Purpose and Process of Government

Inquire: What are Politics?

Overview


What resources are acquired by what people, or groups of people, and how are they acquired? Who receives indirect help — like tax breaks — and who doesn’t, and why?

The United States allows its citizens to participate in government in many ways. The United States also has many different levels and branches of government that any citizen or group might approach. Many people take this as evidence that U.S. citizens, especially as represented by competing groups, are able to influence government actions. Some political theorists, however, argue that this is not the case. They claim that only a handful of economic and political elites have any influence over government.

Big Question: How do we determine who gets what, when they get it, and how it is acquired?

Watch: A Kennedy Here, and a Bush-Bush There, Everywhere a Clinton…

In 1960, John F. Kennedy was elected president of the United States. JFK was, of course, tragically killed in Dallas, Texas in November 1963. JFK’s younger brother, Robert Kennedy, was killed while running for president in 1968. Regardless, their youngest brother, Edward “Teddy” Kennedy ran for president in 1980, against his party’s incumbent, President Jimmy Carter.

However, this story is not about the Kennedy tragedy; it is about the part the Kennedys have played in U.S. history, along with two other families. A man named George Herbert Walker Bush also ran for president in 1980, and though he lost the primary battle to Ronald Reagan, he was chosen as Reagan’s running mate in 1980 and 1984, becoming the vice president. In 1988, George H.W. Bush was elected in his own right. Bush ran for re-election in 1992, but lost to a man named Bill Clinton.

Clinton was reelected in 1996, and he was replaced by George W. Bush, the son of George H.W. Bush, in 2000. George W. Bush was reelected in 2004. In 2008, his brother and the Governor of Florida, Jeb Bush, ran for president, as did Bill Clinton’s wife, Hillary Clinton. While neither was nominated by their respective parties in 2008, Jeb Bush tried again and fell short of the nomination again in 2012, and in 2016. However, in 2016, Hillary was back, and though she was the Democratic Party’s presidential nominee, she did not win the election.
If you make a timeline of elections from 1960 through 2012 — a span of 52 years and 15 presidential elections — a Kennedy, a Clinton, or a Bush was in at least the primaries 12 out of 15 times, if you include running mates in the equation. A Kennedy, a Clinton, or a Bush was an actual nominee or candidate in eight of the 15 elections. A Kennedy, a Clinton, or a Bush was elected president or vice president in seven of the 15 elections. A Kennedy, a Clinton, or a Bush has been either the president or vice president for 28 of the 52 years. Did someone say, “royal families”?

As of 2018, Joseph Kennedy III, Robert Kennedy's grandson and a Massachusetts representative, is a rising Democratic star, while George P. Bush, George H.W. Bush’s grandson, Jeb Bush’s son, George W. Bush’s nephew and Texas Land Commissioner, has been elected twice to his statewide office in Texas. Did someone say, “Kennedy vs. Bush 2020”?1

1Stanton, Zack; Kennedy Could Be the Democrats’ Best Hope (But May Not Want to Be) (2018); POLITICO - POLITICO LLC 2018; https://www.politico.com/magazine/story/2018/02/06/joe-kennedy-2020-democrats-off-message-216942; Date Accessed: Sunday, April 29, 2018

Read: Elitism vs. Pluralism

Overview

Many Americans fear that a set of elite citizens is really in charge of the United States’ government and that others have no influence. This belief is called the elite theory of government. In contrast to that perspective is the pluralist theory of government, which believes that political power rests with competing interest groups who share influence in government. Pluralist theorists assume that citizens who want to get involved in the system do so because there are a great number of access points to government. That is, the U.S. system, with several levels and branches, has many places where people and groups can join and engage with the government.

The Elite Theory

C. Wright Mills was the foremost supporter of the elite theory. In his book, The Power Elite, Mills argued that government is controlled by a combination of businesses, the military, and political elites.

Most political elites are highly educated and often graduate from prestigious universities. According to the elite theory, the wealthy use their power to control the nation’s economy in such a way that those below them cannot advance economically. Their wealth allows the elite to secure for themselves important political positions. They then use their political power to make decisions and allocate resources in ways that benefit themselves. According to this theory, politicians do the wealthy’s bidding instead of attending to ordinary people’s needs, and order is maintained by force. In contrast, others believe that people favor government by the elite because they believe the elite are better fit to govern; as such, average citizens are content to allow them to do so.

