Chapter 1
The Origins of American Political Principles

Focus Questions

Q1  What are the broad purposes of government?

A1  The ancients believed the role of government and politics was to foster human excellence. However, it is imperative to remember that the Greeks and Romans believed the virtuous should rule. Furthermore, values of equality and order would be served through a society based upon the rule of law to provide for the common good. In the Middle Ages, government was largely used to facilitate religion and maintained the need for the individual to live a proper life in the service of God. The role of government changed in the early sixteenth century by downplaying the role of religion while alternatively promoting the role of limited government to protect private property and individual rights.

Q2  How should government be designed to achieve its purposes?

A2  According to Plato the philosopher-king’s wisdom and intellect would promote order, stability and justice. Yet, Aristotle takes a more realistic view of Athenian society by advocating the best form of government as a polity which combined oligarchic and democratic elements. The Romans combined monarchical, aristocratic, and democratic principles as a mixed government within representative bodies like the Senate and the Assembly in order to champion the causes of both the rich and the poor. Government in the Middle Ages was determined through divine right, whereby a monarch or Pope was ordained by God to rule. Hence, wisdom and virtue rested within these few individuals who governed to promote religious life and protect the religious establishment. The Renaissance, Protestant Reformation, and Enlightenment periods shifted the role of government from upholding religious doctrine to secular concerns such as protecting inalienable rights, private property and promoting commerce. In turn, Enlightenment political philosophers largely appealed to individualism and not religious hierarchy as a means to provide order and stability in which individuals could flourish.

Q3  What lessons about government did colonial Americans draw from the history of ancient Greece and Rome?
The Framers of the U.S. Constitution adhered to the tradition of mixed government initially expounded by Aristotle and the Romans. Plato was suspicious of democracy’s rule of the many because good government would decay into mob rule. Hence, the passions of the masses needed to be quelled by more aristocratic elements. This was maintained in the indirect selection of both the Senate and the presidency within the Constitution. Aristotle also advocated mixing aristocratic and democratic elements in a governing structure called a polity. In effect, this governmental design allowed the few and the many to participate in the politics providing an orderly society where the poor should be able to select government officials who were held accountable. This was made manifest in the aristocratic-like Senate and the more democratic House of Representatives. The Framers referenced the institutional design of the Roman republic. The republic was designed designating institutional powers and governed according to the rule of law. While the Framers rejected the religious hierarchy of the Middle Ages, they appealed to inalienable rights endowed upon every individual by God, per the writings of John Locke, in which a just government and society could not be impeded.

**Q4**

*What circumstances led Europeans to leave their homelands to settle in America?*

**A4**

Individuals immigrated to the colonies to escape religious persecution, civil unrest after the English Civil War and to pursue social and economic opportunities. Colonists enjoyed a vast array of natural resources, a large geographical area where freedom of religion and economic opportunity flourished. Also, their heterogeneous social composition as well as continual promotion of ideals such as equality and tolerance tended to promote political freedom at the same time that social expansion of the population was occurring.

**Q5**

*What did democracy mean to our colonial ancestors, and did they approve it?*

**A5**

Answer: The colonists were skeptical of democracy and viewed this type of governing authority as mob rule. Society was largely seen as segmented into those who should rule and those who should not. In fact, the Founders believed the elite (well-educated, land owners) should occupy positions of leadership. Thus, an aristocratic element within government was necessary to protect against the threat of mob rule historically associated with democracy. Fundamentally, the idea of republicanism was promoted as an ideal at a higher level than democracy. This was made most manifest in the tendency to prefer mixed constitutional schemes over single-body regimes like monarchy, aristocracy, and democracy. It was in this respect that our colonial ancestors were both innovative and critical of extant governmental forms yet simultaneously wedded to the past, especially the Greco-Roman ancients.
Chapter Outline

I. A Tradition to Draw From

History and experience provided lessons upon which the Founders referenced in designing American political institutions.

A. The Ancients: Who Rules and for What Purposes?

The philosophy of Plato and Aristotle was concerned with structuring a society, known as a city-state, and based upon human nature: Speech and reason as the fundamental characteristics of humans. Thus, the political community or polis is designed according to the virtues and abilities of its inhabitants.

