

CHAPTER 1 THE POLITICAL LANDSCAPE

Narrative Lecture Outline

The Preamble to the Constitution is a statement of principles and goals that the Founders thought Americans should live by and live up to...whether we have done so, and how we might better achieve these goals, are some of the things that I hope you keep in mind as we progress through this course on American government.

In the early days of the American republic, the only people allowed to participate in “democracy” were white, land-owning men over the age of 25 (the actual voting age depended upon the state in which he lived). Therefore, the term “We the People” has changed significantly in meaning since 1787. “People” now includes virtually the entire adult population regardless of race, gender, religion, or other socioeconomic indicators. The only acceptable limits are on felons and people currently suffering from severe mental illness. This is an example of how our government and society has evolved and continues to evolve to “form a more perfect union.”

In order for us to understand where the country is going, we must first look at where we have been. In this lecture, we will look at the government, politics, the theoretical roots of American government and explore the characteristics and thoughts of today's Americans.

The Origins of American Government: What It Is and Why We Need It

A government is made up of institutions and individuals. Governments make and enforce policies. They conduct the affairs of state. A government has the legitimate right to use force to keep order. A democratic state has a government elected by citizens who have rights and responsibilities. This is different than in an authoritarian regime in which the government rules over subjects who have no rights.

One becomes a member of a democratic community by becoming a citizen. Citizenship can be bestowed in a variety of ways. In some societies, one becomes a citizen if you are born on the territory of the country or your parents are citizens, citizenship is automatic in the United States (also known as *jus soli* or the ‘right of soil’). You could also choose to be a citizen, called naturalization, by learning about a political system, meeting some form of residency requirement, and taking an oath. These are usually called territorially based citizenship policies. Under Bismarck and until the 1990s, Germany had a different form of citizenship. Citizenship was by blood (*jus sanguinis* or ‘right of blood’). Your parents had to be ethnically German for you to receive citizenship. There was no method by which a non-German could become a citizen until the late 1990s when the law on citizenship was changed to allow naturalization. There are other types as well but these are the poles—citizenship by choice and citizenship by blood.

Citizens have responsibilities as active members of a polity. They are expected to obey the laws, vote, pay taxes, and submit to military service, if eligible. Citizens also have rights and freedoms. Subjects, those subjected to the rule of the few or the one, have no rights nor freedoms and their sole responsibility is to do what they are told.

Political science is the study of governments and politics. A government is the set of institutions that make rules in society. A government should have a monopoly on the legitimate use of force in society, if it is not capable of exercising a monopoly on force, a government is considered weak or incapable, perhaps illegitimate. Politics are often defined as the “study of who gets what, when, where and how” or as the “authoritative allocation of values.” Politics is often different under different governments and countries. For this course, we will focus on politics and government in the United States.

Functions of Government

The Framers of the Constitution set out a democratic system designed to:

- Establish Justice
- Ensure Domestic Tranquility
- Provide for the Common Defense
- Promote the General Welfare
- Secure the Blessings of Liberty

Types of Government

Not all governments have the same functions or goals. There are a number of different types of government, ranging from the rule of one to the rule of many and varying by ‘who participates, who governs, and how much authority those who govern enjoy.’ Monarchy is generally defined as the rule of one in the interest of all. The Framers rejected monarchical government due to their experience with the English king. The Framers also rejected aristocracy, rule of the few for the benefit of the many. Tyranny was also rejected by the Framers. Tyranny is the rule of a single person to benefit no one but themselves. Oligarchy was little better, broader than tyranny, but still the rule of the few to benefit only the ruling group. The Framers chose a polity – rule of the many for the public good (other theorists call this a ‘republic’). The Framers disliked ‘democracy’ as mob rule – the rule of the many in their individual interests – and preferred a more indirect representative democracy to some ideal type of absolute democracy in which the many would run roughshod over the rights of the few.

Roots of American Government: Where Did the Ideas Come From?

The Reformation and the Enlightenment: Questioning the Divine Right of Kings

The Protestant Reformation was based on the idea that individuals should be able to talk to God without going through a priest. This individual empowerment is a major precursor to democracy because Protestantism brought with it the idea of covenants. This idea of a self-governing congregation without the need for formal hierarchy led to the idea that secular matters also could be self-governing.

Covenants evolved into the idea of the social contract—that people must give their consent to be governed. This is one of the bases of democracy.

