

Third Edition

DEMOCRACY FOR THE FEW

Michael Parenti



Democracy for the Few

Third Edition

Michael Parenti

St. Martin's Press

New York

Library of Congress Catalog Card Number: 79-92301

Copyright © 1980 by St. Martin's Press, Inc.

All Rights Reserved.

Manufactured in the United States of America.

43210

fedcba

For information, write St. Martin's Press, Inc.,

175 Fifth Avenue, New York, N. Y. 10010

TYPOGRAPHY: Murray Fleminger

CLOTH ISBN: 0-312-19356-4

PAPER ISBN: 0-312-19357-2

ILLUSTRATION ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

Page 9: Tony Auth in *The Philadelphia Inquirer*; page 17: Ed Valtman in *The Hartford Times*, Conn./Rothko Cartoons; page 39: drawing by Donald Reilly, © 1974 *The New Yorker Magazine*, Inc.; page 90: B.C. by permission of Johnny Hart and Field Enterprises, Inc.; page 114: copyright 1977 by Herblock in *The Washington Post*; page 118: Margulies/Rothko Cartoons; page 129: Sidney Harris; page 134: by permission of Jules Feiffer, copyright 1977, distributed by Field Newspaper Syndicate; page 151: Sidney Harris; page 191: Sidney Harris; page 206: Sidney Harris; page 227: Konopacki in *The Madison Press Connection*/Rothko Cartoons; page 242: © 1976 by Don Wright, distributed by NYT Special Features Syndicate; page 266: Sidney Harris; page 322: Vadillo in *El Sol de Mexico*/Rothko Cartoons.

Democracy for the Few

Third Edition

To Samuel Hendel and Clara Hendel

Preface to the Third Edition

The study of politics is itself a political act, containing little that is neutral. True, we can all agree on certain “neutral” facts about the structure of government and the like. However, the textbook that does not venture much beyond these minimal descriptions will offend few readers but also will interest few. The truth is that any determined pursuit of how and why things happen as they do draws us into highly controversial subject areas.

Most textbooks pretend to a neutrality they do not really possess. In fact, the standard textbooks are not objective but merely conventional. They depict the status quo and propagate an acceptance of things as they are, fortifying the orthodox notions and myths about American politics while avoiding any serious attempt to explain the injustices and inequities that are the realities of socio-political life.

Democracy for the Few offers an alternative interpretation, one that students are not likely to get in elementary school, high school or most of their college courses, or in the mass media or popular political literature. The book directs critical attention to the existing practices and institutional arrangements of the American political system (who governs, what governs and how?) and critical analysis of the outputs of that system (who gets what?).

I have attempted to blend several approaches. Thus, although the book might be considered an alternative text to the standard works, much attention is given to traditional *political institutions*. The Constitution, Congress, the presidency, the Supreme Court, political parties, elections and the law enforcement system are treated in some detail. However, the presentation is organized within a consistent analytic framework so that the nuts and bolts of the various institutions are seen not just as a collection of incidentals to be memorized for the final examination but as components of a larger system, serving certain interests in specific ways. When the institutional, formalistic features of American government are put into an overall framework that relates them to the realities of political pow-

er and interest, they are more likely to be remembered by the student because their function and effect are better understood.

In addition, the book devotes considerable attention to the *historical development* of American politics, particularly in regard to the making of the Constitution and the growing role of government. The major eras of reform are investigated with the intent of developing a more critical understanding of gradualism in American politics.

A major emphasis in this book is placed on the *politico-economic aspects of public policy*. The significance of government, after all, lies not in its structure or symmetry as such, but in what it does. And in describing what government does, I have included a good deal of information not ordinarily found in the standard texts. I have done this because it makes little sense to talk about the "policy process" as something abstracted from its content and substance, and because students are often poorly informed about politico-economic issues. But again, this descriptive information on who gets what, when and how is presented with the intent of drawing the reader to an inquiry, an analysis and an overall synthesis of American political reality.

