

PERSPECTIVES ON AMERICAN GOVERNMENT

READINGS
IN
POLITICAL
DEVELOPMENT
AND
INSTITUTIONAL
CHANGE



EDITED BY CAL JILLSON

AND DAVID BRIAN ROBERTSON



Perspectives on American Government

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Development and
Institutional Change

EDITED BY Cal Jillson and
David Brian Robertson

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Perspectives on American Government

To our teachers and our students

Acknowledgments

One of the great joys near the end of a book project is thinking back on all of the people who helped, in their various ways, to move the project along. But producing a “reader” is a special kind of book project and the list of persons deserving gratitude and thanks extends broadly. The selections in a reader are explicitly meant to be the best of their kind, in this case, the most formative and insightful writings that exist on American political development. Making these selections gave us an opportunity to reassess and more fully appreciate the writing that has shaped all our work and thinking for more than thirty years. We also come away from this work impressed with the creativity and insight of our colleagues and confident in the health and vibrancy of our field – the study of American politics and American Political Development (APD).

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Brief Contents

Acknowledgments	xvi
Introduction	1
Chapter 1: The Origins of American Political Principles	11
Chapter 2: The Revolution and the Constitution	44
Chapter 3: Federalism and the American Political System	84
Chapter 4: Political Socialization and Public Opinion	125
Chapter 5: The Mass Media and the Political Agenda	155
Chapter 6: Interest Groups	188
Chapter 7: Political Parties	221
Chapter 8: Voting, Campaigns, and Elections	254
Chapter 9: Congress: Lawmaking and Domestic Representation	289
Chapter 10: The President: Governing in Uncertain Times	322
Chapter 11: Bureaucracy: Shaping Government for the 21 st Century	363
Chapter 12: The Federal Courts: Activism v. Restraint	396

Chapter 13: Civil Liberties and Civil Rights	428
Chapter 14: Government, the Economy, and Domestic Policy	462
Chapter 15: America's Place in a Dangerous World	492
Source Information	527

Full Contents

Acknowledgments	xvi	
Introduction	1	
1	<i>The Origins of American Political Principles</i>	11
Introduction	11	
1.1	John Locke, “Of the Beginnings of Political Societies” (1690)	13
1.2	<i>Federalist Papers</i> , 1 and 2 (1787)	17
1.3	Gordon S. Wood, “Republicanism” (2002)	21
1.4	Samuel P. Huntington, “The Disharmonic Polity” (1981)	25
1.5	James Morone, “The Democratic Wish” (1998)	29
1.6	Rogers M. Smith, “The Multiple Traditions in America” (1993)	36
Discussion Questions	43	
Suggested Additional Reading	43	
2	<i>The Revolution and the Constitution</i>	44
Introduction	44	
2.1	Thomas Paine, “Common Sense” (1776)	46
2.2	David Brian Robertson, “Madison’s Opponents and Constitutional Design” (2005)	50
2.3	Benjamin Franklin, Debates at the Constitutional Convention, “On Signing the Constitution” (1787)	61
2.4	Letter to Congress to accompany the Constitution (1787)	63

2.5	Herbert Storing, “What the Anti-Federalists Were <i>For</i> ” (1981)	64
2.6	<i>Federalist Papers</i> , 47 and 48 (1788)	71
2.7	Akhil Reed Amar, “America’s Constitution” (2005)	74
	Discussion Questions	82
	Suggested Additional Reading	83
3	<i>Federalism and the American Political System</i>	84
	Introduction	84
3.1	<i>Federalist Papers</i> , 39 and 45 (1788)	86
3.2	The Webster-Hayne Debates (1830)	90
3.3	V.O. Key, “Southern Politics in State and Nation” (1949)	94
3.4	Margaret Weir, “States, Race, and the Decline of New Deal Liberalism” (2005)	100
3.5	Suzanne Mettler, “Gender and Federalism in New Deal Public Policy” (1998)	110
3.6	Martha Derthick, “Keeping the Compound Republic” (2001)	117
	Discussion Questions	123
	Suggested Additional Reading	123
4	<i>Political Socialization and Public Opinion</i>	125
	Introduction	125
4.1	John and Abigail Adams, “Women in the New Nation” (1776)	127
4.2	Alexis de Tocqueville, “Unlimited Power of the Majority in the United States” (1835)	129
4.3	Walter Lippmann, “The World Outside and the Pictures in Our Heads” (1922)	133
4.4	Susan Herbst, “Contemporary Public Opinion Research” (1993)	137
4.5	Cass Sunstein, “Polarization and Cybercascades” (2007)	142
4.6	Lawrence Jacobs and Robert Shapiro, “Politicians Don’t Pander” (2000)	146
	Discussion Questions	153
	Suggested Additional Reading	154

