

POLITICS, PRESIDENTS AND PARTISANSHIP

ESSAYS IN
AMERICAN GOVERNMENT

edited by

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Politics, Presidents, and Partisanship: Essays in American Government

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chapter 1

The Contradictions of an Advanced Capitalist State

James Q. Wilson

In this interesting essay James Q. Wilson offers one assessment as to why everyone is in such a foul mood today towards the government. While everyone will not agree with his assessments of why the inner city is increasingly unlivable or why values and morals seem in decline, Wilson does a good job of showing that negatives such as these are at least in part a by-product of our particular constitutional system. Wilson argues that our system was not intended to work smoothly or eradicate all social ills.

Our Founding Fathers believed in two principles in particular that set the tone for how our constitutional system of government was to work. The Founders believed in the superiority of democracy (at least representative democracy, for they feared true democracy could easily become mobocracy) and at the same time stressed that the U.S. system would protect the rights of the individual (including a strong emphasis upon protection of property rights). This predisposition toward “classical liberalism” is reflected in the U.S. Constitution.

The founders created a system in which it is hard for any majority to gain, keep, and use power. Checks and balances make it difficult for tyranny to emerge (which is good), but this system with power divided also makes it difficult to bring about change. The Constitution purposely made it hard for anyone to govern, because the Founders understood that a majority (any majority) could bring about negative revolutionary change. Our Founders were conservative in that they believed that when change comes it should come slowly, through evolutionary change. If there is not widespread consensus on problems such as poverty or crime, the system is just not conducive towards solving such problems. One should also note that while our system advocates equality in the abstract, it does not advocate or encourage infringement of property rights to achieve true economic equality, social justice, or a decent standard of living. For good or ill, our system is one in which the rights of the individual are paramount.

Karl Marx thought that the contradictions of capitalism were the inevitability of declining profits and exhausted markets. He got it only slightly wrong: Those turned out to be the problems of *communist* states. The problems of advanced capitalist, democratic societies are not economic at all, they are political and cultural.

The U.S. has pursued happiness with greater determination and more abundant success than any other nation in history. For 45 years it waged, with steady resolve and remarkable forbearance, a Cold War that preserved the security of the Western world without sacrificing its liberty in the process. So remarkable has been our achievement that millions of people from every corner of the globe have come here to be part of America. And what have they found? A nation of grumpy citizens, convinced that their country, or at least its government, has gone to hell in a hand basket.

More Americans today than at any time since the late 1950s say that they distrust the people who manage their affairs: Around 75% believe that they have little or no confidence in the government.

Part of this grumpiness reflects the recent recession. As we recover from those bad times, we will recover a bit from our bad mood. But only a bit. The decline in popular confidence did not begin with the recession, or the Bush Administration, or Watergate or Vietnam; it began in the early 1960s and has been going, with only occasional and modest upticks, ever since. Whatever irritates us, it has been irritating us for a long time.

Politicians can take some solace in the fact that the decline in confidence has not been limited to government but has affected virtually every major institution in our society, especially corporations and labor unions. But it is little solace: We don't vote for corporate officials; we do vote for governmental ones.

Before trying to explain why the public is so grumpy now, I think it worth asking why they were so euphoric before. Maybe low public confidence in government is the norm and

the high confidence that existed in the 1950s was the aberration. It's not hard to imagine why we felt so good then. We had just waged, with great success, an immensely popular war for a manifestly good cause; at the end of the war we were indisputably top Nation, with a currency that was the world's standard, a productive capacity that was unrivaled, export markets that took everything we produced and begged for more and a monopoly on the atom bomb.

My guess is that Americans have usually been suspicious of their politicians and that the Eisenhower-era euphoria was unusual, perhaps unprecedented. I'd like to believe that because I find it troubling that Americans might normally be so silly as to think they could always trust officials in Washington to do the right thing.

But even if we discount the slide on the grounds that we were overdue for a return to normalcy, there are features of the current anger that strike me as more troublesome than anything we can attribute to the post-Ike hangover.

One is the condition of our inner cities. It is not just that they are centers of unemployment, high crime rates, school dropouts and drug abuse; that has, alas, always been the case. Today, however, the problems seem more pervasive, more widespread and more threatening than in the past. Once there were bad neighborhoods to be avoided; elsewhere, life was, if not prosperous, at least orderly. Today the signs of decay seem omnipresent—panhandlers and graffiti are everywhere, senseless shootings can occur anywhere and drug use has penetrated even the best schools.

To cope with these problems in the past we have relied on the schools and the police. But today that reliance seems misplaced; the schools don't teach students, the police can't maintain order.

