Unit 5: Political Participation

Summary: Governing is achieved directly through citizen participation and indirectly through institutions (e.g., political parties, interest groups, and mass media) that inform, organize, and mobilize support to influence government and politics, resulting in many venues for citizen influence on policy making. The principle of self-government is dependent on both citizen participation and the operation of the various linkage institutions that help citizens connect with the government. These institutions help people become a part of the policy-making process. Playing an important role in this process, the media report public opinion data and can sometimes influence the formation of that opinion as well. The accuracy of public opinion data is dependent upon the scientific polling methods that are used, and the results of these opinion polls are often used as a means of political influence. The role the media play in this process is at times criticized for the bias demonstrated in the format, context, and content of information distributed as well as the manner in which that bias impacts public understanding of political information. Social media poses both opportunities and challenges for democratic participation. Social movements, political parties, and interest groups also serve to connect the electorate with the government by influencing the manner in which people relate to and participate in its composition, functions, and policy-making agenda. Various social movements develop in response to conditions perceived as negatively impacting specific groups of people; their political strategies are aimed at changing public policy in a way that benefits the adversely impacted group. Political parties run campaigns in an attempt to win office and make policy consistent with their platform and goals. Over time political parties respond to election results, campaign laws, and changes in the way information is disseminated to the public. Even though political parties are designed to connect the people with government, there are various barriers that interfere with this connection, even to the extent of preventing candidates who represent interests outside the two major parties from being elected. Finally, interest groups exist as a form of political participation for people with particular policy concerns. While these groups exist for different causes, they are sometimes criticized for wielding a disproportionate impact on the policy-making process based on their organized pressure tactics and allocation of money for campaigns and lobbying. Like political parties and interest groups, elections connect citizens with government. The number of eligible voters has expanded over time based on various constitutional provisions, court rulings on voter access and campaign finance, and legislation. The Fifteenth, Nineteenth, Twenty-Fourth, and Twenty-Sixth Amendments, each a response to a specific social/political concern, serve to eliminate political discrimination against people due to a citizen’s race, sex, age, and ability to pay a poll tax. Voter turnout is impacted by the various provisions that states implement regarding voter requirements and qualifications that involve issues not addressed in those amendments. Voter turnout varies widely from election to election, and political candidates have taken advantage of technology and campaign finance laws to communicate their platforms more effectively to the voting public. The data regarding voter turnout in the United States provides a foundation for interesting analysis when compared to voter turnout in other democracies, and political scientists periodically study why voter turnout in the U.S. falls below that in other similar republics.

Below are the Learning Objectives (Bold Headings) and the Essential Knowledge (Check boxes) for Unit 5. Can you check all the boxes? Terms in bold are the required documents or the required SCOTUS cases. Pay close attention to them.

Describe the voting rights protections in the Constitution and in legislation.

- Legal protections found in federal legislation and the **Fifteenth, Seventeenth, Nineteenth, Twenty-Fourth, and Twenty-Sixth Amendments** relate to the expansion of opportunities for political participation.
Describe different models of voting behavior

- Examples of political models explaining voting behavior include:
  - Rational-choice voting—Voting based on what is perceived to be in the citizen’s individual interest
  - Retrospective voting—Voting to decide whether the party or candidate in power should be re-elected based on the recent past
  - Prospective voting—Voting based on predictions of how a party or candidate will perform in the future
  - Party-line voting—Supporting a party by voting for candidates from one political party for all public offices across the ballot

Explain the roles that individual choice and state laws play in voter turnout in elections.

- In addition to the impact that demographics and political efficacy can have on voter choice and turnout, structural barriers and type of election also affect voter turnout in the U.S., as represented by:
  - State voter registration laws
  - Procedures on how, when, and where to vote
  - Mid-term (congressional) or general presidential elections
  - Demographic characteristics and political efficacy or engagement are used to predict the likelihood of whether an individual will vote.

Factors influencing voter choice include:

- Party identification and ideological orientation
- Candidate characteristics
- Contemporary political issues
- Religious beliefs or affiliation, gender, race and ethnicity, and other demographic characteristics.

Describe linkage institutions.

- Linkage institutions are channels, such as the following, that allow individuals to communicate their preferences to policy-makers:
  - Parties
  - Interest Groups
  - Elections
  - Media

Explain the function and impact of political parties on the electorate and government.

- The functions and impact of political parties on the electorate and government are represented by:
  - Mobilization and education of voters
  - Party platforms
  - Candidate recruitment
  - Campaign management, including fundraising and media strategy
  - The committee and party leadership systems in legislatures

Explain why and how political parties change and adapt.

