Inquire: Is Public Participation Important in a Democracy?

Overview

A democracy relies upon the involvement of the population. It is, after all, a “demos-kratos” — deriving from the two Greek words δῆμος, meaning the people, and κράτος, meaning power or rule. Demos-kratos — Power to the People.

As such, participation in government matters. If the people are not involved, it ceases to be a democracy. Although they may not get everything they want, people can achieve many goals and improve their lives through civic engagement.

But, what does participation look like? Is there more to it than voting? Can, and does, a single person really make a difference?

Big Question: What does participation look like in American democracy?

Watch: “Give it to the People”

In the 2004 movie, National Treasure, our hero, Ben Gates discusses with FBI Agent Sadusky what to do with the enormous historical treasure they find.

Sadusky: The Templars and the Freemasons believed that the treasure was too great for any one man to have, not even a king. That’s why they went to such lengths to keep it hidden.

Ben Gates: That’s right. The founding fathers believed the same thing about government. I figure their solution will work for the treasure too.

Sadusky: Give it to the people.*

“Give it to the people.” A democracy. Yet, nowhere is the word “democracy” mentioned in the Declaration of Independence or the U.S. Constitution. How could that be? Our government is a democracy, isn’t it?

It’s important to remember that democracies did not originate with the founding of the United States. Ancient Greece and Rome both had forms of democratic governments. The word democracy actually comes from two Greek words, meaning a form of government that gives power to the people. But how, when, and to which people? The answers to those questions have changed throughout history.

*Give it to the people.
Interestingly, the founders feared democratic rule. James Madison expressed this attitude in Federalist #10: "...instability, injustice, and confusion... have in truth been the mortal disease under which popular governments everywhere perished..." In the late 18th-century, rule by the people was thought to lead to disorder and disruption. Yet, a democratically-based government was still seen as superior to the monarchies of Europe.

In present-day New England, many small towns hold town meetings in which citizens can decide on important issues by directly voting, much like the citizens of ancient Athens. This is an example of a direct democracy, and these meetings are one of the few instances of direct democracy that still operate today. Decisions are made by all citizens, not their representatives.

But, could a direct democracy work in a large, diverse population spread over a geographical distance? Generally, the answer has been no. As a solution, the Romans developed the republic: an indirect, or representative, democracy. In this system, representatives are chosen by the people to make decisions for them. The representative body solves the problems of direct democracy by being a manageable size for doing government business. The founders even preferred the term republic to democracy because it described a system they generally preferred: the people's interests are represented by more knowledgeable, or wealthier, citizens who were responsible to those that elected them. Today we tend to use the terms republic and democracy interchangeably.

While democracies have come in many shapes and sizes (as reflected by the different answers to questions of how, when, and to which people power is given), the key is, "Who has the power?" If the answer is the people, then the government is a democracy. And since history has shown that government is too much power for one person, let's "give it to the people!"

*National Treasure (2004); Screenplay by: Jim Kouf, Cormac Wibberley, Marianne Wibberley; Story by: Jim Kouf, Oren Aviv, Charles Segars; Directed by: Jon Turteltaub; Produced by: Jerry Bruckheimer, Jon Turteltaub; Screenplay by Jim Kouf; Production company: Walt Disney Pictures; Release date: November 19, 2004

Read: Democracy: It’s Not A Spectator Sport

Overview

“Democracy is not a spectator sport, it’s a participatory event. If we don't participate in it, it ceases to be a democracy.” - Michael Moore*

Representative democracy cannot work effectively without the participation of informed citizens. Engaged citizens familiarize themselves with the most important issues confronting the country and with the different plans candidates have for dealing with those issues. Then they vote for the candidates they believe will be best suited to the job. They may even join others to raise funds or campaign for candidates they support. They inform their representatives on how they feel about important issues. Through these and other efforts, engaged citizens let their representatives know what they want and thus influence policy. Only then can government actions accurately reflect the majority's interests and concerns. Even people who believe the elite control the government should recognize that it is easier for them to do so if ordinary people make no effort to participate in public life.
Pathways to Engagement

