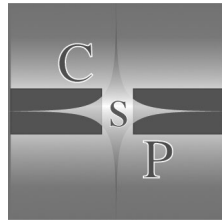


How American Politics Works

How American Politics Works:
*Philosophy, Pragmatism, Personality
and Profit*

By

Richard J. Gelm



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To the memory of Robert H. Benz and to my own niece and nephews, Andrea, Jeremy, Marc, Andrew and Aaron.

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PREFACE AND ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

Politics is a manifestation of human nature and historical change. American politics reflects who Americans are and what they want to become. Americans want politics to operate according to their best nature, and sometimes it does. But just as people struggle on a personal level to follow their own better values, the political system sometimes succumbs to our worst nature. Lofty ideals are hindered by individual aspirations. Even public leaders drawn by a sense of the public good are susceptible to personal ambition. Many pursue careers in government to help their fellow man, but some are in it for personal gain. Most seek some form of both. This can be seen in every sector of human activity. American politics is not exempt.

This book seeks to explain the American political system through the “four Ps”: Philosophy, Pragmatism, Personality and Profit. By examining these diverse human motives, the sometimes contradictory and perplexing system of American politics can make more sense. Chapters are dedicated to the Constitution, Federalism, Civil Liberties, the Media, Political Parties and Elections, Interest Groups and Money, the Congress, the President, the Courts, and Economic Policy. For each institution the philosophical and moral principles upon which it is built are explored before examining the historical development of the system. The book identifies key personalities that have played integral roles in America’s history, as well as the preeminent position of money as the fuel of American politics. Policy is rarely made to conform to lofty principles alone. It often results from short-term incremental compromise, driven by people in pursuit of noble goals and personal self-interest.

The increasing importance of personalities in American politics has moved political discourse further from policy and principle and toward the negative name calling and personal attacks that have turned many away from television news coverage of politics. Perhaps most importantly, however, the core human motives of self-interest and the pursuit of profit drive individuals to seek their own interests rather than the general public interest. While self-interest is celebrated as the foundational value of a successful capitalist economic system, it is shunned in the political realm. Controlling self-interest in politics, while rewarding it in the economic realm, sets the public up for disillusion.

Despite public pessimism, American politics still works. Alternative systems are fraught with even greater problems. The success of the American system, however, rests in the hands of an informed public that can counterbalance the self-interest of narrow groups. Turning away from politics is exactly the wrong way to avoid the further deterioration of the system.

Succumbing to simplistic stereotypes that “all politicians are in it for the power” and “they are all out to make money” leads to dangerous pessimism. While the public must remain vigilant against those who seek personal gain at the expense of the common good, citizens must stay committed to a system, which although flawed, is our best hope. The proper balancing of ambition and idealism through pragmatic compromise is the dynamic and safeguard of American politics. *How American Politics Works* offers a comprehensive presentation of the realities, challenges and possibilities of the American political system to bring an understanding, fascination and dedication to the wider American public.

I am very grateful to all of those who contributed to this project including my distinguished friends, family and colleagues who read the manuscript and offered helpful suggestions, including Stephen Sayles, Thomas Caughron, Senator George McGovern, Richard H. Gelm, June Gelm, Robert H. Benz, David Benz and Candice Valdinaire. Zoila Garcia, Maria Munoz and Kristin Howland provided invaluable assistance in dictation, editing and secretarial support. The entire staff of Cambridge Scholars Publishing, including Carol Koulikourdi and Amanda Millar, was especially supportive. I also thank all of my students at the University of La Verne who, over the last 15 years, have helped me sharpen my ideas in the classroom through their intriguing questions and clever comments. They have inspired me with the confident belief that the American political system, though often criticized, is accessible and does work. I also thank my brother John Gelm and Melanie Thiemann for suggesting several years ago the idea for a book on American politics that would be accessible to a wide audience. I hope I have achieved what they helped envision. Any and all errors, however, are mine alone. I take full responsibility for any deficiencies in this book.

