The Politics of Agenda-Building: An Alternative Perspective For Modern Democratic Theory

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The fall of the Weimar Republic and the rise of Nazi and fascist movements in the first half of the twentieth century sent out tremors that were to shake the very foundations of democratic thought. As a simple act of faith, democratic theorists had assumed that the common man had both the right and the ability to participate in his own governance. If given the opportunity, the overwhelming majority of people in any polity would presumedly be reasonable, relatively rational, and responsible political actors. Hitler's rise to political power in a constitutional system that had been scrupulously constructed to be a showpiece of democracy, coupled with the historically unparalleled rise of mass movements throughout the world, called this traditional democratic faith and trust in the common man seriously into question.

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Any remaining confidence was to be further rocked, if not destroyed, by the development of modern empirical research on public opinion and popular participation in those political systems that had long served as models of stable democracy. The classical theory of democracy required that "the electorate possess appropriate personality structure, that it be interested and participate in public affairs, that it be informed, that it be principled, that it correctly perceive political realities, that it engage in discussion, that it judge rationally and that it consider the community interests."[1] Systematic research over the past two decades has consistently revealed that these high standards and historically perceived requisites for democracy are not being met or even approached by any western democracy. Studies in the United States, for example, have revealed strong strains of authoritarianism, abiding prejudice, and low levels of tolerance in the general population.[2]

Most people tend to exhibit little interest in public affairs and few participate actively. In fact, in all but national elections, less than a majority even bother to vote.[3] This may be just as well in view of the abominable state of popular knowledge and information about political issues. Even among persons holding political opinions, it has been found that these opinions are often based on little or no factual information or knowledge. Studies of public opinion have further shown that, rather than seeking out diverse sources of information, people tend to screen out potentially dissonant information and to perceive political stimuli selectively in terms of preconceived notions. Similarly, if people discuss politics at all, they tend to converse only with those who are in fundamental agreement with their own views.[4] Thus, the classical assumption of popular compe-

[1]Bernard Berelson, "Democratic Theory and Public Opinion," *Public Opinion Quarterly*, 16 (Fall 1952), 329.

[2]James Prothro and Charles Grigg, "Fundamental Principles of Democracy: Bases of Agreement and Disagreement," *Journal of Politics*, 22 (May 1960), 276-294; and Herbert McClosky, "Consensus and Ideology in American Politics," *American Political Science Review*, 58 (June 1964), 361-362.

[3]Lester Milbrath, *Political Participation* (Chicago: Rand McNally, 1965), 19-22.

[4]Robert Lane and David Sears, *Public Opinion* (Englewood Cliffs: Prentice-Hall, 1964), 57-71.

tence has been demonstrated to be a myth even in those polities that seem to have been most successful at democratic government.

That "democratic governments continue to flourish and provide reasonably satisfactory governance for their citizens,"[5] despite the fact that the average citizen does not and perhaps cannot play the role that classical theorists would have him play, has presented political science with the problem of reconciling democratic theory with reality. This problem has been a major preoccupation of a number of theorists over the past two decades and has led to some rather heated controversies. The dominant theme emerging from these efforts to reconcile theory and reality has been characterized as "democratic elitism" or "the elitist theory of democracy."[6] Here the focus of attention is shifted from political man to the political system, and logical priorities are reversed.

Whereas in classical thought the role of the individual or average citizen was a central question, that role has now become secondary and dependent; the primary concern is now with the social (not the individual) requisites of stable, effective, and reasonably responsive government. From this perspective, the low levels of interest and participation may be seen not as a malady or a blemish, but as a symptom of the basic soundness of the system and as positive evidence of an underlying confidence in the government and general satisfaction with existing circumstances. As Lester Milbrath suggests, "there is doubt that the society as a whole would benefit if intense and active involvement in politics became widespread throughout the population."[7] Thus, widespread, active in-

[5]Milbrath, *Political Participation,* 143.

[6]Perhaps it would be more appropriate to call the theory one of pluralistic democratic elitism. For convenience, we will use the term "modern democratic theory." What we are talking about is not really a theory, but at most, only a partial theory. Statements on this theory include: Seymour Lipset, *Political Man* (Garden City: Doubleday, 1960); Seymour Lipset, *The First New Nation* (Garden City: Doubleday, 1967); Joseph Schumpeter, *Capitalism, Socialism, and Democracy* (New York: Harper, 1942); V. O. Key, *Public Opinion and American Democracy* (New York: Knopf, 1961); V. O. Key, *The Responsible Electorate* (Cambridge: Belknap, 1966); Robert Dahl, *Who Governs?* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1961); and Robert Dahl, *A Preface to Democratic Theory* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1956).

