

Unit 2 Lecture Notes

This unit mostly comprises information about participation in the political process, and the variety of inputs to the political system (refer back to Figure 1-4 on page 29 of your textbook that shows the American Political System).

Inputs to the system include (in the order that we will discuss them):

- Public opinion (Chapter 6)

- The media (Chapter 10)

- Political participation and voting (Chapter 7)

- Political, candidates, and campaigns (Chapter 8)

- Interest groups (Chapter 9)

Chapter 6 – Public Opinion and Political Socialization

Public Opinion

We begin this unit by trying to understand the nature of public opinion. The concept of **public opinion** refers to those opinions held by ordinary citizens that they are willing to express openly. The essential question we have to ask ourselves is how, and whether, public opinion affects public policy. This is important because we do not live in a direct democracy (remember the theory of political power – majoritarianism – where the majority also prevails in the determining public policy), rather, we live in a republic, where we have representatives who make policy decisions for us.

To measure public opinion, decision makers today use the practice of **polling**. This involves contacting citizens to get their opinions of a variety of issues. The type of polling that is considered most scientific is called a **probability sample**. The key to this type of polling comes in what is known as a **random sample**. This means that everyone who can possibly be polled (called the population) has an equal chance of being chosen. The accuracy of the poll is expressed in terms of **sampling error**. For example, for years the Gallup company has been conducting a poll of citizens asking simply whether they feel the president is doing a good job. When we view the results of the poll, we always see something expressed as “a margin of error of + or – 4%”. Let’s say that the president’s rating is 55%. With a margin of error of either plus or minus 4%, that would mean that the range of where

the real number of people who approve of the job the president is doing could be as low as 51% or as high as 59%. The warning I wish to issue to you is the danger of using this type of sample for conducting public policy. At times it is very difficult to get firm results through a random sample poll. Public opinion is quite dynamic. Though statisticians, and many political leaders, view polls as valid ways to make policy decisions, it can be dangerous to totally rely on them because of the imprecise results that they offer. Getting a clear consensus on almost any issue is very difficult, thus making decision making a challenge for elected leaders.

Another type of polling that is not scientific at all is the non-probability sample. This typically is something like a news reporter asking people on the street what they may think of something. This is rarely used in any type of public policy making process.

Political Socialization

The question we must now ask is how do people get their opinions and beliefs regarding politics? Your textbook defines **political socialization** as the process by which people acquire their opinions, beliefs, and values. It also points out that socialization is a lifelong process. There are three theories of learning that help to explain how this process:

- 1) The **primacy principle** refers to the fact that what is learned first is often lodged most firmly in one's mind. Those ideas and opinions that we learn early on are the ones that we tend to remember the longest.
- 2) The **structuring principle** refers to the tendency of earlier learning to structure later learning. One thing to note here is that the learning process is cumulative. We continue to learn but we rarely change our ideas and opinions. This principle helps to explain why people do not change, because as they get older, they tend to look at things from the perspective of what their previous ideas and opinions were.
- 3) If there is going to be a change in how people change their ideas and opinions, if it occurs at all, is based on what is called the **age-cohort tendency**. This holds that if a significant break in the pattern of political socialization it is almost always concentrated among younger citizens. The older we get the less likely we are to change our political ideas and opinions.

Your book then discusses a variety of what it calls **agents** of political socialization. These include the family, primary and secondary schools, peers, the mass media, political leaders and institutions. In addition to these, I think that there is one additional factor that we have to consider today, and that is the role of the Internet.

The family: This is considered to be the most important agent of political socialization. The reason for this is a learning theory we mentioned above, the “**primacy principle**”. Our families are where we tend to first learn our political ideas and opinions. Most children tend to accept uncritically the political attitudes of their parents. We simply absorb those things that our parents discuss, and they tend to become our own ideas and opinions. Since this is what we learn first, this is what stays with us the longest.

Primary and secondary schools: These tend to act as reinforcing agents. At this level we are rarely challenged in the beliefs that we bring to school from home. Indeed, most of the time at this level we are taught nothing more than to respect government institutions rather than question them. As an example, most primary and secondary schools often start the day with the Pledge of Allegiance, which helps to foster a sense of patriotism that does not allow for questioning of government actions. This is in large measure because they reflect the values already in place in society.

Peers: Again, this tends to be a reinforcing agent. We tend to associate with friends, neighbors, and co-workers who share the same ideas and opinions that we already share.

The mass media: This agent can, at times, challenge our thinking. It presents information that we do not necessarily have control over, thus it can challenge our perceptions. What is interesting is a fairly recent phenomena of cable news channels and how some of these channels take on a biased approach to journalism. What we see happening now is that citizens can pick and choose among a wide range of media outlets, and tend to listen to those that reinforce their own ideas and opinions. In this context the media does not challenge thinking, but reinforces previously held ideas. We will discuss the role of the media further when we discuss information presented in Chapter 10.

