

## CHAPTER 2

# Majoritarian or Pluralist Democracy?

### LEARNING OBJECTIVES

After reading this chapter, you should be able to

- Define the key terms at the end of the chapter.
- Arrange types of governments on a continuum on the basis of the number of rulers they contain.
- Indicate how the symbolic value of democracy has changed over the years.
- List the four principles of procedural democracy.
- Outline the central principles of the substantive view of democracy.
- Point out the differences between the procedural and substantive views of democracy and indicate the key problems with each.
- Explain why representative democracy has replaced participatory democracy in the modern world.
- Compare the assumptions and mechanisms of the majoritarian, pluralist, and elite models.
- Discuss the pressures faced by newly democratizing states.
- Make a preliminary attempt to identify the strengths and weaknesses of the majoritarian, pluralist, and elite models as they apply to the American system.

### MAJORITARIANISM, PLURALISM, AND THE CHALLENGE OF DEMOCRACY

Farm subsidies are hard to get rid of. Although a majority of Americans want to discontinue farm subsidies, they do little about it. On the other side, farmers actively support farm subsidies and support their interest group which lobbies hard to keep them. So the question becomes, Who should have their way, the non-vocal majority or the very vocal minority? If the minority keeps winning, how can that be? What is democracy? This chapter will explore the theory of democratic government and two theories of democracy, procedural democracy and substantive democracy.

### CHAPTER OVERVIEW

#### The Theory of Democratic Government

Forms of government can be arranged on a continuum according to how many people hold power in them, that is, according to whether a government is based on rule by one (an autocracy), by few (an oligarchy), or by many (a democracy).

Historically, rule by the people—democracy—was greeted with scorn; in the modern world, however, most governments try to style themselves as democratic. This chapter provides methods for deciding on the validity of their claims. It defines democracy and tries to show the kind of democracy the United States is.

The authors present two different theories of democracy. The first is a procedural theory and emphasizes how decisions are made. It relies on four main principles: universal participation, political equality, majority rule, and responsiveness of representatives to the electorate. Under the requirements of the procedural theory, there need be no protections for minorities. The second theory is a substantive one and pays more attention to the content of what government does. Substantive theorists generally expect the government to protect the basic civil rights and liberties of all, including minorities; some substantive theorists go further and expect the government to ensure various social and economic rights. The difficulty with substantive theory is that it is hard to reach agreement on the scope of government action to bring about social and economic equality.

## Institutional Models of Democracy

Democracies of today are representative democracies rather than participatory democracies. They require institutional mechanisms to translate public opinion into government policies. These institutional mechanisms may be designed to tie government policies closely to the will of the *majority*, or they may be structured to allow *groups* of citizens to defend their interests before government.

The classic model of democracy is the *majoritarian model*. It assumes a population of knowledgeable voters who willingly go to the polls to vote on issues and to select candidates who they believe will best represent them. The main tools of majoritarian democracy are elections, referenda, and initiatives. (Although public opinion in the United States supports national referenda, referenda and initiatives are available only at the state and local level.) While proponents of majoritarian democracy point to the stability of public opinion and to the desire of many Americans to become more involved in politics, critics argue that majoritarian assumptions do not correspond very well to U.S. political reality. For example, in the United States, citizens are not well informed and voter turnout is low. However, many voters make their choices with just a little information.

A second model, the *pluralist model*, better reflects the limited knowledge and participation of the real electorate. It envisions democratic politics taking place within an arena of interest groups. This model relies on open access that allows individuals to organize into groups to press their claims on multiple centers of government power (Congress, state legislatures, bureaucratic agencies, and so on).

A third model, *elite theory*, which is also discussed in this chapter, is more of an antidemocratic theory. Elite theory maintains that democracy is a sham, since power is really in the hands of a small number of individuals who control all government decisions and manipulate the political agenda. However, although in U.S. politics a small group of people can have a big impact, different groups affect different issues. This observation tends to undermine elite theory.

## Politics of Global Change

As China created a new market economy, democratic values crept into China's government system. Some people are expecting that freedom in the economic realm will translate into freedom of the political realm. Although the government now allows groups to organize and criticize their government, the Communist Party is trying to retain control. Over time, some people think, pressure will build to allow free elections and more citizen involvement in policymaking.

## The Global Trend Toward Democracy

No government lives up fully to the standards of either the pluralist or the majoritarian model, but some nations come close enough to be called democracies.

Democracies have been rare throughout history. Democratization can only be achieved with great difficulty. Many nations who start the democratization process fail because of deep-seated differences in their societies. U.S. efforts to introduce democracy in Afghanistan and Iraq have focused attention on

the problems related to building new democracies. Struggles in these countries show that the transition to democracy is not easy and may be complicated by economic difficulties and ethnic tensions.

