**A SHORT GUIDE TO THE AMERICAN POLITICAL SYSTEM**

**INTRODUCTION**

The United States is - by size of electorate - the second largest democracy on the globe (India is the largest and Indonesia comes third) and the most powerful nation on earth, politically, economically and militarily, but its political system is in many important respects unlike any other in the world. This essay then was written originally to inform non-Americans as to how the American political system works.

What has been striking, however, is how many Americans - especially young Americans - have found the essay useful and insightful. There is considerable evidence that many Americans know and understand little about the political system of their own country - possibly more than is the case with any other developed democratic nation.

In the U.S., the National Assessment of Educational Progress (NAEP) tests what American students are learning. It has found that the two worst subjects for American students are civics and American history. One NAEP survey found that only 7% of eighth graders (children aged 13-14) could describe the three branches of government.

**HISTORICAL BACKGROUND**

To understand any country's political system, it is helpful to know something of the history of the nation and the background to the creation of the (latest) constitution. But this is a fundamental necessity in the case of the American political system. This is because the Constitution of the United States is so different from those of other nations and because that Constitution is, in all material respects, the same document as it was over two centuries ago.

There were four main factors in the minds of the 'founding fathers' who drafted the US Constitution:

1. The United States had just fought and won a bloody War of Independence from Britain (1775-1783) and it was determined to create a political system that was totally different from the British system in which considerable authority still resided in a hereditary King (George III at the time) or Queen and in which Parliament was increasingly assertive in the exercise of its growing powers. Therefore the new constitution deliberately spread power between the three arms of government - executive, legislature and judiciary - and ensured that each arm was able to limit the exercise of power by the other arms.
2. The United States was already a large country with problems of communications and a population of varied background and education. Therefore, for all the intentions to be a new democracy, it was seen as important to limit the influence of swings in public opinion. So the election of the president was placed in the hands of an Electoral College, rather than the subject of direct election, and the terms of office of the president and the two chambers of the legislature were all set at different lengths.
3. The United States was the creation of 13 individual states, each of which valued its traditions and powers, and so the overarching federal government was deliberately limited in its powers compared to the position of the central government in other nations. Arguably the later Civil War was about states' rights more than it was about slavery and there is still a real tension today between the states and federal government.
4. The original 13 states of the USA were of very different size in terms of population and from the beginning there was a determination by the smaller states that political power should not be excessively in the hands of the larger states. Therefore the Constitution is built on a 'Great Compromise' between the Virginia plan (representation by population) and the New Jersey plan (equal representation for all states) which resulted in the House of Representatives being constructed on the basis of population and the Senate being composed of an equal number of representatives regardless of population. This is why today six states have only one member in the House of Representatives but two members in the Senate.

The effect of the 'Great Compromise' was to give disproportionate influence to the smaller states where the population tends to be more rural and more conservative and, over the last two centuries, this impact has become greater. In 1790, the most populous state, Virginia, was 20 times larger than the least, Tennessee. Today, the equivalent ratio - California compared to Wyoming - is 67 to 1. This impacts the political composition of both the Senate and the Electoral College.

Also, whatever the 'founding fathers' intended, the sheer longevity of the Constitution and the profound changes in America since its drafting means that today the balance of power between the three arms of state is not necessarily what the drafters of the Constitution had in mind. So originally the legislature was seen as the most powerful arm of government (it is described first in the Constitution) but, over time, both the Presidency (starting with the time of Abraham Lincoln and the Civil War) and the Supreme Court (especially on social issues like desegregation, marriage and abortion) have assumed more power.

**THE CONSTITUTION**

Unlike Britain but like most nation states, the American political system is clearly defined by basic documents. The Declaration of Independence of 1776 and the Constitution of 1789 form the foundations of the United States federal government. The Declaration of Independence establishes the United States as an independent political entity, while the Constitution creates the basic structure of the federal government. Both documents are on display in the National Archives and Records Administration Building in Washington, D.C. which I have visited several times. Further information on the thinking expressed in the Constitution can be found in the Federalist Papers which are a series of 85 articles and essays published in 1787-1788 promoting the ratification of the Constitution.

The United States Constitution is both the longest-lasting in the world, being over two centuries old, and one of the shortest in the world, having just seven articles and 27 amendments (the constitutions of Jordan, Libya and Iceland are the shortest in the world running to a mere 2,000-4,000 words).

As well as its age and brevity, the US Constitution is notable for being a remarkably stable document. The first 10 amendments were all carried in 1789 - the same year as the original constitution - and are collectively known as the Bill of Rights. If one accepts that these first 10 amendments were in effect part of the original constitutional settlement, there have only been 17 amendments in almost 230 years. In fact, famously the 27th Amendment took over 200 years to achieve ratification, having been originally proposed at the same time as the 10 that make up the Bill of Rights but having only reached ratification in 1992. The last new and substantive amendment - reduction of the voting age to 18 - was in 1971, almost half a century ago.

One of the major reasons for this relative immutability is that - quite deliberately on the part of its drafters - the Constitution is a very difficult instrument to change. Article 5 of the Constitution sets out two mechanisms for amending the Constitution, although only the first of these has ever been used and most Americans have no knowledge whatsoever of the second.

The first process requires that a proposed amendment has to secure a two-thirds vote of members present in both houses of Congress. Then three-quarters of the state legislatures have to ratify the proposed change (this stage may or may not be governed by a specific time limit). As an indication of how challenging this process is, consider the case of the Equal Rights Amendment (ERA). This was first written in 1920, shortly after women were given the vote in the USA. The proposed amendment was introduced in Congress unsuccessfully in every legislative year from 1923 until it was finally passed in 1972. It was then sent to each state for ratification but, by 1982, it was still three states short of the minimum of the 38 needed to add it to the constitution. Various attempts since 1982 to revive the amendment have all failed.

The second process requires two-thirds of the 50 states to demand that Congress convenes a constitutional convention. The 'Founding Fathers' feared that, if the federal government were to become oppressive, Congress would be unlikely to call a convention to correct matters and therefore, to protect the people's freedom, they provided that that a convening power should instead be vested in the states. Since the enactment of the Construction, a total of 33 amendments have been proposed (27 were passed) and every single one of these was initiated by the Congress and there has never been a constitutional convention. No one has a firm count of the number of resolutions that state legislatures have passed calling for such a convention, but it is over 500.

At the heart of the US Constitution is the principle known as **'separation of powers'**, a term coined by the French political, enlightenment thinker Montesquieu. This means that power is spread between three institutions of the state - the executive (President & Cabinet), the legislature (House of Representatives & Senate) and the judiciary (Supreme Court & federal circuits) - and no one institution has too much power and no individual can be a member of more than one institution.

