CHAPTER 1

Making Sense of American Politics

CHAPTER OUTLINE

I. The Nature and Role of Government and Politics
   A. What Is Government?
   B. What Is Politics?
   C. What Has Been the Role of Government in American History?

II. What Are the Fundamental Issues of Government and Politics?
   A. Who Should Govern?
   B. Where Should Governmental Authority Be Vested?

III. Understanding American Government and Politics
   A. The Power of Reason
   B. Political Myths and Stories
   C. Beliefs and Ideologies

CHAPTER SUMMARY

Government is so pervasive in our lives that it needs no introduction. Its impact can be seen in almost all aspects of society. The news media broadcast daily the actions and inaction of government. If we tire of hearing the news, we still cannot escape the presence of government because it affects our income, welfare, security, and environment. Yet even though government should be a subject that is well known to us, it is not. Americans tend to love their country but resent and suspect their government. We criticize politicians and doubt government’s positive influence in our lives.

Despite the interplay between citizens and government, myths often compose what we believe about government. Dispelling some of those myths will increase our understanding of the institutions, processes, tensions, and goals of government. Myths are described in this chapter as stories, proverbial sayings, and pervasive attitudes that have an impact on the way we think about the world around us. This textbook, particularly in Chapter 1, sheds light on American government. This chapter will help you recognize myths and understand their consequences.

Chapter 1 first discusses the significance of myths for politics in the United States and then deals with some basic concepts and activities of government, providing you with terms and ideas that will help you as you read the text and complete the course. This introductory chapter raises three fundamental issues about government and politics: How do we define government and politics? How does the U.S. political system deal with issues of who should govern and where authority should be vested? What role do myths, ideology, and reason play in helping us understand the American political system of government? As you prepare to read, you should be asking the same questions that the authors raise and wondering about what the answers will be. Throughout the chapters in this book, you will find that key terms, along with their definitions, are readily identified, and the authors have included a series of reading and comprehension questions at the end of each section. Use these tools to help keep your reading and understanding on track.
LEARNING OBJECTIVES
After carefully reading and studying the chapter, you should be able to:

1. Describe political myths, ideologies, beliefs, and how Americans use these items to shape their understanding of American government and politics.
2. Define government and differentiate it from politics.
3. Describe the changing role and importance of government in America.
4. Distinguish between the concepts of authority and power, and describe different traditional views on who should hold each in the United States.
5. Define democracy and distinguish direct democracy from republic.
6. Discuss American responses to the question of where—at the local, state, or federal level—government authority should be vested.
7. Identify and understand the competing views on the proper role of government expressed by liberalism, conservatism, populism, and libertarianism.

READING POLITICS & POPULAR CULTURE
1. What does John James Barralet’s print of George Washington being raised from his tomb by Father Time and the Angel of Immortality have on shaping political myths?
2. How do popular culture products that touch upon the subject of the 9/11 attacks, such as movies, books, songs, and video games, use myths to promote their messages and perspectives. (If you are stuck on an item to consider, consider the following examples: United 93 and Fahrenheit 9/11 (movies), Toby Keith’s “Courtesy of the Red, White, & Blue (The Angry American)” and Bruce Springsteen’s “The Rising” (music), the Department of Defense’s American Army (video game).
3. Do you think that cartoons, television, movies, music, etc., tend to promote different images of government because they are different types of media?

REVIEWING CHAPTER 1
Identifying Key Terms and Ideas
Fill in the following terms and definitions in the appropriate blanks:

1. The set of beliefs that tends to resist government interference in economic matters while favoring government action in private moral affairs is called _____.
2. A set of conceptual tools used to help people think about whether government is doing what it ought to be doing is called a(n) _____.
3. A representative democracy in which decisions are made by elected or appointed officials is a(n) _____.
4. Procedures used in many states and localities to allow citizens a direct vote in deciding public policy issues are called _____.

a. power b. politics c. myths d. elitist e. republic f. authority g. ideology h. democracy i. pluralist
5. The view that political power should be distributed as equally as possible to all citizens in a political system is a(n) _____ view of power.