Political leaders and institutions: What we see happening here is that both of these serve as guides to opinion through their ability to shape political debate and opinion through the symbols and slogans they use. Political leaders are getting much more adept at what is known as **spin**, which is the attempts of politicians to change the public's perceptions of news events. We will discuss further in the chapter on the media.

The Internet: This is very new, and the ramifications of how it will affect ideas and opinions remains to be seen. One thing about the Internet that I think is very important to understand, it offers a platform for virtually all citizens to have a forum to express ideas much more openly, and readily available to other citizens, than any other group or institution that I can think of. Almost everyone today has the ability to create their own web page from which they can offer opinions of their own, thus making the Internet perhaps the ultimate in democratic expression.

Frames of Reference: How Americans Think Politically

Your textbook discusses a variety of ways that we (political scientists) classify how Americans think in terms of political beliefs. Among these are cultural thinking, ideological thinking, group thinking, and partisan thinking. The one that seems to be most prevalent in our society today is ideological thinking, which I would like to spend more time discussing in depth. You should read your textbook to be aware of the other classifications of American political thinking.

We all have certain ideas and beliefs about a wide variety of things, including political ideas and beliefs. Typically, we refer to these ideas and beliefs as "ideology".

Ideology (per textbook): a consistent pattern of opinion on particular issues that stems from a core belief or set of beliefs.

Political rivalry is based upon ideological differences.

The two most dominant ideological groups in America today are generally classified as liberalism and conservatism are the two dominant systems of beliefs and values in America and Texas today.

Liberalism is often identified as being “left wing”, while conservatism is often referred to as being “right wing”.

How do we classify ideology? This can be VERY confusing.

Book simplifies this issue based mostly along economic policy and social policy, but today it is much more difficult to understand what the differences really are.

Our analysis on ideological types is based upon looking at ideology on these four policy areas:

- 1) economic issues
- 2) social issues (government’s role in resolving complex social problems: school desegregation, health issues, etc)
- 3) government’s role in deciding moral issues
- 4) position on civil liberties

Conservatism:

- 1) Economic issues: basic belief in laissez-faire, but in practice tend to be pseudo laissez-faire. That is, the theoretical assertion that an unregulated economy produces the best results coupled with practical support for government policies that help business to overcome problems in the marketplace. Commonly referred to as the “right wing” of the political spectrum. Conservatives often argue that economic problems are caused by over-regulation by the government.
- 2) Do not necessarily believe that government has a role in solving social issues.
- 3) Do tend to believe that government should support “traditional values”, including morality, and teaching respect for institutions. Believe in government having a role in the regulation of religion, sexual activity (except that government should NOT distribute condoms), and drug use. This tends to come from a very pessimistic view of how people behave. Have to save people from themselves. One thing to note here is that there seems to be a bit of a division among today’s conservatives in this area. At this point we have to make a distinction between what I call “**classic conservatives**” and “**neo-conservatives**”. Classic conservatives in many ways

are like libertarians in that they seek limited government in all areas. They are uneasy about the expansion of government's role on morality based issues. The neo-conservatives, on the other hand, seem to feel more comfortable in using government as a tool to implement moral values upon all of society.

- 4) Civil liberties: complex! Believe government has no role in regulating ownership of handguns, but then support things that would limit freedom of expression in certain areas (including religion). Also tend to be "tough on crime", to the degree that they do not fully support all Bill of Rights issues involving rights of the accused.

Liberalism:

- 1) Economic issues: more apt to blame "market failure" for economic problems and to place more faith in the ability of government to direct economic activity. Commonly referred to as the "left wing" of the political spectrum.
- 2) Do tend to support government involvement in solving social problems (expansion of voting rights).
- 3) Prefer that government NOT be involved in moral issues. This primarily stems from belief that each individual has right to determine their own destiny.
- 4) Civil liberties: also complex! Tend to support restriction of gun ownership rights, but otherwise they are considered "civil libertarians", strongly supporting freedom of expression, religion, and rights of accused.

In addition to the liberals and conservatives, your textbook also discusses libertarians and populists. These are two ideological types that have a certain amount of influence in policy areas. Generally speaking (and very simply), libertarians distrust government influence in just about every sector of policy issues. We cannot consider them as simply anarchists, because they do view the role of government as being somewhat legitimate, but very limited. Populists are the polar opposites of libertarians. In general, they view the role of government as being very active in virtually all policy areas.

REMEMBER: all of the above are to a degree generalities. Even within ideological types there can be wide variation on policy issues.

The Influence of Public Opinion on Policy

Public opinion does serve as a guiding force in public policy. In general, we can say the following about the influence of public opinion on public policy:

- 1) It is difficult to substantiate that the majority prevails on public policy issues.
- 2) Politics includes a battle over the control of public opinion.
- 3) People's views are neither fixed nor simply a product of personal circumstances.
- 4) Public opinion is dynamic and can be changed, activated and crystallized through political action.