This principle is also known as **'checks and balances'**, since each of the three branches of the state has some authority to act on its own, some authority to regulate the other two branches, and has some of its own authority, in turn, regulated by the other branches.

Not only is power spread between the different branches; the members of those branches are deliberately granted by the Constitution **different terms of office** which is a further brake on rapid political change. So the President has a term of four years, while members of the Senate serve for six years and members of the House of Representatives serve for two years. Members of the Supreme Court effectively serve for life.

The great benefit of this system is that power is spread and counter-balanced and the 'founding fathers' - the 55 delegates who drafted the Constitution - clearly wished to create a political system which was in sharp contrast to, and much more democratic than, the monarchical system then in force in Britain. The great weakness of the system is that it makes government slow, complicated and legalistic which is a particular disadvantage in a world - unlike that of 1776 - in which political and economic developments are fast-moving and the USA is a - indeed the - super power.

Since the Constitution is so short, so old and so difficult to change, for it to be meaningful to contemporary society it requires interpretation by the courts and ultimately it is the Supreme Court which determines what the Constitution means. There are very different approaches to the interpretation of the Constitution with the two main strands of thought being known as *originalism* and the *Living Constitution*.

Originalism is a principle of interpretation that tries to discover the original meaning or intent of the constitution. It is based on the principle that the judiciary is not supposed to create, amend or repeal laws (which is the realm of the legislative branch) but only to uphold them. This approach tends to be supported by conservatives.

Living Constitution is a concept which claims that the Constitution has a dynamic meaning and that contemporary society should be taken into account when interpreting key constitutional phrases. Instead of seeking to divine the views of the drafters of the document, it claims that they deliberately wrote the Constitution in broad terms so that it would remain flexible. This approach tends to be supported by liberals.

**THE PRESIDENCY**

**What is the Presidency?**

The President is the head of the executive branch of the federal government of the United States. He - so far, the position has always been held by a man - is both the head of state and the head of government, as well as the military commander-in-chief and chief diplomat.

The President presides over the executive branch of the government, a vast organisation numbering about four million people, including one million active-duty military personnel. The so-called Hatch Act of 1939 forbids anyone in the executive branch - except the President or Vice-President - from using his or her official position to engage in political activity.

**Who is eligible to become a President?**

To be President, one has to:

* be a natural-born citizen of the United States
* be at least 35 years old
* have lived in the US for at least 14 years

**How is a President chosen?**

The President is elected for a fixed term of four years and may serve a maximum of two terms. Originally there was no constitutional limit on the number of terms that a President could serve in office and the first President George Washington set the precedent of serving simply two terms. Following the election of Franklin D Roosevelt to a record four terms, it was decided to limit terms to two and the relevant constitutional change - the 22nd Amendment - was enacted in 1951.

Elections are always held on the first Tuesday after the first Monday in November to coincide with Congressional elections. So the last election was held on 3 November 2020 and the next election will be held on 5 November 2024. The ballot paper contains the names of the presidential and vice-presidential candidate for each political party.

The President is not elected directly by the voters but by an Electoral College representing each state on the basis of a combination of the number of members in the Senate (two for each state regardless of size) and the number of members in the House of Representatives (roughly proportional to population). The states with the largest number of votes are California (55), Texas (38) and New York (29). The states with the smallest number of votes - there are seven of them - have only three votes. The District of Columbia, which has no voting representation in Congress, has three Electoral College votes. In effect, therefore, the Presidential election is not one election but 51. In virtually all cases, the winner of the presidential election in any given state secures all the Electoral College votes of that state. The exceptions are Maine and Nebraska.

The total Electoral College vote is 538. This means that, to become President, a candidate has to win at least 270 electoral votes. The voting system awards the Electoral College votes from each state to delegates committed to vote for a certain candidate in a "winner take all" system, with the exception of Maine and Nebraska (which award their Electoral College votes according to Congressional Districts rather than for the state as a whole). In practice, most states are firmly Democrat - for instance, California and New York - or firmly Republican - for instance, Texas and Tennessee. Therefore, candidates concentrate their appearances and resources on the so-called "battleground states", those that might go to either party. The three largest battleground or swing states are Florida (29 votes), Pennsylvania (20) and Ohio (18). Others include North Carolina (15), Virginia (13), Wisconsin (10), Colorado (9), Iowa (6) and Nevada (6).

This system of election means that a candidate can win the largest number of votes nationwide but fail to win the largest number of votes in the Electoral College and therefore fail to become President. Indeed, in practice, this has happened four times in US history: 1876, 1888, 2000 and 2016. On the last occasion, the losing candidate (Hillary Clinton) actually secured 2.9 million more votes than the winning candidate (Donald Trump). If this seems strange (at least to non-Americans), the explanation is that the 'founding fathers' who drafted the American Constitution did not wish to give too much power to the people and so devised a system that gives the ultimate power of electing the President to members of the Electoral College. The same Constitution, however, enables each state to determine how its members in the Electoral College are chosen and since the 1820s states have chosen their electors by a direct vote of the people. The United States is the only example in the world of an indirectly elected executive president.

The Electoral College does not actually meet as one body. Instead, since 1936, federal law has provided that the electors in each of the states (and, since 1964, in the District of Columbia) meet "on the first Monday after the second Wednesday in December next following their appointment" to vote for President and Vice-President. After the vote, each state then sends a certified record of their electoral votes to Congress. The votes of the electors are opened during a joint session of Congress, held in the first week of January.

In the event that the Electoral College is evenly divided between two candidates or no candidate secures a majority of the votes, the Constitution provides that the choice of President is made by the House of Representatives and the choice of Vice-President is made by the Senate. In the first case, the representatives of each state have to agree collectively on the allocation of a single vote. In the second case, each senator has one vote. This has actually happened twice - in 1800 and 1824. In 1800, the House of Representatives, after 35 votes in which neither Thomas Jefferson nor Aaron Burr obtained a majority, elected Jefferson on the 36th ballot. In 1824, neither John Quincy Adams nor Andrew Jackson was able to secure a majority of the votes in the Electoral College and the House of Representatives chose Adams even though he had fewer Electoral College votes and fewer votes at the ballot boxes than Jackson.