Indeed, the government as a whole seems to be out of control. It has a huge peacetime deficit at which politicians feebly gesture; the number of interest groups besieging Congress has risen tenfold since 1960; we are entertained by the prospect of legislators easily writing bad checks when many ordinary folk find it impossible to write good ones; everybody knows that the nation faces serious problems, but the only issue on which Congress has been able to break out of its policy gridlock has been doling out favors to the savings and loan industry; the presidential race confronts us with the wearying spectacle of candidates exchanging personal barbs and policy bromides.

While I think there is some exaggeration in most of these complaints, there is much truth in all of them. To this extent the public's grouching is well founded. Why do these problems exist?

There are three reasons: prosperity, freedom and democracy.

Prosperity. For a century or more, dangerous drugs have been consumed. Middle-class people used opium, jazz musicians used heroin, stockbrokers sniffed cocaine. But starting in the 1960s, these drugs moved out of the elite markets and entered the mass market. The rea-

son was that the nation had become prosperous enough so that ordinary people could afford them. The discovery of crack cocaine in the early 1980s brought that drug within the reach of almost everyone. Everybody knows that drug addicts often steal to support their habits. What most people don't know, is that today many addicts do not have to steal to do this; they can act by on the strength of part-time jobs, family support and public aid.

The inner city has always been a haven for criminals who could take advantage of its anonymity, disorder and low-cost housing. So long as they had to search out their victims on foot, the criminals were neighbors. The availability of cheap automobiles put everyone within reach of burglars and robbers. As these offenders began to share in the general prosperity, they were able to replace fists with guns and cheap Saturday-night specials with modern semiautomatic weapons.

We have always had youth gangs in our cities, but even as late as the 1950s they were armed, if at all, with knives. When I was growing up in southern California, a dangerous gang was one whose members had made zip guns out of lengths of tubing taped to crude wooden stocks and loaded, one round per gun, with .22-caliber bullets. Today many gangs can afford Uzis, MAC-10s and 9mm pistols.

All of these changes should have been anticipated because there is no way to confine prosperity to law-abiding people only. The extraordinary standard of living that makes Americans the envy of much of the world extends to the criminal as well as the noncriminal; the rising tide has, indeed, lifted all boats, including those carrying pirates.

What frustrates many Americans, I think, is that their hard-earned prosperity was supposed to produce widespread decency. They had been taught to believe that if you went to school, worked hard, saved your money, bought a home and raised a family, you would enjoy the good life. About this they were right. But they also thought that if most people acted this way their communities would improve. About this they were not right. What produced the good life for individuals did not produce it for cities.

The reason is that prosperity enabled people to move to the kinds of towns Americans have always wanted to live in—small, quiet and nice. As the middle class moved out to the suburbs they took with them the system of informal social controls that had once helped maintain order in the central cities. As employers noticed that their best workers were now living outside these cities, they began moving their offices, stores and factories to the periphery.

Prosperity not only enhanced the purchasing power of urban criminals, it deprived them of the legitimate jobs that had once existed as alternatives to crime and it emancipated them from the network of block clubs, PTAS and watchful neighbors that are the crucial partners of the police.

As we Americans get better off individually, our cities got worse off collectively. This was probably inevitable. But it left us feeling angry and cheated.

Freedom. Freedom in the last 30 years has undergone an extraordinary expansion in at least two ways. The powers exercised by the institutions of social control have been constrained and people, especially young people, have embraced an ethos that values self-expression over self-control. The constraints can be found in laws, court rulings and interest-group pressure; the ethos is expressed in the unprecedented grip that the youth culture has on popular music and entertainment.

One should not exaggerate these constraints. The police, for example, must now follow much more elaborate procedures in stopping, arresting and questioning suspects. This is burdensome, but it is not clear that it has materially reduced their ability to solve crimes or arrest criminals. Most homicides, robberies and burglaries are solved because there is eyewitness testimony or physical evidence; confessions are not typically the critical determinant of a successful prosecution. An important exception involves consensual crimes, such as drug dealing. Lacking a victim or a witness, many prosecutions depend on undercover drug purchases or overheard conversations, and what can be purchased or overheard is now far more tightly regulated.

These constraints have become particularly restrictive with respect to the police's ability to maintain order. Gangs, vagrants, panhandlers, rowdy teenagers and graffiti painters were once held in check by curbside justice: threats, rousts and occasional beatings. Today the threats are emptier, the rousts rarer, the beatings forbidden. In many places vagrancy and public drunkenness have been decriminalized. In cities where the police kicked or arrested graffiti painters they now must organize graffiti paintout campaigns.

