

Government and the People in a Polarized Society



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The problem isn't that people don't understand how good things are. It's that they know, from personal experience, that things really aren't that good.

– NOBEL LAUREATE, ECONOMIST PAUL KRUGMAN

In an important book published in 2007, Paul Krugman shows how, since the 1980s, American society has become steadily more unequal. Following the Great Depression of the 1930s, from the 1940s to the 1970s America experienced what has been called a 'Great Compression' when incomes and wealth became more equally distributed. Since then, however, the rich have increased their share of income and wealth substantially, while the real incomes of poorer Americans have stagnated or even fallen.¹ In addition, beginning in the 1980s and accelerating since the late 1990s, American politics has been increasingly characterized by ideological polarization on a wide range of non-economic issues ranging from foreign policy and the environment to moral issues such as abortion, prayers in public schools and homosexual rights. Today, the Republicans are consistently on the right on these issues while the Democrats are (slightly less consistently) on the left. The upshot has been the emergence of a much more confrontational and abrasive style of politics centred on the proper role of government in society. Interestingly these differences do not easily align with the 'traditional' position of Democrats and Republicans on the role of government. For while the Republicans remain the 'hands off' party on such issues as the environment and welfare, they now seek a highly intrusive role for government on many of the moral issues, in education, homeland security, and, of course, in foreign policy. Meanwhile the Democrats remain active supporters of big government in social policy, the environment, many aspects of the economy and civil rights. There is, in fact, a deep paradox here, because for much of the history of the Republic, Americans have been suspicious of big government both in terms of its role in domestic affairs and in terms of its role in the wider world. Unlike the citizens of most West European states – and indeed of America's immediate neighbours, Mexico and Canada – Americans have always mistrusted the very *idea* of big government. Low taxes and limited public spending have been populist rallying cries since the beginning of the Republic. Today, however, the US has, in absolute terms, by far the largest government of any country on earth, which provides for a vast array of social and economic programmes as well as defence forces and commitments with global reach.

At the inception of the Republic, no question aroused as much passion as did the proper scope of the federal government in society. What the Founding Fathers decided on was an institutional structure that required the assent of several diverse constituencies (those electing the House, Senate and president) before a bill was passed. The presidential power of veto provided an additional check on government, as did the institution of federalism, which served further to fragment government in the new republic. These institutional features were both a product of and reinforced by a public philosophy of limited government. From the very beginning Americans accepted that government was a necessary evil and that essential services such as law and order, sanitation and education should be provided by state and local rather than the federal government. The first 10 amendments to the Constitution (the Bill of Rights) provided citizens with legal protection from a potentially intrusive central government. In particular, the First Amendment rights of freedom of speech, assembly and religion were designed to act as bulwarks against the power of the state. Americans also mistrusted standing armies. Instead they placed their

faith in a people's militia or, later, in armies and navies which would be largely disbanded once a national emergency had passed.

What is remarkable about the ensuing 150 years of American history is just how powerful an influence this public philosophy was. For it was not until the 1930s and the 1940s that the federal government assumed a permanent and extensive role in social policy and defence. But many Americans remain deeply ambivalent about these new functions. Support for the particular benefits provided by a range of social programmes such as Medicare and social security is high, but antipathy to the general notion of the federal government supporting those in need remains. Politicians from all sides preach the virtues of less government and lower taxes while promising to defend existing programmes. A similar tension exists in a range of conscience issues. Those who want to protect 'family values' are usually opponents of big government, yet the advance of their agenda would require strong government action in such areas as abortion, school prayer and the rights of sexual minorities. Politicians known to be tough on crime support an extension of the powers of government, including those of federal agencies such as the Department of Homeland Security (DHS). But these very same politicians often preach the virtues of limited government.

Nowhere is this tension more obvious than in foreign and defence policy. Public support for a major world role waxes and wanes according to the historical circumstances. It was high during and immediately after the Second World War, but fell dramatically in the aftermath of defeat in Vietnam. Even so the need to balance the power of the Soviet Union required the Americans to retain large armed forces, including the nuclear deterrent, whether they liked it or not. With the demise of the old communist enemy most commentators expected the US to take on a different role aimed at least in part towards advancing a humanitarian agenda, as the interventions in Somalia, Bosnia and Kosovo showed. After 9/11 all this was to change. US interventions abroad are now justified as part of the war on terrorism. By definition, this has involved the sort of military role that is associated with big government and strong states. Indeed, to many foreign observers America is now seen as an imperial power. And at home, new battle lines are being drawn between supporters and critics of this new role.

Of course, the balance between limited government and an expanded federal role ebbs and flows as historical events such as recessions and wars change values and interests, but never has it taken on the form it has today, with both Democrats and Republicans prepared to support an enhanced government role in order to fulfil strongly held ideological commitments in foreign, economic and social policy.

