

# 1

## **Introducing Government in America: Government, Politics, and the Policymaking System**

### **□ Chapter Overview**

Politics and government matter. By emphasizing the role of public policy, Edwards' text helps students understand how government and politics affect their everyday lives. To that end, Chapter 1 establishes the foundation for the balance of the text by introducing questions fundamental to the study of politics, government, and public policy. We begin by exploring the key functions of government. We then turn to consider the nature of American democracy, focusing on three specific questions: What is the nature of a democratic politics? How can citizens affect policy? And conversely, how does policy affect citizens? We conclude by exploring contemporary debates over the limits of democracy and the proper role of government in the United States today.

## □ Study Outline

1.1

**Learning Objective 1.1: Identify the key functions of government and explain why they matter. (p. 9)**

### **Government**

- The institutions through which public policy is made are collectively known as government. The key functions of government are:
  - **Maintain a national defense:** A government typically maintains armed forces to protect its sovereignty.
  - **Provide public goods and services:** The government provides **collective goods**, those goods and services which cannot be denied to anyone, as well as other goods and services which may be provided by both the government and the private sector, such as college and medical care.
  - **Preserve order:** The government is responsible for maintaining public order, sometimes using extreme measures, if needed.
  - **Socialize the young:** The government pays for public education as a means of instilling knowledge and pride in the nation in the young.
  - **Collect taxes:** The government uses tax money to fund the public goods and services it provides.

1.2

**Learning Objective 1.2: Define politics in the context of democratic government. (p. 11)**

- **Politics** is the process by which government leaders and policies are selected.
- The activities in which citizens engage in order to influence that selection are known as **political participation**, which may take the form of voting, running for office, or by getting involved in political action groups.
- **Single issue groups** include members who are uncompromisingly committed to a particular issue.

1.3

**Learning Objective 1.3: Assess how citizens can have an impact on public policy and how policies can impact people. (p. 12)**

- The **policymaking system** is the process by which the people shape public policy.
- The political processes and channels through which the concerns of the people are translated into public policy are **linkage institutions**, such as political parties, elections, interest groups and the media.
- Through these linkage institutions, concerns reach the **policy agenda** from which the policymaking institutions select issues to be addressed.

1.4

**Learning Objective 1.4: Identify the key principles of democracy and outline theories regarding how it works in practice and the challenges democracy faces today. (p. 15)**

***Democracy in America: Traditional Democratic Theory***

- Traditional democratic theory suggests that five characteristics are needed in order to make a political system democratic:
  - **Equal right to vote:** The public has the right to **vote** for government representatives, and the principle of one person, one vote is generally respected.
  - **Opportunities for effective political participation:** Citizens must have equal opportunities to express their **political views** by such means as voting or joining political groups such as **political parties**.
  - **Enlightened understanding:** The public should be informed about various political and social issues to formulate judgments and make **informed decisions**.
  - **Citizen control of the political agenda:** The issues taken up by the government should reflect those issues that are of concern to the people.
  - **Social inclusion:** All people subject to the laws of a nation must have the opportunity to become citizens and to possess all the **rights of citizenship**.
- In addition, democratic political systems must balance two principles that often conflict:

- **Majority rule:** Decisions are made by a vote of the **majority** to reflect the will of the largest percentage of citizens.
- **Minority rights:** The American political system protects some rights of the **minority** against the majority.
- Freedom of speech and of petition, for example, allows the minority to express its opinions despite **majority rule**.

### *Three Contemporary Theories of American Democracy*

- Traditionally, two main competing theories describe contemporary American politics: pluralist theory and elite theory. A third, hyperpluralist theory, has been developed more recently.

#### *Pluralist Theory*

- The political system is composed of groups representing **competing interests**.
- The existence of such groups indicates that the government allows sufficient access to policymaking.
- The interests of the public may be more widely represented in government.
- Power is **decentralized** so that no one body or group has too much influence over policymaking.

#### *Elite and Class Theory*

- Government favors only a narrow percentage of the public, primarily the **wealthy**. Wealth is the main cause of political influence.
- Many political groups may exist, but the distribution of government resources among them is not necessarily equal. The more wealth and influence a group has, the more it benefits from the government.
- Groups do not have equal access to policymaking or equal power; **big business** plays a prominent role in politics because corporations that have money also have power.
- Businesses have tremendous advantages in their ability to organize, both through the concentration of their interests and through the interlocking relationships among the

people who run business and the government, and therefore out-compete other groups.

### *Hyperpluralism*

- The proliferation of political groups has weakened the government.
- Policies are often made by “subgovernments” or “iron triangles” composed of interest groups, the bureaucracies that regulate these groups, and the congressional committees that oversee these bureaucracies.
- With so many interests vying for political influence and so many points of access in government, power is decentralized, and, ultimately, policies become muddled and therefore less effective.

### *Challenges to Democracy*

- Modern democracies face numerous challenges from a variety of sources:
  - **Increased complexity of issues:** An increase in the knowledge base makes it difficult for average citizens to make informed decisions.
  - **Limited participation in government:** Citizens do not take full advantage of participation opportunities, as demonstrated by poor voter turnout.
  - **Escalating campaign costs:** An increase in the costs of running for office makes candidates increasingly dependent on PACs and further removed from democratic theory.
  - **Diverse political interests:** Diversity of population can lead to weak coalitions, which may result in policy gridlock.

### *American Political Culture and Democracy*

- American democracy is held together by a unifying political culture, a common set of political values that are widely shared in the nation, which includes liberty, egalitarianism, individualism, belief in a free market, laissez faire economics, and populism.
- In recent years, some scholars have worried that a polarization has taken place within the nation—a so-called culture war—threatening a division that might jeopardize the

nation's health. Other scholars disagree, saying there is little evidence of irreconcilable differences among groups, especially outside of political elites.

**1.5**

**Learning Objective 1.5: Outline the central arguments of the debate in America over the proper scope of government.**

(p. 25)

### ***The Scope of Government in America***

- The scope of responsibilities of the United States' government includes economic, military, and domestic activities. However, **individualism** in America makes the scope of the United States government comparatively small in relation to other democracies.

### **For Additional Review**

To understand more fully the important ideas of the government in America, review the relevant vocabulary terms in the chapter. To aid in your review, create flash cards or make sentences using the vocabulary terms. Review these vocabulary study aids in preparation for the test.

To understand more fully the important ideas of the government in America, develop and use effective strategies for taking notes on readings. Create a system of note-taking which allows you to write quickly and get down the basic concepts. Use the structure of the textbook as the structure of your notes. Review these notes in preparation for the test.

## **□ Review Questions**

### **Multiple-Choice Questions**

1. Which of the following best illustrates elite theory?
  - a. The idea that large interest groups such as AARP (American Association of Retired Persons) dominate government decision-making.
  - b. The idea that a small group of wealthy individuals dominate government policy-making.
  - c. The idea that contending interests are so strong within the United States that government is often weakened.
  - d. The fact that more than 20,000 special interest groups lobby Congress each year.
  - e. The idea that because of technologies such as the Internet and television, Americans are increasingly isolated from their government, jeopardizing the strength of traditional groups in society.