

JAMES Q. WILSON

SIXTH EDITION

AMERICAN GOVERNMENT

BRIEF VERSION

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James Q. Wilson

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To Diane

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Preface



THE TIMES HAVE CHANGED. WHEN THE FIFTH EDITION OF THIS BOOK CAME OUT right after the much-discussed impeachment of President Bill Clinton, I said that other developments in American politics were far more important.

But with this, the sixth edition, we must begin to understand how powerfully our political lives have changed because of the defining moment in recent American history—the terrorist attacks on the World Trade Center in New York, the Pentagon, and an empty field in Pennsylvania on September 11, 2001.

Law enforcement authority aimed at terrorists has been expanded, a new Department of Homeland Security will almost surely be created, a preemptive military action against Iraq is possible, and domestic politics must be played out against the backdrop of America's new war against terrorism.

This edition tells the story of these events through December 2002 and also analyzes other important events and trends in American politics. For example, the congressional election of 2002, the first held after the continental United States became the target of terrorist attacks, is described. New provisions governing the powers of law enforcement are discussed. And of course every chapter and almost every table have been updated.

Beneath these changes, of course, the enduring features of American politics, shaped by our Constitution and habits, have remained unchanged. As always, I have stressed the historical evolution of our practices and institutions, focusing on the importance of the Constitution and American political culture in shaping governmental activities.

SUPPLEMENTS

The supplement package for this edition has been revised to provide as much help as possible to instructors and students.

The *Instructor's Resource Manual with Test Items* (IRM) includes chapter overviews and objectives, important terms with definitions, key themes, discussion questions, and multimedia resources (films, videos, and software) for each chapter. The test bank consists of multiple-choice, true-false, short-answer, and essay questions. These test items are also available in computerized format for both Macintosh and Windows systems. The HM Testing software

provides a complete testing solution, with test generation, classroom administration, and online testing features.

PowerPoint Slides, containing full-color versions of art from the text, are available to adopters of the book and can be downloaded from the instructor Web site at college.hmco.com.

For instructors who wish to include in their course a unit on state and local politics, a chapter-length *State and Local Government* supplement is available for students.

An *Online Study Guide* is also available for students who wish to drill themselves on the text's content in preparation for examinations. The *Guide* contains practice quizzes with multiple-choice, true-false, and essay questions; outlines; questions on how to interpret data; critical thinking questions; primary resources; and conceptual applications for each chapter.

The *Online Study Guide* and additional study aids are available to students on the companion Web site for this text, accessible via the Houghton Mifflin Web site at college.hmco.com.

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JAMES Q. WILSON IS AN EMERITUS PROFESSOR OF MANAGEMENT AND PUBLIC policy at the University of California, Los Angeles, and lectures at Pepperdine University, where he is the Ronald Reagan professor. From 1961 to 1987, he was a professor of government at Harvard University. Raised in California, he received a B.A. degree from the University of Redlands and a Ph.D. from the University of Chicago.

He is the author or coauthor of fifteen books, including *The Marriage Problem* (2002), *Moral Judgment* (1997), *The Moral Sense* (1993), *Bureaucracy* (1989), *Crime and Human Nature* (1985, with Richard J. Herrnstein), and *Political Organizations* (revised edition, 1995).

Wilson has served on a number of advisory posts in the federal government. He was chairman of the White House Task Force on Crime in 1967, chairman of the National Advisory Council on Drug Abuse Prevention in 1972–1973, a member of the President’s Foreign Intelligence Advisory Board in 1986–1990, and a member of the President’s Council on Bioethics (2002).

He has received three lifetime achievement awards from the American Political Science Association: the Charles E. Merriam Award for advancing government through social science knowledge, the John Gaus Award for scholarship on public administration, and the James Madison Award for distinguished scholarship. In 1991–1992 he was president of the Association.

He is a fellow of the American Academy of Arts and Sciences and of the American Philosophical Society. During his free time, he rides horses and goes scuba diving.

