Chapter Focus

The purpose of this chapter is to show that while the American political system is “biased against action” (constitutional restrictions), it has developed into a large and activist set of collective institutions affecting virtually every aspect of the average citizen’s life. The factors associated with this development and the implications of growth are covered in this chapter. After reading and reviewing the material in this chapter, you should be able to do each of the following:

1. Identify the key factors associated with the growth of government.
2. Describe the restraints on the growth of government.
3. Compare and contrast the respective feature of the “old” versus “new” policy-making systems.
4. Summarize the pros and cons of changing the contemporary American political system both in terms of structure and process.

Study Outline

I. Introduction
   A. Original constitution designed to make adoption of new policies difficult
      1. Checks and balances
      2. Separation of powers
   B. Yet, how to explain contemporary big government
      1. Federal government spending at 25 percent of GNP
      2. Federal debt of 3 trillion dollars
      3. Government employees: 3 million civilians, 2 million military
      4. Many other government rules, policies, powers
   C. For first 150 years, a “limited” federal government
      1. No debt
      2. Limited military
      3. Business regulation left to states
      4. State politicians more prominent
      5. Predictable policies by parties on tariff
II. Restraints on Growth
   A. Three restraints in nineteenth and early twentieth century
      1. Constitution limited federal policies in commerce, individual rights as then interpreted
      2. Popular opinion supported a limited governmental role
      3. Potential interest groups lacked necessary political resources
   B. Other “public-interest” elites were absent

III. Relaxing the Restraints
   A. Constraints on federal action have weakened or disappeared
      1. Courts have changed interpretation of Constitution
      2. Bill of Rights extended to states
      3. Citizens can use federal courts
      4. Business now regulated
      5. Broad discretion granted to bureaucracy
   B. Public and elite opinion demanded federal expansion
   C. Wide distribution of political resources
      1. Number of interest groups have grown
      2. Easier access to federal courts
      3. TV and mass protests
      4. College education more common
      5. Political candidates must present wider, mass issues
   D. The old system
      1. Small agenda of political issues
      2. Limited leadership circle
      3. Small congressional staff; presence of congressional coalitions
      4. Importance of states’ rights
      5. Focus of policy debate was domestic
      6. Debate over “legitimacy” of new issues
      7. Presidency less powerful
      8. Only crisis forced government into bold action
   E. The new system (began in the 1930s)
      1. Large policy agenda
      2. End of debate over legitimacy of government action
      3. Diffusion/decentralization of congressional power
      4. Multiplication of interest groups
      5. Debate over “managing” rather than “ruling” (examples: Social Security, civil rights, deficit, and Medicare)
   F. Old-new systems—essential differences (see CHAPTER BOX)
      1. Hard to start new program versus hard to change existing system
      2. Power centralized versus power decentralized
   G. Two periods in U.S. politics changed political landscape
      1. Early 1930s—depression/New Deal
      2. Mid-1960s—intellectual/political ferment; LBJ election—“Great Society” and “War on Poverty”
      3. The two periods changed political America
      4. 1960s probably more important since changes in pattern of leadership
   H. Reagan administration
      1. Very conservative
      2. Few legislative breakthroughs
      3. Increased federal spending and 1981 tax cut
4. Huge deficit
5. Difficulty in reducing budget a reflection of decentralization

I. Republican congressional agenda since 1994 (“Contract with America”)
   1. Many proposals did not pass Senate or vetoed by President
   2. Success: Turnback of AFDC

