When people have the freedom to further their own personal interests in politics, the results may be disastrous. Chaos? Tyranny? Can a political system be set up to avoid these pitfalls, while still granting citizens and politicians the freedom to pursue their interests?

*Republic at Risk* is a concise and engaging introduction to American politics. The guiding theme is the problem of self-interest in politics, which James Madison took as his starting point in his defense of representative government in *Federalist* 10 and 51. Madison believed that unchecked self-interest in politics was a risk to a well-ordered and free society. But he also held that political institutions could be designed to harness self-interest for the greater good. Putting Madison’s theory to the test, the authors examine modern challenges to the integrity and effectiveness of US policy-making institutions, inviting readers to determine how best to respond to these risks.

Walter J. Stone is Professor Emeritus of Political Science at University of California, Davis. He has taught the introductory American politics course for more than four decades at Davis, Grinnell College, and the University of Colorado. He is the author of *Candidates and Voters* (Cambridge University Press 2017) and, with Ronald B. Rapoport, *Three’s a Crowd* (The University of Michigan Press 2005).

James A. McCann is Professor of Political Science at Purdue University, where he has taught courses on American politics since 1991. He is the author of many articles on US and comparative politics and has previously published two books. The most recent, with Michael Jones-Correa, is *Holding Fast: Resilience and Civic Engagement among Latino Immigrants* (Russell Sage Foundation 2020).
… the constant aim is to divide and arrange the several offices in such a manner as that each may be a check on the other, that the private interest of every individual may be a sentinel over the public rights.

– James Madison, Federalist 51

“Before we can determine how well the American system of government is working, we have to understand how it is designed to work. Republic at Risk provides a sophisticated, yet accessible, explanation of the theory behind ‘Madison’s Republic,’ and offers ample empirical evidence with which to assess the republic in practice. For those who have ever been frustrated, or simply bewildered, by the operation of American politics, Republic at Risk is essential reading.”

Stephen K. Medvic, Franklin & Marshall College

“Republic at Risk is not only a superb introduction to American politics, but an excellent introduction to political science, through its focus on competing theoretical models of the American political system. I completely reoriented my course after seeing the first edition, and the second is even better – completely updated and with new material on polarization, gridlock, and the Supreme Court.”

Ronald Rapoport, College of William and Mary

“Sweeping across mass and elite political behavior, Stone and McCann explore the boundaries of Madison’s argument that ‘self-interest is the problem, and the solution.’ Blending eighteenth-century political thought with contemporary academic scholarship and current events, they illuminate how the evolution of formal and informal norms, rules, and institutions has shaped outcomes that either sustain or distort the Founders’ original intentions. The end product is a masterpiece of how the very best political scientists approach the study of American politics.”

Sarah A. Fulton, Texas A&M University

“Republic at Risk is the perfect text for an introductory course in American government. Short and readable, the book presents the arguments about our democracy’s future that are particularly relevant in the current context, in a way that will engage students throughout a semester.”

L. Sandy Maisel, Colby College
REPUBLIC AT RISK

An Introduction to American Politics

Second Edition

Walter J. Stone
University of California, Davis

James A. McCann
Purdue University, Indiana
To Ann E. Cassidy-Stone and Ann Marie Clark
Brief Contents

List of Figures: xi
List of Tables: xv
Preface to the Second Edition: xvii

1. Introduction: Self-Interest as the Problem and the Solution: 1

2. Some Enduring Questions and Relevant Concepts: 3


4. Citizen Participation in Politics: An Interest in Self-Interest?: 35

5. Who’s in Charge Here? Voting Choice in Elections: 56


7. Political Parties: An Alternative to the Republic?: 103


9. Congress: Representation and Power: 149

10. Presidential Leadership: Beyond Self-Interest?: 167

11. The Supreme Court: Another Way out of the Problem of Self-Interest?: 201

12. Conclusion: Self-Interest and Representative Government: 221

Appendix: Federalist Papers 10 and 51 by James Madison: 237

References: 249
Index: 255
## Contents

List of Figures .............................................. xi
List of Tables ........................................... xv
Preface to the Second Edition ......................... xvii

### Introduction: Self-Interest as the Problem and the Solution   1

#### 1 Some Enduring Questions and Relevant Concepts .......... 3

- Why the Public Good Is So Difficult to Achieve .............. 3
  - What Is Democracy? .................................... 3
  - The Principal-Agent Problem ............................. 4
  - The Paradox of Collective Action ......................... 5
- Models in Political Science ................................ 8
- Key Concepts ............................................. 12

