

# Lecture IX – Mass media, civic engagement and democracy

## Democracy and civic engagement (Putnam, *Bowling Alone*)

→ What is the role of voluntary associations in a democratic system? Two different contributions:

- External effects: voluntary associations allow individuals to express their interests and demands on government and to protect themselves from abuses of power by their political leaders. Unless we happen to be rich or famous, we have very little chance of making our voices heard without associations that pool communicative (and other) resources together in order to make their voices heard.
- Internal effects: associations instill in their members habits of cooperation and public-spiritedness (“the civic culture”) as well as the skills that are required to participate politically (“schools for democracy”, but how democratic are associations?). They can also serve as “forums for thoughtful deliberation over vital public issues”.
  - Associations inoculate from extremist views, since it has been demonstrated by political psychologists that people divorced from community, occupation and associations are the biggest supporters of extremism.
  - Associations breed the spirit of **reciprocity**, which means being able to put oneself in someone else’s shoes even if he disagrees with the other. Reciprocity allows compromise and also the possibility that opposing sides agree on some ground rules even when they are in disagreement (example: the Constitution).
  - The healthiest associations are those that provide memberships and social bonds that are:
    - Cross-cutting
    - Overlapping

→ Biggest critiques to American pluralism:

- *The End of Liberalism*: too many lobbies and interest groups make it impossible for politicians to tackle the most important issues, to cut off privileges and to cut or improve ineffective government programs.
- Class bias in associations: “The flaw in the pluralist heaven is that the heavenly chorus sings with a strong upper-class accent”.
- Associations breed polarization and extremism because they expose their members to selective information that serve to reinforce their views (and isolate from potentially enlightening alternative views), and because they promote conformism among those who strongly identify with them.

→ Voluntary associations are not everywhere and always good, and can be used by antidemocratic forces (KKK is an association just as the ACLU is). Further, not everyone who participates will walk away a better, more democratic person.

→ If associations are turning into “tertiary groups”, and if membership in such groups is declining and becoming less and less demanding and involving, what effects can we expect for our democracy?

- “Politics without social capital is politics at distance”. Putnam thinks that communication at a distance, such as calling in a radio show (what about chats and forums on line?) does not imply responsibility. These interactions are mostly anonymous and do not last over time, so there is no meaningful incentive for individuals to actually consider other opinions and to

scrutinize one's ideas in the light of other points of view. "Citizenship is not a spectator sport".

- If political participation declines, it is mostly those in the middle of the political spectrum who drop out, while those at the extremes are more likely to stay because they care more about certain issues. As a consequence, politics might become more unbalanced even if more and more voters declare they are middle of the road. Example: George W. Bush's 2000 campaign started at Bob Jones University, which forbids interracial dating. In the primaries in North Carolina, the Confederate flag was a stone thrown at John McCain.
- If social capital decreases, then also informal discussion about politics, such as conversations at the dinner table, will decrease.
- Politics by proxy, through specialized and professional groups that provide political service for a certain price, might help citizens influence government more effectively than actively taking part to meetings and grassroots activities, especially if we conceive politics as just a set of policies.
  - However, tertiary associations do not help citizens learn and acquire social capital.
  - Moreover, they tend to be moved not by the desires of their members, but by internal forces. Associations tend to be oligarchic if members are not involved directly ("the iron law of oligarchy").
  - Finally, most politics does not really happen in Washington. For example, a neighborhood in which residents are not organized and involved in local issues is an easier target for criminal organizations and for private enterprises such as hazardous waste companies. It has always been true that those who are not organized have a harder time than those who are organized.

→ Putnam studied the introduction of regional government in Italy beginning in 1970 (*Making Democracy Work*). He found that those regions that had experienced higher levels of social capital and civic associations also had the most effective and successful governments. He distinguishes between "civic regions" such as Emilia Romagna and Tuscany, and "uncivic regions" such as Calabria and Sicily (Banfield: "amoral familism" in Southern Italy).

Why does civic engagement matter for the performance of government?

- Demand side: citizens in engaged communities expect better governments, and in part through their efforts they get it. Because politicians know that citizens have high expectations and feel that they are kept accountable, they work better and abstain from abuses of power more than in "uncivic" communities. A "virtuous circle of accountability" is therefore established.
- Supply side: social capital lowers transaction costs and eases dilemmas of collective action. Individuals from communities low in social capital are distrustful of others, therefore they expect them to cheat and free-ride in matters of collective good, and as a consequence they are more prone to free-ride themselves (a vicious circle is thus established). On the other hand, in communities rich in social capital government is seen as "us", not as "they", therefore individuals are more likely to give their contribution to collective causes. "In this way social capital reinforces government legitimacy".
  - Examples: tax compliance and subscription to public broadcasting are positively correlated with local social capital.