6. According to the _____, memories of events such as the Great Depression, the 9/11 attacks, and the governmental response to Hurricane Katrina have fostered a perceived threat to American safety and security.

7. The view that political power should be in the hands of a relatively small group of top leaders who share a common understanding about the fundamental issues is a(n) _____ view of power.

8. The view that political power should be dispersed among many competing group leaders who share a common acceptance of the political system is a(n) _____ view of power.

9. The capacity of individuals occupying formal government positions to make and enforce public policies is called _____.

10. Those institutions and officials who execute and enforce public programs are a(n) _____.

11. The set of beliefs that government should do no more than what is minimally necessary in the areas of economic and personal freedoms is called _____.

12. Stories, stereotypes, and persistent attitudes about politics that have an impact on the way people think about government are called _____.

13. The act of influencing or controlling government for the purpose of formulating or guiding public policy is called _____.

14. The set of beliefs usually favoring government intervention in the economy but not in the private lives of individuals is called _____.

15. The set of beliefs that tends to favor government intervention in both economic and private matters is called _____.

16. A government based on the consent and will of the majority is a(n) _____.

17. The ability to influence the choices of other people and so to influence what goes on in government is called _____.

18. Strongly held assumptions or attitudes about politics and government which do not rely upon empirical evidence or narratives are called _____.
Understanding Facts and Concepts

True/False: If any part of the statement is incorrect, mark it F for false and write in the reason(s) why the statement is false.

1. T F Myths about American government are falsehoods spread by unpatriotic people.

2. T F Recent low congressional approval ratings have resulted in large turnover in the membership of Congress.

3. T F Myths can help a country by providing a sense of common social and political identity.

4. T F Although government in the United States performed traditional functions before the 1930s, since that time government activity has expanded greatly.

5. T F Most Americans employ reasoned analysis as the method for making sense of their political world.

6. T F Political beliefs emerge from an ongoing process called political socialization.

7. T F A democracy and a republic are one and the same thing.

8. T F In the United States, governing authority is vested in national, state, and local governments that share power.

9. T F When confronted with evidence that challenges deeply held beliefs Americans must reshape their views.
10. T F The pluralist view of power differs from the elitist in that the pluralist believes that power should be distributed as equally as possible to all citizens of the nation.

11. T F The major political ideologies of the United States all agree on the need for governmental activity to regulate private moral affairs.

12. T F Conservatives generally favor government intervention in the economy but oppose it in domestic issues like the control of pornography.

13. T F Populism and libertarianism have increased in popularity as more Americans have found that their views do not fit comfortably into either of the more traditional American political perspectives.

14. T F Initiatives and referendums allow for citizens to directly make public policy decisions.

15. T F Stories, proverbial sayings, and pervasive attitudes are important forms of myths that shape citizen attitudes on American politics.

16. T F Government has only become important to the lives of most Americans in the past seventy years.

17. T F Only recently has the government become involved in the economy.

18. T F Ideologies do not have to reflect extreme positions on issues.

19. T F The framers of the American constitution wanted citizens to be politically active according to their group interests.
20. T F American popular culture is there to entertain the public and is irrelevant in shaping the way citizens think about government and politics.

PREPARING FOR AN EXAM

Multiple-Choice Questions

Circle the letter of the correct answer.

1. Stories, proverbial sayings, and pervasive attitudes that help people make sense of government and the world around them are
   a. lies.
   b. myths.
   c. politics.
   d. ideologies.

2. Americans rely on myths because they
   a. help us simplify the complex world in which we live.
   b. help us define our place in the world and provide us with a common social/political identity.
   c. help guide and rationalize our behavior.
   d. all of the above.

