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**LOWI  
GINSBERG  
SHEPSLE  
ANSOLABEHERE**

# **AMERICAN GOVERNMENT**

**a brief introduction**

**AMERICAN**  
**GOVERNMENT**  
A BRIEF INTRODUCTION



FIFTEENTH EDITION

# AMERICAN GOVERNMENT A BRIEF INTRODUCTION

**THEODORE J. LOWI** Late of CORNELL UNIVERSITY

**BENJAMIN GINSBERG** JOHNS HOPKINS UNIVERSITY

**KENNETH A. SHEPSLE** HARVARD UNIVERSITY

**STEPHEN ANSOLABEHRE** HARVARD UNIVERSITY



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Sandy, Cindy, and Alex Ginsberg

Rise Shepsle, Seth Shepsle, and Nilsa Sweetser

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# PREFACE

This Fifteenth Edition continues our endeavor to make *American Government: A Brief Introduction* the most authoritative and contemporary introductory text on the market. This major revision brings a renewed focus to the institutions, processes, and data that illuminate big questions about governance and representation in the United States. Those who have used the book in the past know that we have always emphasized the role of American political institutions. In every chapter we encourage students to think critically and analytically about how well the institutions discussed in that chapter serve the goals of a democratic society. To further support this goal, we have developed a new digital, adaptive study tool, InQuizitive, for the Fifteenth Edition. When assigned in conjunction with the chapter reading, InQuizitive helps students master the core concepts and ideas in each chapter, and challenges them to apply what they have learned.

This book was written for faculty and students who are looking for a little more than just “nuts and bolts” but prefer a brief-format text. No fact about American government is intrinsically difficult to grasp, and in an open society such as ours, facts abound. The philosophy of free and open media in the United States makes information about the government readily available. The advent of the internet and new communication technologies have further expanded the opportunity to learn about our government. The ubiquity of information in our society is a great virtue. Common knowledge about the government gives our society a vocabulary that is widely shared and enables us to communicate effectively with each other about politics. But it is also important to reach beyond that common vocabulary and to develop a more sophisticated understanding of politics and government.

The sheer quantity of facts in our society can be overwhelming. In a 24/7 news cycle it can be hard to pick out the stories that are important and to stay focused on them. Today, moreover, Americans may choose among a variety of news sources, including broadcast, print, and various online formats, all clamoring for attention. The single most important task for the teacher of political science is to confront popular ideas and information and to choose from among



them the small number of really significant concepts that help us make better sense of the world. This book aims to help instructors and students accomplish this task.

The major changes in this Fifteenth Edition are intended to combine authoritative, concise coverage of the central topics in American politics with smart pedagogical features designed to get students thinking about quantitative data and current issues. Highlights of the revision include the following:

- **A new Chapter 1 introduces the themes of representation and governance** that help students understand fundamental questions about American government. Throughout the text we use the themes of representation and governance to frame important questions about American politics. This organization helps students see how institutional rules and structures, history, and empirical evidence lead to a deeper understanding of the major topics in American politics.
- **New analysis of the 2018 midterm elections**, including data illustrations, walks students through what happened and why. Chapter 10 includes a section devoted to the 2018 elections, as well as updated data, examples, and other information throughout the book.
- **A new primer called “Making Sense of Charts and Graphs,”** by Jennifer Bachner (Johns Hopkins University) at the end of Chapter 1 sets students up to understand political data that they encounter in the news and in the course, including in the many new Timeplot and Analyzing the Evidence infographics throughout the book.
- **New coverage of public policy** from contributing author Elizabeth Rigby (George Washington University) is integrated throughout the book, including current coverage of issues like health care, the new 2017 tax law, the government’s role in higher education, and the “hidden welfare state.” The economic and social policy chapter (Chapter 13) has been completely revised to reflect updated scholarship.
- **New Policy Principle boxes**, also authored by Elizabeth Rigby, highlight the various players and structures that shape current policy debates, including congressional action on the opioid crisis (see Chapter 5), and federal versus state marijuana laws (see Chapter 3).
- **New and revised Timeplot** features use quantitative data to illuminate long-term trends in American politics. New Timeplots explore federal and state and local spending (see Chapter 3) and immigration from continent of origin (see Chapter 9).
- **Six new Analyzing the Evidence units** written by expert researchers highlight the political science behind the information in the book, while the remaining units have been updated with new data and analysis. Each

unit poses an important question from political science and presents evidence that can be used to analyze the question. The new units are

