U.S. Democratic Values

Inquire: What Matters in a Democracy?

Overview
The Statue of Liberty guards the New York harbor. The Liberty Bell sits majestic, and cracked, in Philadelphia. Patrick Henry cried, “Give me liberty or give me death!” Liberty rings through much of American democracy’s history and framework, as do words like equality and justice. But, what do these words mean, and what really matters in this “government of the people, by the people, for the people”?

Big Question: What matters in democracy?

*http://www.abrahamlincolnonline.org/lincoln/speeches/gettysburg.htm

Watch: TTMs (Things That Matter)

What matters? Priorities define a group, an organization, or a person. What are the goals? What are the objectives? Does a group — or a person — need goals?

In the Old Testament of the Christian Bible, the Book of Proverbs states: “Where there is no vision, the people perish.” Or, put another way, “If you do not know where you are going, you can’t get there,” or “The man who aims at nothing usually hits it.”

In any endeavor, for a person to be successful, there must be an understanding of the individual’s priorities. Otherwise, success is impossible. Even if certain successes are achieved, how would you know if it was what you intended to accomplish?

The secret is to focus on the “TTMs” — Things That Matter — and to work to keep those TTMs in mind with everything you do.

American democracy has TTMs: the vital goals and ideas that make the government and the country into what the founding fathers envisioned. These TTMs are what the American people have worked to create from 1776 to today.

These TTMs include the ideas of majority rule, liberty, equality, and justice. These are issues that are still discussed and fought for in America today. The goal of achieving these TTMs remains fundamental to becoming the society and country the founding fathers dreamed of; the place envisioned by the millions of immigrants looking for a better life; the world the settlers struggled to forge out of the wilderness; and the society the American people are still struggling to shape today.
It is a government where while the majority rules, minority positions and rights are valued and protected. It is a place where liberty is protected for each person: where the phrase, “All men are created equal…” means all people are equal regardless of color, creed, ethnicity, race, or economic position and all people receive justice under the law.

This ideal may never be met, but having these goals gives America a road map to follow as they try to achieve the perfection that can never be. However, the effort is what matters. As Robert Browning said, “Ah, but a man's reach should exceed his grasp, or what's a heaven for?”

*Browning, Robert; “Andrea del Sarto” line 98 (1855); Poetry Collection: Men and Women (Published 1855)

Read: Impacts on Political Activity: Age, Interests, Income, and Education

Overview

Americans aged 18–29 are less likely to become involved in traditional forms of political activity than older Americans. A 2015 poll of more than 3,000 young adults conducted by Harvard University’s Institute of Politics revealed that only 22 percent claimed to be politically engaged and fewer than 10 percent said they belonged to any type of political organization or had volunteered for a political campaign. Only slightly more said they had gone to political rallies.

However, while Americans under age 30 are less likely than older Americans to engage in traditional types of political participation, many remain engaged in activities on behalf of their communities. One-third reported that they had voluntarily engaged in some form of community service in the past year.

Why are younger Americans less likely to become involved in traditional political organizations? One answer may be that as American politics become more partisan in nature, young people turn away. Committed partisanship, which is the tendency to identify with and to support (sometimes blindly) a particular political party, alienates some Americans. Such Americans often feel that elected representatives do not vote in support of the nation’s best interests, instead just voting in the way their party wishes them to. When elected officials ignore all factors other than their party’s position on a particular issue, some voters become disheartened while others may become polarized. However, a recent study revealed that it is distrust of the opposing party, and not an ideological commitment to their own party, that is at the heart of most partisanship among voters.

Young Americans are particularly likely to be put off by partisan politics. More Americans under the age of 30 now identify themselves as Independents instead of Democrats or Republicans. Instead of identifying with a particular political party, young Americans are increasingly concerned about specific issues, such as same-sex marriage. People whose votes are determined based on a single issue are unlikely to vote according to party affiliation.

Another factor involved in low youth voter turnout in the past was that younger Americans do not feel that candidates generally tackle issues relevant to their lives. When younger voters cannot relate to the issues put forth in a campaign, such as entitlements for seniors, they can lose interest. This dynamic changed somewhat in 2016, as Democratic candidate Bernie Sanders made college costs an issue, even promising free college tuition for undergraduates at public institutions. Senator Sanders enjoyed intense support on college campuses across the United States. After his nomination campaign failed, young voter
enthusiasm faded. Despite the fact that Democratic nominee Hillary Clinton eventually took up the free tuition issue, young people did not flock to her as well as they had to Sanders. In the general election, won by Republican nominee Donald Trump, turnout was down and Clinton received a smaller proportion of the youth vote than President Obama had in 2012.

While some Americans disapprove of partisanship in general, others are put off by the ideology — established beliefs and ideals that help shape political policy — of one of the major parties. This is especially true among young Americans. As some members of the Republican Party have become more ideologically conservative on many issues (e.g. same-sex marriage, legalization of certain drugs, immigration reform, gun control, separation of church and state, and access to abortion), young people who did not identify with one of the major parties have in recent years tended to favor the Democratic Party.

Of the Americans under age 30 who were surveyed by Harvard in 2015, more tended to hold a favorable opinion of Democrats in Congress than of Republicans, and 56 percent reported that they wanted the Democrats to win the presidency in 2016. Even those young Americans who identify as Republicans are more liberal on certain issues, such as being supportive of same-sex marriage and immigration reform, than older Republicans are. The young Republicans also may be more willing to see similarities between themselves and Democrats.