3. The government includes which of the following institutions and officials.
   a. press, Internet bloggers, and news anchors
   b. special interest groups, lobbyists, religious leaders
   c. business leaders, nonprofit groups, and students
   d. judges, bureaucrats, and legislators

4. Which of the following is the best definition of politics?
   a. the capacity to make and enforce public policies possessed by individuals in formal government roles
   b. the act of influencing or controlling government for the purpose of formulating or guiding public policy
   c. the act of giving or offering money or favors to someone in a position of trust to induce dishonest behavior
   d. a belief in government based on the consent and will of the majority

5. Aristotle classified governments into ___ types.
   a. 5
   b. 3
   c. 2
   d. 7

6. Although governments in the United States performed traditional functions before the 1930s, since that time, government activity has
   a. declined dramatically.
   b. concentrated mostly on foreign affairs.
   c. been limited largely to social welfare programs.
   d. expanded enormously to address problems once solved by families and communities.
7. Historically, following Aristotle’s influence, democracy has often been
   a. welcomed as the best kind of government.
   b. feared as self-interested mob rule.
   c. rejected as government by the few.
   d. confused with monarchy.
8. A democracy and a republic are related in that
   a. both are opposed to libertarianism.
   b. a democracy is a representative form of a republic.
   c. a republic is an indirect kind of democracy.
   d. both put government directly in the hands of the people.
9. Initiative and referendum are
   a. stories that help people understand the world around them.
   b. systems of government in which appointed officials make policy.
   c. procedures for giving citizens a direct voice in making public policy decisions.
   d. mechanisms to prevent a public vote.
10. The capacity and ability to influence the choices of others and so to wield influence over government is
    a. authority.
    b. elitist.
    c. politics.
    d. power.
11. The idea that the United States would be better off if power were concentrated in the hands of a small, well-informed group of national leaders who understood the fundamental issues before the country and shared views on their solution is a(n)
    a. majoritarian view of power.
    b. elitist view of power.
    c. populist view of power.
    d. pluralist view of power.
12. The ancient Greeks made a distinction between two types of human understanding. Understanding gained through listening to stories and other narratives is referred to as
    a. logos.
    b. mythos.
    c. ouzo.
    d. none of the above.
13. Beliefs differ from reasoned analysis because
    a. they remain unchanged.
    b. they ignore common sense.
    c. they do not rely on empirical evidence or logic.
    d. they are not dependent on assumptions.
14. The belief that the government should intervene in economic affairs but stay away from regulations on abortion and sexual conduct could be described as
    a. liberal.
    b. majoritarian.
    c. libertarian.
    d. conservative.
15. Populists favor government intervention in
   a. both economic and personal matters.
   b. neither economic nor personal matters.
   c. economic but not personal matters.
   d. personal but not economic matters.

16. According to David Broder, direct participation in democracy
   a. should be expanded to more areas.
   b. is most important at the state and local level.
   c. can be damaging to our system of checks and balances.
   d. requires citizens to hold strict political ideologies.

17. Lincoln Chaffee’s electoral efforts in 2000 and 2006 illustrate a situation where voters are faced with a situation where
   a. their beliefs are challenged by conflicting evidence.
   b. party labels are completely irrelevant.
   c. they apply reasoned analysis.
   d. a ballot initiative reduced voter turnout.

18. Aristotle believed democracy to be
   a. the perfect form of government.
   b. a weak version of aristocracy.
   c. a mobocracy.
   d. a wrong form of government in any situation.

19. How is governmental power distributed in the United States?
   a. Equally.
   b. Some members of society have a greater influence on government.
   c. According to groups.
   d. According to individual wealth.

20. Libertarians tend to favor
   a. government in both economic and personal matters.
   b. no government intervention in the economy but some intervention in personal matters.
   c. no government intervention in the economy or personal matters.
   d. government intervention in the economy but not in personal matters.

21. Conservatives tend to favor
   a. government in both economic and personal matters.
   b. no government intervention in the economy but some intervention in personal matters.
   c. no government intervention in the economy or personal matters.
   d. government intervention in the economy but not in personal matters.