5	<i>The Mass Media and the Political Agenda</i>	155
	Introduction	155
5.1	Thomas Jefferson, “Newspapers and Democracy” (1787)	156
5.2	H.L. Mencken, “Newspaper Morals” (1914)	158
5.3	<i>New York Times v. United States</i> (1971)	161
5.4	Samuel Kernell, “The Early Nationalization of Political News in America” (1986)	167
5.5	Bartholomew Sparrow, “The News Media as a Political Institution” (1999)	174
5.6	Scott Gant, “We’re All Journalists Now” (2007)	179
	Discussion Questions	186
	Suggested Additional Reading	186
6	<i>Interest Groups</i>	188
	Introduction	188
6.1	Debates at the Constitutional Convention, “Popular Participation, Factions, and Democratic Politics” (1787)	190
6.2	Alexis de Tocqueville, “Political Association in the United States” (1835)	194
6.3	E. E. Schattschneider, “The Scope and Bias of the Pressure System” (1960)	197
6.4	Kay Lehman Schlozman, “What Accent the Heavenly Chorus?” (1984)	202
6.5	Richard Harris and Daniel Tichenor, “Organized Interests and American Political Development” (2002–2003)	208
6.6	Elisabeth Clemens, “Politics Without Party: The Organizational Accomplishments of Disenfranchised Women” (1997)	215
	Discussion Questions	220
	Suggested Additional Reading	220
7	<i>Political Parties</i>	221
	Introduction	221
7.1	James Reichley, “Intention of the Founders: A Polity Without Parties” (2000)	223

7.2	James Madison, “A Candid State of Parties” (1792)	227
7.3	John H. Aldrich, “Why Parties Form” (1995)	229
7.4	Sidney Milkis, “The President and the Parties” (1993)	235
7.5	James Sundquist, “Party Realignment: What, When, How?” (1983)	242
7.6	Morris Fiorina, “Culture Wars?: The Myth of a Polarized America” (2006)	246
	Discussion Questions	252
	Suggested Additional Reading	253
8	<i>Voting, Campaigns, and Elections</i>	254
	Introduction	254
8.1	Debates at the Constitutional Convention, “Should Common Citizens be Allowed to Vote?” (1787)	255
8.2	Alexander Keyssar, “Democracy Ascendant: The Right to Vote” (2000)	260
8.3	V.O. Key, “The Voice of the People: An Echo” (1966)	269
8.4	Samuel L. Popkin, “The Reasoning Voter” (1991)	272
8.5	Anthony King, “Running Scared” (1997)	277
8.6	Dennis Johnson, “Political Consultants at Work” (2007)	282
	Discussion Questions	288
	Suggested Additional Reading	288
9	<i>Congress: Lawmaking and Domestic Representation</i>	289
	Introduction	289
9.1	Edmund Burke, “Letter to the Electors of Bristol” (1774)	291
9.2	<i>Federalist Papers</i> , 62 (1788)	293
9.3	Woodrow Wilson, “Congressional Government” (1885)	296
9.4	David Mayhew, “The Electoral Incentive” (1974)	300
9.5	Eric Schickler, “Institutional Development of Congress” (2004)	305
9.6	Barbara Sinclair, “Parties and Leadership in the House” (2006)	314
	Discussion Questions	320
	Suggested Additional Reading	321

