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Senior Lecturer in History,
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American Politics For Dummies®

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Introduction

Welcome to *American Politics for Dummies.*

Growing up in Britain in the 1980s and 1990s, my first memories of America were from popular culture. I remember watching *ET, SpaceCamp* and *The Goonies*, and loving every minute of their optimistic and adventurous views on American life. I wanted to be a part of that world, wanted to go to high school in Middle America, play baseball and drive a car at an early age. Life was so much more exciting over the other side of the pond than here in Britain.

It was this love of American popular culture that started me on the path to discovering American politics and society. I began to think about the backdrop to these and other movies, about how actors could become political figures, and how America was a superpower dictating world affairs. I wrote this book as an introduction to the US – to give you an idea of the rich and complicated world that is American history and politics.

About This Book

To make your reading experience go smoothly, *American Politics For Dummies* follows a few important rules. For example, new terms show up in *italics,* followed by their definitions. A key word or term in a bullet list stands out in **bold.**

Sometimes, I couldn't resist including information that is interesting but not critical to your understanding of American Politics – maybe a story about a major player in government or excerpts from a speech that had an impact. You see these bits in shaded grey boxes. I hope that you find them interesting, too, but feel free to breeze right by them if not.

Throughout the book, I direct you to further information where it might come in handy. So, for example, when I talk about election cycles in Chapter 12, I might direct you to Chapter 10, where I go into detail about elections of all kinds.

Foolish Assumptions

To write this book, I had to make a couple of key assumptions about who you are. I assumed that you have an interest and some knowledge about America, and I assumed that you're interested in learning more about its history and politics. For those of you who feel that your understanding of America is limited, don't worry. We all have to start at the beginning sometime, and I wrote this book keeping you in mind. It's not a difficult read, but it is comprehensive, and with each chapter, I'm sure you'll have a better grasp of what's happening in the American political realm.

How This Book Is Organized

This book is organised in six parts to give you a review of the most important subjects you need to know when learning about America.

Part I: Running Down the Basics of American Politics

What's the very best place to start? The beginning, naturally. The chapters in this part give you an overview of the key elements that explain what America is and how it operates. I show you how the country came to be, including the fears and hopes that led to the construction of the constitution, which is the defining document for American government. I also give you a sense of how the government is structured in a federal sense and within the states.

Part II: Discovering How the American Government Functions

The founders of the United States of America worked hard to ensure that they created something new, something that would correct what they saw as the wrongs of British rule in the early days of the colonies. In doing so they created a complicated system of many layers. I show you how those layers function together (and in opposition) and examine whether the system is overloaded.

Part III: Glimpsing Elections and Political Parties

Giving the people input into who runs their government is an essential part of American government, but it has become an incredibly complicated one as the country expanded and grew more diverse. The chapters in this part of the book give you the details on how elections work, including the ways in which two major political parties have come to dominate the political process. I show you the predictable ways in which people vote according to details like where they live and how old they are. I also discuss some of the politics behind politics, like how interest groups work to curry popular favour.

Part IV: Investigating American Politics and Society

Giving the people the power to vote means that all the basic human talents and shortcomings – all the difficulties of reaching agreement and making things happen – are magnified and scrutinised on the world stage. In this part of the book, I talk about changing views regarding race, and I tell you about issues wherein agreement continues to elude politicians and the people they serve. I also talk about tough economic times and the ways government has worked to coax the country through them.

Part V: Looking Into American Politics on the World Stage

America doesn't operate in a vacuum. In fact, its actions and reach are a major part of the world political scene. In this part, I talk about America's mission abroad, its special relationships with various countries, and the ways that America sees and protects itself have changed since the terrorist attacks of 9/11.

Part VI: The Part of Tens

Every *For Dummies* ends with top ten lists of quick, fun, and weird or surprising information. I used mine to cover major political scandals and interesting candidates who ran for office but didn't quite make the grade.

Icons Used in This Book

Those little pictures in the margins are intended to make this book even easier to navigate by calling your attention to certain types of information. I use the following icons throughout *American Politics For Dummies*.

American politics is full of memorable characters (and many that the citizens would prefer you forget). Whenever I highlight the actions or speech of one of them, I put this icon next to the tale.

The way politics operates in theory and the way it plays out in real life are sometimes two different things. Wherever I talk about the politics behind the politics, you see this icon.

Some concepts come up again and again because they're so important to your understanding of the topic. I want you to be able to find those quickly and so highlight them with the icon you see here.

