The Spirit of American Politics

IN THIS CHAPTER YOU WILL LEARN THE ANSWERS TO FOUR KEY QUESTIONS:

- Who Governs?
- How does American politics work?
- What does government do?
- Who are we?
INAUGURATION DAY, 2013. The President stands in front of the U.S. Capitol and repeats the oath of office.* The ceremony reflects an American legacy that stretches all the way back to President George Washington, who repeated the same words in 1791. It remains a highlight in the life of the world’s oldest democracy. It is a solemn moment: even Washington was visibly nervous when he spoke the oath.

Members of Congress surround the president on the inaugural stage. Congress looks a lot more like America today than a decade ago: today it includes 93 women, 87 Hispanics, and 41 African Americans, together making up the largest-ever collection of non-white males.* The United States still has a long way to go, however, before it really reflects America (see Figure 1.1).

Chief Justice John Roberts of the Supreme Court leads the President through the oath of office.* The Court serves as a check on Congress and the president, measuring their actions against the Constitution of the United States. The court is charged with protecting rights guaranteed by the Constitution. For example, the Court struck down racially segregated schools for violating the Constitution and ruled that every American accused of a serious crime has a right to a lawyer.1

What you cannot see on Inauguration Day is the sheer depth of this democracy. Americans elect 500,000 public officials—from the governors of their states to the mayors of their cities, from soil and water commissioners in Iowa City to cemetery trustees in Lempster, New Hampshire. No other country in the world comes close to voting on so many offices.

Yet this proud democracy is full of paradoxes. On four occasions, Americans inaugurated presidential candidates who got fewer popular votes than their opponents; thus, nearly one in ten of the nation’s presidents were not the people’s choice. Congress reflects another peculiar twist to the democracy. Its approval rating, measured by a Gallup poll in December 2011, fell to 11 percent—the lowest number ever recorded. Yet more than 85 percent of House and Senate incumbents won reelection in 2012, and most of them by landslides.* The public overwhelmingly disapproves of Congress, but voted to return their representatives to Capitol Hill for another term.

The Supreme Court’s nine members represent still another limit to American democracy. Justices are not elected; they are appointed for life. At times, the Court has looked more like a bastion of privilege than a protector of rights. Back in 1857, the Court ruled that, according to the Constitution, black people “were so far inferior” that they had “no rights which the white man was bound to respect.”2 More recently the Court has struck down legislation governing prayer in schools, abortion, limits on campaign finance, guns near schools, and many other controversial topics.

*To be updated for publication based on November 2012 election results.
INAUGURATION DAY, 2013. The President stands in front of the U.S. Capitol and repeats the oath of office.* The ceremony reflects an American legacy that stretches all the way back to President George Washington, who repeated the same words in 1791. It remains a highlight in the life of the world’s oldest democracy. It is a solemn moment: even Washington was visibly nervous when he spoke the oath.

Members of Congress surround the president on the inaugural stage. Congress looks a lot more like America than it did a decade ago: today it includes 93 women, 27 Hispanics, and 41 African Americans, together making up the largest-ever collection of non-white males.* The United States still has a long way to go, however, before it really reflects America (see Figure 1.1).

Chief Justice John Roberts of the Supreme Court leads the President through the oath of office.* The Court serves as a check on Congress and the president, measuring their actions against the Constitution of the United States. The court is charged with protecting rights guaranteed by the Constitution. For example, the Court struck down racially segregated schools for violating the Constitution and ruled that every American accused of a serious crime has a right to a lawyer.1

What you cannot see on Inauguration Day is the sheer depth of this democracy. Americans elect 500,000 public officials—from the governors of their states to the mayors of their cities, from soil and water commissioners in Iowa City to cemetery trustees in Lempster, New Hampshire. No other country in the world comes close to voting on so many offices.

Yet this proud democracy is full of paradoxes. On four occasions, Americans inaugurated presidential candidates who got fewer popular votes than their opponents; thus, nearly one in ten of the nation’s presidents were not the people’s choice. Congress reflects another peculiar twist to the democracy. Its approval rating, measured by a Gallup poll in December 2011, fell to 11 percent—the lowest number ever recorded. Yet more than 85 percent of House and Senate incumbents won reelection in 2012, and most of them by landslides.* The public overwhelmingly disapproves of Congress, but voted to return their representatives to Capitol Hill for another term.

The Supreme Court’s nine members represent still another limit to American democracy. Justices are not elected; they are appointed for life. At times, the Court has looked more like a bastion of privilege than a protector of rights. Back in 1857, the Court ruled that, according to the Constitution, black people “were so far inferior” that they had “no rights which the white man was bound to respect.”2 More recently the Court has struck down legislation governing prayer in schools, abortion, limits on campaign finance, guns near schools, and many other controversial topics.

*To be updated for publication based on November 2012 election results.

As you can see, democracy is complicated. Yes, the United States is the world’s oldest democratic country. Yet the candidate who loses the popular vote can win the White House, a terribly unpopular Congress can be reelected in landslides, and unelected judges, appointed for life, can strike down the will of the people’s representatives.

We address four questions through this book to help make sense of American politics and government. By the time you finish reading, you will understand the debates each question has generated—and be able to participate knowledgeably yourself.

