

Unit 1: Foundations of American Democracy

The U.S. Constitution arose out of important historical and philosophical ideas and preferences regarding popular sovereignty and limited government. Compromises were made during the Constitutional Convention and ratification debates, and these compromises have frequently been the source of conflict in U.S. politics over the proper balance between individual freedom, social order, and equality of opportunity.

The first semblance of a national government created after independence was a state- centered, decentralized system that reflected a fear of a powerful central government. Yet, the lack of powers held by the weak national Congress, coupled with each state's independent and often conflicting actions, raised concerns with such key actors as James Madison and Alexander Hamilton as to whether the Articles of Confederation were able to protect the new nation. The weaknesses led to a call for change and a decision to host a convention to revise the Articles. The convention itself was a triumph of negotiation, collaboration, and compromise, extending beyond the delegates' original mandate. It led to the creation of a new constitution that granted more centralized authority, while dispersing powers among three branches in the national government, and reserving powers and authority to the states to govern within their borders.

The group that favored the new federal Constitution, the Federalists, argued that the constitutional separation of powers and checks and balances would protect people from governmental tyranny and unify the nation. The Federalists also argued that although the Constitution lacked a specific listing of rights, it protected civil liberties in general by limiting the national government to powers that were enumerated. By contrast, the Anti-Federalists argued against the new federal system, claiming that the new Constitution would erode

the sovereignty of the states, the prominence of local self-government, and their inherited liberties, as it lacked a specific listing of rights needed to protect the people from the national government. The Federalists, after James Madison's eventual concurrence, promised the Anti- Federalists that they would support the addition of a bill of rights once the Constitution was ratified. The Constitution was ratified in 1788 although the last state, Rhode Island, did not ratify it until 1790. The Bill of Rights, the first ten amendments to the U.S. Constitution, was ratified in 1791.

More than 200 years later, the compromises that were necessary for the Constitution's ratification, and in some instances led to ambiguity, continue to fuel debate and sometimes even conflict over how best to protect liberty, equality, order, and private property.

Essential Questions

- n How did the founders of the U.S. Constitution attempt to protect individual liberty, while also promoting public order and safety?
- n How have theory, debate, and compromise influenced the U.S. Constitutional system?
- n How does the development and interpretation of the Constitution influence policies that impact citizens and residents of the U.S.?

Unit 2: Interactions Among Branches of Government

Because power is widely distributed and checks prevent one branch from usurping powers from the others, institutional actors are in the position where they must both compete and cooperate in order to govern.

The three key institutions of the federal government are Congress, the presidency, and the courts. The bureaucracy, which implements policy, is seen by some as an extension of the executive branch and by others as, in effect, a fourth branch of government because of the discretion it can exercise in carrying out policy directives. The Constitution grants specific powers to Congress, the president, and the courts, and in addition, each branch exercises informal powers (developed through political practice, tradition, and legislation). Because checks and balances are designed to prevent one branch from becoming too powerful, Congress and the president, for example, will sometimes cooperate and sometimes compete in governance.

The powers of Congress are set forth in Article I of the Constitution. Congress is bicameral, with the Senate representing states and the House of Representatives reflecting each state's population. Congress passes laws that cover a wide range of policy areas, and each chamber has different responsibilities and rules. The federal budget is a good example of how the president and Congress must cooperate and compromise. While Congress is empowered to develop and pass a budget, in the modern era the president typically proposes one, which may lead to ideological debate. There are several reasons it is difficult for Congress to pass legislation, including ideological differences. Much of the work of Congress is done in committees, and congressional committees also exercise oversight to ensure that the bureaucracy is carrying out policies as intended.

The expressed powers of the president are set forth in Article II of the Constitution. The president has a significant degree of informal power, which has grown over time. Under the Constitution, Congress checks the power of the president, and this leads to tension between the two branches over both foreign and domestic affairs. The president and Congress have several interrelated powers. For example, while Congress passes legislation, the president must sign it into law. The president appoints judges and members of the cabinet, who must be confirmed by the Senate. The president also oversees most of the bureaucracy. Technology has impacted the president's use of the "bully pulpit" to influence public opinion. In addition to reaching out to the public through televised press conferences and the State of the Union message, the president is increasingly making use of social media to communicate views to a vast audience.

