

NINTH EDITION

*Gary Wasserman*

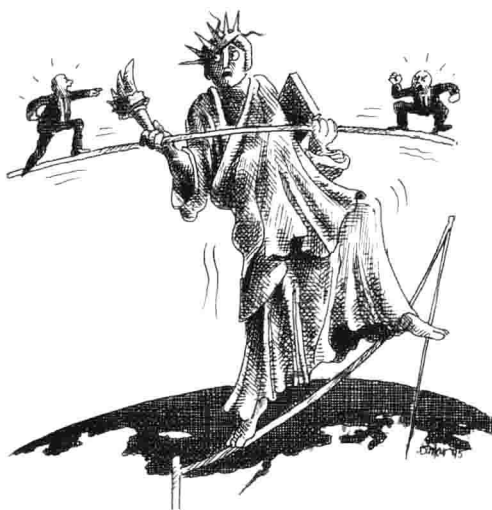
# The Basics of **AMERICAN POLITICS**



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NINTH EDITION

**Gary Wasserman**



**LONGMAN**

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## P R E F A C E

*The Basics* remains a “nuts and bolts” American government text—comprehensive, current and short. It introduces the key institutions and groups in American politics, discusses their history, explains their present behavior and shows them in action. It is written with students in mind.

This ninth edition keeps to the approach that has gained student acceptance in previous editions. It presents the ‘game of politics’ by describing four major government ‘players’—the presidency, the bureaucracy, Congress, and the Supreme Court—and four nongovernment players—voters, political parties, interest groups and the media. Framing the players are the ‘rules of the game’ in two chapters on the Constitution and civil liberties. Chapters explaining political science concepts open the book (“What is Politics?”) and close it (“Who Wins, Who Loses: Pluralism vs. Elitism”).

The ninth edition covers the current period of American politics, a time with never a dull moment:

- The travails of the presidency, both private scandal and public impeachment, raised questions not only about Bill Clinton and his privacy, but about the role of the office and its relations with the press and public.
- The waters were not much calmer in Congress with new elections, changes in leadership and spirited debates on issues from foreign spying to social security.
- American federalism strengthened with power devolving from Washington to state and local governments.
- The public mood was reflected in the continued decline in voter turnout as well as popular trust in government.
- Media—from White House spin and advocacy ads to the internet and scandal investigations—seemed pervasive.
- Election reform focused on efforts to limit lobbyists’ impact on public policies and eliminate soft money for political parties.

For these and more, this edition of *The Basics* provides discussions, analysis and cases introducing students to American politics, and encouragement to go further in their studies and involvement.

