Where Do You Belong: The Reign of Pluralism in the United States Government

D'Andre Devon Lampkin
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D’Andre Lampkin

National University
Abstract

The purpose of this research project is to introduce readers to the term pluralism and its rise in American government. Pluralism is a philosophical term introduced in the course, Introduction to psychology. It is described as a relationship between individuals and governments, multiple government, and groups. This research project will endeavor to show that the United States government and its social contract is not one that serves the wants and needs of the individuals citizen, as the constitution suggest, but the wants and needs of powerful groups. It will also explore concepts of pluralism and attempt to describe how those concepts apply to the United States government while providing examples of individuals and contemporary organizations that facilitate the rise of pluralism in the United States.
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In the 1939 production of The Wizard of Oz, the wicked witch of the South confronts Dorothy and demands she returned the ruby red slippers once worn by the wicked witch of the East. Glinda, the Good Witch of the North defends Dorothy by telling the wicked witch of the South, “You have no power here! Be gone, before somebody drops a house on you, too!” Realizing Glinda was right, she threatened to get Dorothy and her “little dog too” and disappeared into a plum of red smoke. Did the wicked witch of the South, a woman who arrived to Oz by way of great powerful magic, commands a strong army, and demonstrates time and time again her master of wizardry, not have power in Oz because she was outnumbered or because she did not share the same interest as the people of Oz? The theory of social contracts assumes that the individuals come first and that many individuals acting together have the most power. As most people who saw the movie came to realize, despite all the disadvantages it was individuals acting as a group who ultimately destroyed the wicked witch, ensured the prosperity of Oz, and got Dorothy home. Today no one questions the rightful ownership of the slippers. Had the lion, tin man, and scarecrow been forced to act as individuals, the prospects for Dorothy to get home would have been impossible. They made a pact to work together in order to the interest of Oz remained intact even though the leader everyone revered was found to be a fraud. The drama perfectly illustrates a world where individuals are supposed to have ultimate say in how they will
be governed but are not able to make much change unless they band together in groups that have common interest in mind.

The philosophy of Pluralism implies that groups, not people acting as individuals, govern the United States. One cannot understand the theory of social contracts until they truly understand how decisions are made, power is wielded, and who really governs. (Wolff). The social contract theory developed by the United States government is said to be society that is formed by individuals who agree to live in harmony for mutual benefit with the assumption that decisions are based on collective agreement of said individuals. (Social Contract) The government has overtime fallen short of fulfilling these ideals as it has evolved into a government that only serves the wants and needs of interest groups and corporations.

The ideals of a social contract are very simple in that its main focus is mutual defense of rights and mutual decisions by deliberative assembly. (Ernest). In their writings, contemporary philosophers John Locke and Jean-Jacques Rousseau make note that nowhere in the original social contract does it mention the forming of representatives, agents, or officials. As Rousseau writes, “I therefore maintain that since sovereignty is merely the exercise of the general will, it can never be alienated, and that the sovereign, which is only a collective being, cannot be represented by anything but itself.” (Wolff). More specifically, because sovereignty implies an exercise of general will, no individuals’ ideas or will can be represented by anyone or anything
but him or herself. Everyone must equally participate in the process of creating laws in order to reaffirm with certainty that a democracy exist. To the contrary, the United States government is made up of representatives who are responsible for reflecting the ideals of individuals within their area or region of responsibility. As per the constitution, the House of Representatives creates and passes federal laws and is a part of the legislative branch. The number of representatives is proportionate to the number of citizens living in the 50 United States and they are tasked with representing the interest of each individual. Everyone is essentially lumped into a group who then elects the agent who will represent them. It is impossible for representatives to capture the wants and needs of every citizen residing in each jurisdiction. Therefore it is impossible to uphold the belief that an individual citizen can be in total agreement with the contractual obligations or laws governing him or her. It is also foolish to believe that voting alone will secure what you want from the government.