[7]Milbrath, *Political Participation,* 147.

terest and participation, once seen as a requisite for a stable, effectively functioning democracy, become indicators of a faltering and potentially unstable system. The revised requisites become: (1) social pluralism, (2) diverse and competing elites that are circulating and accessible, (3) a basic consensus at least among the elites on the rules of democratic competition, and (4) elections that provide regular opportunities for citizens to participate in the selection of public officials. The discredited notion that government involves the active participation of the population is not, however, to be discarded. It is a myth that is functional for the system. Again quoting Milbrath:

> it is important to continue moral admonishment for citizens to become active in politics, not because we want or expect great masses of them to become active, but rather because the admonishment helps keep the system open and sustains the belief in the right of all to participate, which is an important norm governing the behavior of political elites.[8]

There can be no doubt that the revised theory is empirically more viable as a descriptive statement of functioning democracies than is classical theory. By focusing at the systems level, the revised theory can reasonably explain phenomena that must be regarded as anomalies in classical theory. In fact, from the systemic point of view, it is possible to demonstrate in a fairly compelling fashion that the often ill-formed and irrational decisions of individual voters add up to a highly rational and responsible collective choice.[9]

Systems of Limited Participation

As the revised theory has increasingly assumed the status of conventional wisdom, the type and range of the major questions upon which attention is concentrated have changed. Questions of stability, characteristics of elites, and internal governmental decision making have become paramount. Classical questions about the distribution of influence, equality of access, individual freedom

[8] *Ibid.*, 152.
[9] Key, *Responsible Electorate,* passim.

and self-actualization through political participation have become less important. Even the most sanguine interpretations of existing democracies by contemporary theorists, however, admit that control and access is unevenly distributed in the population. As Robert Dahl writes:

> I do not know how to quantify this control, but if it could be quantified I suppose it would be no exaggeration to say that Mr. Henry Luce has a thousand or ten thousand times greater control over the alternatives scheduled for debate and tentative decision at a national election than I do . . . It is a reasonable preliminary hypothesis that the number of individuals who exercise significant control over the alternatives scheduled is . . . only a tiny fraction of the total membership.[10]

Despite this acknowledgment, most contemporary theorists have exhibited relatively little formal concern with the scope of participation and influence in the determination of political alternatives. Attention is concentrated on those who do influence key decisions and how that influence is exercised. Yet E. E. Schattschneider admonishes us that narrow participation in the selection of political alternatives will reinforce existing biases in the polity and undermine its long-run stability.[11] He contends that participation in the arena of conflict where political alternatives are determined is highly restricted. Referring to this arena as the pressure system, he characterizes it as "essentially the politics of small groups. . . . The flaw in the pluralist heaven is that the heavenly chorus sings with a strong upper class accent. Probably 90 per cent of the population cannot get into the pressure system."[12]

The pressure system is thus limited to "legitimate" groups, that is, those that have already gained access to the political arena. Entry into the pressure system for previously excluded groups may require extra-legal action or behavior outside the legitimate "rules of the game." As Gamson has written:

> the American political system normally operates to prevent incipient

[10]Dahl, *Democratic Theory*, 72-73.

[11]E. E. Schattschneider, *The Semi-Sovereign People* (New York: Holt, 1960), 97-142.

[12]*Ibid.*, 35.

> competitors from achieving full entry into the political arena. Far from there being built-in mechanisms which keep the system responsive, such groups win entry only through the breakdown of the normal operation of the system or through demonstration on the part of challenging groups of a willingness to violate the "rules of the game" by resorting to illegitimate means.[13]

This greatly restricts the types of issues and conflicts that can develop over scarcities in the system. Those who have the greatest needs are ordinarily not included in the pressure system, and it therefore does not accurately reflect the basic conflicts throughout society. As Gamson notes: "This results in a situation in which large numbers of citizens are outside the political arena in which competition and influence occur; . . . This situation can be described as one of stable unrepresentation . . . [and] the normal operation of the political system serves to amplify the power of those groups who already possess it."[14]

Stable unrepresentation suggests a bias in the selection of those issues and demands that will be considered in a political system, and raises important, but largely unexamined, questions about ways in which issues are selected and resolved. Thus, the question of the distribution of influence is raised again, but now the question relates not to influence over decisions, but to influence over the range and types of alternatives considered.

Reactions to Systems of Limited Participation

While the revised theory of democracy serves to resolve one intellectual crisis (viz., that of reconciling theory with reality), it has created another—a threefold crisis that has practical as well as intellectual implications. The first aspect of this crisis may be called a *prescriptive crisis.* Classical democratic theory sought to serve as both a descriptive statement and a normative prescription. As a normative theory, it provided a goal and relatively clear-cut criteria for evaluating progress towards that goal. Most contemporary theorists would not contend that their theory is more than descriptive.