This third edition contains a great deal of updated information and, I believe, a more highly developed interpretation of such things as the systemic role of the presidency, how Congress operates, the new strength of corporate interest groups, the environmental struggle, and the crisis within the political economy. These issues are likely to be the major ones of the 1980s. Every chapter and almost every page have been reworked with an eye to bringing as much new data to the reader as possible in as clear and readable a way as the limitations of space and talent allow. My hope is that this new edition of the book proves to be as useful a tool for the student and the lay reader as were the earlier ones.

For this third edition I once more enjoyed the conscientious assistance of the staff at St. Martin's Press, including Thomas Broadbent, Ellen Wynn, Michael Weber and especially Bertrand Lummus. It goes without saying that Bert Lummus's professional competence, experience and sly humor were almost always assets.

Bruce Andrews of Fordham University worked over every page of the manuscript of the third edition, doing as superb a job of reviewing as any author might wish. To him I owe a special expression of gratitude.

On short notice Jerome Hanus of American University generously provided me with some expert guidance for one of the chapters. My thanks also go to the many fine people at the Institute for Policy

Studies in Washington, D.C., for making their already crowded facilities and their abundant good will available to me. Gretchen McEvoy, Laurie Wimmer and Nora Lachman also assisted me in various ways, making the eight-month task of writing this revision a lighter and more pleasant one.

The personal inscription remains the same: To Clara and Samuel Hendel, one of the very nicest and best teams in the academic world. Their friendship and support, extending back over many years, have helped me in ways that go beyond the confines of scholarship. In return they have my lasting appreciation. Now into his second or third "retirement," Sam Hendel continues to provide several generations of his former students with the kind of encouragement and guidance we need, and he himself remains an active advocate of the best democratic principles. I hope this book measures up to the standards he has set.

Michael Parenti

Democracy for the Few

Third Edition

Contents

1	The Study of Politics	1
	The Politico-Economic System	2
	Understanding the “System”	6
2	Wealth and Want in the United States	8
	Who Owns America?	8
	The Pursuit of Profit	12
	The Distribution of Want and Misery	22
3	The American Way	34
	Who’s on Top?	34
	Getting More and Getting Ahead	37
	Are Americans Conservative?	44
	Conservatives, Liberals, Socialists and Democracy	46
4	A Constitution for the Few	52
	Class Power in Early America	53
	Containing the Spread of Democracy	56
	Plotters or Patriots?	61
	An Elitist Document	63

5 The Growth of Government 65

- Serving Business: The Early Years 66
- The “Progressive” Era 68
- The New Deal: Reform for Whom? 70

6 Politics: Who Gets What? 76

- Welfare for the Rich 76
- The Pentagon: Billions for Big Brother 81
- The Sword and the Dollar: Travels Abroad 88
- Taxes: The Unequal Burden 94

7 Health, Welfare and Environment: The Leaky Pump 98

- The Poor Get Less 98
- “Urban Removal” and the Death of Cities 103
- Health and Safety for Nobody 108
- On Behalf of Pollution and Radiation 113

8 Law and Order: The Double Standard 120

- The Protection of Property 121
- Criminal Enforcement: Unequal before the Law 124
- Police Terror: Who Guards the Guardians? 136

9 Law and Order: The Repression of Dissent 141

- The Methods and Victims of Repression 141
- Agents of National Insecurity 149
- Watergate: “The System Works”—For Itself 156
- Mind-Controls for Law and Order 159

10	The Mass Media: By the Few for the Many	167
	He Who Pays the Piper	168
	The Politics of Entertainment	176
	Repressing the Press	180
11	The Sound and the Fury: Elections, Parties and Voters	184
	The Harvesting of Votes	184
	The Two-Party Monopoly	188
	Democratic Competition: Does It Exist?	195
	Nonvoting as a Rational Response	196
	Voting as an Irrational Response	201
12	Who Governs? Leaders and Lobbyists	205
	“The People Who Own the Country Ought to Govern It”	205
	Campaign Contributions: What Money Can Buy	209
	Lobbyists and Their Special Interests	214
	Corruption as an American Way of Life	220
13	Congress: The Pocketing of Power	224
	Rule by Special Interest	225
	The Legislative Labyrinth	234
	Congress: A Product of Its Environment	237
14	The President: Guardian of the System	241
	The Corporate Politician	241
	The Dual Presidency	245
	The President versus Congress: Who Has the Power?	251
	Change from the Top?	257