→ Conclusion: democracy and democratic government simply work better where social capital is higher. Despite being a substantially elitist system, democracy requires participation and confidence from the citizens. When such confidence is missing, public policy faces higher obstacles and the legitimacy of government itself is threatened. Moreover, a vicious circle is created by which citizens who are less engaged in government get lower performance from it, feel less satisfied and therefore become even more disengaged.

## The metamorphoses of representative government (Bernard Manin, *The Principles of Representative Government*)

→ Manin studies the different forms of representation that have appeared in Western democracies. Their key feature of representation is **accountability**:

- The governors have to be accountable to the governed, through scrutiny and evaluation of their activities (e.g. campaigns and voting).
- As a consequence, the governors have to take into account the preferences of the governed.

According to Manin, representation and accountability have taken different shapes over time. *Changes in representative forms do not imply the end of representative government, rather the introduction of different ways in which democratic accountability is provided.*

Manin identifies three ideal-types (what is an ideal-type?) of representation:

- **Parliamentarism**
- **Party government**
- **Audience democracy**

These three ideal-types are analyzed in terms of four main features:

1. Election of representatives: what kind of people are elected to represent voters? How and why are they elected? (Including the process of selection of plausible candidates.)
2. Partial independence of representatives: every representative system implies a degree of autonomy of the elites from the people who elected them.
3. Freedom of public opinion: in order for democracy to function, public opinion must be free to form and express itself. However, the way in which public opinion differs from, and influences, that of representatives varies from time to time.
4. The making of decisions after trial by discussion. A key feature of democracy is that both voters and officials can be persuaded by rational discussion based on general and long-term arguments that do not just reflect their parochial interests.

### **Parliamentarism**

Election of representatives: the representative is elected because he owns the trust of the constituents, based on *private and local relationships* with people with whom he gets frequently in contact. There is no competition on politics, but rather the mobilization of social resources that come from outside politics. *Notables* are elected.

Partial independence of representatives: because they owe their seat to non-political factors such as social standing, representatives act as “trustees” and not as “spokespersons” of their voters.

Freedom of public opinion: restriction of franchise and the elitist and extra-political nature of the system create a *horizontal split* between the opinions of the governors and those of the governed. Therefore, the voice of the crowd must be heard “at the doors of Parliament”, but this can generate anger and violence.

Trial by discussion: because representatives are not bound to the wishes of their voters, the Parliament works as a pure *deliberative forum* in which representatives form their opinion through free discussion. Meaningful deliberation is thus possible.

### **Party government**

Election of representatives: the enlargement of the franchise makes it impossible for the voters to personally know whom they are voting for. As a consequence, people vote for individuals who bear the colors of a party with which voters can identify (the party as an intermediary institution between the governed and the governing). Parties do not bring to power people who are similar to their voters, but they create a *new elite of activists and party bureaucrats*.

The fact that people vote for a party rather than a person is evidenced by *electoral stability*.

- Voters continue to choose the same party even if candidates change
- Party preferences are transmitted from generation to generation
- This is because parties represent *meaningful social cleavages in society* (mostly depending on class divisions)
- As a consequence, casting a vote becomes mostly an act of *expression of identity* rather than a matter of choice or desire for certain public policies.

Parties propose their policy platforms, but very few people other than activists know them. Election remains an expression of trust, but it is trust in parties (a *symbolic good* in marketing terms) rather than in persons (a *material good*).

Partial autonomy of representatives: the elected representative is a mere spokesman for his party: party discipline ensures compliance. However, mature party systems need *compromise* between opposing sides (since they would otherwise express a conflict that would be unsustainable for the whole society, consider the birth of Fascism in Italy and the end of the Weimar Republic).

Therefore, party leaders have room to decide *to what extent* the promises made under the policy platform have to be carried on or sacrificed for the sake of compromise.

Freedom of public opinion: parties organize both the electoral competition and the expression of opinion (through *demonstrations, petitions, and the partisan press*). Most voluntary associations and the press are somehow linked, and organic to, the parties. Because the press is mostly partisan, well-informed people are rarely exposed to opposing views, rather they are constantly reinforced in their opinions. As a consequence, the differences in public opinion are reflected in electoral differences.

