

Introduction

A Class Analysis of the American Political System

We live in a time when political officials manipulate information with minimal consequences. Many Americans' political opinions are formed independently of evidence-based reasoning. Political officials regularly misrepresent reality, as seen in the 2016 presidential election. The non-partisan fact-checking group *PolitiFact* analyzed statements made by presidential candidates, finding that only a third of them were true. For the Democrats, 53 percent of Hillary Clinton's statements were true, compared to 51 percent for Bernie Sanders.¹ Republican candidates were even worse. Just 9 percent of Donald Trump's statements were true, while 78 percent were false.² Only 22 percent of Ted Cruz's statements were true, 53 percent for John Kasich, 7 percent for Ben Carson, 48 percent for Jeb Bush, 37 percent for Marco Rubio, and 28 percent for Carly Fiorina.³ In a troubling sign for democracy, the second most deceptive candidate of all—Donald Trump—won the election, with 78 percent of his statements deemed “mostly false,” “false,” or “pants on fire.”⁴ Trump's rampant deceptions and falsehoods continued throughout his presidency, much to the chagrin of fact-checkers and reporters.⁵

The public's tolerance of manipulative official rhetoric represents a fundamental threat, in that democracy is premised upon citizens making informed political decisions. The prevalence of deception in American politics suggests that the political system no longer serves the interests of the many. Instead, our system increasingly serves the interests of the American upper class—as represented by large corporations, business leaders, and the professional class that is attached to corporate America. In this vein, I echo the claims of previous critical scholars, such as political scientist Michael Parenti, who documents “upper-class dominance of public life,” including politics, by business interests.⁶ In the words of sociologist C. Wright Mills, there is a “power elite” that is comprised of business officials, political leaders, and military officials, all working in service of the “the corporate rich.”⁷ G. William Domhoff similarly forwards a “class theory” of

societal power, examining the working relationship between major corporations, members of the upper class, and policy-oriented advocacy organizations.⁸

A Marxist analysis of American politics places economics—and particularly the corporate class and business elites—at the center of political power. Through a “historical materialist” analysis, the Marxist framework envisions upper-class and business interests as dominant over other realms of public life, including political institutions, the media, individual identities, and social interactions. Power in society has an economic foundation, which determines how various social institutions function. One need not be a Marxist, however, to believe that business and upper-class interests play a dominant role in influencing the political process, as most Americans see government as controlled by the wealthy. I adopt a broader framework in this book than simply talking about the “business class.” The American upper-class includes business interests, but also trade associations that are tightly linked to corporate interests, and professional associations.⁹ These professional groups include doctors, lawyers, engineers, and other service-based professionals, who operate within the capitalist system working for major corporations, although others may be employed by public institutions or be self-employed. It is this upper class, and particularly its core corporate component, with which I am interested.

It is common today to hear Americans complain about the role of money in elections. But this is only one part of upper-class power in politics. The link between interest groups giving campaign donations and favorable votes on policies from legislators is inconsistent at best. Rather, a more expansive view of American political power is needed. This expanded view recognizes that politics is heavily dominated by corporate interests, with the political system itself being captured by the wealthy. This domination occurs in numerous ways, with wealthy Americans increasingly comprising the political elite who run Washington, with bureaucratic officials being courted and captured by business lobbies, with corporate media reinforcing a pro-business ideology via news and entertainment media, and with political officials and media directing public attention away from political discussions in an age of mass political demobilization. The demobilization of the public makes it increasingly difficult to challenge upper-class political power. The masses are relegated to the sidelines due to the growth in anti-government rhetoric from political leaders, which turns the public off from politics. Simultaneously, the rising prominence of non-political, diversionary mass-media entertainment programming also diverts Americans from political matters.

The Italian Marxist Antonio Gramsci spoke of the power of “hegemony,” which referred to the process through which business and political leadership indoctrinate the mass public in favor of political rhetoric and policies that favor upper-class interests. Hegemony, which means to guide or lead, essentially refers

to the brainwashing of Americans in favor of developing an ideology that favors corporate capitalist prerogatives—and with Americans embracing policies that run contrary to their own economic interests.