Does the United States qualify as a democracy? The authors contend that it does, and in this chapter and throughout the text they explore which model best describes American democracy. They argue that the pluralist model more closely conforms to the American system than either the elitist or the majoritarian model. At the same time, there are signs that the American system is becoming more majoritarian, because people seem to think that the pluralist system has not served the United States very well.

## KEY TERMS

**autocracy**

**oligarchy**

**democracy**

**procedural democratic theory**

**universal participation**

**political equality**

**majority rule**

**participatory democracy**

**representative democracy**

**responsiveness**

**substantive democratic theory**

**minority rights**

**majoritarian model of democracy**

**interest group**

**pluralist model of democracy**

**elite theory**

**democratization**

## RESEARCH AND RESOURCES

The first chapter of this guide introduced you to specialized encyclopedias and dictionaries. Those fairly massive works are not updated very frequently, and they are geared to provide an introduction to, or an overview of, a subject. If you need in-depth information, you will probably want to start by looking for books on your subject. For that, begin with the Internet gateway that lets you search for books in your library. Visit the catalogs of other libraries, because your library may be able to borrow the book you need through an interlibrary loan service.

Since the process of writing, editing, and publishing books takes months, you will not usually find the most up-to-date information in books. Supplement your search by checking periodical indexes, journals, and newspapers. For help in locating specialized periodical literature in political science, try the four excellent indexes listed here. These indexes have long been available in paper form, but many college and university libraries now have access through the Web. Check with your librarian.

1. *ABC POL SCI*. Santa Barbara, CA: ABC-Clio. This index specializes in publications on political science and government. It includes foreign and non-English-language materials and is a little

harder to use than either of the next two. The subject index in the back of this work gives you reference numbers for articles. The articles are listed by reference number in the front of the volume.

2. *Public Affairs Information Service (PAIS)*. New York: Public Affairs Information Service. This index includes books, government publications, and reports of public and private agencies, in addition to periodical articles on government, economic and social conditions, and business and international relations. Articles are indexed by subject.
3. *Social Sciences Index (SSI)*. New York: H. W. Wilson Company. This index covers English-language periodicals in the social sciences, including anthropology, economics, environmental sciences, geography, law criminology, planning, public administration, psychology, social aspects of medicine, and sociology, as well as political science. Articles are indexed by subject and by author.
4. *LexisNexis*, a division of Reed Elsevier, provides online access to a wide variety of news articles about government, politics, business, and law. Many colleges have either the full version available or its somewhat scaled-down sibling, *Academic Universe*.

## USING YOUR KNOWLEDGE

1. Check with your college library to see which paper and online indexes mentioned above are available for your use. Select at least two of the following—*SSI*, *ABC POL SCI*, *PAIS*, or *LexisNexis*—and look for works on democracy published in the last year. After you have located *democracy* in the indexes, browse through the list of titles, narrow your focus, and prepare a short bibliography on some aspect of democracy. (Examples might include “Democracy in the Third World,” “Democracy in Eastern Europe,” “Pluralist Democracy,” “Democracy in America,” and “Measuring Democracy throughout the World.”)
2. A number of websites devoted to democracy are indexed in the Google Directory at <http://directory.google.com/Top/Society/Politics/Democracy>. Visit some of these websites and describe the form of democracy advocated there. In particular, note whether each site supports a form of democracy that is more pluralist or more majoritarian.

## SAMPLE EXAM QUESTIONS

### Multiple-Choice Questions

1. What was the original purpose of the farm subsidies program in the 1920s?
  - a. stabilize food choices
  - b. offer more options for farmland production
  - c. develop new species of crops
  - d. stabilize food prices
  - e. cause prices to fall
2. What term do we use to describe government power in the hands of a few powerful elite?
  - a. autocracy
  - b. democracy
  - c. dictatorship
  - d. monarchy
  - e. oligarchy

3. What term do we use to describe a politician who appeals to and deceives the masses by manipulating their emotions?
  - a. legislator
  - b. demagogue
  - c. elitist
  - d. populist
  - e. dictator
4. Which of the following is *not* one of the four principles of the procedural theory of democracy?
  - a. political equality
  - b. responsiveness
  - c. protection of minorities
  - d. universal participation
  - e. majority rule
5. What term is best used to describe the concept of one vote per person?
  - a. universal equality
  - b. universal egalitarianism
  - c. unicameral legislation
  - d. political equality
  - e. political leveling
6. What do we call the concept that everyone in a group must meet to make decisions, while observing political equality and majority rule?
  - a. substantive theory of democracy
  - b. procedural theory of democracy
  - c. elite theory of democracy
  - d. initiative and referenda
  - e. none of the above
7. Which principle does procedural theory consider absolute?
  - a. political equality
  - b. responsiveness
  - c. protection of minorities
  - d. universal participation
  - e. majority rule
8. The majoritarian model of democratic government
  - a. offers protection for minority rights.
  - b. relies on a relatively passive citizenry.
  - c. is organized around the activities of groups.
  - d. expects citizens to have a high degree of knowledge.
  - e. fits well with the behavior of voters in America.
9. What is the form of democracy that selects individuals to govern on the behalf of others called?
  - a. minority rule
  - b. indirect democracy
  - c. participatory democracy
  - d. procedural democracy
  - e. representative democracy