Because opinions cannot be voiced outside the parties' organizations and outlets, in party democracy, *the freedom of public opinion takes the form of the freedom of oppositions*. Instead of a horizontal gap, we now see a *vertical gap between the opinions of the majority and those of the minority*.

Trail by discussion: party discipline transforms Parliament sessions from a forum to a place in which decisions taken elsewhere are ratified, and occasionally justified to the public outside the Parliament. Negotiations and discussions take place outside the Parliament, in the "smoke-filled rooms" of party headquarters and in the discussions among officials of different parties in order to reach compromise.

### **Audience democracy**

Election of representatives: electoral stability is gradually disappearing. Election results are no longer stable, but vary according to two kinds of factors:

- The individuality of candidates: voters tend to choose the person and not the party (or the policies proposed). Parties maintain a role but tend to become *instruments in the service of a leader*. Two main reasons can be found:
  - The mass media system has allowed individual candidates to communicate directly and personally with large masses of voters. The key representative figure in audience democracy is the *media expert*.
  - The role and extent of government has widened, therefore it is not possible to select candidates on the basis of their proposals (because proposals would have to be too

detailed and complex and because the kinds of problems that will have to be tackled by government are not known in a political campaign). As a consequence, *prospective voting* becomes harder but *retrospective voting* on the candidates' records and achievements might be more feasible.

- The terms of the electoral choice: *what is at stake* (what is *considered to be at stake*) in a campaign massively influences the electoral choices. This is because there is no single social or political cleavage that can mobilize the majority of voters, but voters divide along multiple lines of opinion and political preference. Politicians (and the media) therefore have a degree of “structured autonomy” in articulating the terms of the competition. This process of *defining the agenda* might look like a subtle form of *manipulation*: “Voters seem to *respond* (to particular terms offered at each election) rather than just *express* (their social or cultural identities).” Through a process of *trial and error*, politicians articulate the issues and the cleavages they find more useful to themselves, and voters respond and sanction these proposals. Therefore, in the long run there should be a *convergence* between the terms of electoral choice and divisions in the public.
  - Example: the election of 1992 (*It's the economy, stupid!*), the election of 2004?

Partial autonomy of representatives: politicians have to create a *system of differences* between themselves in order to guide the voters' choice. However, these differences are created under *relatively vague commitments* that are based mostly on image and symbols and therefore leave a certain degree of autonomy to the representative.

Freedom of public opinion: the channels of public communications are mostly non-partisan, even though they might not be politically neutral. Because elections results vary accordingly to the terms of competitions and the issues of the day, when the agenda changes *the non-electoral expression of opinion might not coincide with its electoral expression*. The expression of such opinion is guaranteed not by partisan institutions, but by *polling organizations* that are professional, business organizations not linked to the political parties.

Manin sees such development as positive for democracy: “The expression of the people “at the door of parliament” is more regularly present today than in Parliamentarism: the people do not only make their presence known in exceptional circumstances. The extra-parliamentary voice of the people is both made more peaceful and rendered commonplace.”

→ Is “government by polling” entirely positive and healthy for democracy?

Trail by discussion: it does not take place in the parliament or at party headquarters, but within the public. This is because, according to Manin, unlike in the past, the *floating voter* is not someone who is detached from politics, but someone who is well-educated and interested in politics, and willing to change his mind if provided with meaningful arguments.

However, this view is too optimistic if we look at electoral and public opinion data: both in the US and in Italy we see an increase of “independent” voters, but most of these voters have very little interest in, and knowledge of, politics. Rather than trying to persuade the undecided (who are nonetheless at the center of the political stage, consider the “pseudo-focus groups” held by the networks in the 2000 elections), political campaigns mostly consist of rallying those voters who supported a party or a candidate in the previous election.

→ Manin gives a mixed judgment of the changes in representative government brought about by audience democracy. Audience democracy is a legitimate form of representation because it allows some forms of accountability. It has not damaged representative government. Only it has *substituted one kind of elite with another*. However, there is the impression of a crisis in representation because expectations have been disappointed that democracy would be deepened and the relation between

the governing elite and the governed mass would be made more strict, as the direction of history appeared to be.

- Parties used to provide the means for a richer identification for the voters, while it is harder to identify with candidates who market themselves only according to their image
- Party policy platforms have lost their meaning, therefore policy control from the voters to the candidates has become more difficult and haphazard than in the past.