

The Theory of Modern Government

CHAPTER

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Contemporary Connection

Over \$1 billion was spent by candidates, political parties, and special interest groups in the 2010 midterm elections, the most in any midterm election. Perhaps that is why many people believe in the elite theory of government, one of the theories of modern government that we explore in this chapter.



When looking at the interrelationship between government and politics, you need to understand the theoretical nature of both concepts. Government has an impact on our everyday lives in many ways. Our federal form of government has a huge effect on the manner in which we are able to function as part of our society—from the manner in which our recycled garbage is picked up to the speed limit on interstate highways. The political decisions that come into play result in these many policy decisions.

A working definition of government is those institutions that create public policy. Constitutionally defined, the formal institutions of government on the national level are the executive branch headed by the president, the legislative branch consisting of the Congress, and the judicial branch made up of the Supreme Court and lower courts. A similar structure exists on the state and local levels. In addition to the defined institutions of government, modern government is also characterized by

those agencies that implement public policy—bureaucracies, including regulatory agencies, independent executive agencies, government corporations, and the cabinet. These institutions, sometimes acting independently, sometimes acting in concert, create and implement public policy.

The noted political scientist Harold Laswell, in a famous description, defined politics as “who gets what, when, and how.” This definition can be expanded to include why—why politicians are able to succeed or fail in getting elected and why they succeed or fail in the process of creating policy. Politics, unlike government, is not defined constitutionally but evolved from the writings of James Madison, Alexander Hamilton, and John Jay in the Federalist Papers, unwritten traditions and precedents that started with the formation of the first political parties, and the philosophical differences that emerged after candidates were elected to office. Politics is characterized by conflict and resolution, compromise, and the interrelationship of individuals and groups.

THE LIBERTY BELL HAS LONG BEEN A SYMBOL OF DEMOCRACY



Government and politics, thus, can be defined by a formula that combines both concepts and results in an end goal: government plus politics equals the creation of public policy. In other words, what government does through politics results in public policy. In evaluating how successful government and politicians are, you must look at the extent that public policy is achieved. This chapter also explores in detail those forces that come into play in the quest to control the policy agenda on both a theoretical and a practical level.

THE BASIC FUNCTION OF GOVERNMENT

Government is essential because it has an impact on your everyday life.

If you look at the basic function of government as protection through defense and support of individuals through raising revenue, you will clearly see that government influences everybody. It is also clear that not everybody has the same needs, shares the same ideology, or has the same priorities.

PREAMBLE TO THE CONSTITUTION:

- the establishment of a more perfect union
- the establishment of justice
- the insurance of domestic tranquility
- the promotion of the general welfare
- the security of individual liberty

Once you consider these principles, you'll see how people can differ on the meaning, interpretation, and implementation of these functions of government. When you look at specific examples of these functions and how they affect us, you will see the scope of government. Such policy areas as universal health care, the nature and size of our armed forces, the welfare system, Social Security and Medicare, and the extent that government should regulate our lives illustrate the expanding role of government and the impact it has on our lives.

The Meaning of Politics

If you define politics as who gets what, when, how, and why, then you have to determine the nature of the process and outcome. Because politics deals with individuals and their needs, values, and attitudes, it stands to reason that people with similar needs, values, and attitudes will band together to form political parties. Once a political party is formed, in order for the needs, values, and attitudes to translate into actual policy, the party must succeed in electing its members to office. Thus individuals running for office must have a base of electoral support, a base of political support (the party), and a base of financial support. Obviously, the issue of incumbency comes into play as those elected officials who are reelected become entrenched in the system and have an advantage over young political mavericks who want to break into the system.

Politics, the means by which individuals and groups get involved, results in the formal election of officials.

The Electorate

The role of the electorate is also crucial in determining the means with which individuals get involved. How the voters perceive the candidate's positions on issues, the way people feel about the party, the comfort level of the voter in relation to the candidate and the party, as well as the influence the media have on the election all come into play in the eventual success or failure of the candidate.

The campaign attempts to convince the voters that the candidate will fulfill the expectations and satisfy the needs of the voters. An excellent example of this was the 1992 presidential election and the emergence of the third-party candidacy of Ross Perot. He established an independent political party, United We Stand, and attempted to mold a campaign based on a populist perspective. Initially, the voters responded to him, but in the end they rejected his candidacy. On the other hand, in the same election, Bill Clinton, using the issue of change, attracted a constituency that responded to his image and perceived a candidate who would solve the economic problems facing this country.

