CHAPTER 7 Participation and Voting

Parallel Lecture 7.1

This lecture covers the entire chapter on participation and voting.

I. As participation in citizen militias demonstrates, political participation is more than just voting.

A. According to the democratic ideal, “government ought to be run by the people.”

1. **Political participation** can be defined as those actions of private citizens by which they seek to influence or to support government and politics.

2. In the model of direct democracy, citizens participate directly in government affairs.

3. Indirect democracy relies on **elections**—formal procedures for voting—as the formal mechanism for citizen participation.

B. Political participation may be classified as “unconventional” or “conventional.”

1. **Unconventional participation** is a relatively uncommon behavior that challenges or defies government channels or the dominant culture. It is usually personally stressful for both participants and their opponents.

a) Despite its long history (e.g., the Boston Tea Party), Americans generally disapprove of unconventional political action, and particularly those acts that interfere with daily living (such as occupying buildings). (See Figure 7.1 in the text.)

b) Unconventional participation has been successful in influencing government decisions.

(1) Notable successes include

(a) Discouraging President Johnson from seeking reelection

(b) Heightening concern over the Vietnam War

(c) Lowering the voting age to eighteen

(2) The civil rights movement relied on **direct action**—assembling crowds to confront business and local government—to demand equal treatment for blacks.

(a) Unconventional participation pressured Congress to pass civil rights laws against discrimination.

(b) Black protest in the South has been in part responsible for increased welfare support.

c) People participating in unconventional ways (such as direct political action) tend to share three characteristics:

(1) Distrust of the political system

(2) A strong sense of political efficacy

(3) A highly developed sense of group consciousness

d) Studies suggest that Americans are more likely to participate in unconventional politics than are citizens in other democratic countries.

2. **Conventional participation** is a relatively routine, added behavior that uses the channels of representative government. (See Compared with What? for a comparison of participation in the United States with other democratic industrialized nations.)

a) **Supportive behaviors** are mainly ceremonial acts expressing allegiance to government and country.

b) **Influencing behaviors** seek to modify or reverse government policy.

(1) Citizens may seek to derive particular benefits from government.

(a) Democratic theory encourages citizens to serve their self-interest through channels such as voting.

(b) To obtain lucrative benefits (such as government contracts) citizens may resort to behind-the-scenes forms of influence; this is not always in the public interest. Such behavior poses a serious challenge to democracy.

(c) Individuals with higher economic status are more likely to contact public officials to ask for special services.

(d) Citizens demand more of local than of national government.

(e) Those with financial resources can make campaign contributions that may be designed to result in future political favors being dispensed.

(2) Citizens engage in two kinds of activities that influence the selection of government personnel and policies.

(a) **Low-initiative** acts, such as voting, do not require much effort by the individual.

(b) **High-initiative** acts require active participation by individuals to obtain benefits for a group. Such activities can be associated with the electoral process, or they can be separate, such as filing class-action suits.

c) Compared with citizens of other countries, Americans are less likely to vote in elections, but more likely to engage in other forms of conventional participation.

II. Participation through elections and voting lies at the heart of the democratic process.

A. Electoral procedures specify three rules for making collective decisions:

1. Who is allowed to vote

2. How much each person’s vote will count

3. How many votes are needed to win the election

B. The gradual elimination of property-holding requirements expanded suffrage to all white males by the 1850s, but further expansion of the right to vote (to blacks and women) came rather slowly.

1. Though long in coming, actions by the national government to enforce political equality within the states dramatically increased the registration of southern blacks. (See text Figure 7.2.)

a) Although the Fifteenth Amendment gave blacks the right to vote, southern states reestablished restrictive registration requirements (poll taxes, literacy requirements).

b) The U.S. Supreme Court decided in 1944 that laws preventing blacks from voting in “private” party primaries were unconstitutional.

c) The Voting Rights Act of 1965 suspended the remaining voting tests that discriminated against blacks.

2. Women had to fight long and hard to win the right to vote.

a) No woman had the right to vote until 1869.

b) Pressured by the unconventional tactics of the suffragettes, twelve states gave women the right to vote between 1869 and 1918.

c) The Nineteenth Amendment, forbidding states to deny women the right to vote, was ratified in 1920.

3. The final expansion of suffrage in the U.S. took place in 1971, when the 26th Amendment lowered the voting age to 18.

4. While universal suffrage has taken far longer than we might be proud of, the records of other nations in granting voting rights makes the U.S. look fairly democratic.

a) Women were not granted the right to vote in many European countries until the 1940s; they did not have the right to vote in Switzerland until 1971. Women are still not universally enfranchised around the world.

b) Many people of color⎯whether or not they are minority groups⎯were not fully enfranchised until the 1960s or later.

c) Most democratic nations have a minimum voting age of 18, though some have a higher age requirement.