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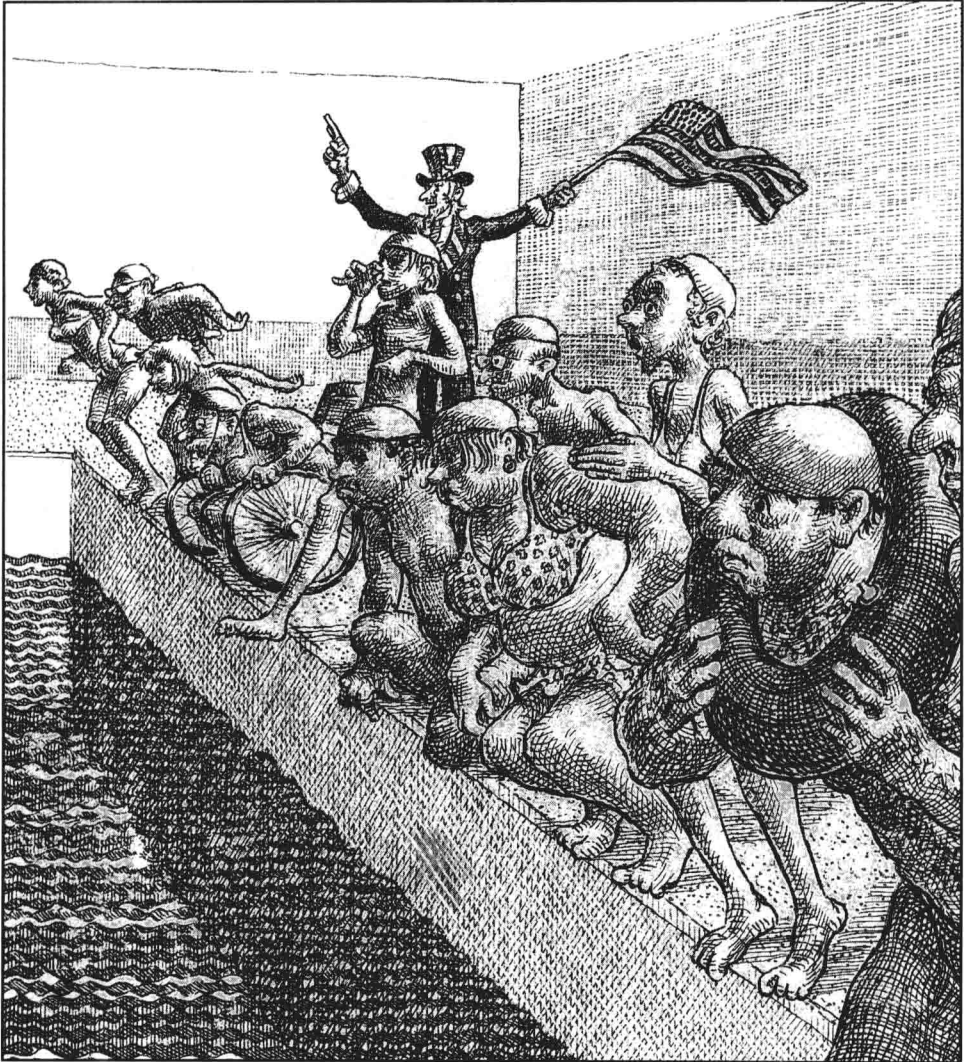
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## CHAPTER ONE

### What Is Politics?





## THE FIRST DAY OF CLASS

Man, they have some strange guys teaching here this year. The first day of my American government class, the prof comes in and asks us to sit in alphabetical order. Is this believable? Of course all the freshman sheep do it. But since I am sitting next to the door—for a quiet exit—I don't want to move. So I ask him whether he wants us to wear Power Ranger shirts to his next class. A bit too cute, perhaps, because he asks me if I think politics goes on in the classroom.

I reply, "No, we study politics, but very few of us actually indulge."

"Incorrect," the guy responds, and would I mind leaving his class.

"Yes, I would mind," I say, "considering the costs of my first seven years at college."

"Will you *please* leave?" he says.

OK, so I start to exit. He then stops me and asks why I am departing. I remind him that while he may have missed it, he has just asked me to leave. But he insists, inquiring why I'm doing what he asked. I am beginning to think I have missed something and I respond that he is *the kahuna* here, the teach. I am just a non-paying student.

"In other words," he says, "my position as the teacher of this class influenced you to do something you didn't want to do. In fact, it influenced everyone's behavior by getting the class to sit in alphabetical order. So we just saw a process of influence in this classroom that affected a group of people. That's politics. Now you may sit down, and I hope you've learned something here."

This story reveals a process of influence between the teacher and the students. This relationship is not only an educational one but a political one as well. It is political in the sense of political scientist Harold Lasswell's famous definition of *politics* as *the process of who gets what, when, and how*. The teacher (who) gets the student to leave the class (what) immediately (when) by using his authority to persuade and threaten him (how). This indeed is politics.

Our definition of politics centers on actions among a number of people involving influence. How do people get others to do what they wish? How does our society or any society (like that classroom) distribute its valued things, such as wealth, prestige, and security? Who gets these valued things, which political scientists call *values*, and how do they get them? The dialogue hints at an answer to these questions. That answer lies in the concepts of *power* and *authority*.

## POLITICS AND POWER

Notice in the story that the teacher influenced the student to do something the student didn't want to do (leave the class). The teacher demonstrated that

he had power over the student. *Power* is simply the *ability to influence another's behavior*. Power is getting people to do something they wouldn't otherwise do. Power may involve force (often called *coercion*), or persuasion, or rewards. But its essence is the ability to change another's actions in some way. The more power one has over another, the greater the change, or the easier the change is to accomplish. Having more power also could mean influencing more people to change.



