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### **More Direct Democracy?**

Since the Constitution was written over 200 years ago, American society has undergone constant change due changing demographics and improvements in the education of citizens. Accompanying these changes has been a larger electorate as suffrage has been granted to groups other than white, male property owners, namely women and blacks. It could also be argued that with the advent of modern forms of news media, this larger electorate can be better informed on the issues. Information is readily available to anyone wanting to study any issue. Continuing with this line of thought, it might seem plausible to suggest that the American public has changed in such dramatic fashion that the concerns of the framers of the Constitution, that the American public would not be able to govern itself wisely, no longer apply to society. One may argue that the electorate has become so well informed that it is now capable of governing itself directly. Therefore, one might say the United States should adopt a more direct form of democracy at the federal level by allowing citizens to propose and pass legislation through initiatives and referendums.

While this argument may seem plausible in light of the recent confusion in the Presidential election due in part to the existence of the electoral college, it is not a desirable proposal. Putting aside any Constitutional considerations, the fact that the policy opinions of U. S. citizens can be unstable makes it undesirable for the public to have a more direct role in governing itself.

Central to this argument is the writing of Philip Converse that examines the ideological strength of the American public. He suggests that “. . . ‘ideological innocence’ was widespread among the American public . . .” (Public Opinion, p 260). While his research was conducted in 1952 and again in 1964, it seems his conclusions still hold true in 2000. The idea of “ideological innocence” among Americans suggests that citizens do not subscribe to a given ideology that helps them form their opinions on policy proposals. In addition, Converse advances the argument that Americans do not subscribe to the notion of ideological “constraint”(Public Opinion, p 260). Constraint refers to the ability of persons to recognize how their different beliefs on policy proposals relate to each other to form a consistent set of beliefs (Public Opinion, p 260). Therefore if it is true that most Americans do not possess a great deal of ideological constraint, then their behavior is unpredictable.

Converse goes on to present evidence of this unpredictability by showing the instability of opinions over a relatively short period of time. As he studied the responses of individuals asked the same question two years after being asked the first time, Converse suggested, “. . . so many people’s responses changed from one survey to the next that many respondents seemed to be answering at random” (Public Opinion, p 262). More specifically, Converse points to the empirical fact that between 1956 and 1958 forty percent of the people who originally answered a specific question replied with a different opinion when asked the same question just two years later (Public Opinion, p 262). This evidence clearly supports the suggestion that the public opinion of Americans is unstable as no societal revolutions nor political realignments occurred between 1956 and 1958, the two years in question.

This instability of opinions has a host of ramifications for the proposal of establishing a more direct form of democracy where the people are given greater authority in the creation of public policy. Four of these ramifications will be introduced here with more in depth analysis to follow, ~~in preceding paragraphs~~. First, a system of this nature combined with an unstable public opinion is likely to greatly empower interest groups in the creation of public policy. Secondly, it is likely that the power of the media to set the political agenda and promote its own interests would be increased by this combination of instability and direct democracy. Also, it seems plausible to suggest that voter turnout will become very low if more public policy is decided through the use of initiatives and referendums because elections will be held more frequently. Finally, though this may seem to be an irrational idea at first glance, it seems that the possibility for conflicts in creating policy will exacerbate the divisions which currently exist within society therefore leading to the possibility of violence and a less stable government. After examining these four arguments, and they will show that allowing the public to have more direct control in their government is not a good idea.

Good point

Another good point

The first area that could come into play in a more direct system is a greatly enhanced role played by interest groups. In order for initiatives to be brought to the public's attention, it will be necessary for petitions to be signed. Interest groups have the resources, through their members, to complete such a task. This gives interest groups an unfair advantage, however, in setting the political agenda for the American people. Also, interest groups have the financial capabilities to run a national campaign either supporting or opposing an initiative. One would need to look no further than the election held November 7, 2000 to see the impact interest groups could have on initiatives. The

creation of Nebraska's Initiative 416 was a direct result of an interest group that was able to pool its resources to collect signatures and run a successful campaign.

In addition to getting initiatives on the ballot and running a legitimate campaign to support the initiative, interest groups can act in a less civic-minded manner. In their campaigns, it is possible that interest groups may attempt to do their own polling to gain an idea of where the public stands on the issue at hand. In conducting their polls, however, interest groups could conduct push polls in order to attract voters to their side of the issue. Push polls are conducted in a manner where they inject information that could bias the respondent in a given direction (American Mind, p 29). It is also possible, and less blatantly obvious to respondents, that an interest group conducting a poll could use leading phrases or poorly worded questions which increase the likelihood of getting a response favorable to their side of the issue (American Mind, p 55). Considering the relative instability in public opinion suggested by Converse, it appears interest groups not only have the ability to set the political agenda, but they can also create the policy. With this in mind, the increased power given to interest groups is not necessarily a positive outcome of a more direct process of governing because the interest groups do not represent everyone.