**“Making Sense of Charts and Graphs”** in Chapter 1, contributed by Jennifer Bachner (Johns Hopkins University)

**“State Policies on Renewable Energy”** in Chapter 3, contributed by David Konisky (Indiana University)

**“Is the Public Principled or Prejudiced When It Comes to Affirmative Action?”** in Chapter 4, contributed by David C. Wilson (University of Delaware)

**“Unilateral Action and Presidential Power”** in Chapter 6, contributed by Jon Rogowski (Harvard)

**“Explaining Vacancies in Presidential Appointments”** in Chapter 7, contributed by Sanford Gordon (New York University)

**“Public Support for Military Action”** in Chapter 14, contributed by Christopher Gelpi (The Ohio State University), Peter D. Feaver (Duke University), and Jason Reifler (University of Exeter)

This Fifteenth Edition of *American Government: A Brief Introduction* is accompanied by a new innovative assessment tool, InQuizitive, an adaptive learning tool that offers a range of “nuts and bolts,” as well as applied and conceptual questions, drawing upon features of the text, like the Analyzing the Evidence infographics, to help ensure that students master the material and come to class prepared. See the back cover for additional information on InQuizitive. We also offer a comprehensive resource package to support teaching and learning with *American Government: A Brief Introduction*, including the Norton Coursepack featuring additional book-specific activities that can be assigned through your Learning Management System, and a comprehensive test bank, revised for this new edition.

For the Fifteenth Edition we have profited greatly from the guidance of many teachers who have used earlier editions and from the suggestions of numerous thoughtful reviewers. We thank them by name in the Acknowledgments. We recognize that there is no single best way to craft an introductory text, and we are grateful for the advice we have received.

Benjamin Ginsberg  
Kenneth A. Shepsle  
Stephen Ansolabehere

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We note with sadness the passing of Theodore J. Lowi. We miss Ted but continue to hear his voice and to benefit from his wisdom in the pages of this book.

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We are more than happy, however, to absolve all these contributors from any flaws, errors, and misjudgments that this book contains. We wish it could be free of all production errors, grammatical errors, misspellings, misquotes, missed citations, etc. From that standpoint, a book ought to try to be perfect. But substantively we have not tried to write a flawless book; we have not tried to write a book to please everyone. We have again tried to write an effective book, a book that cannot be taken lightly. Our goal is not to make every reader a political scientist. Our goal is to restore politics as a subject of vigorous and enjoyable discourse, releasing it from the bondage of the thirty-second sound bite and the thirty-page technical briefing. Every person can be knowledgeable because everything about politics is accessible. One does not have to be a philosopher to argue about the requisites of democracy, a lawyer to dispute constitutional interpretations, an economist to debate public policy. We will be very proud if our book contributes in a small way to the restoration of the ancient art of political controversy.

Benjamin Ginsberg  
Kenneth A. Shepsle  
Stephen Ansolabehere

**AMERICAN**  
**GOVERNMENT**  
A BRIEF INTRODUCTION





# INTRODUCTION: GOVERNANCE AND REPRESENTATION

What if the United States replaced its current political system with a new Constitution and new institutions of government? Recently testifying before a Senate committee, former senator Tom Coburn (R-Okla.) bluntly told his former colleagues, “America doesn’t trust you anymore. That’s the truth.”<sup>1</sup> Coburn, who retired from the Senate in 2014, now leads a group calling for a convention of the states to bypass Congress and rewrite the U.S. Constitution. As we will see in Chapter 2, Article V of the Constitution lists this type of convention as one of the ways the Constitution can be amended, though the only such convention of the states ever held was the original Constitutional Convention of 1787.

Coburn’s group is mainly interested in the adoption of a constitutional amendment requiring the federal government to balance its budget. If it was actually held, however, a convention of the states would have unlimited authority to change the Constitution and the American system of government—a prospect welcomed by some and frightening to others.

What makes some Americans willing to go back to the constitutional drawing board? The short answer is a decline in public confidence in America’s institutions. Although Coburn represents just one group focused on one issue, many Americans believe that government is “broken.” In recent years, Americans have actually named government as the nation’s top problem, edging out the economy, unemployment, and even terrorism.<sup>2</sup> Fewer than 20 percent say they trust the government to do what is right.<sup>3</sup>



Asked for specifics, they often cite frustration with the government's apparent inability to get things done;<sup>4</sup> for example, after six months in office President Trump had made little headway in securing congressional approval for his signature proposals, such as the repeal of Obamacare and the repair of America's crumbling roads and highways. Many Americans also raise concerns about the honesty and fairness of voting and electoral processes, saying the government is not as democratic as they might have hoped.

