

## Chapter 1 Lecture Notes

This is a course in the government of the United States of America. Essentially, what we are, and will be, discussing, is a political system. It was created over 220 years ago, and has endured despite considerable hardships at times within the country, as well as many cultural changes. There are many things to discuss to understand this system that somehow governs approximately 300 million people, and many questions to answer. What is politics? What is government? What is this thing called America, and how is it held together? These are just a few of the questions we must try to answer this semester. I try to teach this course in a very practical manner. It is hoped that you will leave here with something more than just a few definitions of what some of these concepts are, and that this course will prepare you to become inquisitive citizens within our society. My ultimate goal is to offer some insights into how “it” (meaning our government, our politics, our constant adjusting to different aspects of our life) all comes together. But first we must start with some basic definitions in order to lay the groundwork for later understanding of this complex system.

### **Political Culture: The Core Principles of American Government**

One of the things that many scholars (Crevecoeur, Toqueville, Bryce, etc.) have attempted to do over time is to try to define what makes America the country that it is. Most nations are built on a common ethnicity, religion, language, history. These things do not apply well to America. Other than sharing geographical borders, we are a very diverse nation. Yet there is something quite strong that seems to bond us together. To begin to understand how the United States government was created and functions we have to begin by understanding our unique political culture.

Your textbook defines **political culture** as a “term that refers to the characteristic and deep-seated beliefs of a particular group of people about government and politics”. It is, essentially, a shared system of values, beliefs, and habits of behavior with regard to government and politics. It is the contention of the author of your textbook that there exists a set of “core ideals” that help to create an enduring legacy of political continuity. He refers to these as the **America’s Core Values**, a somewhat common set of political beliefs unique to American and held by most Americans. By using these we can help create a framework from which we can analyze the political processes and government structures of the United States.

### **America’s Core Values**

As stated in your text, “an understanding of America’s ideals begins with the recognition that they are based on the notion that the government exists to serve the people. The cornerstone of society is the individual rather than the government.” Your textbook discusses these concepts in depth, but let us summarize them here:

**Liberty.** The principle that individuals are should be free to act and think as they choose, provided they do not infringe unreasonably on the freedom and well-being of others. Also rooted in this core value is the concept of **individualism**, which is defined as “a commitment to personal initiative and self-sufficiency; it rests on the belief that the people should be free of undue government restraints as they seek to advance themselves economically.”

**Equality.** This is “the notion that all individuals are equal in their moral worth and thereby entitled to equal treatment the law.” This is an interesting concept in that it is not so clearly stated constitutionally and has been a point of deep divisions in its interpretation.

**Self-government.** “The principle that the people are the ultimate source of governing authority and should have a voice in their governing.” It has as its basis some of the concepts of John Locke, whom we will discuss more in depth in the Second Chapter, that the people are the ultimate source of governing authority and that their general welfare is the only legitimate purpose of government.

According to your author, these beliefs are mythical and symbolic in nature, and do not always match reality. Also keep in mind that these are general principles, not fixed rules of conduct, and thus are subject to conflict when putting them into practice. Political ideals have a powerful influence on American politics by shaping what people expect from politics and helping to define the boundaries of acceptable action. Thus, as stated by your author, “A defining feature of the U.S. political system is Americans’ ongoing pursuit of the political ideals upon which the nation was founded.”

## **Politics**

According to your textbook, politics can be defined as “the process through which a society settles its conflicts and decides the policies by which it will be governed.” Political scientist Harold Lasswell defined it as the struggle to determine “who gets what, when, and how”. It involves conflict and the struggle for lesser resources. Political conflict is rooted in two general conditions of society: 1) scarcity, society’s resources are finite, but people’s appetites are not; 2) differences in values, people see things in different ways. In very basic terms, those that have “it” want to keep “it”, those that don’t have “it” want to get “it”.

## **Government**

Government can be defined as the effort of people to find agreeable ways of living together. It is, essentially, a social institution. We can also view it as a public institution with the authority to allocate values in society. It is a way for defining the relationships between people within a society. One of the unique aspects of government in America, as we will discover, is the multiple levels of government throughout the country.

Two aspects to government:

- 1) the **institutions** in a society which make decisions that affect the whole society
- 2) it also involves the **processes** by which decisions are made.

Know this: government is deeply involved in politics, but politics is also found in other aspects of society.