While there has always been an upper-class of Americans that dominates politics, this pattern of governance was not static throughout history. The American society of 1787 was far more dominated by the upper class than today. Most Americans were politically disenfranchised, since state laws required that they own property to vote. Membership in the upper class, unlike today, was not based predominantly on being a part of the corporate class, since the United States was a pre-capitalist, agriculturally-based society. Rather, societal elites hailed from various backgrounds and occupations; they were slave and land owners, lawyers, creditors, shippers, traders, and merchants, among other professionals. Within this system, women, African Americans, Native Americans, and non-property-owning males—the vast majority of the population—were explicitly prohibited from participating in politics. Due to a series of popular struggles throughout the nineteenth and twentieth centuries, however, the United States moved in a radically more democratic direction in which the masses of Americans eventually gained the power to participate in the political process. Still, political dominance by the upper class goes through cycles. In the 1930s and in response to growing public anger over the Great Depression, President Franklin Roosevelt undertook a series of “New Deal” reforms that introduced significant regulations on corporations, while establishing basic protections for American workers and basic welfare programs for the poor. A tax system based on heavy redistribution of wealth from rich to the middle class and poor emerged by the end of World War II, and the welfare state was dramatically expanded during the 1960s under President Lyndon Johnson’s “War on Poverty.” From the 1930s through the 1960s, mass social movements emerged to challenge upper-class domination of American politics and society, and demanded democratic reforms that enhanced the representation and living conditions of the masses.

Despite the rollback of business power during this period, in the last four decades, we have seen the rise of a “neoliberal” era, marked by the growing power of a corporate capitalist upper class which exercises power over politics, and in which the mass public’s impact on the political system has significantly declined. In these pages, I define neoliberalism as including many policy proposals, all of which seek to enhance corporate and upper-class power, at the expense of most Americans. These include: support for deregulation of businesses and corporations; demands for personal responsibility and sacrifice, in an effort to gut the social welfare state; failure to prioritize infrastructure spending on public education, roads, bridges, and other necessary public goods; constant demands for tax cuts on wealthy Americans and corporations, under the promise that the

benefits will one day “trickle down” to workers; efforts to privatize vital social welfare programs such as Social Security, Medicare, and Medicaid, to funnel increased profits to Wall Street; militant resistance to raising the minimum wage to match inflation-based increases in consumer prices, or to increase wages past the inflation rate to keep pace with increased worker productivity rates; assaults on public and private sector unions that bargain for pay raises and benefits for workers, which are seen as a burden on government budgets and corporate profits; opposition to free college tuition and universal health care, to be paid for through an increasingly progressive tax system in which the wealthy pay higher tax rates than poorer Americans; and opposition to government efforts to combat global warming, through regulations on fossil-fuel-burning corporations and large increases in taxpayer funding for renewable energy research and development. These policies, while greatly enriching upper-class and corporate interests, have resulted in serious insecurity for working Americans, and produced record inequality.¹⁰ Only recently, in the post-2008 era, have citizens begun to rise up in mass to protest the emergence of record inequality in society, and in an effort to rollback growing upper-class and corporate power over politics.

Defining American Politics

American politics is a contested terrain. Politics, defined by political scientist Harold Lasswell as the process of deciding who gets what, when, and how, is filled with conflict.¹¹ Politics is contentious because it represents a process whereby individuals, interest groups, and political officials decide who will benefit from government via the allocation of taxpayer funded benefits and other protections.

Government is vital to the people. Regardless of whether one is ignorant to politics or not, government will continue to tax people to pay for programs, and set policies that regulate the behavior of the masses. Government is expected to provide public services and goods, providing security against foreign and domestic threats, collecting taxes for public services, and preserving law and order. But in an era when many Americans are tuning out politics and the news, civic competence is endangered.¹² Despite such ignorance, politics will not become irrelevant. Rather, if mass apathy continues, it is the public that will lose its ability to critically engage in important political matters. Sadly, in a media system that diverts public attention away from politics and toward entertainment, Americans are losing their ability to think critically about enduring issues in the world around them.¹³

To understand the importance of government, one must recognize the point of government. Government refers to a system of institutions that creates rules

to regulate the behavior of, and provide services for individuals. U.S. governing institutions exist at the state, local, and national levels. All governments rely on top-down authority, with officials setting rules and regulations impacting how people live and interact. Democratic governments rely on public consent, while dictatorships have little interest in the people's will, instead relying on violence to suppress the people.