CHAPTER ONE

AMERICAN POLITICS: AN INTRODUCTION

American politics is complicated, sometimes contradictory and often times baffling, because politics as a uniquely human endeavor is by nature perplexing. People are influenced by numerous motives and consequently, politics takes on multiple forms. In the 21st century, American politics has been ridiculed, belittled and criticized by the media, the public and politicians alike, but simultaneously the system is held out as a model for the world. Most Americans are at best disinterested in participating in politics.¹ Voter turnout in America is near the bottom among all industrialized democracies.² And yet some give their lives for the preservation of political freedom.

The purpose of politics is to resolve our most contentious disagreements. It requires us to examine ourselves. And it requires struggle.³ The process of politics is disillusioning, because by its nature, it is rancorous and combative.⁴ Its language often borrows from warfare, as we debate the “war on poverty,” discuss “strategies and tactics” and engage in “election battles.”⁵ But politics is also noble. It is a way to achieve peace, feed and clothe the hungry, care for the sick, clean and preserve the environment and provide public education.

Unfortunately, in surveys taken since 1952, between 60 and 70 percent of Americans have agreed with the statement that, “Sometimes politics and government seems so complicated that a person like me can’t really understand what’s going on.”⁶ But, it does not need to be. Accepting the inevitable paradoxes of politics without becoming so disillusioned and dropping out, is essential to the survival of American democracy.

The Political Context

The word politics conjures up a wider variety of definitions and emotions than just about any other word. For some, politics represents scandal, backroom deal making, nasty conflict, and protection of narrow interests against the best interests of the whole.⁷ Others live and breathe politics. It is a life vocation. Lofty principles motivate activists to work

toward creating a more just world, sometimes risking their lives in pursuit of civil rights and the abolition of poverty. Some are moved to tears by the sound of the nation's anthem or the words of a great president, while others cringe at politicians who seem obsessed with their own interests. Some others couldn't care less. For them, politics is a boring exercise of bantering "talking heads."

Most are selective about their interest and passion. The same individual who cheats on his taxes is often militant about demanding his Social Security benefits. Many who voice vociferous "support for the troops" in Iraq are unwilling to pay higher taxes to fund them. Motives for political action range from deeply held philosophical and moral principles to raw greed. Some are drawn to public service to help others. Others seek personal gain. Most seek a combination of both.

Perhaps most frustrating is that in American politics there are few fixed rules and the rules of the game are in flux. The American political rulebook is the U.S. Constitution. The document itself, however, is notoriously brief. Most of the rules of politics are not even discussed in the Constitution. And where its provisions are specific, they can be changed through formal amendment, court interpretation, and changing American values.

The foundational values that support the system are subject to change. Basic principles like "all men are created equal," "equality of opportunity," and "individual liberty," though widely held, are often compromised in practice. And when they are enforced, the inherent ambiguity of the principles themselves leads to inevitable disagreement.⁸ Most Americans, for example, would agree that "family values" should guide public policy. Liberals emphasize taking care of the needy and weakest, which is a central principle of family life. Conservatives tend to call for "tough love" to encourage other tenets of a strong family, like individual responsibility and personal growth. Even families struggle with these principles.

Clarity and consensus on values would not necessarily guarantee they would be a priority. Values often give way to expediency. Tight governmental budgets may prevent government from fulfilling its pledges. Compromise on principles, though sometimes necessary, helps foster disillusionment among the faithful. Because American ideals are often illusive in practice, some have argued that American politics presents a "promise of disharmony."⁹

American politics must be viewed within the dynamic of human nature and historical change. Who Americans believe they are and what they want to become is integrally tied to the makeup of the American political

system. But the system has evolved through trial and error. Americans want politics to operate according to our best nature, but because of human limitations, it is also affected by our worst. Lofty ideals are hindered by individual ambition. The public seeks leaders drawn by a sense of the public good, but those same leaders are susceptible to personal ambition.

America's founders embraced philosophical principles touting the equality and natural rights of men, but they simultaneously recognized the darker side of human nature. The limits of men preclude any ideal implementation of policy. The founders themselves compromised their principles to achieve pragmatic solutions. Many of the founders admitted slavery was wrong, yet they protected it in the Constitution to hold southern slave states in the Union. The strong personalities of Washington, Jefferson and Madison helped forge a new nation. But, as capable and high-minded as America's founders may have been, they were also human. They also sought personal gain.

