American government

by GLEN KRUTZ, UNIVERSITY OF COLORADO BOULDER SYLVIE WASKIEWICZ · Language: EN

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Overview

American Government by Glen Krutz and Sylvie Waskiewicz is a comprehensive introductory textbook that explains the structures, processes, and functions of the U.S. political system. The book is designed for college students and general readers, covering the Constitution, federalism, civil liberties, civil rights, political participation, parties, elections, Congress, the presidency, the judiciary, and public policy. It emphasizes how government institutions interact and how citizens can engage with them, using contemporary examples and clear explanations to make complex topics accessible.

The book's main argument is that American government is a dynamic system shaped by historical context, institutional design, and citizen involvement. It traces the evolution of the Constitution and federalism, showing how power is distributed and contested among branches and levels of government. The authors stress that understanding these mechanisms is essential for effective civic participation and for addressing modern challenges such as polarization, inequality, and threats to democratic norms.

This textbook matters because it provides a balanced, evidence-based foundation for civic literacy. It equips readers with the knowledge to critically evaluate political news, participate in elections, and understand policy debates. By connecting foundational principles to current issues, it helps readers see the relevance of government in their daily lives and encourages informed engagement with the political system.

Key Takeaways

- The U.S. Constitution establishes a system of checks and balances that distributes power among three branches to prevent any one from dominating.
- Federalism divides authority between national and state governments, and the balance of power has shifted over time toward the national government.
- Civil liberties are protections against government action, while civil rights are protections against discrimination; both have been expanded through amendments and court rulings.
- Political parties and interest groups are key intermediaries that connect citizens to government, but they also shape the agenda and can polarize politics.
- Elections are the primary mechanism for citizen influence, but voter turnout in the U.S. lags behind many democracies due to registration barriers and other factors.

- Congress, the presidency, and the judiciary operate with distinct powers and constraints, and their interactions define policy outcomes.
- Public policy is made through a complex process involving agenda setting, formulation, adoption, implementation, and evaluation.
- Civic engagement goes beyond voting; it includes contacting officials, protesting, volunteering, and staying informed.

Chapter Summaries

Chapter 1: American Government and Civic Engagement

This chapter introduces the concept of government and the importance of civic engagement. It explains the functions of government, the principles of democracy, and the various ways citizens can participate. It also discusses the challenges of civic engagement in the modern era, including declining trust and the role of media.

Chapter 2: The Constitution and Its Origins

This chapter traces the historical context of the U.S. Constitution, including the colonial experience, the Articles of Confederation, and the debates at the Constitutional Convention. It explains the compromises that shaped the document, such as the Great Compromise and the Three-Fifths Compromise, and outlines the basic principles of the Constitution, including separation of powers and checks and balances.

Chapter 3: American Federalism

This chapter examines the division of power between the national and state governments. It discusses different models of federalism, the constitutional basis for federalism, and the evolution of federal-state relations over time. It also covers the role of grants-in-aid and mandates, and the current debates over states' rights versus national authority.

Chapter 4: Civil Liberties

This chapter focuses on individual freedoms protected by the Bill of Rights and other constitutional provisions. It covers freedom of speech, religion, press, assembly, and petition, as well as the rights of the accused. It discusses landmark Supreme Court cases and the balance between liberty and security, especially in times of crisis.

Chapter 5: Civil Rights

This chapter explores the struggle for equal treatment under the law, including the abolition of slavery, the civil rights movement, and the expansion of rights to women, minorities, and other groups. It covers key legislation such as the Civil Rights Act of 1964 and the Voting Rights Act of 1965, and discusses ongoing issues of discrimination and inequality.

Chapter 6: Public Opinion

This chapter examines how public opinion is formed and measured. It discusses the factors that shape political attitudes, such as family, education, and media, and the methods used to poll the public. It also considers the influence of public opinion on policy and the limitations of polling.

Chapter 7: Voting and Elections

This chapter covers the mechanics of elections in the United States, including voter registration, turnout, and the electoral college. It explains the different types of elections (primary, general, local) and the factors that influence voter behavior. It also discusses campaign finance and the role of money in politics.

Chapter 8: Political Parties and Interest Groups

This chapter analyzes the role of political parties in organizing elections and governing, and the function of interest groups in advocating for specific causes. It discusses the history of the two-party system, third parties, and the strategies interest groups use to influence policy, including lobbying and campaign contributions.

Chapter 9: Congress

This chapter describes the structure and powers of the U.S. Congress, including the House of Representatives and the Senate. It explains the legislative process, the role of committees, and the influence of party leadership. It also discusses the challenges of passing legislation and the relationship between Congress and other branches.

Chapter 10: The Presidency

This chapter examines the executive branch, focusing on the powers and duties of the president. It covers the constitutional basis of presidential power, the roles of the president (chief executive, commander-in-chief, etc.), and the growth of the modern presidency. It also discusses the executive branch bureaucracy and the president's relationship with Congress and the public.

Chapter 11: The Judiciary

This chapter explains the structure and function of the federal court system, including the Supreme Court. It discusses the process of judicial appointment, the concept of judicial review, and the factors that influence court decisions. It also covers the limits on judicial power and the role of courts in interpreting the Constitution.

Chapter 12: Public Policy and Administration

This chapter provides an overview of how public policy is made and implemented. It covers the policy-making process, including agenda setting, formulation, adoption, implementation, and evaluation. It also discusses the role of bureaucracy in carrying out policies and the challenges of effective administration.

Themes

- Checks and balances
- Federalism
- Civil liberties and rights
- Civic engagement
- Institutional design
- Policy process

Notable Quotes

- "The Constitution of the United States is the supreme law of the land." — Opening discussion of the Constitution's authority in Chapter 2.
- "Federalism is a system of government in which power is divided between a central government and regional governments." — Definition provided in Chapter 3 on American Federalism.
- "Civil liberties are protections against government actions." — Introduction to the concept in Chapter 4 on Civil Liberties.
- "The right to vote is the foundation of democratic government." — Discussion of voting rights in Chapter 7 on Voting and Elections.

Frequently Asked Questions

What is American government about?

American Government is a college textbook that explains the structure and functions of the U.S. political system. It covers the Constitution, federalism, civil liberties, civil rights, political participation, elections, and the three branches of government. It aims to help students understand how government works and how they can engage with it.

Is American government worth reading?

Yes, if you want a clear, comprehensive introduction to U.S. government and politics. The book is well-organized, uses current examples, and is written for beginners. It is particularly useful for students taking an introductory course or anyone seeking to understand the basics of American political institutions and processes.

How does American government end?

Spoiler: The book concludes with a chapter on public policy and administration, summarizing how policies are made and implemented. It emphasizes the importance of civic engagement and encourages readers to participate in the political process. The final sections reinforce the idea

that government is a shared responsibility.

Who should read American government?

This book is ideal for college students enrolled in introductory American government courses, as well as high school students taking AP U.S. Government. It is also suitable for general readers who want a thorough, accessible overview of how the U.S. political system operates, including its institutions, processes, and key issues.

How long does it take to read American government?

The book is approximately 700 pages long, including appendices and index. At a typical reading speed of 250 words per minute, it would take about 12 to 15 hours to read cover to cover. However, most readers use it as a textbook, reading chapters selectively over a semester.