Power always involves a relationship between people and groups. When someone says that a person has a lot of power, one should ask: Power to influence whom to do what? What is the power relationship being discussed? Take the statement "The United States is the most powerful nation in the world today." If the sentence means that because of its huge wealth, large army, and educated population, the United States can influence any other country however it wishes, the statement is wrong. These resources (wealth, army, and population) can give only a *capacity* for power. Whether this capacity is converted into effective influence will depend on the relationship in which it is applied. Certainly the United States had greater wealth, population, and troops than Somalia. Yet in attempting to bring order to that chaotic African country with American troops in 1993, the United States had very limited power to change the behavior of the warlords who ruled there. America's unwillingness to see more casualties or commit more troops also was an unwillingness to bear the costs of power. Eventually all the troops were withdrawn.

People generally do not seek power for its own sake. They usually want it for other values it can get them—for the fame or wealth or even affection they think it will bring. Power, like money, is a means to other ends. Most people seek money for what it can buy—whether possessions, prestige, or security. Just as some people go after money more intently than others, so too do some people seek power more than others. Of course, power, like money, does not come to everyone who seeks it.

## Elites

Those who do gain power often are called a political elite. *Elites* are those who get more than others of the values society has available (such as wealth and respect). We could answer the "who" part of the question "who gets what, when, and how?" by saying the elite are those who get the most.

There may be different elites depending on what value is being considered. In a small town, the owner of the largest business may be getting most of the wealth in the community, whereas the poor but honest mayor may have most of the respect. In most cases, however, the values overlap. The wealthy

## Guess Who's Coming to Dinner

Imagine one hundred people at the banquet seated at six tables. At the far right is a table set with English china and real silver, where five people sit comfortably. Next to them is another table, nicely set but nowhere near as fancy, where fifteen people sit. At each of the four remaining tables twenty people sit—the one on the far left has a stained paper tablecloth and plastic knives and forks. This arrangement is analogous to the spread of income groups—from the richest 5 percent at the right to the poorest 20 percent at the left.

Twenty waiters and waitresses come in, carrying 100 delicious-looking dinners, just enough, one would suppose, for each of the one hundred guests. But, amazingly, four of the waiters bring 20 dinners to the five people at the fancy table on the right. There's hardly room for all the food. (If you go

over and look a little closer, you will notice that two of the waiters are obsequiously fussing and trying to arrange ten dinners in front of just one of those five.) At the next-fanciest table, with the fifteen people, five waiters bring another 25 dinners. The twenty people at the third table get 25 dinners, 15 go to the fourth table, and ten to the fifth. To the twenty people at the last table (the one with the paper tablecloth), a rude and clumsy waiter brings only five dinners. At the top table there are four dinners for each person; at the bottom table, four persons for each dinner. That's approximately the way income is distributed in America—fewer than half the people get even one dinner apiece.

*Source: From Equality by William Ryan. Copyright © 1981 by William Ryan. Reprinted by permission of Pantheon Books, a division of Random House, Inc.*

businessman will get plenty of respect, and the mayor will use people's respect for her to make income-producing contacts and investments.

To see the difference between an elite and the rest of us, we can look at one value (wealth) in one society (the United States). Clearly, wealth is not distributed equally among the population—some (the elite) get more than others. The top fifth of the American population has an income nine times that of the bottom fifth. The top 1 percent of the nation owns 33 percent of the wealth. Federal government figures show that more than 34 million Americans live below the official poverty line. Further, inequality seems to be growing. One study of the auto industry showed that in a recent five-year period, the income of production workers rose 33 percent while the income of chief executive officers rose 246 percent. These differences show the division between an elite and the bulk of the population in the way that our society's value of wealth is distributed. (See "Guess Who's Coming to Dinner.")

