Public Opinion in a Democracy

IN A DEMOCRATIC society, public opinion matters. What the public thinks about political and social issues is important. Let's consider a few examples.

Late in the evening of June 24, 2011, the New York state legislature passed same-sex marriage legislation for that state. Shortly thereafter, Governor Andrew Cuomo delivered a few remarks, including the following: "We reached out to [the people of the state of New York] . . . and they weighed in and they made a difference. Democracy works when the people speak, and the people spoke in volumes over these past few months and this legislature responded this week to their calls."[1] During that same summer, national leaders debated whether to raise the debt ceiling so that the U.S. government could borrow enough money to pay its bills. Ultimately, a deal was reached to raise the ceiling, yet the outcome was uncertain for weeks. At a time during which President Barack Obama and key Republicans in Congress were making little progress toward addressing the issue, the president had this to say: "I know we can do this. We can meet our fiscal challenge. That's what the American people sent us here to do. They didn't send us here to kick our problems down the road. That's exactly what they don't like about Washington. They sent us here to work together. They sent us here to get things done."[2] Congressional Republicans were hearing a different message from the public. "[T]hey keep asking the question, 'where are the jobs?' We know all of the deficit spending and the national debt are a burden on the American people and they create uncertainty for the American people, and they really create uncertainty for small business people," said Speaker of the House John Boehner. He continued, "I made clear [to the president] that we would not increase the debt limit without real cuts in spending and real changes to the way we spend the American people's money."[3]

As these examples illustrate, in a democracy, such as the United States, we expect the public to have a role in governmental decision making. Yet the precise role that citizens should play in a democracy has been argued about for centuries. Whether the public actually can and really does live up to democratic expectations is also a debatable topic. In the pages that follow, we explore the normative issues related to how the public ought to function in a democracy. Throughout this

book, we review empirical studies of public opinion that describe how the public does function in America. We then link these studies back to the normative theories of how citizens should behave in a democracy. Focusing on public opinion from these two angles will, we hope, provide you with a broad understanding of this important topic.

THEORIES OF DEMOCRACY

A simple definition of *democracy* is "rule by the people." What exactly, however, does rule by the people mean? Answering this and related questions about democracy is neither easy nor straightforward. In fact, many people across many centuries have devoted their lives to examining democracy and delineating the proper characteristics of a democracy. **Democratic theory** is "the branch of scholarship that specializes in elucidating, developing, and defining the meaning of democracy."[4] Among other topics, democratic theorists deliberate over how the people should rule in a democracy (by voting directly on all laws or by electing representatives for this task) as well as who should qualify as a democratic citizen (all adults, only those who are educated, or some other group). Democratic theorists also focus on citizens' ruling capabilities and the role of the public in a democracy, as indicated by the following overview of major democratic theories.

Classical Democratic Theory

The earliest Western democratic societies emerged in the city-states of ancient Greece. In Athens's direct democracy, for example, governing decisions were made by the citizens, defined as all nonslave men of Athenian descent. All citizens were eligible to participate in the Assembly, which met at least forty times per year. Assembly members debated all public issues, often at great length, before making any final decisions. The Assembly tried to reach a consensus on all matters, and unanimous decisions were preferred, under the belief that the common interest would only be realized when everyone agreed.[5] When unanimity was not possible, votes were held to resolve differences of opinion. The implementation of the Assembly's decisions was conducted by smaller groups of men, who had been selected by lot or directly elected by the Assembly. These officials served for short periods of time and were not allowed to serve multiple terms in a row. These procedures ensured that many different men would serve in this executive capacity and that all citizens would have an equal chance of fulfilling these roles.[6]

One of the few surviving descriptions of Athenian citizens and their democratic participation is contained in Pericles' oration at a funeral for fallen soldiers:

> It is true that our government is called a democracy, because its administration is in the hands, not of the few, but of the many; yet while as regards the law all men are on an equality for the settlement of their private disputes, as

