

# POLITICS

AN

# AMERICAN PERSPECTIVE

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UNEASY DEMOCRACY:  
The Tension of  
Citizenship and Ideology

EARL KLEE

**POLITICS: AN AMERICAN PERSPECTIVE**

**Uneasy Democracy:  
The Tensions of Citizenship and Ideology**

**Volume One in the CITIZEN OF DEMOCRACY Series**

**EARL KLEE**

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## CITIZEN OF DEMOCRACY

Earl Klee's *Politics: An American Perspective* is Volume One in the *Citizen of Democracy* Series. This new Series is intended to promote informed discussion of the democratic political system and challenge citizens to become active in supporting programs that strengthen democracy.

All who think about democracy recognize its fragility and its need for constant defense against "attack" by people who knowingly or unknowingly support ideas and positions that could lead to an authoritarian political system.

The complexities and subtleties of this assault are beyond the understanding of almost all citizens. The accumulated knowledge of hundreds of writings would be needed and even if that were possible to obtain much uncertainty would remain. Nevertheless, concerned citizens must engage themselves in an effort to acquire relevant information and determine its validity. We sincerely hope this Series will encourage citizens to undertake these endeavors. This first volume by Earl Klee will offer for many readers a new and stimulating way to view democracy.

The Series is planned to offer volumes in political science, economics, sociology, psychology, anthropology, education, law and philosophy. Each volume will be written by a different author.

## **Dedication**

To Linnea, in bright health and stellar companionship

## Acknowledgements

I want to give recognition to the cooperative and stimulating environment created by my colleagues in the Social Science field major at the University of California, Berkeley. They helped to establish an atmosphere within which clear thinking could take place. Students in numerous classes at American University (Washington D.C.), San Francisco State University, California State University at Hayward, and particularly the University of California at Berkeley will recognize many of the arguments voiced here. They helped me to sharpen these ideas and carefully reconsider political "truths" of all stripes.

I want to thank Linnea Klee and Ralph Bunch for superb editing jobs. They taught me much about clear expression. My publisher deserves much credit for his constant encouragement of the project. The late Arthur Graff taught me much about the spirit of passionate inquiry.

## Editor's Foreword to Series

The *Citizen of Democracy* Series has three main objectives. First, it will help meet the needs of many thoughtful citizens in understanding the vocabulary, concepts, facts and theories that reside in social science literature relating to government. Second, it will make available to social science professors a selection of texts for basic courses written at a level of English challenging to the developing intellect of serious students. And third, it will contribute toward re-establishing the concept of *polis*, the relationship between the members of a community based on their individual and collective competence, responsibility, and vision of a more rationally organized, more environmentally benign, more internationally constructive, and more economically efficient, not to say democratic nation, a goal increasingly recognized as necessary and appropriate in the evolution of the American society.

The Series contemplates, in addition to this volume in American government and politics, separate volumes in economics, sociology, psychology, education, law and anthropology. Each will present a critical analysis of the relevant cultural features in place currently and the process by which they developed. Authors are urged to provide a sophisticated overview of their particular disciplines' characterization of American society, to integrate with some consistency that view with the ap-

proaches of their Series colleagues, and to aim their contributions toward understanding the requirements implicit in the evolution of American society toward the realization of *polis*. At the same time, there is no design to exact a consensus of conclusions among the contributing volumes; each author will pursue the imperatives of his or her particular discipline and insights.

The first volume in this Series, Earl Klee's *Politics: An American Perspective*, immediately exemplifies the holistic approach to its subject; the perspective of Professor Klee, a political scientist, is enlightened by an integration of related social science knowledge. The reader becomes aware of the anthropological role of myths in creating the social climate in which economic factors such as the market determine and are determined by the psychology of individual expectations and motivations, all within a logical historical framework. Thus politics and its expression in the structures and processes of government are given life and relevance. The reader is not patronized by simplifications of the complex reality and problems he or she is challenged to comprehend. Instead, the author's basic optimism and progressive clarification of the subject supports and encourages the reader toward civic competence, a major objective of these related volumes.

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# Contents

Foreword	ix
Introduction: Orienting Ourselves in the Political World	1
1 Developing a Common Vocabulary	9
Politics: Its Meaning and Resultant Complexities	
The State, Power and Legitimacy	
Democracy, Citizenship and the Question of Autonomy	
Equality and Liberty: Seeing Beneath Rhetorical Surfaces	
Constitutionalism and Democratic Foundations	
2 Surveying the Varieties of Politics	43
Ideology and the Uses of Political Power	
the Political spectrum	
The Centrist Consensus: An American Hybrid	
3 Analyzing American Political Culture	69
The Problem of Political Culture	
Tocqueville's America and Ours	
Deciphering American Exceptionalism	
4 Inhabiting the Everyday World: Charting the Relationship Between Politics and Economics	93
The Continuing Revolutionary Force of Capitalism	
Market Logic, Oligopoly and Beyond	
Components of Free Market Theory	
The Problematics of Free Market Theory	
Creative Destruction and the Duality of American Capitalism	