In 1996 Bill Clinton was the incumbent and had the advantage of an electorate that supported his positions regarding education, the environment, Medicare, and Medicaid, unlike Republican candidate Bob Dole who lacked focus in his campaign. Third-party candidate Ross Perot lost the support of a major part of his constituency. However, he again raised a significant issue of campaign finance reform, which after the election became a scandal for both major political parties.

In 2000 the electorate couldn't make up its mind between George W. Bush, who promised to bring "honor and integrity" back to the Oval Office, and the incumbent vice president, Al Gore, who had to separate himself from Bill Clinton's scandals while still identifying himself with the longest period of prosperity in United States history. In the end, Gore narrowly won the popular vote but lost the electoral vote in one of the closest and most disputed elections in history.

George W. Bush campaigned for reelection in 2004 emphasizing that he would “build a safer world and a more hopeful America.” His Democratic opponent, Senator John F. Kerry, told the voters that he was the “real deal” and that “America deserves better.” The voters decided not to change a commander-in-chief during a time of war and gave the incumbent both a popular and electoral vote majority.

In the first election since 1952 that did not feature an incumbent president or vice president, Barack Obama, the first African-American nominee of a major political party, campaigned using the theme “change we can believe in.” His opponent, Arizona Senator John McCain, chose “country first,” emphasizing his military credentials. The country elected Obama, giving him a majority of the popular vote and more than 350 electoral votes.

The Function of Interest Groups

The U.S. political system evolved from various interest groups vying to implement a policy agenda.

In looking at the Federalist Papers, you can see how the U.S. political system was characterized and created from established groups who had differing attitudes toward how best to form a new government. In Federalist No. 44 James Madison writes in 1787 “We are brought to this undeniable conclusion that no part of the power is unnecessary or improper for accomplishing the necessary objects of the Union. The question, therefore, whether this amount of power shall be granted or not resolves itself into another question, whether or not a government commensurate to the exigencies of the union shall be established; or in other words, whether the Union itself shall be preserved.” The Anti-Federalist position found in *The Debates on the Constitution in Letters from the Federal Farmer*, written in 1787, responds by stating that “there appears to me to be not only a premature deposit of some important powers in the general government—but many of those deposited there are undefined, and may be used to good or bad purposes as honest or designing men shall prevail.” Even the overall fight over the ratification of the proposed constitution was waged on “party lines.” Federalists supported ratification. Anti-Federalists opposed ratification. In this case, the policy agenda was the adoption of a new constitution.

Once the Constitution was ratified, two parties evolved. The Federalist Party, headed by Alexander Hamilton and made up of the country’s upper class, supported a strong national government and set a policy agenda that would solve the nation’s economic problems. In doing so, the party appealed to business interests such as manufacturing and trade. It believed in a loose construction, or a liberal interpretation, of the Constitution. The opposition party, the Democratic-Republicans, led by Thomas Jefferson after his return from France where he was the United States ambassador, was characterized as the party of the “common man.” It believed in a more limited role of the central government and was considered to be strict constructionist, which is characterized by a belief in a conservative interpretation of the Constitution. Its constituency was farmers, merchants, and the middle class of American society. The party was afraid of a powerful president and believed that Congress should be the main cog of government. In the 2010 midterm elections a unique special interest group, the Tea Party, emerged and played a significant role in determining the outcome of the election. The Tea Party’s name is derived from the Boston patriots who organized the Boston Tea Party in 1773. The modern-day Tea Party consists of its founders, Republicans who served in the House of Representatives, and a grassroots movement of people who believed in less government, lower taxes, and lower government spending, and has as one of their battle

cries, “taking the government back.” Even though it is not a formal political party, it influenced the Republican party by supporting candidates in the primaries and general election. Many of the victorious candidates who won were “Tea Party candidates” and pledged to support the principles of the movement.

As you can see, these two parties had divergent views resulting in differing policy objectives. Ultimately, the Democratic-Republicans prevailed. The Federalist Party failed and eventually faded from the scene. (For a full discussion of political parties, turn to Chapter 11.)