These concerns point to two of the most fundamental issues of American democracy: governance and representation. **Governance** means making official decisions about a nation's affairs and having the authority to put them into effect. A **government** is the institution or set of institutions that makes such decisions. Governments develop policies and enact laws designed to promote the nation's security and welfare. Some citizens may not agree with particular policies and laws, so governments generally need the power to enforce them.

In some nations, governance is the responsibility of a small group of rulers who are apt to equate the nation's welfare with their own. In a democracy, however, ordinary citizens' voices are heard and taken into account when decisions are made. In modern democracies, citizens influence government by selecting at least some of their leaders. This process is called political

In a constitutional democracy like the United States, the powers of government are limited (by a constitution) and many perspectives must be taken into account (through democratic institutions).

### ■ Why do Americans care about representation and effective governance?

#### **governance**

The process of governing, which involves making official decisions about a nation's affairs and having the authority to put them into effect.

#### **government**

The institutions through which a land and its people are ruled.



## representation

An arrangement in which citizens select individuals to express their views when decisions are made.

**representation.** Generally, when the government makes decisions, the views of the majority as expressed through its representatives prevail. If laws and policies consistently run counter to the will of the majority or favor special interests, the legitimacy of the government—that is, the belief that the government’s actions are valid and proper—may be undermined.

The effectiveness and interplay of governance and representation are at the heart of America’s constitutional system—and when they are not working effectively, many Americans notice and become concerned. Throughout this book, as we examine the major features of American government, we will see that the themes of representation and effective governance—and how the two do or do not work together—underlie many important questions about today’s political system, from Tom Coburn’s call for a new constitutional convention to lawsuits charging that some states conduct elections in ways that give one party an advantage or deprive minorities of fair representation.

## After reading this chapter, you should be able to . . .

- Identify the main purposes of government and the major types of government, including constitutional democracy
- Define *politics* and explain how representation enables citizens to influence political decisions
- Describe three reasons why achieving effective governance and meaningful representation can be difficult, even when people agree on these principles



## WHY IS GOVERNMENT NECESSARY?

Before we turn to the particulars of the American political system, let’s consider the basic purposes of any government. Government enables a large group of people to live together as peacefully as possible. In the Declaration of Independence, America’s founders, influenced by the writings of the British philosopher John Locke (1632–1704), declared that governments were needed to promote “life, liberty and the pursuit of happiness.” A modern interpretation of these ideas might say government is necessary for three reasons: to maintain order, to protect property, and to provide public goods.

**Maintaining Order.** For people to live together peacefully, law and order are required, and these can be secured only by a government able to use force if needed to prevent violence and lawlessness and maintain citizens’ safety. This potential for the use of force may sound like a threat to “life, liberty, and the pursuit of happiness” until you think about the absence of government, or

anarchy. According to the British philosopher Thomas Hobbes (1588–1679), anarchy is even worse than the potential tyranny of government because anarchy is characterized by “continual fear, and danger of violent death . . . [where life is] solitary, poor, nasty, brutish and short.”<sup>5</sup> Governmental power can be seen as a threat to individual liberty, yet maintaining order and keeping people safe are essential so that we can enjoy that freedom.

**Protecting Property.** After the safety of citizens comes the security of their property. Protection of property is almost universally recognized as an important function of government. John Locke wrote that whatever we have created with our own labor is considered our property.<sup>6</sup> But even Locke recognized that although we have the right to own what we produce, that right means nothing if someone with greater power than ours decides to take what we own or trespass on it.

Something we call our own is ours only as long as laws help ensure that we can enjoy, use, consume, trade, or sell it. Property rights, then, can be defined as all the laws against theft and trespass that permit us not only to call something our own but also to make sure our claim sticks.

**Providing Public Goods.** Another British philosopher, David Hume (1711–1776), observed that although two neighbors may agree to cooperate in draining a swampy meadow, the more neighbors there are, the more difficult it will be to get the task done. A few neighbors might clear the swamp because they understand the benefits that each of them will receive from doing so. But as the number of neighbors who benefit from the clearing expands, many will realize that they all can get the same benefit if only a few clear the swamp and the rest do nothing.



One important role of government is to provide public goods, like national defense. National defense may benefit everyone within a country, but without government, no one has an incentive to pay for it on their own.