American politics is not all noble, but neither is it without virtue. America has had leaders who genuinely cared about the betterment of the people and country, but they too were susceptible to self-interest. The cynic dwells on the examples of the latter, while the optimist focuses on the former. But, both coexist in the system of American politics, because politics inherently combines the best and the worst of people. Politics is a reflection of human nature. It is driven by philosophy, pragmatism, personality and profit.

Philosophy

Debate continues over whether or not the United States was founded on moral values. The question is not whether moral principles, philosophies or religion¹⁰ influenced our founders, but rather, which ones did. Americans have a long history of moralizing issues.¹¹ The philosophers who most influenced the founders, John Locke, Montesquieu, and the authors of the *Federalist Papers*, all stressed the importance of virtue in the formation of a good society.¹²

Politics is about disagreement over fundamental principles and values. It is the process by which people attempt to reconcile these differences in a peaceful and orderly way.¹³ Since politics results in government policy that determines the winning and losing values, David Easton has called politics the "authoritative allocation of values."¹⁴

All of us are guided to some degree by a worldview, a framework through which we evaluate the world. For some, this worldview may be based on a belief in following the guidelines set out by a supernatural

power. Others look to science. Many operate from a more personalized religion, or set of general opinions about human nature.¹⁵ Philosophical foundations, upon which we construct our view of the world and the relationship of humans within it, are the source of much political action.¹⁶ But Americans do not have a consensus on values.

Liberals and conservatives argue over the proper role of government and the morality of public policy. On welfare policy for example, liberals seek government intervention as a counterweight against corporate power. They view inequality as the result of the “raw self-interest” of corporations. Conservatives on the other hand, maintain that the values of hard work, individual initiative and talent determine the winners and the losers. They believe that the values of individual effort are undermined if the government takes from the successful and gives to those who fail.¹⁷ And then, liberals and conservatives even argue amongst themselves.¹⁸

But, these values have meaning in the political process. Presidential rhetoric appeals to these lofty principles. The Supreme Court looks to the *Federalist Papers*, which are widely considered to be the foundational documents of American political philosophy, when making its decisions.¹⁹ Public opinion and voting behavior are greatly influenced by values. Many studies have demonstrated that people use core principles and values in formulating their issue positions.²⁰

While political scientists debate the extent to which the general public thinks in terms of political ideology,²¹ Americans do cite values as important factors shaping their beliefs.²² Values influence our worldview, which in turn shapes our politics and positions on political issues.²³ Evidence suggests that Americans are not purely selfish in their politics. They incorporate both self and societal interests in the formation of their public policy positions.²⁴

In CNN exit polls from the 2004 presidential election twenty-two percent of respondents placed “values” at the top of their most important issues list.²⁵ Realizing the power of values to politically energize the public, Republican strategists in 2004 successfully positioned the same-sex marriage issue to mobilize conservative religious voters.²⁶ Cultural issues have been gaining salience in American politics, especially since 1968.²⁷ They are now central to liberal and conservative, and Democratic and Republican, differences. Passion driven politics can lead to significant conflict.²⁸ The present American political climate seems frozen as Democrats and Republicans lock horns in battle.

It is obvious that most Americans are not conversant in the philosophies of Locke, Montesquieu and the founding fathers, but they do acknowledge and hold sacred the general principles of equality, liberty and

justice,²⁹ what some have described as the “liberal tradition” in America.³⁰ While few are conversant in the philosophical debates on political rights, people infuse the concepts into their understanding of political life.³¹ Most can relate to the powerful metaphors of the “common man,” “pulling oneself up by one’s bootstraps,” and the “American dream.” These concepts are built on collective norms that have meaning in the context of our political attitudes and behavior.³²

The general public need not be conversant in philosophies and ideologies to be influenced by them. Research shows that the public relates to political issues similarly to ways in which elites frame them.³³ The level of elite rhetoric, however, has declined precipitously in recent years. And the decline in the public’s trust in government and politicians is in part, attributed to the increasing incivility of elites as they debate publicly on cable television.³⁴ Political candidates often stoke the fires of the cultural wars for political gain.³⁵