IV. Should the System Be Changed?
   A. Two critics: federal government too weak or too strong
   B. Reducing the barriers to action
      1. Separation of powers precludes effective national leadership
      2. Increase in presidential authority needed to increase accountability
      3. President, not Congress, must be in charge of the bureaucracy
   C. Proposals for reducing the separation of powers
      1. Presidential appointment of members of Congress to cabinet
      2. Permit president to dissolve Congress
      3. Special election for a failing president
      4. “Team” president and congressional representatives in each district
      5. Single six-year term for president
      6. Increase term of House members from two to four years
      7. Reforms would combine old and new systems
   D. Critics of proposals
      1. British parliamentary system has not worked better than U.S. system
      2. Congressional cabinet officers no guarantee of greater legislative success
      3. Special elections are expensive and confusing for voters
      4. District “team” would be destabilizing
      5. Six-year term would reduce presidential accountability
      6. System’s problems mainly the result of ineffective leaders
   E. Making the system less democratic
      1. Government does too much, not too little
      2. No politician has incentive “to do less for anybody”
      3. Must avoid pushing “add button” repeatedly through either a balanced budget amendment or a limit on taxes
      4. Big government hard to manage
      5. Allow president true line-item veto
      6. Narrow authority of federal courts
   F. Critics reaction
      1. Government spends money not in budget
      2. President could use line-item veto to spend more
      3. Curtailing courts is an attack on citizens’ rights
   G. Term limits
      1. Unclear if term limits would make system more or less democratic
      2. Proposal: House members six terms and senators two terms
      3. Possibility that courts might not uphold
      4. Effect uncertain, either create citizen-legislator or make dependent on staff and interest groups
      5. Unlikely since doubtful Congress would propose such an amendment
   H. Who is right?
      1. Two-hundred-year-old Constitution is not necessarily outdated
      2. Compare U.S. government to other nations
Key Terms Match

Match the following terms and descriptions.

a. line-item veto
b. New System
c. Old System
d. term limits

1. ____ The American policy-making system characterized by a small agenda, domination by central leadership, debates over the legitimacy of policies, and a focus on domestic affairs.
2. ____ A power that would permit the president to disapprove a particular part of a bill and to approve the remainder.
3. ____ The American policy-making system characterized by a large agenda, the diffusion power in Congress, debates over funding and administration of policies, and the multiplication of interest groups.
4. ____ A proposal to limit members of the House to six terms and senators to two terms.

Did You Think That…?

Three misconceptions are listed below. You should be able to refute each statement in the space provided, referring to information or argumentation contained in this chapter. Sample answers appear at the end of the Study Guide.

1. “American government has always been large, powerful, and expensive.”

2. “American government has always had the right to enter new policy areas, such as civil rights or industrial regulation.”

3. “The separation of powers in the American political system makes it virtually impossible for government to enact meaningful legislation.”
II. Practicing for Exams

**True/False.** Read each statement carefully. Mark true statements *T*. If any part of the statement is false, mark it *F*, and write in the space provided a concise explanation of why the statement is false.

1. The Framers anticipated the increase in the scope of government activities that has occurred during this century.

2. Until recently, most senators and representatives served only one or two terms of office.

3. Politically, it is easier to enact new programs than to terminate outmoded ones.

4. Throughout the nineteenth century, the Supreme Court expanded its powers in the name of equality.

5. Pressure to expand the scope of government lessened with the demise of the labor movement in the early 1920s.

6. An example of the expanded role of government today is that businesses are regulated to a greater degree than they had been previously.

7. Today, the federal government’s participation in almost any activity is considered legitimate.

8. One factor contributing to government’s expanded role today is that the courts are giving a narrower interpretation to the Constitution.

9. Under the Old System of American politics, government took bold action only during times of war.
10. The Old System of politics was characterized by small government, concern for states’ rights and local constituents, and political leadership that was closed to outsiders.

11. One characteristic of the New System of American politics is the concentration of power in the hands of congressional leaders.

12. Under the New System, debate is more likely to focus on the legitimacy of a government policy than on its administration.

13. The New System is marked by conflict among a great many political participants.

14. Two events that catalyzed government expansion during this century were the Great Depression and the Vietnam War.

15. Policy making is likely to be greatest when party representation in Congress is evenly balanced and debate is most spirited.

16. The Reagan era was marked by drastic cuts in government spending.

17. Under Republican leadership, Congress, after 1994, enacted legislation to cut taxes, devolve back onto the states control over many programs, produce a balanced budget by the year 2002, and lessen the extent of regulation of economic activity.

18. When the text refers to reducing the separation of powers as a means of making government more effective, it means giving the president more power.