### public good

A good that, first, may be enjoyed by anyone if it is provided and, second, may not be denied to anyone once it has been provided. Also called *collective good*.

### free riding

Enjoying the benefits of some good or action while letting others bear the costs.

### autocracy

A form of government in which a single individual rules.

### oligarchy

A form of government in which a small group of landowners, military officers, or wealthy merchants controls most of the governing decisions.

### democracy

A system of rule that permits citizens to play a significant part in government, usually through the selection of key public officials.

### constitutional government

A system of rule that establishes specific limits on the powers of the government.

### authoritarian government

A system of rule in which the government's power is not limited by law, though it may be restrained by other social institutions.

A **public good** (or *collective good*) is a benefit that no member of a group can be prevented from enjoying once it has been provided. The clearing of the swamp is one example; national defense is another. National defense is one of the most important public goods—especially when the nation is threatened by war or terrorism. Enjoying a public good without working for it is called **free riding**. Without government's powers to enforce a policy to build a bridge or create an army, even the richest, most concerned citizens have no incentive to pay for it.

A government provides the processes, procedures, locations, and participants through which these three basic purposes can be fulfilled. Effective governments enact laws and develop policies to maintain order, protect property, and provide essential public goods like defense, public health and sanitation, basic education, and a transportation infrastructure. Governments that do not effectively fulfill these functions are often referred to as “failed states.” While we may disagree about how much and what government should do to address these basic purposes, most people agree that government has some role in each area.

## FORMS OF GOVERNMENT

Government comes in many different forms, as simple as a tribal council that meets occasionally to advise the chief or as complex as the United States' vast establishment with its forms, rules, governmental bodies, and bureaucracies. Governments vary in structure, size, and operating methods. Two questions are of special importance in determining how they differ: Who governs? And how much governmental control is permitted?

In some nations, political authority is held by a single individual—a system called **autocracy**. When a small group of landowners, military officers, or wealthy merchants controls most of the governing decisions, that government is an **oligarchy**. If many people participate, and the general population has some influence over the choice of leaders and their subsequent actions, the government is called a representative **democracy**.

Governments also vary in how they govern. In the United States and a number of other nations, governments are legally limited in what they control (substantive limits), as well as how they go about controlling it (procedural limits). These are called **constitutional governments**. In other nations—for example, Saudi Arabia—forces that the government cannot fully control, such as a powerful religious organization or the military, may help keep the government in check, but the law imposes few real limits. Such governments are called **authoritarian governments**. In a third group of nations, including the Soviet Union under Joseph Stalin or North Korea today, governments not only lack any legal limits but also seek to eliminate organized social groups or institutions that might challenge

their authority. Because these governments attempt to dominate all of a nation's political, economic, and social life, they are called **totalitarian governments**.

Which of these forms of government is best? Representative democracies, limited by constitutions, are not always the most efficient form. Because many voices must be heard, they can be slow to take action. However, citizens generally benefit from a constitution that protects against harsh or arbitrary governmental action, and from rules that require the government to take account of their welfare and views. A trade-off thus exists between efficiency and inclusiveness.

### **totalitarian government**

A system of rule in which the government's power is not limited by law and in which the government seeks to eliminate other social institutions that might challenge it.

## **A Brief History of Democratic Government**

The government of the United States is a representative democracy and is bound by a constitution that sets limits on what government can do and how it does it. With the possible exception of ancient Athens and several other ancient Greek city-states, such democracies were unheard of before the modern era. Prior to the seventeenth century, governments seldom took into account the opinions of their ordinary subjects. But in the seventeenth century, in a handful of Western nations, important changes began to take place in the character and conduct of government. How did these changes come about? How did we get to where we are today?

The key force behind the imposition of limits on governmental power in Europe was the emergence of a new social class called the *bourgeoisie*, a French word meaning “free residents of the city” (as opposed to landowners and rural residents who were legally required to provide labor to the landowners). The bourgeoisie later came to be thought of as the “middle class” or those engaged in commerce or in industry. To gain a share in the control of government—to join the monarchs and aristocrats who had dominated European governments for centuries—the bourgeoisie tried to change existing governmental institutions, especially parliaments, into ones in which they could actively participate politically.

Parliaments had existed for hundreds of years, controlling governments from the top and not allowing influence from below. The bourgeoisie embraced them as the way to wield their greater numbers and growing economic advantage against aristocratic rivals. The United States was the first nation founded mainly by members of the bourgeoisie, and so, not surprisingly, the first political institution the Founders built in their struggle against the British monarchy was a parliamentary body, the Continental Congress, which provided the collective foundation for colonial opposition to British power.

