

maximize the government's responsiveness to the majority. Some have proposed incorporating public opinion polls, first used regularly in the 1930s, in government decision making. More recently, some have suggested using computers for referenda. For instance, citizens could vote on an issue by inserting plastic identification cards in computer terminals installed in all homes. But Americans are decidedly cool toward electronic democracy. Roughly two-thirds of the public don't believe that instant computer voting on referenda would improve our democratic process.²⁰

The majoritarian model contends that citizens can control their government if they have adequate mechanisms for popular participation. It also 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.

Critics contend that Americans are not knowledgeable enough for majoritarian democracy to work. They point to research that shows that only 26 percent of a national sample of voters said that they "follow what's going on" in government "most of the time." More (32 percent) said that they followed politics "only now and then" or "hardly at all."²¹ Two scholars who have studied citizens' interest in politics conclude that most Americans favor "stealth" democracy—like a B-2 bomber that exists but is not routinely visible.²² They say, "The kind of government people want is one in which ordinary people do not have to get involved."²³ If most citizens feel that way, then majoritarian democracy is not viable, even with the wonders of modern information technology.

The call for enhancing majoritarian democracy through interactive electronic technology raises other concerns. Some believe that instead of quick and easy mass voting on public policy, what we need is more deliberation by citizens and their elected representatives. In this view, the government works best by depending on policymakers who immerse themselves in the substance of public policy problems.

Defenders of majoritarian democracy respond that although individual Americans may have only limited knowledge of or interest in government, the American public as a whole still has coherent and stable opinions on major policy questions. One study concluded that people "do not need large amounts of information to make rational voting choices."²⁴

An Alternative Model: Pluralist Democracy

For years, political scientists struggled valiantly to reconcile the majoritarian model of democracy with polls that showed widespread ignorance of politics among the American people. When only half of the adult population bothers to vote in presidential elections, our form of democracy seems to be "government by *some* of the people."

The 1950s saw the evolution of an alternative interpretation of democracy, one tailored to the limited knowledge and participation of the real electorate, not an ideal one. It was based on the concept of *pluralism*—that modern society consists of innumerable groups that share economic, religious, ethnic, or cultural interests. Often, people with similar interests organize formal groups—the Future Farmers of America, chambers of commerce, and the Rotary Club, for example. Many social groups have little contact with government, but occasionally they find themselves backing or opposing government policies. When

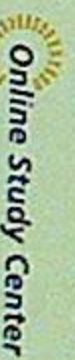
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Majoritarian or Pluralist Democracy?

- The Theory of Democratic Government
- Institutional Models of Democracy
- The Global Trend Toward Democracy



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