15	The Politics of Bureaucracy	259
	Government by Secrecy and Deception	259
	Bureaucratic Action and Inaction	262
	The Anarchy of Regulation	269
	Public Authority in Private Hands	276
	Government "Meddling"	280
16	The Supremely Political Court	283
	Who Judges?	283
	Playing with the Constitution	285
	Nibbling Away at the First Amendment	289
	The Court Today	294
	Influence of the Court	298
17	Democracy for the Few	301
	Pluralism for the Few	302
	The Myth of the Mixed Economy	307
	Reform within the System?	310
	Questioning the Status Quo	314
	Upward from Capitalism	318
	ABOUT THE AUTHOR	325
	INDEX	327

1

The Study of Politics

Who governs in the United States? Whose interests are served by the American political system? Who gets what, when, how and why? Who pays and in what ways? These are the questions investigated in this book. American government as portrayed in most textbooks bears little resemblance to actual practice. What many of us were taught in school might be summarized as follows:

1. The United States was founded by persons dedicated to building a nation for the good of all its citizens. A Constitution was fashioned to limit authority and check abuses of power. Over the generations it has proven to be a “living document” which, through reinterpretation and amendment, has served us well.
2. The nation’s political leaders, the president and the Congress, are for the most part responsive to the popular will. The people’s desires are registered through periodic elections, political parties and a free press. Decisions are made by small groups of persons within the various circles of government, but these decision-makers are kept in check by each other’s power and by their need to satisfy the electorate in order to remain in office. The people do not rule but they select those who do. Thus government decisions are grounded in majority rule—subject to the restraints imposed by the Constitution for the protection of minority rights.
3. The United States is a nation of many different social, economic, ethnic and regional groups, which make varied and competing demands on public officeholders. The role of government

is to act as a mediator of these conflicting demands, attempting to formulate policies that benefit the public. Most decisions are compromises that seldom satisfy all interested parties but usually allow for a working consensus; hence every group has a say and no one chronically dominates.

4. These institutional arrangements have given us a government of laws and not of men which, while far from perfect, allows for a fairly high degree of popular participation and a slow but steady advance toward a more prosperous and equitable society.

THE POLITICO-ECONOMIC SYSTEM

In recent years many Americans have begun to question whether the political system works as described above. With the persistence of poverty, unemployment, inflation, overseas interventions, gargantuan military budgets, crises in our transportation, health, educational and welfare systems, environmental devastation, deficient consumer and worker protection, increased taxes, a growing national debt, municipal bankruptcies, urban decay, widespread crime in the streets and in high public places—many persons find it difficult to believe that the best interests of the American people are being served by the existing political system.

The central theme of this book is that our government represents the privileged few rather than the needy many, and that elections, political parties and the right to speak out are seldom effective measures against the influences of corporate wealth. The laws of our polity operate chiefly with undemocratic effect because they are written principally to advance the interests of the haves at the expense of the have-nots and because even if equitable in appearance, they usually are enforced in highly discriminatory ways. Furthermore, it will be argued that this “democracy for the few” is not a product of the venality of officeholders as such but a reflection of how the resources of power are distributed within the entire politico-economic system. The chapters ahead treat various aspects of that system, including the structure of the corporate economy, the distribution of wealth and want, the dominant value system, the outputs and costs of public policy (who benefits, who pays), the role of the mass media, the uses of law and order, militarism and foreign policy, and the functions of voting, elections, political parties, pressure groups, the Constitution, Congress, the presidency, the courts and the federal bureaucracy.

