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Types of democracy

AP US Government and Politics: LOR-1.B.1 (EK), LOR-1.B.3 (EK)

There are several types of democracy. In this article, learn about participatory democracy, pluralist democracy, and elite democracy.

Key points

- **Participatory democracy** is a model of democracy in which citizens have the power to decide directly on policy and politicians are responsible for implementing those policy decisions.
- **Pluralist democracy** is a model of democracy in which no one group dominates politics and organized groups compete with each other to influence policy.
- **Elite democracy** is a model of democracy in which a small number of people, usually those who are wealthy and well-educated, influence political decision making.

Models of democracy

When the United States was founded, the Founders created a **democratic republic**, a system of government in which the power to govern comes from the people, but elected officials represent their interests. This system of government allows American citizens to participate in government in many ways.

The United States also has many different levels and branches of government that any citizen or group might approach. Many people take this as evidence that US citizens, especially as represented by competing groups, can influence government actions. Some political theorists, however, argue that this is not the case. These different opinions have sprouted three popular models of democracy: participatory, pluralist, and elite.

We can see each model of democracy in the American government today. In this article, we'll define participatory, pluralist, and elite democracy and describe examples of each.

Participatory democracy

A **participatory democracy** is a model of democracy in which citizens have the power to make policy decisions. Participatory democracy emphasizes the broad participation of people in politics.

However, this is not a **direct democracy**, in which citizens are directly responsible for making policy decisions. In a participatory democracy, citizens can influence policy decisions, but do not make them. Politicians are still responsible for implementing those policy decisions. The United States does not have a pure participatory democracy, but at some levels of government, we can see examples of a participatory democracy playing out.

Examples of participatory democracy today

We can see participatory democracy in local and state forms of government, where citizens have multiple access points to influence policymakers. **Town hall meetings** are a way for local and national politicians to meet with constituents to hear their opinions on topics they are interested in or to discuss upcoming legislation.

Initiatives and referendums are two ways in which local and state governments allow for citizens to influence policy decisions. An **initiative** is a process that allows citizens to bypass their state legislature by placing proposed laws on the ballot. Some states even allow citizens to place constitutional amendments on the ballot.

Only 24 states have an initiative process. Nevada is one of those states, and in 2016, the state of Nevada voted on Nevada Background Checks for Gun Purchases, Question 1 which would require individuals who intend to purchase guns from someone who does not have a firearms license to undergo a background check.

[Example: deep dive into Nevada Background Checks for Gun Purchases]

A **popular referendum**, on the other hand, allows voters to approve or repeal an act of the state legislature. Similar to initiatives, voters sign a petition to get the measure on the next ballot, but popular referendums differ in that the law in question has already passed in the state legislature. In 2016, Maine conducted a referendum vote on a measure that would outlaw hunting bears after baiting them with doughnuts. Because doughnuts are so popular for controlling Maine's bear population, voters overwhelmingly defeated the measure.

Both initiatives and referendums show how local and state governments allow for the broad participation of voters to influence policymaking. Elected representatives are then responsible for enacting the decisions of their constituents.

Pluralist democracy

Pluralist democracy is a model of democracy in which no single group dominates politics and organized groups compete with each other to influence policy. We see examples of pluralist democracy at both the state level and the federal level. As in a participatory democracy, anyone can participate in influencing political decisions, but in a pluralist democracy, individuals work through groups formed around common causes.

Theorists who back pluralist democracy argue that people self-select which causes they want to spend their time on and then support those groups. Those groups then compete over gaining support from notable politicians who will advocate their interests.

Examples of pluralist democracy today

The most notable example of pluralist democracy in the American political system is the role that interest groups play in political decisions today. **Interest groups** are groups of people who attempt to influence policymakers to support their position on a particular common interest or concern.

We'll go into more detail about interest groups later in the course, but for now, what you need to know is that groups like the National Rifle Association (NRA) and the National Organization for Women (NOW) influence policymakers in many ways. They influence politicians through monetary donations, lobbying, and testifying in Congressional hearings.

Interest groups are an example of pluralist democracy because people join groups that are focused on issues that they care about.

Elite democracy

Elite democracy is a model of democracy in which a small number of people, usually those who are wealthy or well-educated, influence political decisionmaking. Advocated by some of the Framers, like Alexander Hamilton, the elite democratic model argues that participation in politics should be limited to a small group of highly-informed individuals who can make the best decisions for all citizens.

Examples of elite democracy today

We can see the influence of elite democracy today in the structure of the Electoral College. Although the people popularly elect a presidential candidate, the Electoral College serves as a check on the potential tyranny of the majority. In US history, there have been three presidential elections in which the people popularly elected one candidate for president, but the other candidate won the Electoral College and therefore the presidency.

The Electoral College is an example of elite democracy because it places a small group in charge of making major political decisions, even if those decisions contradict the popular will.