#### 2 Big Answers, Bigger Questions: Madison’s Theory of the Republic .......... 13

- The Problem of Self-Interest in Politics .................... 14
  - The Problem Extended: Tyranny .......................... 16
  - Self-Interest as the Solution ............................. 17
  - Why Does It Work? Self-Interest, Representation, and Conflict .......................... 19
  - The Solution Extended: Ambition vs. Ambition ........ 21
    - Institutions with Different Interests and Overlapping Power .......................... 21
- Madison’s Republic Summarized .............................. 24
  - The Nature of Politics and the Public Good .............. 25
  - The Bill of Rights and Madison’s Republic .............. 27
  - The Madisonian Republic as Theory ...................... 29
  - The Madisonian Republic as Politics .................... 30
- Key Concepts ............................................. 34
# Contents

## 3 citizen participation in politics: an interest in self-interest? 35
- Self-Interest and the Costs of Political Participation 36
  - Four Propositions about the Costs of Participation 37
  - Comparing the Costs and Benefits of Participation 44
    - The Citizen’s Problem in Electoral Politics: What Are the Benefits? 46
  - Who Votes, Who Doesn’t, and Why? 47
- A Model of Political Participation 50
  - Participation Beyond Voting Revisited 52
- Self-Interest vs. Self-Interest: A Problem for the Republic 54
- Key Concepts 55

## 4 Who’s in Charge Here? Voting Choice in Elections 56
- How Should Elections Work? 56
  - The Information Assumption 57
  - The Assumption that Voters Act on Their Interests 60
    - Position Issues 61
    - Valence Issues 61
- Heuristics as Decision Shortcuts 62
  - Ideology and Position Issues 64
  - Valence Judgments 67
  - Party Identification 68
- Models of Voting Choice 69
  - The Spatial Model of Voting Choice 70
  - Retrospective and Valence-Differential Models of Voting Choice 73
  - Party Identification and the Michigan Model of Voting Choice 75
  - Which Model Is “Best”? 84
- Are Voters “in Charge”? 85
- Key Concepts 87

## 5 Interest Groups and Pluralist Theory: Self-Interest in the Republic Reconsidered 88
- The Classic Pluralist Theory of American Democracy 89
  - What Is an Interest Group and Why Do People Join? 89
  - Central Claims in Classical Pluralist Theory 92
- Critique of Pluralist Theory 95
  - Non-Political Interest Groups Do Not Provide Reliable Political Representation 96
  - The Interest-Group System Is Highly Unrepresentative 98
- The Pluralist Response 99
  - Is the Group System Unduly Biased? 101
- Conclusion 101
- Key Concepts 102
Contents

6 Political Parties: An Alternative to the Republic? . . . . . . . 103
  • Parties Defined 104
  • The Normative Basis of Party Theory 105
    o Value 1: Political Equality 106
    o Value 2: Electoral Democracy 106
    o Value 3: Responsibility 107
  • Party Theory’s Critique of Madison’s Republic 110
    o Self-Interest 110
    o Representation 111
    o Conflict and Dispersed Power 111
  • Why Are Parties Essential to Representative Democracy? 112
    o Coalition Maintenance 113
    o Agenda Control 115
    o Mobilizing the Electorate and Framing Electoral Choice 116
  • Party Theory Summarized 117
  • The Parties in American Politics 117
    o Why Only Two? 118
  • Party Polarization 119
    o Convergence and Divergence in Party Politics 120
  • Choice vs. Representation: A Dilemma in a Two-Party System 125
  • Third Parties in the American System 127
  • Conclusion: Assessing Party Theory 128
  • Key Concepts 129

7 A Pivotal Politics Model of the Policy Process: The Separation of Powers Reimagined . . . . . . . . . . 130
  • Who Is Pivotal in a Legislature Governed by Majority Rule? 131
    o Extension: Bicameralism and the Gridlock Zone 134
  • Extraordinary Majorities in the Policy Process 137
    o The Filibuster in the Senate 139
    o Presidential Vetoes and the Veto Pivot 142
  • Implications and Assessments 145
  • Key Concepts 148

8 Congress: Representation and Power . . . . . . . . . . . . 149
  • Member Goals and District Pressures in Congress 151
  • How Do Members Get Elected and Reelected? 156
    o Incumbent Strength and Challenger Quality 157
    o The Norm of Universalism 158
  • Committees and Parties in Congress: How Congress Gets Anything Done 160
    o Committees in Congress 160
    o Political Parties in Congress 162
  • Conclusion 164
  • Key Concepts 166
Figures

