The American Government Textbook: Looking Beyond Pluralism

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Introduction to American Government remains the most popular course offered by Political Science Departments. According to APSA's most recent Departmental Survey, 98% of all departments teach some version of this course. Unlike upper-level courses where instructors use a variety of book chapters, articles, and secondary textbooks, there is still a significant reliance on a single textbook in most versions of the introductory course. This is evidenced to some extent by the sheer number of titles that often fill the shelves of most instructors, as the leading publishers – Cengage, Longman, Sage, McGraw-Hill and Prentice-Hall send us dozens of new editions every semester. Many of these titles, often authored by the most well known political scientists within the subfield of American politics, have been a staple at college bookstores for decades, as many are in their tenth edition or more.

One of the reasons why most instructors choose an introductory text as their primary teaching and learning tool is because most are written in a way that make them accessible to freshman college students, most of whom have had very little exposure to a college-level analysis of the institutions, processes and policies that make up these textbooks. Something else that most of these books have in common is that they present American government and politics through the framework of pluralism - the dominant model among political scientists to explain American politics. The pluralist model, best described by political scientists such as Robert Dahl (1961) and before him, David Truman (1951), depicts American politics as an interplay of interest groups contending for power. In effect, when posing the question of "who governs,?" the response is "Everyone through an interplay of interest groups that ensure that no one interest has too much power or influence." This interest group basis for explaining American politics has dominated American politics textbooks for decades.

However, since the 1960s, there has always been an influential core group of political scientists who argued that this pluralist model is deficient and that one needs to understand the operation of American politics, political institutions, and behavior from the perspective of class or socioeconomic status. McConnell (1966), Schattschneider (1960), Lindblom (1977, 1982), Dahl (1991), Verba, Schlozman and Brady (1995, 2013, 2018), are influential political scientists who have made this argument that class and socioeconomic status are influential variables or forces affecting American politics. More recently, the American Political Science Association Task Force on Inequality and American Democracy (2004) concluded that there were "disturbing inequalities" in citizen participation, government responsiveness, and patterns of public policy-making and that trends in these areas "may be coming together to amplify the influence of the few and promote government unresponsive to the value and needs of the many." They called on the field to dedicate more research to address issues of political and economic inequality and a system trending toward elite governance.

This resulted in a surge in studies and findings that indeed indicate that in many areas, American government and politics is far more elite-driven than it is pluralistic. Presenting our political system as pluralistic becomes even more troublesome when looking at lobbying (Drutman 2017), a lack of policy responsiveness by congress (Bartels 2008; Gilens 2012), unequal representation via the interest group universe (Schlozman, Brady and Verba 2012, 2018) and the overall lack of response by policymakers to address growing economic inequality (Hacker and Pierson 2011, Jacobs and Skocpol 2005) — focusing on the plethora of findings in economics, illustrating the exponential growth of economic inequality in the U.S, especially as compared to our European counterparts (Saez and Zucman 2016, Picketty 2014.) much of the blame for such inequality has been traced to the policy decisions (of all three branches as well as

regulatory agencies) of the past forty years. Many studies have traced the transformation of American politics that occurs beginning in the 1970s, where neo-liberalism restructured the US around a variety of principles committed to market fundamentalism and limited government that made class a more pronounced issue. It was also during this time that businesses and corporations became more politically active to assert their political interests. The result has been the creation of a political system where it is impossible to describe or explain the operation of American political institutions or public policy outcomes without reference to social class accurately. The political system has changed so fundamentally since the late 1970s, and it is crucial to address whether most American government textbooks continue to present a pluralistic ideal of American politics that has not existed in over four decades.

In this study, I look at eleven introductory American government textbooks to assess the degree to which they move beyond traditional models of pluralism and toward a more critical approach of one that reflects recent scholarship. I find that the vast majority of textbooks, perhaps fearing that a more critical approach would lead to political and civic disengagement among college students, present an overly idealized version of American government and politics. An evaluation of these textbooks reveals that very little attention is given to the exponential rise of corporate power and moneyed interests in American politics over the past four decades, even while this phenomenon has come to define political institutions, behavior, and public policy. As the introductory textbook is often the first and for some undergraduates, the only exposure they have to American government and politics, this has important implications. Are we as educators presenting students with a realistic and necessarily critical description of who really governs in America?