Contents

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Preface **xi**

About the Author **xiii**

1	WHAT SHOULD WE KNOW ABOUT AMERICAN GOVERNMENT?	1
	The Meanings of Democracy	5
	Representative Democracy	6
	Suggested Readings	8
2	THE CONSTITUTION	9
	The Problem of Liberty	9
	Human Nature	9
	The Real Revolution	11
	The Articles of Confederation	11
	The Constitutional Convention	12
	The Constitution and Democracy	19
	The Constitution and Liberty	23
	The Constitution and Slavery	26
	Political Ideals or Economic Interests?	28
	Liberty and Equality	29
	A Recipe for Moderation	29
	Summary	31
	World Wide Web: The Constitution	32
	Suggested Readings	32
3	FEDERALISM	34
	Governmental Structure	35
	Federalism: Good or Bad?	37
	The Founding	38
	The Evolving Meaning of Federalism	39
	The Division of Powers: Federal and State	42
	Fiscal Federalism	43
	Federal Aid and Federal Control	51

Federalism and Public Policy	54
Evaluating Federalism	55
Summary	56
World Wide Web: Federalism	57
Suggested Readings	57

4 PUBLIC OPINION AND THE MEDIA

58

What Is Public Opinion?	60
Why Do We Distrust the Federal Government?	61
The Origins of Political Attitudes	63
Political Ideology	73
Political Elites and the New Class	77
The Impact of the Media	78
The Structure of the Media	81
Rules Governing the Media	84
Government and the News	86
Interpreting Political News	88
Are News Stories Slanted?	89
Summary	94
World Wide Web: Public Opinion and the Media	95
Suggested Readings	96

5 POLITICAL PARTIES AND INTEREST GROUPS

97

Parties—Here and Abroad	97
The National Party Structure Today	101
State and Local Parties	105
The Two-Party System	109
Nominating a President	112
Do the Parties Differ?	115
Interest Groups and Political Parties	117
Kinds of Organizations	119
Funds for Interest Groups	122
The Problem of Bias	123
The Activities of Interest Groups	124

Regulating Interest Groups	130
Summary	132
World Wide Web: Political Parties and Interest Groups	133
Suggested Readings	133

6 CAMPAIGNS AND ELECTIONS 135

Political Participation	136
Historical Voting Patterns	138
Explaining—and Improving—Turnout	141
Political Campaigns	143
The Effects of Campaigns	149
How to Win the Election	154
Election Outcomes	157
Modern Technology and Political Campaigns	163
Elections and Money	165
The Effects of Elections on Policy	171
Summary	174
World Wide Web: Campaigns and Elections	175
Suggested Readings	175

7 CONGRESS 177

The Evolution of Congress	179
Who Is in Congress?	181
Getting Elected to Congress	184
The Organization of Congress: Parties and Interests	185
The Organization of Congress: Committees	191
The Organization of Congress: Staffs and Specialized Offices	196
How a Bill Becomes Law	198
How Members of Congress Vote	204
A Polarized Congress in an Unpolarized Nation	207
What It All Means	208
Ethics and Congress	209
The Power of Congress	212
Summary	215
World Wide Web: Congress	216
Suggested Readings	216

8 THE PRESIDENCY 218

- The Powers of the President 220
- The Evolution of the Presidency 221
- The Modern Presidency 225
- Who Gets Appointed 229
- Presidential Character 233
- The Power to Say No 237
- The President's Program 239
- Presidential Transitions 241
- The President and Public Policy 244
- Summary 252
- World Wide Web: The Presidency 253
- Suggested Readings 253

9 THE BUREAUCRACY 255

- Distinctiveness of the American Bureaucracy 255
- The Growth of the Bureaucracy 256
- The Federal Bureaucracy Today 260
- Congressional Oversight 272
- Bureaucratic "Pathologies" 275
- Reinventing Government 277
- Summary 278
- World Wide Web: The Bureaucracy 279
- Suggested Readings 279

10 THE JUDICIARY 280

- The Development of the Federal Courts 282
- The Structure of the Federal Courts 287
- The Jurisdiction of the Federal Courts 290
- Getting to Court 294
- The Supreme Court in Action 298
- The Power of the Courts 301
- Checks on Judicial Power 306
- Summary 309
- World Wide Web: The Judiciary 310
- Suggested Readings 310