The U.S. is a representative, republican political system. It relies on Americans to participate in choosing their political leaders. But direct participation in government by the public is limited by political officials, who dominate policy deliberation, lawmaking, and policy implementation. In a republican system, government-public relations are based on a social contract, which is an agreement between people and political leaders in which the latter represents the common interests of the former. But the rise of upper-class and business dominance of politics inhibits democracy, with the wealthy disproportionately impacting politics over the many.

Americans are educated by schools and the media to believe they live in a democracy, and that government empowers the masses. A constitutional system supposedly ensures that no government branch dominates over others, while voting guarantees that political officials represent the people. These beliefs provide comfort to many people. But little of this narrative is an accurate reflection of reality. In the neoliberal era, political leaders have done little to promote the interests and preferences of the average American.¹⁴ Government has done little to stem the rising tide of income and wealth inequality at a time when officials adopt a "hands off" mentality toward business, which has allowed for record profits and a declining sense of corporate responsibility to workers. The commitment to a form of politics that favors the upper class has grown with the election of Donald Trump, whose administration the *Washington Post* reports is "the richest in modern American history."¹⁵

Many Americans have disassociated themselves from politics. They view the political system as irrelevant or harmful to the masses, or both. Government distrust is at record levels. A crisis of confidence has emerged, with most feeling political officials are failing to democratically represent the public. In line with an upper-class bias, most Americans see government as run by the few, and for the few.¹⁶ Critics have long complained that corporations and the wealthy control American politics, and public concern about this control of politics is growing.¹⁷ None of this is meant to suggest that the U.S. has abandoned all democratic aspects of government. The system is still able to represent the masses in various ways. But if current trends continue, there will be little left of the democratic system in coming years and decades.

The State of Politics Today: Engagement or Apathy?

If American politics is dominated by upper-class and business interests, it would take a massive uprising from the citizenry to combat this encroachment on democracy. Are most Americans up to the challenge? Many scholars are pessimistic about the masses and their knowledge of politics. Numerous political scientists view the public as generally ignorant, incapable, or unwilling to take the necessary steps to develop informed political opinions.¹⁸ Only a third of Americans can name all the branches of the federal government, and a third cannot name a single branch. Most Americans do not know which party controls the House and Senate.¹⁹ Seventy-seven percent of young Americans cannot name one of their two U.S. Senators.²⁰ If most Americans are uninformed on political issues, how can they present a unified front to fight against growing corporate power?

Public ignorance to politics is not new. By the turn of the twenty-first century, polls demonstrated that political knowledge levels were comparable to mid-twentieth century levels, despite the percent of high school graduates nationwide growing from about 50 percent in the 1940s to about 90 percent by 2011, and Americans with a bachelor's degree increasing from about 5 percent to a third of the public.²¹ The growth in formal education over time should have produced greater political knowledge, not stagnation. But mass political ignorance was prevalent in the 2010s, with 77 percent of young Americans unable to recall the name of one of their Senators, with only one-in-four Americans correctly identifying all three branches of government, with less than one-in-three able to identify the Chief Justice of the Supreme Court, and with less than four-in-ten recalling the name of their member of the House of Representatives.²²

Recent evidence suggests that public ignorance is intensifying. While about a third of young Americans (18–29) voted in the 1978 Congressional elections, it fell to about 20 percent by 2014.²³ And while about half of young Americans (18–24) voted in the 1964 and 1968 presidential elections, it had fallen to 38 percent by 2012.²⁴ The young's attention to politics via newspapers also fell during this time period, as did traditional political activities such as writing to public officials, giving money to political campaigns, and working for a political campaign.²⁵ Overall attention to the news was significantly lower for younger Americans in the 2010s compared to the 1990s, with 57 percent of those 18–29 saying they paid attention to political news, compared to 79 percent of those 30–39, 73 percent of those 40–59, and 79 percent of those 60 and older, and with only a quarter of Americans 18–29 saying they pay close attention to the news, compared to a third of those aged 30–39, over 40 percent of those 40–59, and more than half of those over 60.²⁶ These numbers suggest that declining political attentiveness is a significant concern across the board.