People can become civically engaged in many ways, either as individuals or as group members. Some forms of individual engagement require very little effort. In fact, a simple way to be engaged is to stay informed about community, statewide, and nationwide debates and events. Awareness is the first step toward engagement. News is available from a variety of sources: newspapers, national news shows, cable and internet news channels, broadcast news channels, radio broadcasts, etc. Various news outlets may project bias or prejudice in their news portrayals, so you should familiarize yourself with a variety of news outlets and find the ones you are most comfortable with in their reporting of the news.

Another form of individual engagement is to write or email political representatives. Filing a complaint with the city council is another avenue of engagement. City officials cannot fix problems if they do not know anything is wrong to begin with. Responding to public opinion polls, actively contributing to a political blog, or starting a new blog are all examples of ways to get involved.

One of the most basic ways to engage with government as an individual is to vote. Individual votes matter. City council members, mayors, state legislators, governors, and members of Congress are all chosen by popular vote. Although the United States’ president is not chosen directly by popular vote, but by a group called the Electoral College, individuals’ votes determine how the Electoral College will ultimately vote. Registering to vote beforehand is necessary in most states, but it is usually a simple process and many states allow registration online.

Voting, however, is not the only form of political engagement in which people may participate. Individuals can engage by attending political rallies, donating money to campaigns, and signing petitions. Starting a petition is relatively easy and there are also some websites that encourage people to become involved in political activism by providing petitions that can be circulated through email. Taking part in a poll or survey is another simple way to make your voice heard.

Some people prefer to work with groups when participating in political activities or performing community services. Group activities can be as simple as hosting a political book club or discussion group. Coffee Party USA, an online forum, provides a space for people from various political perspectives to discuss issues they are concerned about. People who wish to be more active often work for political campaigns. Engaging in fundraising efforts, handing out bumper stickers and campaign buttons, helping people register to vote, and driving voters to the polls on Election Day are all important activities that anyone can engage in. Individual citizens can also join interest groups that promote their favored causes.

Engagement does not exclusively entail political activities. Many people today seek other opportunities to become involved. This is particularly true of young Americans. Although young people today often shy away from participating in traditional political activities, they do express deep concern for their communities and seek out volunteer opportunities.

Although they may not realize it, becoming active in the community and engaging in a wide variety of community-based volunteer efforts are important forms of civic engagement. These efforts help the government do its job. Government demands are great, but funds do not always exist to undertake all the projects it may deem necessary. Even when there are sufficient funds, politicians have differing ideas regarding how much the government should do and what areas it should be active in. Volunteers and community organizations help fill these gaps. Examples of community action include tending a community garden, building a Habitat for Humanity house, cleaning up trash in a vacant lot, volunteering to deliver meals to the elderly, and tutoring children in after-school programs.
Some people prefer even more active and direct forms of engagement such as protest marches and demonstrations, including civil disobedience. Such tactics were used successfully in the African American Civil Rights Movement of the 1950s and 1960s, and remain effective today. Likewise, the sit-ins (and sleep-ins and pray-ins) staged by African American civil rights activists, which they employed successfully to desegregate lunch counters, motels, and churches, have been adopted today by movements such as Black Lives Matter and Occupy Wall Street.

Other tactics, such as boycotting businesses whose policies activists disapprove of, are also still common. Along with boycotts, there are now “buycotts,” in which consumers purchase goods and services from companies that give extensively to charity, help the communities in which they are located, or take steps to protect the environment.

Whatever form it takes, the more people involved in the governmental process, the healthier the democracy will be. It is vital that the electorate make efforts to stay informed because, “there is nothing more important in a democracy than a well informed electorate.”


**Reflect: The Best Way?**

Poll: Which of the following do you think is most important when it comes to participating in democracy?