A New Structure of Power in America	
New Forms of Statism	
The Military-Industrial Link	
The Social Security System, Medicare and Beyond	
<b>5 Citizenship, Reformism, and the Integrity of the American Polity</b>	<b>135</b>
Political Quiescence and the Populist	
Beyond Left-Right Boundaries: Crisis and the Breaking of Traditional Constraints	
The Free Market Revisited	
Post-Pluralism	
Post-Liberalism	
Social Democracy American Style	
American Democratic Socialism	
<b>6 Politics Present and Future</b>	<b>169</b>
Back to Basics: Reformism and Alternate American Futures	
Democracy Under The Shadow of Power and Bureaucracy	
<b>Further Reading: Becoming a Democratic Citizen</b>	<b>193</b>
<b>End Notes</b>	<b>201</b>
<b>Bibliography</b>	<b>209</b>

## Introduction

### Orienting Ourselves In The Political World

This volume exploring the modern nature of politics is the first in a series entitled *Citizen of Democracy*. It takes very seriously the task of probing the meaning of citizenship within advanced industrial society, with a particular focus on the American context. In recent years there has been much discussion and lamentation about high levels of illiteracy presumably found among the American populace. This illiteracy refers both to the absence of necessary reading and writing skills and ignorance of the cultural and historical world we inhabit. Attending to these worrisome concerns, this work makes a strong plea for citizen literacy, and the need for sustained education in active citizenship. Only when we find ways to increase these two factors will we be able to avoid the use of democracy as a rhetorical cliché.

We must initially confront the ambiguous and highly conflicted place politics occupies in American society. Levels of political participation and knowledge in America are embarrassingly low. Reluctance to participate results in part from a strong anti-political bias that pervades the culture. This pre-existing inclination toward anti-politics is reconfirmed by the pervasive image manipulation found throughout public life, which commodifies political candidates, and leeches out the

issue and value dimension of public debate. In recent British and French election campaigns there have been many complaints about the “Americanization” of their politics. This has become a term of opprobrium used to describe the trivialization of politics, the substitution of image for content, and the hollow and calculatingly manipulative quality of political rhetoric. We have indeed reached a destructive state of affairs when the name of our country is evoked as a shorthand way to describe the devolution and erosion of public life. Determining how we came to this pass and what we can do about it is a basic purpose of this work. This aim is grounded in the strong belief that a realistic confrontation with things as they are is the only meaningful starting point for understanding and change.

A personal note is also in order. Carrying around the honorific title “political scientist” is often an unpleasant burden, one which I often find myself admitting to with reluctance. The designation science strongly suggests of regularity and predictability, the very characteristics the public world lacks. More vitally, the phrase political science blinds us to the fact that politics represents a continual struggle over basic value questions that know no definite answer or final resting point. This struggle to find meaning and convince others is compelling and even poignant. The fascination of politics lies in the opportunity it offers us to examine conflicting beliefs and the logic behind them. We are then forced to match these against our own values. Hence politics has an inherent educative dimension: It compels us to give an accounting of our own commitments and value stances. Also, politics offers us unrivalled opportunities to study human character in operation, whether this be in war, in peace, or simply in the presentation of basic viewpoints in conflict. In this sense politics represents the ultimate spectator sport, but one that inevitably draws us onto the field as com-

petitors. Perhaps this is one underlying reason why many of us tend to shy away from this most vital arena.

The intention of this volume is to reach what is becoming an endangered species: the educated reader who has an interest in functioning as an active and informed citizen. With Jefferson, we strongly feel that this citizenship is the only solid bedrock upon which a democratic society can be constructed. What follows is a detailed discussion and analysis of the meaning of politics in the light of cultural, economic and social realities. The central focus will be on the American polity, with examples drawn from other advanced industrial societies. The criteria used for inclusion in this compass is democratic governance and a relatively open society. Identifying features of democracy include a multiparty system, political accountability of public officials, a free press and open political discussion and critique, free movement within and out of the society, and the active protection of individual rights from the arbitrary action of public or private actors. It is a sad commentary on the presumed expansion of human liberty that there is not a high growth rate in the number of nations practicing these fundamentals. But that reality itself will return us to a clear analysis of the conditions necessary for human freedom to be exercised.

The aforementioned anti-political bias stands as a key hindrance to an adequate discussion of the concerns of this volume. This negative reality is most vividly expressed and acted upon in America. But it must be remembered that from our late twentieth century vantage point, fear, suspicion and cynicism about politics and the exercise of public power are certainly called for. One keen student of the problem has estimated that there have been 100 million man-made dead in the course of this century.<sup>1</sup> Most of the development of this necropolis is attributable to World Wars I and II, the Stalinist war against Russian society, Nazi genocidal

policies and the Pol Pot regime's destruction of two million Cambodians. The causal agents shaping this blood-soaked century can be grouped under two main categories. The first is the blinding force of nationalism, creating invidious distinctions between different peoples and removing limitations on what nations can do to protect their security. The second involves the power of political ideologies, which have often been used to sanctify the elimination of targeted groups for various reasons of state. Thus for many in our age, politics has simply meant state-sponsored terror. Given these realities, there is little wonder that people express hesitancy about public life. This expansive level of awareness has to exist as unavoidable background to any discussion of modern politics, as such penetrating political commentators as Hannah Arendt and George Orwell remind us, otherwise we blind ourselves to human capability.