10	<i>The President: Governing in Uncertain Times</i>	322
	Introduction	322
10.1	John Locke, “Of Prerogative” (1690)	324
10.2	Gouverneur Morris, Debates at the Constitutional Convention, “Limits on Executive Power” (1787)	327
10.3	<i>Federalist Papers</i> , 70 and 72 (1789)	330
10.4	Abraham Lincoln, “On Suspension of Habeas Corpus” (1861)	332
10.5	Theodore Roosevelt, “Immediate and Vigorous Executive Action” (1909)	336
10.6	Keith Whittington and Daniel Carpenter, “Executive Power in American Institutional Development” (2003)	338
10.7	Andrew Rudalevige, “Charting a New Imperial Presidency” (2006)	352
	Discussion Questions	362
	Suggested Additional Reading	362
11	<i>Bureaucracy: Shaping Government for the 21st Century</i>	363
	Introduction	363
11.1	Max Weber, “Characteristics of Modern Bureaucracy” (1922)	365
11.2	Woodrow Wilson, “The Study of Administration” (1887)	368
11.3	Norton Long, “Power and Administration” (1949)	372
11.4	James Q. Wilson, “Bureaucracy” (1989)	376
11.5	Daniel Carpenter, “The Evolution of the National Bureaucracy” (2005)	380
11.6	Paul Light, “Thickening Government” (1995, 2004)	388
	Discussion Questions	394
	Suggested Additional Reading	395
12	<i>The Federal Courts: Activism v. Restraint</i>	396
	Introduction	396
12.1	<i>Federalist Papers</i> , 81 (1788)	398
12.2	<i>Marbury v. Madison</i> (1803)	400

12.3	Jeffrey Rosen, “The Most Democratic Branch” (2005)	404
12.4	Howard Gillman, “The Courts and the 2000 Election” (2001)	408
12.5	Thomas M. Keck, “Modern Conservatism and Judicial Power” (2004)	415
12.6	Gerald Rosenberg, “The Hollow Hope” (1991)	420
	Discussion Questions	426
	Suggested Additional Reading	427
13	<i>Civil Liberties and Civil Rights</i>	428
	Introduction	428
13.1	James Madison, “Memorial and Remonstrance Against Religious Assessments” (1785)	429
13.2	Abraham Lincoln, “Speech on the Dred Scott Decision” (1857)	433
	“The Gettysburg Address” (1863)	433
	“Second Inaugural Address” (1865)	433
13.3	<i>Plessy v. Ferguson</i> (1896)	438
13.4	<i>Brown v. Board of Education</i> (1954)	445
13.5	Richard M. Valelly, “Institutions and Enfranchisement” (2004)	449
13.6	Desmond King and Rogers Smith, “Racial Orders in American Political Development” (2005)	455
	Discussion Questions	460
	Suggested Additional Reading	461
14	<i>Government, the Economy, and Domestic Policy</i>	462
	Introduction	462
14.1	Alexander Hamilton, “Report on Manufactures” (1791)	464
14.2	Joseph Schumpeter, “The Process of Creative Destruction” (1942)	468
14.3	Franklin Delano Roosevelt, “Call For Federal Responsibility” (1932)	471
	“Message to Congress on Social Security” (1935)	471
14.4	Benjamin I. Page and James R. Simmons, “Is American Public Policy Effective?” (2000)	475

14.5	John W. Kingdon, “American Public Policy in Comparative Perspective” (1999)	479
14.6	Theda Skocpol, “America’s First Modern Social Policies and Their Legacies” (1992)	486
	Discussion Questions	491
	Suggested Additional Reading	491
15	<i>America’s Place in a Dangerous World</i>	492
	Introduction	492
15.1	Alexander Hamilton and James Madison, “The Pacificus-Helvidius Debate” (1793)	494
15.2	George Washington, “Farewell Address” (1796)	498
15.3	Alexis de Tocqueville, “Why Democratic Nations Naturally Desire Peace, and Democratic Armies, War” (1840)	500
15.4	Bartholomew H. Sparrow, “Limited Wars and the Attenuation of the State” (2002)	504
15.5	Joseph Nye, “The Paradox of American Power” (2002)	513
15.6	Walter Russell Mead, “America’s Sticky Power” (2004)	519
	Discussion Questions	525
	Suggested Additional Reading	526
	Source Information	527