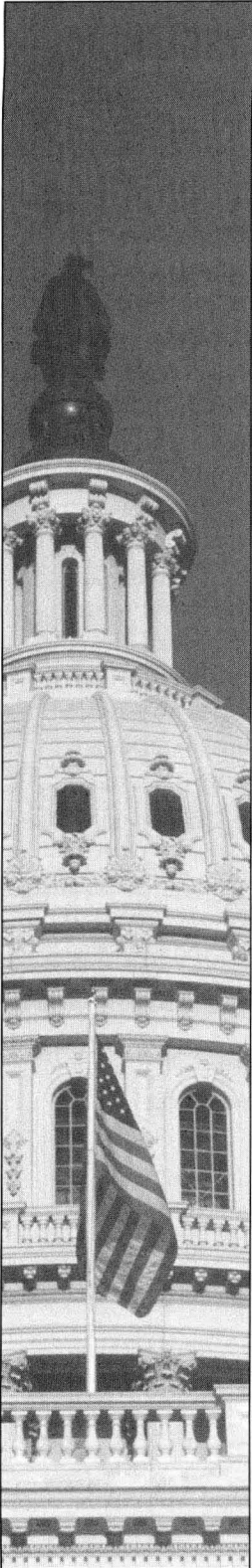
11	CIVIL LIBERTIES AND CIVIL RIGHTS	312
	Freedom of Expression	316
	Church and State	321
	Crime and Due Process	325
	Terrorism and Civil Liberties	332
	Equal Protection of the Laws	333
	Summary	345
	World Wide Web: Policy Making	346
	Suggested Readings	346
12	POLITICS AND PUBLIC POLICY	347
	How the American System Affects Policy Making	348
	How Things Get Done	350
	Four Kinds of Political Coalitions	351
	Some Cautionary Remarks	357
	Summary	358
	World Wide Web: Policy Making	359
	Suggested Readings	359
13	AMERICAN GOVERNMENT: CONTINUITY AND CHANGE	360
	Restraints on Growth	362
	Relaxing the Restraints	364
	Can or Should We Go Back to the Old Politics?	370
	Should the Constitutional System Be Changed?	371
	Appendix	378
	References	417
	Glossary	434
	Credits	449
	Index	451

WHAT SHOULD WE KNOW ABOUT AMERICAN GOVERNMENT?

MOST AMERICANS THINK THEY KNOW how their government works, and many don't like it. A common view goes like this:

The president gets elected because of some slick television ads, although he has ducked all the tough questions. His party's platform is a meaningless set of words that gives you no idea what he will do in office. Once in the White House, he proposes bills and then Congress decides which to pass. Congress and the president do this not to solve problems, but to reward whichever interest groups have spent the most money getting them elected. The laws they enact are turned over to an all-powerful bureaucracy that administers them much as the bureaucrats see fit, adding a lot of needless red tape. If you don't like these laws, you can sue, but the courts will base their decisions on their own liberal or conservative preferences and not on any standards of justice or fair play. All of these people—presidents, members of Congress, bureaucrats, and judges—act without any real respect for the Constitution. No wonder our national problems don't get solved.

Almost every sentence in the preceding paragraph is either flatly wrong, greatly exaggerated, or seriously



incomplete. If you want to find out why, read this book. By the time you are finished, you may still think our system has faults, but you will have a clearer idea of what they are and how they arose.

These criticisms contain enough truth, however, to alert us to another reason for taking a course on American government. How our government operates is quite different from how other democratic governments, such as those in Western Europe, operate. We know that the president and Congress are often at loggerheads, that neither can exercise complete control over the bureaucracy, that judges often intervene to tell government agencies what to do, and that our politicians always seem to be involved in some scandal. We are also aware that other levels of government—cities and states—seem to compete with the federal government for the right to make certain decisions.

To most Europeans, all this would be absolutely baffling. In a country such as Great Britain, the legislature automatically approves almost any policy the chief executive (the prime minister) proposes, and does so without making any changes. The bureaucracy carries out the policy without resistance, but if something should go wrong, the legislature does not investigate the agency to see what went wrong. No citizen can sue the government in a British court; if one tried, the judge would throw the case out. There are no governors who have to be induced to follow the national policy; the national government's policies are, for most purposes, the *only* policies. If those policies prove unpopular, there is a good chance that many members of the legislature will not be reelected.

American government is not like any other democratic government in the world. Far from taking it for granted, students here should imagine for a moment that they are not young Americans but young Swedes, Italians, or Britons and ask themselves why American politics is so different and how that difference affects the policies produced here.

