUT THE AUTHOR**

William Lasser is Professor of Political Science at Clemson University. A gifted teacher, he was recognized with Clemson University's Alumni Master Teacher Award in 1993. Professor Lasser is the author of *The Limits of Judicial Power: The Supreme Court and American Politics* (University of North Carolina Press, 1988); *Perspectives on American Government: A Comprehensive Reader, Second Edition (D. C. Heath, 1996); and Benjamin V. Cohen and the Spirit of the New Deal* (The Twentieth Century Fund, in progress).

# **Preface**

ny introductory textbook-any introductory course, for that matter-must carve up a very large subject and present various slices of reality, hoping in the end to leave the student with a taste of the big picture and an appetite to learn more. Long-standing tradition in American Government courses leaves little doubt that textbooks should begin with a discussion of the principles of American political culture and constitutionalism; progress through a survey of the processes by which individuals and groups interact with their government; continue with an analysis of government institutions; and end with a discussion of various public policy issues. Minor variations are allowed, but the overall framework is as well established as that of American government itself.

The traditional approach has its virtues, and I make no attempt to deviate from it in the structure of this book, *American Politics: Institutions and Interconnections*. It conforms to our deep-seated notions about politics, which are grounded in the separation of powers and in the belief that individuals and groups can influence governmental institutions and thus public policy. It also fits with the divisions within the field of political science, allowing the professor to bring to bear the latest research findings of scholars of various subspecialties. And the divisions of the traditional course match up nicely with advanced offerings in most political science departments.

The established framework, however, suffers from a critical flaw. The division of material between various chapters and sections is highly artificial and does not reflect the reality of American politics as experienced by practitioners and pundits alike. In real life, American institutions, practices, and policies are delicately intertwined; actions by one institution affect others, and developments in one area create ripple effects everywhere.

Consider the most obvious example: the legislative and executive branches. Discussing Congress in one chapter and the presidency in another may be customary and convenient, and even inevitable; but in Washington the two institutions revolve around

each other like twin stars in a distant galaxy. No major legislation can be passed without at least considering the views of the White House. Will the president compromise? Can Congress override a veto? Will a Senate committee threaten to hold up the president's pet project? Likewise, no chief executive can undertake a significant operation at home or abroad without taking Congress into account. How will this play on the Hill? What does Senator So-and-So think? Can Representative Such-and-Such be kept on board?

The major events in American politics—a presidential election, a Supreme Court nomination, a fight over the federal budget—almost never involve just one process or one institution. The big story is found not by examining people and institutions in isolation but by understanding how they interact and how their concerns in one area constrain or condition their actions in others. American politics, like a Beethoven symphony, is more than just the sum of its parts; it is not enough for students to understand the role of the violins or trumpets if they lack an overall sense of the music itself.

Emphasizing the interconnectedness of American politics—without abandoning the traditional, familiar framework in which the subject is typically presented—is the approach of this book.

#### The Interconnections Theme

Each chapter provides a thorough introduction to a key part of the American political system before examining its relationship with other parts and to the system as a whole. Text discussions and feature boxes highlight how important relationships and interactions influence American politics and democracy. Five sets of interconnections receive particular emphasis throughout the text:

 Interconnections between the people and their government. In a democracy the relationship between the people and the government is of paramount importance. Boxes on the people and their government illustrate how individuals and groups can make their influence felt and how (or whether) the government responds to their wishes.

- Interconnections between the state and national governments. The interplay between the local, state, and national governments is treated explicitly in the chapter on federalism. But it also shows up elsewhere—for example, in the discussion of political parties.
- Interconnections among the branches of the federal government. The discussion of Congress, for example, recognizes the president's role in the process of making the laws. The discussion of the federal bureaucracy, likewise, pays special attention to the interactions among the bureaucracy, the courts, and Congress.
- Interconnections between America and the world.
   Americans can no longer pretend that the United States operates in isolation from the rest of the world or that the rest of the world will dance to any tune we play. Worldwide economic and political developments affect American politics, just as our decisions affect life in other countries. America's relationships with foreign nations are discussed not only in the text but in special "Global Perspectives" boxes.
- Interconnections between the parts and the whole.
  No discussion of civil rights, for example, can
  proceed without some attention to economic
  issues. No adequate analysis of political parties is
  possible without an appreciation for the basic
  ideas and assumptions that shape our political
  culture. Theoretical issues must be constantly
  applied in practice; practical questions must be
  constantly related to theory.

These interconnections are presented in two ways. First, the text emphasizes the natural interconnections between the various parts of the American political system. This approach makes the individual chapters more interesting and encourages students not to lose sight of how diverse themes fit together. A discussion of presidential approval ratings, for example, provides the opportunity for consideration of how the White House uses the media; an examination of domestic policy making allows for a review of the role of interest groups in the American system. Such interconnections are presented naturally and unobtrusively, but the cumulative effect, I believe, is a richer and deeper understanding of American politics and government.

Second, the text discussions are supported by "Interconnections" boxes in every chapter, which highlight and illustrate the relationships between institutions, practices, and people. The "Interconnections" boxes provide more detailed examples than are possible in the text itself. They also keep students focused on the importance of relating diverse elements and are useful launching pads for class discussion.

#### Themes of the Book

Within the broad interconnections framework, this book develops two key themes. First, there is a continual emphasis on the relationship between theory and practice in American politics. Students are repeatedly challenged to compare and contrast the theoretical underpinnings of American politics with the practical realities of everyday life. Particular emphasis is placed on the political philosophy of the Framers and on the ongoing significance of the debate that surrounded the adoption of the Constitution of 1787.

Second, this book examines the fundamental question of how, and how well, popular government works in the United States. Students are challenged to understand the fundamental principles of democratic government, to define the nature of the public interest, and to examine political institutions, practices, and interconnections in light of these issues. They are also encouraged to understand how they can participate in the political process, and to what effect.