Linkage Institutions—The Informal Institutions

By definition, a linkage institution is the means by which individuals can express preferences regarding the development of public policy. Examples of linkage institutions are political parties, special interest groups, and the media. Preferences are voiced through the political system, and when specific political issues are resolved, they become the basis for policy. In today’s political system, the two major political parties, the Democrats and the Republicans, each have national platforms that outline their position on various public issues. For instance, the Republican Party has stood for less government, whereas today’s Democratic Party has supported government programs such as Medicare. In areas of social concern, Republicans have been opposed to abortion on demand, whereas Democrats have been identified as a party favoring choice.

In order to implement these policies, Democrats and Republicans have to be elected to public office. Candidates and political parties must assess the nature of the electorate. Are there a significant number of single-issue groups, those special interests who base their vote on a single issue? Or is the candidate’s stand on issues broad enough to attract the mainstream of the voting electorate? The media, through daily newspapers and television newscasts, as well as columnists and editorials, attempt to influence the voters, the party, and the candidate’s stand on issues. The media have been accused of simplifying the issues by relying on photo opportunities (photo ops) set up by the candidates and 30-second statements on the evening news shows (sound bites). The interaction of linkage institutions results in the formation of a policy agenda by the candidates running for elected office.

An example of how linkage institutions work is the 2010 midterm elections. As a result of the rise of the grassroots movement that called themselves “the Tea Party” (named after the colonists who dumped tea in Boston Harbor in 1773), many Tea Party members voted Republican in the midterm election resulting in a gain of 63 seats and control of the House of Representatives for the Republicans.

Policy-Making Institutions

Even though each branch of government has separate powers, a significant policy-making function is defined by the Constitution. In addition, the development and growth of bureaucracies becomes a fourth branch of government, because it has independent regulatory power and is connected directly and indirectly to the federal government itself.

The president as chief executive proposes to Congress a legislative agenda. Along with this agenda is a budget proposal that defines the extent of government involvement in supporting legislation as well as the size of government. The decision to sign

Public policy is affected by the linkage institutions of political parties, elections, interest groups, and the media.

The formal institutions created by the Constitution—including the presidency, Congress, and the courts and bureaucracies—are the significant and major policy-making institutions.

or veto legislation determines the fate of legislation and the resulting public policy. Congress, through its committee system and ultimately its votes, determines the fate of the president's legislative agenda and the proposed budget. Over the past 30 years, the issue of the nation's deficit has been paramount in determining the nature of legislation passed. This changed in 1996 after President Clinton signed a balanced budget. By 2000 the debate shifted away from deficit spending to what the budget surplus should be used for. After September 11, 2001, tax cuts, a recession, and an expanded war on terrorism resulted in the return of large deficits.

President Obama, facing the worst economic crisis since the Great Depression, signed the American Recovery and Reinvestment Act of 2009. This law cost close to \$1 trillion and included tax cuts for 95 percent of Americans as well as job stimulus provisions. Obama also announced measures that dealt with the ailing banks, auto industry, and housing market. These acts, along with the 2010 federal budget, resulted in the largest deficits in American history, totaling more than \$1 trillion.

THE SUPREME COURT

The Supreme Court in particular has a direct impact on the public policy through its interpretation of the Constitution and how it relates to specific issues brought before the Court. An activist Court will forge new ground and through such decisions as *Roe v Wade* or *Brown v Board of Education* establish precedents that will force legislative action. A Court that shows judicial restraint will maintain the status quo or mirror what the other branches of government have established as current policy. Decisions that established the legitimacy of state restrictions on abortions such as parental approval, and a narrower interpretation of Miranda Rights (those rights guaranteed to people arrested) were characteristic of a more conservative Rehnquist Court in the late 1980s and 1990s.

BUREAUCRACIES

The size of government has increased since World War II as a result of the bureaucracy, which became an integral part of the government. Even though the size of the government workforce has decreased, the influence of the bureaucratic agencies on public policy has been dramatic. In particular, regulatory agencies such as the Food and Drug Administration (FDA) and the Environmental Protection Agency (EPA) have issued directives as a result of congressional legislation. The Clean Air Act resulted in a number of policy statements by the EPA regarding auto pollution in the individual states. The FDA debated the advisability of approving the abortion pill RU486 and gave the go-ahead for a private group to conduct testing. It was approved in 2000, and consumers were able to purchase the drug.