- Voting
- Working for a political campaign
- Civil disobedience
- Writing, emailing, and/or contacting elected officials
- Forming a group to push for changes in the law

**Expand: From the People to the Policy**

Discover

In a democracy, the government must respond to the people. But, even with an informed and participating population, how do the needs, the concerns, and even the wants of the people become issues for the government to act on? This is called the Public Policy Cycle. Public policy is defined as, “government policies that affect the whole population.”6 These are the laws passed by Congress, the decisions made by the courts, the executive decisions made by the president, and even the rules and regulations promulgated by the bureaucracy.
Step One of the Public Policy Cycle is the people. The people are always the basis of government actions in a democracy. Some individual or group has a problem or an issue that s/he needs the government to address.

However, the average person does not have contacts in the government’s legislative or executive branches. They need something that will allow them to make their issue relevant in the state capitol. That brings us to Step Two: the linkage institutions.

These are the groups, associations, and media that can begin to move an idea from the people to the government. These groups link the people to the public policy making process. These include political parties, interest groups, and the media, as well as other institutional groups in American society. In this course we will study the impact of each of these linkage institutions and how they influence public policy.

For example, take Candace Lightner. After her 13-year-old daughter was killed by a drunk driver, Lightner wanted to change public policy and stop drunk drivers. On September 5, 1980, in California, Lightner founded MADD — Mothers Against Drunk Drivers. This group, and its subsequent growth and support across America, gave Lightner the ability to change public policy by linking her into Step Three and allowing her message and her issue to become a part of the public policy agenda. Now, it becomes a political issue.

When an issue, problem, or concern becomes part of the public policy agenda and becomes a political issue, this means it is now part of the political process. It may be discussed by candidates as they campaign for office or it may become a plank in a party platform.

Regardless, now this “interest, problem, or concern” is in play — and moves into Step Four to be addressed by the government’s policy making institutions.
In the United States government, these policy making institutions include the legislative, executive, and judicial branches, in addition to the bureaucracy. The function, actions, and organization of each will be a large part of the information covered in this course.

If one or more of the policy making institutions decides to take action and make, change, or eliminate a law, rule, regulation, etc., they will be in Step Five — making public policy.

Staying with the MADD example, as Lightner and others began to get media coverage and tell their stories to state legislatures, public policies began to change regarding drunk driving. MADD’s agenda began to become law — the public policy of almost every state was changing.

Which brings us to Step Six — the people — again, because the new public policies begin to affect people.

With the MADD example, drunk drivers began going to jail more and the legal standard for impaired driving became more restrictive across the United States, impacting more people. As public policy impacts people, suddenly there are new people with interests, problems, or concerns, and the cycle starts all over again.

Lesson Toolbox

Additional Resources and Readings
History of Democracy | What is Democracy?
- A video giving a detailed history of democracy in the world
  - https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=8opqrE2jSmA

What are the key features of a democracy?
- A short video explaining the key features of all democracies
  - https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Qi-getj3JX8

Lesson Glossary

civil disobedience: refusal to comply with certain laws as a peaceful form of political protest
civic engagement: individual or group activity done with the intent to advocate on behalf of the public
direct democracy: form of democracy in which people directly decide on policy initiatives
linkage institutions: the groups, associations, and media that can begin to move an idea from the people to the government, linking the people to the public policy making process
public policy: government policies that affect the whole population
public policy agenda: when a political issue becomes part of the political process, in which it may be discussed by candidates or become part of a party platform
Public Policy Cycle: stages in which the needs, concerns, and wants of the people become issues for the government to act on and affect change
republic: form of democracy in which people elect representatives to decide on policy initiatives for them

Check Your Knowledge

1. True or False: Some people prefer active and direct forms of engagement such as protest marches and demonstrations, including civil disobedience.
2. True or False: The public policy cycle begins with the people and ends with the government.
   A. True
   B. False

3. People can participate in political engagement by…
   A. Voting
   B. Attending Rallies
   C. Protest marches
   D. All of these

Answer Key:
1. A  2. B  3. D

Citations

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