Chapter 10 – The News Media: Communicating Political Images

The media can simply be defined as those business organizations that exist to provide us with “news”, information about what is happening in the world around us. We generally separate the media into two types: **broadcast** (television and radio), and **print** (newspapers and magazines). Your textbook doesn't say much more about the media other than it tends, in Texas, to be pretty conservative, primarily because the media more often than not relies on advertising revenues from other businesses in the local areas, thus tending to reflect the business point of view on most issues (hard to bite the hand that feeds you). Many people today feel that the media is becoming even more conservative in light of the fact that many large media corporations are purchasing news outlets and thus controlling more of what gets distributed as news.

With regard to the political process, the media serve an important function because they provide us with a **link** to our political institutions and leaders. This is one of the important concepts from this unit: **linkage institutions** (political parties, interest groups, and the media). Because we do not often have direct access to our leaders today we rely on these groups to carry our “message” to our political leaders.

The media plays four important roles, three of which it does pretty well with, and one that it is not well equipped to handle.

- 1) **signaler** – it alerts us to important events when they occur
- 2) **common carrier** – it serves as an open channel to our political leaders. Our leaders attempt to use it to bring us information about

important issues. Most officials try to get favorable news coverage, but today's press is less deferential to political leaders than in the past (Viet Nam, Nixon).

- 3) **Watchdog role** – the media often acts as a protector to us of deceitful, careless, incompetent, and corrupt officials.
- 4) **Public representative** – does not do too good in this role. This is when the media attempts to act as a spokesperson for and advocate of the public. It is hard for the media to know exactly what it is that the public thinks.

For many of us the media is important because it is a primary source of information.

What is important for our consideration here is the ability for educated voters to get reliable information about what politicians think on various issues, as well as how they behave (from the standpoint of voting behavior) when they are in office. This is a major emphasis of mine in terms of the goals I have for this class. More than anything else, I want you to become informed citizens. To accomplish this is not easy, and it requires that you be able to conduct some research that will help you find answers regarding politicians and their behavior. This is the principle goal of your research project. It is hoped that you will be able to remember these skills in the future so that you will continue to seek out information on political candidates and policy issues in order to make the best possible decisions that you can.

Earlier we defined **power** as the ability of persons to control policy decisions. There is a common saying today that “**information is power**”, and I think that this is very true. Thus, I would like to re-define **power** as follows: the ability to control one's own destiny without the influence from others, or to exercise influence over others. The more you can know about something the better off you are at making wise decisions about it. My main concern with the media is that a lot of the information you get through it tends to be superficial. That is why I have provided you with the Internet links from my web site (click on “Information and Important Links” near the top of my web page) that has a lot of Internet sites on it with valuable information. The Internet offers a lot of opportunities to gather information about the political process that were not there even ten years ago. It has tremendous potential to further democratic ideals. It gives virtually everyone a forum from which to speak their ideas on the political issues

facing our society. One word of warning, however, the Internet also can easily be misused, so be very cautious of the information you gather here.

Another modern concept that has become very popular to discuss in recent years is that of **spin**. **Spin** can be defined as the attempt of politicians to manipulate the news stories so that the news event appears favorable to the politician's point of view.

Chapter 7 – Political Participation and Voting

Political participation is an involvement in activities designed to influence public policy and leadership. A main issue of democratic government is the question of who participates in politics and how fully they participate. One thing that we can say for certain, voting is the most widespread form of active political participation among Americans.

The right to vote is known simply as **suffrage**. Today, the only qualifications for voting are that you be 18 years of age on election day, and that you are a citizen of the United States. In some states, you have to be a resident of the state for at least 30 days prior to the election in order to register. This is in order to allow the state to have time to verify residency. Some more progressive states, such as Minnesota, have allowed for registration of voters up to and including election day as a way of trying to recruit more people to come vote. Another reason for voter disqualification is having been a felon. Most states do have programs that allow past felons to regain their voting rights, but this varies from state to state. In most circumstances once a felon has been released from prison he must stay out of trouble for at least 10 years to regain voting rights.

Historically speaking, the ability to vote in the United States has not always been so easy. The U.S. Constitution originally did not say anything about who was qualified to vote, thus leaving it up to the states to determine qualified voters. Generally speaking, in order to vote in early elections in this country, you had to be white, male, and a property owner. Some states even had restrictions based on certain religious requirements. In 1790, only about 5% of the population of the country were considered eligible to vote.

Since that time a major trend in this country has been the expansion of voting rights. The expansion of suffrage has been a major struggle for primarily two groups: women, and African-Americans.

Women were eventually given the right to vote in 1920, with the adoption of the **19th Amendment** to the Constitution (the right “to vote shall not be denied on account of sex”). To put this into perspective, this is approximately 130 years after the first elections in this country, and only 84 years ago. Women struggled mightily to obtain their rights and had to wait a long time to obtain them.

