

AMERICAN GOVERNMENT

BRIEF VERSION Fifth Edition

James Q. Wilson

To Diane

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Preface

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TO WRITE ABOUT AMERICAN POLITICS TODAY, ONE MUST MAKE AN important choice: Is the impeachment (and then acquittal) of President Clinton the Great Event of the late 1990s, or are there other changes in American government that occurred at about the same time that are of greater moment?

Though the press was devoted to the sexual tribulations and House impeachment of Mr. Clinton, I believe that other changes—some of them scarcely noted by the press—were more significant. In this edition, I have described, briefy, the impeachment effort, but I have devoted much more space to things that, I suspect, will have more lasting importance:

- * The effort of the Supreme Court to reestablish the idea that the states have certain rights that the federal government cannot trump (Chapter 3).
- * The devolution of the old Aid to Families with Dependent Children (AFDC) program back to the states, a move that stimulated a remarkable variety of state approaches to welfare (Chapter 3).
- * The preoccupation of the media with sexual scandal to an extent not seen before during the twentieth century (Chapter 4).
- * The continued expansion by the Court of the definition of sexual harassment in a series of expansive but confusing decisions (Chapter 11).
- * The end, at least for the time being, of annual budget deficits (Chapter 8).
- $\ast\,$ The new life of efforts to "reform" campaign finance (Chapters 5 and 6).
- * The passage of a law that attempts to check unfunded mandates—that is, federal laws that require states to do something without giving them the money to pay the bills (Chapter 3).

All of these matters are treated in more detail than President Clinton's impeachment, though that is certainly described (in Chapters 4, 7, 8, and 10), as is the law creating independent counsels and the history of their work (Chapter 8).

NEW TO THIS EDITION

Some new things were added in this edition, chief among them a list of World Wide Web addresses at the end of each chapter so that students can use computers to look up facts about law, politics, and government. The chapter on the Constitution (Chapter 2) was enlarged to explain the impact of political theory, especially that of John Locke, on how our nation was founded.

Some existing material has been given a sharper focus. For example, the chapter on elections (Chapter 6) now has a section that explains, as simply as possible, what factors decide presidential races (and, to some extent, congressional ones). The chapter on Congress (Chapter 7) draws attention to the extraordinary level of partisanship—and a rather ill-tempered sort of partisanship—now on display in the House. A special box has been added on the remarkable congressional election of 1998, when, for one of the few times ever, the president's party gained seats during an off-year contest (Chapter 6). Every chapter and almost every table was revised and brought up to date.

In making these changes, I was greatly aided by advice received from the reviewers of this and previous editions: Richard H. Baker, St. Louis Community College at Meramec; Gregory S. Butler, New Mexico State University; Henry Carey, John Jay College of Criminal Justice; James W. Davis, Washington University; David E. Dupree, Victor Valley Community College; Stewart W. Gardner, University of Texas—Pan American; Kenneth Goldstein, Arizona State University; Richard Hartwig, Texas A & M University at Kingsville; Fred A. Kramer, University of Massachusetts—Amherst; G. Roger McDonald, John Jay College of Criminal Justice; Michael E. Milakovich, University of Miami; Paul Peterson, Coastal Carolina University; Raymond D. Pomerleau, San Francisco State University; Aaron Rodrigues, Cuesta College; Ricardo Salas, Fullerton College; John W. Soule, San Diego State University; Daniel L. Stover, Kaskaskia College; and Greg Thorson, University of Minnesota—Morris.

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 Bank* includes Chapter Outlines with new, additional information that may help in the preparation of lectures; Important Terms with definitions; sections for each chapter on important themes, data for analysis and discussion, and lists of resources (films, videos, and software); and a full bank of multiple choice, true-false, and essay test questions. These test items are also available in computerized format for both Macintosh and Windows systems.

A transparency package, containing full-color overhead transparencies, is available to adopters of the book.

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 at a nominal extra cost.

A *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.

Additional study aids are available to students on the companion web site for this text, accessible via the Houghton Mifflin web site http://www.hmco.com/college. Resources include a Policy Portfolio and interactive self-quizzes, as well as primary source documents, web links, and Internet exercises for each chapter.

A Guide to the Internet with Student Exercises is a brief, helpful guide to using the Internet for political science research. It introduces students to key Web resources and asks them to think critically about the information found there.

About the Author

* * *

James Q. Wilson is an emeritus professor of management and public policy at the University of California, Los Angeles. 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. Wilson is the author or coauthor of fourteen books, including Moral Judgment (1997), The Moral Sense (1993), Bureaucracy (1989), Crime and Human Nature (1985, with Richard J. Herrnstein), Thinking about Crime (1983), and Political Organizations (1974).

Wilson has served in 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 Attorney General's Task Force on Violent Crime in 1981, and a member of the President's Foreign Intelligence Advisory Board in 1986–1990.

In 1997 the American Political Science Association conferred on him the Charles E. Merriam Award for advancing the art of government through the application of social science knowledge and in 1990 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 a member of the American Philosophical Society. When not writing, teaching, or advising, he goes scuba diving. He says that it clears the brain.

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1

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.

SOME KEY POLITICAL CONCEPTS

* * *

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 no large socialist, communist, or Marxist political party. In France, Great Britain, Italy, and elsewhere, socialist and Marxist parties are large and powerful.
- ★ 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 United States Capitol

- * 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 consti-