



AP[®] Government and Politics: United States 2001 Sample Student Responses

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Public policy is the pinnacle of US government. The goal of every elected official is to enact policy that follows his beliefs and furthers his interests. However, the actual enactment of public policy is often quite difficult. Divided government, weak political party discipline, and the increase in special interest groups have made it difficult for the federal government to enact public policy.

Divided governments have occurred during almost half of all elections over the past fifty years. With a president from one party and one or both houses of Congress having a majority of the opposing party, cooperation is usually difficult and creates problems for the successful passing of public policy. During president Reagan's administration, his "Reaganomics" plan failed, partially because of lack of support of ~~an~~ a Congress with a Democratic majority. This is just one example of how a divided government struggles with public policy, and there are many others. Fundamental ideology clashes between Republicans and Democrats cause the most problems, and as compromise often cannot be reached, a policy may die. Divided government provides one roadblock to passing public policy, but it is not the most significant.

The largest problem faced by the federal government today in passing public policy is the weak party discipline and loyalty. An administration's policies usually need support

from most, if not all, of its representatives in Congress. More and more often, however, members of a party are so moderate that they may vote with the opposition, thereby ruining the presidential party majority in Congress and sacrificing the bill. With the decline of strong party leaders in Congress, Congressmen are increasingly voting on specific issues and not simply along party lines. Since President Bush (jr) announced his plan to eliminate the "death tax," several prominent Republicans have spoken out in favor of it. This seeming lack of support from within a president's own party undermines his position and makes it increasingly difficult to pass public policy.

Another factor in the government's inability to enact policy is the increasing number of interest groups and ~~press~~ political action committees.

As these groups contribute more and more money to political campaigns, it becomes increasingly difficult for politicians to ignore their requests. However, with so many competing interests, it is hard for lawmakers to propose any policy that would satisfy all of them. Interest groups are also becoming more visible to the public, bringing new issues to the national front, and altering public opinion. This influence of such groups creates mixed signals for Congressmen, and consequently public policy becomes muddled or non-existent. One example of interest group

influence on legislation can be seen in the banning of snowmobiles in Yellowstone National Park. Although originally a fairly local debate, both snowmobile and environmental interest groups have brought the issue to the nation, increasing the number of opinions the government must take into account and further delaying legislation.

Public policy is the ultimate goal of government, and yet is often difficult to achieve. Many factors contribute to the complexity of enacting legislation, but the bottom line is usually the same. With majority support, from both the executive and legislative branches, as well as from the public, effective public policy will be enacted.

Our federal government is a somewhat inefficient institution. Many factors cause the slowing of the policy-making process, such as divisions in our government, the decline of Party influence, and the contrasting rise in Interest group and PAC influence.

The system of ~~checks and balances~~ the ~~separation~~ of powers was designed by the framers of the constitution to have "power check power." That is, when one branch of government wishes to gain more influence, it can do so by limiting the power of the other, ~~and so it~~ This has caused Congress and the ~~President~~ cause problems for the other in enacting public policy. This is especially evident when Congress is controlled by a different Party than the President. This happened during President Clinton's first term, during the "Republican Revolution." The Republicans, led by Newt Gingrich and ~~Dick~~ Dick Armey, attempted to pass the ten points of their "Contract with America." But they ran into opposition from Clinton and the Democrats, and failed in their ~~campaign~~ policy campaign.

However, when the President and Congress are of the same party, this does not always mean a smoother policy-passing process. This was the ~~case~~ case at the beginning of Clinton's term with the Democratic-controlled Congress. This ~~is~~ was ~~caused~~ ^a ~~by~~ the ~~is~~ was caused by the recent trends in declining party loyalty. Although most Representatives, ~~and~~ Senators, and other candidates still identify with one of the two major parties, they aren't

as strongly influenced by the Party heads as has been the case in past years. Candidates now rely more on the media for election than on the influence of other ranking party members. Therefore, once elected, these new members of the House and Senate feel less pressure to act along party lines, or to vote for the policy adopted by their Party.

Along with the growth in its influence from the media has come the power of interest groups and Political Action Committees. The interest groups will fund a candidate's campaign in return for his loyalty to their particular issue. With the growing number of interest groups also comes a larger difference in the influence among Representatives and Senators. Thus, a given Representative will feel less pressured to vote for Party issues and more so to vote for the issues of the interest groups. This leads to more disarray in the policy-making process, and therefore a more unorganized and inefficient enactment.

To enact any piece of public policy, the Federal government has to jump through a lot of hoops, per say. Many times a divided government will be an obstacle, as sometimes the President will be a member of one political party and one or both houses of Congress will be of an opposing political party. For instance, our country can have a Republican president and a majority of Republicans in the House, but perhaps the majority of the Senate is Democrat. Any legislation ~~the~~ the president proposes that might be disagreeable with Democrat leaders would most likely never be approved by the Senate. In this way many of his public ~~policy~~ ^{proposals} would "die" in the Senate committees.

As our government is becoming increasingly de-centralized, it is no surprise that the United States has a weak party discipline. The majority of Americans today do not identify themselves as "strong" Republicans, Democrats or Independents. In elections, the ~~split~~ split ticket is becoming more common place, as people have started to consider a candidate's qualities and character over which party a candidate belongs to. Many times a candidate will not even reveal the party they belong to ~~then~~ →

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in ~~of~~ advertisements or while ~~campaigning~~ campaigning. Party-generated voting is a rarity now, which could explain ~~the~~ the public's divided views on public policy.

Interests groups and political action committees often will donate money to a candidate, but only if the candidate agrees to the political views of the group. ~~It is a~~ ~~part~~