For African-Americans, the course to obtaining voting rights has not been as “easy” as it was for women. Following the Civil War three important amendments were added to the Constitution. The first, the **13th Amendment** (1865), simply put an end to the practice of slavery. Next, the **14th Amendment** (1868) was passed. This is a complex and wordy amendment, but for our purposes here the important thing that it did was to establish citizenship for ex-slaves. Finally, the **15th Amendment** (1870) declared that the right to vote shall not be denied “on account of race, color, or previous condition of servitude”.

In theory, this should have provided African-Americans the rights necessary to not only vote, but also take a place in society. Unfortunately many states (mostly Southern states) came up with a variety of “gimmicks” designed to limit the involvement of African-Americans in the electoral process. Among these were:

- Poll taxes – a requirement to pay a tax in order to vote

- White only primaries – primary elections in which only whites were allowed to run and participate.

- Literacy tests – tests that were required to prove that you were competent enough to vote. The thing to note about these were that whites were considered competent, so they were not required to take these tests.

- Grandfather clauses – persons were disqualified from voting simply because their grandfather had not been eligible to vote.

It took a long time, essentially 100 years, to put an end to a lot of the racist practices of excluding African-Americans from voting. The Civil Rights movement of the 1950s and 1960s (refer back to Chapter 5 in your textbook) helped to put an end to many of these practices. It was a gradual and difficult process. The first important step towards equal rights for African-Americans came with the Supreme Court decision in the case of **Brown v. Board of Education of Topeka (1954)**. Public schools, indeed all public

facilities in most parts of the South, had been segregated since the Civil War. In 1897 the Supreme Court ruled, in the case of Plessy v. Ferguson, that separate facilities in public places were legal as long as they were equal, thus creating the doctrine of “separate but equal”. The Brown decision said that schools were no longer allowed to be separate, thus ending the concept of “separate but equal”.

The next major event in the Civil Rights movement was the passage of the **Civil Rights Act of 1964**. This granted all persons equal access to public places (theaters, restaurants, bars, hotels, etc.), as well as bar discrimination in the hiring, promotion, and wages of personnel in medium to large firms. These were major steps in trying to end the discrimination of African-Americans, but they only indirectly applied to the political process. Also in 1964, the **24th Amendment** was adopted, which put an end to the poll tax. As interpreted by some states, this applied only to national elections. A Supreme Court ruling in 1966 extended this ruling to all elections. With regard to voting rights, the main piece of legislation that ended all other forms of discrimination (literacy tests, etc.) was the **Voting Rights Act of 1965**. This act forbid any discrimination in the voting and registration process. It empowered the U.S. Attorney General with the ability to go into states and take over the registration process, if necessary, to ensure that all persons had the ability to properly register to vote. The thing I wish to emphasize to you that this act occurred 100 years after the end of the Civil War. Another way of looking at it is that is happened only a little over 35 years ago. That is a long time to have to suffer from being unable to exercise a very basic right that is fundamental to any democracy.

In order for any citizen to be able to vote the first step is that they must register. This is part of every political system, and is necessary in order to prevent fraud and justify the legitimacy of who is elected. Today you are allowed to register in person or by mail, and your registration remains in effect as long as the voter remains qualified. Voters may register at anytime and vote in any election, provided they have registered 30 days prior to an election. In order to try to engage more people to register to vote, in 1993 Congress enacted what has become known as the “**motor voter**” law. This requires states to ask persons who are applying for or renewing their drivers license if they would like to register. If the person indicates they would, then they are given a voter registration card.

Voter Participation

Voting is a form of political participation, a sharing in activities designed to influence public policy and leadership. Political participation involves other activities in addition to voting, such as joining political parties and interest groups, writing to elected officials, demonstrating for political causes, and giving money to political candidates. It is especially important in democratic societies for ordinary people to be involved in meaningful political activities. There are several things we can note about the patterns of voting within the U.S.:

- 1) A historical trend in the United States since the nation's founding has been to gradually remove barriers to voting and participation based on property ownership, sex, race, literacy tests, and payment of poll taxes.
- 2) Voter turnout in the U.S. is lower than other democracies. Factors that influence voter turnout in the U.S. include registration requirements, frequency of elections, long ballots, and party differences.
- 3) With regard to registration requirements, citizens in the U.S. must rely on personal initiative to register, as opposed to other democracies where this responsibility is placed on government. This may influence some people to think that it is not worth the time or effort to register.
- 4) Americans have more elections more frequently than any other democracy in the world. This tends to make voting burdensome. In addition to this, many elections are held during the work part of the week thus making it difficult for some people to get to the polls. In other democracies election days are either held on weekends or are declared to be a holiday.
- 5) Long ballots play a role in low voter turnout because citizens are often not aware of all of the offices for which they can possibly cast votes for. Although having so many political offices does help to engage more citizens in actively participating in the political process, it places a huge burden on the voter, who may not understand the office or what the candidates running for the office stand for.
- 6) Low voter turnout in the U.S. is also affected by voters' perceptions that there is not much difference between the Democratic and Republican parties. Party choice in the European

democracies is more sharply divided over policies and class interests.

What motivates people to vote? There are certain factors that help explain why some Americans do vote in all or nearly all elections while other Americans are apathetic, meaning they seldom or never vote.

