

## Preface to *American Politics Today*

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Our book is based on three simple premises: politics is conflictual, political process matters, and politics is everywhere. It reflects our belief that politics is explainable, that political outcomes can be understood in terms of decisions made by individuals—and that the average college undergraduate can make sense of the political world in these terms. It focuses on contemporary American politics, the events and outcomes that our students have lived through and know something about. The result, we believe, is a book that provides an accessible but rigorous account of the American political system.

*American Politics Today* is also the product of our dissatisfaction with existing texts. Twenty-five years ago we were assistant professors at the same university, assigned to teach the introductory class in alternate semesters. While our graduate training was quite different, we found that we shared a deep disappointment with available texts. Their wholesale focus on grand normative concepts such as civic responsibility or their use of analytic themes such as collective action left students with little idea of how American politics really works, how events in Washington affect their everyday lives, and how to piece together all the facts about American politics into a coherent explanation of why things happen as they do. These texts did not engender excitement, fascination, or even passing interest. What they did was put students to sleep.

The first three editions of this book broke new ground in both approach and content. In the Fourth Edition, our themes continue to embody our belief that we can move beyond simply describing what happens in political life to predicting and explaining behavior and outcomes -- and

that we can do so in an introductory class. In part we wish to counter the widespread belief among students that politics is too complicated, too chaotic, or too secretive to make sense of. More than that, we want to empower our students, to demonstrate that everyday American politics is relevant to their lives. This emphasis is also a response to the typical complaint about American government textbooks—that they are full of facts but devoid of useful information, and that after students finish reading, they are no better able to answer “why” questions than they were before they cracked the book.

In this edition, we maintain our central focus on conflict and compromise in American politics—identifying what Americans agree and disagree about and assessing how conflict shapes American politics, from campaign platforms to policy outcomes. While this emphasis seems especially timely given the budget crisis of 2013, the hotly contested midterm elections in 2014, and the intense debates (and often stalemates) in Congress over health care reform, immigration, and economic opportunity, our aim is to go beyond these events to identify a fundamental constant in American politics: the reality that much of politics is driven by disagreements over the scope and form of government policy, and that compromise is an essential component of virtually all significant changes in government policy. Indeed, it is impossible to imagine politics without conflict. Conflict was embedded in the American political system by the Founders, who set up a system of checks and balances to make sure that no single group could dominate. The Constitution’s division of power guarantees that enacting and implementing laws will involve conflict and compromise. Accordingly, despite the general dislike people have for conflict, our students must recognize that conflict and compromise lie at the heart of politics.

Throughout the text, we emphasize common sense, showing students that politics inside the Beltway is often strikingly similar to the students’ own everyday interactions. For example, what sustains policy compromises made by members of Congress? The fact that the members typically

have long careers, that they interact frequently with each other, and that they only deal with colleagues who have kept their word in the past. These strategies are not unique to the political world. Rather, they embody rules of thumb that most people follow (or are at least aware of) in their everyday interactions. In short, we try to help students understand American politics by emphasizing how it is not all that different from the world they know.

This focus on common sense is coupled with many references to the political science literature. We believe that contemporary research has something to say about prediction and explanation of events that students care about—and that these insights can be taught without turning students into formal theorists or statisticians. This emphasis has the secondary benefit of tying the introductory course to the wider political science discipline, including the American politics subfield and work on democracies more generally. To this end we include a link in each chapter to an online feature (“What Do Political Scientists Do?”) that talks about a specific piece of research, setting out the author’s research question and showing how he or she went about answering it. These boxes are augmented by videos in which the authors discuss their research, as well as how they came to be interested in politics and political science. Together, the boxes and videos allow us to offer deeper explanations of political phenomena, as well as reinforce our argument that political science research is both understandable and relevant.

The Fourth Edition builds on these strengths. First, we have worked to streamline and improve the presentation of text and graphics. The result is a text that is even more accessible to students. We also have improved the pedagogy by revising already extensive review and quiz material at the conclusion of every chapter and added smart new graphics—“How it Works in Practice,” and many new figures and tables—within the chapters. In the Fourth Edition, new or revised chapter openers use contemporary stories and examples (from student loans to marijuana legalization to the Syrian civil war) to highlight the conflict and compromise theme. We refer to these openers throughout

the chambers to illustrate and extend our discussion. You also might be happy to know that we did all of this while cutting the length of the book by 10%!

