



# THE AMERICAN POLITICAL SYSTEM

**KEN KOLLMAN**

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W. W. Norton & Company  
New York ■ London

## PREFACE

A common impression is that students entering colleges and universities today do not care about politics or are uninformed. In fact, many students, even before they arrive at college, are awash in facts about politics, public opinion, and international events. They regularly encounter information or opinions about the political world, whether online or through traditional media, through personal conversations and public speeches, or within their clubs and other associations.

Consider the conflicting—and often negative and misleading—messages about the American political system that are broadcast widely and likely to reach the typical student in the United States. Even brief attention to the news or other political programming might lead one to believe some subset of the following: Politicians are venal and corrupt. Lobbyists are venal and corrupt. Congress cannot get anything done. The government meddles too much in the economy and/or in people's lives. The federal government cannot close a military base, reform a bureaucracy, or coordinate relief efforts effectively. The government does not promote jobs effectively enough. No politician wanting to keep his or her job would ever want to raise taxes. Americans' taxes are outrageously high. The Social Security program is going broke. The government spends too much beyond its budget. Political parties get in the way of effective compromise. The Supreme Court is out of touch with public opinion. Interest groups essentially bribe politicians.

Students may try to make sense of the American political system, but understanding can be elusive. The challenge of getting an accurate, coherent picture of American politics is exacerbated by the enormity of the American political system. The bombardment of information about a broad range of topics across different institutions and levels of government may give the impression of incoherence or disorder. The political system looks chaotic and sometimes random. Or the impression can be one of complexity, making useful understanding nearly impossible.

What students entering introductory courses often lack is a coherent intellectual framework with a set of logical concepts to make sense of political information. I wrote this book to provide such a framework. My goal is to give a



clear introduction to the core facts about American government and an intellectual toolkit to navigate the extraordinarily complex political system in the United States. I want my own students to be able to take that toolkit away from the course, and I hope readers of this book will do so too. The tools in this book can help students understand the political issues and information that they encounter throughout their lives—in the news, and in their own experiences.

### *Analytical Tools for Understanding American Politics*

This textbook conveys the core theoretical insights and analytical tools from modern political science and applies them to the American political system. Political science is a diverse discipline in many ways, but the core of contemporary scholarship may be described as follows:

- One, people face recurrent collective dilemmas and principal-agent problems.
- Two, political institutions, including those in the United States, are intended to solve collective dilemmas and principal-agent problems.
- And three, the specific details of those institutions affect how costs and benefits are allocated in society. In other words, institutional details matter for who gets what in society.

After learning about this core—studying the various kinds of collective dilemmas and principal-agent problems—students can make better sense of the major topics in American politics. For example, as they learn about Congress in Chapter 5, they can consider the institutional features of congressional elections and of legislative action with a keen eye on how those features are intended to (but do not always successfully) solve social dilemmas. They learn the consequences of having the specific institutions in place in Congress, such as which states or congressional districts will benefit under certain kinds of policy making processes. Students can make sense of how members of Congress are typically re-elected even when a large majority of Americans are unhappy with Congress as a whole. And they can see how internal congressional politics affects bargaining between the two chambers and between Congress and the president. In every chapter throughout the text, the analytical tools from Chapter 1 are used to provide insights into the topic at hand.

### *A Problem-Oriented Approach*

Each chapter starts with a puzzle, illustrated through a story about American politics, then uses the concepts and information in the chapter to help “solve” the puzzle. Chapter 1, for example, uses the story of the Obama stimulus policies of 2009 and 2010, and asks how the majority of Americans can be in favor of tax cuts and stimulus when the economy is down, and at the same time strongly opposed to government deficits. At first, this does not appear to make sense. If

deficits are caused by the government spending more than it collects in taxes, increased spending and lower taxes will increase the deficit, so it seems illogical that people who oppose deficits would support the stimulus policies. The chapter then introduces the concepts of public goods, free-riding, and collective dilemmas. We see that politics is often about conflicting interests and that providing public goods may require coercion by the government. By the end of the chapter, these analytical concepts help explain the puzzle posed by the Obama stimulus package and the reaction in its aftermath.

These types of puzzles motivate not only what follows in the chapters, but also political science researchers. The book reflects some of the best of contemporary scholarship, with rich citations and reference lists, and careful attention to annotating the sources for the charts and tables. Students will find the information accessible, accurate, and clearly specified.

