

American Politics
A Very Short Introduction

By Richard M. Valelly

Questions for Thought and Discussion

- On a scale from 1 to 5, with 1 being “quite poor” and 5 “quite good,” how would you have ranked the performance of American politics works *before* you read this book? Why?
- *After* reading this book how would you rate the performance of American politics on this 1-5 scale? If the two rankings differ, *why* do they differ? If your mind changed in the course of reading and thinking about the book, then what changed your assessment?
- Does government by discussion require that people in public office – and that the voters – be willing to change their policy views and political orientations after a sustained period of discussion? Why or why not? Can you think of examples of such change? Can you think of examples of long running discussions about an issue where minds do (or did) not seem to change? What differentiates the two examples?
- What would be the danger that might come with considerable willingness on the part of public officials and citizens to change their partisanship? What is the danger that would come with zero willingness for them to change their partisanship? How does American democracy find a middle course?
- What reforms can you imagine that would equalize the power among citizens to set the agenda of public debate? How feasible are they?
- When are presidents most likely to succeed in manipulating public opinion? What can be done to cut down on that danger?
- Find the website that David Mayhew maintains – the URL is at p. 33 of the book – and that can be used to track legislative productivity in the last decade. Does such productivity seem to be shrinking or staying about the same? Does legislative productivity mean lots of laws or actual problem-solving? Does the idea of legislative productivity tacitly assume that government *should* solve problems – and is that a contestable assumption?
- Congress is required to produce a budget every year. The President also frames its budget deliberations. Lately this process has faltered. Should the President and Congress move to biennial rather than annual budgeting? Does the Constitution prevent that? Should the Constitution be changed – or would that not fix the problem, and if so why not?
- Which part of the Constitution has allowed the filibuster to develop over time? Does that seem like an especially prominent or important part of the Constitution? Does the actual importance of the filibuster seem disproportionate to the textual passage that authorizes the filibuster? Does that same passage authorize a change in the filibuster? If the filibuster is unlikely to be disestablished, has the Constitution in effect been amended – but not by the amendment procedure established by the Constitution itself?
- Does the filibuster (as it currently works) contribute to government by discussion? Why or why not? Did it previously work to foster government by discussion?
- Do you have a favourite Supreme Court justice? Why? What qualities does he or she have – or had? Should all of the justices be like your favourite justice? Why or why not?
- Why do you think that Chief Justice John Roberts cast the deciding vote in favour of Obamacare? What does that act on his part say about how “political” the Court is?
- Is the public capable of evaluating Supreme Court decisions? How would you know one way or another? Should the public have a reasonably good grasp of what the Court does? Why or why not?
- Can you name a bureaucracy that works well? Why do you think that it works well? How typical or atypical do you think that bureaucracy is? Why?

- Can you think of an agency that ought to be abolished? Why? Can you think of any agency that ought to be created? Why do you think that it should be created? What kinds of political consequences would the creation of a new agency have?
- With the help of the appendix to the book that lists websites and blogs develop a list of reputable public opinion surveys that address public policy, political issues, government performance, and citizen political preferences. Are there any important issues that are not covered by the surveys? How much should an office holder take surveys into account? Why or why not?
- Make a list of major third parties in American political history. What criteria do you use for listing them as major? Then make a timeline that displays when these parties flourished. How do you explain the overall pattern that you see? One possible explanation would be public preferences. But do surveys show that Americans are against the formation of a successful third party today? If not, then what fosters the increased partisanship among American citizens?
- Look at the historical data available at the website on income inequality in the U.S. maintained by Emmanuel Saez: <http://elsa.berkeley.edu/~saez/#income> What do you make of the historical data? Do you find the trend a matter of concern or not? Why? If you do consider it a problem, then under what political circumstances could one expect to see a reversal of increased and sustained income inequality? Can such a reversal be done through government by discussion and electoral politics? If so, how? What are some of the reasons that you can think of for why increasing income inequality is quite surprising?

Further Reading

E. Scott Adler and John Wilkerson, *Congress and the Politics of Problem Solving* (Cambridge University Press, 2013)

Sean Gilmard and John W. Patty, *Learning While Governing: Expertise and Accountability in the Executive Branch* (University of Chicago Press, 2012)

Martin Gilens, *Affluence and Influence: Economic Inequality and Political Power in America* (Princeton University Press, 2012)

Christopher S. Parker, *Fighting for Democracy: Black Veterans and the Struggle Against White Supremacy in the Postwar South* (Princeton University Press, 2009)

John Sides and Lynn Vavreck, *The Gamble: The Hand You're Dealt With* (Princeton University Press, 2012)

Theda Skocpol and Vanessa Williamson, *The Tea Party and the Remaking of Republican Conservatism* (Oxford University Press, 2012)

Other works by Richard M. Valelly

"What Political Scientists Can Teach Us About Income Inequality," *Chronicle of Higher Education*, Chronicle Review, 17 October 2008

"The Dynamics of Power," *Chronicle of Higher Education* Chronicle Review 11 August 2006; Cover Story

"What's Gone Right in the Study of What's Gone Wrong," *Chronicle of Higher Education* Chronicle Review 16 April 2004; Cover Story.

"An Overlooked Theory on Presidential Politics," *Chronicle of Higher Education* Chronicle Review 31 October 2003

"Voting Alone: The Case Against Virtual Ballot Boxes," *The New Republic* September 13 and 20, 1999