Consider these differences in *politics*:

- ★ In the United States, the police and the public schools are controlled by towns, cities, and states. In Europe, they are usually controlled by the national government.
- ★ If you want to run for office in the United States, you can do so by collecting the required number of signatures on a petition to get on the ballot in a primary election; if you win the primary, you then run in the general election. In Europe, there usually aren't any primary elections; instead, party leaders decide who gets on the ballot.
- ★ In the United States, fewer than one worker in five belongs to a labor union. In many European nations, a much larger proportion of workers belong to unions.
- ★ The United States has no large socialist, communist, or Marxist political party. In France, Great Britain, Italy, and elsewhere, socialist and Marxist parties are large and powerful.

SOME KEY POLITICAL CONCEPTS

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GOVERNMENT

Government consists of those institutions that have the authority to make decisions binding on the whole society.

Note: Many institutions, such as colleges, corporations, and private clubs, exercise power over us. A government differs from these in two ways:

1. *Authority:* People believe that the government has the right to exercise power over all subordinate parts of society; a government can lawfully issue orders to a corporation or college, but a college or corporation cannot lawfully issue orders to the government.
2. *Power:* A government has a monopoly over the use of legitimate force. Governments, not private organizations, control the army, the police, and the prisons.

POLITICS

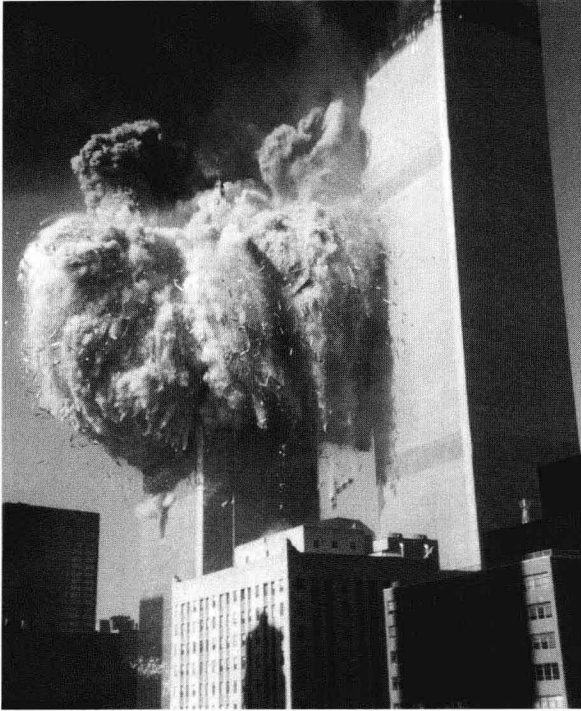
Politics is the activity generated by the conflict over who will run the government and what decisions it will make.

Note: Politics exists wherever there is disagreement about who should hold office or what decisions he or she should make. Thus it is no more possible to “take politics out of government” than it is to take emotion out of marriage.

- ★ The United States has many politically active persons who consider themselves born-again Christians. Such persons are relatively rare in Europe and certainly not a political force there.
- ★ In the United States, judges decide whether abortions shall be legal, which pornographic movies may be shown, and what the size of a congressional district shall be. In Europe, the legislature decides such issues.
- ★ When the prime minister of Great Britain signs a treaty, his nation is bound by it; when the president signs a treaty, he is making a promise only to try to get the Senate to ratify it.

Consider also these differences in *policies*:

- ★ The tax burden in the United States is about half what it is in Sweden and many other European nations.



*The World Trade Center
in New York City*

- ★ The United States adopted federal policies to provide benefits to the elderly and the unemployed about a quarter of a century *after* such policies were already in effect in much of Europe.
- ★ The United States government owns very few industries. In parts of Europe, the government owns the airlines, the telephone system, the steel mills, the automobile factories, and even the oil companies.
- ★ Throughout much of the 1980s and into the 1990s, the president and Congress could not agree on a budget—how much to spend, where to make cuts, and whether taxes should be increased; as a result, on some occasions the country had neither a budget nor the authority it needed to borrow money to keep paying its bills, and so the government partially shut down. In European democracies, this kind of deadlock almost never occurs.

How do we explain these differences? It is not that America is “democratic” and other nations are “undemocratic.” Great Britain and the United States are both democracies—but two different *kinds* of democracies. The American kind is the product of two closely related factors: our constitutional system and the opinions and values of the people. We have the kind of constitution we do because the people who wrote it had certain beliefs about how government should be organized, and those beliefs are perpetuated and sharpened by the workings of the government created by that constitution.

