

1

Partisan Politics

How does the U.S. political system work? What are the major forces shaping political life? Who governs in the United States? Who gets what, when, how, and why? Who pays and in what ways? These are the questions pursued in this book.

Beyond Textbooks

Many of us were taught a somewhat idealized version of American government, which might be summarized as follows:

1. The United States was founded upon a Constitution fashioned to limit political authority and check abuses of power. Over the generations it has proven to be a "living document," which, through reinterpretation and amendment, has served us well.
2. The people's desires are registered through elections, political parties, and a free press. Government decision makers are kept in check by each other's power and by their need to satisfy the electorate in order to remain in office. The people do not rule directly but they select those who do. Thus, government decisions are grounded in majority rule — subject to the restraints imposed by the Constitution for the protection of minority rights.
3. The United States is a free and pluralistic nation of manifold social and economic groups. The role of government is to mediate the conflicting demands of these groups. Although most policy decisions are compromises that seldom satisfy all interested parties, they usually allow for a working consensus. Hence, every significant group has a say and no one group chronically dominates.

4. These institutional arrangements have given us a government of laws and not of individuals, which, while far from perfect, allows for a fairly high degree of liberty and popular participation.

This view of the United States as a happy, pluralistic polity assumes that existing political institutions operate with benign effect; that power is not highly concentrated nor heavily skewed toward those who control vast wealth; and that the state is a neutral entity with no special linkage to those who own the land, technology, and capital of this and other societies. These assumptions will be challenged in the pages ahead.

The theme of this book is that our government more often represents the privileged few rather than the general public, and that elections and the activities of political parties are insufficient defenses against the influences of corporate wealth. It will be argued that the laws of our polity are written principally to advance the interests of the haves at the expense of the rest of us. Even when equitable as written, the law usually is enforced in highly discriminatory ways. This “democracy for the few” is a product not only of the venality of particular officeholders but a reflection of the entire politico-economic system, the way the resources of power are distributed.

The American people are not always passive victims (or willing accomplices) to all of this. The mass of ordinary people have made important political and economic gains, usually after long and bitter contests that have extended beyond the electoral process. This democratic struggle is an important part of the story that will be treated in the pages ahead.

This book tries to demonstrate that just about every part of the politico-economic system, be it the media, lobbying, criminal justice, overseas intervention, or environmental policy, reflects the nature of the whole, and in its particular way serves to maintain the overall system — especially the system’s basic class interests. Therefore, seemingly distinct issues and social problems are often interrelated.

The political system comprises the various branches of government along with the political parties, laws, lobbyists, and private interest groups that affect public policy. By public policy I mean the decisions made by government. Policy decisions are seldom neutral. They usually benefit some interests more than others, entailing social costs that are rarely distributed equally. The shaping of a budget, the passage of a law, and the development of an administrative program are all policy decisions, all *political* decisions, and there is no way to execute them with neutral effect. If the wants of all persons could be automatically satisfied, there would be no need to set priorities and give some interests precedence over others; indeed, there would be no need for policies or politics.

Politics extends beyond election campaigns and the actions of government. Decisions that keep certain matters within “private” systems of power — such as leaving rental costs or health care to the private market —

are highly political even if seldom recognized as such. Power in the private realm is generally inequitable and undemocratic and often the source of conflicts that spill over into the public arena, for instance, management-labor disputes and racial and gender discrimination.

Someone once defined a politician as a person who receives votes from the poor and money from the rich on the promise of protecting each from the other. And President Jimmy Carter observed: “Politics is the world’s second oldest profession, closely related to the first.” Many people share this view. For them, politics is little more than the art of manipulating appearances in order to sell oneself, with the politician acting as a kind of prostitute. While not denying the measure of truth in such observations, I take a broader view. Politics is more than just something politicians do. It is the process of struggle over conflicting interests carried into the public arena. It also involves muting and suppressing conflicting interests. Politics involves not only the competition among groups within the system but the struggle to change the system itself, not only the desire to achieve predefined ends but the struggle to redefine ends and pose alternatives to the existing politico-economic structure.

The Politico-Economic System

Politics today covers every kind of issue, from abortion to school prayer, but the bulk of public policy is concerned with economic matters, which is why some writers refer to the “politico-economic system.” The most important document the government produces each year is the budget. Probably the most vital functions of government are taxing and spending. Certainly they are necessary for everything else it does, from delivering the mail to making war. The very organization of the federal government reflects its close involvement with the economy: thus, one finds the departments of Commerce, Labor, Agriculture, Interior, Transportation, and Treasury, and the Federal Trade Commission, the National Labor Relations Board, the Interstate Commerce Commission, the Securities and Exchange Commission, and numerous other agencies involved in the economy. Likewise, most of the committees in Congress can be identified according to their economic functions, the most important having to do with taxation and appropriations.