- 1) Frequent voters in the U.S. have a strong sense of civic duty, which means they regard participation in elections as one of the responsibilities of citizenship.
- 2) Voter turnout is influenced by the degree to which people believe that their participation will make a difference. People who feel alienated from government tend to withdraw from politics.
- 3) Other differences in voter turnout are associated with age, education, and economic class. Middle-aged and senior citizens voter in higher percentages than citizens under the age of thirty. The higher the level of a person's education, the more likely that individual is to vote. Americans from lower economic levels are less likely to vote than their European counterparts due in part to the lack of labor or socialist parties to activate. The two major parties seldom seek out voters of lower socio-economic classes since they know that they do not often vote. This is something that is unique due to our two-party system. We will discuss this further in the next chapter, but the problem stems from government representatives who come from distinct geographical areas. In other democracies proportional representation helps to produce representation that involves citizens from a wider range of interests including virtual all socio-economic classes.

We generally look at two types of voting patterns here in the United States, prospective voting and retrospective voting.

- 1) **Prospective voting** is the less prevalent form of voting which requires that voters know the issue positions of candidates and choose the candidate whose proposals best match their own issue preferences. This is a more difficult approach for voters to take since they are usually not well informed about campaign issues; sometimes they do not know the names of major candidates and are unable to link candidates with issues.

- 2) **Retrospective voting** is more prevalent and occurs when voters support the incumbent party or candidate when they are pleased with their performance, and reverse their position when they are displeased. Economic conditions can become a key factor in retrospective voting since voters tend to hold the incumbent party responsible for the state of the economy. Asking voters if they are better off now than previously plays into this approach to voting. It forces public officials to pay more attention to voters' policy preferences.

Conventional Forms of Participation Other Than Voting

There are other forms of political participation besides voting that offer a greater opportunity for personal influence or involvement. These may include campaign activities, community activities, lobbying group activities, and attentiveness to the news.

- 1) **Campaign related activities** include working for a candidate or a party, attending election rallies or meetings, contributing money and wearing a candidate's campaign button. Campaign participation is higher in the U.S. than in Europe because Americans have more opportunity to become more involved in that activity.
- 2) The U.S tradition of **community participation** goes back to colonial days. Many Americans participate in public affairs through local organizations such as parent-teacher associations, neighborhood groups, civic clubs, church-affiliated groups, and hospital auxiliaries.
- 3) Americans can participate in **lobbying group activities** to pressure government officials or attempt to influence public policy.
- 4) **Passive political participation**, such as reading newspapers and watching television news is important if people are to participate effectively and intelligently in politics. Though most Americans rely on television for news, only about a third of them pays close attention to political news.

Unconventional Activism: Social movements and Protest Politics

Social movements, or political movements as they are sometimes called, refer to broad efforts to achieve change by citizens who feel that government

is not properly responsive to their interest. Examples of unconventional protest activities used to draw attention to grievances are street demonstrations or civil disobedience.

- 1) Most citizens believe that the proper way to express disagreement over public policy is through voting, not protesting.
- 2) Americans especially disapprove of protests over war.
- 3) Participants in social movements tend to be younger and emphasize nonmaterial values more than non-participants.

Chapter 8 – Political Parties, Candidates, and Campaigns

The political party is the one institution that aims to develop broad policy and leadership choices and then presents them to the voting public to accept or reject. This process gives citizens the opportunity, through elections, to influence how they will be governed. Political parties are one of what we have already discussed as a **“linkage institution”**, an institution that provides a link between ordinary citizens and elected officials. Political parties are organized around various **interests**. A single interest is something of value or some personal characteristic that people share and that is affected by government activity. Because our political system is dominated by two political parties, they must appeal to a wide range of people across many interests in order to place their candidates in office.

Party Competition and Majority Rule: The History of U.S. Parties

Party competition in American today takes place primarily between the Democratic and Republican parties. Competition between these two major parties narrows the choices of options to two and in the process enables people with different opinions to render a common judgment. In electing a party, voters choose its candidates, its philosophy, and its policies over those of the opposing party.

- 1) The first parties in American originated from the rivalry between those who favored a strong national government that defended commercial interests (Federalists) and the supporters of states' rights and small landholders (Jeffersonian Republicans, which eventually became the Democratic party).
- 2) Emergence of grass-roots political parties during the Jacksonian era strengthened the power of popular majorities.

- 3) Dissent over the issue of slavery, resulting in the Civil War, ended nearly three decades of competition between the Whigs and the Democrats.
- 4) After the Civil War, the nation settled into a pattern of competition between the Republican and Democratic parties that has prevailed ever since.

Durability of the two parties is due not to the ideological consistency but to their remarkable ability to adapt during periods of crisis and remake themselves with new bases of support, new policies and new public philosophies.