**What are the powers of the President?**

* Within the executive branch, the President has broad constitutional powers to manage national affairs and the workings of the federal government.
* The President may issue executive orders to affect internal policies. The use of executive orders has varied enormously between presidents and is often a controversial matter since, in effect, it is by passing the Congress to achieve what would otherwise require legislation. Very few such orders were issued until the time of Abraham Lincoln (the Emancipation Declaration was such an order); use of executive orders was considerable and peaked during the terms of the seven presidents from Theodore Roosevelt to Franklin D Roosevelt (1901-1945); but, since the Second World War, use has been more modest with Democrats tending to issue them a bit more than Republicans.
* The President has the power to recommend measures to Congress and may sign or veto legislation passed by Congress. The Congress may override a presidential veto but only by a two-thirds majority in each house.
* The President has the authority to appoint Cabinet members, Supreme Court justices. federal judges, and ambassadors but only with the advice and consent' of the Senate which can be problematic especially when the Senate is controlled by a different political party to that of the President.
* The President has the power to pardon criminals convicted of offences against the federal government and most controversially President Gerald Ford used this power to pardon his predecessor Richard Nixon.
* The President has the power to make treaties with the 'advice and consent' of the Senate.
* The President can declare war for 60 days but then has to have the approval of Congress (although it can be difficult to withdraw troops once they have been committed).

Since 1939, there has been an Executive Office of the President (EOP) which has consistently and considerably expanded in size and power. Today it consists of some 1,600 staff and costs some $300M a year.

Besides the formal powers of the President, there are informal means of exercising influence. Most notably, Teddy Roosvelt introduced the notion of 'the bully pulpit': the ability of the President to use his standing to influence public opinion. Over time, the changing nature of media - newspapers, radio, television, the Internet, social media - has presented a variety of instruments for the White House to use to 'push' Congress or other political players or indeed communicate directly with the electorate. As President, Donald Trump used his personal Twitter account to issue several messages a day to 88 million followers.

**Other interesting facts about the Presidency**

* Although the 'founding fathers' wanted to avoid a political system that in any way reflected the monarchical system then prevalent in Britain and for a long time the Presidency was relatively weak, the vast expansion of the federal bureaucracy and the military in the 20th century has in current practice given a greater role and more power to the President than is the case for any single individual in most political systems.
* The President may be impeached which means that he is removed from the office. The House of Representatives has the sole power of approving articles of impeachment, while the Senate has the sole power to try all such articles of impeachment. Three Presidents have been impeached by the House of Representatives but acquitted at the trials held by the Senate: Andrew Johnson (1868), Bill Clinton (1999) and Donald Trump (2020). Richard Nixon resigned before he would certainly have been impeached (1974). In January 2021 - following an assault on Congress - Donald Trump became the only president in US history to be impeached by the House twice, but currently the Senate has not yet deliberated on the charge.
* The President may be removed from office if a majority of the Vice President and the principal officers of the executive departments decide that the President is unable to discharge the powers and duties of his office. In fact, this provision of the Constitution - the 25th Amendment - has never been invoked.
* Although the President heads the executive branch of government, the day-to-day enforcement and administration of federal laws is in the hands of the various federal executive departments, created by Congress to deal with specific areas of national and international affairs. The heads of the 15 departments, chosen by the President and approved with the 'advice and consent' of the Senate, form a council of advisors generally known as the President's "Cabinet". This is not a cabinet in the British political sense: it does not meet so often and does not act so collectively.
* In fact, the President has powers of patronage that extend way beyond appointment of Cabinet members. In all, the President appoints roughly 4,000 individuals to positions in the federal government, of which around 1,200 require the confirmation of the Senate. As the divisions in American politics have deepened, so the confirmation process has become more fractious and prolonged - when first elected, Barack Obama had to wait ten months before all his nominees were in their jobs.
* The first United States President was George Washington, who served from 1789-1797, so that the current President Joe Biden is the 45th to hold the office. However, there have been 46 presidencies. Grover Cleveland was the 22nd and 24th President and therefore was the only US president to serve two non-consecutive terms (1885-1889 and 1893-1897) and to be counted twice in the numbering of the presidents.
* So far, every US President has been male. All but two Presidents have been Protestant (John Kennedy was a Catholic as is Joe Biden) and all but one President has been white (the exception was Barack Obama). On assuming office, the youngest was Theodore Roosevelt (42) and the oldest was Joe Biden (78).
* Four sitting Presidents have been assassinated: Abraham Lincoln in 1865, James A. Garfield in 1881, William McKinley in 1901, and John F. Kennedy in 1963. A further eight Presidents were subject to near misses in assassination attempts.
* The President is sometimes referred to as POTUS (President Of The United States) and the Presidency is often referred to by the media as variously the White House, the West Wing, and the Oval Office.
* Such is the respect for the Presidency that, even having left office, a President is referred to by the title for the remainder of his life.

The position of Vice-President is elected on the same ticket as that of the President and has the same four-year term of office. The Vice-President is often described as 'a heart beat away from the Presidency' since, in the event of the death or incapacity of the President, the Vice-President assumes the office.

In practice, however, a Vice-Presidential candidate is chosen (by the Presidential candidate) to 'balance the ticket' in the Presidential election (that is, represent a different geographical or gender or ethnic constituency) and, for all practical purposes, the position only carries the power accorded to it by the President - which is usually very little (a major exception was Dick Cheney under George W Bush). The official duties of the Vice-President are to sit as a member of the "Cabinet" and as a member of the National Security Council and to act as ex-officio President of the Senate.

**PRESIDENTIAL PRIMARIES**

An important feature of the American political system is that the two major parties - the Democrats and the Republicans - hold a system of primaries to determine who will be their candidate in the general election. These primaries are particularly important when it comes to the four-yearly Presidential election.

The key point to understand is that formally the Democratic and Republican Parties choose their Presidential candidate through a vote of delegates at a national convention and not directly through the various ballots in the various primaries.

Each party allocates delegates to each state, roughly proportionate to its size in numbers of citizens. There are two types of delegates. The normal delegates are those who are chosen by voters to back a specific candidate. Technically these delegates are pledged to that candidate but there are circumstances in which they can switch their support. Then there are what the Democrats call super delegates and the Republicans call unpledged delegates who are notable figures in the party such as former presidents, state governors and members of the two houses of Congress who are free to back whichever candidate they wish. They can do this any time they like. They can also change their mind before the convention.

How the normal delegates are chosen is a matter for each party in each of the 50 states.

Some hold caucuses which require voters to turn up to discussions on the merits of the contending candidates. Most hold conventional-style elections. In the case of the Democrats in Texas, there is both a caucus and an election. Another variation is that, in some cases, one can only take part in a caucus or election if one is registered for that political party but, in other cases, anyone in the state - including those registered for another party or none - can vote.

How normal delegates are then allocated to the different candidates is also a matter for each party in each of the 50 states. In most of the Republican contests (but not all), the candidate who wins the most votes in that state's primary wins all the party's delegates for that state - a system known as 'winner takes all'. In all the Democrat contests, delegates are allocated roughly proportional to the vote secured by the candidate subject to a minimum performance. The allocation process varies, but typically it is based on the performance of the candidate in particular Congressional districts.