Hobbes, Locke, and a Social Contract Theory of Government

Both Hobbes and Locke wrote about social contracts. However, they took different views about the reasons for a social contract and what life was like prior to the social contract (the state of nature).

Thomas Hobbes was a pessimist who believed that man's basic state was one of war. Strong government was necessary to restrain man, and men must give up certain rights to a government in order to survive. John Locke had a different view of human nature and government. Locke argued that men formed governments in order to preserve property and justice. If governments fail to do this, the people have a right to revolt since the government has broken the contract.

Both philosophers contributed to the ideas on which the Founding Fathers built this country. Our system tries to strike a balance between the two views of government and human nature.

Devising a National Government in the American Colonies

At the time of the founding, several forms of government existed: monarchy, oligarchy, and aristocracy. All are based on elite rule and give few rights to the subjects who live under them.

The colonists did not want to replicate that under which they had suffered in the Old World, so they sought to establish a new system: a democracy.

The first representative assembly in the New World was the Virginia House of Burgesses, created in 1619. In addition, New England began a tradition of direct democracy through town meetings, and many colonists were hostile towards British taxation because they were not allowed representatives in the British House of Commons nor in the House of Lords.

It seemed obvious that the colonies wanted some form of self-rule but the traditions of direct democracy and representative democracy evidenced above stood in conflict. Virginia and other colonies wanted representative democracy while New England espoused direct democracy. As the colonies got larger, it became fairly obvious that direct democracy would be too cumbersome and time-consuming so representative democracy, or a republic, became the ideal of government in the colonies.

American Political Culture and the Characteristics of American Democracy

I usually list these seven attributes on the board and hold a discussion about the meaning of each. During the discussion, I try to ask specific questions that get at how each idea works in the American context.

Personal Liberty

Equality

Popular Consent and Majority Rule

Popular Sovereignty

Individualism

Civil Society

Religious Faith

Changing Characteristics of the American People

Changing Size and Population

During the 1790s, there were fewer than 4 million people in 13 states and each member of Congress represented 30,000 people. Today, there are more than 300 million Americans in 50 states plus territories, commonwealths, and dependencies and most members of the House of Representatives represent roughly 650,000 Americans but a member of Congress from Montana (with only one seat in the House) represents roughly 936,000 Americans (according to <http://mt.gov/> accessed on December 20, 2006).

Changing Demographics of the U.S. Population

America has grown. Growth has benefits and costs. Recent debates about immigration tend to focus only upon the costs of this type of growth. However, there are also substantial benefits and much of the dynamism the United States exhibits can be attributed, in part, to immigration growth and the racial and ethnic changes the country has experienced throughout its history.

The age make-up of the United States is also changing. Americans are getting older, as we can see from debates about Medicare and other issues for the elderly.

Changes in Racial and Ethnic Composition

During colonial times, most colonists came from Anglo-Saxon northern Europe and shared a Protestant Christian heritage. Slaves came from Africa and the Caribbean but had no rights. Laborers and indentured servants came from Asia but also had no rights. Both groups were relatively small in number. Immigration peaked in the early 1900s and achieved a smaller peak during the 1980s. The earlier peak consisted of immigrants from northern and eastern Europe while the latter peak was predominantly from Asia and other parts of the world. Obviously, over time, immigration patterns have changed. The U.S. is no longer an Anglo-Saxon country.

The structure of racial minorities in America is also changing. By 2025, Latinos/Hispanic Americans are projected to outnumber African Americans and the Asian American population is expected to double.

Changes in Age Cohort Composition

The age structure is also changing. America is getting "grayer." Today, we live longer and are in better health. When the United States was founded, people lived to the ripe old age of 35, on average. Today, life expectancy is in excess of 75 years for men and 80 for women! This has important implications for many public policies, but in particular on health care and Social Security.

Political scientists and others refer to different age groups by generational labels that can be useful in understanding public policy and the demands individuals and groups make of governments. Each group is characterized by common characteristics that are formed on the basis of common political experiences. (I find it very useful to query the students on their "formative political experiences" and first political memories...it is a nice reality check on what they remember and the fact that they have a quite different perspective than many of their

teachers because they are of a different generation.) The group born after WWII is called the “Baby Boom” generation. This group tended to be experimental and quite liberal. They grew up with JFK, the summer of love, and the Beatles. This group is now reaching retirement age. Those born from the late 1960s through the 1970s are called “Generation X-ers.” Then “Generation Y” or the Millennial Generation and they are characterized by a faith in the capitalistic system and are highly optimistic since their formative experiences occurred during the boom times of the 1980s. These changes have significant policy impacts as each successive generation has distinct political interests. As the Baby Boomers age and go on Social Security, the system will experience new stresses. Working aged people face huge deficits from the Iraq War and War on Terror and share an aversion to raising taxes that could turn to cutting the benefits of the elderly. Older people often resent paying property taxes for schools they no longer use and so vote against school funding. There are other policies on which the generations disagree as well.