1. The Greeks: Monarchy, Aristocracy, Democracy

a. According to Aristotle, the purpose of politics is to create an order that fosters human excellence. Plato’s leader was the philosopher-king. While Plato doubted the reality of this king, concluding that good government would be uncommon and short-lived, he and particularly Aristotle identified three forms of government:

1) Monarchy—rule by one leader.
2) Aristocracy—rule by a few good men.
3) Democracy—rule by the many.

b. Aristotle also theorized that governments would decay. Thus, monarchy decays into tyranny through despotic actions of a single ruler. Second, aristocracy decays into oligarchy whereby the few rule to advance their self-interests contrary to the common good. Finally, democracy decays into mob rule as the masses rule according to their passions.

c. Aristotle’s additional contribution: Political Order based on Reality.

1) Aristotle’s contribution was pragmatic by addressing the needs of the wealthy and the masses within a society to form a mixed government.
2) He believed oligarchy and democracy are the most common regimes. Therefore, the best elements of each might be combined and made into a good, workable, and stable government. He called this form “polity.”

2. The Romans: Republicanism and Mixed Government

a. The Romans, notably Polybius and Cicero, believed government’s institutional structure should arbitrate power between rich and poor. Accordingly, this order was a republic or mixed state in which monarchical, aristocratic, and democratic elements are represented.

b. Polybius asserted this mixed government would promote stability via a strong executive while also providing a legislative branch whereby the few (wealthy) and many (poor) could participate in the political process.

c. Cicero appealed to the rule of law and the virtues of liberty, equality, and the informed consent of individuals to provide stability, order, and freedom.

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d. Cicero’s impact upon the Framers is seen with the concepts of limited government, separation of powers, and checks and balances. The Founders, specifically James Madison, reflected upon the ancient philosophers’ beliefs concerning the roles, institutions, and mechanisms of politics. However, the task at hand for the Framers of the U.S. Constitution was to design a government balancing order and freedom to an end of providing a just government that may be sustained over an extended period of time.

B. The Middle Ages: The Secular Serves the State

The Christian view of political life maintained the highest goal of man is salvation and eternity which is achieved by serving God. This view of political life was proposed by St. Augustine and St. Thomas Aquinas who advocated that both ruler and ruled should conduct themselves in the political realm as in their personal life through a devotion to God.

1. This had political implications. To achieve salvation the political order was organized to support religion. Thus, religious institutions were active in political matters.
   a. Order was needed to allow religion to prosper in peace.
   b. Rule by one or a few (i.e. the Pope or king).
   c. Religious order assured obedience to authority.
   d. Power would flow down.
   e. The many would follow: Obedience would flow up from the masses.
   f. Religious values (moderation, tolerance and faith) would promote stability and peace.

2. Accordingly, hierarchy was the best form of social and political organization.
3. These conditions led to the formation of a stable and peaceful community.
4. The emphasis placed on religion in the Middle Ages negatively influenced the Framers. The Founders believed politics and religion should be separate.
5. In American colonial history, the Puritans of Massachusetts were the closest approximators to the theocratic elements in politics inherited from the Middle Ages.

C. Secularism, Individualism, and the Idea of Progress

Beginning in the 1600s the religious hierarchy dominating politics began to wane. Subsequently, a commitment to science and human progress replaced a devotion to religious doctrine within social life. Instead, more emphasis was placed upon the idea that an appeal to individualism and freedom would lead to political and social order.

1. Because there was less emphasis upon salvation, religion was increasingly divorced from politics. However, this did not discount the need for strong government.
   a. The political theorist, Niccolò Machiavelli, observed Italian politics and concluded that strong government was needed to provide peace and order.
   b. Individualism and the Protestant Reformation.
1) The Reformation elevated the status of the individual and lessened the role of the Church.
2) This was in solid opposition to the Catholic Church’s hierarchy.
3) However, political hierarchy was still needed to provide peace and order.

2. Secular issues such as power, social order and economic development began to slowly replace religion. Several philosophers led this revolution.
   a. Francis Bacon believed that science and discovery rather than salvation would lead to human progress.
   b. However, on account of the English Civil War, Thomas Hobbes maintained an absolute sovereign was needed to restrain human self-interest and provide peace and order.
   c. John Locke stressed the ideas of natural rights and a social contract based upon individual consent. Locke had such a strong impact upon the Framers, specifically James Mason and Thomas Jefferson, that they based the Declaration of Independence upon contract theory. Locke stressed the ideas of popular sovereignty, rule of law, parliamentary supremacy, a limited monarchy, and political accountability, even proposing the revolutionary notion that if the monarch violated the terms of his contract with the people, they had the political right to break the contract and design a new form of government.
   d. Adam Smith’s invisible hand as it applied to economic markets had a natural order if competition were allowed to prevail. So, governmental and religious hierarchies were unnecessary.

