

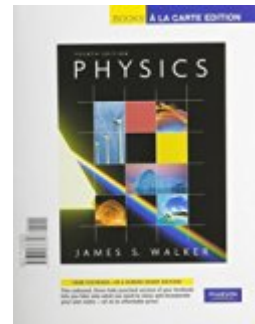
# H-Net Reviews

in the Humanities & Social Sciences



James Eisenstein, Mark Kessler, Bruce A. Williams, Jacqueline Vaughn Switzer. *The Play of Power: An Introduction to American Government*. New York: St. Martin's Press, 1996. 639 pp. \$49.32 (cloth), ISBN 978-0-312-13662-8.

Reviewed by Ray Wrabley (University of Pittsburgh at Johnstown)  
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There are dozens of American Government textbooks on the market, many of them very respected and successful, some even regarded as classics in their umpteenth edition. Frequently there is little that distinguishes one from another, other than an idiosyncratic “conceptual framework,” the number and kinds of graphics, boxes, and photos, or the package of ancillary materials available to the adopter. *The Play of Power: An Introduction to American Government* is typical of the standard American Government textbook on the market. It provides balanced coverage of political and constitutional history, American political institutions and processes, and political participation. This basic version does not include separate chapters on public policy, but many policy issues are addressed in the coverage of the congress, the presidency, the bureaucracy, the courts, and interest groups.

The chapters are organized in a logical sequence but they are written so that they may be used in an alternative sequence if an instructor would so desire. The writing style is very straightforward and not unnecessarily academic and jargonistic. The tone is respectful of students and their experiences and, despite multiple authors, it remains consistent throughout the text.

There are a number of features of *The Play of Power* that make it attractive and that make it one of the textbooks that I have used with satisfaction for several years. As is suggested by the title, the authors describe politics as a game of power played by many players, though theirs is not an application of formal game theories to politics. Instead, they ask students to think of a number of familiar games, like basketball or Monopoly, and the ways that the rules, strategies, and resources shape how players go about pursuing their goals and with

what effect. The authors invite students, then, to look at politics as a game—a “grand” game with sometimes deadly consequences—that is shaped by certain rules (some found in the Constitution), that is played by many players (politicians, voters, organized interests, etc.) who bring various and unequal resources (money, status, connections, etc.) to the game, and who win various material and symbolic outcomes. The “game of politics” metaphor is sometimes difficult to sustain throughout the coverage of many topics, but it provides a useful organizational framework. It dashes some of the idealistic notions of American government and politics that students may have picked up in high school civics classes, as well as the more cynical notions that they pick up in the popular media. In the end, I think it is useful in helping students make sense of who gets what, and how, as well as who does what, and why—and with what success.

Another attractive feature of *The Play of Power* is a serious, consistent, and ultimately successful effort to draw on students’ own experience to uncover the relevance of politics and government. The authors compare and contrast political issues and dilemmas to student issues, to student relationships among themselves, with the university, with their parents, and with local government. This helps students see the rule-making and choice-making, as well as the tradeoffs of the political process.

The authors of *The Play of Power* also pull off fairly effectively the challenge of describing the roles of minorities and women in American political history and contemporary politics. This has become an increasingly common undertaking for authors of American government textbooks. Some authors weave a discussion of

these issues throughout all the chapters of the text, some set aside special chapters to address these issues, and some use special features, like boxes, to highlight significant issues or individuals. There are drawbacks to each approach. There is a temptation to be heavy-handed in the presentation, or to judge historical practices against contemporary standards. *The Play of Power* takes a fairly judicious approach that errs, if at all, on the side of over emphasis. Discussions of important women or racial minorities and their struggles for citizenship rights are integrated into the text. Examples of routine political processes and developments also give visibility to women and racial minorities. Finally, special boxes highlight important political documents, like the Declaration of Sentiments issued at Seneca in 1848, or individuals like Cesar Chavez.

There are several features of this textbook that students will find helpful. Each chapter ends with an “applying knowledge” exercise that challenges students to apply some of the terms and concepts that have been discussed. There is also a list of key terms and recommended readings at the end of each chapter. Each chapter is extensively footnoted and there is a glossary at the end of the book. Charts inside the front and back covers illustrate the relationships of basic concepts and elements in “the play of power.”

Among the less attractive features of *The Play of Power* is some of the clutter. I find a leaner textbook more desirable. This book, like many others, has various boxes—about “common beliefs,” “participants,” “resources,” “strategies,” “rules,” and “outcomes.” It also has photos with captions, tables, and graphs. The text is a bit broken up to wrap around these features. The book also has two chapters on civil rights/civil liberties (Constitutional Rights as Rules and Constitutional Rights as Resources) and three chapters that cover political participation and elections (Political Parties, Voting, Elections). These sections probably could have been streamlined. *The Play of Power* also gives very little coverage to the Clinton Presidency and the political developments of the period (it was published in 1996 but seems to cut off before that).

On the whole, this basic American Government text is student-oriented and well-written, with a useful organizing framework. It makes American political processes and history accessible and understandable for undergraduates.

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