Why do so many fail to pay attention to politics? A number of reasons may explain this trend. For one, Americans are working harder and longer hours for stagnating to declining pay over the last four decades. As the American middle class is squeezed by increased workplace demands, deteriorating pay, and spiraling credit card, health care, and educational debt, these impositions limit the time many have to pay attention to politics. Government failure to address these concerns is troubling at a time when officials are lambasted for siding with business interests over the mass public.

Another reason for declining attention is the fragmentation of the media. In the era of *Netflix*, cable, satellite television, *YouTube*, *Facebook*, and other social media, Americans have more media choices than ever. In the mid-twentieth century choices were radically constricted, and it was more difficult to avoid the news with so few options. With growing fragmentation of the media, Americans are subject to an endless barrage of entertainment programs, making it easier to avoid politics and the world around them. Many who are not forced to pay attention to the news will not pay attention, and media providers are happy to cater to their alternative preferences. In this case, corporate pursuit of profits trumps interest in informing the masses. This process is another example of the elevation of corporate interests over the political empowerment of the people.

A final reason for declining political attention is the transformation of American culture. Many Americans are socialized to assume that politics is bad, and not worthy of their time. Distrust of government has risen dramatically in recent decades, first during the Vietnam War, and later after the 2008 economic crash. During the Vietnam War, Americans discovered that the Johnson administration lied to the public about the reasons for war. This deception was apparent with the release of the “Pentagon Papers,” a declassified record of government documents chronicling government lies about war. Trust continued to fall greatly through the mid-to-late 1970s. In addition to the Pentagon Papers, the public also experienced the Watergate scandal, which involved Republican President Richard Nixon illegally ordering a break-in at the Democratic National Headquarters in Washington DC. The twin blows of the Pentagon Papers and Watergate shook public confidence in government, radically changing American political culture. And public disgust with government began to grow again in the early twenty-first century. Many white Americans were angry about their own economic stagnation and their growing work obligations (as represented by their increased work hours), which translated into increased voter support for Donald Trump, who had promised to “Make America Great Again” by helping the working- and middle-classes.²⁷

The 2010s were years of intense displeasure with government. In 2015, just 38 percent of Americans—the lowest number since 1972—trusted the national

government to handle domestic problems “a great deal” or “a fair amount.”²⁸ Only 20 percent trusted government “to do what is right” “just about always” or “most of the time,” a record low since this question was first tracked in 1958.²⁹ Only 20 percent of Americans felt in 2015 that government was “run for the benefit of all,” rather than the few. These numbers suggest a massive crisis of confidence.³⁰ Much of the public’s anger is related to the perception that American politics unfairly favors the upper class and wealthy. Most Americans feel the rich are not being taxed enough.³¹ They think elections are dominated by elites and money, rather than controlled by the people.³² As the *Washington Post* reports: “by nearly a 2-to-1 margin (64 percent to 36 percent), Americans believe their ‘vote does not matter because of the influence wealthy individuals and big corporations have on the electoral process.’”³³ Most feel government should do more to reduce the gap between rich and poor, but with a political system that fails to prioritize aiding the needy and poor, inequality continues to grow.³⁴

Despite the evidence of declining political involvement, other evidence suggests fears about public ignorance may be exaggerated. Americans—particularly the young—are more directly engaged in politics than previously believed. While the young are less likely to follow the news, vote, or be a member of a political party, they are more likely to participate politically in unconventional ways. Engaged citizens are less trustful of government, but *more* likely to sign petitions and participate in boycotts of consumer products in pursuit of social justice causes, and more likely to participate in political demonstrations and rallies.³⁵ Young Americans have become more likely in recent decades to be involved in community-based political activities, and to converse with others on election-related matters.³⁶ Young Americans are more likely to be “active member[s]” of a group outside of political parties “that tries to influence public policy or government.”³⁷ Relevant to the upper-class business bias in politics, young Americans are also more likely to oppose capitalism entirely and to support socialism. Counter-cultural values within this group are pronounced, with American youth less likely than older Americans to prioritize consumerism, and more likely to base their identities on shared communal experiences.³⁸ These findings reveal a profound youth alienation from a political-economic system that many feel does not represent their political or economic interests.

