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3rd Edition

# Politics

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parties and elections

**Ann M. DeLaney**

Former Chair of the Indiana  
Democratic Party





# Politics

3rd Edition

**by Ann DeLaney**

for  
**dummies**<sup>®</sup>  
A Wiley Brand

## Politics For Dummies®, 3rd Edition

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# Introduction

---

**W**elcome to *Politics For Dummies*, 3rd Edition.

Like many older women who grew up in a traditional two-parent family with a mother who never worked outside the home, I was taught that a lady was mentioned in the newspaper when she was born, when she married, and when she died — and certainly at no other time. Politics wasn't a topic that was discussed in our home at the dinner table. I think my parents voted, but I couldn't tell you how, and I know they never went to a fundraiser for a candidate or volunteered for a campaign.

When I became active in politics and began appearing in the press and on television with some regularity, my mother wondered where she and my father had gone wrong. What I had discovered, to my parents' dismay, was that politics wasn't all that complicated and actually could be fun. It could also be tough, even dirty and nasty at times, but winning and being part of something bigger than yourself bring a tremendous sense of satisfaction and control, even if your only involvement is to vote for the candidate of your choice. You're exercising your rights, and the candidates have to consider your views. You are in control!

## What Is Politics?

---

What exactly is politics? That depends on who's doing the defining. Some people use the word *politics* as an expletive. Suppose you've just seen a particularly vicious negative political advertisement on TV, where one candidate challenged the honesty, patriotism, or parentage of the opposing candidate. You would not be alone if you dismissed the ad by saying, "That's just politics."

Many of us use the phrase "That's just politics" to express our displeasure with everything we see wrong with the US political system. We get disgusted with special legislation that gives certain types of people tax benefits. We dislike seeing officials get favorable treatment from regulatory agencies for constituents or contributors.

Many of us are offended by Congress's generosity to itself (pensions, free lunches, and golf trips from lobbyists). We disapprove of members of Congress saying one thing and voting for another (such as supporting term limits but not retroactively). And we tend to condemn these activities with our disgust: "That's just politics!"

It may be "just politics," but after you learn the ropes, you can have an impact on politics. You can find out how candidates stand on issues of importance to you. You can make elected officials listen to your concerns and those of your neighbors. You can make a difference!

Politics is more than just what is wrong with our system. Politics *is* our system. It orders our lives. It determines who wins and who loses when governments make decisions. It determines whether the future will be brighter or bleaker for our children.

Here's just a sample of the many things that politics determines:

- »» Who serves in office and for how long
- »» The policies our governments enact
- »» Who wins and who loses when groups compete for resources or favorable legislation
- »» Who pays taxes, how much, and what kind
- »» Whether a landfill opens near your neighborhood despite your concerns about having potentially toxic waste close to where your children play
- »» What your children are taught in school, what tests they take, and what scores they must achieve to graduate
- »» How much you pay to send your children to a state-supported college and whether student loans are available to help you pay the cost
- »» When your garbage is collected and what items are accepted

From the sublime to the ridiculous, politics is everywhere!

Regardless of how you define it, politics is the glue keeping our entire society together and determining the relationships of all the members of that society. You can't avoid politics. You can refuse to participate in the process by not registering or voting, but the process will still affect you and your family every day of your lives, in ways you know and in ways you can't imagine.

You can't avoid it, no matter how far you try to bury your head in the sand. So, you may as well find out enough about politics to understand what's really happening. As soon as you understand politics, you can act to improve your position in those decisions that have an impact on you, your family, and your neighborhood. Who knows, with *Politics For Dummies*, 3rd Edition, at your side, you may decide to run for president of the United States or at least for school board or county or city council. Anyway, you can make politics work for you.

## Why You Need This Book

Americans have been taught to think that politics is something that decent people don't know anything about and certainly don't participate in. The combination of late-night talk shows and jokes at the expense of politicians has convinced most people that politics is dirty, sleazy, and incomprehensible to normal people.