I didn't resist every authorly urge to go deeply into a topic here or there, but you're welcome to skip those bits. When the information gets particularly detailed, I alert you with this icon.

Where to Go from Here

Forget everything you know about reading a book. Well, maybe not everything. But this book is structured so that you can jump in anywhere you like. If you're the kind of reader who has to start at page one and keep turning pages until you hit the back cover, then by all means do. Because this book is also a reference tool, however, you'll get just as much out of it if you flip around according to whatever seems interesting at any given moment.

I wrote each chapter to stand on its own, and so you don't need other chapters or previous knowledge to understand what you're reading. Want to know more about the challenges universal health care has faced in American politics? Flip right over to Chapter 15. Maybe the courts are your cup of tea. You find my rundown of the American court system in Chapter 7. Curious about cycling? Well, you're on your own there.

Enjoy the journey!

Part I

Running Down the Basics of American Politics

web extras

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In This Part . . .

- Trace a new republic's emergence form 13 British colonies.
- Understand the what, how and why of the political system the Americans established in the new world.
- Examine the US Constitution as it was being produced and as it's viewed today
- Dig into the roles liberalism and political parties play in American government.

Chapter 1

Witnessing the Birth of America

In This Chapter

- Describing the emergence of the new nation
- Considering the meaning of democracy
- Considering issues in contemporary America
- Explaining the emergence of the US on the world stage

The United States isn't your typical nation; it didn't emerge from a long process of interactions between a mix of geography and culture, as was the case in Europe. The nation emerged from a fight for liberty – a fight that was based on a new way of dealing with relations between a government and its people. And today, if you look around the globe, you can see how much influence the American concept of government has had. Around half of the nearly 200 countries in the world are democracies, and many of these have emulated the American political system.

This chapter takes you on a sweeping tour of all things American. I identify how America came to be this revered nation by examining its historical and philosophical roots, describe key domestic debates facing the nation today and discuss the role of US involvement on the international stage.

Recounting the Events That Birthed a Nation

The United States came into being when it publicly declared its independence on 4 July 1776. But that was the culmination of a lot of struggle and growth, and the emergence of the 13 colonies that became the first 13 states of the new nation – and a letter that changed politics for generations to come.

Establishing the 13 colonies

The first English settlements in North America were established by companies under the guidance of King James I in order to make money. Two principal companies were given charters: the London Company and the Plymouth Company. The London Company established the Jamestown colony in 1607 in Chesapeake Bay, in what became Virginia. Ten years later it began to grow tobacco, and by 1619 had employed African slave labour. This land had been appropriated from the Native Americans without much consideration for the fact that the company was effectively stealing it. By the 1630s Virginia had been joined by Maryland, founded by Lord Baltimore.

The Plymouth Company was less successful, and its settlement in what's now Maine was abandoned shortly after its establishment. Not until 1620 were the English successful in establishing a settlement – in Plymouth, Massachusetts. These settlers were the famous Puritan separatists who fled England aboard the *Mayflower*.

By 1630, the Massachusetts Bay Company had been established in the area in and around Boston by more Puritan settlers. These settlers were given a charter to govern themselves. Interestingly, anyone considered a freeman and able to vote or hold office had to be a Puritan Christian. Some colonists left and established new colonies; those that thought Massachusetts was too religiously restrictive did so and created Rhode Island in 1636, and settlers who thought it wasn't strict enough formed Connecticut in the same year and New Haven a year later.

The English passed a series of laws – the Navigation Acts – in the latter half of the seventeenth century. These laws ensured that most goods or raw materials transported from one English colony to another had to be carried by English or English colonial ships, and goods such as tobacco and fur intended for sale to other colonies and European powers had first to pass through England and be taxed. While this arrangement was good for England, which saw an expanding Royal Navy dominate the high seas as a result of this wealth creation, the American colonists were less pleased. They complained because the laws restricted their ability to produce manufactured goods and to trade with other colonies in other nations. Just like today, people who think they're paying too much for something will find cheaper ways of getting it. In this instance, smuggling of goods in and out of the American colonies was the result. Smuggling was a source of tension over the next 100 years and eventually led to the American Revolution.

Dear George: The Declaration of Independence

The Declaration of Independence was probably the greatest child-seeking-divorce-from-parents-letter ever to have been written, and one of only a few to have been written by a colony to its former ruler. To cap it off, the declaration of love lost was made public on an international scale.