Understanding the moral and philosophical justifications behind our actions is crucial for explaining how American politics works, but only up to a point. Even on core values, Americans experience ambivalence.³⁶ American political philosophy has evolved and been modified over the years. Individuals struggle to find meaning in the values of right and wrong. Those who think they have the right answers are often unable to back them up with more than personal opinion. And even if we knew the right philosophy, America lacks a centralized government authority capable of imposing a single philosophy. As a result, the American system is criticized for contradictory policy. For example, the American government funds public efforts to combat smoking, but simultaneously subsidizes tobacco farmers.³⁷ Such incoherent policy is the result of thousands of isolated decisions and an inability to see the whole picture. Without definite answers, the best that may be accomplished is to adjust as we go along.

Pragmatism

Most people do not routinely moralize every decision they make, but understand the need to address problems as they arise. Time to ponder the moral, ethical and philosophical issues involved in every political decision is not a luxury people have. Achieving complete consensus is impossible. And complete information is often illusive. Yet, problems often demand immediate action. Consequently, the American political system tends to respond incrementally to problems. Slowed by a system of checks and

balances, compromised, partial solutions are often the most that can be achieved.

Compromise can be frustrating. It is often belittled as “wheeling and dealing” and criticized as “sacrificing principle.” In that compromise, by definition, means no one gets everything they want, it is inevitably disappointing, and responsible for much of Americans’ discontent with politics. But, consider the alternative. Given that Americans lack a consensus on values, denying compromise would mean that only one side wins and the rest are at their mercy. This was the founders’ greatest fear. Who among us has the total truth that we will all submit to? Particularly in a system built upon the premise that men are fallible and limited, the thought that any one philosophy could provide all of the answers seems implausible.³⁸ Philosophy and moral beliefs must be flexible if they are to be applied to the rapidly changing, complex world of politics. Even the ancient Greeks, who experimented with democracy, understood that laws couldn’t be fixed. They recognized the need for “pragmatic innovation” that necessitates certain flexibility in the law.³⁹

If we accept that our capacity to know truth is limited, pragmatism makes sense. It permits us to make incremental improvements as we move forward. It has been said that there is even a certain “logic” to incremental decision making, as we can make smaller corrective decisions along the way that lead us closer to a more ideal solution.⁴⁰ Charles Lindblom describes this process of mutual adjustment as the “intelligence of democracy.”⁴¹

A system of balanced compromise may in fact be the strength of American politics. Some have gone so far as to argue that the U.S. really has no “creed” other than our pragmatism and that our moderate, pragmatic approach to politics is the “genius” of our system.⁴² It is the ability of the American system to adjust and refine its values that may be its greatest strength. In fact, the political philosophy the founders embraced was itself a product of centuries of refinement. But, in what remains a strength of the American political system also lays the seeds of discontent. Americans are ambivalent about compromise.

Personality

Politics is about people. It is inherently a human endeavor.⁴³ It requires people. American politics is heavily influenced by individual personalities. The U.S. has been fortunate to have great leaders appear during times of great crisis. Washington, Madison, Lincoln, Roosevelt, to name just a few, have been critical to providing great vision and

leadership. But, others who were the wrong people at the wrong time adversely affected America. President Buchanan's inaction and neglect during the late 1850s allowed the nation to move closer toward civil war. Supreme Court Chief Justice Taney's reckless decision on slavery in 1857 fueled the lead up to the war. Segregationist governors during the 1950s and 60s, George Wallace and Lester Maddox, were an embarrassment to American politics, while Richard Nixon's corrupt actions in the Watergate scandal permanently scarred America's view of politics.

Although Americans claim a system of laws, individual leaders matter.⁴⁴ Great leaders possess strong personal skills and are willing to use them for the public good.⁴⁵ A strong moral compass must guide them, because these same abilities can also be used for corruption. The intersection of philosophy and personality happens at the level in which a person in power chooses to constrain his or her power. This is fundamental to the nation's acceptance of the "rule of law" over the "rule of men."⁴⁶ Given that even great leaders have fallible human qualities, law must secure restraint on personal ambition.