In this book, we will not try to explain all the ways in which America differs from Europe. This book is not about comparative politics; it is about American politics. But keeping in mind the distinctive features of our system will, I hope, make the following chapters more interesting. You might try the following experiment. As you read this book, see how many of the differences listed above you can explain. You won't be able to explain them all, but you will be able to explain several.

THE MEANINGS OF DEMOCRACY

To explain why American democracy differs from democracy in Britain or Sweden, we must first understand what is meant by **democracy**. That word is used to describe two different political systems.

One way the term *democracy* is used is to describe political systems in which all or most citizens participate directly in making governmental decisions. The New England town meeting, for example, comes close to fitting this definition of **direct democracy**. Once or twice a year all the adult citizens of a town come together to vote on all major issues and expenditures. In many states, such as California, a kind of direct democracy exists whenever voters are asked to approve or reject a specific policy, such as a plan to cut taxes or build a water system (a **referendum**), remove an elected official before his or her term has expired (a **recall**), or propose a new piece of legislation or a constitutional amendment (an **initiative**).

The second meaning of democracy was most concisely stated in 1942 by the economist Joseph Schumpeter: "The democratic method is that institutional arrangement for arriving at political decisions in which individuals [that is, officeholders] acquire the power to decide by means of a competitive struggle for the people's vote." This system is usually called a **representative democracy**. The Framers of the American Constitution called it a **republic**.

Several arguments can be made in favor of representative democracy over direct democracy. First, direct democracy is impractical because it is impossible for all the citizens to decide all the issues: they don't have the time, energy, interest, or information. It is practical, however, to expect them to choose among competing leadership groups. Second, direct democracy is undesirable because the people will often make bad decisions on the basis of fleeting desires or under the influence of unscrupulous demagogues or clever advertising. Third, direct democracy makes it difficult to negotiate compromises among contending groups; instead, one side wins and the other loses—even when there may have been a middle ground that both sides would have accepted.

You may think that these criticisms of direct democracy are unfair. If so, ask yourself which of the following measures (especially those that you feel strongly about) you would be willing to have decided by all citizens voting in a referendum. Abortion? Gun control? Federal aid to parochial schools? The death penalty? Foreign aid? Racial integration of public schools? The defense budget?

Free trade? Most people, however “democratic” they may be, favor certain policies that they would not want decided by, in effect, a public opinion poll.

REPRESENTATIVE DEMOCRACY

In this book, we will use the word *democracy* to mean representative democracy, but we will not try to settle the argument over whether, or under what circumstances, direct democracy might be better. It is important to note, however, that representative democracy can exist only if certain conditions exist: freedom of speech and of the press (so that voters can learn about what their representatives are doing and communicate their preferences to them), freedom to organize (so that people can come forward as candidates for office), reasonably fair access to political resources (so that candidates can mount an effective campaign), a decent respect for the rights and opinions of others (so that the winners in an election are allowed to assume office and govern and the losers are not punished or banished), and a belief that the political system is legitimate (so that people will obey its laws without being coerced).

Broadly speaking, representative democracy can take one of two forms: the parliamentary system or the presidential system. The *parliamentary system*, common to almost all European democracies, vests political power in an elected legislature. The legislature, in turn, chooses the chief executive, called the prime minister. So long as the prime minister has the support of a majority of the members of parliament, he or she can carry out any policy that is not forbidden by the nation’s constitution. (Some parliamentary democracies do not have a written constitution. In Great Britain, for example, Parliament can do almost anything that it believes the voters will accept.) In a parliamentary democracy, political power at the national level is centralized; the prime minister and his or her cabinet make all the important decisions. The bureaucracy works for the prime minister. The courts ordinarily do not interfere. The theory of a parliamentary system is that the government should make decisions and then be held accountable to the voters at the next election.

A *presidential system* vests political power in separately elected branches of the national government—a president and a congress. In addition, there may be an independent judiciary, as there is in the United States, that can disapprove of the actions of the president and Congress if they violate the Constitution. The president proposes legislation but has no guarantee that Congress will accept it, even if the president’s party has a majority of members in Congress. The bureaucracy works for both the president and Congress; since its loyalties are divided, its actions are not always consistent with what the president or Congress wishes. Political power at the national level is decentralized and shared. The theory of a presidential system is that policies should be tested for their political acceptability at every stage of the policy-making process, not just at election time.