Evolution of Representative Democracy

The development of our representative democracy evolved from other forms of democracies.

From the roots of our political system in ancient Greece, to the writings of Enlightenment thinkers such as Montesquieu and Locke, to the principles outlined in the Declaration of Independence, our representative democracy has emerged as a distinct republican form of government.

The origins of Greek democracy come from the premise that governmental rule should be that of the many rather than the few. In its purest form a direct democracy would have every citizen attending a town meeting and voting on every issue

with the majority prevailing. Because of the size of the country, this becomes impractical and works only on a limited scale such as the classic New England town meeting where, for instance, a town's budget is approved.

Enlightenment thinkers proposed that a democracy should rely on the consent of the people. They also felt that there were natural rights that could not be taken away by the government, such as life, liberty, and property. In drafting the Declaration of Independence, Thomas Jefferson felt that these principles of unalienable rights should be incorporated. They were also included in the Constitution. The individual became the central focus of government policy. Such concepts as equality, freedom, and order became the driving forces of our democracy.

ELECTIONS

The measure of democracy became open and free elections. In order for a democracy to succeed, these elections had to be open to all citizens, issues and policy statements of candidates had to be available to the electorate, citizens could form political parties to advocate policies, and elections would be determined by a majority or plurality. Obviously, our constitutional republic in its early days did not meet the criteria. Slaves and women were not given the right to vote. There were property requirements, and the state legislatures determined who would represent the states as senators. Even today, we still have an electoral college, which determines the official outcome of presidential elections based on the vote of electors rather than the direct vote of citizens.

Today, the test to determine whether our democracy is working still relies on the way the individual determines the final fate of who runs the government and how policy is determined. Through linkage institutions and sovereignty, individuals must have a forum and a vote to determine their elected officials. Guarantees of voting equality through "one man, one vote" representation, the recognition that the size and makeup of congressional districts should be as democratic as possible, has achieved this goal. Amendments to the Constitution creating direct elections of senators; voting rights for freed slaves, women, and 18-year-olds; the elimination of poll taxes; and legislation such as the Voting Rights Bill have accomplished this. Participation in government and politics is another indicator. In addition, a free media that informs the electorate creates an atmosphere of increased involvement by citizens.

The basic concepts of our democracy today rely on the worth and dignity of the individual, respect for equality, majority rule with minority rights, compromise, and the guarantee of individual freedom.

ROLE OF GOVERNMENT

Government itself must become responsive. It must respect minority rights even though its elected officials were chosen by majority rule. Individual freedom must be respected and is guaranteed through the Bill of Rights. Court decisions such as *Tinker v Des Moines* have reinforced the concept that the First Amendment is even applicable to high school students. Finally, government itself must operate on the basis of consensus and compromise. Otherwise public policy, the measure of whether government succeeds or fails, will not be implemented. During the George Herbert Walker Bush administration the cry of "gridlock" was heard because a Republican president had difficulty achieving his legislative agenda because there was a Democratic Congress.

After the Republicans assumed control of Congress in 1994, a divided government again dominated American politics. In 1995, the Republicans tested a weakened president by forcing a government shutdown caused by a budget stalemate.

This backfired when public opinion turned against the GOP. A complete turn-around occurred at the conclusion of the 104th Congress prior to the 1996 election when both the president and Congress reached compromises regarding healthcare portability, the minimum wage, and welfare reform. At the start of the 105th Congress, a bipartisan agreement on a balanced budget was reached.

After the contested 2000 election, newly elected President George W. Bush had to face a divided Congress in 2001 when one of his fellow Republicans became an independent and voted with the Democrats, giving the Democrats a single vote majority in the Senate. This lasted until the 2002 midterm election, when the Republicans again regained control of Congress. In 2006, the Democrats won back Congress as a result of voter discontent with the Iraq War. The Democrats expanded their majorities in both houses in the 2008 election, thus ending divided government.

In 2010, the Republicans regained control of the House of Representatives by winning more than sixty seats. The Republicans also gained six seats in the Senate but failed to win a majority. Thus, a new era of divided government began with the 112th Congress in January 2011.

The Importance of Control

Modern political theory revolves around who controls the agenda.