There is certainly a concern as to the content of textbooks that are available to those who teach the course on introductory American government. Several scholars have focused exclusively on visual images presented in books, looking at African Americans (Allen and Wallace 2010) and religious groups (Eisenstein and Clark 2013) finding that. Those studies which have examined the textual content of books also focus on race, examining, for instance, how Asian Pacific Americans are presented (Takeda 2015). Others look race coding and poverty (Clawson and Kegler 2000) how the LGBT community is presented (Novkov and Gossett 2007), as well as issues regarding women and gender (Olivio 2012). All of these topics, even standing alone, are quite important. It is also essential to think about how they might interact, especially when class and economic issues are brought to fore. When considering notions of intersectionality, that is how class, race, and gender interact to allocate political power and determine how governmental institutions operate, and it becomes even more critical to examine how such topics, including class and economic and political inequality, are treated in most textbooks.

Others, such as Franke and Bagby (2005), focus specifically on the 'Founding' chapter in American government textbooks. They divide the books into categories when it comes to presenting the framers of the Constitution. They find about half the textbooks present the founders in a more positive light, as philosophers who brilliantly debated and deliberated, pontificated on 18th Century liberal ideas. The second category includes textbooks that focus economic and class influence of the founders, invoking the interpretation by Charles Beard, who concluded that the founders represented the economic elite who crafted a constitution to protect their own property rights. There is only one other study that is similar to the research presented here. In 2000, Treibwasser compared three American Government textbooks that were published

in the early part of the 20th century with two that were published in the second half of the century and used as a model for most current mainstream texts. He found that unlike the older texts, the later texts focused much less on the influence of economic institutions and forces in shaping governmental decisions. He is troubled by this 'diminution in economic analysis,' as he contends that "The exclusion of economic factors in our texts very often leaves our students ill-equipped to understand the problems society now encounters, let alone even to consider possible solutions to these problems." (2000, 482). The conclusions of his study are important but somewhat limited as to the small number of textbooks and the fact that the research is twenty years old.

While I do not expect authors to present a critique of the pluralist paradigm in all chapters throughout the text, there are some areas where such a critique may appear. First, if authors intend to present a more critical approach to American government and politics, one would be able to identify this in the introductory chapter. The interest group chapter is of particular interest here, as the majority of research that is critical of the pluralist paradigm is found in studies about interest groups. This is likely because the pluralist paradigm is anchored in Truman's notion of group politics (1951), confirmed by Dahl's New Haven study and primarily accepted by much of the field of political science.

While most textbooks include the obligatory Schattschneider quote regarding the "upper-class accent" of the pluralist chorus, how many of them include a significant and substantive analysis of the exhaustive evidence, detailing the incredible economic advantages that moneyed interests have over all other interest groups. interest group universe? (Baumgartner and Leech 1998; Berry 1989; Schlozman 1984; Schlozman and Burch forthcoming; Tichenor and Harris 2002–03; Walker 1991). How many of these mainstream textbooks focus on the rise of corporate power in America beginning in the 1970s, through the power of interest groups, trade

associations, and PACs? How well do they articulate the reality of a highly advantaged business interest which is well-financed and better positioned to influence policy outcomes that serve to deepen economic and political inequality? (Schlozman, 2013).