19. One approach to reducing the separation of powers would be to shorten the terms of members of the House from four years to two.
20. Reducing the separation of powers would probably increase the political clout of interest groups.

21. The basic argument for separation of powers is that it makes the president and Congress more accountable and less powerful.

22. Someone who advocates a smaller role for government would make government less responsive to interest groups and individual wants.

23. Critics of big government would favor a line-item vote for the president.

24. Some states now limit the number of terms its congressional representatives can serve.

25. A critic of term limits might argue that they give too much power to incumbents.

26. Members of Congress are limited to no more than four consecutive terms in office.

Multiple Choice. Circle the letter of the response that best answers the question or completes the statement.

1. The most striking change in American government during the twentieth century was the:
   a. extent to which its powers have become diffused among state and local governments.
   b. dramatic expansion in the scope of its activities.
   c. striking reduction in the power of the presidency.
   d. centralization of congressional power.

2. Which of the following was true with regard to government regulation of business until the mid-twentieth century?
   a. It was mandated by the Supreme Court.
   b. It was handled by the federal government.
   c. It was uniformly prohibited by the Supreme Court.
   d. It was left to the states.
3. One major difference between government today and government a hundred years ago is that a hundred years ago:
   a. presidents were more powerful.
   b. Congress did more.
   c. the Supreme Court was more activist.
   d. most legislators served one or two terms of office.

4. Politicians routinely make a variety of promises to the voter. Which of the following statements about this observation is true?
   a. It is less true today than ever before.
   b. It is an inevitable result of democracy in a pluralistic society.
   c. It could change if voters took more time to inform themselves on the issues of the day.
   d. It is of only minor consequence in understanding American politics.

5. In the nineteenth century, the Supreme Court would have struck down as unconstitutional any attempt by Congress to:
   a. pass legislation dealing with public morals.
   b. enact legislation vetoed by the president.
   c. allow major issues to be settled by the states.
   d. delegate major responsibilities to executive agencies.

6. For a century and a half after the creation of the Republic, the powers that government could exercise were limited. One reason for this was:
   a. pressure from foreign powers to keep government small.
   b. the absence of a constitutional bill of rights.
   c. the Court’s narrow interpretation of the Constitution.
   d. the power of the national media.

7. For a century and a half after the creation of the Republic, the powers that government could exercise were limited. One reason for this was:
   a. the Court’s broad interpretation of the Constitution.
   b. tight party control of government agencies.
   c. a lack of political resources among interest groups.
   d. term limits for members of Congress.

8. In recent decades, several factors have brought about an expansion of the role of the federal government. Which of the following is not one of these factors?
   a. the extension of the Bill of Rights to states
   b. public demands for a more activist role by government
   c. reduced government regulation of business
   d. greater access to the political system among interest groups

9. One effect of greater government authority in policy making has been to:
   a. expand the definition of what government can do legitimately.
   b. reduce the influence of elite opinion on the government’s agenda.
   c. centralize power in both Congress and the federal bureaucracy.
   d. extend the property rights of most businesses.
10. Which of the following characterized the New System of policy making in America?
   a. presidential press conferences
   b. “insider” lobbying
   c. weak congressional chairmen
   d. few congressional subcommittees

11. Which of the following characterized the Old System of policy making in America?
   a. court restraints on government’s exercise of economic powers
   b. political parties dominated by activists chosen in primaries and caucuses
   c. a long policy agenda marked by bitter debates over funding
   d. a broad view of individual freedoms

12. Which of the following characterized both the early 1930s and the mid-1960s?
   a. economic prosperity
   b. huge Democratic majorities in Congress
   c. war
   d. party conventions as the primary means of selecting presidential candidates

13. The text states that the transition from the Old System to the New System of policy making occurred chiefly during two periods—the Great Depression and the mid-1960s—but that the latter was perhaps the more important
   a. because it also saw changes in the pattern of political leadership.
   b. because it witnessed the passage of so much unprecedented legislation.
   c. because it saw the end of interest-group politics.
   d. because it saw the creation of dozens of new government services.