II. The Liberal Roots of American Politics
   English settlers came to North America to flee religious persecution, poverty, and political oppression. The colonies encouraged individualism, freedom, liberty, and equality. American political development grew from these tenets buttressing classical liberalism.
   A. Religious Persecution
      1. Most early groups fled to America to escape religious persecution.
      2. The most important were the Puritans.
         a. From 1629 to 1640 Charles I sought to exclude Puritans from English society resulting in the exodus of many Puritans from England.
      3. Other groups, including the Quakers and the Huguenots, left England and France, respectively.
   B. The lack of social, economic, and political opportunity as a result of the English Civil War and subsequent political unrest between 1640 and 1688 forced many to flee England to the colonies.
      1. The abundance of land and opportunity in America attracted many poor and middle-class people.
      2. Political Participation in the Early Colonies
         a. Initially, few people came to America in search of democracy.
1) Neither the religious leaders nor the mass of people believed in the utility of democracy.
2) Government was dominated by the elite and educated within any community.
   (a) In the Northeastern colonies, political positions were occupied by religious and secular leaders who deliberated on how best to persuade and educate the public on policy issues.
   (b) The mid-Atlantic colonies were the most individualistic in character and the governmental infrastructure was dominated by the economic elite.
   (c) Southern colonies were generally oligarchic in their governance with the majority of leadership coming from the "plantation gentry."
3. The large amount of uninhabited land allowed "space" for dissent, whereby marginalized groups could move and implement their preferred religious, economic, or political life.
   a. For example, while in England Puritans and Quakers faced oppression from the Anglican Church. Yet, in America, they were free to practice their religion.
   b. Another instance concerned Roger Williams who was banished from the Massachusetts colony. Once this occurred, he simply moved to what is now Rhode Island.
   c. Finally, the Quakers pushed the Scottish-Irish from Philadelphia to the western portion of the state and southern colonies.
4. Economic Opportunity and Social Fluidity
   a. Two factors allowed for self-sufficiency and social mobility into the next social class.
      1) America was overwhelmingly agrarian.
      2) Nearly 80 percent of people made their living from the land.
5. Heterogeneity
   a. By the mid 1700s, the population of America was diverse.
      1) Out of a population of 1,850,000 in 1765, only 53 percent of people were of English origin.
      2) There were also many diverse and active religious groups.
6. Equality and Tolerance
   a. The American colonies became a refuge for diversity that led to a respect and tolerance for diverse religious groups.
      1) Some groups practiced this as a matter of religious teaching.
      2) Others learned from witnessing oppression and tolerated other groups.

III. Conclusion
A. We must understand the early colonists were not enamored with democracy. John Winthrop, an Anglican minister and leading political figure in Massachusetts,
declared: “A Democratie is accounted the meanest and worst of all forms of Governmt and Historyes doe recorde, that it hath been allways of least continuance and fullest of troubles.”

B. The ancients, medieval Christians, and the moderns greatly influenced (both positively and negatively) colonial governments.
   1. However, the colonists embraced classical liberalism meaning:
      a. limited government;
      b. individual liberty;
      c. freedom from government intrusion in economic matters and personal beliefs;
      d. commerce.
   2. Religious, social, and economic factors attracted settlers to the American colonies.

Lecture Suggestions

Institutional/Philosophical Focus: Influences on American Governing Institutions

I. The Ancients
   A. Plato believed while every inhabitant within the city-state would have a role in society, the ideal political order would be comprised of a single ruler known as the philosopher-king. Consequently, this monarch would promote the common good given his wisdom and sense of justice.
   B. Aristotle was more pragmatic than Plato. He advocated an institutional design, including a mix of aristocratic and democratic elements. In turn, political participation would include the rich and poor to increase the probability of a stable and peaceful society.
   C. The Roman republic included a Senate whereby an elected body would deliberate matters of domestic and foreign policies. This deliberative body included aristocratic elements of society but also addressed the concerns of the people. An appeal to natural law as the source of human dignity while codifying these laws aspired to provide stability and protect individual liberty. The teachings of Cicero influenced the Framers through the establishment of representative government, separation of powers, and checks and balances.