In practice, normally the parties have clearly decided on a candidate well before the holding of the convention which therefore becomes more a coronation than a selection.

However, it is not unknown for a party to reach the convention with no clear choice. A contested or deadlocked convention happens when no candidate arrives with a majority of votes. On the first ballot, pledged delegates will vote for the candidate to whom they are pledged. But, in any subsequent ballots, delegates are then free to vote for whomever they want. This could include the other candidates or even - subject to the rules of the convention - people who are not candidates. Delegates keep on voting until someone wins a majority.

The most famous deadlocked convention - it involved the Democrats - took place in 1924. It required 103 ballots to chose the Democratic candidate - who then lost to the Republican candidate in the general election. The last deadlocked convention was experienced by the Republicans in 1976, when Gerald Ford did not have enough delegates before the convention to claim the nomination (his opponent was Ronald Reagan), but eventually won the nomination (Reagan withdrew) and went on to lose the general election. The last time a contested convention produced a candidate who went on to win in the general election was in 1932 with Franklin Roosevelt.

The tradition is that the political party holding the White House has its convention after that of the other party.

**THE HOUSE OF REPRESENTATIVES**

**What is the House of Representatives?**

The House of Representatives is the lower chamber in the bicameral legislature known collectively as Congress. The founders of the United States intended the House to be the politically dominant entity in the federal system and, in the late 18th and early 19th centuries, the House served as the primary forum for political debate. However, subsequently the Senate has been the dominant body.

**Who is eligible to become a member of the House?**

To be a member of the House, one has to:

* be at least 25 years old
* have been a US citizen for at least seven years
* live in the state which one represents (but not the actual district)

**How is a member of the House chosen?**

The House consists of 435 members (set in 1911), each of whom represents a congressional district and serves for a two-year term. House seats are apportioned among the states by population according to each decennial (every 10 years) census, but every state must have at least one member and in fact seven states have only one Representative each (Alaska, Delaware, Montana, North Dakota, South Dakota, Vermont and Wyoming). Typically a House constituency would represent around 700,000 people.

Once House seats are reapportioned to the states, it is state legislatures that must redraw the physical boundaries of Congressional districts. Although the states are bound by limits established by Congress and the Supreme Court, there is scope for gerry-mandering to ensure electoral advantage for the dominant political party in the state. Such reapportionment of members of the House takes effect three years after the decennial census so, as the next census will take place in 2020, reapportionment will take effect for the 118th Congress (2023-2025).

Members of the House are elected by first-past-the-post voting in every state except Louisiana and Washington, which have run-offs if no candidate secures more than 50% of the vote. Elections are always held on the first Tuesday after the first Monday in November in even numbered years. Voting in congressional elections - especially to the House - is generally much lower than levels in other liberal democracies. In a year when there is a Presidential election, turnout is typically around 50%; in years when there is no Presidential election (known as mid-terms), it usually falls to around one third of the electorate.

In the event that a member of the House of Representatives dies or resigns before the end of the two-year term, a special election is held to fill the vacancy.

The House has five non-voting delegates from the District of Columbia (1971), Guam (1972) the Virgin Islands (1976), American Samoa (1981) and the Northern Mariana Islands (2008) and one resident commissioner for Puerto Rico (1976), bringing the total formal membership to 441. Non-voting delegates are not allowed floor votes, but can vote in any committees to which they are assigned.

**What are the powers of the House?**

* The House of Representatives is one of the two chambers that can initiate and pass legislation, although to become law any legislation has to be approved by the Senate as well.
* Each chamber of Congress has particular exclusive powers. The House must introduce any bills for the purpose of raising revenue.
* If the Electoral College is tied, the choice of President is made by the House of Representatives.
* The House has a key role in any impeachment proceedings against the President or Vice-President. It lays the charges which are then passed to the Senate for a trial.
* The House (and the Senate) have the power to declare war - although the last time this happened was in 1941.

**Other interesting facts about the House**

* The Speaker of the House - chosen by the majority party - has considerable power. He or she presides over the House and sets the agenda, assigns legislation to committees, and determines whether and how a bill reaches the floor of the chamber.
* Currently the Majority Leader in the House - and therefore the Speaker - is the Democrat Nancy Pelosi, while the Minority Leader is the Republican Kevin McCarthy.
* Much of the work of the House is done through 20 standing committees and around 100 sub-committees which perform both legislative functions (drafting Bills) and investigatory functions (holding enquiries). Most of the committees are focused on an area of government activity such as homeland security, foreign affairs, agriculture, energy, or transport, but others are more cross-cutting such as those on the budget and ethics.
* Activity in the House of Representatives tends to be more partisan than in the Senate. One illustration of this is the so-called Hastert Rule. This Rule's introduction is widely credited to former Speaker Dennis Hastert (1999-2007); however, Newt Gingrich, who directly preceded Hastert as Speaker (1995-1999), followed the same rule. The Hastert Rule, also known as the "majority of the majority" rule, is an informal governing principle used by Republican Speakers of the House of Representatives since the mid-1990s to maintain their speakerships and limit the power of the minority party to bring bills up for a vote on the floor of the House. Under the doctrine, the Speaker of the House will not allow a floor vote on a bill unless a majority of the majority party supports the bill. The rule keeps the minority party from passing bills with the assistance of a small number of majority party members.
* The House of Representatives has met in its chamber in the south wing of the Capitol in Washington DC since 1857.
* Offices of members of the House are located in three buildings on the south side of the Capitol along Independence Avenue: the Cannon, Longworth, and Rayburn Buildings.
* The House and Senate are often referred to by the media as Capitol Hill or simply the Capitol or the Hill.

**THE SENATE**

**What is the Senate?**

The Senate is the upper chamber in the bicameral legislature known collectively as Congress. The original intention of the authors of the US Constitution was that the Senate should be a regulatory group, less politically dominant than the House. However, since the mid 19th century, the Senate has been the dominant chamber and indeed today it is perhaps the most powerful upper house of any legislative body in the world.

**Who is eligible to become a member of the Senate?**

To be a member of the Senate, one has to:

* be at least 30 years old
* have been a US citizen for at least nine years
* live in the state which one represents

**How is a member of the Senate chosen?**

The Senate consists of 100 members, each of whom represents a state. Each state has two Senators, regardless of population, and, since there are 50 states, then there are 100 senators. This equality of Senate seats between states has the effect of producing huge variations in constituency population (the two senators from Wyoming represent less than half a million electors, while the two senators from California represent 34M people) with gross over-representation of the smaller states and serious under-representation of racial and ethnic minorities.