### **Sovereignty and the Social Contract**

Sovereignty can be defined as the ultimate authority to govern. Under our system of government, each individual has the authority to govern themselves. They concede some of this sovereignty to a government to help make an orderly society. This is the basis of what is called the “social contract”, first theorized by Thomas Hobbes, which creates an unwritten bond between those who are governed and those who do the governing. This is discussed further in Chapter 2 and in a special handout which you can download and read.

### **Legitimacy**

The belief people have that their government is based upon morally right principles, and that therefore they should obey its laws. All governments, in order to be effective, must have this. Somehow, the people must recognize the right of the government to govern.

### **Democracy**

According to your textbook, “democracy is a form of government in which the people govern, either directly or through elected representatives.” It is a form of government based upon the theory that the legitimacy of any government must come from the free participation of its citizens. It is based on the idea of the consent of the governed, which has come mostly to mean majority rule.

### **Constitutionalism**

Rules of this restrict the lawful uses of power, and relate specifically to the idea “that there are limits on the rightful power of government over its citizens. In a constitutional system, officials govern according to law, and citizens have basic rights that government cannot deny or abridge.” Your textbook then goes on to cite examples, such as freedom of expression, of things that government cannot take away from its citizens. Remember, a constitution is a limiting document, its purpose to limit the powers of government.

### **Capitalism**

A set of rules governing the distribution of costs and benefits. It “holds that government should interfere with the economy as little as possible.” It emphasizes free enterprise and individual self-reliance. A major characteristic of the American system is a sharp

distinction between what is political, and therefore to be decided in the public arena; and what is economic, and therefore to be settled in the private realm.

### **Public policy, Power, and Authority**

What government formulates, or, as per your textbook, “a decision by government to pursue a particular course of action.” Laws, rules, regulations, ordinances - all these things are examples of public policy. There is seemingly no end to the policies that government formulates. This is largely in response to what you, the tax-paying public, requests.

Your textbook warns that, “Rules are necessary in politics because the stakes are so high.” Competition for power among a great many interests of all kinds is a major characteristic of American politics. Those who decide political issues are said to have **power**, a term that “refers to the ability of persons, interests, or institutions to control policy decisions.” Many people seek to influence public policy, and use a variety of resources to achieve this. Considering all of the factors that can come from policy decisions it is no surprise that people seek political power. Power exercised through the laws and institutions of government is known as authority. **Authority** can be more strictly defined as the recognized right to make binding decisions.

### **Theories of Power in Modern Democracies**

According to your text, there are four different theories of modern democracy in America, and who is able to exercise power under each:

- 1) **majoritarianism**. This is the concept that the numerical majority prevails not only in counting votes but also in determining public policy. This is sometimes referred to as classical democracy. The problem with this form of democracy is that sometimes minority groups can get overlooked when considering public policy. It is also rare that majorities make decisions under our system of democracy.
- 2) **pluralism**. This holds that policies are effectively decided through power wielded by special interests that dominate particular policy areas. It helps to protect the rights of minorities. It tries to assure representation for all segments of a diverse (**pluralistic**) society. The problem with this form of democracy is that many times the will of the majority is thwarted.
- 3) **elitism**. This holds that policy is controlled by a small number of well-positioned, highly influential individuals. It is NOT democratic at all. In most theories of elitism the elite is an economic elite who controls the principal economic resources and products in society. The elite uses its economic power to gain and hold political power, sometimes openly and sometimes covertly.

- 4) **Bureaucratic rule.** The idea that power resides in the hands of career government bureaucrats. Mostly proposed by German sociologist Max Weber, it argues that all large organizations tend toward the bureaucratic form, with the result that decision-making power devolves to career administrators whose experience and knowledge of policy issues exceed those of elected officials.

No one of these theories completely explains how decisions are made, but each has its merits, and, as we shall see during this semester, helps to explain how things happen within our government institutions and processes. Indeed, the author of your text states that “each of these theories...must be taken into account in any full explanation of politics and power in America”.

## Political System

Government is essentially a political system. It exists to resolve conflicts in society (figure 1-2, Page 27). This is a model of our political system and shows how the various parts of the American government are interdependent and how they function. The framework for our government is the Constitution.

### CONSTITUTIONAL FRAMEWORK

Includes provisions for limited government (e.g. checks and balances), representative government, civil liberties and civil rights.

Inputs	Political Institutions	Outputs
Includes public opinion, voting and other forms of participation, political parties, campaigns, interest groups, and the news media	Includes the major institutions of government: Congress, the presidency, the judiciary, and the bureaucracy	Includes laws, programs, and other actions in such areas as economic policy, social policy, foreign policy, and defense policy