

## Why Study American Government: A Rationale

A frequent question that students ask is, "Why should I take a course in American government?" Without a useful response, many students will have no real understanding of the importance of the course or of its relevance to them and to their interests. Many of them may treat the course as just another academic requirement to be gotten out of the way.

Teachers often find that posing the question and asking students to answer it can be an effective way to begin a course in American government. Several answers are suggested here. No doubt you and your students will provide other answers. Those offered here are ones that are among the most important.

### **Government in the United States is democratic.**

American government is government of, by, and for the people. It is firmly based on the twin concepts of popular sovereignty and limited government. We believe that the people themselves are, and should be, the only source for any and all governmental action. We believe that the people are far more capable of governing themselves—and doing so wisely and fairly—than is any one person or small group.

However, such a governmental arrangement can succeed only to the extent to which the people will permit it to do so. That is, it can succeed only to the extent that the people will participate and, in fact, govern themselves. The people can participate in a meaningful way only if they know and understand how the government operates and what their roles in that government are.

### **Government in the United States is a complex system.**

The government of the United States is complex because it is composed of many separate parts. It is a system because those many parts are interrelated and interact. The whole cannot be understood without a knowledge of the many parts. The many parts cannot be understood without a knowledge of the whole.

Because of its complex nature, the American governmental system is not one that can be readily and easily understood. The task requires both time and disciplined study.

### **Government in the United States can be no better than the people are willing to make it.**

Who is responsible for a bad law, for maladministration, for corruption, for inefficiency, for

wastefulness, or for any other shortcoming in the operation of the American governmental system? If, or when, any of these conditions exist anywhere in this country, it is ultimately the people themselves who are to blame. When, on the other hand, honesty, integrity, and effectiveness prevail in public affairs, then, too, the people are the reason.

It should be obvious that "good government" is most likely to be best served when the people know and understand their governmental system. Adlai Stevenson said it well when he said, "Your public servants serve you right."

### **Government in the United States is an all-pervading social force.**

From its origins in the protection of individuals from one another, the role of government has expanded in scope and function to the point where it occupies a critical part of our every waking and sleeping hour. From the instant a person is born—in a government-inspected hospital under the care of a government-licensed doctor—until proper legal certification of his or her death, that person is in almost constant contact with agencies of government—federal, State, and/or local. Receiving an education, marrying, buying or renting housing, driving an automobile—even eating and breathing—are affected in myriad ways by government in the United States.

Many of the instances of citizen contact with government involve the government's performance of services for citizens. Whether government will, or should, provide all of those services, or any of them, and how they are to be performed are questions that citizens and their representatives are faced with deciding.

Citizen-government relationships often involve duties that a person must perform or rules that he or she must obey. Whether these duties or restraints are in fact necessary, and at what particular times, under what circumstances, and in what manner they are to be performed or observed, are also matters that involve decisions by citizens and their representatives.

### **Government in the United States is expensive.**

Few need to be told this fact, of course—nor told that it is a matter of direct and immediate consequence to each and every person in this country.

Why is government so expensive? How are the hundreds of billions of dollars that government uses each year raised? How is this revenue spent? Who gets "what, when, and how"? The answers to these and similar questions are important for all citizens to know in order to participate intelligently in their government.

**There is no final word on studying American government.**

The answers presented here to the question "Why study American government?" are broad

in scope. None of them is exclusive of the others, and each answer could be developed at some length. Indeed, each of them suggests a number of different approaches in answer to the opening question. For example, both the all-pervading social force of government and its high costs might prompt one to ask, "What can or should government do for me?" Or the third answer—that government can be no better than we are willing to make it—might stimulate consideration of the necessity for respect for and obedience to the law.