14. One consequence of the increased scope of government power during this century is:
   a. a proliferation of interest groups.
   b. more efficient government.
   c. more respect for public officials.
   d. stronger political parties.

15. Despite his promises to the contrary, Ronald Reagan was unable during his presidency to:
   a. enact an income tax cut.
   b. increase military spending.
   c. reach an arm accord with the former Soviet Union.
   d. cut overall domestic spending significantly.

16. According to many critics, government could be made stronger and more responsive to the needs of citizens by:
   a. making the system less democratic.
   b. reducing presidential authority.
   c. mandating a balanced federal budget.
   d. reducing the separation of powers.
17. Many critics argue that the separation of powers strangles government and makes policy making difficult. The reasons they cite include all of the following except that it:
   a. limits effective national leadership.
   b. discourages compromise in passing legislation.
   c. gives interest groups too much power.
   d. limits presidential and congressional accountability.

18. One way that has been proposed to reduce the separation of powers is to:
   a. require presidential and congressional candidates to run as a team.
   b. enact a constitutional amendment calling for a balanced budget.
   c. limit the president’s right to use the line-item veto to block spending.
   d. allow presidents to serve an unlimited number of terms.

19. The separation of powers promotes rather than limits effective government by:
   a. discouraging client and interest-group politics.
   b. making legislators more accountable for their actions.
   c. giving citizens a means to fight the bureaucracy.
   d. freeing the president to lead without interference from Congress.

20. One disadvantage of having presidents and legislators run together in a district is that doing so might:
   a. enhance the separation of powers.
   b. destroy federalism.
   c. make government too powerful.
   d. make government inert.

21. Defenders of the American political system argue that the real problem is not the separation of powers but the:
   a. incompetence of key political leaders.
   b. failure of judicial review to curtail bad legislation.
   c. limited access that most citizens have to the system.
   d. power the president has over the bureaucracy.

22. Those who believe that the federal government is too strong and needs to be curtailed argue that the current system:
   a. already has too many checks and balances in it.
   b. emphasizes short-term benefits for some over long-term public interests.
   c. gives the president too much power to block legislation.
   d. discourages government activism and denies fundamental rights to many citizens.

23. Democracy in the United States requires politicians to:
   a. enact only those programs that are in the public interest.
   b. make promises to voters.
   c. study all issues closely.
   d. respond only to the needs of the electorate.
24. How would a line-item veto be used to reduce the federal deficit?
   a. It would give the legislature the power to veto a bill it feels will unbalance the budget.
   b. It would give the president the power to veto a bill he feels will unbalance the budget.
   c. It would give the legislature the power to veto part of a bill it feels will unbalance the budget.
   d. It would give the president the power to veto part of a bill he feels will unbalance the budget.

25. One proposal to change the political system is to impose term limits on members of Congress. How might this improve the system, according to proponents?
   a. It would encourage elected officials to do what was best and not what will get them re-elected.
   b. It would allow presidents to call for special elections whenever their popularity was great enough.
   c. It would reduce the amount of time and money spent on campaigns and allow officials to concentrate on their jobs.
   d. It would put an end to political corruption by placing incumbents and challengers on equal footing.

Essay. Practice writing extended answers to the following questions. These test your ability to integrate and express the ideas that you have been studying in this chapter.

1. What factors existed into the twentieth century that limited the scope of government in the United States? What changes finally occurred to bring an end to this limited role for government?

2. How might the adoption of each of the following measures affect the American political system, pro and con: (a) limiting presidents to a single, six-year term; (b) allowing presidents to dissolve Congress and call for a special election; (c) lengthening the terms of members of the House from two to four years; (d) giving presidents a true line-item veto; (e) requiring the president and congressional candidates to run as a team in each congressional district, and (f) term limits for members of Congress?

3. Several states have passed legislation that imposes term limits on their delegations to Congress. Why have they done this? What are some arguments against term limits?

4. In your opinion, is government in America too strong or too weak? If it is too strong, how can its power be reduced? If it is too weak, how can its power be increased?