If you control the agenda, you will be the one to get the what, when, and how. There are three schools of thought regarding how the agenda is controlled. The first theory, pluralism, involves different groups all vying for control of the policy agenda. No single group emerges, forcing the groups to compromise. A centrist position is achieved, and, although no one group is totally happy, a number of groups, as a result of the bargaining that goes on, agree on mutually acceptable positions.

Elite and class theory revolves around an economic strata of society controlling the policy agenda. An upper class, the wealthy of society, is recognized as the elite and controls the linkage institutions of government. The Majoritarian model of democracy is the purest form of democracy. Its principal tenet relies on direct democracy, with a majority vote characterizing the model. In practical terms, when voters get a proposal on the ballot by the initiative process, they will vote on it directly by using majority rule.

MERGING OF POLITICAL THEORIES

Our democracy has components of each of these political theories. No one theory is ideal. Each has its own advantages and disadvantages. However, most political analysts would agree that a democracy characterized by a pluralist society working in harmony and achieving compromise through centrist positions usually has a good chance of success.

Historically, when the Federalists became the first party to control the government, it was controlled by the elite. Today, many critics of our system contend that there are too many special interest groups who, through their political action committees, are able to influence key lawmakers. Those officials who are able to achieve consensus seem to have the most success in achieving public policy goals.

The Importance of Goals

In evaluating the success or failure of government and our political system, always analyze whether elected officials are achieving their goals, which translate into public policy. Another way of putting it is whether or not officials are meeting the needs of the public they serve. To make a final judgment, you should ask the following questions about government and politics as you continue reading this text:

Modern government changes as a result of who can best serve the public interest.

- What is the public interest?
- Who determines the parameters of what the public wants?
- How much influence should government have on the lives of its citizens?
- How big should government be?
- How much money should government spend?
- What is the best way to raise money for government spending?
- How should government and its elected officials deal with serious ethical issues such as abortion, euthanasia, and birth control?
- Should candidates campaign negatively in order to get elected?
- How should government and politicians restore the public's confidence in their elected officials and government?

Review

Section 1: Multiple-Choice Questions

1. Which of the following is considered a linkage institution?
 - (A) The bureaucracy
 - (B) The Congress
 - (C) The executive department
 - (D) The government
 - (E) The media
2. All of the following are characteristics of politics EXCEPT
 - (A) individuals with similar ideas banding together to form political parties
 - (B) the means through which individuals and groups get involved
 - (C) who gets what, when, how, and why
 - (D) the passing of laws that serve to further minority rights
 - (E) the interrelationship of individuals and groups
3. Which of the following institutions established in the Constitution make public policy?
 - (A) The Senate, the president, and political parties
 - (B) The Congress, the president, and the courts
 - (C) The Congress, the courts, and the military
 - (D) The Congress, the president, and the military
 - (E) The Congress, the president, and the bureaucracy

4. Which of the following best defines a set of institutions linking government, politics, and public policy?
 - (A) An educational system
 - (B) A political system
 - (C) A social system
 - (D) An economic system
 - (E) A socioeconomic system
5. Which of the following principles describes a philosophy of the Federalist Party?
 - (A) Federalists believed in a loose construction of the Constitution.
 - (B) Federalists believed in a strict interpretation of the Constitution.
 - (C) Federalists believed in a conservative interpretation of the Constitution.
 - (D) Federalists believed that Congress should be the main cog of government.
 - (E) Federalists believed that the interests of the common man should be reflected in government.
6. All the following characteristics reflect the reasons why political parties are formed EXCEPT:
 - (A) People band together because of similar needs.
 - (B) People band together because of similar values.
 - (C) People band together because they have similar income.
 - (D) People band together because of similar beliefs.
 - (E) People band together because they have similar goals.
7. Which of the following groups examines a candidate's record primarily on specific issues?
 - (A) Single-interest groups
 - (B) Elite groups
 - (C) Plurality groups
 - (D) Democrats
 - (E) Republicans
8. All of the following are basic principles of our democracy today EXCEPT a belief in
 - (A) the worth and dignity of the individual
 - (B) the need for political equality
 - (C) universal healthcare
 - (D) the guarantee of individual freedoms
 - (E) the need for a balance between freedom and order
9. Which of the following institutions is commonly called the fourth branch of government?
 - (A) The bureaucracy
 - (B) Special interest groups
 - (C) The executive branch
 - (D) The Congress
 - (E) The Supreme Court