Many of the same restraints have reduced the authority of the schools. Disorderly pupils can still be expelled, but now with much greater difficulty than once was the case. The pressure to pass students without demanding much of them has intensified. As the freedom of students has grown, that of teachers has shrunk. The immense bureaucratic burdens on classroom teachers have deprived them of both time and power, with the result that they have both less time in which to teach and less authority with which to make teaching possible.

The expansion in personal freedom has been accompanied by a deep distrust of custodial institutions. The mentally ill were deinstitutionalized in the belief that they would fare better in community mental health clinics than in remote asylums, but there weren't enough clinics to treat the patients, the patients were not compelled to enter the clinics and their families were unequipped to deal with them. The mentally ill and the drug dependent now constitute a majority, it is estimated, of homeless adults on the streets.

Democracy. Americans have two chief complaints about our government. One is that it seems unable or unwilling to cope adequately with the costs of prosperity and the darker side of freedom. The other is that it has not managed to extend that prosperity and freedom to everyone. These two views are not in principle incompatible, but many Americans suspect that in practice they are. That is one reason, I think, that race relations are, at least rhe-

torically, so bad. Whites think the government is too tolerant of crime, gangs, drug abuse and disorderly behavior; blacks think it is too preoccupied with law and order and not concerned enough with ending racism and widening opportunities. Public reaction to the Los Angeles riots expressed that tension.

But even if that tension did not exist, it is not clear that democracy, American style, could effectively meet popular expectations. Those expectations are that government should be nonintrusive and have a balanced budget; spend more money on education, health care, crime control and environmental protection; strike the right balance between liberty and order; and solve the problems of racism, drug abuse, school failures and senseless violence.

I am not making this up. Every poll that I know of taken over the last few decades shows that large majorities think that the federal government taxes too heavily and spends too little, that deficit financing is wrong, and that Washington should solve problems that no state or local government has been able to solve.

If people are asked how the government can reconcile more spending, lower taxes and a balanced budget, the answer they give is clear: Eliminate waste, fraud and mismanagement. That no amount of waste reduction, fraud detection and bureaucratic reorganization can possibly achieve this reconciliation seems beside the point.

Now, a strong, decisive government might cut through the rhetoric and actually make the "tough choices" of which Americans are so fond (provided, of course, that the tough choices gore someone else's ox). But democracy, American style, does not lend itself to making tough choices. The reason is simple: the Constitution of the United States.

That Constitution was written not to make governing easy but to make it hard; not to facilitate choices but to impede them; not to empower leaders but to frustrate them. The constitutions, written and unwritten, of European democracies are very different: They were designed to allow the government to govern, subject only to the periodic checks of a popular election. Here, popular participation is encouraged; there, it is discouraged. Here, the courts can overturn presidential and congressional actions; there, they cannot. Here, many officials have the power to say "no" and none has the power to say "yes" and make it stick; there, a prime minister can say "yes" and make it stick.

European democracies are designed to be run by leaders like Ross Perot. Of course, abroad no one like Ross Perot would have a chance of becoming a leader, because the system for picking officials is designed to insure that only insiders and never outsiders have a chance at grabbing the golden ring. Candidates for office in England and Europe are chosen by party managers, guaranteeing that only people acceptable to the managers can be nominated. Candidates in the U.S. are picked by people attending caucuses, voting in primaries and signing petitions, creating the possibility for candidates detested by party managers to become party nominees.

This system for making policy and choosing candidates creates quite predictable results, and among them are the very things that so many Americans find distasteful about politics.

Politicians, knowing that party leaders are powerless, run personal campaigns stressing media images and relying on personal attacks. Knowing that money is essential to politics and that party leaders don't have much, candidates raise funds from individuals and interest groups. Aware that a primary campaign is the most important campaign, incumbents look for ways to discourage challengers from appearing.

Once in office, politicians know that it is their personal visibility and not their party's slogans that affect their chances of staying in office. Accordingly, they organize the Congress so that all members will have large staffs, all members will be able to introduce high-profile bills (even if many are doomed to defeat) and as many members as possible will have a chance to chair a committee or subcommittee. When a bill is passed, it is in everyone's interest to insure that it contains something for every important constituency; if the result is confusion or contradiction, the bureaucracy can be left with the task of sorting things out. When the bureaucracy can't sort it out—when it can't both build highways and make it easy for people to go to court to block highway construction—Congress and the White House can blame the mess on "the bureaucrats" and promise that heads will be knocked and names taken.