Another topic to consider when assessing textbooks is how authors present labor unions. In the 1950s, John Gailbraith (1952) accurately described American politics as made up of "countervailing powers" where there is a triumvirate of big business, big labor, and big government. The power of anyone is kept in check by the other two. From the New Deal up until the 1980s, this was very much the case, as the business interest and its allies' opposition to workers' rights and decent wages, would often be thwarted by the power of unions along with pro-labor Democrats. Corporations began to hire labor-management consultants to break unions or to make sure that workers were not successful at forming a union in the first place. Throughout the seventies and eighties, there was a tremendous explosion in the number of unfair labor practices cases at the NLRB. The assault on unions by the business lobby took its toll and helped enormously in hobbling this "countervailing power." Questions remain as to whether the textbooks reflect this reality and relative power among different interest groups like business and labor.

The sample consists of eleven American government and politics textbooks, most of which are widely used in introductory classes and published by the biggest publishers in political science – Sage/CQ, Cengage, McGraw-Hill, Longman, Norton, and Oxford. I use the following coding scheme to help describe the textbooks as fitting squarely within the pluralist paradigm or taking a more critical non-pluralist approach.

Table 1. Pluralist/Non-Pluralist Coding Scheme

Topic	Points
Pluralistic Title	1
Preface/Introductory Chapter	
Introduction emphasizes American government as pluralistic	1
Introduction takes a critical approach to American government	-1
Interest Group Chapter	
Opens with positive political engagement story	1
Emphasizes 'upper class accent' in general	-1
Emphasizes a varied universe of competing groups	1
Emphasizes the decline of labor as countervailing force	-1
Depicts business and labor as fairly equal	1
Highlights the advantage of business compared to other interests	-1
Revolving door presented in positive light	1
Revolving door presented as negative light	-1

For some of the textbooks, the title itself foreshadows a more sanguine perspective as to the authors' presentation of a thriving pluralistic democracy. Such is the case with titles such as *Gateways to Democracy* (Geer, Herrera, Schiller and Segal 2016), *We the People* (Ginsberg, Lowi, Weir, Tolbert and Campbell 2019), *Living Democracy* (Shea, Green and Smith 2013), *American Democracy Now* (Harrison, Harris and Deardorff 2019), *The American Democracy* (Patterson 2012) and *By the People* (Morone and Kersh 2018). Contrast this with the titles of three non-mainstream – *Democracy for the Few* (Parenti 2000), *The Irony of Democracy* (Schubert, Dye and Ziegler 2014), and *The Politics of Power* (Katznelson, Kesselman and Draper 2013). I do not include these in my analysis, as they can be characterized as "point of view" textbooks that offer different topical chapters than the mainstream books. Moreover, they are presented and marketed very differently by book publishers. For instance, they are much smaller in page length and have very few graphics compared to their mainstream counterparts.

In some cases, one can discern the pluralist theme, which is woven throughout the chapters, from the authors opening example on the very first page. Greer et al. (2016)., for instance, present the "American Story" of Barack Obama, overcoming obstacles and pursuing opportunities to rise to become the nation's first black president. They note how this 'pull-yourself-up-by-your-bootstraps' success story is "compelling, speaking directly to how the U.S. political system can work," and that anyone can make a difference like Obama if they are willing to walk through '" one of the many gateways of American politics." (2016, 3). The election of Barack Obama has provided authors with a perfect success story to set the tone of their text, as Morone et al. (2018) also begin their book with a story about Obama, detailing the pageantry and patriotism during his 2012 inauguration.

Most authors are likely strongly motivated to write a text that encourages political and civic engagement. After all, for years, political scientists have been lamenting the decline of such engagement among young people (Galston 2001, 2004; Delli Carpini and Keeter 1996). It stands to reason that authors who write for a captive audience of mostly freshman political science majors as well as potential majors, try to present American government and politics in such to mitigate youth trends toward disengagement. In *We the People (*Lowi et al. 2019), for instance, the authors begin their textbook with chapter one, titled 'American Political Culture.' In the first two pages, they present a high-lighted box contains a story about the nation's two youngest elected officials, who won seats in the recent election to the West Virginia House of Delegates and a city council in Texas. Their approach to explaining American government and politics then is set early, as they relay to students the pluralistic message that their book is about "to show what government does, how and why and what you can do about it." (2019, 4). Similarly, in *Living Democracy* (2015), the authors. pose the question header at the beginning of chapter one

– "Can average citizens play a meaningful role in American politics?" They answer in the affirmative, highlighting the surge in voting turnout by youth in the Iowa Caucus, propelling Obama to victory over the favored candidacy of Hillary Clinton.