A Senator serves for a six-year term. One third of the Senate stands for election every two years: class 1 involves 33 seats, class 2 involves 33 seats, and class 3 involves 34 seats. In practice, every two years, in addition to the class of that cycle, there may well be one or two extra seats up for election because of vacancies. In the event that a member of the Senate dies or resigns before the end of the six-year term, a special election is not normally held at that time (this is the case for 46 states). Instead the Governor of the state that the Senator represented nominates someone to serve until the next set of Congressional elections when the special election is held to fill the vacancy.

For a long time, Senators were elected by the individual state legislatures. However, since the 17th Amendment to the Constitution in 1913, members of the Senate are elected by first-past-the-post voting in every state except Louisiana and Washington, which have run-offs. Elections are always held on the first Tuesday after the first Monday in November in even numbered years.

Each Senator is known as the senior or junior Senator for his or her state, based on length of service.

**What are the powers of the Senate?**

* The Senate is one of the two chambers that can initiate and pass legislation, although to become law any legislation has to be approved by the House of Representatives as well.
* Each chamber of Congress has particular exclusive powers. The Senate must give 'advice and consent' to many important Presidential appointments including Cabinet members, Supreme Court justices. federal judges, and ambassadors.
* The Senate has the responsibility of ratifying treaties.
* If the Electoral College is tied, the choice of Vice-President is made by the Senate.
* The Senate has a key role in any impeachment proceedings against the President or Vice-President. Once the House of Representatives has laid the charges, the Senate then conducts a trial on these charges. The Supreme Court Chief Justice presides over such a trial. A two-thirds majority of the Senate is required to uphold impeachment charges.
* The Senate (and the House) have the power to declare war - although the last time this happened was in 1941.

**Other interesting facts about the Senate**

* The most powerful position in the Senate is the Majority Leader but he or she does not have the same control over the upper chamber as the control that the Speaker of the House has over the lower chamber, since the 'whipping' system is weaker in the Senate.
* Currently the Majority Leader in the Senate is the Democrat Chuck Schummer, while the Minority leader is the Republican Mitch McConnell.
* Much of the work of the Senate is done through 16 standing committees and around 40 sub-committees which perform both legislative functions (drafting Bills) and investigatory functions (holding enquiries). Most of the committees are focused on an area of government activity such as homeland security, foreign relations, health, energy, or transport, but others are more cross-cutting such as those on the budget and rules.
* Activity in the Senate tends to be less partisan and more individualistic than in the House of Representatives. Senate rules permit what is called a filibuster when a Senator, or a series of Senators, can speak for as long as they wish and on any topic they choose, unless a supermajority of three-fifths of the Senate (60 Senators, if all 100 seats are filled) brings debate to a close by invoking what is called cloture (taken from the French term for closure).
* The Senate has met in its chamber in the north wing of the Capitol in Washington DC since 1859.
* Offices of members of the Senate are located in three buildings on the north side of the Capitol along Constitution Avenue: the Russell, Dirksen, and Hart Buildings.
* The Senate and House are often referred to by the media as Capitol Hill or simply the Capitol or the Hill.

**THE SUPREME COURT**

**What is the Supreme Court?**

The Supreme Court is the highest court in the United States. Article III of the U.S. Constitution created the Supreme Court and authorised Congress to pass laws establishing a system of lower courts.

Though the first Supreme Court comprised six justices, Congress has altered the number of Supreme Court seats - from a low of five to a high of 10 - six times over the years. In 1869, Congress set the number of seats to nine, where it has remained until today.

The nine Justices comprise the Chief Justice of the United States and eight Associate Justices. They have equal weight when voting on a case and the Chief Justice has no casting vote or power to instruct colleagues. Decisions are made by a simple majority.

Below the Supreme Court, there is a system of Courts of Appeal, and, below these courts, there are District Courts. Together, these three levels of courts represent the federal judicial system.

There are 13 appellate courts that sit below the Supreme Court and they are called the U.S. Courts of Appeals. There are 94 federal judicial districts which are organised into 12 regional circuits, each of which has a court of appeals.

**Who is eligible to become a member of the Court?**

The Constitution does not specify qualifications for Justices such as age, education, profession, or native-born citizenship. A Justice does not have to be a lawyer or a law school graduate, but all Justices have been trained in the law. Many of the 18th and 19th century Justices studied law under a mentor because there were few law schools in the country.

The last Justice to be appointed who did not attend any law school was James F. Byrnes (1941-1942). He did not graduate from high school and taught himself law, passing the bar at the age of 23.

All Supreme Court judges are appointed for life.

**How is a member of the Court chosen?**

The Justices are nominated by the President and confirmed with the 'advice and consent' of the Senate. As federal judges, the Justices serve during "good behavior", meaning essentially that they serve for life and can be removed only by resignation or by impeachment and subsequent conviction.

Since the Supreme Court makes so many 'political' decisions and its members are appointed so rarely, the appointment of Justices by the President is often a very charged and controversial matter. Since Justices serve for life and therefore usually beyond the term of office of the appointing President, such appointment are often regarded as an important part of any particular President's legacy.

**What are the powers of the Court?**

The Supreme Court is the highest court in the United States. The court deals with matters pertaining to the federal government, disputes between states, and interpretation of the Constitution.

It can declare legislation or executive action made at any level of the government as unconstitutional, nullifying the law and creating precedent for future law and decisions.

However, the Supreme Court can only rule on a lower court decision so it cannot take the initiative to consider a matter.

There are three ways that a matter can come to the Supreme Court:

1. A federal authority makes a decision that is challenged as unconstitutional which goes straight to the Supreme Court which is not obliged to take it
2. A state makes a decision which someone believes is unconstitutional but the matter would have to have previously been heard by a Federal Court of Appeal (there are 11 circuits covering the 50 states)
3. There is a conflict between states that needs to be resolved (if the two or more states are in the same circuit, the matter would first have to go to the appropriate Federal Court of Appeal)