Once again, support for the views of a particular party does not necessarily mean that someone will vote for members of that party. Other factors may keep even those college students who do wish to vote away from the polls. Because many young Americans attend colleges and universities outside of their home states, they may find it difficult to register to vote. In places where a state-issued ID is required, students may not have one, or may be denied one, if they cannot prove that they paid in-state tuition rates.

The likelihood that people will become active in politics depends not only on age, but on such factors as wealth and education. In a 2006 poll, the percentage of people who reported that they were regular voters grew as levels of income and education increased.

Political involvement also depends on how strongly people feel about current political issues. Unfortunately, public opinion polls, which politicians may rely on when formulating policy or deciding how to vote on issues, capture only people’s latent preferences or beliefs. Latent preferences are not deeply held and do not remain the same over time. They may not even represent a person’s true feelings, since they may be formed on the spot when someone is asked a question, about which he or she has not formulated a real opinion. Indeed, voting itself may reflect merely a latent preference because even people who do not feel strongly about a particular political candidate or issue can vote.

On the other hand, intense preferences are based on strong feelings regarding an issue that someone adheres to over time. People with intense preferences tend to become more engaged in politics; they are more likely to donate time and money to campaigns or to attend political rallies. The more money one has and the more educated one is, the more likely that he or she will form intense preferences and take political action.

Reflect

Poll: Political Environment
Which party did your parents or the adults in your life vote for in the last presidential election?
- Democrat
Republican
Unsure

If you did or could vote, which party would you have voted for?
- Democrat
- Republican

Expand: Balance

Liberty and Equality

Liberty and equality: these words represent basic values of democratic political systems, including that of the United States. Historically, rule by absolute monarchs and emperors have often brought peace and order, but at the cost of personal freedoms. Democratic values support the belief that an orderly society can exist in which freedom is preserved. But, order and freedom must be balanced.

The Influence of the Enlightenment

The American government has its roots in the 17th and 18th century Enlightenment in Europe: a movement that questioned the traditional authority of the monarch to rule. What gives one person the right to rule another? Enlightenment philosophers answered this question by acknowledging the importance of establishing order. They were influenced by the chaos of medieval times, when a lack of centralized government brought widespread death and destruction. Havens from invaders and attackers were necessary for survival, so weaker people allied themselves with stronger ones, and kings came to rule. Kings provided protection in return for work and allegiance from their subjects.

As order was established and new economic patterns emerged, people began to question a king's right to rule. For example, John Locke, an 18th-century English philosopher, theorized that the right to rule came from the "consent of the governed." Montesquieu wrote with admiration about three "branches" of government that checked one another's power. Rousseau believed that communities were most justly governed by the "general will," or majority rule, of their citizens. Though the philosophers believed that rulers were important for maintaining order, they questioned the sacrifice of individual freedom that they saw under European monarchs.

Two Kinds of Balance

Imagine a society in which everyone was perfectly free to do as he or she pleased. How long would it take for chaos to set in? Order implies a necessary loss of freedom if people are to survive. However, how far can order go? Democratic countries cherish individual freedom and generally believe that laws should not be repressive; a little order can be sacrificed in the name of liberty. So one kind of balance is between order and liberty.

Democratic societies also expect another kind of balance: a compromise between liberty and equality. Complete liberty logically leads to inequality. A strong or ambitious person might acquire more goods and property than another, and someone is bound to dominate. But, the line has to be drawn before an individual seizes power that greatly restricts the liberties of others.

Shouldn't governments help preserve some degree of equality for their citizens? But, if they overemphasize equality, won't they restrict their citizens' liberties? For example, governments can bring about more equality by taxing rich citizens more than the poor, but if they carry their policies too far, won't
they restrict the individual’s freedom to strive for economic success? The balance between liberty and equality is an important cornerstone of democratic government.

In the late 18th century, the founders created the blueprints for the United States government in an effort to achieve these delicate balances — between liberty and order, and liberty and equality. Their success is reflected in the continuing efforts to refine such balances. The formula has changed with time, but the framework provided by the Constitution, and the values expressed by the Declaration of Independence, remain the same.

Lesson Toolbox

Additional Resources and Readings

Political Parties: Crash Course Government and Politics #40
- A Crash Course video covering partisanship and political parties in the U.S.
- https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=VEmOUHxessE&t=118s

How Voters Decide: Crash Course Government and Politics #38
- A Crash Course video covering the influences on voter decisions
- https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=eermkiaFoWc

Lesson Glossary

Enlightenment: a European movement of the late 17th and 18th centuries that questioned the traditional authority of the monarch to rule
ideology: established beliefs and ideals that help shape political policy
partisanship: the tendency to identify with and to support a particular political party

Check Your Knowledge

1. True or False: American government has its roots in the Second Great Awakening.
   A. True
   B. False

2. True or False: Support for a particular party always means that someone will vote for members of that party.
   A. True
   B. False

3. It is not only important that the U.S. has liberty and equality but...
   A. that all citizens give up their personal freedoms to the government.
   B. that there is more focus on equality than there is for liberty.
   C. that there is a balance for order and freedom.
   D. that citizens pay taxes.

Answer Key:
Citations

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