Essay Questions

1. Who has the ability to influence government?
2. Who should govern? Describe several responses to that question in light of the concepts of political authority and of political power.
3. Who should govern in America? Describe how procedures such as initiatives and referendums support your answer.
4. List and define four different ideological opinions about how much government should do.
5. What are political myths, and how do they influence American government?
ANSWER KEY

Reading Politics & Popular Culture
1. Barralet’s print is a good example of how pervasive myth-creating imagery can become. This particular image was used on household china and on the dome of the U.S. Capitol building. The imagery elevates Washington to a mythical status. The imagery is not satirical, but emboldens the viewer to conclude that Washington’s greatness is recognized by supernatural forces. This approach minimizes the actual history of Washington’s life.

2. There are, of course, multiple avenues of analysis for this exercise, but the attempt to pay attention to the ways that events are manipulated in popular culture offers an exercise in the appropriation of events for a variety of meanings; especially prominent are myths of vulnerability, mourning, and revenge. Consider the extreme contrasts that can be found among popular culture portrayals of the same event.

3. Here are some things to think about when answering this question. How does visual perception change your perception of events, that is, do media differences such as camera perspective make a difference? Do the accounts of politics lyrically expressed in the music you listen to depend on style of music to facilitate the point? That is, does it make a difference whether the sound is punk or easy listening if the words are the same?

Identifying Key Terms and Ideas
1. k
2. g
3. e
4. p
5. n
6. r
7. d
8. i
9. f
10. j
11. o
12. c
13. b
14. m
15. l
16. h
17. a
18. q
Understanding Facts and Concepts

1. False. Myths about American government are stories and attitudes that help people understand what is happening in government.

2. False. Despite the public’s generally low regard for Congress, voters have consistently reelected their representatives.

3. True.

4. True.

5. False. The complex nature of the U.S. political system is often too difficult and time consuming for many people to figure out.

6. True.

7. False. A republic is a type of democracy—a representative democracy.

8. True.

9. False. People may open themselves up to an alternative view, but they may also choose to ignore or filter out the new information.

10. False. That would be the majoritarian view of power; the pluralist view holds that power should be distributed among many competitive elites who share a common acceptance of the rules of the political game.

11. False. Both the major ideologies of liberalism and libertarianism tend to oppose governmental intervention in personal and private matters.

12. False. Conservatives generally oppose governmental intervention in the economy but favor intervention in private moral affairs.

13. True.

14. True.

15. True.

16. False. While the size of government has grown in the past seventy years, it has always played a central role in shaping the economic and social lives of Americans.

17. False. Governments have always been involved in economies. Notice, for example, that governments guarantee the value of money.

18. True.

19. False. Madison, for example, in Federalist 10 is very interested in designing a government that reduces the ability of citizens to organize to pursue their more immediate interests.

20. False. The words and images used in American popular culture reflect the realities of American life and in turn shape that reality. These sights and sounds are relevant in shaping citizen perceptions of government and politics.

Multiple-Choice Questions

1. b

2. d

3. d
Essay Questions

1. Your answer should argue for one of the following and should be supported with specific examples:
   - Elites
   - Pluralist groups

2. Select one of the following as the answer to be supported and compare it to the other possible answers. Give specific examples to support your answer.
   - Democracy
   - Aristocracy
   - Monarchy

3. Make sure you address the following points:
   - Aristotle’s three types of government
   - Differences between a democracy and a republic
   - Pros and cons of initiatives and referendums.
4. Pick one of the following ideologies and demonstrate why you think it is the best. Give specific examples to support your choice.
   - Liberalism
   - Conservatism
   - Libertarianism
   - Populism

5. Address the following points:
   - Myths may be innocent falsehoods, or they may be serious distortions.
   - Myths simplify complex problems.
   - Myths help define our place.
   - Myths surround our most important institutions and people.
   - Myths help us organize and make sense of new information.