The post Civil War era brought political change to parties known as “**realignment**”. A party realignment disrupts the existing political order because a significant proportion of voters favored one party over the other. Realignment results in an enduring change in party coalitions which forces the government to take new policy directions. There are 4 elements of realignments:

- 1) The disruption of the political order because of the emergence of one or more unusually powerful and divisive issues.
- 2) An election contest in which the voters shift their support strongly in favor of one party.
- 3) A major change in policy through the action of the stronger party.
- 4) An enduring change in the party coalitions, which works to the lasting advantage of the dominant party.

Keep in mind that realignments are relatively rare, there has to be major changes in existing political order for these to occur. Your textbook (pp 237-238) discusses the history of realignments, which you should read.

A dealignment offers an alternative explanation for electoral change. This has come into use in more recent times. It suggests that the U.S. electoral system, rather than undergoing a realignment favorable to one party, has been in the process of moving a partial but enduring number of voters away from partisan loyalties. The dealignment thesis portrays a wavering sector of voters as shifting its support from one party to another, arguing that parties have a weaker hold on the voters than in the past. Increases in split-ticket voting and in numbers of voters who label themselves as “independents” are indicators of this trend. Please keep in mind that much

of this theory is based on the decline of partisanship, which did indeed seem to be evident from the 1960s through the early 1990s. However, since the mid 1990s, we have seen a renewal of heavily partisan activities among policy makers in Washington. This seems to be despite the fact that many voters still identify themselves as independent and not belonging to one of the major parties. The two major parties have drifted further towards their “core constituencies” in recent years, which has increased partisan rancor in many parts of the country.

Electoral and Party Systems

While the United States has historically been a two-party system, most other democracies have multiparty systems, in which three or more parties have the capacity to gain control of government separately or in coalition.

- 1) The primary factor that helps to perpetuate the two party system in the U.S. is **plurality voting with single-member districts**. Election of a single candidate who receives the most votes within a specific geographical area perpetuates the power of a dominant in an area making it difficult for challenging parties to gain power. The way our system of elections is set up, under the U.S. Constitution, there are no provisions for run-off elections. Thus, whoever gets the most votes (not necessarily a majority) in general elections is the one who gets to occupy public office. This is what is meant by plurality voting (the most, not necessarily the majority). In addition, U.S. Congressional districts are defined as specific geographical areas. Within each district only one person gets to serve. This perpetuates a winner-take-all type of system which discourages potential third parties.
- 2) European democracies use **proportional representation** and multi-member districts, which encourages smaller parties to compete for power. They can draw support from minority factions and take more decisive stands on issues.
- 3) Historically, the American two-party system encourages both parties to stay near the center of the political spectrum and avoid divisive issues in order to attract the most voters. Both parties tend to follow shifts in public opinion.
- 4) Groups that support a party are collectively referred to as a party coalition. European parties tend to divide along class lines while American parties must attract broad coalitions since they have to

accommodate a wide range of interests to gain the voting plurality necessary to win elections.

- 5) In a general sense, the American Democratic and Republican parties appeal to different coalitions of the electorate and vary somewhat in stands and priorities for policy.

The most important thing to remember about political parties is that **they exist to get candidates elected to office in order to influence public policy**. Thus, political parties sometimes sacrifice ideological consistency in order to simply win an office.

In order to appeal to the broadest possible number of voters parties attempt to create **platforms (statements of what the party's position is on a variety of issues)** that will appeal to a **coalition (wide and varied groups)** of interests. It is impossible to make everybody happy, but the party attempts to make enough people happy so that its candidates are successful and can win office.

NOTE! Because of the shortage of time, below is the remaining information that I want you to know about political parties and campaigns. It is not organized logically, nor is it fully written out. These are from additional study notes that I use in teaching the Texas State and Local Government class. Knowing these things should be sufficient at this time for your preparation for the exam.

Campaign – the period of time before voting day begins when candidates attempt to influence potential voters to support them.

Successful candidates follow two simple rules of campaigning:

- 1) get your name recognized in a popular way
- 2) keep your arguments simple and emotional

Campaign resources – two primary resources: people and money.

People are comprised of **professionals and volunteers**. Professionals plan, organize, manage, write speeches, and raise money. Volunteers distribute literature, register and canvass voters, and get supporters to the polls.

Volunteering can be a very rewarding experience for those who participate.

Publicly funded campaigns – money comes from a central pool that is shared equally by all candidates. The U.S. is one of few democracies which does not use this method of campaign funding.

Privately funded campaigns – money comes entirely from private citizens or groups. Reform of campaign funding has primarily focused on restricting how much individuals can contribute to a campaign.

Buckley v. Valeo (1976) – Supreme Court ruling that held that restrictions of the Federal Campaign Act of 1972 suppressed 1st Amendment guarantee of free speech. Impact was important for individuals who wished to fund their own campaigns (Ross Perot, for example). This protection was also extended to Political Action Committees (PACs).

“hard money” – contributions that go directly to a candidate. This money has been, historically, very limited and very tightly controlled.

“soft money” – contributions that go to political parties or PACs. This money is very difficult to track and has largely been unlimited.