> regards the value set on them it is as each man is in any way distinguished that he is preferred to public honors, not because he belongs to a particular class, but because of personal merits; nor, again, on the ground of poverty is a man barred from a public career by obscurity of rank if he but has it in him to do the state a service. . . . And you will find united in the same persons an interest at once in private and in public affairs, and in others of us who give attention chiefly to business, you will find no lack of insight into political matters. For we alone regard the man who takes no part in public affairs, not as one who minds his own business, but as good for nothing; and we Athenians decide public questions for ourselves or at least endeavor to arrive at a sound understanding of them, in the belief that it is not debate that is a hindrance to action, but rather not to be instructed by debates before the time comes for actions. For in truth we have this point also of superiority over other men, to be most daring in action and yet at the same time most given to reflection upon the ventures we mean to undertake; with other men, on the contrary, boldness means ignorance and reflection brings hesitation.[7]

As Pericles portrays, Athenian democracy was characterized by the active participation of public-spirited men. In fact, he labeled "good for nothing" those men not taking part in public affairs. This passage also alludes to other key characteristics of democratic citizenship that appear in **classical models of democracy**, such as high levels of attention to and interest in political matters, and the capability of deciding matters in favor of the general interest rather than only to advance one's own selfish interests.

Writing centuries later, Jean-Jacques Rousseau proposed a theory of democracy that has much in common with the classical model. Rousseau strongly advocated **popular sovereignty**, arguing in *The Social Contract* that "sovereignty [is] nothing other than the exercise of the general will" and "since the laws are nothing other than authentic acts of the general will, the sovereign can act only when the people is assembled."[8] Rousseau also distinguished the "general will" from the "will of all": "the general will studies only the common interest while the will of all studies private interest, and is indeed no more than the sum of individual desires."[9] In other words, the general will is not determined by simply adding up every person's individual opinions but, rather, reflects what is in the best interest of the entire society. Procedurally, Rousseau favored a **direct democracy** in which all citizens (restricted to property-owning free men) were to meet, discuss, and decide on the content of the laws. As in the Athenian Assembly, Rousseau envisaged vigorous legislative debate with a preference for unanimous decisions. Active political participation by the citizenry served multiple purposes for Rousseau. It was the only method by which the general will could be reached and enshrined

in law. Active participation was also beneficial for the individual participants; in other words, political participation had "intrinsic value . . . for the development of citizens as human beings."[10]

Rousseau's theory did depart from classical democratic theory in two important ways. First, Rousseau preferred that the citizens not be as involved in implementing the laws as they were in crafting legislation. He placed less faith in the public's ability to execute laws and proposed that a body of administrators be selected for this duty.[11] The administrators would be selected by the citizens and would be expected to follow the general will but would be distinct from the citizen assembly. Second, Rousseau's vision of democracy relied on relative economic equality among citizens, as enshrined by all free men having only a limited right to property. This does not mean that Rousseau favored *strict* equality of property but, rather, that he opposed *unlimited* accumulation of wealth. Short of this, some inequality was acceptable. Further, according to Rousseau, a citizen would not be able to make decisions for the benefit of all if he were motivated by fear of losing his economic independence. The right to enough property to make each citizen economically free from other citizens would prevent the formation of groups motivated by economic self-interest. Rousseau feared that the existence of such groups would undermine the creation of laws benefiting the common good.[12]

Later democratic theorists and practitioners have criticized classical democratic theory as unworkable for most societies. First, the city of Athens and Rousseau restricted citizenship rights to a degree that has become unacceptable for many democracies. In both cases, only free men were citizens; women and slaves were not given political rights. Further, the existence of a slave economy in Athens and the reliance on women for unpaid domestic labor created much leisure time for the free men to participate in government.[13] The amount of time necessary to participate in the Assembly debates (forty times per year!) is simply not feasible for most contemporary working adults. Second, most democratic polities are larger than were the Greek city-states or the eighteenth-century towns of Rousseau's Europe. In fact, both the Greeks and Rousseau assumed that "[only] in a small state, where people could meet together in the relative intimacy of a single assembly and where a similarity of culture and interests united them, could individuals discuss and find the public good."[14] One of the primary reasons more modern democratic theories, including those that follow, departed from the classical variants was to accommodate popular rule in large, diverse, and populous nation-states. In fact, and as will become clear as you proceed through the chapters of this book, democratic theory has very much evolved away from classical democracy in an attempt to speak to actual conditions in present-day societies. Nevertheless, classical democracy was the first historical variant of democracy, so understanding it is important for understanding more recent democratic theories.