Many authors continue to present the interest group chapter solidly within the framework of pluralism, filling the chapter with descriptions of how 'all' interest groups overcome collective action challenges with various types of benefits. Similar to the text's introductory pages, the vast majority of textbooks reinforce the pluralistic message by presenting in the chapter's opening pages, a feel-good story, usually involving college-age students, who successfully formed an interest group and impacted some aspect of policy change. In the pages that follow, the following topics are most often covered: types of interest groups, the history of interest groups in America, collective action and free-rider problems, benefits that overcome free-rider problem, insider/outsider strategies, and lobbying and its financing.

In *Gateways* (Geer et al. 2016), the interest group chapter opens with a photograph of young Sam Gilman, who, while interning at the Bipartisan Policy Center in Washington, D.C., helped form Common Sense Action to "take back politics for the Millenial generation." (2016, 253). In *We, the People* (2014), 25-year-old Ben Brown is presented as a highly engaged young person who, reacting to what he perceived as the inordinate amount of power held by AARP to slant the policy debate toward issues concerning retired citizens, formed a counter group called The Association of Young People. Another commonality for the more pluralistically-minded textbooks is to refer within the first page or so, to De Tocqueville's admiration for American's natural tendency to form groups. The authors seem to endeavor to set the tone for students as to the notion of American exceptionalism, especially when it comes to Americans ability to join together with their neighbors and associates in order to solve problems as a community. Looking

to connect to the lives of their undergraduate audience, the authors of *American Politics Today* (2019), also begin with the student loan crisis, describing the "armies of lobbyists" from the private loan industry who attempted to defeat President Obama's student loan reform measures. Thus raising the question for students as to whether pluralism through interest groups actually exist in American politics. By opening the chapter with a story such as this, the authors seem to lean more heavily toward understanding interest groups in light of Madison's warning about the "mischiefs of factions," noting that some groups may disregard the public good when seeking to wield power for themselves.

Other textbooks, such as *American Democracy Now* (2019), are more unabashed about their pro-pluralism perspective, as the authors exhort students not to think of "the typical image necessarily…of wealthy lobbyists…But today, technology has made it possible for organized interests that are not part of the traditional power structure to emerge and exert important influence on policymakers….(and that) organized effort of people from all walks for life can influence policymaking." They conclude their introductory paragraph with the following" "Although moneyed interests dominate politics, interest groups play a crucial role in leveling the political playing field by providing access for organized average people." (2019, 227).

When it comes to describing the types of interest groups and their relative power, there is a good deal of variation among textbooks. Some textbooks, such as *American Government and Politics* (Ford et al. 2018), begin with a lengthy discussion of the successes of social movements of the 1960s involving civil rights, farmworkers, and LGBT groups. In the pages that follow, they reinforce the pluralistic ideal of equally competing groups by providing a few paragraphs each under subheadings for business groups, agricultural interest groups, labor groups, public-employee unions, interest groups of professionals, the unorganized poor, environmental groups

and public interest groups. Although they acknowledge, in passing the decline of union membership, like most textbooks, they attribute it to changes in the global economy and automation and fail to mention the full-frontal assault by the corporate interest on labor unions for the past four decades.

In fact, another criteria that is useful here is how specifically, textbooks depict the precipitous decline of unions and their relative weakness in comparison to the countervailing force of business. In AM GOV (2019), the authors include a paragraph about unions under the subheading 'Corporate and Business Interest.' As with the Ford et al. (2019), they present a somewhat incomplete picture of union decline. Moreover, they indicate that the massive loss that labor experienced as a result of the Janus decision by the Supreme Court (the Court ruled that public employee union members were not required to pay dues to their union) was a result of "a lack of cohesion among labor union members." They fail to place the decision in the proper context, which is that the case was the culmination of much broader push by conservative and pro-business interest groups to weaken labor, especially public unions (Rosemary and Pearson 2017, Marvit 2018, Akard 1992).