### *Insights through Comparison*

To gain insights into how specific institutional details matter, each chapter includes an “In Comparison” section that describes features of the American system as they compare to features in other countries. Students will read about research findings on the consequences in other countries of having different institutions and social circumstances. For example, a section in Chapter 13 looks at the differences between simple plurality and proportional electoral systems, and the research connecting those institutional details to certain political and policy outcomes. A section in Chapter 4 explores how France and the United States differ over the interpretation of the separation of church and state. Sections in other chapters provide data and analysis comparing the United States to other countries on political participation, party systems, public opinion, and constitutional design. While instructors often do not have time to cover comparative material, the comparisons made in this textbook help students understand the American system better by highlighting the impact of certain kinds of institutions.

### *Pedagogical Features*

This text uses innovative pedagogy to help students grasp important concepts and master basic factual material. In each chapter, the following features reinforce the information in the chapter text.

**Concept Maps** in every chapter help students understand fairly abstract concepts in political science. These full-page sections provide visual representations of important ideas such as:

- *Collective Dilemmas, Institutions, and Outcomes* (Ch. 1), showing how the nature of the institution designed to solve a collective dilemma shapes the outcome.

- *The Seesaw Effect in Federalism* (Ch. 3), depicting how a successful federal system self-corrects if power tilts too far toward the national government or the states.
- *Four Models for Understanding Congress* (Ch. 5), contrasting four models for understanding the goals and behavior of legislators.
- *Where Do Political Attitudes Come From?* (Ch. 9), visualizing the complex array of influences on individual opinions about politicians and policies.

**Know the Facts boxes** give close attention to the nuts and bolts of American government without cluttering the text with excessive detail on features that are relatively straightforward. Using clear tables and outlines, these boxes cover basic factual information that every student taking an American government course should know.

**Historical Path boxes** reinforce important history that students should be familiar with, helping them to put events in historical context and see long-term trends.

**A rich art program** includes tables and figures that are an integral part of each chapter, carefully chosen photos that illustrate key points, marginal definitions of key terms, and information about additional resources on the StudySpace student website.

### *Support Materials for Students and Instructors*

This textbook is accompanied by an extensive set of resources developed specifically for instructors and students to use with *The American Political System*.

#### **Free and open StudySpace website ([wwnorton.com/studyspace](http://wwnorton.com/studyspace))**

Written by Jamie Monogan (University of Georgia), the *American Political System* StudySpace features practice quizzes, chapter outlines, flashcards of key terms, researcher videos that help students understand the book's empirical puzzles, and Concept Map exercises that ask students to think critically about the key issues described in the book's Concept Map infographics.

#### **Instructor's Resource Disc**

- *PowerPoints*: Written by Sarah Treul (University of North Carolina, Chapel Hill), the PowerPoint slides feature concise text slides, helpful notes and suggestions for instructors, all the figures and photos from the text, enhanced Concept Map PowerPoints, and researcher videos.
- *Researcher Videos*: In which prominent political scientists talk about the chapter-opening puzzles from the text.
- *Art Files*: Files for all figures, tables, and photos are available in JPEG and PowerPoint formats.

### **Instructor's Manual**

Written by Suzanne Chod (North Central College), the instructor's manual includes chapter outlines, lecture ideas, teaching suggestions for each Concept Map, in-class activities based on the researcher videos, suggested web activities, suggested supplementary readings, and suggested in-class and homework assignments.

### **Test Bank**

Written by Joseph Ura (Texas A&M University), the test bank includes multiple-choice, true/false, and essay questions for every chapter, all labeled for question type, difficulty, and concept. Available in the following formats: print, CD-ROM, PDF, RTF, Blackboard, WebCT, ANGEL, Desire2Learn, Moodle, and ExamView Assessment Suite.

### **Coursepacks**

Available at no cost to professors or students, Norton coursepacks for online or hybrid courses are available in a variety of formats, including all versions of Blackboard and WebCT. Content includes chapter-based assignments, test banks and quizzes, interactive learning tools, and all content from the StudySpace website.

### **Ebook**

An affordable and convenient alternative, Norton ebooks retain the content and design of the print book and allow students to highlight and take notes with ease, print chapters as needed, and search the text. Norton ebooks are available online and as downloadable PDFs.