Introduction

How does American government work, and why does it work the way it does? By understanding the way people have answered these questions in the past and present, we can better understand the enduring puzzles of the American political system – and we can use it more effectively in the future. More than ever, we need to step back and understand how our government and politics have developed over time, to help us make sense of the dramatic political, economic and social changes that now are challenging American democracy. Americans count on their national government to keep the nation prosperous or to return it to prosperity once it has faded, to protect it against enemies, to ensure their freedoms, to guarantee that they are treated fairly, and to make sure that they have access to roads, parks, education and other important public services. Government touches our lives in many more ways than we think. Yet American government often seems mysterious and distant.

Citizens, leaders, scholars and thoughtful observers have studied these puzzles for over two centuries because they have dealt with many of the same problems that we face today. By drawing on their insights and the lessons they draw from the past, we can better appreciate the way the Congress, federalism, the two-party system and other institutions affect our lives now. More important, with historical perspective we can better understand those features of our government that are evolving, such as presidential power, the impact of the media, economic management and foreign policy. It is impossible to appreciate these features merely by taking a snapshot of current elections, institutions, or public policies. To truly understand the direction of American government and politics, we must examine their development over long periods of time.

In the last three decades, scholars have established the field of American Political Development, or APD, to study systematically the evolution of American government, politics and public policy. These scholars focus on the ways that political culture, ideology, governing bodies and institutions that link citizens and government (such as political parties, interest groups, and the media) have shaped political conflict and government action over decades. American Political Development emphasizes that the decisions of the past laid down paths that helped lead us to the political choices we face today, and that understanding these paths helps us approach the puzzles of government with more knowledge and wisdom.

The field of American Political Development is rooted in a very broad and realistic view of government. Often, the APD approach begins by asking, what does American government have in common with other governments, in other places and times? How and why does American government differ from these other governments? Most APD scholars begin with the medieval idea of “the state” rather than “government” to broaden their grasp of the problems and basic tasks that all governments confront. The word “state” refers to an organization that tries to control a territory and a people.¹ The definition of the state includes “continuous administrative, legal, bureaucratic and coercive systems,” that is, offices and legal procedures that last beyond one or two national leaders.² Like every other government in history, American government tries to keep order within the nation, and to defend its citizens from foreign threats. To accomplish this task, American government has developed such enduring institutions as an army and navy, the U.S. Department of Justice, the Border Patrol, the Internal Revenue Service, state and local police forces, an extensive system of courts and a network of prisons. Like other governments, American government tries to maintain the loyalty of its citizens and its legitimacy, that is, the willingness of powerful groups and the population as a whole to obey its rules. To accomplish this task, American government enables citizens to influence government officials (most notably, through elections) and provides public policies that serve many interests. Examples of such policies include public education, the national parks, small business loans, the Social Security program and the National Weather Service.

By starting with the state, APD scholars can pose important questions about American government that often are overlooked by those who study only the latest political events. Instead of analyzing the most recent election, APD scholars examine the way elections have evolved up to now, and how the recent presidential elections resemble and differ from other elections in American history. Understanding these similarities and differences helps us see more clearly whether or not the last election marks a fundamental turning point in American politics. Instead of asking why Congress passed a recent law, APD scholars ask how the new policy continues and breaks with the policy traditions of the past, and what these patterns are likely to produce in the future.

These questions of political continuity and change are at the heart of the concept of “political development,” a term defined by key scholars Karen Orren and Stephen Skowronek as “a durable shift in governing authority.” These authors define “governing authority,” in turn, as “the exercise of control over persons or things that is designated and enforceable by the state.”³ Political development, then, examines the use and control of government authority. This approach frames the key questions for understanding American government: How has the state exercised control in the past, and how does it exercise control now? How has the state enforced its will in the past, and how does it enforce it now? How have decisions about controlling the state developed over time? These questions invite the study of “state-building,” or the growth and decline of state power, such as the power to tax and to redistribute resources, or the power to police and regulate behavior.

The APD approach offers three clear advantages to anyone who wants to understand American politics. First, APD examines the changing capacity of the state to accomplish its tasks, the limits on its powers to succeed, and the reasons for those