Theories of Democratic Elitism and Pluralism

In contrast to classical democracy, theories of democratic elitism and pluralism do not allocate to citizens direct involvement in governmental decision making. Rather, the citizenry exerts indirect control. **Democratic elitists** view frequent competitive elections as the primary mechanism by which citizen preferences are expressed. Voters select their preferred candidates, and the elected officials deliberate over and vote on the nation's laws. These officials (or political elites) are accountable to the public in that they must periodically run for reelection. Thus, the elites have an incentive to represent the wishes of the public, and the will of the public will be reflected, to some degree, in governmental decisions. Yet the daily decisions are made by the elites, who, by their knowledge and expertise, are better able to make these decisions. Joseph Schumpeter outlines his theory of democratic elitism as follows:

> Suppose we reverse the roles of these two elements [the selection of representatives and the decision-making power of the voters] and make the deciding of issues by the electorate secondary to the election of the men who are to do the deciding. To put it differently, we now take the view that the role of the people is to produce a government. . . . And we define: the democratic method is that institutional arrangement for arriving at political decisions in which individuals acquire the power to decide by means of a competitive struggle for the people's vote.[15]

Pluralists also view competitive elections as one important mechanism by which citizens hold elected leaders accountable. Unlike democratic elitists, however, pluralists emphasize the essential role performed by groups, as intermediaries between the public and the elites, in representative democracies. **Interest groups** are especially important for transmitting the wishes of the citizenry to government officials in between elections. Such groups, which represent a wide variety of issues and concerns, attempt to influence elected officials and other governmental decision makers. Bargaining ensues, and the public policies that result are compromises among various groups.[16] Because interest group leaders have the desire and knowledge to lobby government officials, members of the public do not need to be actively involved to have their views represented in lawmaking. For example, citizens who care about human rights do not need to write letters to their elected officials but can, instead, have their concerns vocalized by an interest group such as Amnesty International or Human Rights Watch. Leader responsiveness to public concerns should result, argue pluralists.

Why have democratic elitists and pluralists proposed a more minor role for citizens in democratic politics? Simply put, "the individual voter was not all that the theory of democracy requires of him."[17] In practice, much evidence suggests

that not all citizens are interested in or knowledgeable about politics, that levels of citizen apathy run high, and that many do not participate in politics. This evidence, collected by social scientists beginning in the 1940s, contributed to the development of democratic elitism and pluralism.[18] Indeed, it was the disconnect between dominant democratic theories and the reality of life in existing democracies that focused theorists' attention on actual democratic practices.[19] Put another way, the theories of democratic elitism and pluralism were constructed by examining contemporary democracies to determine what features they shared, particularly the levels of political involvement and interest among the citizenry.[20] Note that deriving a democratic theory based on observations from existing democracies results in a very different theory than that which emerged from ancient Athens.

Contemporary democratic elitism and pluralism can trace their intellectual roots to earlier theorists of **representative democracy**, such as the English philosophers Jeremy Bentham and James Mill and the American James Madison.[21] These earlier theorists, especially Madison, advocated that most people are not capable of democratic citizenship in the classical sense. In *Federalist* No. 10, written in 1787, Madison argues that humans are self-interested and will pursue what benefits themselves rather than the nation as a whole. In societies where the liberty of individuals to form their own opinions and pursue their own goals is ensured, groups of similarly interested people will form. By Madison's definition, such groups, or **factions**, consist of citizens "who are united and actuated by some common impulse of passion, or of interest, adverse to the rights of other citizens, or to the permanent and aggregate interests of the community."[22] To overcome the negative effects of such factions, the causes of which are "sown in the nature of man," Madison proposes a republic in which a few citizens are elected by the rest of the public to serve in the national government.[23] In his own words,