II. The Middle Ages
   A. During the medieval period institutional governance resided in the Pope and monarchs who were endowed as rulers by divine right. The Pope dominated economic and social life and was largely responsible for the salvation of believers. Monarchs upheld religious tenets and ruled based principles accordingly. This power hierarchy maintained strict order through obedience to religious doctrine and the monarch’s proclamation(s).
   B. Institutional design was based upon inheritance, lineage, and religious succession.
III. The Enlightenment
A. The decreased influence of religion on economic and social life did not eradicate a governing hierarchy but allowed greater latitude for individual choice and opportunity to flourish.
   1. The Protestant reformation led by Martin Luther and John Calvin stressed individual faith and congregational autonomy as opposed to the order of the Catholic Church.
   2. In the *Prince*, Niccolo Machiavelli addressed the need for the establishment of strong institutions that would produce order allowing individualism to flourish.
B. In *Leviathan*, Thomas Hobbes advocated the need for a strong monarch with absolute power to rule. Subsequently, this “top-down” design would facilitate order and stability by controlling the natural passions inherent in human beings.
C. John Locke’s concept of a social contract asserting the need for limited government to protect private property, in turn, maintaining order while preserving the natural rights of life, liberty, and property. The Framers were influenced by Locke’s appeal to inalienable rights when drafting the Declaration of Independence and debating the merits of the U.S. Constitution.

IV. The Colonial Period
A. Social, economic, and political institutions in the colonies were based upon religion, wealth, and community values. Government positions were held by religious and secular leaders who were prominent in the community.
B. Given the large geographical area, if one did not like the institutional arrangement there was ample room to start a new community.
C. Initially, the colonies were governed according to English laws and officials appointed by the King of England.

American Political Development (APD) Focus: The Framer’s Approach to Form a Stable and Just Government
I. Introduction
   “One mode of developing a political system is via a constitution. Constitutionalism may be defined as a structure for preserving or enhancing [a regime], a statement of the way people should treat each other, and the values that form the basis for the people's working relationship, as well as the serious, remaining problems in the political order” (Lutz, 1988, p. 3). Thus, the Founders of the U.S. federal government relied upon the teachings of the past. It is well known that James Madison researched the plight of confederations throughout history prior to attending the Constitutional Convention of 1787 in Philadelphia, PA. History guided the Framers in an attempt to establish a new form of government.

II. The Ancients
   A. Beginning with Plato’s Republic, political scientists have examined the origin, nature, and design of the state to promote the common good of a community. A society relies upon fundamental rules to establish a formal method of governing.
Thus, the ruler and the ruled are subject to the constraints imposed upon them by the law of the land which governed interactions within the city-state, as well as promoting the common good.

B. It is important to remember that both Plato and Aristotle’s reliance on the virtuous, educated and efficacious elite influenced the Founders. Democratic government could degenerate into mobocracy and therefore aristocratic institutions (a president, Senate) should be included within the structure of the federal government. However, to check a despot ruler or rulers, an appeal to the will of the people should also be instituted in a lower house, specifically the House of Representatives.

C. Aristotle's impact on the Framers is apparent in his concept of polity in which a combination of democracy and oligarchy and a system of checks and balances are built in to each institution of the federal government.

D. The influences of the Romans on American government may be seen in the establishment of republican principles including limited and mixed government comprised of representatives elected by an informed citizenry.

III. The Middle Ages
The impact of this era provided a guide on what not to do; specifically, political authority should not rest in the hands of any religious entity. This led the Founders to conclude that religion and politics should be separate.

IV. The Enlightenment
A. The decline of religious authority which dominated in the Middle Ages led to a transitional period leading political philosophers to deliberate how best to balance order and freedom. This will be a major concern for the Founders.
   1. Machiavelli proposed that religion could be used as a tool to provide order and stability. As a result, institutional arrangements would allow individuals to pursue their desires within the Italian republics.
   2. Thomas Hobbes sought to suppress individual self-interest by establishing an absolute sovereign who had final arbitration concerning all disputes guided by the rule of law. Hobbes’ influence on political development is akin to Machiavelli whereby individuals can only achieve their potential through a government structured to mediate human passions. Only when order is established can individualism flourish. Hobbes asserts the need for enumerated rights prohibiting specific actions and behaviors to form an orderly and stable society.
   3. Probably the greatest influence on American political development was due to the writings of John Locke. The belief that individuals consent to be ruled through a social contract was similar to Hobbes’ notion of the need for government. Men consent to contract with each other to rein in their self-interest and form a government accordingly. According to Locke, the paramount role of government is to protect inalienable rights of all free men, specifically, those enumerated in the Declaration of Independence including
life, liberty, and property. These concepts along with limited government comprise the tenets of classical liberalism.

