

CHAPTER 2

Majoritarian or Pluralist Democracy?

PARALLEL LECTURE 2.1

This lecture parallels the material in Chapter 2 and probes more deeply into the models of democracy introduced in this chapter.

- I. The theory of democratic government
 - A. One fundamental distinction among governments is the number of people who participate in important decision-making.
 1. Rule by one: **autocracy** (or monarchy)
 2. Rule by a few: **oligarchy** (or aristocracy)
 3. Rule by the people: **democracy**
 - B. Democracy has a symbolic value that overshadows its meaning.
 1. The phrase “we the people” is difficult to quantify and could include children not of voting age, an unyielding rule by the same majority and perhaps illegal immigrants. For example, the names of more than 20 percent of the world’s political parties contain some variation of *democracy*.
 2. Once a definition of the “people” is determined, how the people make governing decisions is problematic.
 - C. There are two schools of thought about what constitutes democracy.
 1. The **procedural view** of democracy prescribes a set of normative principles for democratic decision-making.
 - a) Three principles derive from answers to three questions about decision making in any group:
 - (1) Who should participate? Everyone—which leads to the principle of **universal participation**.
 - (2) How much should individual preferences count? Equally—which leads to **political equality**.
 - (3) How many votes are needed to reach a decision? A majority—which leads to **majority rule**.
 - b) These principles, however, apply only to government in a direct or **participatory democracy**, in which all members of the group meet to make decisions themselves.
 - (1) In an **indirect democracy**, also commonly called **representative democracy**, citizens choose officials to make decisions for them.
 - (2) Given the fact of representative government in all modern nations, a fourth principle is needed.
 - c) **Responsiveness** states that elected representatives should respond to public opinion.
 - (1) They should do what a majority of the citizens want, no matter what that is.
 - (2) This principle is unsettling to some people, who fear the enactment of “undemocratic” decisions as a response to majority rule.

2. The **substantive view (substantive democratic theory)** evaluates democracy on the basis of the substance of government policies.
 - a) Most substantive theorists require that democratic government must guarantee civil rights and liberties.
 - b) Some would add social and economic rights to the list of substantive outcomes a democracy ensures.
 - c) Ideology generally determines which substantive rights are really necessary: conservatives tend to have a narrower view of what is needed than do liberal theorists.
- D. Procedural and substantive views of democracy are often at odds with each other.
 1. The unlimited majority rule of proceduralism may result in policies that are unfavorable to minorities, and that clash with **minority rights**.
 2. The imprecise standards of the substantive perspective cannot adequately resolve whether policies are truly democratic.
 3. On the whole, this text favors the **procedural** conception of democracy, because it more clearly approaches the classical definition of democracy as government by the people.
 4. The text also assumes that compromise is necessary. Pure procedural democracy should be diluted to protect minority rights by guaranteeing that civil liberties and civil rights are part of the structure of government.
- II. Understanding democratic government through institutional models
 - A. Representative democracy requires some means by which decision makers can determine what people want.
 1. Democratic government requires **institutional mechanisms**—established procedures and organizations—to promote government responsiveness.
 2. Examples of institutional mechanisms are elections, political parties, legislatures, and interest groups.
 3. Some institutional arrangements facilitate responsiveness; other arrangements compromise responsiveness but allow groups of citizens to defend their interests in the policymaking process. Either arrangement can meet the criteria for procedural democracy, though the structures of government will be quite different. We can refer to these arrangements as *models of democracy*.
 - B. The **majoritarian model** of democracy looks like the classic textbook theory of democracy.
 1. It interprets government “by the people” as government by the majority of the people.
 2. It attempts to approximate the people’s role in direct democracy within the limitations of representative democracy.
 - a) Popular election of government officials fulfills the first three principles of procedural democratic theory: universal participation, political equality, and majority rule. The threat of electoral defeat is expected to motivate elected officials to be responsive (the fourth principle).
 - b) Citizens are also encouraged to participate directly in decision making through the institutional mechanisms of the **referendum**, the **initiative**, and the **recall**.
 3. It contends that citizens can control their government if they have adequate mechanisms for popular participation.
 4. It assumes that citizens are knowledgeable about government and politics, that they want to participate in the political process, and that they make rational decisions in voting for their elected representatives.