## Authority: Legitimate Power

Often, members of an elite reinforce their position by gaining authority. *Authority* is legitimate power. By *legitimate* we mean even more than "legal": The word im-

plies something *accepted as right*. This correctness or *legitimacy* is connected in people's minds to both the position and the wishes of the authority. People also may think something is legitimate if it was chosen using an agreed-upon procedure, such as an election. People generally recognize certain others as having the right to influence their behavior in certain ways. Most people feel that a vice president *should* follow the wishes of the president; students *should* listen to their teacher; children *should* obey their parents. All these influences have a personal moral quality. Other reasons that people have for obeying authorities include habit, the authority figure's personal appeal, desire to be accepted by the group, and self-interest. But although they may not always follow it, people widely recognize authority as deserving obedience, and that is what gives it legitimacy.

Thus authority is an efficient form of power. If people feel they *should* follow the wishes of an authority, then there is no need to force or even to persuade them to do so. The cost of influence is lowered for the authority. If, however, people do not respect the authority's legitimacy, its power can disappear quickly. For example, in April 1992, rioting took place in Los Angeles, California, by black youths enraged at a jury decision declaring four policemen not guilty in the beating of Rodney King. The three days of rioting left dozens dead and almost \$1 billion in damage. Because the police had lost their legitimacy in the eyes of many in the black community, the cost to the police of influencing their behavior went up. The police could still force people off the street; an element of force lies behind most authority. But anyone can clear a street with a gun. Only an accepted authority can do it with just a word.

Power and authority, then, are central to politics. They are also central to many other aspects of life—almost all human interactions involve people who are trying to influence others. In a political science course, we could study the politics of a school or a hospital or a family—who influences, who is influenced, and what is the process of influence. But most students of politics are interested in a bigger question: How does our whole society decide who gets what, when, and how? To find out, we need to study the most important organization that decides who is to get the valued things of our society—government.

## THE NEED FOR GOVERNMENT

Government is one of humanity's oldest and most universal institutions. History records very few societies that have existed with no government. *Anarchy* (a society without government) may be an interesting theory, but it seldom has been applied for long. Instead, people have lived under forms of government that vary from the tribal council of a Native American village to the complex dictatorship of Communist China. Why is government so common?

One answer is that government is as common in society as is *political conflict*—the dispute over distribution of a society's valued things. These values (such as wealth) are limited, but people's demands for them are pretty unlimited. This imbalance means conflict. Whenever people have lived together, they have

needed a way to regulate the conflicts among them. The question is not *whether* there will be conflict, but *how* the conflict will be handled. Who will decide on the rules that determine who wins and who loses? And how does one get the loser to accept the decision? The usual way to channel political conflict, and thus preserve society, is to have some form of government.

Most governments in the world today claim to be democratic. A *democracy* is a form of government in which most people can effectively participate. Because it is generally impractical for all the people to take part in their government directly, their participation is usually through representatives whom they choose in free elections. (What many countries call “free elections,” however, without competing political parties and an independent press, would not impress Americans.) Hence, the people rule themselves indirectly, through their representatives, in a form of government often called a *representative democracy*.

An essential part of democracy is a tolerance of different opinions and interests. Unlike ideologies like communism, democratic politics doesn’t assume that some groups, like capitalists, are wrong and shouldn’t participate in politics. Politics in a democracy acts like a marketplace, continually reacting to demands by different groups and reaching compromises among them. As British political scientist Bernard Crick wrote, democratic politics “. . . chooses conciliation rather than violence . . .” as a way to maintain order and adapt to change. Reaching decisions this way means that democratic politics is likely to be messy, with few clear-cut victories by anyone. It also accepts that groups must be free to speak for their own interests and that none has a monopoly on the truth.

Yet establishing governments, even democratic ones, does allow some people great power over many others. This power includes the ability to coerce others more effectively than if government didn’t exist. As illustrated by the mass murders of Jews by Nazi Germany and the more recent genocide of Tutsis in Rwanda, control of government may even mean the power to kill millions of your own citizens.

In Chapter 2, we will see that the politicians who wrote the United States Constitution recognized this problem. They set up a number of checks and divisions of power to limit the future leaders of the United States government. Of course, these checks may not always work. In the late 1980s, the press learned that government officials had transferred money from arms sales to Iran to the Contra forces fighting the Nicaraguan government. This had been done by advisers to the president in violation of the law. It had been kept secret from Congress, the public, and, apparently, President Reagan.