[13]William Gamson, "Stable Unrepresentation in American Society," *American Behavioral Scientist,* 12 (November-December 1968), 18.

[14]*Ibid.,* 19.

Nonetheless, the theory undermines the very criteria that gave classical theory its potency as a normative goal. Inasmuch as modern democratic thought has replaced classical theory, there is a danger that it too will be elevated to serve a normative as well as a descriptive function. Because the modern theory of democracy was developed only as descriptive theory, it perhaps "unwittingly purveys an ideology of social conservatism tempered by modest incremental change."[15] In other words, as the basis for evaluative criteria the theory has a strongly conservative bias. "By revising the theory to bring it into closer correspondence with reality, the elitist theorists have transformed democracy from a radical into a conservative political doctrine, stripping away its distinctive emphasis on popular political activity so that it no longer serves as a set of ideals towards which society ought to be striving."[16]

Thus, the theory can become little more than a rationalization for existing conditions. In shifting the focus away from individual and popular participation to the systemic level, the theory certainly invites at least the implicit introduction of new evaluative criteria or goals; namely, those of stability and efficiency. Thus, "on its face, it would appear that the democrat is left with a Hobson's choice: a theory which is normatively sound but unrealistic, or a theory which is realistic but heavily skewed toward elitism."[17]

The second problem with the modern theory of democracy is related to the first and may be called a *crisis of relevance*. Because the theory simply describes existing systems and provides an explanation of the normal functions of the conventional political machinery of these systems, it provides no guidelines for social change and no direction for political action. By concentrating on "the maintenance of democratic stability, the preservation of democratic procedures, and the creation of machinery which would produce efficient administration and coherent policies,"[18] it forces us to view major so-

[15]David Easton, "The New Revolution in Political Science," *American Political Science Review*, 63 (December 1969), 1052.

[16]Jack Walker, "A Critique of the Elitist Theory of Democracy," *American Political Science Review*, 60 (June 1966), 288.

[17]Peter Bachrach, *The Theory of Democratic Elitism: A Critique* (Boston: Little, Brown, 1967), 99.

[18]Walker, "Elitist Theory," 293.

cial conflicts and social movements as aberrations rather than as a normal part of political life. This does not "help political science reach out to the real needs of mankind in a time of crisis."[19] It provides neither the knowledge nor the perspective necessary for social action. Dramatic innovation, mobilization, and violence are the frequent companions of social change, even in democratic systems. It is insufficient to regard these as simply disruptive influences or precipitants of crises in the normal operations of democracy. Ironically, in a time when all of these problems loom large and cry out for solution, our revised theory of democracy offers no guidance.

To the protesting students throughout the world who are saying "the existing system—the power structure—is hypocritical, unworthy of respect, outmoded and in urgent need of reform," who "speak of repression, manipulation and authoritarianism," and who complain "about being suffocated by the subtle tyranny of the Establishment,"[20] the theory says nothing and even fails to recognize their concerns. At a time when students, blacks, and other minority groups are rebelling against centralized power and demanding full participation—"not merely the consent of the governed but the involvement of the governed,"[21] modern theorists suggest that "participatory democracy" may be anathema to stable democratic government and by default seem to accept stable unrepresentation or underrepresentation as a natural, if not necessary, condition. To urgent questions like how the priorities of a democratic system can be altered or changed, how the system can be mobilized to meet the pressing demands of a decaying environment, overpopulation, and the full recognition and acceptance of the civil rights of all men, the theory is silent in content and largely devoid of useful inferences.

The third major aspect of the general crisis of democratic theory is closely related to the second and may be called a *crisis of research guidance*. As a research paradigm, modern theory directs attention to an important and perhaps insufficiently examined range of phe-

[19]Easton, "New Revolution," 1052.

[20]Kenneth Keniston, "You Have to Grow Up in Scarsdale to Know How Bad Things Really Are," *The New York Times Magazine*, April 27, 1969, 127.

[21]*Ibid.*, 130.

nomena. In so doing, however, it tends to dictate research priorities and prescribe both the type and range of phenomena to be considered. It is not that the questions it leads us to ask are unimportant, but rather that it leads us away from other important questions which thus tend not to be explored. For example, modern theory leads us to ask what functions for the system are performed by different levels of participation, but not how participation may serve the individual. It leads us to explore the exercise of power in decision-making situations, but to overlook "the equally, if not more important area of what . . . (may be) called nondecisionmaking, that is, the practice of limiting the scope of actual decisionmaking to 'safe' issues by manipulating the dominant community values, myths, and political institutions and procedures."[22] It directs our attention to the consensual basis of conflict management and to the incremental character of normal political decision making, but it ignores or treats as aberrant conditions violence and the threat of violence. Both can be important political resources for spurring social change even in a relatively stable democratic system.

