

Exam 1

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Question 1

Question

What is the difference between a representative democracy and a direct democracy. and where do we see examples of each in the American political system?

Answer

A direct democracy has the citizens participate directly in the government. In a representative Democracy, the people do not directly influence the government. The people instead will elect representatives (hence the name) that may be more familiar with the semantics of the government (Krutz et. al, 15). The idea is that these people will be more efficient in choosing what happens to the people of the government. There are examples of both types of democracy in the US.

The much more common form of democracy seen in the US is the representative democracy. At the federal level, both the senators (in the Senate) and representatives (in the House) are elected by the people. The people also partake in the election of the President, however this process involves a complex system known as the electoral college. In Illinois at the state level, there is a similar structure. The Governor is elected by popular vote, and instead of a house of representatives there is a general assembly. They accomplish much of the similar duties at the state level as opposed to the federal level. Even at the city level in Chicago, there is an elected mayor and aldermen and alderwomen which make up a city council. All of these are examples of governmental bodies run by representatives elected by the people (Krutz et. al, 16).

Examples of direct participation in democracy are few and far between in the US. One that immediately comes to mind is the New England town hall meeting (Krutz et. al, 16). These meetings allow people to discuss their problems and speak their stresses about what is happening in the town. These aspects exist outside of just New England. People are often encouraged to write to their senators to encourage support for a certain bill. This ensures that the senators have a connection with the people that they are supposed to represent.

Question 2

Question

What shortcomings of the Articles of Confederation was the Constitution of 1787 designed to fix, and did it?

Answer

The Articles of Confederation had many shortcomings which provided the early US with a weak central government which could not do much. Early foreign relations were a mess, as Congress had no power to impose tax on the people. This was because they feared taxing the people without fair representation (Krutz et. al 45). While this resulted in a small central government, it was way too small to be effective to any extent. One final problem was the supremacy of the state over the central government. This meant that when the federal government asked the states for money, they could deny that money. This led to an underfunded central government, which cannot get anything done.

The constitution fixed some problems simply by giving the government more powers. For example the problem of an underfunded government was solved by the ability by Congress the enumerated power to levy tax on the people. In order to prevent the fear of overstepping, the drafters of the constitution included the general welfare clause to indicate that no law should be passed which hurts the American people. The constitution was about balance, specifically with the state and central governments. This led to the supremacy clause of the constitution. This clause stated that the constitution would be the 'supreme' document of US law (Krutz et. al, 54). If any state law were to contradict a concept framed by the constitution, then the constitution's ruling should prevail. Even then, the framers believed this would create too big of a government. This makes sense, as the constitution could literally trump any single state law. The solution here is the creation of separate powers in the constitution which balance each other so neither end is too powerful and cannot infringe upon the rights of the states.

Question 3

Question

How has political culture been used to explain the evolution of American politics? Why is it impossible to use public opinion to explain that evolution?

Answer

The political culture is a set of rigid, shared views and judgements held by a group of people with regard to the system of politics. Public opinion on the other hand is not specific to the system of politics, it involves the people who participate in politics. People expressing their support for one president over another are expressing their public opinion, whereas people who demonstrate support (or lack thereof) for a certain bill may be expressing the current political culture. The public opinion is inherently fluid, so it changes rapidly and in many different ways. The political culture is much more rigid, but can change over longer periods of time.

The change in political culture can correspond with a change in ideals. If an event occurs which completely contradicts the views of people at the time, a shift is necessary in political view. The new political culture will reflect the needs of people in that time. One example is the shift in the structure of congress following the stock market crash of the late 1920s (Krutz et. al, 2003). Before the crash, many citizens had voted in Republican representatives and senators, this changed quickly however as the people felt the democratic party's policies had suited their needs better at the time. What did not matter was the people's fluid opinion on who the specific people were that were running the show. All that mattered to the people were what exactly was being done to ensure their suffering was minimized. The people did care in that time who was doing it, but overall it was more the policies that enticed the people rather than the specific people.