> The effect of [a representative democracy] is . . . to refine and enlarge the public views by passing them through the medium of a chosen body of citizens, whose wisdom may best discern the true interest of their country and whose patriotism and love of justice will be least likely to sacrifice it to temporary or partial considerations. Under such a regulation it may well happen that the public voice, pronounced by the representatives of the people, will be more consonant to the public good than if pronounced by the people themselves, convened for the purpose.[24]

Similar beliefs in the decision-making superiority of elite officials are reflected in the writings of contemporary democratic elitists and pluralists. In an especially uncharitable view of the public, Joseph Schumpeter states as fact "that the electoral mass is incapable of action other than a stampede."[25] More broadly, he argues that the public is capable of voting but little else, and that therefore the elites

should be allowed to make decisions in between elections without public interference. Elite control over decision making should also result in more stable governments, with fewer changes in policy due to public impulses. Some theorists also emphasize that elites are more supportive of democratic norms and values, especially the civil rights and liberties of marginalized and/or unpopular groups, than are members of the public. In general, they suggest, this support for rights and liberties is beneficial to a democracy where decision making is in the hands of the elite.[26] The elites are not immune from public pressures to restrict individual liberties but will typically sort out such issues among themselves, with a preference toward maintaining such liberties.

Critiques of democratic elitism and pluralism have come from many quarters. Participatory democrats, as we describe in the next section, interpret the empirical evidence related to citizen participation vastly differently than do democratic elitists and pluralists. Others have contradicted the pluralist assumptions that interest groups will represent all points of view and that governmental officials are responsive to these groups. Government officials can choose to ignore a group's demands, especially when they believe the group lacks widespread public support. As just one example, Amnesty International's pleas in 2003 to the U.S. military to stop the abuse of Iraqi prisoners in Abu Ghraib prison went largely unheeded until the news media became aware that photographs of the abuse existed, photographs that were eventually released to the American public in 2004.[27]

Further, some groups possess more resources than others and thus have more influence over policymaking: "The flaw in the pluralist heaven is that the heavenly chorus sings with a strong upper-class accent."[28] This fact did not go unnoticed by pluralists. Some accepted the inequality of political resources and argued that the inequalities did not accumulate within certain types of people but, rather, were dispersed throughout society. In other words, "Individuals best off in their access to one kind of resource are often badly off with respect to many other resources. . . . Virtually no one, and certainly no group of more than a few individuals, is entirely lacking in some influence resources."[29] Pluralists, however, did not fully develop the implications of group inequalities, an oversight that has been somewhat rectified by more recent theorists in this area.[30] Assumptions about noncumulative inequalities have also been challenged. Business groups, these critics contend, occupy a privileged position in U.S. politics due to their wide array of resources.[31]

Finally, Jack Walker's assessment of democratic elitism takes quite a different form. He charges the democratic elitists with changing "the principal orienting values of democracy."[32] Earlier democratic theorists stressed the importance of citizen participation and the personal benefits that accrue to individuals from this participation. In contrast, under democratic elitism, "emphasis has shifted to the needs and functions of the system as a whole; there is no longer a direct concern

BOX 1-1 WHAT ABOUT THE WOMEN?

". . . factions, the causes of which are 'sown in the nature of man . . .'"
James Madison, 1787

". . . make the deciding of issues by the electorate secondary to the election of the men who are to do the deciding."
Joseph Schumpeter, 1976 (originally published in 1943)

"The individual voter was not all that the theory of democracy requires of him."
Bernard Berelson, Paul Lazarsfeld, and William McPhee, 1954

When you read these quotations in this text, did they sound unusual to you? Did you stop and wonder whether the original writers really meant their statements to refer only to men? Or are women implicitly included as well? Would these statements have taken on a different meaning if a female noun or pronoun had been used? What if Madison had stated that the causes of factions are "sown in the nature of woman"? Would you have paused and wondered about that statement? Today, writers often substitute "him or her" for "him" or even alternate using "him" and "her" or "man" and "woman" when their statements apply equally to men or women. This was not always the case, however, and certainly was not the norm in the 1700s or even as recently as the 1950s.