All five of the most recent U.S. presidents attended Ivy League schools such as Harvard, Yale, or Columbia. Among members of the House of Representatives, 93 percent have a bachelor’s degree, as do 99 percent of members of the Senate. In contrast, fewer than 40 percent of U.S. adults have even an associate’s degree.

Approximately 80 percent of both the Senate and the House of Representatives are male, and fewer than 20 percent of Congress members are people of color. The nation’s laws are made primarily by older, well-educated, white male professionals and businessmen.
The makeup of Congress is important because race, sex, profession, education, and socioeconomic class have an important effect on people’s political interests. For example, changes in the way taxes are levied and spent do not affect all citizens equally. A flat tax, which generally requires that everyone pay the same percentage rate, hurts the poor more than it does the rich. If the income tax rate was flat at 10 percent, all Americans would have to pay 10 percent of their income to the federal government. Someone who made $40,000 a year would have to pay $4,000 and be left with only $36,000 to live on. Someone who made $1,000,000 would have to pay $100,000, a greater sum, but he or she would still be left with $900,000. People who are not wealthy would probably pay more than they could comfortably afford, while the wealthy, who could afford to pay more and still live well, would not see a real impact on their daily lives. Currently, more than half of the members of Congress are millionaires; their median net worth is just over $1 million, and some have much more.

Similarly, how revenue is allocated affects the rich and the poor differently. Giving more money to public education does not benefit the wealthy as much as it does the poor, because the wealthy are more likely than the poor to send their children to private schools or to at least have the option of doing so. However, better funded public schools have the potential to greatly improve the upward mobility of members of other socioeconomic classes who have no other option than to send their children to public schools. As of 2003, more than 40 percent of Congress sent their children to private schools. Overall, only 10 percent of the American population does so.

Therefore, a Congress dominated by millionaires who send their children to private schools, is more likely to believe that flat taxes are fair and that increased funding for public education is not a necessity. Their experience, however, does not reflect the experience of average Americans.

Pluralist Theory

Pluralist theory rejects this approach, arguing that although there are elite members of society, they do not control the government. Instead, pluralists argue that political power is distributed throughout society. Rather than resting in the hands of individuals, a variety of organized groups hold power, with some groups having more influence on certain issues than others.

Thousands of interest groups exist in the United States. Approximately 70–90 percent of Americans report belonging to at least one group.

According to pluralist theory, people with shared interests will form groups in order to make their desires known to politicians. These groups include such entities as environmental advocates, unions, and organizations that represent the interests of various businesses. Because most people lack the inclination, time, or expertise necessary to decide political issues, these groups will speak for them. As groups compete with one another and find themselves in conflict regarding important issues, government policy begins to take shape. In this way, government policy is shaped from the bottom up rather than from the top down, as we see in elitist theory. Robert Dahl, author of Who Governs?, was one of the first to advance the pluralist theory. Dahl argued that politicians seeking an “electoral payoff” are attentive to the concerns of politically active citizens and, through them, become acquainted with ordinary people’s needs. Politicians will attempt to give people what they want in exchange for their votes.

The Hyperpluralist Theory

A third theory has been put forward: hyperpluralism. This theory takes pluralism a step further by suggesting that the influence of special-interest groups is so strong that the power of centralized government is weakened. Supporters of hyperpluralism hold competition at the core, but do not work to
negotiate or compromise to benefit equal opportunity. It promotes a community which recognizes all group demands as legitimate and in the hands of the government to handle.

Essentially, there are so many groups that possess so much power that the government is almost incapable of action. As a result, the actions taken are self-serving to what are referred to as iron triangles. Iron triangles are composed of key interest group leaders interested in a specific policy, the government agency in charge of administering that policy, and the congressional members, committees, and subcommittees handling that policy. In iron triangles, the needs of the people are rarely considered a real concern or actually addressed.

Reflect: Pluralism, Elitism, or Hyperpluralism?

Poll: In your opinion, is the American government better described by elitism, pluralism, or hyperpluralism?
- elitism
- pluralism
- hyperpluralism

Expand: Let’s Make A Deal!

The Tradeoffs Perspective

In 1963, NBC premiered a game show entitled “Let’s Make A Deal!” The host gives the contestant a prize, and then offers a trade with known or unknown item(s), telling the contestant, “Let’s make a deal!” In the 50-plus years since the show premiered, the name and phrase have become synonymous with efforts to make trades in America. “Let’s make a deal” rings through school cafeterias as kids trade lunch items, through corporate boardrooms, and through Congress’ halls and the conference rooms at every level of American government.