Changes in Family and Family Size

Families have changed as well. Family sizes have gotten smaller and single-parent families are on the rise. The “ideal size” for a family, as measured by polls, was four children in 1949 and today most said that between none and two children were best. In 1940, 90 percent of households were family households. In 2004, that number is just over 67 percent two-parent households and another 20 percent are single-parent households. Years ago, most two parent families had a single wage earner, now most are dual income couples. These demographic changes also have policy ramifications. Day care, flexible hours, after school programs are new demands that come from these demographic changes.

Implications of These Changes

All of these changes have seemed to intensify “us” versus “them” attitudes in the country. Attempts to redress inequalities in the 1960s and 1970s have led to backlash more recently. Economic downturns always exacerbate relations between newer and more established groups in society as well. Changes in immigration and perceptions that immigrants no longer “become American” have contributed to governance problems in the U.S. and have complicated the public policy arena.

Demographics matter because attitudes, values, and ideas affect views on politics and government, on how and whether we vote, on what issues we support and oppose and so on. A few examples: Baby Boomers want to protect Social Security, young parents want to improve the public schools their children attend, and many single people without children demand that government also fund things in which they are interested.

Political Ideology: Its Role in the World and in American Politics

To discuss ideology, I often begin by asking students to determine what their ideology is (if they have one). I ask questions such as:

What do you feel is the correct role of government in general?

In the following circumstances, what should the role of government be: poverty in general, child poverty, child abuse, marriage and divorce laws, privacy issues (specifically—should the government be able to access your Internet accounts or e-mails? should telemarketers be regulated at all, and if so how?), defense issues, and so on?

Do you consider yourself a liberal, conservative, or what? Now what does that mean to you? (list attributes on the board)

Political ideology is defined as a more or less consistent set of values that are reflected in the political, economic, social, and moral make-up of society. Globally, ideology has been used to justify incredible acts of carnage. Nazism was such an ideology and so was Communism. So is democracy. Ideologies are powerful and can shape the world view of people who believe in them. Ideologues are blind and unthinking adherents to that world view. Ideologues see everything through the lens of their world view and discount anything that doesn't fit. The Colbert Report is a wonderful parody of this phenomenon on the political right in the United States though the left is equally guilty of such us versus them thinking.

Many Americans espouse liberalism or conservatism with a growing number saying that they are libertarian. But what does this mean? (Often less than we might think.) In the contemporary United States, a conservative favors state action over federal action, emphasizes fiscal responsibility such as balanced budgets, and feels that many social issues such as poverty and homelessness are best addressed by the private sector. A liberal tends to favor a more active government especially in terms of regulation of the economy. Liberals tend to actively call for the protection of the rights of minorities, the elderly, women, and the environment. They advocate social services for the poor and working classes as well. On the other hand, libertarians believe in free market economics, personal privacy, and extremely limited government. Some hard-line libertarians argue that the only legitimate role for government is to provide for the national defense. Some more moderate libertarians favor severe limitations on government and government spending, but foresee a larger role than simply defense.

The problem with these "labels" is they tend to be applied thoughtlessly and dogmatically. They obscure our ability to see gray areas and common interests and instead polarize the political debate. They are often highly misleading. People often have conflicting views instead of a true ideology. They feel that the government should do more to help the poor (a "liberal" view) and yet strongly favor more defense spending (a "conservative" view). They feel that civil rights for minorities are very important as are rights for the elderly ("liberal") and also argue that government regulation of the economy should be very minimal ("conservative"). So these labels need to be used carefully and thoughtfully.

Current Attitudes Toward American Government

Ideology and experience greatly affect how we view our government. It is now part of our political culture to expect negative campaigns, dishonest politicians, and political pundits who bash our leaders and institutions.