Negative campaigning – the practice of using personal attacks on candidates by their opponents. Harmful to democracy for four reasons:

- 1) some elections are being decided on the basis of inaccurate or irrelevant charges
- 2) discussions of public policy are being pushed aside
- 3) many good people may not enter public life for fear of being publicly humiliated
- 4) citizens are disheartened and thus more apt to stay home on election day

Primary – an election held within a party to nominate candidates to the general election or to choose delegates to a presidential nominating convention. States hold their primaries in the Spring of general election years. In Texas it is held on the 2nd Tuesday in March in even numbered years. Candidates must win a majority of votes cast to receive party nomination for a specific office (other than the presidency), if no majority is acquired then the two leading candidates have a runoff thirty days later.

There are three different types of primaries:

- 1) **Open primary** – any registered voter may participate in any party’s primary. The only restriction is that the voter may only participate in runoffs of the party they originally voted in during the primary. Many states have recently moved toward this type of primary in order to engage more voters in the party nomination process.
- 2) **Closed Primary** – only registered members of a party may participate in that party’s primary. In the past most states had this type of primary. The purpose was to make sure that people from another party would not “cross over” and vote for weaker candidates, thus making it easier for their party to win the general

election. By law Texas has closed primaries, but in practice they are open because the parties do not maintain permanent lists of their members, allowing voters to vote in any primary.

- 3) **Blanket primary** – all candidates of all parties run on one list and any registered voter can participate (used in only two states).

Super Tuesday – started in 1988, this is the date that 10 southern states, including Texas, agreed upon to all have their primaries on the same day. It is significant primarily for the presidential campaign. A large number of delegates is available for presidential candidates to win on this date.

Administration of primaries is the responsibility of each party. Most of the duties fall upon the county chairperson who is responsible for arranging for polling places, voting machines, and counting votes.

General elections – held in even numbered years on the first Tuesday after the first Monday in November to choose state and national executives and legislators, and state judges.

Special elections – may be called to fill vacancies in Congress or the state legislature, or to vote on proposed constitution amendments. Most cities choose their councils in special elections.

Absentee or early voting – Texas voters may vote absentee for a period of two weeks before the election at the county clerk's office or at a variety of polling places around the county. Prior to 1987, absentee voting was restricted to those with cause (illness or a planned absence from the county). With the removal of all restrictions on absentee voting the voting levels have increased slightly with 25 to 40 percent of voters casting early ballots.

Campaigns have changed significantly with the advent of the mass media. Modern campaigns emphasize the candidate rather than the party. This raises issues of accountability, because the candidate is not necessarily bound to the party's platform. Candidates often are able to raise their own money independently of the party. Most candidates for national offices today tend to be career professionals. The stakes are quite high and it takes a lot of money to be able to run for any office. This leads to what is known as the **money chase**. It is a relentless cycle in which the office-holders are virtually campaigning all the time.

In terms of party politics, this is very different from "old politics". Here organization was the key. The parties had rallies, members often went door-to-door, and information was spread by word of mouth. In the "new

politics” it is much more media centered and less personal. Money is used to hire consultants (hired guns), pollsters, professional fund-raisers, connections and influence. Often the task is to put together the “image” of a candidate (“image is everything”). The job of the consultants is to make their candidate look good, and to make the other candidate look bad. It is your instructor’s opinion that this leads to more divisiveness in modern politics and campaigns. With the advent of sophisticated polling, candidates are often groomed to tell the voters what they want to hear, rather than actually have fixed positions on any issue.

Chapter 9 – Interest Groups

Pluralist theory of American politics holds that society’s interests are most effectively represented through the efforts of groups. Sometimes special interests can wield too much power, wrongly prevailing over the general interest. Single-issue politics occurs when separate groups organized around nearly every conceivable policy issue press their demands and influence to the utmost, at whatever cost to the broader society.

An **interest group** can be defined as a set of individuals who organize to promote a shared political interest. Also called a “faction” or “pressure group” or “special interest”, an interest group is characterized by its formalized organization and by its pursuit of policy goals that stem from its members’ shared interest. Interest groups promote public policies, encourage the political participation of their members, support candidates for public office, and work to influence policymakers.

Political interest groups – groups that try to influence public policy to their member’s advantage.

Interest groups differ from political parties in the following respects:

- 1) the focus of parties is broad, encompassing many interests, while the focus of a group is narrow, comprising just one interest
- 2) parties attempt to gain power by running candidates in elections while groups merely try to influence officeholders
- 3) parties must appeal to citizenry for support while groups may work entirely behind the scenes

Interest groups are usually classified into five distinct types of groups: economic groups, spiritual or ideological groups, artistic-recreational groups, public interest groups, and ethnic groups.

The two most important things to understand about interest groups are that not all interests are organized, and that organized interests are much more powerful than unorganized interests.