**Other interesting facts about the Court**

* Each year, around 8,000 petitions are made to the Supreme Court seeking a judgement, but each term the number of cases determined is only about 100.
* When a case is considered in public by the Court, each side of the case only has half-an-hour to state its position. All the detail is set out in documents and all the rest of the time of the public hearing is taken up by questions from the Justices.
* Decisions of the Supreme Court are taken in private conference, following discussion and debate. No Justice speaks for a second time until every Justice has spoken once.
* Given how difficult it is to change the US Constitution through the formal method, one has seen informal changes to the Constitution through various decisions of the Supreme Court which have given specific meanings to some of the general phases in the Constitution. It is one of the many ironies of the American political system that an unelected and unaccountable body like the Supreme Court can in practice exercise so much political power in a system which proclaims itself as so democratic.
* The Supreme Court in practice therefore has a much more 'political' role than the highest courts of European democracies. In the 1960s, the court played a major role in bringing about desegregation. The scope of abortion in the USA is effectively set by the Supreme Court whereas, in other countries, it would be set by legislation. Indeed in 2000, it made the most political decision imaginable by determining - by seven votes to two - the outcome of that year's presidential election. It decided that George W Bush had beaten Al Gore, although Gore won the most votes overall.
* A recent and momentous instance of this exercise of political power was the Supreme Court decision in the case of the challenge to Barack Obama's signature piece of legislation, the Patient Protection and Affordable Care Act, often dubbed Obamacare. No less than 26 states challenged the legality of these health reforms under a clause in the constitution governing interstate commerce. In the end, the Court ruled by five to four that, while the individual mandate provision in the Act is not itself a tax, the penalties imposed for not buying health insurance do represent taxes and therefore the entire requirement falls within the remit of Congress's right to impose taxes.
* William Howard Taft (1857-1930) was the 27th President of the United States (1909-1913) and later the tenth Chief Justice of the United States (1921-1930). He is the only person to have served in both of these offices.
* In the history of the United States, there has only been five women members, two black members and one Hispanic member of the Supreme Court. Following the death of Ruth Bader Ginsberg and her replacement by Amey Coney Barrett, the present membership of the Court includes three women members and one black member.
* Following the death of Ruth Bader Ginsberg and the appointment of Amy Coney Barrett, six of the justices are Roman Catholic and two are Jewish. Neil Gorsuch was raised Roman Catholic but now attends an Episcopal Church.
* Following the appointment by President Trump of Neil Gorsuch, Brett Kavanaugh and Amy Coney Barrett to the Supreme Court, there is now a conservative majority on the Court. All the conservative members were appointed by Republican presidents, while all the liberals were appointed by Democratic presidents. Since Gorsuch, Kavanaugh and Barrett are young by Supreme Court standards, Trump is viewed to have a secured a legacy that will last decades.
* In April 2021, new Democrat President Joe Biden fulfilled a campaign promise by ordering a study of reform the Supreme Court, creating a bipartisan 36-member commission that will spend six months examining issues such as expansion of the Court and institution of term limits for its Justices.
* A special feature of the American political system in respect of the judiciary is that, although federal judges are appointed, nationwide 87% of all state court judges are elected and 39 states elect at least some of their judges. Outside of the United States, there are only two nations that have judicial elections and then only in limited fashion. Smaller Swiss cantons elect judges and appointed justices on the Japanese Supreme Court must sometimes face retention elections (although those elections are a formality).

**POLITICAL PARTIES & ELECTIONS**

The Federalist Party was the first American political party and existed from the early 1790s to 1816. The party was run by Alexander Hamilton, who was Secretary of the Treasury and chief architect of George Washington's administration. The Federalists called for a strong national government that promoted economic growth. The Democratic-Republican Party was an American political party formed by Thomas Jefferson and James Madison in 1791â€“1793 to oppose the centralising policies of the new Federalist Party.

Although these parties were soon succeeded by others, there remains to this day the basic political cleavage between those who want to see an activist central government and those who want to limit the power of the central government - now represented broadly by the Democratic Party and the Republican Party respectively.

To an extent quite extraordinary in democratic countries, the American political system is dominated by these two political parties: the Democratic Party and the Republican Party (often known as the 'Grand Old Party' or GOP). These are very old and very stable parties - the Democrats go back to 1824 and the Republicans were founded in 1854.

In illustrations and promotional material, the Democratic Party is often represented as a donkey, while the Republican Party is featured as an elephant. The origin of these symbols is the political cartoonist Thomas Nast who came up with them in 1870 and 1874 respectively.

The main reason for the dominance of these two parties is that - like most other Anglo-Saxon countries (notably Britain) - the electoral system is 'first past the post' or simple majority which, combined with the large voter size of the constituencies in the House and (even more) the Senate, ensures that effectively only two parties can play. The other key factor is the huge influence of money in the American electoral system. Since effectively a candidate can spend any amount he can raise (not allowed in many other countries) and since one can buy broadcasting time (again not allowed in many countries), the US can only 'afford' two parties or, to put it another way, candidates of any other party face a formidable financial barrier to entry.

Some people tend to view the division between the Democratic Party and the Republican Party in the United States as the same as that between Labour and Conservative in Britain or between Social Democrats and Christian Democrats in Germany. The comparison is valid in the sense that, in each country, one political party is characterised as Centre-Left and the other as Centre-Right or, to put it another way, one party is more economically interventionist and socially radical than the other. However, the analogy has many weaknesses.

1. The Centre in American politics is considerably to the Right of the Centre in most European states including Britain, Germany, France, Italy and (even more especially) the Scandinavian countries. So, for instance, most members of the Conservative Party in the UK would support a national health service, whereas many members of the Democratic Party in the US would not.
2. As a consequence of the enormous geographical size of the United States and the different histories of the different states (exemplified by the Civil War), geography is a factor in ideological positioning to a much greater extent than in other democratic countries. For instance, a Northern Republican could be more liberal than a Southern Democrat. Conversely there is a group of Democratic Congressmen that are fiscally very conservative - they are known as "blue dog" Democrats or even DINO (Democrats In Name Only).
3. In the United States, divisions over social matters - such as abortion, capital punishment, same-sex relationships and stem cell research - matter and follow party lines in a way which is not true of most European countries. In Britain, for instance, these sort of issues would be regarded as matters of personal conscience and would not feature prominently in election debates between candidates and parties.
4. In the USA, religion is a factor in politics in a way unique in western democracies. Candidates openly proclaim their faith in a manner which would be regarded as bizarre elsewhere (even in a Catholic country like France) and religious groupings - such as the Christian Coalition of America exert a significant political influence in a manner which would be regarded as improper in most European countries (Poland is an exception here).
5. In the United States, the 'whipping system' - that is the instructions to members of the House and the Senate on how to vote - is not as strict or effective as it is in most European countries. As a consequence, members of Congress are less constrained by party affiliation and freer to act individually.
6. In the USA, political parties are much weaker institutions than they are in other democracies. Between the selection of candidates, they are less active than their counterparts in other countries and, during elections, they are less influential in campaigning, with individual politicians and their campaigns having much more influence.
7. The cost of elections is much greater in the US than in other democracies which has the effects of limiting the range of candidates, increasing the influence of corporate interests and pressure groups, and enhancing the position of the incumbent office holder (especially in the winning of primaries). As long ago as 1895, the Chairman of the Republican National Committee Mark Hanna stated: *"There are two things that are important in politics. The first is money, and I can't remember what the second one is."*
8. Whereas in other countries, voters shape the policies and select the candidates of a party by joining it, in the USA voters register as a supporter of one of the major parties and then vote in primary elections to determine who should be the party's candidate in the 'real' election.