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*What you are suggesting is the capacity to manipulate public opinion.*

The media is also likely to experience an increase in influence if governing at the federal level becomes more directly tied to the people. This presents a definite advantage for the established groups in society. According to Barbara Bardes, "... the question of which stories to cover and which sources to use is definitely slanted toward the government and known establishment sources" (American Mind, p 92). As a result of this, minorities and other disadvantaged groups are not likely to receive adequate

attention when attempting to get their issues on the public agenda (American Mind, p 92). The effect of the media, though, goes beyond bringing further disadvantages upon minorities and others less fortunate.

The media will also, in a society where the people directly run the government, play a key role in setting the agenda for the nation as a whole. Carroll J. Glynn describes this problem by explaining, "The more play and emphasis newspapers and television news give to particular events or issues, the more likely are audiences of those media to regard them as more salient, more important." (Public Opinion, p 389). Specifically, the media may employ the practices of priming and framing. Priming "shapes the political choices that citizens need to make." (American Mind, p 93). In other words, priming allows the media to decide the relevant issues. Framing involves "defining how responsibility is to be assigned for the problem . . ." thereby also suggesting what policy changes need to be made to correct the problem (American Mind, p 94). Allowing the media to define the political landscape of America for the citizens is not desirable. Therefore, the power and influence of the media is further evidence that the people should not play a more direct role in the federal government of the United States.

Another potential problem for a more direct form of governing in the United States is the traditionally low voter turnout for elections. Even Presidential elections, which are by far the most popular elections in the U. S., only attract approximately fifty percent of voters to the polls. In non-presidential elections, voter turnout is significantly lower than fifty percent. According to the information presented in lecture, part of the reason people neglect to vote in higher numbers is that the costs of voting usually outweigh the benefits received. From a completely rational point of view, not voting is

the best decision. The costs of voting include the time it takes to vote, the time required to become informed on the issues, and even the cost of obtaining this information. The most significant benefit of voting is the psychological satisfaction one experiences after having completed their civic duty. The problem that develops from the cost-benefit analysis is that with more elections, costs are going to increase greatly while the benefits one receives will not increase greatly and may actually decline. It could be argued that in a more direct form of government, the benefits will increase because people will be allowed to directly vote on policy in a manner that coincides with their best interest. The total increase in benefits will not approach the amount necessary to offset the additional costs of voting involved in more frequent elections.

Finally, I would like to examine the potential for disaster that is created by implementing a more direct form of government in the United States. When the framers of the Constitution set up the United States government, they not only had in mind the supposed incapacity of the people to govern themselves wisely, but they were also concerned with the possibility of tyranny by the majority. Putting aside their inconsistency in regard to their positions on slavery on the basis that it was a circumstance of the times, the framers wanted to insulate the country from the whims of the uncontrolled majority that would be able to trample any minorities in the country. Due to the overriding belief that all men were created equal, the framers of the Constitution sought to establish a government that would ensure the rights and liberties of all its citizens. Therefore institutions such as the Supreme Court were put into place along with the legislative and executive branches. The checks and balances that were also put into place made it nearly impossible for policy to be enacted which ignored the

*some would argue*

rights guaranteed by the Constitution in the name of benefiting the majority. It is difficult, though, to imagine a President vetoing a policy passed directly by the people, but if the policy violates people's rights, that is exactly the step he should take. Therefore it is difficult to envision how a relatively unstable public fits into the established in the Constitution with its system of checks and balances.

After looking at the possible ramifications of implementing a more direct form of government in the United States, it seems unwise to allow citizens a more direct role in governing the country. The political instability suggested by Converse leads to increasingly powerful roles of interest groups and the media. In addition, the low voter turnout that occurs in the United States is not favorable to a government where people have a direct say in the policies enacted. Finally, the potential for dramatic changes and injustices to occur would seem to increase if the federal government were to become more direct.

The United States Constitution, and more specifically its Articles, was written and ratified over 200 years ago. In a display of incredible insight, the framers were able to devise a plan of government that was flexible enough to adjust to the times but strong enough to survive even a civil war that divided families, the basic thread of society. While more direct forms of democracy are successful at the state level, the size and diversity of the United States as a whole makes it difficult for people to understand some national issues. Then without a strong sense of ideology from which to draw policy decisions, the U. S. public becomes a relatively unstable policy-making institution that would prove harmful to the U. S. in the future.

## Bibliography

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