Written and passed by the Continental Congress (see Chapter 2) on 2 July and published on 4 July 1776, the Declaration starts by explaining that any group wishing to separate from a former ruler needs to provide reasons for doing so. The Declaration begins with the classic sentence, 'We hold these truths to be self-evident, that all men are created equal, that they are endowed by their Creator with certain unalienable rights, that among these are life, liberty and the pursuit of happiness.' Of course, the founders' definition of 'all men' really meant White men and not women or other races. Broadening the scope came much later in the life of America, and I discuss part of that struggle in Chapter 14.

The Declaration goes into great length outlining the injuries inflicted by George III, including refusal to pass laws for the common good, restricting justice and economic growth, and the destruction of colonial lives and property by mercenary armies and insurrections. The Declaration then suggests that the colonists have repeatedly pleaded with the British to grant them greater respect but have found their response wanting.

Finally, the colonists declare they are free people by granting themselves absolution 'from all allegiance to the British Crown' as a new nation with 'full power to levy war, conclude peace, contract alliances, establish commerce, and to do all other acts and things which independent states may of right do.'

The backstory: Opposing colonial power

The Declaration arose from an environment of increasing discontent. From the mid-1700s, colonists were frustrated with the British controlling their destiny. Combined with steady population growth – 2 million people by the early 1760s – was a growing economy and a desire among colonists for further territorial expansion. However, colonists were constrained by a series of British Acts, taxes and royal proclamations that fuelled increasing resentment of colonial rule.

The year 1763 was important in signalling the beginning of the end for British colonial America. The Seven Year War (1756–1763) pitting European powers against each other was echoed in North America as the French and Indian War. It was a battle between the French and the British for colonial domination of the region, and the British won. With the defeat of the French, the colonists believed they could thus expand the territory under their control. However, fearful of Native American rebellion in response to such expansionism, in 1763 King George III issued a royal proclamation forbidding it. Siding with the Native Americans, George III declared that colonists on these lands would have to be removed and, adding to the perceived insult, they would have to help pay for the building of military outposts to protect the border they didn't want.

In the next two years relations between the British colonial powers and the colonists were further inflamed when a series of Acts sought more revenue from the colonies and greater control over their affairs. In 1765, for example, the Stamp Act – used to finance troops based in the colonies – was the first direct tax applied to the colonists. They responded by submitting petitions and boycotting British goods. They also established groups such as the Sons of Liberty, which rebelled against colonial power. Their argument was that without representation in Parliament taxation should not be applied.

By 1767 further Acts had asserted British control over the colonies, and a growing number of colonists were refusing to pay taxes. At one protest against taxes in 1770, British troops killed five people. Referred to as the Boston Massacre, this event became the beacon of resistance against British control. Simultaneously, London relented and repealed all Acts except taxing tea. In December1773, in an incident known as the Boston Tea Party, a group of men dressed as Native Americans raided the East India Company ships docked in Boston and dumped their cargo of tea into the harbour.

Parliament then introduced the Intolerable Acts, severely restricting the powers of the Massachusetts government by placing it under Crown control. In response, the colonists organised themselves and held the First Continental Congress, in Philadelphia in 1774. Twelve of the thirteen colonies sent delegates (Georgia declined), and although disagreements occurred about whether to seek a resolution with Britain or to request legislative parity or separation, they were united in their opposition to Britain's increasing dominance. The Congress issued a declaration on how it wanted Britain to respond to its grievances, and declared it would meet again the following year if the demands weren't met. Before it met again, however, British troops had attempted to seize patriot weapons and the revolution began.

The Second Continental Congress met in 1775, organised the Continental Army and established George Washington as its commander. A year later, on 4 July, the Congress published the Declaration of Independence, assumed the functions of government and began appointing ambassadors, signing treaties, raising an army, seeking loans from European lenders and issuing money. The battle of Yorktown in October 1782 signalled the end of the war, with General Washington accepting the surrender of the British general, Cornwallis.

In February 1793 the British declared an end to hostilities and in September signed the Treaty of Paris recognising the United States of America as a new nation. The child was officially divorced from its parents.

How to Be a Democracy: The Manual

Creating a new state brought new issues to be addressed, including what the state would look like, how it would respond to the fear of tyrannical rule, and what type of relationship would be formed between government and the people.