10. Approximately what proportion of Americans describe democracy by mentioning freedom, rights, and liberties?
  - a. one-quarter
  - b. one-third
  - c. one-half
  - d. two-thirds
  - e. three-quarters
11. What is the primary mechanism for democratic government in the majoritarian model?
  - a. universal participation
  - b. popular election
  - c. aristocracy
  - d. elitism
  - e. policy
12. Which of the following is not among the watchwords associated with pluralist democracy?
  - a. one person, one vote
  - b. divided authority
  - c. decentralization
  - d. open access
  - e. government by groups
13. What do we call a special election to unseat an elected official?
  - a. referendum
  - b. recall
  - c. procedural election
  - d. initiative
  - e. universal election
14. What factors are expected to motivate public officials to be responsive?
  - a. campaign financing and redistricting
  - b. recall and referendum
  - c. reelection and the prospect of defeat at the polls
  - d. watchdog groups and television
  - e. lobbyists and coalitions
15. Elite theory appeals to people who believe
  - a. the public should be actively engaged in politics.
  - b. direct democracy is the only true democracy.
  - c. in the principle of responsiveness.
  - d. government should respond to the demands of many groups.
  - e. wealth dominates politics.
16. What do we call a model of government that places a high value on participation through organized groups?
  - a. elitism
  - b. substantive democracy
  - c. pluralism
  - d. socialism
  - e. majoritarianism

17. What is the key to the success of a majoritarian democracy?
  - a. popular participation
  - b. the presence of many organized groups
  - c. decentralized government
  - d. economic equality
  - e. low citizen involvement in civic affairs
18. The two major mechanisms of a pluralist democracy are interest groups and
  - a. centralized hierarchy.
  - b. liberal campaign financing rules.
  - c. popular elections.
  - d. decentralized structure of government.
  - e. capitalism.
19. What do we call the fundamental idea that government responsiveness comes through mass political participation?
  - a. substantive democracy
  - b. majoritarian democracy
  - c. minority rights
  - d. pluralist democracy
  - e. elitist theory
20. The observed relationship between democracy and economic performance suggests that democratic nations are
  - a. no more or less prosperous than nondemocratic nations.
  - b. less prosperous than nondemocratic nations.
  - c. less likely to support free markets than nondemocratic nations.
  - d. more prosperous than nondemocratic nations.
  - e. retarding global economic growth.
21. Roughly what percentage of the American population follows what's going on in government most of the time?
  - a. 12 percent
  - b. 18 percent
  - c. 26 percent
  - d. 39 percent
  - e. 43 percent
22. The United Nations has tracked the number of democracies around the world and noticed an increase in their number from 1990 to 2003. What percentage increase did the world see in the number of democracies between 1990 and 2003?
  - a. 3 percent
  - b. 7 percent
  - c. 10 percent
  - d. 13 percent
  - e. 16 percent
23. Democratic governments and processes
  - a. guarantee correct decisions.
  - b. are observed in nearly all contemporary nations.
  - c. always protect minority rights.
  - d. reject unlimited majority rule.
  - e. may not necessarily result in desirable policies.

24. The principle of majority rule conflicts most directly with
  - a. popular sovereignty.
  - b. minority rights.
  - c. universal participation.
  - d. a sense of community identity.
  - e. government responsiveness.
25. According to the theory of American democracy, what is the fundamental principle which provides social glue to generate trust and cooperation in the political system?
  - a. civic participation
  - b. popular elections
  - c. campaign financing
  - d. universal participation
  - e. decentralized government

### Essay Questions

1. What are the principal assumptions of each of the models of democracy? Are assumptions of either model more likely to be satisfied in practice?
2. Explain how the principles of procedural democracy may threaten liberty.
3. Advocates of participatory democracy maintain that all citizens must engage in the business of government and that government institutions should encourage this type of universal participation. What are the merits and disadvantages of this type of democratic governance? How have social changes undermined efforts to expand this type of participation in governance?
4. Explain how an economy built around a private sector and market forces are changing China's government.
5. Discuss the difficulties of democratization and the forces that tend to interrupt that process.



**ANSWERS TO MULTIPLE-CHOICE QUESTIONS**

1. d
2. e
3. b
4. c
5. d
6. e
7. b
8. d
9. e
10. d
11. b
12. a
13. b
14. c
15. e
16. c
17. a
18. d
19. b
20. d
21. c
22. e
23. e
24. b
25. a