## What Is Government?

*Government* is a political association that does two things:

1. **It makes rules determining who will get the valued things of a society.**
2. **It alone regulates the use of legitimate force in society.**

The first part of the definition deals with how society distributes the values it has available—wealth, respect, safety, and so on. The second part deals with how these decisions are enforced. Government, then, has the final word over who gets what and has the ultimate say over how it will be done.



The government does not always *directly* determine who will get the valued things in a society. The United States is a capitalist system, based on the private ownership of the economy. This means that the government doesn't directly decide on what jobs people will do, what products they will make, or who will get the income from the sale of the products. Instead, in theory, the United States government only protects and legitimates the private distribution of most of society's values. Our government is set up to allow people to get what they can without government interference.

But this noninterference also can be viewed as a decision supporting the status quo or existing distribution of values in American society. The government not only refuses to interfere but also prevents others from interfering in the status quo. For example, it enforces laws such as those supporting repayment of debt and punishment of robbery. In practice, these and other government functions, such as providing a sound currency, protecting from domestic unrest, and safeguarding private property, do mean government intervention. Most groups, whatever their political leanings, favor intervention if it favors them.

At the same time, the government sets limits on the private distribution of values. While allowing people to accumulate wealth, the government puts higher taxes on those with higher incomes. It also supports welfare programs to help the people who are getting the least of society's wealth. Both taxes and welfare illustrate the government's use of its legitimate power (authority) to place limits on the private distribution of this value of wealth.

## Making and Supporting Decisions

The government also may intervene more directly in disputes among its citizens. Citizens of a town near a river may not be able to swim there because a paper mill dumps sewage into it. The citizens of the town or the owners of the mill may ask the government to settle the dispute. The appropriate part of the government may respond by passing a law, or by a ruling of an administrative agency

such as the Environmental Protection Agency, or by a court decision on whether the town or the paper mill will get the use of the river (the “valued thing”).

How the government supports its decision brings us to the second aspect of government—its exclusive regulation of legitimate force. In enforcing its decisions, the government may employ, allow, or prevent the use of force. Either the paper mill or the town’s swimmers may be ordered not to use the river and may be fined or arrested if they do so. Only the government is allowed to regulate what kind of force is used, and how.

The government is not the only group in society that can legitimately use force. Parents may discipline their children to keep them from swimming, or the paper mill may employ guards to keep people off their property. But only the government can set limits on this force. Most governments permit parents to spank their kids yet forbid physical abuse of children. The paper mill’s guards may be forbidden to use guns to keep swimmers out. Government does not *monopolize* the use of legitimate force, but it alone *regulates* its use.

## THE STUDY OF POLITICS

What is the study of politics? One thing you will notice about political science is that it’s a lot like other *social sciences* such as history, economics, sociology, and psychology. Each studies aspects of the relations among people. In any large group of people, many social interactions are going on. Each of these disciplines may look at the same group and ask different questions about the relationships that are occurring. This division of labor is partly traditional and partly a way of separating complicated human relations into more easily understood parts. Political science fits in by studying one type of interaction between people—that involving power and authority. The following example will make the approaches of the other disciplines clearer and distinguish them from political science.

### Political Science and Microsoft

What questions would an economist, a psychologist, and a historian ask about the operations of a “society” like the giant computer software company Microsoft? An *economist* might ask questions about the production and distribution of the various Microsoft operating systems and other programs. In designing its Microsoft Network, how did the company attract subscribers and content providers? How were Windows 98 buyers discouraged from using a rival web browser from Netscape? A *psychologist* might concentrate on the motives and goals of Bill Gates, the founder of Microsoft and probably the richest man in America. What is the psychological makeup of this successful entrepreneur? How does he deal with subordinates and competitors? A *historian* might look at the origins and development of Microsoft. What factors within the industry explain why in a few years its operating systems ran more than four-fifths of the



world's computers? Why did it become a \$5 billion corporation while competitors fell by the wayside?