C. **Progressivism**—a philosophy of political reform popular during the 1920s—left an important legacy of mechanisms for direct participation, particularly in the policymaking process.

1. The state-run **direct primary** allows ordinary citizens to choose their candidates.

2. Through the **recall,** a special election initiated by petition, citizens can remove an unpopular official from office (available in 20 states).

3. Through the **referendum,** citizens vote directly on issues written as propositions (available in 24 states).

4. By means of the **initiative,** voters propose issues to be decided by the legislatures or directly determined by the voters (available in 24 states).

5. The development of an “industry” that manages petitioning and campaigning for referenda and initiatives calls into question whether these reforms result in the development of better policy.

D. The Internet as a mechanism of direct democracy

1. It allows citizens who seek to initiate legislation to collect on petitions the thousands of signature needed to place the proposal on the ballot.
2. It encourages much closer connection between citizens and their elected and appointed government officials, as more government goes on-line.

E Voting for candidates serves democratic governments in two ways.

1. It allows citizens to choose the candidates they think would best serve their interests.

2. Elections make public officials accountable for their actions, as long as voters know the candidates and offices.

3. Voters choose many more state and local officials than national officials.

4. Americans elect more officials than the citizens of any other nation.

III. Different explanations underlie differences in political participation across time and across nations.

A. Except for voting turnout rates, which have declined over time, Americans participate in politics about as much in the 1980s as they did in the 1950s. (See text Figure 7.4.)

B. Socioeconomic status is an indicator of most types of conventional political participation. People with more education, higher incomes, and white-collar jobs are more likely than others to participate in politics. The **standard socioeconomic model** of participation shows the relationship between socioeconomic status and conventional political involvement.

1. Unconventional behavior, however, is related to higher socioeconomic status in much the same way.

2. Regardless of socioeconomic status, young people are less likely than older people to participate in conventional politics.

3. The strongest single factor in explaining most types of conventional political participation is education. (See Figure 7.5.)

4. Race and gender, as well as family status can be related to political participation as well

C. Low voting turnout in the United States can be attributed to several factors.

1. Voting turnout has declined over time for two reasons. (See Figure 7.6.)

a) Lowering the voting age from twenty-one to eighteen in 1971 increased the pool of eligible voters least likely to vote.

b) Studies have found that the belief in the efficacy of voting is declining among all voters.

2. Voting turnout in the United States is lower than in other democratic countries for three main reasons.

a) In the United States, voting laws and election procedures do not encourage voting.

(1) No election holidays are provided to allow people to vote.

(2) The burden of registration is placed on the individual⎯and registration often requires much more initiative than actually voting.

(a) The motor-voter law aimed to simplify the registration process in all states, and thus increase voter registration rates. By 1998, over half of all registration took place through agencies specified in the motor-voter law.

(b) Though registration rates have risen, the congressional election voting rate in 1998 declined by almost 2.4% compared to 1994.

b) Political parties fail to mobilize voters because of weak party-group linkages.

c) Inadequate information about a large number of candidates and offices discourages people from voting.

IV. Achieving the democratic goal of political participation involves trade-offs among freedom, equality, and order.

A. According to normative theory, individuals should be free to participate in politics as they wish and as much as they wish⎯or to not participate.

1. All barriers to participation⎯and all compulsory participation regulations⎯should be abolished.

2. The value of freedom in participation will allow all forms of expression⎯including wealth, connections, and organizational strength.

3. Unlimited freedom in political participation will tend to favor those with the resources to advance their political self-interest.

B. Citizens’ ability to influence government should be equal, regardless of differences in their personal resources.

1. Elections serve the ideal of equality better than any other means of political participation.

2. Groups of people who have few individual resources can combine their votes to wield political power.

C. Governments have a stake in channeling participation to conventional channels, to maintain order.

V. Mass participation defines a nation as democratic; the types of participation citizens engage in defines it as a majoritarian or pluralist system.

A. Apart from allowing citizens to choose candidates or issues, elections serve other important purposes.

1. Elections socialize political activity.

2. Elections institutionalize access to political power.

3. Elections bolster states’ power and authority.

B. We can better understand participation through the two models of democracy.

1. The **majoritarian model** of democracy favors collective decisions, formalized through elections, over private influence on government.

2. The **pluralist model** of democracy favors a decentralized and organizationally complex form of government, and it encourages forms of conventional participation other than voting.