One other oddity of the American party system is that, whereas in most countries of the world the colour red is associated with the Left-wing party and the colour blue with the Right-wing party, in the United States the reverse is the case. So the 'blue states' are those traditionally won by the Democrats, while the 'red states' are those normally controlled by the Republicans.

Two interesting features of American political elections are low turnout and the importance of incumbency.

Traditionally turnout in US congressional elections is much lower than in other liberal democracies especially those of Western Europe. When there is a presidential election, turnout is only about half; when there is no presidential election, turnout is merely about one third. The exception was the elections of 2008: the excitement of the candidacy of Barack Obama led to an unusually high turnout of 63%, the highest since 1960 (the election of John F Kennedy).

While Congress as an institution is held in popular contempt, voters like *their* member of Congress and indeed there is a phenomenon known as 'sophomore surge' whereby incumbents tend to increase their share of the vote when they seek re-election. More generally most incumbents win re-election for several reasons: they allocate time and resources to waging a permanent re-election campaign; they can win "earmarks" which are appropriations of government spending for projects in the constituency; and they find it easier than challengers to raise money for election campaigns.

**THE FEDERAL SYSTEM**

Understanding the federal nature of the United States is critical to appreciating the complexities of the American political system.

Most political systems are created top-down. A national system of government is constructed and a certain amount of power is released to lower levels of government. The unique history of the United States means that, in this case, the political system was created bottom-up.

First, some 240 years ago, there were 13 autonomous states who, following the War of Independence against the British, created a system of government in which the various states somewhat reluctantly ceded power to the federal government. Around a century later, the respective authority of the federal government and the individual states was an issue at the heart of the Civil War when there was a bloody conflict over who had the right to determine whether slavery was or was not permissable. With the exception of Switzerland, no other Western democracy diffuses power to the same degree as America.

So contested is the whole notion of federalism in the American political system that initially (1775-1789) the country was not a federation but simply a confederation with minimal powers for the federal government. This system was found not to work and so the Constitution of 1789 provides a sophisticated balance of powers between the federal and state governments.

In fact, whatever the letter of the Constitution, in practice the balance of power has ebbed and flowed with circumstances and personalities and so historians have characterized different periods with their own terms: Dual Federalism (1789-1865 & 1865-1901), Co-operative Federalism (1901-1960), Creative Federalism (1960-1968), New Federalism (late 1960s-1980s) and Competitive Federalism (1990s-onwards).

Today the powers of the federal government remain strictly limited by the Constitution - the critical Tenth Amendment of 1791 - which leaves a great deal of authority to the individual states.

Each state has an executive, a legislature and a judiciary.

The head of the executive is the Governor who is directly elected. As with the President at federal level, state Governors can issue Executive Orders.

The legislature consists of a Senate and a House of Representatives (the exception is the state of Nebraska which has a unicameral system which is non-partisan).

The judiciary consists of a state system of courts. Surprisingly - at least to non-Americans - around 90% of US judges are elected.

The 50 states are divided into 3,141 counties (parishes in Louisiana and boroughs in Alaska). Each county has its court.

Although the Constitution prescribes precisely when Presidential and Congressional elections will be held, the dates and times of state and local elections are determined by state governments. Therefore there is a plethora of elections in the United States and, at almost all times, an election is being held somewhere in the country. State and local elections, like federal elections, use the 'first past the post' system of election.

In fact, most states choose to elect the governor and legislature when Congressional elections are held on the first Tuesday after the first Monday in November in even numbered years. Exceptions are the states of Virginia and New Jersey which hold their governor and legislature elections in odd numbered years (known as "off-year elections"). This means that these states provide the first electoral indication of how voters view the performance of a newly-elected President and/or Congress.

The debate about federalism in the US is far from over. There are those who argue for a stronger role for the federal government and there are advocates of locating more power at the state level. Supporters of a more federal approach have pointed out that the country's failure to deal with the coronavirus pandemic was in part because of the existence of almost 2,700 state and local health departments and the challenge of police reform is so huge because the country has around 18,000 police departments. Conversely, the recent rise of the electorally-successful Tea Party movement owed a good deal to the view that the federal government has become too dominant, too intrusive and too profligate and efforts at federal level to reform such crucial issues as health insurance and gun control have been fiercely resisted by many states.

Meanwhile many states - especially those west of the Rockies - have what has been called "the fourth arm of government": this is the ballot or referendum initiative. This enables a policy question to be put to the electorate as a result of the collection of a certain number of signatures or the decision of the state legislation. Over the last century, some 3,000 such initiatives have been conducted - in some cases (such as California) with profound results.

**RECENT TRENDS**

In all political systems, there is a disconnect between the *formal* arrangements, as set out in the constitution and relevant laws, and the *informal* arrangements, as occurs in practice. Arguably, in the United States this disconnect is sharper than in most other democratic systems because:

* The US Constitution is an old one (late 18th century) whereas most countries have had several constitutions with the current one typically being a 20th century creation.
* The US Constitution is relatively immutable so it is very difficult to change the provisions to reflect the reforms that have come about over time from the pressure of events.
* Since the US adopted its Constitution, the US has become the pre-eminent world economic and political power which has brought about major changes in how the Presidency operates, most especially in the international sphere.

What this means is that, in the last century and most especially since the end of the Second World War, the reality of how the American political system operates has changed quite fundamentally in terms which are not always evident from the terms of the Constitution (and indeed some might argue are in some respects in contravention of the Constitution). The main changes are as follows:

* The balance of power between the Congress and the President has shifted significantly in favour of the President. This is evident in the domestic sphere through practices like 'impoundment' (when money is taken from the purpose intended by Congress and allocated to another purpose favoured by the President) and in the international sphere through refusal to invoke the War Powers Resolution in spite of major military invasions. Different terms for this accretion of power by the Presidency are "the unitary executive" and "the imperial presidency".
* The impact of private funding of political campaigns and of lobbyists and special interest groups in political decision making have increased considerably. Candidates raise their own money for campaigns, there is effectively no limit on the money that can be spent in such campaigns (thanks to what is called super Political Action Committees), and the levels of expenditure - especially in the presidential primaries and election proper - have risen astronomically. In the presidential race of 2012, both Barack Obama and Mitt Romney spent over one billion dollars. Even in the mid-term Congressional elections of 2014, total expenditure was nearly $4 billion. All this has led to some observers describing the American political system as a plutocracy, since it is effectively controlled by private finance from big businesses, which expect certain policies and practices to follow from the candidates they are funding, and big donors, who often expect preferment such as an ambassadorship from a candidate elected as President.
* There has been a growth of what is called "pork barrel" politics through the use of "earmarks". The term "pork barrel" refers to the appropriation of government spending for projects that are intended primarily to benefit particular constituents, such as those in marginal seats, or campaign contributors. Such appropriations are achieved through "earmarks" which can be found both in legislation (also called "hard earmarks" or "hardmarks") and in the text of Congressional committee reports (also called "soft earmarks" or "softmarks").
* The nature of political debate in the United States has become markedly more partisan and bitter. The personal lifestyle as well as the political record of a candidate might well be challenged and even the patriotism or religiosity of the candidate may be called into question. Whereas the politics of most European countries has become more consensual, US domestic politics has become polarised and tribal. As a result, the political culture is often more concerned with satisfying the demands of the political 'base' rather than attempting to achieve a national consensus.