Two aspects of American democracy receive special attention: the need to balance majority rule and majority rights, and the relationship between self-government and the public interest. To illustrate the tension between majority rule and minority rights, the book emphasizes the history, practice, and theory of civil rights and civil liberties. To illustrate how Americans have debated the public interest over time, the text examines prominent debates and discusses periods of major political change, such as the New Deal, the 1960s and 1970s, and the 1994 midterm elections.

American Politics: Institutions and Interconnections is also marked by a number of other innovative features. Taken together, these features deepen and broaden the study of American politics and aim to increase students' interest in and enjoyment of their course:

 Humor and human interest. Boxes, quotes, sidebars, cartoons, and photographs capture the many faces of American politics, from the humorous to the poignant. "Politics Light" boxes are aimed at entertaining students as well as giving them a new point of view. "People and Politics" boxes introduce students to the human side of the political equation.

- "Issue and Debate" boxes. Controversial issues are presented in "Issue and Debate" boxes, which provide arguments on both sides of a question and encourage students to challenge their existing viewpoints. These boxes are particularly suited for stimulating formal or informal class discussions.
- "Global Perspectives" boxes. Comparisons of American institutions and practices with those of other nations allow students to grasp more firmly how their system works and to acquire a better understanding of the international community.
- "Taking Part" boxes. Students are given the
  opportunity to learn how they can get involved in
  the political system through these features, which
  include behind-the-scenes advice from a journalist on how to write an effective letter to the editor,
  as well as a guide to how to find political information on the Internet.
- "Careers in Politics" boxes. These brief features
  present interviews with men and women working
  in and around government, giving students a
  sampling of the wide range of career options
  available in the field of politics.
- "Economics and Politics" boxes. The relationship between economics and politics is highlighted in these boxed features, which include such topics as an examination of the economic origins of the Constitution and a discussion of cost-benefit analysis.
- A variety of other pedagogical devices, including questions for thought and discussion at the beginning of each chapter; charts, graphs, and photographs throughout the text; summaries, key terms, review questions, and suggested readings at the end of each chapter; appendixes; and a glossary.

### **Chapter Structure**

All chapters follow a consistent format. Such consistency makes it easy for students to approach the text and simplifies the professor's task of choosing which

material to emphasize most specifically. The pattern of the chapters is as follows:

- A brief, captivating introduction is designed to grab students' attention and to provide a focal point for the introduction of the major themes of the chapter. These "teasers" frequently involve key constitutional questions.
- Questions to keep in mind make the themes and goals of the chapter explicit, make review easier, and foster students' critical thinking skills.
- Basic concepts quickly run through the "nuts and bolts" that students are expected to learn and that they must understand in order to grasp fully the more thematic material that follows.
- Several thematic sections go beyond the essential material and explore various themes of importance from a theoretical and institutional perspective. Interconnections themes are emphasized.
- Chapter summary, review questions, and suggestions for further reading give students the opportunity to consolidate what they have learned and to explore further material.

#### Supplements

A comprehensive supplements package accompanies this text:

- Instructor's Guide. This helpful manual includes suggested lecture topics, discussion topics, inclass activities, student papers, and lists of supplementary readings, videos, films, and software for each chapter.
- Test Item File. The Test Item File includes more than 1,000 multiple-choice and true/false questions. It is available in print or on disk for MS-DOS and Macintosh.
- Study Guide. A learning aid designed for students using American Politics, this guide complements each chapter by providing learning objectives, a chapter summary, explanations of key interconnections, multiple-choice and true/false self-test questions, and a glossary.
- Transparencies. Approximately 50 full-color transparencies are drawn from the exciting illustration program of American Politics.

- Free Subscription Offer. When students purchase their copy of American Politics, they will automatically receive a free eight-week subscription to Newsweek magazine.
- Congress Tutor Software for MS-DOS. Updated to include the 104th Congress, this innovative new software by Richard Davis of Brigham Young University allows students to search and analyze congressional voting records. Students gain insights into the real workings of Congress by correlating search data of an individual, an issue, or a state with an assortment of factors, among them gender, religious affiliation, and receipt of PAC money.
- Studying American Government: A Vade Mecum. Designed for beginning students by Kenneth M. Holland of Memphis State University, this helpful guide to doing college-level work in political science covers reading and study strategies, library research, and writing assignments and is available for student purchase—for only \$1 over the cost of American Politics!
- Media Policy. D. C. Heath will offer adopters of American Politics an array of media supplements for classroom use, including various software and video options.

#### Acknowledgments

It is a cliché to suggest that a book could not have been completed without the help and support of one's editors, colleagues, students, friends, and family. But some clichés are true, and none more so than this one.

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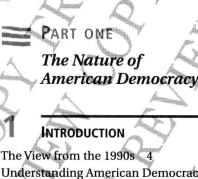
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Finally, I thank my wife, Susan J. S. Lasser, whose love is an unending source of joy and comfort; and our son, Max, who has watched with enthusiasm as "Daddy's book" has grown up with him. Max, this book's for you.

William Lasser

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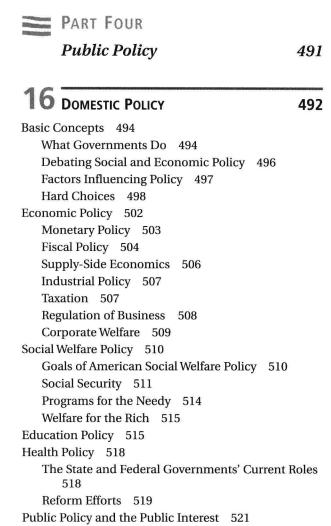
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