## **ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS**

I am grateful for the comments, suggestions, and constructive criticism that the following reviewers provided at various stages of this book's development:

Scott Adler, *University of Colorado*

Scott Ainsworth, *University of Georgia*

John Anderson, *University of Nebraska, Kearny*

Julia Azari, *Marquette University*

Robert Boatright, *Clark University*

Frederick Boehmke, *University of Iowa*

Michael Brown, *Emerson College*

Brian Brox, *Tulane University*

Justin Buchler, *Case Western Reserve University*

Peter Burns, *Loyola University, New Orleans*

Michael Burton, *Ohio University*

Jamie Carson, *University of Georgia*  
Daniel Cassino, *Fairleigh Dickinson University*  
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 Jamie Monogan, *University of Georgia*  
 Joanna Mosser, *Drake University*  
 Michael Nelson, *Rhodes College*  
 James Newman, *Idaho State University*  
 Hans Noel, *Georgetown University*  
 Catherine Paden, *Simmons College*  
 Evan Parker-Stephen, *Texas A&M University*  
 Michael Reinhard, *Millsaps College*  
 Travis Ridout, *Washington State University*  
 Robert Robinson, *University of Alabama, Birmingham*  
 Mark Rom, *Georgetown University*  
 Beth Rosenson, *University of Florida*  
 Robert Sahr, *Oregon State University*  
 Debra Salazar, *Western Washington University*  
 Pamela Schaal, *Ball State University*  
 Scot Schraufnagel, *Northern Illinois University*  
 Jungkun Seo, *University of North Carolina, Wilmington*  
 Emily Shaw, *Thomas College*  
 Fred Slocum, *Minnesota State University*  
 Keith Smith, *University of the Pacific*  
 Stephen Swindle, *Lee University*  
 Barry Tadlock, *Ohio University*  
 Terri Towner, *Oakland University*  
 Sarah Treul, *University of North Carolina, Chapel Hill*  
 Joseph Ura, *Texas A&M University*  
 Abigaile Van Horn, *North Central College*  
 Renee Van Vechten, *University of Redlands*  
 Timothy Werner, *Grinnell University*

Stephen Wirls, *Rhodes College*

Frederick Wood, *Coastal Carolina University*

Gina Woodall, *Arizona State University*

Thanks are also due to the following people for helping put this book together: Daniel Magleby, Sang-Jung Han, David Cottrell, Molly Reynolds, Semra Koknar, Sarah Neuman, Michael Robbins, Phil Clark, Nick Marcus, Hannah Bozian, Sarah Danserau, Josh Deyoung, Emma Rew, Peter Gutsche, Zachary Goldsmith, Charles Doriean, Jennifer Miller-Gonzales, Paul Poast, and Tim Ryan. Paul Gargaro was especially helpful in the initial drafting of chapters. The team at Norton—project editor Melissa Atkin, production manager Eric Pier-Hocking, and assistant editor Jake Schindel—did a superb job keeping track of myriad details throughout the development and production process and ensuring the high quality of the printed book. Thanks to Steve Dunn for supporting the original idea, to Roby Harrington for key moments of inspiration during lively conversations, and especially to Ann Shin, a talented, demanding editor who confidently guided me to the end of a long process.

Ken Kollman

**This book is dedicated to**

**Anne M. and Anne C.  
Paul V., Jr. and Paul E.**

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Printed in the United States of America

First Edition

Editor: Ann Shin

Developmental editor: Harry Haskell

Copyeditor: JoAnn Simony

Project editor: Melissa Atkin

Marketing managers: Nicole Netherton and Sasha Levitt

Assistant editor: Jake Schindel

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Book designer: Lissi Sigillo

Concept Maps designer: Janna Sonsalla

Photo researchers: Susan Buschhorn and Elyse Rieder

Media editor: Peter Lesser

Ancillaries editor: Lorraine Klimowich

Composition: TexTech, Inc.

Manufacturing: Quad Graphics

Cover design and art by Jennifer Hever

Library of Congress Cataloging-in-Publication Data

Kollman, Ken, 1966—

The American political system / Ken Kollman.—1st ed.

p. cm.

Includes bibliographical references and index.

**ISBN 978-0-393-92696-5 (pbk.)**

1. United States—Politics and government—Textbooks. I. Title.

JK276.K65 2011

320.473—dc23

2011027502

W. W. Norton & Company, Inc., 500 Fifth Avenue, New York, NY 10110

[www.wwnorton.com](http://www.wwnorton.com)

W. W. Norton & Company Ltd., Castle House, 75/76 Wells Street, London W1T 3QT

1 2 3 4 5 6 7 8 9 0

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