Most people will never run for office. They'll never work in a political campaign or directly give money to a political party or to a candidate. A substantial number of people in the United States, more than one-half of eligible voters, will either never register to vote or won't vote regularly. Most adults know little or nothing about politics, but they're not to blame. The process by which people serve in elected office, and what they do when they get there, remains a mystery to most. Whatever meager attempts are made to teach civics in schools are limited to how a bill becomes a law and the like. Schools make little if any effort to prepare students to understand politics.

This book can help you understand what's going on, how people are trying to influence or manipulate you, and what you can do about it. Whether you like it or not, politics affects your life, for better or worse, in many different ways. Wouldn't you like to have a voice in these decisions that have a direct effect on your life? You have opinions on these issues. Those opinions should be considered before such decisions are made. Because you can't avoid politics, you may as well understand it and make it work for you.

The key to understanding politics is to realize that it isn't all that complicated. Selling a candidate isn't really much different from selling a product, any product — even deodorant! The words the media uses on the nightly news and never bothers to define — such as *caucuses*, *primaries*, *pollsters*, and *political action committees* — are just jargon.

This book tells you what really happens, starting from when you register to vote. It helps you sift through the many conflicting messages you see and hear in the media and from the campaigns. Then you can vote for the candidate who is right for you — the one you can trust with important decisions that affect your life.

I hope that this book will peel away the layers of misperception and distrust so that, after you understand politics, you can also understand how politics can work for you. Who knows? As soon as you understand what's going on, you may decide that politics can be fun, even as a spectator sport!

## How to Use This Book

This book is meant to be a reference that you can take off the shelf whenever you have questions about what's happening politically. You can read it through from cover to cover, if you like, and if your social life is at an unusual lull. *Politics For Dummies*, 3rd Edition, is designed to answer your questions by easy reference to the table of contents, the index, the icons, and the sidebars. As your questions arise, you can find exactly what you want to know without having to read the entire book.

This book answers the questions most frequently asked by intelligent people who have avoided the perils of politics to date. If you have little or no knowledge of politics, don't be embarrassed. You're like most people, and this book can help you understand and make politics work for you. If you have some knowledge and want to increase it, this book is the vehicle to do so.

## How This Book Is Organized

Each chapter attempts to answer a frequently asked question about politics. The chapters are organized into parts, each of which covers an area of politics. Here's a summary of what you will find in each part.

### Part 1: Politics and You

This part is all you need for intelligent cocktail party conversation to demonstrate that you're in the know and taking the first step in any kind of political activity.

### Part 2: Making Your Voice Heard

In Part 2, I tell you how to communicate with the big shots as well as how to start changing the world as we know it by becoming a political player. Here, you can find out how to start getting yourself involved in politics. The last chapter opens up the world of politics on the Internet. Politics is one of the top three topics on the Internet, so whatever your political beliefs, there's a website out there for you.

## **Part 3: Politics Is a Team Sport**

Part 3 discusses why the United States has only two major parties and all sorts of minor parties and independent candidates. It tells you some of the differences between Democrats and Republicans, how to become a member of a political party, and what happens when you do. Are you part of a special interest? This chapter tells you what special interest groups are, how to join one, and how to make them work for you.

## **Part 4: It's All Marketing**

In Part 4, you find out how a campaign introduces and sells the candidates, and you see how to separate the truth from the advertising run by the campaigns. All this should help you choose which candidate you want to vote for.

## **Part 5: Let the Campaigns Begin!**

This part talks about campaigns at the local, state, and national levels. Find out where the money goes and where the special interests are. The parties also want to know what you think about everything under the sun, so I include a chapter telling you about all those polls that the parties — and the media — like so much. Then I talk about the issues that candidates and parties don't want to discuss in public because you might not like what they have to say. This part also explores the dark side of politics — the whys and wherefores behind negative campaigning and the reforms needed for politics to clean up its act.

## **Part 6: Presidential Politics**

Part 6 covers the presidential campaigns: from the Iowa caucuses to the national party conventions to the electoral college. Turn here to find out what actually goes into electing a president.