One way to determine whether the authors did mean to refer only to men when they wrote these sentences would be to read more writings by these authors to try to determine their opinions regarding the political roles and rights of women. It is useful to bear in mind, however, that women's increasing involvement in politics has been accompanied by changes in language use (not coincidentally). Early theorists might not have made their views toward women's role in politics known because this role was minimal, by law and by custom. Furthermore, when women did engage in political activities, they were not viewed as political actors and could more easily be overlooked. Thus, in some instances, it can be difficult to sort out whether these writers really meant to refer to men only or whether by "man" they really meant "human." We encourage you not to just assume that using "man" implies women as well but, rather, to consider the time period in which the author was writing and the nature of his or her conclusions regarding women and men in politics. In other words, do stop and think when you encounter "him" or "man" rather than merely breezing over these words.

Our approach in this book is to alternate using male and female nouns and pronouns when our statements are meant to apply to both women and men. So, unless otherwise specified, when we say "her" or "woman" we could have also said "him" or "man."

with human development. . . . [Elitists] have substituted stability and efficiency as the prime goals of democracy."[33] Participatory democracy, the final democratic theory we examine, represents a shift back toward the developmental functions of democracy that Walker supports.

Participatory Democracy

As its name suggests, **participatory democracy** emphasizes the importance of political participation by the public. While participatory democrats recognize the need for representative democracy in nations as large as the United States, they also see the possibility and benefits of more political involvement by the public than is currently practiced.[34] Because participation is linked to social class and wealth today, participatory democrats advocate greater political involvement of all citizens as a means to redress inequality. "This is not to say that a more participatory system would of itself remove all the inequities of our society," writes one theorist. "It is only to say that low participation and social inequity are so bound up with each other that a more equitable and humane society requires a more participatory political system."[35]

This theory of democracy originated during the protest movements of the 1960s and also represented dissatisfaction with the democratic elitist and pluralist models that were dominant at that time.[36] Participatory democrats agreed with these other theorists that levels of disinterest and apathy ran quite high among the American public, but they disagreed over the reason for these attitudes. Rather than citizens being politically disinterested by nature or simply preferring to spend their time on other pursuits, such as family, work, and leisure, participatory democrats argue that the political system, with its relatively few opportunities for meaningful citizen influence, breeds apathy. To political scientist Benjamin Barber, people "are apathetic because they are powerless, not powerless because they are apathetic. There is no evidence to suggest that once empowered, a people will refuse to participate. The historical evidence of New England towns, community school boards, neighborhood associations, and other local bodies is that participation fosters more participation."[37] **Citizen apathy** is thus a problem to be examined and solved rather than an accepted fact of political life in modern democracies.[38]

Participation in democratic decision making provides many personal benefits to those who engage in this activity, according to participatory democrats. On this point, they agree with democratic theorists of earlier eras, especially the nineteenth century's John Stuart Mill.[39] Citizens become more politically and socially educated and can develop their intellect and character through political participation. By communicating with and learning from other members of the public, individuals can look beyond their own self-interest and come to know what is best for the community or nation as a whole. In short, participation, in and of itself, can produce better democratic citizens.[40] Peter

Bachrach, in articulating his vision of democracy as fostering individual self-development, states, "the majority of individuals stand to gain in self-esteem and growth toward a fuller affirmation of their personalities by participating more actively in meaningful community decisions."[41]