There are **three general rules of interest-group formation**:

- 1) economic producing groups are more likely to be organized than citizen's groups
- 2) regardless of the type of group, people with more education and income are more likely to join than are people with less income and education
- 3) citizens who join groups out of personal involvement (as opposed to economic stake) tend to feel very strongly about the particular issue that is the group's reason for existence.

Interest groups attempt to persuade both public and individual government officials to take a particular point of view on specific policy issues. In doing so they perform important functions in the political process:

- 1) they furnish information to officeholders in all branches of government
- 2) they politicize and inform members of their groups as well as others
- 3) they mediate conflict within their groups
- 4) they engage in electioneering, especially the contribution of money to the candidates
- 5) they help to form public opinion by disseminating information supporting their own policy stands to citizens

Interest groups are involved in a wide range of activities:

- 1) interest groups enhance democratic government in many ways, such as providing information, getting people involved in politics, and contributing to debate about issues.
- 2) Although they do offer some positive influences in government, their efforts to skew the process of government to benefit themselves can make a corrupting influence and deflect public policy-making into private channels.
- 3) Interest groups also involve themselves in electioneering through supporting candidates for public office. Some of this influence is accomplished through **political action committees** – a committee formed by an organization, industry, or individual for the purpose of collecting money and then contributing that money to selected political candidates

and causes. Texas currently has no limits on how much these groups can contribute to candidates.

- 4) Lobbying – to **lobby** is to attempt to influence policy makers face-to-face. **Lobbyists** are individuals who are hired by specific interest groups to directly work with policy makers (**inside lobbying**) in order to gain favorable legislation or rulings for the group who hired them. Lobbyists generally feel that making direct contact with legislators is the best lobbying technique. Contributing money to politicians is the best way to ensure personal access to legislators. However, the power of money in the interest-group system brings up uncomfortable questions about democracy in Texas. When policy is made at the behest of a few rich interests working behind the scenes, then government is **plutocratic** (that is, government by the wealthy), not democratic. Because the volume of legislation and the difficulty legislators have in staying informed, **information** is one of the most important resources available to lobbyists. **Information is a tool of influence** not only in dealing with the legislature, but also in dealing with the bureaucracy.
- 5) Interest groups also work to persuade the public. Some interest groups attempt to influence the government indirectly by “educating” the public. This can help by increasing the amount of information on public available to citizens on public policy. However, citizens have to be cautious in that the viewpoint may tend to be one-sided. Citizens should always question the accuracy of information from these sources.
- 6) As society has grown more complex, administrative agencies or bureaus have been created to regulate various private interests to protect the public. These agencies often exist within the executive branch of government. Since the administrators who run these agencies have considerable latitude in interpreting laws, the executive branch of government may be an interest group target. Though regulatory agencies are intended to be independent, they often become dominated by the interest they were created to control. **Co-optation** is the transition of an agency from guardian of the public interest to a defender of private interests. This results from several factors:
 - a) those who serve in regulatory agencies tend to come from (and later return to) the regulated industry
 - b) even the best intentioned regulators may develop personal ties to people associated with the regulated interest that make it difficult to remain independent

- c) once needed regulations are in place, public awareness of the regulated interest declines, making it easier for the industry involved to co-opt the regulators without public scrutiny.
- 7) Because courts make policy by interpreting and applying the law, interest groups are active in the judicial process. The NAACP provides an outstanding example of an interest group that was able to press its case in the courts after having been unsuccessful both in electoral politics and in lobbying the legislative and executive branches.

Iron triangles and issue networks describe two patterns of group influence through which most public policy is decided. An **iron triangle** is a stable set of bureaucrats, legislators, and lobbyists who seek to develop and perpetuate policies beneficial to their common purposes. An **issue network** is a less formal grouping of officials, lobbyists and policy specialists who are brought together by their shared interest and expertise in a particular policy area. Participants may leave or join the issue network as policy dictates. Once the issue is resolved, the network disbands.

Pluralist theory holds that organized groups provide for the representation of society's many and diverse interests. The pluralist account of interest group influence falls short when the question of equal representation of interests in society is raised.

- 1) The positive aspects of contributions of groups to self-government are that they can convey to policymakers popular sentiment regarding desired policy. They provide minorities a way to call attention to their needs. In this way diverse interest in society can be accommodated. Lastly, interest groups can raise issues that are neglected by the party system.
- 2) The negative aspects of pluralist interest group theory focus on interest group liberalism and economic bias.
 - a. Interest group liberalism describes the tendency of officials to support the policy demands of interest groups that have a special stake in a policy. They may use society's resources to benefit a minority.
 - b. The group representation system gives advantage to America's economically oriented groups, particularly corporations.

c. Middle class interests are favored over those of less advantaged sectors of society.

3) **James Madison** described the dilemma inherent in group activity. In a free society, open advocacy of self-interest is desirable even though government could fall under the control of a dominant interest, whether of the majority or of the minority. In order to protect Americans from the potential threat of tyranny from the numerical majority, Madison's proposal for separation of powers and checks and balances actually gives minorities the opportunity to block changes in policies that may be desired by the majority.