Another dimension of the role of personality in politics is found in opinion formation. Personalities serve as surrogates for political knowledge. Most Americans can identify political figures they admire or despise. They often look to these elites to guide their own thinking on issues. Conservatives may use Ted Kennedy, Hillary Clinton or Jesse Jackson as individuals they disagree with. Liberals may use Clarence Thomas, George W. Bush or Rush Limbaugh as their negative lightning rods. Any proposal or position taken by these elites is immediately suspect in the eyes of their opponents. Alternatively, the public looks for cues from elites they admire. Evidence suggests that this is particularly true concerning welfare policy.⁴⁷ When it comes to challenging expert or scientific opinion, Americans are more likely to feel confident in doing so if an elite they favor does so as well.⁴⁸

Unfortunately, the focus on individuals in American politics can distract the focus from issues. Rather than debating issues, politicians and media critics often attack the messenger; demonizing, ridiculing or discounting those who raise counter arguments. This tactic is not new to American democracy. Alexis de Tocqueville, the great 19th century observer of American Democracy, identified this tendency in the 1840s.⁴⁹

The decline of political parties and the rise of media in American politics have propelled individuals into the forefront. Before Americans saw images of their elected officials, they relied more heavily on newspapers and party organizations to read about the issues. Television coverage is notorious for its lack of in-depth issue analysis. Personal

images fill that void and serve as surrogates for political information. Evidence suggests that for less educated Americans this is especially true. When making political choices they rely on personal characteristics, rather than issues and ideology more frequently than do the better educated.⁵⁰

Our own personalities also affect our politics. Personality and emotions are correlated with political judgment.⁵¹ In fact, genetics has been linked to political attitudes and predisposition toward a political party.⁵² Fascinating new research in neuroscience and political science suggests that rationality itself is influenced by emotions, and political judgment cannot escape this influence.⁵³ The human attempt to settle disputes peacefully through politics may itself be a highly adapted evolutionary behavior that helps preserve and perpetuate the species.⁵⁴

Profit

While the link between genetics and politics may be preliminary, it is a given that humans are highly motivated by self-interest. At the center of the American economic system is the principled assumption that individuals are motivated by the pursuit of profit. This message comes directly from the great 18th century economist Adam Smith.⁵⁵ America's founders were as convinced of this principle as the 17th century philosopher John Locke, who argued that the "pursuit of property" is an inherent human right.⁵⁶

It is not surprising then that many engage in politics to enhance their financial position. Government makes decisions that affect wealth. As Harold Lasswell defined politics, it's about "who gets what, when and how."⁵⁷

One of the best predictors of how people vote is their level of income. This has virtually everything to do with whether or not they see government policy helping or hurting them financially. The rich tend to vote Republican to protect their wealth. They support candidates who promise lower taxes, so they can keep what they have. Lower income individuals are more likely to vote Democrat.⁵⁸ They tend not to fear higher taxes and they support government programs that redistribute wealth to the less affluent through public subsidized education, welfare, government assisted health care, and Social Security.⁵⁹ In fact, although lower income Americans are generally not politically active, when a clear monetary benefit is at stake, like Social Security benefits, lower class senior citizens are actually more likely to become politically engaged than more affluent seniors.⁶⁰

At the core of the American economic system is the belief that people by nature are ambitious. It is the foundational motivation for the pursuit of profit that encourages economic risk in the hopes of monetary reward. But, the pursuit of profit is not restricted to the purely economic realm. In fact, any lines of distinction between politics and economics are mostly imaginary. Human greed knows no such boundaries. Many engage in politics for the express purpose of making money. And even those who work for government for the public interest have lucrative job opportunities awaiting them when they leave public service, because of the connections they have made while in government.

The worst of self-interest leads to government corruption. The public, however, has become so convinced that corruption is endemic to politics, they greatly overstate its existence.⁶¹ Since political wrongdoing garners more media coverage than government success stories, the public perception is understandable. The recent fall of Congressman Randy “Duke” Cunningham illustrates the most blatant corruption of bribes for government action. The congressman was given the longest sentence of a convicted member of Congress, eight years and four months, for taking bribes and evading taxes.⁶²

Politicians are probably no more prone to corruption than individuals in business, medicine, law or any other occupation of power. Lord Acton’s often-cited statement that, “power corrupts and absolute power corrupts absolutely” is an assumed truism. The American system of democracy and capitalism, which encourages individual success in wealth and power, may itself sow the seeds of corruption.⁶³ Public officials cannot be expected to always check their own self-interest. The watchful eye of the media and political competitors often are the only real checks upon it.