Although elitists and pluralists present political influence as a tug-of-war with people at opposite ends of a rope trying to gain control, in reality, government action and public policy are influenced by an ongoing series of tradeoffs or compromises, like the game show. For instance, an action that will meet a large number of people’s needs may not be favored by the elite members of society. Meanwhile, giving the elite what they want may interfere with plans to help the poor. As pluralists argue, public policy is created as a result of competition among groups. In the end, the interests of both the elite and the people likely influence government action, and compromises will often attempt to please them both.

Since the framing of the U.S. Constitution, tradeoffs have been made between those who favor the central government’s supremacy and those who believe that state governments should be more powerful. Should state governments be able to respond to the desires of citizen groups by legalizing marijuana use? Should the national government be able to close businesses that sell marijuana, even in states
where it is legal? Should those who control the Federal Bureau of Investigation (FBI) and the National Security Agency (NSA) be allowed to eavesdrop on Americans’ phone conversations and read their emails? Should groups like the American Civil Liberties Union (ACLU), which protect all citizens’ rights to freedom of speech, be able to prevent this?

Tradeoffs also occur as a result of conflict between groups representing the citizens’ competing interests. Many Americans believe that the U.S. must become less dependent on foreign energy sources. However, many would also like to have access to inexpensive sources of energy. Such people are likely to support fracking: the process of hydraulic fracturing that gives drilling companies access to natural gas trapped between layers of shale underground. Fracking produces abundant, inexpensive natural gas, a great benefit to people who live in parts of the country where it is expensive to heat homes during the winter. Fracking also creates jobs. Yet, at the same time, many scholars argue that fracking can result in the contamination of drinking water, air pollution, and increased risk of earthquakes. One study has even linked fracking to cancer. Thus, those who want to provide jobs and inexpensive natural gas are in conflict with those who wish to protect the natural environment and human health. Both sides claim to represent the best interest of the people.

Finally, the government may attempt to resolve conflicting concerns within the nation as a whole through tradeoffs. After repeated incidents of mass shootings at schools, theaters, churches, and shopping malls, many are concerned with protecting themselves and their families from firearm violence. Some groups would like to ban the sale of automatic weapons completely. Some do not want to ban gun ownership; they merely want greater restrictions to be put in place on who can buy guns or how long people must wait between the time they enter the store to make a purchase and the time when they are actually given possession of the weapon. Others represent the interests of those who oppose any restrictions on the number or type of weapons Americans may own. So far, state governments have attempted to balance the interests of both groups by placing restrictions on such things as who can sell guns, where gun sales may take place, or requirements for background checks, but they have not attempted to ban gun sales altogether.

American democracy is built around trade-offs, or as Harold Lasswell asked “Who gets what, when, and how.”

Lesson Toolbox

Additional Resources and Readings

Interest Groups: Crash Course Government and Politics #42
- A Crash Course Government video explaining interest groups and iron triangles
- https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=bOvBA7ollgc

AP Gov Review: Video 17: Iron Triangles
- A quick video giving a detailed graphic and explanation of iron triangles in Congress
- https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=emMnFMiEEWU

Political Ideology: Crash Course Government and Politics #35
- A Crash Course Government video covering political ideologies in the U.S.
- https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=j_k_k-bHigM
Lesson Glossary

**elite theory**: the belief that a set of elite citizens controls the government and ordinary citizens have no influence

**hyperpluralism**: the theory that interest groups are so powerful that they weaken the government

**interest groups**: organizations that represent people who share a common interest and work to protect and promote that interest by influencing the government

**iron triangles**: the policy-making relationships among congressional committees, government agencies, and interest groups

**pluralist theory**: the belief that political power rests with competing interest groups who share influence in government

Check Your Knowledge

1. True or False: Iron triangles are organizations that represent people who share common interests and work together to promote those interests to the government.
   - A. True
   - B. False

2. True or False: Tradeoffs are important in order to give the elite what they want and interfere with plans to help the poor.
   - A. True
   - B. False

3. Which theory of government says that interest groups hold the power in the U.S. government?
   - A. the Hyperpluralist Theory
   - B. the Elite Theory
   - C. the Interest Theory
   - D. the Pluralist Theory

Answer Key:

Citations

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