5. Critics contend that Americans are not knowledgeable enough for majoritarian democracy to work.
 6. Defenders of majoritarian democracy respond that although individual Americans may have only limited knowledge of interest in government, the American public as a whole still has coherent and stable opinions on major policy questions.
- C. The **pluralist model** of democracy was developed to explain how a democracy could still continue to function, given the realities of limited mass political interest or participation.
1. It is based on the idea of **pluralism**, which assumes that people in modern society often form groupings along economic, religious, ethnic, or cultural lines.
 2. Institutional arrangements in a pluralist system favor participation through groups.
 - a) People with similar interests form **interest groups** to try to influence government policymakers. The pluralist model of democracy interprets government “by the people” to mean government by people operating through competing interest groups.
 - b) The pluralist model favors a decentralized and organizationally complex governmental structure that provides these groups open access to public officials who consider their views.
 3. The pluralist model describes our Constitutional system well: the division of authority among the branches of government, and the multiple power centers that federalism creates, provide an open and decentralized system. The rise of many citizen groups has broadened representation in the system. *Divided authority*, *decentralization* and *open access* are some of the watchwords of pluralist democracy.
 4. But recently citizen participation in civic associations has declined which makes it difficult to enhance instruments of direct democracy at the local level
- D. The Majoritarian Model versus The Pluralist Model
1. In Majoritarian democracy:
 - a) the mass public controls government actions
 - b) the citizenry, therefore must have some knowledge of government and be willing to participate in the electoral process
 - c) conclusive elections and a centralized structure of government are mechanisms that aid majority rule.
 - d) cohesive parties with well defined programs contribute to majoritarian democracy.
 2. Pluralism:
 - a) doesn't demand knowledge from citizens in general. It requires specialized knowledge only from groups of citizens, in particular their leaders.
 - b) limits majority action so that interest groups can be heard.
 - c) relies on strong interest groups and a decentralized government structure.
 - d) protects minority interests.
- E. An undemocratic model of democratic government (including U.S. government) comes from the **elite theory**.
1. Elite theory assumes that important government decisions are made by an identifiable and stable minority who has great wealth and extensive business connections.
 2. These people make decisions in the interest of the financial, communications, industrial, and government institutions.
 3. Elite theory:

- a) Holds that the United States is not a democracy, but an oligarchy.
- a) Holds that the powerful few in society define the issues and constrain the outcome of government decisions.
- b) Describes a government that operates in an undemocratic fashion.
- 4. There have been numerous studies testing the validity of elite theory. The research has shown:
 - a) No power elite could be found in New Haven, Connecticut (different groups won on different issues)
 - b) A downtown business elite dominated in Atlanta, Georgia. It affected not all but the key economic development decisions crucial to the city.
 - c) Research suggests that an identifiable elite does not regularly win on government issues.
- 5. Elite theorists reject this view and contend that elite's power comes from its ability to keep issues off the political agenda.
- 6. Although U.S. democracy can be better described by pluralism than by elitism, it must be recognized that all groups are not equally represented in the political system.

III. Democracy and Globalization

- A. Most countries are either governed in an authoritarian manner or are struggling to move out of an authoritarian tradition, but cannot yet be called true democracies.
- B. Democratization is a difficult process—many countries try to make a transition to democracy, but they either fail completely or succeed only in the short run and lapse into a form of authoritarianism. Why is democratization difficult?
 - 1. Democratization is aggravated by ethnic and religious conflicts
 - 2. Democratization is frequently accompanied by political and economic instability. This makes new democratic governments vulnerable to attack by their opponents.
- C. Countries now find it difficult to achieve economic success in the global marketplace without establishing market economies—and economic reforms are often accompanied by political reforms.
- D. There is a strong correlation between economic prosperity and democracy. Countries have free markets tend to protect political freedoms as well.
- E. The communications revolution has made it difficult for authoritarian countries to keep information about capitalism and democracy from their citizens.
- F. The U.S. has long regarded helping countries to democratize as a major responsibility, and has applied both subtle and obvious pressure on nations to engage in democratic reform.
- G. Emerging democracies are fragile because they face numerous pressures.

IV. Evaluating American democracy

- A. How can our government be called democratic when citizen participation and knowledge of government actions are low and government actions do not always reflect public opinion?
- B. Although the United States does not compare favorably to the majoritarian model, it does more closely approach the pluralist model.
- C. But American pluralism has its drawbacks
 - 1. It favors well-organized interests, and many sectors of our society (for example, the poor) are not well organized.
 - 2. Survey data show that although Americans are more satisfied with their democracy than are people in other countries, Americans' trust in government has deteriorated.

- D. If the pluralist model makes the United States look more democratic than the majoritarian model, you should ask yourself these questions:
1. Is the pluralist model really an adequate expression of democracy, or is it a perversion of classical ideals, designed to portray the United States as more democratic than it really is?
 2. Does the majoritarian model result in a “better” type of democracy? Majoritarianism offers little protection to minority groups.
 3. If majoritarianism really is more desirable, is it possible to devise new mechanisms of government to produce the mix of majority rule and minority rights that we desire?