- Parties have adapted to candidate-centered campaigns, and their role in nominating candidates has been weakened.
- Parties modify their policies and messaging to appeal to various demographic coalitions.
- The structure of parties has been influenced by:
  - Critical elections and regional realignments
  - Campaign finance law
  - Changes in communication and data-management technology.
- Parties use communication technology and voter-data management to disseminate, control, and clarify political messages and enhance outreach and mobilization efforts.
Explain how structural barriers impact third-party and independent candidate success.
- In comparison to proportional systems, winner-take-all voting districts serve as a structural barrier to third-party and independent candidate success.
- The incorporation of third-party agendas into platforms of major political parties serves as a barrier to third-party and independent candidate success.

Explain the benefits and potential problems of interest-group influence on elections and policy making.
- Interest groups may represent very specific or more general interests, and can educate voters and office holders, draft legislation, and mobilize membership to apply pressure on and work with legislators and government agencies.
- In addition to working within party coalitions, interest groups exert influence through long-standing relationships with bureaucratic agencies, congressional committees, and other interest groups; such relationships are described as “iron triangles” and issue networks and they help interest groups exert influence across political party coalitions.

Explain how variation in types and resources of interest groups affects their ability to influence elections and policy making.
- Interest group influence may be impacted by:
  - Inequality of political and economic resources
  - Unequal access to decision makers
  - “Free rider” problem

Explain how various political actors influence public policy outcomes.
- Single-issue groups, ideological/social movements, and protest movements form with the goal of impacting society and policy making.
- Competing actors such as interest groups, professional organizations, social movements, the military, and bureaucratic agencies influence policy making, such as the federal budget process, at key stages and to varying degrees.
- Elections and political parties are related to major policy shifts or initiatives, occasionally leading to political realignments of voting constituencies.

Explain how the different processes work in a U.S. presidential election
- The process and outcomes in U.S. presidential elections are impacted by:
  - Incumbency advantage phenomenon
  - Open and closed primaries
  - Caucuses
  - Party conventions
  - Congressional and State elections
  - The Electoral College

Explain how the Electoral College impacts democratic participation.
- The winner-take-all allocation of votes per state (except Maine and Nebraska) under the setup of the Electoral College compared with the national popular vote for president raises questions about whether the Electoral College facilitates or impedes democracy.
Explain how the different processes work in U.S. congressional elections.
- The process and outcomes in U.S. Congressional elections are impacted by:
  - Incumbency advantage phenomenon
  - Open and closed primaries
  - Caucuses
  - General (presidential and mid-term) elections

Explain how campaign organizations and strategies affect the election process.
- The benefits and drawbacks of modern campaigns are represented by:
  - Dependence on professional consultants
  - Rising campaign costs and intensive fundraising efforts
  - Duration of election cycles
  - Impact of and reliance on social media for campaign communication and fundraising

Explain how the organization, finance, and strategies of national political campaigns affect the election process.
- Federal legislation and case law pertaining to campaign finance demonstrate the ongoing debate over the role of money in political and free speech, as set forth in:
  - Bipartisan Campaign Reform Act of 2002, which was an effort to ban soft money and reduce attack ads with “Stand by Your Ad” provision: “I’m [candidate’s name] and I approve this message”
  - Citizens United v. Federal Election Commission (2010), which ruled that political spending by corporations, associations, and labor unions is a form of protected speech under the First Amendment.
  - Debates have increased over free speech and competitive and fair elections related to money and campaign funding (including contributions from individuals, political action committees, and political parties).
  - Different types of political action committees (PACs) influence elections and policy making through fundraising and spending.

Explain the media’s role as a linkage institution.
- Traditional news media, new communication technologies, and advances in social media have profoundly influenced how citizens routinely acquire political information, including new events, investigative journalism, election coverage, and political commentary.
- The media’s use of polling results to convey popular levels of trust and confidence in government can impact elections by turning such events into “horse races” based more on popularity and factors other than qualifications and platforms of candidates.

Explain how increasingly diverse choices of media and communication outlets influence political institutions and behavior.
- Political participation is influenced by a variety of media coverage, analysis, and commentary on political events.
- The rapidly increasing demand for media and political communications outlets from an ideologically diverse audience have led to debates over media bias and the impact of media ownership and partisan news sites.
- The nature of democratic debate and level of knowledge among citizens is impacted by:
  - Increased media choices
  - Ideologically oriented programming
  - Consumer-driven media outlets and emerging technologies that reinforce existing beliefs
  - Uncertainty over the credibility of news sources and information