Other evidence suggests that Americans as a whole are more attentive to politics than previously thought. Drawing on the data from table I.1, a review of *Pew Research Center* surveys from 2011 through 2016 finds that across 16 different political issues, 52 percent of Americans report paying attention to the news, either “somewhat” or “very closely.” These findings suggest that large numbers of Americans are paying attention to what is happening around them.

An overall assessment of available evidence suggests that public ignorance is a serious problem, but that Americans—especially the young—are beginning to mobilize against the political-economic status quo. Those bemoaning the inadequacies of the public are correct that many Americans are politically ignorant and fail to pay attention to politics and the news. These problems are real threats to democracy and are a serious impediment to any mass rebellion against a political system favoring upper-class and wealthy business interests.

American elections have *not* succeeded in shaking much of the public of their ignorance. And despite Americans being better educated than ever before, a shocking number of people are blissfully ignorant to politics, and many are poorly informed.

Massive numbers of Americans fail to participate electorally in selecting their leaders. Over 40 percent of voting-eligible Americans did not vote in 2016, and 63 percent did not turn out in the 2014 midterm elections.³⁹ The United States has among the lowest voter turnout rates in the world, contradicting

Table I.1. Public Attention to the News (2011–2016)

Event	Date	% Paying Very or Somewhat Close Attention	% Paying Very Close Attention
Presidential Election	10/2016	78%	41%
Presidential Election	4/2016	69%	38%
Violence in Syria	9/2015	52%	24%
Wildfires	9/2015	41%	15%
Presidential Election	5/2015	41%	16%
Same-Sex Marriage Ruling	5/2015	40%	18%
Protests Police Violence	12/2014	66%	35%
Midterm Congressional Elections	10/2014	42%	16%
Safety Defects GM Cars	4/2014	44%	19%
Obamacare Exchanges Opening	11/2013	65%	37%
Federal Government Shutdown	10/2013	73%	43%
Senate Immigration Reform Bill	6/2013	50%	21%
Violence in Syria	3/2013	35%	13%
Shooting Portland, Oregon	12/2012	47%	19%
Egyptian Presidential Election	6/2012	33%	13%
Occupy Wall Street Protests	11/2011	50%	20%
Congress Budget Talks	9/2011	57%	31%

Source: Pew Research Center, Monthly Polls, 2011–2016

notions that other countries should look to America as a model of democratic empowerment.⁴⁰

On the other hand, many Americans pay attention to politics and engage in the political process in various ways. Most Americans pay attention to what is happening in the news, and young Americans are increasingly participating in politics in unconventional ways, while challenging the entire foundation of a political system dominated by corporate and upper-class values. We live in the era of mass protest, be it the Tea Party, Occupy Wall Street, Black Lives Matter, anti-Trump protests, or MeToo—a period of protest unrivalled since the 1960s. Much of the public expresses a fundamental distrust of the American political system, feeling it is dominated by the corporate rich. These developments have fueled protests, and suggest that corporate and upper-class power in American politics and society is in an increasingly precarious position in the early twenty-first century.

Book Outline

This book covers many issues related to the U.S. political system. The focus overlaps with the sections typically taught in American government introductory courses. The chapter layout is as follows: chapter 1: Theories of Government and a History of the Founding Era; chapter 2: The U.S. Constitution; chapter 3: Federalism; chapter 4: Interest Groups; chapter 5: Congress; chapter 6: The Presidency; chapter 7: The Bureaucracy; chapter 8: the Courts; chapter 9: Political Parties; chapter 10: Elections and Voting; chapter 11: The Media; chapter 12: Public Opinion; chapter 13: Civil Liberties; chapter 14: Civil Rights; chapter 15: Economic Policy; chapter 16: Foreign Policy; and the conclusion: Where Do We Go from Here?