## **Part 7: The Part of Tens**

Part 7 is the famous *For Dummies* part that's all lists. Here, I've included the ten things you need to teach your kids or yourself about politics, the ten commandments of politics, and, of course, the ten most common political mistakes, just so that you can see whether the latest candidate might have figured out a new way to screw up.

# Icons Used in This Book

The little round pictures in the margins of this book point out information, warnings of thin ice, things you should remember, and ways you can become active in politics. Here's a list of the icons and a brief description of what each one does:



POLITICAL  
STUFF

This icon highlights the interesting, technical parts in the book that are good to know but that you can skip over. These are case studies, historical anecdotes, and all kinds of political trivia for the would-be political buff.



SPEAKING  
UP

This icon flags ways you can find your own voice in politics and make politicians listen to what you have to say.



POLITICAL  
MYTH

This icon sheds light on stories about politics that are part of the common wisdom but may not be true. Look here to find out what the reality is.



TIP

This icon marks political words of wisdom that can help you navigate the system.



WARNING

This icon alerts you to things to avoid and common mistakes people make.



REMEMBER

This icon is a friendly reminder of information discussed elsewhere in the book or stuff you definitely want to keep in mind.

## Where to Go from Here

You can either read this book straight through or skip from chapter to chapter. If you need to brush up on some of the political basics, turn the page. If becoming an active player in politics is what you're looking for, go straight to Part 2. Use this book to find out about politics and to become a player in your community, state, or the country itself.



REMEMBER

In addition to the pages you're reading right now, this book comes with a free access-anywhere Cheat Sheet that offers a number of politics-related pearls of wisdom. To get this Cheat Sheet, visit [www.dummies.com](http://www.dummies.com) and type **politics for dummies cheat sheet** in the Search box.

# 1

## Politics and You

**IN THIS PART . . .**

Seeing how our system of government works

Determining what is government and what is politics

Figuring out what it is you want from your elected officials

Examining the role of money in politics



#### IN THIS CHAPTER

- » Distinguishing between local, state, and federal elected officials
- » Recognizing the difference between politics and government
- » Finding out what politics really means for you

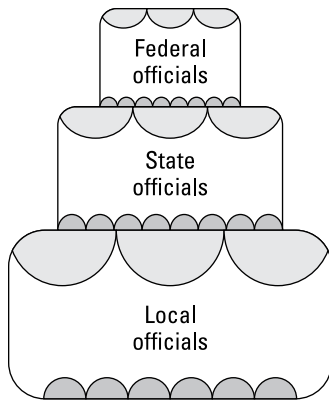
## Chapter **1**

# It's Politics, Baby!

**P**olitics is that unique situation in which you choose people to run parts of your life — by choosing the people who run your government. The US government has all kinds of elected politicians, from the nation's president down to the animal-control officer in your locale. In most cases, you can choose any candidate you think will do the best job.

## Elected Politicians — a Quick Look

Elected officials come in three levels: federal, state, and local. You have a role in determining who gets elected to all three. You can think of these officials as tiers of a wedding cake: As you move down the cake, each layer grows larger and larger, and holds more and more politicians. Check out Figure 1-1. The president and the vice president stand atop the cake of politicians, but it's up to you to decide whether their "marriage" with the voters continues or they get dumped at the next election.



**FIGURE 1-1:** The levels of the US political system are like the tiers of a wedding cake.

## Federal officials

The federal government consists of three branches: judicial, legislative, and executive. Here's how they break down:

- » The *judicial branch* consists of all federal courts, from trial courts all the way to the US Supreme Court. Federal judges are nominated by the president and confirmed by the Senate. You don't have a direct vote in the selection of federal judges, but you do have a sort of indirect vote because you elect the president who makes the selection, and you elect senators who confirm it. Also, both the president and the senators consider public opinion when making their choices.

The judicial branch interprets federal laws when lawsuits are filed in federal courts. It also decides whether state and national laws conform to the federal Constitution. Decisions of the trial courts can be appealed to the Circuit Courts of Appeals and, ultimately, to the Supreme Court.