In making policy in a highly participatory system, officials will have no incentive to say that the government shouldn't tackle a problem or doesn't know how to solve it and every incentive to claim that government must "do something" and that they know just what to do. As a result, we have crime bills that don't reduce crime, drug abuse bills that don't curb drug abuse, education bills that don't improve learning and disability insurance that can't define "disability." The more such things are done, the more interest groups will have an incentive to organize lobbying efforts and open offices in Washington. The more such offices are opened, the more pressure there will be for more bills and the smaller the chances that any given bill will make much sense.

What Americans don't see is a constitutional system at work in an era of big government and mass participation; what they do see are the things that they don't like about politics.

They see interminable, expensive, attack-based campaigns. They don't see the fact that campaigns would be very short (about two months), much less expensive and (perhaps) less attack-based if we didn't have primary elections or caucuses, if party managers picked candidates and if candidates had to run defending a party record.

They see special-interest groups proliferating. They don't see that these organizations are simply the most visible form of popular participation in government, participation that cannot be extended to individuals without also extending it to groups, and they don't see that having many interests is a *result*, not the cause, of big government.

They see American politicians accused of lying, corruption and self-dealing. They don't see the lying, corruption and self-dealing in parliamentary regimes, and they don't see it be-

cause there are not in those places the checks and balances and incessant rivalries of American style democracy that provide politicians with an incentive to expose such misconduct.

They see a government that cannot solve the critical problems of our time. They don't see that no other free government has solved those critical problems, either. European democracies run big deficits (often they are, relative to GNP, bigger than ours), are equally baffled by youth disorders and drug abuse and have made even less progress in combating racism.

What, a citizen may ask, do we get out of all of this confusion, pettiness, incompetence and gridlock?

Prosperity, freedom and democracy.

Cheer up, Americans. You are right to be grumpy, but there is no system for governing a large, free and complex society such as ours that is likely to do much better or make you less grumpy. If you don't believe it, travel.

On your travels you will meet countless people who want to know how to immigrate to the U.S. You will discover that our standard of living, in purchasing power equivalents, is the highest in the world. You will discover that among the larger democracies, our tax rates are the lowest in the world. You can talk to conservative leaders in England, Germany and Sweden who will speak enviously of a nation, America, that has managed to keep the economic burden of social welfare programs so small. (Relatively small, anyway.) American environmental regulations, though sometimes poorly designed and badly administered, set the standard for most of the world.

If you get arrested abroad, you will appreciate the constraints on the American police. The Swiss and the Swedes may strike you as civilized people, and they are, but I would not advise you to provoke the police in Geneva or Stockholm.

If it irritates you that members of Congress pay themselves so much and have such large staffs, try getting your problems solved by a member of the British House of Commons or the French Chamber of Deputies. You will discover that those skilled debaters and bright intellects can't really do very much for you. As individuals, they don't have much power. And not having much power, it stands to reason that they won't be able to vote themselves big salaries or large staffs. If you don't want your legislators to have many perks, strip them of their power—which necessarily includes the power to help you.

And when you get home, look up the public opinion polls that compare how Americans feel about their country and its institutions with how many Europeans feel about theirs. By then you may not be surprised to learn that Americans have much more confidence in their institutions, public and private, than Germans, Frenchmen or Spaniards have in theirs. And you may not be surprised to learn that by majorities of roughly two-to-one Americans are more inclined than many Europeans to say that they are very proud to be citizens of their country and willing, if necessary, to fight for it.

chapter 2

How to Achieve the New World Order

Henry Kissinger

Henry Kissinger was National Security Advisor and later Secretary of State in the Nixon Administration. He has written widely on topics related to United States foreign policy. Ever the theoretician, Dr. Kissinger assesses U.S. foreign policy as a realist—one who argues that national interest must dictate one's actions in international affairs. His arguments are those of a classical realist in his strong belief that one's national interest (especially security and survival in an anarchial world) must be ever sensitive to changes in the balance-of-power around the world. His article also reflects the realist perspective's argument that America has a historical tendency towards wanting to justify U.S. action/intervention upon moralistic principles in the interests of democracy, not our raw national interest.

Dr. Kissinger reflects upon the stability and order of two classic balance-of-power eras. From the mid 1600s to the beginning of World War I (with the rather major exception of Napoleon's efforts to create a unipolar balance of power), Europe and to a large extent the world was dominated by a multipolar balance-of-power of like-minded kings. Stability, order, and the minimizing of open warfare among the great powers was the result of this multipolar balance and are what realists argue should be the concern of any great power.