The bourgeoisie advanced many of the principles that became the central underpinnings of individual freedom for *all* citizens—freedom of speech, of assembly, and of conscience, as well as freedom from arbitrary search and seizure. It is important to note here that the bourgeoisie, including many of America's founders, generally did not favor democracy as such. They advocated political institutions based on elected representatives, but they favored setting conditions such as property requirements for voting and for holding office so as to limit participation to the middle and upper classes. Yet, once the right of

non-aristocrats to have a say in government was established, it was difficult in both Europe and America to limit the expansion of that right to the bourgeoisie. Others also wanted voting rights and representation. Indeed, governments found that expanding participation could be a useful way of encouraging citizens to pay their taxes and serve in the military.

## POLITICS: THE BRIDGE BETWEEN GOVERNMENT AND REPRESENTATION

The term *politics* broadly refers to conflicts over the character, membership, and policies of any organizations to which people belong. As the political scientist Harold Lasswell once put it, politics is the struggle over “who gets what, when, how.”<sup>7</sup> Although politics exists in any organization, in this book, **politics** refers to conflicts over the leadership, structure, and policies of governments—that is, over who governs and who has power. But politics also involves collaboration and cooperation.

The goal of politics, as we define it, is to have a say in who makes up the government’s leadership, how the government is organized, and what its policies will be. Such a say is called power or influence. Most people are eager to have some say in matters that affect them; indeed, over the past two centuries many individuals have risked their lives for voting rights and representation. In recent years, a large number of Americans have become more skeptical about how much “say” they actually have in government, and many do not even bother to vote. This skepticism, however, does not mean that Americans no longer want to have a voice in the governmental process. Rather, many of them doubt that the political system allows them real influence.

As we will see throughout this book, not only does politics influence government but the character and actions of government also influence a nation’s politics. The rules and procedures established by political **institutions** influence the forms that political activity may take. In some nations, the rules of politics limit participation to members of a particular ethnic group, political party, or noble family. In the United States, political participation is open to tens of millions of citizens, though some choose not to take part and others argue that they are improperly deprived of fair voting rights.

### Representation

Participation in politics is the key to representation in government. Those who participate have an opportunity to select representatives who will promote their interests when governmental decisions are made. In other words, representative government allows citizens an indirect say over policy through their direct influence

#### politics

Conflict and cooperation over the leadership, structure, and policies of government.

#### institutions

A set of formal rules and procedures, often administered by a bureaucracy, that shapes politics and governance.



In a representative democracy, citizens choose politicians whom they think will promote their interests. This delegation of power gives politicians a level of independence, but elections make them accountable to constituents.

on the selection of their representatives. As we will see later, Americans can participate in many forms of politics, including lobbying, working in a campaign, organizing a protest march, or even running for office. Most citizens, however, participate primarily through voting for representatives. The Constitution's framers designed the U.S. Congress to be the nation's chief representative institution. Its members are expected to speak on behalf of the people in their districts, representing the views and interests of numerous constituents when decisions are made in the Capitol.

In ancient Athens, democracy was institutionalized in an assembly, the *ecclesia*, where all citizens might express their views and vote. This sort of assembly was possible within the context of a small city-state. However, one could hardly expect all the citizens of the United States to gather in an amphitheater to engage in political debate. Even today, when technology might permit the construction of an electronic version of the *ecclesia*, could millions of citizens engage in the discussion, deliberation, and compromise needed to produce effective government?

Representation can take many forms. Some citizens prefer that their representatives share their own religious, gender, philosophical, or ethnic identities. This approach, often called **descriptive representation**, hinges on the idea that citizens can be confident in governmental decisions if those decisions are being made by others like themselves.

The framers of the Constitution, in contrast, believed that effective representation was tied to accountability. To the framers, the key to proper representation was the ability of citizens to select and remove—essentially to hire and fire—their representatives. Under the U.S. Constitution, citizens would be able to choose representatives whom they trusted to promote their interests and to depose those who failed to do so. This idea is known as **agency representation**, because representatives serve as the agents of their constituents.

#### **descriptive representation**

The type of representation in which representatives are trusted to make decisions on their constituents' behalf because they share the religious, gender, philosophical, or ethnic identities of their constituents.

#### **agency representation**

The type of representation in which representatives are held accountable to their constituents if they fail to represent them properly. That is, constituents have the power to hire and fire their representatives.