The federal judiciary, including the Supreme Court, established under Article III, is designed to be an independent branch of government. The Court's most far-reaching power, judicial review, was justified in *Marbury v. Madison* (1803), where the Court declared that it had the constitutional authority to overturn acts of Congress, state laws, or executive action deemed to be unconstitutional. Thus, judicial review serves as an important check on other branches of government. Appointed for life, justices are somewhat insulated from public opinion. It is not surprising that over the years the Court has handed down decisions that have been unpopular and controversial. Congress and the president may influence the Court through the appointment process, by refusing to implement a Court decision, or by passing legislation that changes the Court's jurisdiction.

Using a merit-based civil service system for all staff except top-level political appointees, the federal bureaucracy carries out laws to regulate a wide range of individual and commercial activities. Bureaucrats implement policy using their discretionary and rule-making authority. Both Congress and the president can hold the bureaucracy accountable in policy implementation, and the two branches will sometimes be in conflict over whether or not administrative agencies are carrying out the letter and spirit of the law.

Essential Questions

- ☐ How do the branches of the national government compete and cooperate in order to govern?
- ☐ To what extent have changes in the powers of each branch affected how responsive and accountable the national government is in the 21st century?

Unit 3: Civil Liberties and Civil Rights

Through the U.S. Constitution, but primarily through the Bill of Rights and the Fourteenth Amendment, citizens and groups have attempted to restrict national and state governments from unduly infringing upon individual rights essential to ordered liberty and from denying equal protection under the law. Likewise, it has sometimes been argued that these legal protections have been used to block reforms and restrict freedoms of others in the name of social order.

The Constitution, but especially the Bill of Rights and the Fourteenth Amendment, are used to assert the rights of citizens and protect groups from discrimination. As such, the government must respect the dignity of the person and assure equal treatment, with its power constrained in the process of protecting individual freedoms. The Fourteenth Amendment includes two clauses that affirm and protect civil rights and liberties—the due process clause and the equal protection clause. The courts must balance the desire for social order with the protection of individual rights and freedoms when considering due process and equal protection challenges.

In a process known as selective incorporation, the Supreme Court has used the power of judicial review to interpret the due process clause in such a way as to prevent states from unduly restricting fundamental freedoms. The Court has been called upon to interpret protections for freedom of political expression and religious exercise, the right to bear arms, the right of privacy, and the rights necessary to ensure that those accused of crimes receive a fair trial.

The equal protection clause provides that states may not deprive persons of equal protection under the law. African Americans, Hispanics, women, LGBTQ (lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender, queer) people, and other groups have used the clause to lead social movements on behalf of their concerns. The Supreme Court has rendered several landmark decisions that expand civil rights, and Congress has passed legislation that expands equality. At times Congress and the courts are asked to determine the legitimacy of equal protection claims by various groups, as well as weigh the majority's concerns that they will be harmed by the changes sought.

Essential Questions:

n To what extent do the U.S. Constitution and its amendments protect against undue government infringement on essential liberties and from invidious discrimination?

n How have U.S. Supreme Court rulings defined civil liberties and civil rights?

Unit 4: American Political Ideologies and Beliefs

American political beliefs are shaped by founding ideals, core values, linkage institutions (e.g., elections, political parties, interest groups, and the media in all its forms), and the changing demographics of citizens. These beliefs about government, politics, and the individual's role in the political system influence the creation of public policies.

American political culture is comprised of citizens' beliefs about government, including their perceptions, relationships, and interactions relative to one another and to their government. Core beliefs about government center around different interpretations and applications of political values, such as individualism (the focus on individual rights and responsibilities), the rule of law (the notion that the law is supreme over all persons), limited government (the idea that the government's power is enumerated and constrained by constitutional rules), and equality of opportunity.