For an introductory textbook, ideological conflict in the context of deep ambiguity on the proper role of government provides a useful theme. It helps international comparison. In few countries has ideological polarization actually increased in recent years. On the contrary, in almost all comparable countries, including Britain, France, Germany and Italy, the political parties have been growing closer together, not further apart. Nor do these countries display the same level of uncertainty about the role of government or the 'state' as do Americans. Most citizens of France and Germany are perfectly happy to see the government provide for a wide range of services in welfare, transport and economic development. Americans, by way of

contrast, often seem to resent the role of the government in these areas while at the same time expecting the government to play a prominent role, especially during times of emergency or economic dislocation. *American Politics and Society* constantly makes comparisons of this sort, so educating students on the importance of a set of uniquely American beliefs and values.

These values are, of course, articulated in the context of the institutional structure of American politics. This structure has been the subject of much criticism in recent years. Critiques have been based in part on specific institutional arrangements, and in particular the separation of powers. With one party often controlling the presidency and another Congress, governing has, so the argument runs, become more difficult than in the past. Underpinning this critique is the simple fact that the American public have an unusually high degree of access to their political institutions – whether at the local, state or national levels. Access is facilitated not only by the sheer number and variety of democratically accountable political institutions, from local school boards through to the US Congress, but also by the fact that Americans take their First Amendment rights to express their views very seriously. Thus the many points of access for the expression of the democratic will are combined with a high expectation on the part of the public that their demands will be translated into policy.

The great paradox of the American arrangements is, of course, that open and free access to decision-makers does *not* always translate into the satisfaction of public demands. Often the very institutional complexity of the system cancels out competing demands and leads to incremental rather than radical change. It is this dynamic that explains many of the policy failures of recent years, such as the failure to reform the health-care system. Institutional arrangements thus facilitate the airing of sometimes strident public demands while often limiting what governments can actually do. Given the deepening ideological divide which has accentuated the intensity of public demands, it is perhaps unsurprising that public frustration with political institutions has increased markedly over the last few years.

These problems were amply illustrated during the 2008 presidential election campaign. The incumbent president George W. Bush, blamed for an unpopular war and a faltering economy, experienced among the lowest approval ratings of any president in the last 60 years (around 30 per cent), while Congress languished at an even lower, at 20 per cent. The Republican contender for president, John McCain, worked hard to dissociate himself from George Bush, while at the same time trying to please an increasingly angry and frustrated Republican right wing. As a Republican he could not promise reforms such as comprehensive health-care coverage for all Americans, but he insisted that the answer to America's foreign policy problems was increased military spending and a more activist role abroad. Democratic candidate Barack Obama argued precisely the opposite – major social policy reforms, especially in health care, withdrawal from Iraq and a scaling down of overseas military commitments. In no other recent election were the battle lines so clearly drawn. One thing is for sure, however, President Obama will have great difficulties building the coalitions necessary to implement radical changes. And this applies even in the context of unified government.

The Chapters to Come

The main purpose of this book is to lead the student through the main institutions of American federal government while at all times placing these institutions in a broader economic, social and comparative context.

Chapter 2 is devoted to a discussion of the role of beliefs and values in American politics and how these link in to the broader society and economy. As such it places a special emphasis on the remarkable way in which the tension in American political thought between the philosophy of limited government and high public expectations of the democratic process has been accommodated within a uniquely *American* ideology. Chapters 3 to 15 cover the main institutions and processes of American government, with each designed to provide basic information and to discuss the relevance of historical trends as well as the relevance of recent research findings in political science. Special attention is paid to the relationship between, on the one hand, the institutional structure of government and, on the other, the public's expectations of the performance of politicians and political processes. Chapters 16 to 20 are designed to add substance and perspective to earlier chapters by examining the policy process in five currently crucial areas: the regulation of public morality in such areas as civil rights; social policy; economic policy; the environment; and foreign policy. Chapter 21 attempts to assess the performance of American government at the turn of the century. Through the use of comparisons with other countries, the chapter makes an audit of the political system and provokes students critically to evaluate the government in terms of democratic responsiveness and public accountability. Particular attention is paid to the ways in which the US is now perceived from abroad and whether or not we are entering a new era where America is seen as a negative rather than a positive influence in world affairs.

The general orientation of this and earlier chapters reflects my conviction that the study of political institutions can be productive only when placed in the broader comparative and historical perspective. The alternative is to condemn the reader to an uninspired descriptive account, which is a fate I would not want to impose on any student of what is one of the most interesting subjects in social science.

Glossary

Great Depression The economic dislocation during the 1929–38 period

Note

- 1 Paul Krugman, *The Conscience of a Liberal* (New York and London: Allen Lane/Penguin Books, 2007).