

Lesson plan for week 5: How democratic is the US?

Handout for students:

Gov 97: Week 5 – How democratic is the US?
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Quick thesis statement exercise

Quick overview of the field

Which institutions are undemocratic? (Levinson)

In what ways is participation undemocratic? (SVB; Lessig)

The Tea Party as a case study: Skocpol and Williamson

Concept map!

Comments on paper:

-I don't care what style of in-text citation you use, but be consistent with whatever style you use. The point of citing is so that I know what reading you are referring to. Usually this means you need to give me the author and date (and sometimes page). I didn't take off points this time, but I will take off points next time.

-Use quotes whenever you use an author's text.

-Titles that say the main point of your paper are good ideas

Takeaways from exercise: [I did an exercise where students read and critiqued a sample thesis statement.]

Good things:

- thesis in the first paragraph
- interesting point that institutions might not always align with moral foundations

Bad things:

- This could all be one paragraph
- no first paragraph with platitudes
- thesis should be at most two sentences. ideally one sentence.
- no "because" component of thesis

Moving away from theory to comparative politics. 4 subdivisions of political science.

Political theory

American Politics

Comparative Politics

International relations

This week: Considering how democratic America is.

For each of these authors, ask yourself: are they identifying a success or failure of electoral democracy? If a success, what institutional features lead to this success? If a failure, what are its causes, and how might we fix it?

All of the authors are saying America is not very democratic.

Our readings deal with two ways to think about the question: one focusing on institutions (Levinson); and the other on public participation (Lessig, Skocpol and Williamson, and SVB)

*****Please note much of this section is taken verbatim from a lesson plan created by Amanda Pinkston*****

So starting with Levinson and **the institutional perspective**, what are the possible grounds for complaint, and to what degree to you agree with him?

The Executive:

1. The method of presidential selection (especially the electoral college)
 - Not infrequently, presidents are not "the people's choice" because they do not win a majority of votes cast. Even worse, sometimes they are 2nd place by the popular vote (Nixon v. Kennedy in 1960, Gore v. Bush in 200).
 - Disproportionate impact for small states
 - Winner-take-all is highly distortionary (campaign for a national popular vote?); a perhaps reduces public participation
 - Candidates only pay attention to "swing states"
 - High risk of deadlock in presidential selection

2. The delay between election day and the inauguration
 - Creates a lame-duck president who has lost non-legal authority to govern
 - Closing the gap would force candidates to have shadow governments ready prior to the election, so that voters would have a better idea of what they're voting for
3. Vague wording on powers granted to the executive; probably too much executive power today (execute the office of the president)
4. Defined term periods and no impeachment for executive incompetence (only high crimes and misdemeanors)
5. Do we really want the veep to be the next in line? (Dick Cheney deeply unpopular)

The Supreme Court:

6. Life tenure for SC justices
 - Justices can stay on despite failing health
 - Clearly the institution is political; cannot eliminate political appointments, but reduce their impact with term limits

So what is Levinson's take on all of this? Constitution was formulated at a different time, with different problems and different concerns. But it's time to revise. On the whole, would revision improve US democracy?

On to participation.

Again, to highlight popular conceptions: start by talking about the pluralistic view of American associational life. Then get into the readings:

SVB: What kinds of organizations are active in Washington, and what kinds of political activities do they engage in? How does activity type vary by organization type?

(you vote when you get asked, but it's the poorer people who are participating less so aren't getting asked to vote)

The quote from Schattschneider on which the book is based: "The heavenly chorus sings with a strong upper-class accent." What does this mean, and why does it sum up the SVB findings?

Lessig: the corrupting influence of campaign cash. Discuss the myriad ways that a focus on funding the next campaign corrupts the behavior of elected representatives. Note Lessig's definition of a democratic (republican) Congress: it is dependent *on the people alone*.

Skocpol and Williamson: A useful case study in the Tea Party.

First, talk about who the Tea Partiers are (the grassroots activists, that is).

If money is what matters in determining whom government is responsive to (according to Lessig and SVB), why was the Tea Party so successful (given that the activists are not particularly wealthy, well-connected Washington insiders)?

-Combination of popular pressure, media and big-time money.

Lessig says that the need to raise money makes American politics more polarized in general. And a key polarizing force has been the Tea Party. But was the drive for money causing the rise of this movement? What was the source of the extremism in this case - the politicians or the public?

Now thinking about the channels through which Lessig says money serves to corrupt Congress, do the mechanisms he proposes seem to fit the Tea Party case?

(to what extent does this back up the idea that decisions are being made at the top)

Schlozman, Verba, and Brady

Unequal Political Voice and the Broken Promise of American Democracy

What is the main point?

-Certain groups of citizens participate less than others

What is political voice?

-activities that have intent or effect of influencing government action

What does political voice do?

-informs policymakers of preferences

-provides incentives/pressure to respond positively

Not all types of communication are equal, a vote is worse than a letter is worse than expert commentary

Does it matter that there is inequality of voice?

-it wouldn't matter if:

1) inequality but representative

2) policymakers ignore voices and just do what they want

3) policymakers compensate for the different types of voices they aren't hearing

Let's focus on #1. Is the inequality representative?

Hand out table [excerpted from reading]

-What is this table telling us? The people who vote have different opinions than those who don't

Now what about #2: do policymakers ignore public input?

-no, there is evidence that they do respond (if got emails from constituents, then voted for passage of smoke-free workplace)

What about #3? Do policymakers compensate?

-No there is overwhelming evidence that their actions can be explained by who reaches out to them?

This is problematic in part because there is continuity in these characteristics, people are less likely to participate if their parents didn't participate.

Issues related to organized interests

-who are they representing?

End discussion:

Lessig suggests a democracy voucher, you get \$50 back from your taxes that you can donate to a party or candidate. What do you think of this idea? (this year, it just finances candidates)

-Ansolobahere critique—everyone can afford this, so why doesn't everyone just do this and it won't be a problem?

Concept map