One final trend worth noting is the frequency of the same family to provide members of Congress. Low polling in elections, the high cost of running for election, and the focus on the individual more than the party all mean that a well-known name can work successfully for a candidate. Everyone is familiar with the Kennedys, Clintons and Bushs in American politics but, in 2014, there are no less than 37 members of Congress who have a relative who has served in the legislature.

**A DIVIDED DEMOCRACY**

Of course, all nation states are divided, especially in terms of power and wealth, but also - to different extents - by gender, race, ethnicity, religion and other factors. Indeed the constitution and institutions of a democratic society are deliberately intended to provide for the expression and resolution of such divisions. However, it is often observed that the USA is an especially divided democracy in at least four respects:

1. It is divided *horizontally* through the 'separation of powers', so that the executive, the legislature and the judiciary are quite distinct in terms of both powers and personalities. Each arm of government exercises a check on the other.
2. It is divided *vertically* through the federal system of government with the division of powers between the federal government and the state governments a very important issue that arguably was once the subject of a civil war. In such a large country geographically, the federal government can seem very distant to many citizens.
3. It is divided *politically* through the sharp (and often bitter) differences of view on many economic issues like tackling the recession and reforming health care and social issues ranging from gun control to gay rights. Since 2009, such differences have been highlighted by the presence of the first black President in the White House and the rapid emergence of a Tea Party movement that is both virulently anti-Obama and anti-mainstream Republicanism.
4. It is divided *racially* through the growth of the non-white electorate. When Ronald Reagan was first elected President in 1980, almost 90% of the US electorate was white; today some 30% of voters are non-white; and that proportion is growing (especially Spanish-speaking communities). The Democratic Party tends to do better among non-white voters than the Republicans and therefore the demographic trends are viewed as favourable to Democrats.

One of the most visible and dramatic illustrations of how the divisions in American politics frustrate decision-making is the regular failure to agree a federal budget before the start of the new financial period. This results in what is known as federal 'shutdown' when most federal employees are sent home because they cannot be paid and many federal institutions therefore close down. This is not an isolated occurrence: it has happened 18 times since 1976 (the last one was in 2013).

A major role of the Congress is to pass legislation but the divided nature of American politics has made this increasingly difficult and the Congress frequently exhibits legislative grid-lock. Hillary Clinton - former First Lady, former Senator, and former Secretary of State - in her memoir "Hard Choices" (2014) talks of *"all the horse trading, arm-twisting, vote counting, alternating appeals to principle and self-interest, and hard-ball politics that go into passing major legislation"*. Reading this short essay, it will be evident to many (especially non-American) readers that the United States is *different* from other democracies. This observation has given rise to the notion of "American exceptionalism". This is an ill-defined term which has been used differently at different times.

**AMERICAN EXCEPTIONALISM**

From the creation of the Republic in 1776, there has been a sense that the United States has been exceptional in its commitment to freedom as expressed in the US Constitution and the Bill of Rights. Even though today there are many challenges to freedom in the USA, many Americans still feel that their attachment to freedom - however defined - is a distinguishing feature of their nation as compared to all others.

Another important version of "American exceptionalism" revolves around the lack of a clear ideological or class-based division between the two major political parties. The USA has never had a credible socialist or anti-capitalist party; both the main parties are pro-capital and pro-business and speak largely to the 'middle class'.

Other versions of the concept revolve around the alleged 'superiority' of the United States because of its history, size, wealth and global dominance plus the 'sophistication' of its constitution and power of its values such as individualism, innovation and entrepreneurship.

In perhaps its most extreme form, the concept has a religious dimension with the belief that God has especially chosen or blessed the country.

Of course, it is easy to view the American political system as exceptional in negative terms such as the unusual influence of race, religion and money as compared to other liberal democracies.

In truth, for all its special features, the American political system needs to be seen as one among many models of democracy with its own strengths and weaknesses that need to be assessed in comparison to those of other democracies.

**CONCLUSION**

Americans are losing faith in the American political system as people around the world are questioning the continued pre-eminence of the United States as the dominant global Since 2004, a clear majority of Americans have told Gallup that they are dissatisfied with the way they are governed. The numbers of those has several times climbed above 80% which is higher than at the time of the Watergate scandal. This disillusionment is reflected in the falling number of Americans who even bother to vote (2020 was an exception).

In "The World In 2015", John Micklethwait, editor-in-chief of "The Economist", wrote: *"In America, there is nothing particularly democratic about the ascent of money politics, the arcane blocking procedures of Congress or the gerrymandering of district boundaries. Indeed they are all reminiscent of the rotten boroughs of 18th century England that infuriated the Founding Fathers."* In his book "Ten Lessons For a Post-Pandemic World", Fareed Zakaria asserted: *"America has become what Francis Fukuyama calls a 'vetocracy'. The system of checks and balances, replicated at every level of government, ensures that someone, somewhere can always block any positive action. The United States has become a nation of naysayers."*

The debate about the effectiveness of the US political system is a part of the wider debate about whether or not the United States is in relative decline on the world stage. In his book "Time To Start Thinking: America And The Spectre Of Decline" , Edward Luce writes: *"Sometimes it seems Americans are engaged in some kind of collusion in which voters pretend to elect their lawmakers and lawmakers pretend to govern. This, in some ways, is America's core problem: the more America postpones any coherent response to the onset of relative decline, the more difficult the politics are likely to get."*

These issues were highlighted very dramatically by the 2016 election as president of Donald Trump, someone who ran for election as the anti-establishment candidate who was going to"drain the swamp", who had never previously held political office, and who governed in a most unconventional and controversial style, concluding his term of office by disputing the validity of the 2020 election and inciting an attack on the Capitol. Although Trump was defeated in the election of 2020, Trumpism remains strong since he won the second-largest number of votes of any presidential candidate in history.

President Joe Biden has much work to do to restore faith in American government at home and in American standing in the world.

**ROGER DARLINGTON**

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