We do not frame the text in terms of any one theory or approach. We present the essential insights of contemporary research, motivated by real-world political phenomena and explained using text or simple diagrams. This approach gives students a set of tools for understanding politics, provides an introduction to the political science literature, and matches up well with students' common-sense intuitions about everyday life. Moreover, by showing that academic scholarship is not a blind alley or irrelevant, this approach helps to bridge the gap between an instructor's teaching and his or her research.

The text continues to be ruthlessly contemporary. While we do not ignore American history, our stress is on contemporary politics—on the debates, actions, and outcomes that most college students are aware of. Focusing on recent events emphasizes the utility of the concepts and insights that we develop in the text. It also goes a long way toward establishing the relevance of the intro class. The new edition discusses the rapidly changing acceptance of same-sex marriage, attempts to address sexual assaults in the military, and debates over income inequality – all issues that affect everyone's lives.

Finally, our book offers an individual-level perspective on America's government. The essential message is that politics—elections, legislative proceedings, regulatory choices, and everything else we see—is a product of the decisions made by real flesh-and-blood people. This approach grounds our discussion of politics in the real world. Many texts focus on abstractions such as “the eternal debate,” “the great questions,” or “the pulse of democracy.” The problem with these constructs is that they don't explain where the debate, the questions, or even democracy come from. Nor do they help students understand what's going on in Washington and elsewhere, as it's not obvious that the participants care much about these sorts of abstractions—quite the opposite, in fact.

We replace these constructs with a focus on real people and actual choices. The primary goal is to make sense of American politics by understanding why politicians, bureaucrats, judges, and citizens act as they do. That is, we are grounding our description of American politics at the most fundamental level—an individual facing a decision. How, for example, does a voter choose among candidates? Stated that way, it is reasonably easy to talk about where the choice came from, how the individual might evaluate different options, and why one choice might look better than the others. Voters' decisions may be understood by examining the different feasible strategies they employ (issue voting, retrospective evaluations, stereotyping, etc.) and by asking ourselves why some voters use one strategy while others use a different one.

By focusing on individuals and choices, we can place students in the shoes of the decision makers, and in so doing, give them insight into why people act as they do. We can discuss, for example, why a House member might favor enacting wasteful pork-barrel spending, even though a proposal full of such projects will make his constituents economically worse off—and why constituents might reward such behavior, even if they suspect the truth. By taking this approach, we are not trying to let legislators off the hook. Rather, we believe that any real understanding of the political process must begin with a sense of the decisions the participants make and why they make them.

Focusing on individuals also segues naturally into a discussion of consequences, allowing us to move from examining decisions to describing and evaluating outcomes. In this way, we can show students how large-scale outcomes in politics, such as inefficient programs, don't happen by accident or because of malfeasance. Rather, they are the predictable results of choices made by individuals (here, politicians and voters).

The policy chapters in the Full and Essentials Editions also represent a distinctive feature of this book. The discussion of policy at the end of an intro class often fits awkwardly with the material

covered earlier. It is supposed to be a culmination of the semester-long discussion of institutions, politicians, and political behavior, but instead it often becomes an afterthought that gets discarded when time runs out in the last few weeks of class. Our policy chapters explicitly draw on previous chapters' discussions of the actors that shape policy: the president, Congress, the courts, interest groups, and parties. By doing so, these chapters show how all the pieces of the puzzle fit together.

Finally, this book reflects our experience as practicing scholars and teachers, as well as interactions with over fifteen thousand students in introductory classes at several universities. Rather than thinking of the intro class as a service obligation, we believe it offers a unique opportunity for faculty to develop a broader sense of American politics and American political science, while at the same time giving students the tools they need to behave as knowledgeable citizens or enthusiastic political science majors. We hope that it works for you as well as it does for us.