The American system of elections probably perpetuates the slide toward abuse. The fact that American elections are privately funded places money and fundraising at the center of American politics.⁶⁴ While there are certainly distinguishing differences between “good” and “bad” money,⁶⁵ the American system of “checkbook democracy” exacerbates the potential for corruption.⁶⁶ One of the most fascinating examples of “cat and mouse” law enforcement is found in the history of government campaign finance laws. With every government regulation and restriction, wealthy donors seem to find a way to get money to politicians.

Politics through Historical Change

As one studies the American political system, it is important to bear in mind that the system is a work in progress. Rules evolve through history

and are shaped by various human motives. Understanding the historical trends, underlying philosophies and the “predictability” of human behavior allows one to more fully comprehend the system.

The purpose of the chapters that follow is to reveal the mechanisms of the American government and politics by focusing on the philosophical, pragmatic, personal and profitable aspects of the system. By examining the diverse human motives, the sometimes contradictory and perplexing system of American politics can make more sense.

¹ John R. Hibbing and Elizabeth Theiss-Morse, *Stealth Democracy: Americans' Beliefs About How Government Should Work* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2002).

² Martin P. Wattenberg, *Where Have All The Voters Gone?* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2002).

³ Frederick Douglass may have put it most succinctly when he stated, “The whole history of the progress of human liberty shows that all concessions yet made to her august claims have been born of earnest struggle...The struggle may be a moral one, or it may be a physical one, and it may be moral and physical, but it must be a struggle. Power concedes nothing without demand. It never did and it never will.” Quoted in Michael C. Dawson, *Black Visions: The Roots of Contemporary African-American Political Ideologies* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2001), p. 259.

⁴ See, for example, John R. Hibbing and Elizabeth Theiss-Morse, *What Is It About Government That Americans Dislike?* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2001).

⁵ See John J. Pitney, Jr., *The Art of Political Warfare* (Norman: University of Oklahoma Press, 2000).

⁶ Reported in William H. Flanigan and Nancy H. Zingale, *Political Behavior of the American Electorate* 11th Edition. (Washington, D.C.: CQ Press, 2006), p.21.

⁷ Even political science professors are partly to blame for the promotion of this cynical view of politics. See Mickey Edwards, “Political Science and Political Practice: The Pursuit of Grounded Inquiry,” *Perspectives on Politics*, Vol. 1, No. 2, June 2003, pp. 349-354.

⁸ See, for example, Michael J. Shapiro, *For Moral Ambiguity: National Culture and the Politics of the Family* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2001).

⁹ Samuel P. Huntington, *American Politics: The Promise of Disharmony* (Cambridge, Mass.: Belknap Press, 1981).

¹⁰ Many scholars have pointed to the influence of religion in shaping the shared beliefs of society. Rousseau coined the term “civil religion” to connote the necessity of such beliefs. Rousseau states, “No state has ever been founded without religion as its base.” See Rousseau, *The Social Contract*, trans. Maurice Cranston (New York: Penguin Books, 1968), bk. 4, chap. 8, p.180. For an overview of political theorists on this question see Raymond Plant, *Politics, Theology and History* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2001).

¹¹ See James A. Morone, *Hellfire Nation: The Politics of Sin in American History* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2003).

¹² See, for example, Robert C. Bartlett, "Socratic Political Philosophy and the Problem of Virtue," *American Political Science Review*, Vol. 96, No. 3, September 2002, pp. 525-533.

¹³ See, for example, Jeremy Waldron, *Law and Disagreement* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1999).

¹⁴ David Easton, *The Political System: An Inquiry Into the State of Political Science* (New York: Knopf, 1953) p. 129.

¹⁵ For a discussion of this debate, see A. James Reichley, *The Values Connection* (Lanham, MD: Rowman and Littlefield, 2001).

¹⁶ See, for example, Dennis Chong, *Rational Lives: Norms and Values in Politics and Society* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2000).