Citizens learn of and develop attitudes about government through political socialization. Several factors contribute to political socialization including family, schools, peers, and social environments. How much influence these factors have on a person's political beliefs relates in turn to lifecycle effects, dispositions that change with age or membership in a group experiencing the same events at the same time, and generational effects, which involve exposure across ages and groups to the same political information. Both lifecycle and generational effects are fueled by past and present political events.

American political culture, through expressed citizen opinions, influences governmental institutions in the formation, implementation, and evaluation of public policy. For example, how people view the principles of freedom and individualism shape opinions about domestic and economic policy, including the appropriate range and types of such policies. The tension behind citizen beliefs about the appropriate role of government is revealed through policy debates and legislation. Some argue that government should take an active role in promoting social equality and ensuring economic opportunity, while others warn that excessive regulation violates individual freedoms.

Major public policy programs are rooted in ideological trends that span decades. For example, ideology impacts the nature and extent to which the federal government shares powers with state governments and how it regulates the marketplace over time, as evidenced by debates about monetary and fiscal policies. Globalization has had an impact on U.S. political beliefs and public policy. How the government determines the nature and direction of social policy, such as that involving immigration or health-care reform, is also impacted by ideological pressure from the right and left, and foreign policy is influenced by citizens' beliefs about the U.S. government's role on the world stage.

Essential Questions:

- n How are American political beliefs formed and how do they evolve over time?
- n How do political ideology and core values influence government policy making?

Unit 5: Political Participation

Governing is achieved directly through citizen participation and indirectly through institutions (e.g., political parties, interest groups, and mass media) that inform, organize, and mobilize support to influence government and politics, resulting in many venues for citizen influence on policy making.

The principle of self-government is dependent on both citizen participation and the operation of the various linkage institutions that help citizens connect with the government. These institutions help people become a part of the policy-making process.

Playing an important role in this process, the media report public opinion data and can sometimes influence the formation of that opinion as well. The accuracy of public opinion data is dependent upon the scientific polling methods that are used, and the results of these opinion polls are often used as a means of political influence. The role the media play in this process is at times criticized for the bias demonstrated in the format, context, and content of information distributed as well as the manner in which that bias impacts public understanding of political information. Social media poses both opportunities and challenges for democratic participation.

Social movements, political parties, and interest groups also serve to connect the electorate with the government by influencing the manner in which people relate to and participate in its composition, functions, and policy-making agenda. Various social movements develop in response to conditions perceived as negatively impacting specific groups of people; their political strategies are aimed at changing public policy in a way that benefits the adversely impacted group. Political parties run campaigns in an attempt to win office and make policy consistent with their platform and goals. Over time political parties respond to election results, campaign laws, and changes in the way information is disseminated to the public. Even though political parties are designed to connect the people with government, there are various barriers that interfere with this connection, even to the extent of preventing candidates who represent interests outside the two major parties from being elected. Finally, interest groups exist as a form of political participation for people with particular policy concerns. While these groups exist for different causes, they are sometimes criticized for wielding a disproportionate impact on the policy-making process based on their organized pressure tactics and allocation of money for campaigns and lobbying.

Like political parties and interest groups, elections connect citizens with government. The number of eligible voters has expanded over time based on various constitutional provisions, court rulings on voter access and campaign finance, and legislation. The Fifteenth, Nineteenth, Twenty-Fourth, and Twenty-Sixth Amendments, each a response to a specific social/political concern, serve to eliminate political discrimination against people due to a citizen's race, sex, age, and ability to pay a poll tax. Voter turnout is impacted by the various provisions that states implement regarding voter requirements and qualifications that involve issues not addressed in those amendments. Voter turnout varies widely from election to election, and political candidates have taken advantage of technology and campaign finance laws to communicate their platforms more effectively to the voting public. The data regarding voter turnout in the United States provides a foundation for interesting analysis when compared to voter turnout in other democracies, and political scientists periodically study why voter turnout in the U.S. falls below that in other similar republics.

Essential Questions:

- ☐ How have changes in technology influenced political communication and behavior?
- ☐ Why do levels of participation and influence in politics vary?
- ☐ How effective are the various methods of political participation in shaping public policies?