1.1 Prisoners’ dilemma illustrated  page 7
1.2 Example of causal models  9
1.3 Example of statistical model of data organized to evaluate causal effect of hours studying on midterm exam score  10
2.1 Ambition vs. ambition: examples of powers of governmental institutions over each other  22
2.2 Institutional logic of “separation of powers”  22
3.1 Increasing the cost of participation lowers the rate
   a. Theoretical relationship between rate of political participation and cost
   b. Rates of participation in presidential election campaigns by approximate cost  38
3.2 What does a resource bias look like?  41
3.3 Income bias associated with four types of participation  43
3.4 A model explaining why people participate in politics  50
4.1 Examples of differences between liberals and conservatives on issues based on core values  65
4.2 Self-identified ideology in the American electorate, 2016  66
4.3 Selected valence considerations in the American electorate, 2016  67
4.4 Party identification in the American electorate, 2016  68
4.5 Spatial model of candidates and voters in two hypothetical districts  70
4.6 Spatial voting in the 2010 US House elections  71
4.7 Spatial voting among voters aware and unaware of candidates’ ideological positions  73
4.8 Example ratings of candidate valence traits by party identification  77
4.9 Modified Michigan model of voting choice  82
5.1 Summary of pluralism critiques about interest groups as channels of political representation  98
# List of Figures

6.1 A prisoners’ dilemma representation of a legislator’s conflict between individual and collective responsibility 108

6.2 Party polarization in the US House of Representatives, 1879-2013 121

6.3 Polarization in the 1970s and in 2010-2012
   a. Comparing ideological polarization in the House, 1970s and 2010 122
   b. Comparing ideological polarization in the electorate, 1970s and 2012

6.4 Ideological positions of Democratic and Republican identifiers, activists, and incumbent members of Congress 123

6.5 Effect of ideological polarization of the parties on the electorate’s awareness of party ideological differences 124

7.1 A model legislature operating under majority rule 131

7.2 Bicameralism and the gridlock region 135

7.3 What happens with an extraordinary majority requirement? 138

7.4 The filibuster in the Senate 140

7.5 Presidents in the legislative process and the Veto Pivot 142

7.6 Changing presidents from one party to the other 145

8.1 District vs. party in the organization of Congress 150

8.2 District ideology and representative party and ideological position-taking 152

8.3 District- vs. party-centered district representation in Congress 153
   a. District-centered representation
   b. Party-centered district representation

8.4 Relationship between ideologies of candidates or incumbents and district ideology, 2010 US House elections 154
   a. Candidate and district ideology
   b. Incumbent (winners in 2010 elections) and district ideology

9.1 Breaking down the concept of presidential leadership 173

9.2 Institutional development of the modern presidency 174

9.3 Abramowitz’s time-for-change presidential election forecast model 188
   a. Causal model behind forecasts
   b. Forecast vote share of incumbents running for reelection compared with actual vote share

10.1 The relationship between ideological values and votes in the Supreme Court 204

10.2 Approval ratings for Congress, the president, and the Supreme Court 208
List of Figures

10.3 Ideological positioning of Supreme Court justices (2015 term) 214
   a. Ideological placements of justices
   b. Ideological placements of justices and President Obama
   c. Ideological placements of justices, including President Obama and Republican-controlled Senate
11.1 “Is the US on the right track or heading in the wrong direction?” 225
11.2 “How corrupt would it be if . . . ?” 227
# Tables

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Table</th>
<th>Description</th>
<th>Page</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>2.1</td>
<td>Critical reactions to Madison’s Republic</td>
<td>33</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>4.1</td>
<td>How much political information does the American public have?</td>
<td>59</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>4.2</td>
<td>Retrospective voting in 2016</td>
<td>74</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>4.3</td>
<td>Valence-differential voting in 2016</td>
<td>75</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>4.4</td>
<td>Ratings of the economy in 2016 by party identification</td>
<td>76</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>4.5</td>
<td>Effects of economy, Obama job approval, and relative candidate traits ratings on voting choice by party identification</td>
<td>78</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>4.6</td>
<td>Relationship between ideology and party identification in 1970s and 2012/2016</td>
<td>80</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>4.7</td>
<td>Effect of party identification on voting choice, 2016 and 2010 elections</td>
<td>81</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>9.1</td>
<td>Constitutionally sanctioned vs. unilateral presidential actions</td>
<td>182</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
Preface to the Second Edition

This revision of the first edition of this book has been a long time coming. A great deal has changed since the publication of the first edition (1990) in the nature and conduct of American politics, in the way our teaching of the introductory course has evolved, and in the political science literature on which we draw when we teach and write about this subject. Our collaboration began at the University of Colorado in the usual way when a faculty member (Stone) and a Ph.D. student (McCann) work together on teaching and research. Since that initial experience, we both have taught dozens of sections of American politics to thousands of undergraduates. While we have observed and incorporated many changes in our teaching over the years, we both have found the initial impulse of the first edition to organize the course around the defense of representative government succinctly offered by James Madison in his two essays, *Federalist* 10 and 51, to be a productive way to think critically about American politics, and help undergraduates to do the same.

