

Sociology 125
Lectures 19 & 20

DEMOCRACY: HOW IT WORKS

November 15 & 20, 2006

I. INTRODUCTION:
HOW TO THINK ABOUT DEMOCRACY

1. Democracy as an Ideal: What is Democracy?

Simple definition: Democracy = “Rule by the people”

But what is the real meaning, the real value we hope to accomplish by “democracy”? What is the core underlying principle?

The substantive ideal of democracy:

Decisions which affect our common fate and common interests should reflect the collective will of equal citizens rather than of powerful elites.

2. Two Important Facts

FACT #1

Private power directly makes public decisions. Many decisions that are of momentous importance to society as a whole and have deep public ramifications are made as “private” decisions by corporations.

FACT #2

The private control over resources represented by the first fact pervasively impinges on democratic decision-making over everything else.

3. CONSTRAINTS ON DEMOCRACY

Constraint #1 = the DEMAND constraint

The demand constraint refers to restrictions on what people are prepared to demand from the government

Constraint #2 = the RESOURCE Constraint

The resource constraint refers to the different capacities different people have for pursuing their political demands

II. THE DEMAND CONSTRAINT

1. The question

How do we explain the kinds of demands that get raised in the political system? Why, most of the time, do most people limit their political demands to things which are compatible with the economic interests of business corporations?

2. The Basic Argument

In capitalism profits provide the motive for investment by competing private firms, and investment is the necessary condition for realizing everyone's economic interests: *the welfare of everyone depends upon the welfare of capitalists*. The “rules of the game” of capitalist democracy insure that in general only those political demands get recognized that are compatible with capitalist interests and a “good business climate.”

3. The causal process

1. Failing to secure capitalist interests leads to inadequate profits
2. Inadequate profits leads to inadequate investment
3. Inadequate investment leads to decline in production
4. Decline in production leads to decline in jobs and wages
5. Decline in incomes, production, profits leads to decline in taxes
6. Decline in taxes undermines other political goals

Therefore:

4. Implications

1. **The interests of business appear to be “general interests” rather than “special interests” (while the interests of other groups are “special interests”).**
2. **The state must insure that the interests of capitalists be given relative priority in public policy.**
3. **Strong tendency for people to limit their demands to those that are consistent with a “good business climate”: before proposing any policy you have to ask “how does this affect business?”**
4. **Politics tends to be preoccupied with short-term economic problems.**

III. THE RESOURCE CONSTRAINT

1. The Basic Idea

- **The demand constraint imposes limits on *what people are likely to demand*, but it does not dictate unique outcomes.**
- **The resource constrain helps explain what happens within those limits: different groups have access to different kinds of resources which they can deploy in political conflicts to influence political outcomes.**
- **Individuals and corporations with high income and wealth are able to uses those resources effectively to influence political processes.**

2. Some Simple Examples

- **Bribes, corruption, side-deals**
- **Prospects for high paying jobs after leaving office**
- **Campaign contributions**
- **Control over mass media**

3. Rational Ignorance

1. Information is necessary for politics, but good information is costly.
2. Question: are the benefits of good information $>$ costs of acquiring high quality information?
3. Answer for most citizens = no
4. Two reasons for this:
 - (i) the costs for most people are very high
 - (ii) the ability of most citizens to make a political difference using this information is very small
5. Therefore: most people only acquire information that they can get at ZERO COST, but zero cost information is of poor quality.
6. **Conclusion:** *It is rational for most people to remain ignorant about political matters.*

4. The Free Rider Problem in Politics

4.1 The basic idea (review):

The Free Rider Problem: Pursuing your own interest in a rational way ends up hurting your own interests, not just those of other people.

Public Goods: A public good is something which broadly benefits everyone (or nearly everyone) and in which the consumption by one person does not exclude consumption by some one else.

Democracy is a public good: Democracy benefits nearly everyone, but it requires a lot of sustained voluntary contribution of activity to function democratically.

4.2 The Free Rider Problem & Democracy

Basic issue:

Democracy requires very high levels of energetic voluntary cooperation among people: People have to be willing to join together for political purposes. The free rider problem makes this difficult. However, it is easier for wealthy people, people with lots of resources, to overcome this problem.

Why is the Free rider problem more difficult for ordinary citizens to overcome than wealthy citizens?

- 1. Efficacy of individual action is low for most people: the impact of your individual action is quite limited.**
- 2. If your own actions make little difference, and if it is costly to participate in democracy, why bother participating?**
- 3. For very wealthy people, their individual action (and money) is likely to make a bigger difference and therefore they are more likely to feel it is worth the trouble to engage in political activities.**

4.3 WHY DO PEOPLE BOTHER TO VOTE?

The problem:

1. In a large election, one vote never makes a difference.
2. There are some costs attached to voting: getting information about candidates and parties, voter registration procedures, getting to the polls, waiting in line.
3. Since there is zero chance that there is any benefit from your individual act of voting (since one vote never decides an election), and since there are real costs to voting, why bother voting?

Answer

It only makes sense to vote if you do not make the decision on the basis of simple cost-benefit calculation: you have to make the decision because of a moral rejection of being a free rider. People vote because they see it as a civic obligation and they believe it is wrong to be a free rider on other people's efforts.

4.4 How our social conditions and political institutions affect free riding in American Democracy

1. The political system is apathy-inducing: few opportunities for active citizen involvement; the electoral rules undermine participation;
2. High levels of inequality erode the sense of community and the sense of civic obligation.
3. Consumerism, individualism and privatism undermine value of collective institutions, including democracy.
4. The role of money in politics makes many people feel cynical about participation: corruption breeds cynicism and cynicism breeds apathy
5. Constant attack on the “affirmative state” undermines people’s identification with government and belief in politics
6. Weak labor movement: the labor movement contributes to a sense of efficacy and solidarity, which encourages participation