Founding forethoughts

In any new game, the rules of play have to be worked out. And new games don't appear in isolation from the experiences of the people developing them; they're driven by those people and experiences. In the case of democracy, the new game developers were also known as the *founding fathers* and were responding to the grievances of the colonists in the 13 colonies. In the wake of their squabbles with King George III, they feared a tyrannical and absolutist leader who dictated terms and did not listen to the needs or wants of the people. Thus, they drew on Enlightenment political philosophy, otherwise known as liberalism, which was being discussed at the time in Europe.

Liberalism proposed a radical reinterpretation of the relationship between the people and those who governed. It suggested that, rather than the ruler having sovereignty and their subjects having to obey them, the people were sovereign and the government was there to work on their behalf. (Chapter 3 tells you more about liberalism.)

Key to ensuring that the government was working in the interests of the people was limiting the powers of the government. The new nation would enshrine individual rights in a Constitution in order to ensure that the government was unable to expand its powers.

Employing a republican state and thwarting tyranny

First and foremost, the founders wanted to establish a state that responded to the needs of the people. They sought to do this by establishing a political system that enabled the people to have their voices represented through elected officials, while also diluting the concentration of power into a federal system that separated powers of government into three branches:

- Executive, which enforces the law of the land and is led by the president (see Chapter 4)

- Legislature, which makes the law (see Chapter 5)
- Judiciary, which enforces the law (see Chapter 7)

Although they liked the idea of democratic government, the founders were also cautious of democracy, associating it with mob rule enabling the majority to dominate all others. In order to avoid this situation, they introduced rights that protected individuals and states.

By dividing the powers of the central government into the legislature, executive and judiciary, the Constitution encouraged struggles between the three branches. In addition to dividing the duties of government into separate branches, the Constitution also details the powers to check and balance the other two branches. Chapter 2 tells you more about these checks and balances.

The Constitution also divided powers between the central (federal) government and the states:

- The federal government is responsible for safeguarding civil society from external and internal threats, and for protecting people's individual rights.
- Each state government is independent and has its own responsibilities for ensuring that the individuals within its constituency are protected.

Government was divided this way in part as a legacy of the colonial states exercising their own authority in their own areas, and partly because it would ensure that these two levels would compete with each other and ensure that power wasn't concentrated in one area. Thus if one of these two layers of government were to infringe people's rights in some way, those people could then turn to the other layer to address their concerns.

The rights protecting the individual and individual states from the tyranny of the majority were enshrined in the first 10 amendments to the Constitution – collectively termed the Bill of Rights. Chapter 2 covers the Constitution and the Bill of Rights in detail.

Defining 'we' the people

You'd be forgiven for thinking that the phrase 'we the people' used in the Declaration of Independence covered every adult living in the country. But the situation wasn't that simple. Defining who the people are – in other words, who has the rights afforded by the US Constitution – depends on

individual and cultural beliefs. The social and political upheavals in US history have had a dramatic impact on who the predominant US culture designates as a member of the 'we' and not the 'others' category.

Race and ethnicity have had a huge impact on the institutional and social development of the American political, economic and cultural system. It's not just a story about how the political system saw the need for change in what constituted 'the people'; it's also about the narratives of the people and how they fought and struggled for equal access and recognition.

Through the 1770s onwards 'the people' were overwhelmingly White men and women and just a few freed slaves and 'civilised' Native Americans. In the immediate aftermath of the Civil War from 1865 onwards and into the Restoration Era, enslaved people were freed, and the definition changed. However, it wasn't until the 1960s that significant advances in terms of political and social equality between races were made. There was a recognition during this period, among increasing numbers of Americans, as well as the government, that the dominance of the White Anglo Saxon Protestant (WASP) culture since the founding of the nation was in need of an overhaul to better reflect the racial and ethnic diversity of the country in the political, cultural and economic realms. This drive for change was particularly focused on the status of African Americans, although the benefits were ultimately felt by all minority groups. The racial and ethnic path of America changed course. Chapter 14 tells you more about race and multiculturalism.

American society has taken 200 years plus to get to where it is today, and by no means has it arrived at destination equality yet. The founders created a political system that can accommodate change and new members, and this unique fight for the rights of the individual to be protected from the tyranny of the majority has stood the country in good stead.

Issues Facing Modern America

The struggles inherent in US domestic policy suggest two things about American society: a narrative of positivity and a belief in change but also a reality that fundamental divisions remain. These struggles, to varying degrees, reflect divisions existing in American society:

- Questions of individual liberty
- Interpretations of the Constitution
- The balance between state rights and federal rights
- The role the federal government should play in regulating the lives of Americans

And while these divisions haven't led to another openly violent and large-scale civil war (see Chapter 14 on that conflict), they do, nonetheless, manifest themselves in a *culture war*. Chapter 15 explores in detail the current issues dividing US society, from gun control to abortion, the power of central government to the death penalty.

