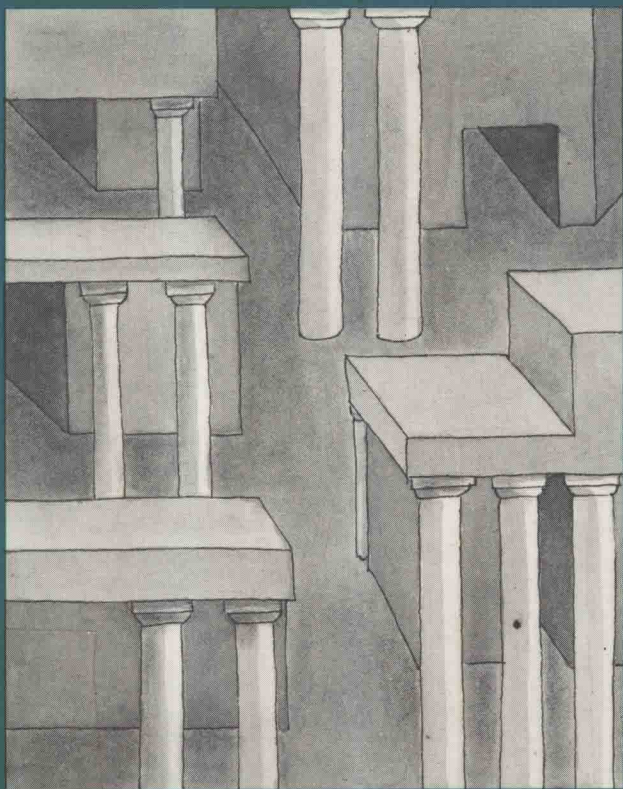


# POLITICAL POWER AND AMERICAN DEMOCRACY

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Clifton McCleskey

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# POLITICAL POWER AND AMERICAN DEMOCRACY

CLIFTON MCCLESKEY  
*University of Virginia*



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# PREFACE



This book is aimed squarely at the task of making American politics more comprehensible. It reflects a conviction, born of years of teaching, research, and political participation, that college students and interested citizens have great difficulty in assimilating the usual descriptions of the American political system.

American politics *is* a confusing affair, and one needs all the help possible in trying to make sense of what goes on. The major problem with most introductory American government textbooks is that they offer a great many details and low-level generalizations without providing any organizing intellectual framework (the principal exceptions are books done from a Marxist or radical perspective, and the framework they offer is ill-founded).

*Political Power and American Democracy* attempts to provide coherence and focus in the study of American politics by viewing salient features through the twin lenses of "power" and "democracy". Both concepts are central to understanding and evaluating American political life, but neither is treated adequately

in most introductory American government textbooks, of whatever length. They usually receive an even worse treatment in books and articles aimed at the general reader.

This interpretive framework makes it possible to identify and explain *the* fundamental problem in American politics today: Too little power to govern. Not enough actual power is generated by the political system, and such power as is generated is quickly and inefficiently dissipated within the institutions and processes provided by the constitution and by countless statutes, regulations, and internal rules.

But governmental systems are not to be judged solely by the existence of enough power to govern successfully; the legitimacy of that power must also be taken into account. In the American political system (and in all others) the legitimacy of power depends on adherence to the principles of democracy. This book shows how our electoral system and governmental institutions must be strengthened both to provide the necessary power to govern *and* to satisfy democratic criteria.

This attempt to provide a broad and accurate overview of American politics, has been aided by my years of teaching and research. My interests have carried me into most of the major fields associated with that subject—parties and elections, constitutional law, presidency and Congress, state and local government. The goal here has been to provide well-organized, conceptually sound, concise explanations. The intent is the same, whether dealing with key concepts (such as democracy, power, judicial review) or explaining political phenomena (such as voter turnout or presidential nominations) or evaluating institutions (such as the legislative process in Congress or the electoral college). The success of that effort must be judged by others, and hence I invite close comparison of the treatment here of these and other matters with that found in most introductory American government textbooks.

It must be admitted that this book does not fit neatly into any of the usual categories—some strands in it are populist, some are liberal, some are conservative. No doubt a few will find that disconcerting, but I expect most readers to be challenged and stimulated by my analysis.

Behind this explanation of American politics are contributions from many persons—my own undergraduate and grad-

uate instructors, colleagues at the three universities where I have taught, countless friends and students, scholars and commentators. This book reflects specific influences worth noting. One is that of William Riker's *Democracy in the United States* (1953) which has always impressed me as a model in its use of ideas to organize and inform textbook writing. James M. Burns' *Deadlock of Democracy* (1963) long ago helped to shape my awareness of the problem of divided power.

I would like to thank Leo Wiegman, David Follmer, Susanne Erickson, Anne Kelly, Waivah Clement, and Ron Warncke for their help and encouragement. My efforts have been greatly aided by the comments and criticisms of several reviewers, including Wayne Allen, New Mexico State University, and David G. Lawrence, Westmont College, plus several others unknown to me.

I have benefited from the reactions of University of Virginia students and my colleagues upon whom I have tried out some of these ideas. Larry Sabato and Elizabeth Radford were kind enough to read and comment on portions of the manuscript, and Sandra Wiley gave the entirety the kind of close and thoughtful scrutiny that all books need. While I would really prefer to have at least some of the blame for any remaining mistakes assigned to all these people, both truth and convention dictate that I assume full responsibility.

For assistance with manuscript typing and reproduction, I am indebted to the University of Virginia, particularly the Woodrow Wilson Department of Government and Foreign Affairs, the Institute of Government, and the Arts and Sciences Word Processing Center. The index was prepared by Pierce McCleskey with his customary expertise and aplomb. Finally, I must acknowledge the invaluable help and support of my wife Jo, who still does not understand why this book was so long in the making. For that matter, neither do I.

CLIFTON MCCLESKEY

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