¹⁷ For two examples, see Benjamin I. Page and James Simmons, *What Government Can Do: Dealing With Poverty and Inequality* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2000) and Joel Schwartz, *Fighting Poverty With Virtue: Moral Reform and America's Urban Poor, 1825-2000* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 2000).

¹⁸ See, for example, James R. Hurtgen, *The Divided Mind of American Liberalism* (Lanham, Md: Lexington Books, 2002).

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²⁰ See, for example, Stanley Feldman, "Economic Individualism and American Public Opinion," *American Politics Quarterly*, Vol. 11, 1983, pp. 3-29, and Stanley Feldman and John Zaller, "The Political Culture of Ambivalence: Ideological Responses to the Welfare State," *American Journal of Political Science*, Vol. 36, 1992, pp. 268-307.

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CHAPTER TWO

PHILOSOPHICAL FOUNDATIONS OF AMERICAN POLITICS

The ideas that underpin American politics and motivated America's founders evolved over hundreds of years. Although people from many parts of the world came and settled in the original thirteen colonies in America, much of the influence on America's founders came from European political ideas that were shaped in a context of profound change. From belief in a rigid God-inspired government, there emerged a ringing endorsement for freedom and secular government. Governments established by men, to rule over men, necessitate a careful balance between individual freedom and the rule of law. This was the dilemma faced by the writers of the American Constitution and the generations of Americans to follow.

From Feudalism to Freedom

During the period of the late Middle Ages and the early Renaissance, about three or four hundred years before the U.S. Constitution was developed, governments and societies in Europe were hierarchical in structure. The political system concentrated all political power in the hands of a monarch at the top of the pyramid. Those who advised the king possessed varying degrees of power. If they could get the king to listen, they could also influence his decisions. Such people included the nobility: barons, dukes and lords. The vast majority of people in European society, however, had no political power. They were at the bottom of the pyramid.

Farming was the dominant occupation of the masses, as the primary purpose of the economy was to produce sufficient food to feed Europe's population. This economy of farm workers dominated by aristocratic landowners was known as feudalism. A few large landowners controlled most of the country's farmland, while serfs worked the land in exchange for housing and food. These serfs had virtually no voice in the political system.

Why would people tolerate a system that denied them a political voice?

Could they view such a system as legitimate? Legitimacy is based upon a widespread acceptance of rules and beliefs that nurture a sense of obligation to government and its rulers. This is often based upon philosophical or moral beliefs. During the feudal period the legitimacy of government was based upon the notion of “divine right of kings.” This belief held that God established governments and that God preferred monarchs to rule and maintain order. Therefore, to challenge the political system would be to challenge God.

Philosophy

The bulwark behind this system was the very close association between religion and politics, and particularly, the church and state. The most powerful religious institution in Europe was the Roman Catholic Church. It served as a source for governmental legitimacy. Even before nation states were firmly established, “the Roman Church had acquired the function of legitimizing kings in their office, of superintending public affairs, of pronouncing on the legitimacy of wars, legal actions, and a variety of other public concerns.”¹

Like the feudal order, the Catholic Church is organized hierarchically. The pope, presiding at the top, rules with the assistance of advisors. Cardinals, archbishops, bishops and even priests, to a certain extent, influence church policy. But the vast majority of common church members (the laity) are expected to follow the rules that are set by the hierarchy to secure their salvation.

Arguments abound as to which came first. Was it the hierarchical nature of the Roman Catholic Church that led to the hierarchical structure of government, or did the hierarchical structure of government help lead to the development of the Roman Catholic Church? The first three centuries of Christianity lacked a centrally organized church. But when the Roman Emperor Constantine formally accepted Christianity in the fourth century, the church aligned with Rome and became more institutionalized. Throughout the Middle Ages it became hierarchical. The parallel development of hierarchically based power in both the religious and political spheres ultimately led to a fusion between church and state.²

While most Americans today accept the doctrine of separation of church and state, in many countries of the world a close association between the government and religion remain. The theocracy in Iran and the former Afghan rule by the Taliban are obvious examples, but even in Western Europe the connection has been strong. In Germany, for example, salaries of ministers and priests can be paid from the proceeds of a church tax. Up until

2000 a person born in Sweden automatically became a member of the Lutheran Church. Swedes seeking to change their religion were required to file papers with the government. Great Britain actually has an official state church. If the Anglican Church of England wants to change its doctrines it must secure approval from parliament. These policies in Europe emanate from the centuries old church-state connection.