- » You elect the members of the *legislative branch*, called Congress. Congress drafts bills, which, if passed and signed by the president, become laws. Congress is able to enact laws on power given to the federal government by the Constitution and the amendments to the Constitution. All other powers are reserved to the states.
- » You also elect the heads of the *executive branch*: the president and the vice president. The executive branch plays a role in making laws by the use of the president's *veto* of legislation. The president may block legislation by vetoing it, or at least force Congress to change proposed legislation by threatening to veto it.

The executive branch also carries out the laws that Congress enacts and the courts clarify. The president then chooses the other top members of the executive branch of government: the Cabinet. Cabinet secretaries run the

various departments of the executive branch, such as Treasury, Justice, State, Labor, and Homeland Security. Cabinet secretaries are appointed by the president and confirmed by the Senate. The top few levels of each department are occupied by political appointees and must also be confirmed by the Senate. All the rest of the tens of thousands of federal employees in these departments are civil service employees. The civil service employees can keep their jobs no matter who the president is, but those political appointees can keep their jobs only as long as the president who appointed them is still in office or until the president who appointed them wants them to leave. They serve at the pleasure of the president.

How we elect federal officials — the president, the vice president, senators, and representatives — is shaped by the US Constitution, which has been changed several times to encourage more participation by voters. For example, until the 17th Amendment to the US Constitution in 1913, voters didn't directly elect their US senators — voters elected their state legislatures, and the state legislatures elected the US senators. The 19th Amendment to the Constitution, adopted in 1920, gave women over the age of 21 the right to vote. The 26th Amendment, adopted in 1971, gave citizens 18 and older the right to vote.

## The president and the vice president

The United States elects a president and a vice president every four years. They're elected together to prevent having the president from one party and the vice president from another — a rather awkward arrangement that actually did happen early in our country's history, when it was standard practice for the candidate who received the most votes to become president, with the candidate who came in second, from the other party, becoming vice president. It didn't damage the republic, but it created enough fuss to suggest that it was not a good idea.

The president signs or vetoes legislation which passes both houses of congress. If the president vetoes legislation, a two thirds vote in the House and the Senate is required to override the veto and enable the legislation to become law.

You don't elect the president and vice president directly, but your votes do determine who holds both offices. See Chapter 23 for more information about this process.

## Representatives

Each state elects members of Congress, called *representatives*, who serve in the House. The number of House seats is limited to 435, so the average member now represents almost three-quarters of a million people. The census, taken every ten years, determines how many of those 435 representatives each state receives.

States with growing populations gain congressional seats after the census. States that have fallen behind in population usually lose seats, although the Constitution guarantees them at least one.

After the census results are tallied, each state draws its own congressional districts (although federal courts sometimes force changes afterward). Usually, state legislatures take responsibility for this task, but sometimes states set up other means for determining their election maps, such as independent commissions. The exact boundaries of congressional districts can be the subject of much political fighting, turf warfare, and teeth gnashing, as powerful politicians try to sweet-talk the mapmakers into drawing districts that will promote their own personal and political ambitions.

Members of Congress are elected every two years, in even-numbered, *general election years* (2018, 2020, 2022, and so forth).

## Senators

Each state, regardless of its population, also elects two senators to serve 6-year terms. Every two years, one-third of the US Senate is elected, so your state may or may not have a Senate contest in a given *general election*, or *even-numbered, year*. Because they are responsible to entire states, senators usually represent a much larger number of people than members of the House do, but the number of people each Senator represents can vary widely. For example, the senators from Alaska represent about three-quarters of a million people, whereas the senators from California represent almost 40 million people.



REMEMBER

Some state and local elections can occur in odd numbered years!

## State officials

Just like the federal government, each state government is divided into three branches: judicial, legislative, and executive. The functions of these three branches are largely the same as they are within the three branches of the federal government:

- » **Judicial:** Judges in state courts interpret state laws. Some states elect their trial court and appellate court judges; some don't. Some states permit citizens to vote to retain or remove judges but don't permit partisan elections for judicial positions. Whether you can play a role in the selection of judges depends on your state law.
- » **Legislative:** State legislatures enact laws that apply to their state. In each state, voters are grouped into legislative districts for the state legislature or general assembly. Most state legislatures include two chambers: an upper

house (usually called the *Senate*) and a lower house (usually called the *House of Representatives*). Terms of service vary from two to four years.

