

# Introduction

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“**W**hat is government itself, but the greatest of all reflections on human nature? If men were angels, no government would be necessary. If angels were to govern men, neither external nor internal controls on government would be necessary.” Although James Madison wrote these words in *The Federalist* No. 51 more than two centuries ago, his words are for today.

Recent events like the national election debacle of 2000, the tragedy of September 11 and its aftermath, the heated climate of the Middle East, and the effect of big money on political decision making and its relationship to the various corporate financial scandals have forced people to take pause and consider realities that our Founding Fathers never dreamed of. Clarification is not easily obtained; television, radio, and newspapers, those repositories of America’s basic freedom to express opinions, however misinformed, frequently mean to seduce with spin and sell product rather than serve anything resembling truth. Yet in the midst of the overheated rhetoric of the moment, Americans are responsibly rethinking their role in history and their place as citizens in a free democracy. In the twenty-first century, people across the political spectrum are seeking a better understanding of international issues such as terrorism and national issues like campaign finance reform. They are turning to their leaders and asking them hard questions about how they are going to govern our land and relate to the unprecedented situations of this fast-changing, crisis-dominated world.

*The Handy Politics Answer Book* is set against this political backdrop. It is meant to answer basic questions about how our very complex government operates and what it promises, thereby removing a barrier to understanding current political drama. Its straightforward, easily understood question-and-answer format addresses contemporary issues as well as the fundamental basics of government and politics in the United States. It traces the historic development of the government and demystifies the departmental labyrinth, providing clear and concise definitions of who does what and why. Meant to inform and entertain, this at-a-glance resource is for those who want to revisit the best snippets of their high school civics class, as well as those who desire a

more detailed background on today's headlines. Organized into easily accessible, topic-oriented chapters, over 1,000 most-asked, potentially useful questions are presented. Interspersed are trivia-oriented and off-the-cuff questions that you might not have considered since you last watched *Jeopardy*. In sum, the book presents an overarching look at government and politics, its key players, and notable events since the time of the early republic.

The book begins with a general look at today's political culture. You'll find out why trust in government has declined, what Americans think of their president, and what the average citizen can do to get involved in government. Questions like Why should I vote? Is government responsive to public opinion? and What is the history of women in government and politics? kick off the book. What follows is an intricate look at civil liberties, those fundamental freedoms so many Americans feel are slipping away in these tenuous times. In 1755 Benjamin Franklin said, "Those who would give up essential liberty, to purchase a little temporary safety, deserve neither liberty nor safety." Civil liberties are under fire in this age of unprecedented wiretapping, data collection, Internet regulation, microchip implants, and increased federal law enforcement powers. Read about these issues and more—why there is so much controversy over school prayer, whether random drug tests for student athletes violate their right to privacy, if burning the American flag is considered free speech, and how September 11 ushered in a new era of restricted freedoms.

Political behavior and political policy—in short, the way government acts—make up the bulk of the book. Readers glean little-known facts about political parties, campaigns and elections, how the media works, the nuances of economic, social, and foreign policy, and the way our government functions in times of crisis. You'll come away with a solid understanding of everything from détente to the newly created Office of Homeland Security, as much as some of these elusive entities can be understood. The most thought-provoking questions—from What is the dirtiest presidential campaign on record? to What is the war on terrorism, exactly?—cover topics as varied as the federal budget, the national debt, war in the Middle East, campaign finance, the electoral college, the origins of the Republican and Democratic parties, how liberals and conservatives differ, and what public interest groups do to gain influence. Terms like Know-Nothings, NAFTA, split-ticket voting, front-loading, PAC, whitewash, Whitewater, dollar diplomacy, MAD, neoconservative, New Deal, and bioterrorism are defined and made easy to understand.

Even government and politics aficionados can use some brushing up on how the three branches of the government interact with one another and work to serve the American people. The executive, legislative, and judicial branches are rigorously covered. Related concepts, such as democracy, limited government, bureaucracy, separation of powers, and check and balances, are examined. What is the president's job description? How does a bill become a law? What is a quorum? A whip? A pocket veto? A filibuster? Logrolling? How do Supreme Court justices interpret the Constitution? How does a case reach the Supreme Court?

Finally, the origins of American government are explored. From early colonial governments to the Revolutionary War and the Declaration of Independence, the red, white, and blue shines through in these chapters. You'll be reminded why the English philosopher John Locke's ideas were inspiration for the new republic, who founded the early colonies, and how an emerging spirit of independence changed the shape of a tenuous America and laid the foundation for a national government. A careful look at the Constitution, our Founding Fathers, the issues of federalism, and state government conclude this section of the book.

No work of this kind would be whole without acknowledging the numerous resources available to those who want to learn more about the workings of American government and current political trends. For this reason, the concluding pages of the book function as their own mini-resource section—complete with original documents like the Constitution and the Declaration of Independence. Here you'll find recommended reading lists and lists of web sites for further study, as well as profiles of prominent political personalities, political journals, and politically active organizations.

"The best political community is formed by citizens of the middle class," said Aristotle, a citizen of an early democracy. An informed citizenry is the best defense against political and corporate chicanery, and an active electorate presents the greatest opportunity for democracy to flourish. *The Handy Politics Answer Book* provides some basic illumination in that quest.