According to some participatory democrats, a fully participatory society necessitates more citizen involvement in decision making in governmental as well as nongovernmental institutions, such as the workplace or school. As Bachrach asks, why should people be excluded from decision making by private organizations when these decisions strongly affect their own lives and livelihoods?[42] Further, engaging in decision making at work and in other nongovernmental venues could increase governmental participation. Engagement in workplace decision making fosters civic skills, provides valuable experience, and, if effective, could create more confidence in an individual's ability to influence governmental decisions.[43] The flip side of this argument is that the lack of involvement in decision making in daily life will probably translate into disengagement from political participation, as the following clearly demonstrates: "After spending the day following orders without question at the factory, a worker cannot be expected to return home in the evening to act like the civics textbook's inquiring, skeptical, self-actualizing citizen. Students who are taught primarily to obey authority in school are not likely to grow into effective democratic citizens."[44]

Skeptics of participatory democracy argue that the public does not respond to participatory opportunities as the theorists contend they will. When barriers to political participation are eliminated or reduced, citizens have not necessarily become more politically active. For example, the National Voter Registration Act of 1993, more commonly known as the motor-voter bill, made voter registration easier and, supporters alleged, would increase voter turnout once enacted. Even though registration rates did increase in the wake of this reform, the levels of voter turnout did not substantially increase because of motor-voter.[45] More broadly, some scholars conclude that participatory democrats' assumptions about the public are unrealistic.[46] Rather than desiring to become more involved in politics, many citizens actually dislike politics and wish to avoid the type of conflict that typically emerges during decision making. In other words, although citizens might in fact learn from one another, as participatory democrats suggest, the more likely response of citizens, others argue, is to bypass any opportunity for deliberation, especially if the chance of disagreement is high.

Democratic Theory and Public Opinion

As you can see, these theories of democracy are quite broad, addressing many features of democratic governance. In our overview in this first section of the book, we have highlighted aspects of the theories that are most relevant for the study of public opinion. In particular, we have discussed how the different theoretical perspectives answer this question: What should the role of citizens be in a

democratic society? This is a key issue that democratic theorists have long debated. In fact, we have organized this textbook around fundamental questions that speak to democratic theory debates about the public.

The second section of the book addresses an important question about the capabilities and competence of citizens: Are citizens pliable? Classical democratic theorists and participatory democratic theorists envision citizens who hold informed, stable opinions based on reason and concern for the general will. At the same time, these theorists believe democratic citizens should be open to persuasion from others but not so open that their brains fall out. In other words, citizens should change their attitudes based on information and evidence, not simply change their minds willy-nilly. As we have discussed, elite democrats and pluralists have lower expectations for the public. They presume that many citizens' opinions are ill informed and that citizens are often influenced by political leaders, the media, and reference groups in society. By examining the role of socialization in shaping political views, the effects of the mass media on opinion, and the stability and instability of political attitudes, the upcoming section addresses the pliability of the public.

Do citizens organize their political thinking? This critical question, addressed in the third section of the book, speaks directly to the quality of public opinion. Classical democratic theorists and participatory democratic theorists expect citizens to hold a wide range of political attitudes that are organized in a meaningful fashion. For participatory democrats, it is crucial that citizens have a sophisticated understanding of politics so they can voice their views and influence elected officials. Elite democrats envision a citizenry that is much less proficient, although they still want citizens to be competent enough to hold officials accountable at election time.

The fourth section examines citizens' appreciation for essential aspects of democratic citizenship and governance by asking: Do citizens endorse and demonstrate democratic basics? The democratic basics we focus on are knowledge of, interest in, and attention to politics; support for civil liberties; and support for civil rights. Whether the public is knowledgeable and interested enough for democratic governance has long divided democratic theorists. Theorists also disagree on what level of citizen support for civil liberties and civil rights is needed for a healthy democracy. Classical and participatory democratic theorists, of course, want citizens to value these democratic basics, whereas elite democrats and pluralists worry much less about such matters.

The fifth section of the book addresses a pivotal question about the nature of citizenship in a democratic society: What is the relationship between citizens and their government? Classical and participatory theorists want citizens to be actively involved in politics. Participatory democrats expect leaders to take public opinion into consideration as they make decisions, which would lead citizens to trust their government. Elite democratic theorists, in contrast, value trust in government for