The title of the first edition, *Republic at Risk*, was a play on words. In the first instance, the title referred to “Madison’s Republic,” the name we gave to our reading of Madison’s defense of republican – or representative – government in the two *Federalist* papers. The name was meant to give credit where credit was due to James Madison’s brilliant essays, while also recognizing that our distillation of the argument was necessarily separate from the whole of Madison’s political thought, and open to question even in the relatively limited ground covered in our reading of numbers 10 and 51. The central ideas and claims were Madison’s, but the interpretations and gap-filling were ours. This “Republic,” then, was a theory of representative government we meant to put “at risk” by testing its claims against evidence assembled in political science and related disciplines on the performance of the living-breathing American republic of the late twentieth century.

In the second instance, the title was meant to suggest that the American constitutional order, still essentially in place as defended in *Federalist* xvii
Preface to the Second Edition

10 and 51, was itself at risk. This was so for two reasons: The theory contains empirical claims that are difficult to square with contemporary theories and evidence about the relationship between the citizen and the state. This is true of claims about how citizens as voters would exercise control over elected leaders, and it is true of organic change in American government, especially as it relates to the increasing dominance of the presidency relative to the Republic’s expectation that pre-eminent constitutional power would reside in Congress.

In the ensuing years as we have thought about American politics and observed the institutions at the center of republican government, we have been increasingly aware of the second dimension of risk alluded to in our title. That is, while we as a discipline have learned a great deal from research on the citizen and the state since the publication of the first edition, two developments in our national politics seem especially likely to put the American republic at significant risk: partisan polarization, and the further enhancement of presidential government especially as manifest in the administration of President Donald J. Trump. Many scholars and pundits have observed that the health of our national polity rests on the willingness of leaders to follow certain norms related to restraint, consultation, integrity, and prudence. President Trump tested many of the norms that were once thought of as inviolate. While the full consequences of his administration remain to be clarified in the coming years and decades, we are comfortable with the observation that his presidency added a significant measure of risk to the practices of representative government in the US.

As remarkable as President Trump’s behavior was, we also recognize that his election and administration was in some important respects a creature of the behavior of his recent predecessors and the partisan polarization that took hold since the first edition was published. One disturbing indicator of this polarization from the perspective of Madison’s Republic was the persistent reluctance of Republicans in Congress to call President Trump to account for his transgressions. As we discuss in the chapter on party theory, partisan polarization is not an unmixed curse on representative government, but it is clear that it can interfere with the expectation that ambition will check ambition, especially as it applies to Congress vs. president. Undoubtedly polarization carries the risk not only that fellow partisans will turn a blind eye to a president’s contraventions, but that it may also stimulate hypervigilance against presidential action by opposing partisans in Congress. Certainly many of President Trump’s supporters saw evidence of this sort of pathology in the Democratic assaults on the administration, whether in the form of impeachment or intrusive investigations.

It is perhaps not surprising that a political theory written in the late eighteenth century would fail to describe and justify the politics of an
Preface to the Second Edition

An economically advanced nation in a position of world leadership two centuries on. Well, that is one way of framing the question we wrestle with in this book.

In writing this much-revised second edition, we have continually been aware of the assistance we have received. To the many students who have patiently tolerated our classroom ruminations, we are most grateful. Their questions and comments, sometimes from puzzlement, sometimes from critical insight, have helped us beyond measure to clarify our thinking. We extend our thanks as well to the multitude of graduate students who have worked with us as teaching assistants, frequently offering the friendliest of constructive criticism. We are also grateful to our editors at Cambridge University Press, Lisa Pinto and Sara Doskow, for their enthusiastic support, critical suggestions, and professionalism. Isaac Hale generously road tested Chapter 7 in his class and gave us excellent feedback from that experience. We thank the two-dozen anonymous referees engaged by Cambridge University Press for their thoughtful criticisms and suggestions, many of which we have incorporated, some of which we have not, probably to our peril. If it takes a village to raise a child, it takes a small town to raise a book of this sort. We stand in humble gratitude for the help and tolerance of all who have come to our aid.

Finally, the thanks we offer our wives seems inadequate to the love and support they have provided. Our dedication of this book to them is about the best we can do to express our gratitude.