Of course, these different fields of study overlap. Members of one discipline often are interested in the findings of another. The economist may find answers to her questions about how focused and innovative the company is in a psychological study of Bill Gates. The historian might ask the economist about Microsoft's mergers with potential competitors to determine the logic behind its expansion. Certainly the economist and the psychologist would want to know about the history of the corporation before studying their particular parts of it.

A political scientist, although interested in the other disciplines' findings, would most likely focus on this central question: *Who is getting what, when, and how?* If Bill Gates runs Microsoft, how does he do it? How do he and his executives reach decisions and implement them? How has the government influenced their decisions, and why did the Justice Department bring its antitrust suit against Microsoft? How did Microsoft gain preeminence in its industry, and how do its leaders keep it, and themselves, on top? Political science focuses on the study of power and authority—on the powerful, the ways in which they exercise their authority, and the effects they produce.

As Lasswell wrote, "The study of politics is the study of influence and the influential."<sup>1</sup> That is the core of what a political scientist would want to find out about Microsoft.

## Why Give a Damn About Politics?

After looking at what politics is and what government and political scientists do, you could still be asking one basic question: Who cares? Why give a damn about politics? Often students say: "Politics is just an ego thing. I don't want to get involved in it." But you *are* involved. Apathy is as much a political position as is activism. Either position will influence who gets what in our society. Safe streets, good schools, and clean food are political decisions influenced by who participates in making them, who is prevented from participating, and who chooses not to participate.

Our lives are webs of politics. From the moment we wake up in the morning, we are affected by someone's political choices. Think of what you have done today and how politics has influenced you. What you had (or didn't have) for breakfast was probably influenced by the price and availability of the food. The quality of the food you ate was regulated by a government agency that made sure those Grade A eggs were Grade A and that the milk was indeed pasteurized. The cost of that milk or those eggs was affected by the decisions of government to aid farmers, as well as the ability of farmers' groups to influence the government

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<sup>1</sup>Harold Lasswell, *Politics: Who Gets What, When, How*. New York: World, 1958, p. 13.



## Who Needs Government?

*Senator Ernest Hollings of South Carolina tells this story:*

A veteran returning from Korea went to college on the GI Bill; bought his house with an FHA loan; saw his kids born in a VA hospital; started a business with an SBA loan; got electricity from TVA; and, then, water from a project funded by the EPA. His kids participated in the school-lunch program and made it through college courtesy of government-guaranteed student loans. His parents retired to a farm on their social security, getting electricity from the REA and the soil tested by the USDA. When the father became ill, his life was saved with a drug developed through NIH; the

family was saved from financial ruin by Medicare. Our veteran drove to work on the interstate; moored his boat in a channel dredged by Army engineers; and, when floods hit, took Amtrak to Washington to apply for disaster relief. He also spent some of his time there enjoying the exhibits in the Smithsonian museums.

Then one day he wrote his congressman an angry letter complaining about paying taxes for all those programs created for ungrateful people. In effect, he said, the government should get off his back.

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*Source: Jonathan Yates, "Reality on Capitol Hill," Newsweek, November 28, 1988, p. 12.*

(through campaign contributions, for instance). The news you heard on the radio of what the government was doing for the economy was conditioned by what officials felt they should tell the public and what media editors felt was newsworthy. The lack of good public transportation to take you to school may have been a result of government decisions to put money into highways rather than buses or trains. The college you attend, the tuition increases you pay, the student loans or other aid you may or may not receive, are all the results of someone's choices in the political game. (See "Who Needs Government?")

Let's take a personal example. Studies of American government have often pointed out that federal regulatory commissions have not effectively regulated the businesses they oversee. These commissions have tended to be closely tied to the powerful economic interests they supervise. The lesson was brought home to me in graduate school.

In July 1972, the cargo door blew off an American Airlines DC-10 flying over Windsor, Canada, causing violent decompression. The pilot managed to land the empty jumbo jet safely. The government's independent National Transportation Safety Board investigated the near disaster. Their recommendations went to the Federal Aviation Administration (FAA), the government regulatory commission in charge of airline safety. The safety board recommended that the FAA order that all cargo doors have modified locking devices and that McDonnell Douglas, the plane's builder, be required to strengthen the cabin floor.