Outward signs of the medieval church-state connection included the installation ceremonies of new heads of state. When a new monarch was enthroned, the pope often presided over the ceremony and placed the crown on the monarch's head. This ritual symbolized to believers the will of God. If the pope is God's official servant on earth a papal endorsement of the monarch indicated that the king must rule by God's will. With this belief, governments could claim authority, legitimacy, and maintain order. The divine right of kings presented a powerful argument to a believing public. A challenge to the government came with a hefty price. Not only would one put his mortal life on the line, he would put his soul in jeopardy as well. To challenge the government, and thereby God's authority, was to risk not only one's mortal life, but also eternal damnation in hell. Even monarchs who did not believe in the doctrine of divine right used it as a tool for personal gain and power.³ And for the non-believing public, the fact that monarchs controlled the military served as a practical deterrent.

As powerful as the religious arguments were, however, feudalism began to break down during the 16th and 17th centuries as new ways of thinking about government and politics developed. While there are many reasons why monarchies would have eventually crumbled, three fundamentally important historical events played major roles. Though these events were not political per se, they ultimately changed the way people thought about many things, including politics. Philosophical, pragmatic and economic movements dominated by strong personalities served as catalysts for change.

These events, which transcended centuries, are the Protestant Reformation, the Scientific Revolution and the rise of capitalism. The Protestant Reformation was a movement within Christianity led by those protesting the power of the Roman Catholic Church. These protestors sought to reform Christianity back to what they believed Jesus had originally intended. Though there were many leaders of the Reformation, Martin Luther is given credit for its initiation.

The Protestant Reformation

Martin Luther was a Catholic priest in the early 1500s who gradually became disillusioned with his church. Although he was troubled by several

church actions, one that particularly bothered him was the system of selling indulgences. Indulgence selling developed through the Middle Ages and was based on the belief that the church had the power to forgive sins. In essence, one could buy forgiveness from the church. In actuality, it went further than this.

Medieval theologians began to speculate on the question of what happens to human beings after they die. The Bible discusses heaven and hell. If you are good you go to heaven. If you are bad you go to hell. Many theologians, however, had trouble with this. What if you are not quite good enough to get into heaven but you have not done enough terrible things to spend the rest of eternity in hell. Certainly God could not be so cruel that He would, for any simple mistake, throw a person in hell to burn for all eternity. The church suggested that there must be some kind of middle ground, a place where one goes after death if he is not quite good enough to get into heaven but not bad enough to go to hell. They called this place purgatory.

Purgatory is a sort of “wait station” where one goes to make restitution for sins committed here on earth. It is a place where one prepares to eventually enter heaven and be in the presence of God. But how long would one stay in this place before getting into heaven? What is an average stay in purgatory? Theologians figured that a stay in purgatory must be long in proportion to the eternity spent in heaven or hell; they calculated that a person might spend several hundred or even thousands of years in purgatory making restitution for sins committed on earth.

But, could one get a head start on restitution? Theologians decided that one might get time off in purgatory by making sacrifices to atone for sins while still on earth. A system developed where the church would grant time off in purgatory in exchange for prayers, sacrifices or monetary donations. The wealthy, getting up in years, might want to buy an “insurance policy.” Since one could not know for sure whether there was a purgatory (or heaven or hell) he could play it safe. A large contribution to the church might be made in lieu of perhaps a hundred or a thousand years in purgatory. This practice became known as the buying or selling of indulgences.

Martin Luther saw this as a moneymaking scheme to profit church clergy. It was not only the wealthy that actually bought these indulgences. Luther was concerned about people of meager means who would use their limited financial resources to buy indulgences and enrich priests and bishops at their own expense. He saw this profiteering racket as religious corruption at its worst.

Luther’s charges against the church, however, went much further than condemning indulgence selling. He also attacked one of the central premises of the Catholic Church: the power of the pope. Catholic teaching maintains