This investigation might be described as holistic; it recognizes, rather than denies, the linkages between various components of the

whole politico-economic system. When we study any one part of that system, be it the media or the courts, lobbying or criminal justice, overseas intervention or environmental policy, we will see how that part reflects the nature of the whole and how it serves to maintain the larger system—especially the system's overriding dominant class interests. We will also see that issues and problems are not isolated, unrelated happenings, even though they are usually treated that way by the news media and various political commentators. Rather, they are interrelated, being the causes and effects of each other in direct and indirect ways. This will become more evident as we investigate the actual components of the political system in some detail.

As the term is used here, the “political system” refers to the executive, legislative and judicial institutions of government along with the political parties, elections, laws, lobbyists and private-interest groups that affect public policy. One of my conclusions is that the distinction between “public” and “private” is often an artificial one. Public agencies are heavily under the influence of private-interest groups, and there are private interests, like some defense companies, that depend completely on the public treasure for their profits and survival.

The decisions made by government are called “policy” decisions. One characteristic of policy decisions is that they are seldom, if ever, neutral. They almost always benefit some interests more than others, entailing social costs that are rarely equally distributed. The shaping of a budget, the passage of a piece of legislation and the development of an administrative program are all policy decisions, all *political* decisions, and there is no way to execute them with neutral effect. If the wants of all persons could be automatically satisfied, there would be no need to set priorities and give some interests precedence over others, indeed, no need for policies or politics as the words have just been used.

“Politics” herein refers to the play of forces bearing upon the public decision-making process and the interplay of public and private power, group demands and class interest. The way prisons and mental institutions are run, for instance, is not only an administrative matter but a political one, involving the application of a particular ideology about normality, authority and social control, which is protective of certain interests and suppressive of others.¹

“Politics” can be used in something other than the interest-group sense. Among socialists, for instance, “politics” signifies not only the

1. See the section in chapter 9 entitled “Mind-Controls for Law and Order.”

competition among groups within the present system but also the struggle to change the entire politico-economic structure, not only the desire to achieve predefined ends but the struggle to redefine ends by exposing what socialists consider to be the injustices of the capitalist system and by posing alternatives to it.²

Along with discussing the political system as such, I will frequently refer to “the politico-economic system.” Politics today covers every kind of issue, from abortion to school prayers, but *the bulk of public policy is concerned with economic matters*. The most important document the government produces each year is the budget. Probably the two most vital functions of government are taxing and spending. Certainly they are necessary conditions for everything else it does, whether it be delivering the mail or making war. The very organization of the federal government reflects the close involvement the state has with the economy: thus one finds the departments of Commerce, Labor, Agriculture, Interior, Transportation, and Treasury, and the Federal Trade Commission, the National Labor Relations Board, the Interstate Commerce Commission, the Federal Communications Commission, the Securities and Exchange Commission, and so on. Most of the committees in Congress can be identified according to their economic functions, the most important having to do with taxation and appropriations.

If so much of this study of American government seems concerned with economic matters, it is because that’s what government is mostly about. Nor should this relationship be surprising. Politics and economics are but two sides of the same coin. Economics is concerned with the allocation of scarce resources for competing ends, involving conflicts between social classes, and among groups and individuals within classes. Much of politics is a carry-over of this same struggle. Both politics and economics deal with questions affecting the material survival, prosperity and well-being of millions of people; both deal with the first conditions of social life itself.

One of the central propositions of this book is that there exists a close relationship between political power and economic wealth. As

2. However, socialists frequently will engage in political struggles for immediate goals, such as agitating against government oppression and U.S. militarism at home and abroad, and supporting progressive causes like environmental protection, human services and labor struggles. They do so because they are interested in alleviating the plight of oppressed people even if only in marginal ways and they wish to contain the ruling powers of the center-right forces as much as possible. Also, through such struggles they seek to heighten political consciousness and to develop ways of fighting the abuses of capitalism. Even when running their own candidates, most socialists see election campaigns primarily as a way of alerting voters to the evasive and deceptive qualities of the major candidates and as a means of creating a dialogue that goes beyond mainstream politics.