

Conclusion

In his inaugural address delivered on the east side of the United States Capitol on January 20, 1961, President John F. Kennedy summoned the American people to the cause of public service. Kennedy's inaugural speech, regarded as one of the most thoughtful and dynamic inaugural speeches in the history of the United States, is especially remembered for one simple yet eloquent sentence. The newly-inaugurated, youthful, and charismatic president proclaimed: "And so my fellow Americans ask not what your country can do for you, ask what you can do for you country." Public service in Kennedy's view was a noble calling, and serving a cause greater than oneself was the mark of a patriot.

As a young boy, I personally witnessed JFK deliver a riveting speech on the New Haven town green during the highly competitive 1960 presidential contest. Although I was raised in a politically active family, I truly believe that JFK's positive impact on American politics, as well as his short-lived presidency, contributed in several ways to my own interest in politics and government. There was something very special about President John F. Kennedy, which to this day continues to set him apart from other presidents and political figures.

In some respects, the spirit of JFK is present throughout the pages of this textbook. At the risk of sounding like an idealist, my intent in writing this work was not only to educate students concerning the mechanics and nuances of Connecticut government,

but also to motivate college students to participate in the political process. I do not and will not subscribe to the view expressed by many cynical Americans that the political process is a closed system, open to only wealthy and powerful individuals. I will never surrender to this line of thinking as long as I teach political science. I contend instead that the political process, especially at the state and local level of government, is not only a porous process, but also in desperate need of young, educated, and ethical public servants. Put differently, the door to the political arena is open to those who wish to take advantage of it. Any person, irrespective of income, race, ethnicity, or religion, can directly participate in the political process and make an important contribution. Consider, for example, the four following excellent opportunities in the state of Connecticut for college students to participate in the affairs of government:

Elected Office: In Connecticut, a resident only has to be 18 years of age to run for a seat in the General Assembly. The same is true for a seat on a local town council, a local school board, or a local commission. The participation of young persons between the ages of 18-21 in the state legislature or in elected positions at the local level would not only enrich the quality of political discourse but also elevate the political voice of young adults. Imagine the extraordinary difference that a caucus of young persons could make in the Connecticut General Assembly, or perhaps on a town council. Think of the difference that young and perceptive lawmakers could make with respect to formulating Connecticut's \$36 billion biennial budget. Or consider the impact young town councilors could make regarding a proposal to cut spending for the high school athletic program or the town's music curriculum. There are 151 seats in the Connecticut House of Representatives and 36 seats in the state Senate. Moreover, there are thousands of elected posts, ranging from council seats to commissions, in the 169 local communities across the state of Connecticut. Numerous opportunities exist therefore for young adults to hold public office and to make a serious difference in the policy process.

Party Politics: Young persons of college age can also influence the political process in ways other than holding elective office. For example, an individual who is 18 years of age or older can register with a political party and through the proper contacts become a member of a local town committee. Although the power of political parties has receded over the years, local party committees in Connecticut are still in many ways integral to the functioning of state and local politics. The local party organization is the ideal mechanism for persons who prefer to work behind the scenes. And let's not forget that membership on a town committee can also lead to an appointment on a local or state commission and eventually a nomination for public office. My own research and discussion with party leaders has discovered that many vacancies exist on local town committees. I have also learned that Democratic and Republican town chairpersons are very interested in having young and enthusiastic individuals join the town committees. Those who wish to participate in the political process would be wise to remember that membership on a local Democratic or Republican party committee is still the gateway into Connecticut politics. Although committees for third parties are not always present in local communities, opportunities do exist to participate in third-party movements. Like the Democratic and Republican parties in Connecticut, the Green Party, Libertarian Party, Concerned Citizens Party, and Working Families Party are all looking for young volunteers to advance their party's cause.

Interest Groups: Special and public interest groups are also in need of motivated and thoughtful activists. Joining an interest group and fighting for a particular interest can be an exhilarating political experience. Moreover, such activity will inevitably result in direct contact with state and local policy makers. Participation in an interest group can also lead to employment as a lobbyist at the Connecticut state Capitol. Although the term "lobbying" has a somewhat negative connotation in the minds of many Americans, the fact of the matter is that economic, social, and political interests need to be represented when lawmakers are passing a bill. Whether the interest represented is that of an insurance company,

a labor union, or handicapped citizens, it is my contention that interest group activity and lobbying are valuable and noble forms of public service.

Voting: The most nominal yet vitally important way in which young persons can make a difference is through the simple act of voting. There is an election every year in Connecticut, for federal, state, or local public office. As in other states across the land, a person has to be only 18 years of age or older and a state resident to cast a vote on election day. Once again, imagine the extraordinary impact 18-21 years olds could make in both primary and general elections if they voted in large numbers. Unfortunately, voter turnout is distressingly low among young persons in this particular age bracket. Reasons given by young persons for not voting include a lack of information about candidates, registration difficulties, unfamiliarity with absentee voting procedures, negative perceptions towards politicians, time constraints, and a feeling that one vote doesn't make a difference, along with the attitude that "things never really change" regardless of which party wins an election. I take issue with many of the reasons, or excuses, expressed by students for not voting. I also stress to my students that election results do matter and that it does make a difference which political party controls the government. American foreign policy, spending priorities on the part of government, tax rates and tax cuts, interest rates, health insurance, environmental protection, and transportation policy, as well as the guidelines that regulate student loans for higher education are among the many policies directly affected by election outcomes. As I often tell my students, persons who do not vote are essentially allowing those who do vote to determine their future. Quite frankly, there are no longer any obstacles to voting in the United States. The property, race, gender, age, and residence barriers have all been lowered and practically any American citizen who is the resident of a state and has a home address can vote in a local, state, or federal election.

One of my favorite maxims, attributed to the English philosopher Sir Francis Bacon (1526-1626), states rather simply that "knowledge is power." This, in my view, is a very accurate

statement, particularly as it applies to political power. Needless to say, it is virtually impossible for a person, or group of persons, to influence the course of government without first acquiring knowledge regarding the structure and mechanics of the political system. At the same time, however, I also believe that knowledge must be accompanied by political action. Indeed, a person can have a detailed working knowledge of the political system, but without political action such knowledge for all intents and purposes is inconsequential. Thus, I have written this introductory textbook with a dual purpose in mind. My intent was to not only increase the reader's knowledge of Connecticut government, but also to stimulate participation, *particularly on the part of college students*, in the political process. I sincerely hope that the readers of this text have acquired useful political knowledge, and as a result feel prepared to apply this knowledge within the political arena.