Key debates in American society collectively reflect conflicting visions of America's future. Such visions are dependent on differing interpretations of moral authority and gravitate around the concepts of conservatism and progressivism:

- From the conservative view of the world, morality is definable, absolute and unchanging. Irrespective of the era in which a person lives they need to obey the same moral code. While conservatives can be secular, their moral code is typically based on religious texts.
- From the progressive perspective, morality is defined by a person's experiences and not some external and absolute force. It is a product of the changing society in which the person lives.

A lot of debate happens in the United States around issues that illustrate and deepen those conflicting takes on right and wrong. These, too, are covered in Chapter 15.

America on the World Stage

The United States of America was borne from an idea, a revolutionary idea. And it marks the US as an *exceptional* and special state. It has forever proclaimed its unique sense of mission and suggested it is a beacon of freedom and righteousness for the world to admire and follow (see Chapter 17 for more details). As a result, America has felt a duty to promote its political system around the world.

Currently, the US remains the only superpower in the world. It still has the capacity to dominate, shape and determine the future course of world history in a way that no other state can match. However, its period of unipolar dominance is coming to an end. China's rise as an economic and military power, India's growing economic strength and Russia's increasing confidence on the world stage are challenging America's status as the dominant hegemon. Whether a rebalancing of international relations will result remains to be seen, but it is certainly food for thought for policy-makers in Washington, DC. Chapter 18 covers US relations with various other nations.

Chapter 2

Recognising the Constitution as a Living, Breathing Document

In This Chapter

- Looking at the lead-up to the creation of the US Constitution
- Understanding the three branches of the federal government
- Explaining the ideological roots of the Constitution
- Explaining how the Constitution has survived for over 225 years
- Considering the Constitution's applicability in the contemporary world

The US Constitution is the defining document for the government of the country. It's also a picture of a moment in time when the enlightenment ideals of liberty and freedom manifested themselves in a struggle against tyranny and in defining a new way of running a government. This amazing document set America on a path different from all other nations at the time.

But humans aren't perfect, and the products of our thoughts are equally imperfect. Determining the original intent of the framers of the Constitution and applying its mandates in the modern era continue to be a struggle. This chapter explores the origins of the Constitution, its contents, and how it has managed to survive so long with so few amendments, highlighting key problems with its application.

Setting the Stage for a New Kind of Government

The battle for autonomy was one fought by the colonists over many years – and a steady stream of hostilities major and minor between themselves and their British rulers. Frustration eventually led the colonists to get organised.

Perhaps the most significant result was the First Continental Congress, held in Philadelphia from September to October 1774.

Twelve of the thirteen colonies sent delegates (Georgia declined), and while disagreements existed about how to respond, such as seeking a resolution with Britain or requesting legislative parity or separation, the delegates were united in their opposition to Britain's increasing dominance. They issued a declaration on how they wanted Britain to respond to their grievances, and planned to meet again the following year if they were not met.

The British response was the 'shot heard round the world' – so named because it had an impact on international relations. British troops went to seize patriot weapons in April 1775. Soon after, the Second Continental Congress met and took over the control of the revolution by organising the Continental Army and placing George Washington as its commander. On 4 July, the Congress published the *United States Declaration of Independence*. The Declaration was a line-by-line explanation by Congress of why the 13 former Colonies were rebelling against the British.

The Congress assumed the functions of government and began appointing ambassadors, signing treaties, raising an army, seeking loans from European lenders and issuing money. With one of the chief objections among the colonies being taxation, the Congress did not raise taxes for the war effort but instead requested money from the 13 former colonies.

Over the next eight years the war raged on, until the battle of Yorktown in October 1782 effectively ended it, as General Washington accepted the surrender of the British General Cornwallis. The November 1782 Anglo-American treaty was a preliminary document to establish peace between the two warring parties, and in February 1793 the British declared an end to hostilities. In September that year, the British signed the Treaty of Paris recognising the United States of America as a new nation.

The spluttering first Constitution

The first Constitution was a map to guide how government should operate and how the people should behave. For over a year, delegates from the 13 founding states debated in order to come to a provisional agreement. This working document, otherwise known as the *Articles of Confederation and Perpetual Union*, was submitted in 1777 for ratification.