V. The American Colonies
A. The origin of American constitutionalism was based upon religious convictions enumerated within church charters such as the Charlestown-Boston Church covenant of 1630. In this document, the church is created to support living in a manner according to God's rules.
B. The Mayflower Compact of 1620 was the first document to create a government based upon the approval of the governed instead of a religious order. The aforementioned political covenant initiated the first modern constitution, namely the Plymouth Agreement.
C. The Settlers upon the Piscataqua for Government in 1641 changed the prevailing, non-secular belief expressed in religious and political covenants; instead, advancing the philosophy that the will of the people is supreme. Thus:
   1. Governing was based upon the decisions of the polity rather than the Church.
   2. The compact demonstrates that the colonists relied upon popular sovereignty as the basis for government and not a monarchy. Consequently, the impetus of American constitutionalism emerged through the conviction to popular sovereignty and representation in government.
D. The Fundamental Orders of Connecticut established a confederation where power was divided between independent towns and a General Court which represented the aggregate community. This political structure greatly influenced American constitutionalism in two distinct fashions.
   1. This is the first instance of federalism in American government. Therefore, dual citizenship may permit an inhabitant of a state to also be a citizen of the United States of America.
   2. By instituting a bicameral legislature consisting of a certain number of members who were elected directly by the people and others who were elected by fellow representatives. The ratified U.S. Constitution of 1789 would incorporate legislative bicameralism to ensure state and popular sovereignty.
E. Regional differences affected American constitutionalism. Three American subcultures:
   1. the moralistic culture of the Northeast;
   2. the individualism characterizing the Mid-Atlantic colonies; and
   3. the paternalistic nature of the South, influenced the structure of the American federal government.
F. However, the original state constitutions possessed similar features. The original eighteen colonial constitutions contained a bicameral legislature, popular elections of the lower house and governor and property requirements to hold public office (Lutz, 1988, pp. 104–105).
G. The basis of our government may be viewed as a culmination of religious covenants, local compacts, regional differences, and political philosophies. These influences coupled with a developing American character transformed a confederacy of colonies

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into a republic composed of independent states to form the oldest existing democracy in the world—the United States of America.

Projects, Exercises, and Activities

1. Aristotle’s typology of regimes allows the students to learn the strengths and weaknesses of a monarchy, aristocracy, and democracy. Discuss the benefits and pitfalls of each.

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<td>Guardians, wealthy families</td>
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2. Discuss the relationship between human nature and the role government. Is there a human nature or is human nature constructed through society via governmental institutions? Specifically, can government change human nature? To facilitate discussion see Larry Arnhart’s books, *Darwinian Natural Right* and *Darwinian Conservatism*, Peter Singer, *The Darwinian Left*, and Steven Pinker’s best-seller, *The Blank Slate*.

3. The term power is both controversial and ubiquitous in all aspects of life. If power is defined as the ability of one individual to get another to act in a particular way, is one form of government (monarchy, aristocracy, or democracy) better suited to exercise power than the others? If so, to what end? Moreover, discuss the degrees of political legitimacy associated with each. Must any government incorporate elements of each to promote freedom and provide stability and order? Why or why not? Refer to historical events to support a position.
4. Form the class into groups, each designing their own constitution. Allow ample time for the exercise (this is best done outside of class, if possible). Compare the tenets of each group’s constitution. Discuss the similarities and differences.

**Additional Resources**

*Supplemental Readings*


*Websites*

[Cambridge Forum for Legal and Political Philosophy](#)
This is the main Web page for the Cambridge Forum for Legal and Political Philosophy, an organization that conducts scholarly investigations and sponsors work/reading groups on relevant topics in political and legal thought/philosophy. It is a good source for information in order to ground your lectures on the American political culture in their philosophical premises.

[Claremont Institute Center for the Study of Statesmanship and Political Philosophy](#)
Official Web page of the Claremont Institute Center for the Study of Statesmanship and Political Philosophy. The institute supports research, scholarship, teachings, public forums, and conferences.

[Foundations of Political Thought](#)
This is the website for the Theory Section of the American Political Science Association. You may access academic papers and join discussion boards via this link.

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The History Place
Information concerning American history—pre-colonial to the present. A plethora of timelines, quotes, and photos are available.

Political Philosophy
This site provides a series of videos containing lectures by Professor Steven B. Smith of Yale University covering an undergraduate introductory course in political philosophy. It is useful for generating ideas and for drawing connections between philosophical premises and their practice in the subsequent political development of the United States.