For most Americans these larger issues do not surface to the level of consciousness, but rather hover in the background as a kind of contributing subliminal fear. Instead, what we could call the microlevel of everyday life predominates. In this reactive understanding, politics is the object of contempt, cynicism and denigration. How many times have you heard the phrase "It's just politics," to describe a situation where a less-deserving person triumphed over a more qualified one? Here politics becomes a shorthand way to describe self-serving and sometimes quasi-corrupt behavior. In the popular mind it is narrowly-based, power-seeking action making for the erosion of normal standards of merit and just reward. The practical consequence of such attitudes is to encourage an apolitical, sleepwalking innocence toward inclusive social realities, and to heighten the degree to which politics turns into a matter of personalities and becomes subject to the pre-packaging force of advertising. As a result, an apolitical vicious circle is created. The more trivialized politics

becomes the easier it is to feel contempt and to reject active awareness and civic responsibility. As predatory and manipulative political figures (or maybe just banal ones) seize control of the levers of power, their appearance only reconfirms existing predispositions. It is a central purpose of this volume to cut through and erode this simplistic everyday rejection and to situate our national politics within the larger flow of pressing historical imperatives. These include rescuing democracy from the skeletal embrace of administrative rationality, recovering the critical, interrogatory essence of political democracy, and learning to oppose all forms of authoritarianism as an unhealthy growth on the body politic.

Surmounting our national anti-political biases will not be an easy task. The nineteenth century British social reformer John Stuart Mill once argued that casting a public ballot should be a vital part of representative government. He thought that by employing this technique, democratic citizens would be forced to publicly justify and argue for their political positions. Mill recognized that the essence of politics must be sustained debate over basic value positions. Political conflict is highly educative in that it forces us to re-examine our own positions in the light of the rhetorical strategies and clashing perspectives of others. The cynic might respond to Mill's suggestion by arguing that such public statements act only to encourage public conformity. But that argument simply highlights our basic point: We need to find ways to stimulate people to think politically and critically, and to see beyond the constricting confines of their own narrow range of experience. In the best sense politics involves an education for life in the world. This volume is intended as one attempt to recover that civic sensibility.

But what do we mean by that vaguely suspicious abstraction, citizenship? In our understanding this central component of democracy has three basic dimen-

sions, all of interlocking importance. First is the real and immediate dimension, built upon assertion of power at the local level, and usually fashioned around people banding together for some public purpose. Second is a cognitive aspect, whereby people come to see themselves as part of a larger whole and are able to establish some sense of continuity between the past, present and future. Third is a symbolic level in which citizenship becomes a badge of membership, creating a sense of public responsibility in the individual. But it should be plain to the observant eye that none of these dimensions has been easy to attain in America. There have been two warring political traditions at work in our history, each struggling to define the cultural boundaries within which conflict takes place. Present on the one hand is the republican tradition, embodied in the founding documents of the nation and periodically surfacing during times of national crisis. It takes quite seriously such lofty abstractions as virtue and the public good, tends to distrust the fragmented individualism of the market, emphasizes self-restraint, and points to a world of the self larger than narrow materialism. On the other hand, the liberal-individualist tradition receives daily confirmation in many of our personal lives. It places primary stress on the self and its reaffirmation, for the most part sees the individual as having only tenuous links with public life, centrally focuses on private property as the road to freedom, and sees government involvement only as a vehicle of last resort.

In reviewing these two political traditions, we must remember the danger of dichotomizing the world into overly neat parts. Each of these positions is internally conflicted and charged with a tension that makes the study of political belief and practice inherently interesting. Such a definitional prologue gives the reader some idea of the analytical quest we are about to undertake. Its importance should be self-evident.



The plan of this book is relatively straight-forward. Chapter One is a detailed discussion of the basic concepts we need to adequately understand the public world surrounding us, and which exert great influence on our lives. In particular we shall interrogate the ideas of democracy, state power, equality, and individual autonomy within highly organized societies. Chapter Two is a survey of the varieties of politics found among advanced industrial societies. A close look is taken at the left-right political spectrum. Chapter Three is an analysis of American political culture, with particular emphasis on what makes this country unique. Chapter Four considers the all-important relationship between politics and economics through a careful analysis of key concepts. Chapters Five and Six are a summary analysis of the place of politics in our world, and an exploration of reform politics and the revival of popular democratic forms. Throughout the work there will be numerous explications of vital political debates. It is written with the understanding that conflict is the lifeblood of politics, and the beginning of political education. It is hoped that some degree of political wisdom will follow in its wake.