Most people get their news about government from the electronic media: from network news (ABC, NBC, CBS), cable news (CNN, C-SPAN, Fox), from the Internet (a huge range from Time and the New York Times online to the Drudge Report and others). There has been a proliferation of news magazine shows as well. These changes have forced media outlets to be even more interested in "scoops": to be the first to air or report an event. This leads to increased reporting of scandals and rumors that often turn out to be incorrect. The "24/7" or instant news report nature of the current media also limits thoughtful commentary and encourages shallow reporting. The visual nature of the electronic media also leads to stories covering interesting images instead of important issues of the day. Looking at American politics this way, leads us to an understanding of why so many in our society today are uninformed and pessimistic.

We also need to be more attuned to how we are viewed in the world. The United States used to be seen as a beacon of liberty and is now seen as decadent, immoral, and hypocritical. We champion democracy, yet support dictators. We claim to be humanitarian, yet do little for Darfur. For much of the world, what they know of Americans is McDonald's, Coca Cola, American movies (violent and full of sex), American TV (the same), and the like. What image would you have of America if that was all you had seen?

High Expectations

Americans' expectations of the government are increasing and have been for a long time. When people have problems, they often demand that the government fix them. This has been happening for 200 years, so of course government today does much more than it did in the 1790s. In addition, the government has gotten larger and stronger in response to various crises such as war, economic depression, and social unrest.

Campaigning also leads Americans to expect more of government. Every campaign promise offered by a candidate leads some to expect the government to solve yet another problem (and when they don't solve them, it adds greatly to public cynicism!).

A Missing Appreciation of the Good

The political and economic systems have become far more complex, and the educational system no longer plays the same socialization role it once did. Many Americans have no idea what government actually does for them. {Discuss what government does with the class: from time zones, to regulating airwaves for radio and TV, clean water, fluoride, FDA inspections, rules on parking...and so on.}

In addition, personal responsibility seems to have declined and people often find it easier to blame the government for their problems than to accept their own failings. This has many implications for politics including an ever larger and more powerful government.

We also have little sense of history. How many times have you heard someone say things like the following: for the first time in history; this is the worst flood in history; there has never been a crime wave like this before; government has never been more powerful than it is today...and so on. Most of these statements are not true. Nor does it seem to be true that everyone in this generation will be less well off than the previous generation. Life expectancy is up, as is the quality of life. In 1970, only 11 percent of people graduated college; in 2002, 26 percent graduated. Cable TV was virtually nonexistent in the 1970s; now almost 70 percent of households have it. The same is true of computers; today more than 51 percent of homes have PCs. The poverty rate has held fairly constant in the last 30 years, so things are not as bleak as we often tend to think. However, that has also come under attack because it is predicated upon outdated ideas about the percentage of one's income used to pay for housing, food, and other necessities.

Mistrust of Politicians

Polls show that only 23 percent of Americans trust our politicians. Scandals have been plentiful and the media cover them with great glee. Recent scandals include Mark Foley's inappropriate liaisons with House pages, scandals related to Jack Abramoff, Tom Delay, Bob Ney, and others. No wonder Americans are distrustful.

Despite these attitudes, most politicians are hard working, honest people who are trying to make their country better. The public servants take pride in helping their constituents and their country. (Discuss why there is such a disjuncture between opinion and reality.)

Voter Apathy

Is voter apathy a problem? Are people confronted with too many choices and are simply weary? Is there enough information about the candidates and issues? Are we just too busy? Do we lack real choices? Do we think our vote doesn't matter? Or are we content? And is low voter turnout a problem at all? These are difficult questions without easy answers. We should consider them as we progress through the course and see if we can come up with ideas about which are the important questions and answers.

Redefining our Expectations Politics involves conflict. Since each of us has different ideas, values, and

ideologies—particularly as we become more diverse as a society—we will most likely not be able to govern ourselves on the basis of consensus. There will be winners and losers in the policy process. Government cannot cure all problems but serves many important purposes and will always play a major role in addressing societal problems.

Frustration and dissatisfaction come with change and perhaps we are in a period in which we redefine our expectations of government and of ourselves in light of all the changes of the last few decades. Government is responding to the changes in society. An unprecedented number of retirements from the Congress in 1994 and 1996 might be an indicator that it is harder today to please voters and less pleasant to work in public service.

The United States has lived through many trying times with our Constitution and system intact. We have survived and thrived through slavery and emancipation, wars and depressions, terrorist attacks, and anthrax...chances are we will adapt to the changes yet to come as well.