1. **Who governs?** Do the people rule? Some of us would answer ‘yes—and today more than ever.’ Others are not so sure. What if the people are *not* in charge—then who is?

2. **How does American politics work?** This may be the most complicated, messy, and fascinating government on Earth. We will guide you through the political maze, helping you understand what makes American politics and government tick.

3. **What does government do?** Many people view politics as unsavory and government as a problem. We will show you how politics can be useful and why
government is sometimes—even often—important. By the time you finish this book, you will have the tools to make informed judgments about what public officials actually do, and whether government is a problem, a solution, or perhaps a bit of both.

4. **Who Are We?** In a rapidly changing, diverse, immigrant nation, this is the deepest question of all. If the people aspire to rule, we have to understand who the people are. American politics is essential to defining Who We Are—as a community, a people, and a nation.

Before we examine these four questions, we want to share our bias: we love politics. We think there is nothing more interesting—not hip-hop or *Modern Family* or the Super Bowl. Well, actually, all those involve politics too. Our goal is not just to help you answer the big questions. We also aim to project the savor and excitement of politics and power and democracy. We will brief you on the basic facts, then ask you to ponder the key questions and join the big debates. And we will suggest many ways that you can.

---

**Who Governs?**

As Benjamin Franklin left the Constitutional Convention in 1787, a woman stopped him. “What kind of government have you given us?” she asked. According to legend, the wise old Franklin responded, “A republic, madam—if you can keep it.” The United States organized itself around a ringing declaration of popular rule: governments derive “their just power from the consent of the governed.” In a republic, the people are in charge. The Constitution drives home the point in its first three words: “We, the People.” Franklin knew, however, that popular governments are extremely difficult to “keep.” All past previous republics—like Athens,
Rome, and Florence—had collapsed. His point was that the people have to be vigilant and active if they are to maintain control.

Popular rule in the U.S. was a bold breakthrough by 18th-century standards, but it certainly did not empower everyone. The Constitution protected slavery and gave slaveholders three-fifths of a vote for every person they kept in chains. Women could not vote, nor could most poor men. American Indians were considered property. The story lies the problem. In the 19th century, Americans learned to genuinely "We, the People." Franklin knew, however, that popular govern-

"A republic, madam—if you can keep it." The United States organized itself around a ringing declaration of popular rule: governments derive "their just power from the consent of the governed." In a way that you can get involved in the pageant of American politics. Before we examine these four questions, we want to share our bias: we love poli-

"Faithfully execute the office of president" and "preserve, protect, and defend the Constitution." Presidents try to put on their commitments, however. American politics is essential to defining Who We Are—deeper question of all. If the people aspire to rule, we have to understand this book, you will have the tools to make informed judgments about what the public really rule? Or do the rich and powerful get the most say? Americans—or perhaps a bit of both.

Do Americans still enjoy their traditional freedoms (left)? Or does the nation’s formidable military create a "military-industrial complex" with too much influence over government (right)? Dwight Eisenhower, the last five star general elected to the White House, worried that it did. He never formulated a clear alternative to American military commitments, however.

A running glossary of key terms appears in chapter context. A complete glossary in the back of the book collects all key terms in one location.
Like many voices across American history, each of these—Eisenhower, Occupy, and Colbert—warn that the people are losing control, that we have not “kept” the republic.

Alongside these concerns, we will see many examples where ordinary American people make an enormous difference. Sometimes they do so simply by voting for change, sometimes by organizing political movements, and sometimes by taking a courageous stand. The Supreme Court’s decision that struck down school segregation came about, in part, because one high-school sophomore named Barbara Johns called a student strike to protest the leaking roof and broken furnace in an all-black school in a small Virginia town. (The story is in Chapter 3.)

Over the years, political scientists have developed three theories to answer the question of where power really lies in American politics. Pluralism suggests that people can influence government through the many interest groups that spring up to champion everything from fighting global warming to banning abortion rights. Elite theory counters that power actually rests in the hands of a small number of wealthy and powerful people—corporate executives or top government officials for example. The military-industrial complex Eisenhower warned against is a classic example. Social movement theory answers that mass popular uprisings—from the civil rights movement to the anti-tax revolt, from the Tea Party (fighting government spending) to Occupy Wall Street (fighting inequality)—have the potential to introduce great changes regardless of who is in control of ordinary, day-to-day politics (see Table 1.1).

We will return to this question in every chapter. Who rules? How well have we, the people, kept the republic? It is one of the most important questions in America today.

THE BOTTOM LINE

- In a republic, power ultimately rests with the people. However, this is a difficult form of government to maintain. The first question of American politics is whether the people ultimately hold the power?
- Scholars have developed three approaches to political power in America: pluralist, elite theory, and social movements.
- We return to the issue in every chapter of this book.

Table 1.1 Theories of Power

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>THEORY</th>
<th>LOCATION OF POLITICAL POWER</th>
<th>SOURCE OF INFLUENCE</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Pluralism</td>
<td>Interest groups</td>
<td>A group’s organization, resources, connections</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Elite Theory</td>
<td>‘Power elite’ in government, corporations, and the military</td>
<td>Status based on leading positions in society</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Social Movement Theory</td>
<td>Popular uprisings/movements</td>
<td>Strength of mass demands</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Tea Party: A national social movement, primarily attracting fiscal and social conservatives, which sought to limit government spending and cut taxes.