Politics and economics are two sides of the same coin. Economics is concerned with the allocation of scarce resources, involving conflicts between social classes and among groups and individuals within classes. Much of politics is a carryover of this struggle. Both politics and economics deal with the survival and material well-being of millions of people; both deal with the fundamental conditions of social life itself.

This close relationship between politics and economics is neither neutral nor coincidental. Governments evolve through history in order to protect

accumulations of property and wealth. In nomadic and hunting societies, where there is little surplus wealth, governance is rudimentary and usually communal. In societies where wealth and property are controlled by a select class of persons, a state develops to protect the interests of the haves from the have-nots. As wrote John Locke in 1689: "The great and chief end . . . of Men's uniting into Commonwealths, and putting themselves under Government, is the Preservation of their Property." And Adam Smith, the premier exponent of early capitalism, wrote in 1776: "The necessity of civil government grows up with the acquisition of valuable property." And "Till there be property there can be no government, the very end of which is to secure wealth, and to defend the rich from the poor."¹

Many political scientists manage to ignore the relationship between government and wealth, treating the corporate giants, if at all, as if they were but one of a number of interest groups. They label as "Marxist" any approach that links class, wealth, and capitalism to politics. To be sure, Karl Marx saw such a relationship, but so did more conservative theorists like Thomas Hobbes, John Locke, Adam Smith, and, in America, Alexander Hamilton and James Madison. Indeed, just about every theorist and practitioner of politics in the seventeenth, eighteenth, and early nineteenth centuries saw the link between political organization and economic interest, and between state and class, as not only important but desirable and essential to the well-being of the polity. "The people who own the country ought to govern it," declared John Jay. A permanent check over the populace should be exercised by "the rich and the well-born," urged Alexander Hamilton. Unlike most theorists before him, Marx was one of the first in the modern era to see the existing relationship between property and power as undesirable and exploitative, and this was his unforgivable sin. The tendency to avoid critical analysis of corporate capitalism persists to this day among business people, journalists, and most academics.²

Power is no less political because it is economic. By "power" I mean the ability to get what one wants, either by having one's interests prevail in conflicts with others or by preventing others from raising their demands. Power presumes the ability to manipulate the social environment to one's advantage. Power belongs to those who possess the resources that enable them to shape the political agenda and control the actions and beliefs of others, resources such as jobs, organization, technology, publicity, media, social legitimacy, expertise, essential goods and services, organized force, and — the ingredient that often determines the availability of these things — money.

Some people say our politico-economic system does not work and should be changed or overthrown; others say it does work or, in any case, we can't fight it and should work within it. Some argue that the existing system is "the only one we have" and moreover the only one we ever *could* have. They fear that a breakdown in this system's social order would mean a breakdown in all social order or a creation of something far worse. These

fearful notions keep many people not only from entertaining ideas about new social arrangements but also from taking a critical look at existing ones.

Sometimes the complaint is made: "You're good at criticizing the system, but what would you put in its place?" implying that unless you have a finished blueprint for a better society, you should refrain from pointing out existing deficiencies and injustices. This book is predicated on the notion that it is desirable and necessary for democratic citizens to examine the society in which they live, possibly as a step toward making fundamental improvements. It is unreasonable to demand that we refrain from making a diagnosis of an illness until we have perfected a cure. For how can we hope to find solutions unless we really understand the problem? In any case, an abundant number of solutions and fundamental changes are offered in the closing chapter and in other parts of this book.

Political life is replete with deceit, corruption, and plunder. Small wonder that many people seek to remove themselves from it. But whether we like it or not, politics and government play a crucial role in determining the conditions of our lives. People can leave political life alone, but it will not leave them alone. They can escape its noise and nonsense but not its effects. One ignores the doings of the state only at one's own risk.

If the picture that emerges in the pages ahead is not pretty, this *should not be taken as an attack on the United States*, for this country and its people are greater than the abuses perpetrated upon them by those who live for power and profit. *To expose these abuses is not to denigrate the nation that is a victim of them.* The greatness of a country is to be measured by something more than its rulers, its military budget, its instruments of dominance and destruction, and its profiteering giant corporations. A nation's greatness can be measured by the democratic nature of its institutions, by its ability to create a society free of poverty, racism, sexism, imperialism, and environmental devastation. Albert Camus once said, "I would like to love my country and justice too." In fact, there is no better way to love one's country, and strive for the fulfillment of its greatness, than to entertain critical ideas that enable us to pursue social justice at home and abroad.

Notes

1. John Locke, *Treatise of Civil Government* (New York: Appleton-Century-Croft, 1937), 82; Adam Smith, *An Inquiry into the Nature and Causes of the Wealth of Nations* (Chicago: Encyclopaedia Britannica, 1952), 309 and 311.

2. See William Appleman Williams, *The Great Evasion* (Chicago: Quadrangle, 1964), for an analysis of the way Marxist thought has been stigmatized or ignored by American intellectuals and those who pay their salaries.