The ever-efficient and tidy state of Nebraska has only one house in its legislature, consisting of 49 members with no party affiliations. The 49 are called senators and are elected for 4-year terms. (For more information about parties and affiliations, see Chapters 6 and 7.)

» **Executive:** The role of the executive branch of a state is to administer the laws. Just like the president, governors also have the power to veto a bill or piece of legislation. However, not all governors' vetoes must have a two-thirds vote of the state legislatures to override. Some governors can have their vetoes overridden by a simple majority of votes in the legislature. Because it took a majority of votes to pass the bill in the first place, it's not that difficult to pass the legislation again. Governors in states with majority override of vetoes don't have as strong a weapon in dealing with their state legislatures as the president does in dealing with Congress.

The voters of each state elect their state governor. Both the date that the election takes place and the length of the governor's term depend on state law. Most states have 4-year terms for their governors and elect them in general-election years. Vermont and New Hampshire have 2-year terms. A few states, like New Jersey, elect their governors in odd-numbered years. Virginia has no term limit on its governorship, but a governor may not serve consecutive terms.

Most states elect a governor and a lieutenant governor on the same ticket, and many states limit the number of terms a governor can serve to two or even one.

## Local officials

Counties, cities, and towns also have elections to choose officials for their legislative and executive branches. Some judicial offices may be elected at the local level, but these courts handle small-claims issues or local ordinances for minor matters. State law largely governs criminal and civil matters.

Mayors, city council members, county commissioners, and the like are elected at the local level. How, when, and for how long these officials are chosen depends on state law. Some states elect local officials in odd-numbered years; others, in even-numbered years. Some officials have term limits; some don't. Some elections are partisan, and some aren't. Your state or county election board or clerk's office can tell you how these elections work in your community. Many local governments also maintain web pages that contain election information.

# Politics versus Government

Politics and government don't differ much, but the rhetoric changes somewhat. A government official may discuss issues in policy-motivated terms. Republican officials, for example, may talk about getting government off the backs of small-business people and about adopting tax policies to encourage initiative. Those Republican officials won't say that Democratic opponents are Robin Hoods robbing the rich to give to the poor, even if that's what they think. On the other hand, Democratic officials may question the fairness of tax breaks for corporations and bemoan the plight of the working man or woman. The Democratic officials probably won't say that the Republican tax proposals are corporate welfare, even if that's what *they're* thinking. The terms, particularly the labels, differ from those used in explicitly political appeals, but the sides are basically the same.

## Politics has spin doctors

In the heat of a political campaign, the campaign manager, the press person, or the Democratic or Republican Party official is the public spokesperson. This person advances and defends ideas proposed by one side of the campaign, and the corresponding person on the opposite side responds. The forum shifts from politics to government as soon as the election is over. Now the person trying to launch the elected official's ideas into the media in the correct way is the press secretary for the elected official. That press secretary is a government employee and must not be seen as political while voters are paying their salary.

The campaign or party spokesperson is responsible for controlling the *spin* of a story — in other words, trying to get the media to portray a story in a way that's favorable to the party official's campaign. The spin, or the way the media approaches a story, determines whether a story helps or hurts a campaign. The person charged with dealing with reporters and getting the message of the campaign into print or on television is referred to as the campaign's "spin doctor." Sometimes, the need to work with the media in understanding the candidate is obvious, as reflected in the following political joke:

*General Washington was crossing the Delaware during the Revolutionary War when his hat blew off and into the water. The general got out of the boat, walked across the water, retrieved the hat, and walked to the other side. The headline in the next day's newspaper read, "General Washington Can't Swim!"*

Obviously, this joke is extreme, but it does illustrate a point: Media portrayal can turn a perfectly positive story into a negative one and vice versa. Spin doctors play a vital role in campaigns because they make sure that the desired image and message of the candidate are portrayed. Every good campaign has at least one, and the campaign attempts to make the spin doctor the only contact person for the media.