To what extent do authors emphasize the 'upper-class accent' of interest groups, both when Schnattschneider described them in the 1960s and the modern context, discussed earlier in this paper? In *We the People*, for instance, the chapter includes a substantial amount of text, including a subheading titled, "Unequal Representation and the Upper-Class Bias of Group Membership." This is likely because the text's first author is Benjamin Ginsburg, who is one of the most prolific political scientists who studies the power of elites in American politics. Other textbooks, such as *American Politics Today* (2019), take a much more pluralist approach to the power of interest groups in general as well as the comparative power of different interests.

Concerning the latter, the authors write, “While business dominates lobbying spending, individuals may lobby the government…to change corporate behavior.” (2019,341). Toward the end of the chapter, in a large section titled “How much power do interest groups have?” they go so far as to conclude that “In sum, dire claims about the overwhelming influence of interest groups and lobbying on Washington policymaking are probably wrong.” (2019, 366). This stands in stark contrast to the concluding pages of The Challenge of Democracy (2014), which includes a section on “Business Mobilization,” indicating that “The advantages of business are enormous,” (2014, 280). The authors conclude the chapter with an uncharacteristically normative section on ‘Reform,’ strongly suggesting that the unfair advantage that business and corporate interests possess should be reduced and that the Trump administration has done the opposite.

Another topic to consider is whether textbooks include the topic of the revolving door. The revolving door, as it has come to be known, is the mechanism by which former members of Congress, parlay their expertise and connections, developed while in office, into a lobbying career working for lobbying firms, law firms or corporations in order to persuade their former congressional colleagues to pursue policy goals that are beneficial to their new employers. Recent studies have shown that business interests are often rewarded with varying degrees of policy success and that lobby firms that hire former members of Congress to gain an advantage in access, leading to beneficial outcomes for the represented industry (Lapira and Thomas 2014, Baumgartner, et al. 2009, Lazarus and McCay 2012, Drutman 2015). Nearly half of all existing members of Congress do in fact move through the revolving door, increasing their congressional salary five to tenfold. Although it is rare for lobby firms to disclose salaries, some estimates indicate that such firms pay former members of Congress between $1 million and $3 million a year due to their ability to leverage their congressional experience into easy access and influence

on behalf of the firm's corporate clients. Anecdotal reports of astronomical salaries abound including former Rep. Billy Tauzin (R-La.) who was paid nearly $20 million lobbying for drug companies from 2006 to 2010; Tom Daschle (D-S.D.), the former Senate majority leader, earning $2.1 million for lobbying work when President Obama nominated him — unsuccessfully — to serve as secretary of health and human services in 2009; and former Sen. Jim DeMint (R-SC), who resigned in the middle of his second term to earn $1 million a year lobbying on behalf of the Heritage Foundation, with a focus on persuading his former colleagues to vote against the Affordable Care Act.

Six of the textbooks include a small section on the revolving door. Five of them do not mention this practice. Most of the textbooks that do include the topic present it in a reasonably balanced way, allowing the reader to decide for themselves whether the practice leads to more pluralism or whether it gives moneyed interests an unfair advantage. In fact, of the textbooks, which include the topic, four of them present it in the same way – as they first describe what most readers will interpret as the greed-driven cases of Tauzin and Daschle. This is followed by a presentation of the argument that all Americans have the right to lobby and to hire the best lobbyists available and that the revolving door "keeps good and knowledgeable people in the policy process."(Losco and Baker 2019, 199). Geer et al.'s (2016) depict an even more sanguine perspective regarding those who pass through the revolving door. After describing DeMint's walk through the revolving door, they reinforce the message of fair and equal playing field, stating that:

> It is also essential to remember that not all relationships among lobbyists, members of Congress and federal officials are tainted or suspicious. Congress and the federal bureaucracy each have elaborate rules governing their behavior with respect to interest groups and lobbyists, and most members and bureaucrats follow them closely. (2016, 280).