So if you do not have power as an individual, how do you gain the power to insure at least parts of your ideas are heard by the representatives? You need to figure out where you fit in. Imagine, you are asked to attend a conference meeting where you will have an opportunity to speak to the Chief Executive Officer about the future of the company. Prior to the meeting employees were asked to complete surveys to choose which research projects you would like to see the company take interest in. You are reassured that everyone’s opinion matters. When you enter the conference room, you see the Chief Executive Officer is standing in the center and the
employees are broken into three groups. The groups are making arguments to the Chief
Executive Officer why they believe their idea is the best. Unbeknown to you, prior to the
meeting, your coworkers met and discovered many of their ideas were similar and they had
better chances of having their ideas chosen by banding together. As you listen to the groups fight
for the attention of your business leader, you began to believe you can make sense of the
situation and shout at the Chief Executive Officer for his attention. When it becomes apparent
that he cannot hear your objections over the rest of the members, you turn to the Chief Executive
Officer’s secretary and ask which group you should stand in. The assistant advised you to stand
in the group that you most identify with. Only when you choose a group that mostly aligns with
your ideals will you began to have your ideas, at least in part, heard.

Everyone belongs to a group. If you think you don’t, then chances are you still haven’t figure out
why all of your political ideas have not become law. Although proponents of pluralism argue that
it is a system where power is evenly dispersed amongst citizens, it truly is a system where power
belongs to many groups. According to the Wolff, in a pluralist society, power is controlled by
professional associations, lobbyist, and coalitions of like-minded people. Rules are established
by bargaining and working out deals between groups with like-minded interest. The remaining
people who are not a part of the groups are merely bystanders hoping that their interests are
represented by those who are in power. The individuals who are doing the bargaining are broken
down into two groups: insider groups and outsider groups.
Corporations have power and can be closely described as insider groups. These groups have similar interest to the government and people in power. Some examples of insider groups include trade associations like the American Petroleum Institute. The American Petroleum Institute, or API for short, controls all import and export oil trade operations in the United States. Quite naturally they would bargain for both the interest of the United States government while ensuring their group controls and profits from all oil deals with the United States. Labor groups like the New York Taxi Workers Alliance lobby to bring better labor conditions to all laborers in general, especially unionized workers. Agricultural groups like the Institute for Agriculture and Trade Policy are typically comprised of various farming associations who promote the interest of general and specialty farming. Lastly, there are professional organizations who take on the responsibility of lobbying for and promoting the interest of their members. Perhaps we see the greatest example of the influence of interests groups today during discussions about gun control.

The National Rifle Association, or NRA, are often cited as influential in determining whether gun laws can or will be changed or the main opposition to changes in the Second Amendment of the United States Constitution. (Stephen).

Outsider groups tend to have less power and often consist of political action committees, also known as PACs and grassroots activist organizations. The political actions committees raise large sums of money to back political campaigns in an effort to place into power the person they believe will promote the groups interest. Grassroots activism groups like the Community
Coalition in South Los Angeles stage protest, rallies, and marches to bring attention to conditions they want to see changed. Both PACs and grassroots activist groups have less access to government officials and the power they do gain depends on how well they are known and how long they have been in existence.

Most philosophers would argue that we are all born into social classes that influence the types of groups we are destined to belong to. Ideas such as this were even illustrated by Earl Latham, professor of government, in the publication titled ‘The Declaration of Independence and The Constitution.’ As the New Deal became popular and the rise and power of labor unions increased, government officials cited communism as a way to scare of proponents who represented a majority. (Latham). Yet, the New Deal passed as labor unions were victorious in their lobbying efforts. Individuals alone lack power and the representatives who are responsible for insuring the power of individuals ultimately represent the ideas of the majority. Additionally, because they want to ensure they are reelected, they generally listen to the wants and needs of the majority they represent. The idea of the social contract cannot be upheld or enforced if those in the United States who do not agree in whole with the laws they do not agree with.
References


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