

American Government

Enduring Principles and Critical Choices

To understand contemporary American politics and government students need to see how political ideas, institutions and forces have developed over time. The fourth edition of *American Government* dwells on the seminal role played by political memory and path dependency in shaping contemporary institutions, political forces, and public opinion as well as the critical choices that have caused them to shift course. It provides a comprehensive depiction of current demographic, political, attitudinal, and governmental facts, trends, and conditions. Each chapter begins with a detailed contemporary portrait of its subject.

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Preface

This book grows out of a friendship that developed from a deep intellectual affinity. Sid Milkis and I met in 1984 when we were put on the same panel at the American Political Science Association meeting. We found that we were both preoccupied by the New Deal. Sid was trying to understand how it gave rise to the modern administrative state. I was trying to figure out how Franklin Roosevelt both embraced the labor movement and staved off the transformation of the Democratic Party into a British-style Labor party. Soon after, Sid came to Brandeis University, where I had become a Fellow of the Gordon Public Policy Center. We had adjoining offices at the center and were able to continue our conversations over lunch and coffee and at the center's seminars. We discovered that our common interests were not limited to Franklin Roosevelt and the New Deal; we had both come to believe that the study of political science had been severed from its historical roots and that our job was to graft the study of contemporary politics back on to those roots. Both of us were already doing this in our American politics teaching with very good results. We saw that students developed a much keener and firmer grasp of current matters when they became aware of the intellectual and institutional connections that the contemporary issues and events had with the past. Sid applied this approach to his book *The President and Parties* and to the textbook he coauthored with Michael Nelson, *The American Presidency: Origins and Development*. Marc applied the approach to essays about the labor movement's impact on the development of American politics. Together, we drew on the American political development framework in our investigations for our book *Presidential Greatness* and our chapter, "The Presidency in History: Leading From the Eye of the Storm," in Michael Nelson's edited volume, *The Presidency and the Political System*. In the meantime, our devotion to connecting past and present came to appear less eccentric; many other scholars also began to find greater meaning and interest in bringing history to bear on the study of American politics. American Political Development (APD) has now established itself as one of the most active and intellectually vibrant movements within political science.

The underlying premise of the APD approach is the conviction that to understand contemporary American politics and governments, students need to understand how political ideas, institutions, and forces have developed over time. In Chapter 1, I invoke what William Faulkner once wrote, "The past is never dead. It's not even past." The past shapes our ideas, attitudes and sentiments endowing

the present with meaning. Delving into the past reveals what key political and governmental principles endure and what critical changes have occurred – hence the book’s subtitle, “Enduring Principles, Critical Choices”. The book dwells on the seminal role played by political memory and path dependency in shaping contemporary institutions, political forces, and public opinion as well as the key decisions that have caused them to shift course. The seminal fourth chapter entitled “Political Development” dwells on those episodes when enduring principles were most profoundly contested. The other chapters likewise elucidate the critical choices that have shaped their specific subject.

Because the very purpose of the APD approach is to shed light on the present, this book provides a comprehensive depiction of present demographic, political, attitudinal, and governmental facts, trends, and conditions. Each chapter begins with a detailed contemporary portrait of its subject. For example, the contemporary portrait segment in “Campaigns, Elections, and Media” includes a detailed description of the 2016 presidential election campaign. The portraits ground the students in the most important facts and analytical principles regarding the chapter subject, and comprise a brief guide to current politics and governments.

There are no separate chapters about civil rights, civil liberties, or public policy because these subjects are so integral to American politics that they form key threads woven into the fabric of the entire book. We do, however, devote an entire chapter to political economy (Chapter 6). We believe that such a chapter is necessary because so much of the substance of political discussion, partisan conflict and policy-making is about economics. As the name, political economy, implies, this chapter highlights the political forces that have shaped the institutional and legal framework in which economic activity takes place. Throughout the book, students are made aware that what they are learning in their history courses complements their political science understanding, and vice versa. Chapter 6 shows them how the study of economics and of political science inform one another as well.

New in the Fourth Edition

This new edition greatly strengthens the book’s coverage of political behavior and the media, and is supported by materials on the Cambridge University Press website, www.cambridge.org. Whereas Part IV of the previous editions, entitled “Political Forces,” contained two chapters, Part IV of this edition, renamed “Political Life,” now contains four. There is an entire chapter devoted to public opinion. Campaigns and elections also have a chapter of their own as do political parties. The consideration of media is now so central to both the campaigns and elections Chapter and the political and civic participation chapter that the word “media” has been added to the titles of both.

The critical choice theme announced in the book's subtitle now receives greater emphasis. In each chapter the critical choices the chapter considers are highlighted. Each critical choice discussion begins with an introductory paragraph that crystallizes the importance of the choice. It ends with a segment entitled "Upshot" that illuminates the contemporary importance of the choice. To stimulate critical thinking, every chapter offers a critical thinking essay question based on a controversial issue the chapter raises. For example, following the sections on the spoils system and civil service reform in the chapter entitled "The Bureaucracy," the following question is posed: "The spoils system distributes government jobs on the basis of party loyalty. The civil service system relies on competitive examination for that purpose. Discuss the strengths and weaknesses of each approach. Which one do you favor?"

This edition provides many more graphs, maps, tables, and timelines than previous editions did. These graphics serve to greatly enrich both the contemporary portrait and the developmental components of each chapter and to strengthen the analytic connection between past and present. They also render the book's content more readable and inviting.

Organization

Each chapter begins with an overview that uses a bullet format to highlight the central themes of the chapter. Each of these bullets serves as a heading for each of the different sections that comprise the chapter. Following the overview there is a brief vignette that provides an evocative introduction to at least one of the key themes bulleted in the overview. For example, the Congress chapter's opening vignette is about Congress' consideration of President Trump's cabinet nominees, revealing how this process exemplifies the growing party polarization of Congress. Next comes the "Contemporary Portrait" section described above. The rest of the chapter is organized developmentally according to the chapter overview bullets. The concluding section is entitled "Looking Forward." It invites the student to make use of insights from the chapter to consider an issue of great present and future importance. For example, the political parties chapter looks at the functions that political parties have historically performed and invites the student to consider which of those functions they still perform; which they do not; and why the loss of certain key functions are of critical importance going forward. The chapter ends with a summary, organized on the basis of the section headings, that focuses on the most important matters the chapter discusses.

Acknowledgments

I thank the coauthor of the previous editions of this book Sidney Milkis for our decades of fruitful intellectual collaboration. The editor of this edition, Robert Dreesen, has been unstinting in his encouragement and support. The developmental editor Brianda Reyes has provided very valuable guidance regarding how to make the book more accessible to students, as well as a host of other helpful suggestions. Jessica Goley, Thomas Goodman, Nick Allmaier, and Peter Wilkin have been gracious, thoughtful, energetic, and diligent in their assistance. I thank my good friend Steve Thomas, for the stimulating conversations we have had about the book and his insights for improving it.