They omit the reality that the rules that are in place are quite weak and ineffectual, leading to a situation where, as a recent investigation by Public Citizen revealed, hundreds of departing members over the past decade have failed to disclose future job negotiations nor did they recuse themselves from matters before Congress related to their future employers (Holman and Brown 2016).

As indicated in Table 2, coding each of the eleven textbooks with the scheme identified earlier in this paper, reveals some interesting findings. As there are seven categories, the highest pro-pluralist score that a book could receive is +7, while textbooks with an approach most critical of pluralism would receive a -7. There is a significant degree of variation even among this relatively small sample of mainstream American government and politics textbooks. The most pluralist textbooks are *Gateways to Democracy* (2016) and GOV'T (2017). At the other end of the rankings, *The Challenge of Democracy* (2014) and *American Government: Power and Purpose (*2014) stand out as the textbooks that provide for students, the most complete picture as to the degree that the interest group choir sings with an upper-class accent.

<<<TABLE 2 AROUND HERE>>>

Conclusion

While there has been a substantial increase in political science scholarship analyzing the backsliding of American government and politics away from pluralism and toward an elite-driven system, when it comes to introductory textbooks used in most survey courses, it appears that pluralism still very much prevails. Although some instructors and students rely on supplemental materials in the form of book excerpts, and journal articles, especially in

introductory courses, there is still a good deal of reliance on the textbook. For most mainstream textbooks, results indicate that many authors choose not to present the interest group universe as a stacked deck in favor of those who have the resources to influence, persuade, and craft policy that advantages its members and often detriments the rest of society.

There are important normative concerns when most textbooks present an idealized picture of the American political system as one where no one group dominates and where every interest has a say in the policies produced by the government. Due to the rising economic and political power of the wealthy, it is no longer accurate to present to students this unrealistic notion of American politics and government that has not existed in over four decades, if it ever has. From a critical theoretical perspective, the hegemonic control that wealthy and powerful interests maintain in our political system is no doubt further reinforced when we as political scientist instructors fail to illuminate such control in our most basic introductory courses. Moreover, critical thinking skills are likely enhanced when we are willing to provide opportunities for our students to thoroughly interrogate the political system, warts and all.

Table 2. Rating Textbooks' Level of Pluralist Perspective

Textbook	Title	Preface	Chapter Intro	Upper-class accent or Equally compting groups	Labor-Business	Business Advantage	Revolving Door	Total Score
Gateways to Democracy (Geer, Schiller, Segal and Herrerra 2016)	1	1	1	1	1	1	a	**6**
GOVT (Sidlow and Henschen 2017)	*	1	1	1	1	1	1	**6**
American Government and Politics (Ford, Bardes, Schmidt and Shelley 2018)	*	1	*	1	1	1	a	**4**
We the People (Ginsberg, Lowi, Weir et al. 2019)	1	1	1	-1	1	1	a	**4**
American Politics Today (Bianco and Canon 2019)	*	-1	1	1	a	1	1	**3**
American Democracy Now (Harrison, Harris and Deardorff 2019)	1	1	*	-1	1	1	a	**3**
By The People (Morone and Kersh 2017)	1	1	-1	-1	a	1	1	**2**
The Logic of American Politics (Kernell and Jacobson 2019)	1	1	-1	-1	a	1	a	**1**
AM GOV (Losco and Baker 2019)	*	1	1	-1	-1	-1	a	**-1**
American Government: Power and Purpose (Lowi, Ginsberg, Shepsle and Ansolabehere 2014)	*	-1	-1	-1	1	-1	a	**-3**
The Challenge of Democracy (Janda, Berry, Goldman, and Schildkraut 2014)	-1	-1	-1	-1	a	-1	a	**-5**

* - Neutral as authors present both sides of pluralist-antipluralist debate

a: Book does not include topic

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