While modern theory directs our attention to the ubiquitous nature of elites and their critical role in the direction of a polity, it fails to specify the points in the system at which the masses may participate in the shaping and determination of major policy issues and the conditions under which they may do so. Consequently, contemporary political science perspectives do not enable political scientists to cope with or explain how at some particular time a previously dormant issue can be transformed into a highly salient political controversy when the basis of the grievance has existed for some time: one example is the pollution problem.

An Alternative Perspective

The inevitable biases in the revised theory of democracy have provoked several scholars to react to the crises discussed above. Peter Bachrach, for example, has attempted to fill the prescriptive vacuum created by the debunking of classical democratic theory.

[22]Peter Bachrach and Morton Baratz, *Power and Poverty* (New York: Oxford, 1970), 18.

By making political norms applicable to all sectors of society where authoritative decisions are made regarding the allocation of values significant to the society, he has attempted to revitalize and give new meaning to the norm of participation and to reassert the social and individual value of the active involvement of citizens in the processes that affect their lives.[23] The so-called post-behavioralist or neo-traditionalist movement represents a response to the crisis of relevance.[24] Here the emphasis is on attempting to address major contemporary problems as systematically as possible, not shirking from trying to provide the best available guidance for social change, even without all the knowledge that might be desired. Perhaps the most significant response, however, has come with respect to the third crisis, the crisis of research guidance.

This response is predicated on four fairly elementary observations which most modern democratic theorists acknowledge but tend not to develop. First, the distribution of influence and access in any system has inherent biases. Consequently, the system will operate to the favor of some and to the disadvantage of others. As Dahl observes:

> in all human organizations there are significant variations in the participation in political decisions—variations which in the United States appear to be functionally related to such variables as concern or involvement, skill, access, socio-economic status, education, residence, age, ethnic and religious identifications, and some little understood personality characteristics.[25]

The second observation follows from the first and notes that the range of issues and alternative decisions that will be considered by a polity is restricted. This restriction arises from two sources. The first is a systems imperative and is predicated on the fact that the processing and attention capabilities of any human organization are necessarily limited. The second source of restriction is that "all forms of political organization have a bias in favor of the exploita-

[23]Bachrach, *Democratic Elitism*, passim.

[24]See, for example, Easton, "New Revolution," 1051-1061; or Michael Haas and Henry Kariel, eds., *Approaches to the Study of Political Science* (San Francisco: Chandler, 1970).

[25]Dahl, *Democratic Theory*, 71-72.

tion of some kinds of conflict and the suppression of others because *organization is the mobilization of bias.* Some issues are organized into politics while others are organized out."[26]

Since the existing bias of a political system both reflects and legitimizes the prevailing balance of power among organized groups, it follows that the range and type of issues and alternatives considered will represent the interests and most salient concerns of previously legitimized political forces. Assuming that the popular balance of forces is subject to change, priorities in the system that determine the issues and alternatives will always lag behind the ongoing struggle for influence; thus, old issues will always tend to command the most prominent positions in formal political deliberations.

Flowing from the above, the third observation is that the system's inertia makes it extremely difficult to change the prevailing bias that determines which issues and alternatives are viewed as legitimate concerns of the polity. As Walker has observed: "The agenda of controversy, the list of questions which are recognized by the active participants in politics as legitimate subjects of attention and concern, is very hard to change."[27] Thus, in any system there is a strong bias in favor of existing arrangements and agenda questions; and the legal machinery of that system is designed and operates to reinforce and defend that bias.

> Power groups of the status quo may use legality and the police to maintain privileges and social norms that no longer reflect the real bargaining relations among groups. This is especially likely when their legitimate social assets are weakening and when their interests are undergoing serious challenge. . . . Whoever is advantaged by the law in his bargaining relationships with others will seek to maintain a doctrine of legality; he will assert the automatic enforceability of 'the letter of the law' and may seek to buttress some laws by new laws which narrow or foreclose the gambits of future discretion.[28]

The contemporary commonplace appeal for "law and order"

[26]Schattschneider, *Semi-Sovereign People,* 71.

[27]Walker, "Elitist Theory," 292.

[28]H. L. Nieburg, "Violence, Law, and the Informal Polity," *Journal of Conflict Resolution,* 13 (June 1969), 200.

may then be seen not only as reflecting a desire for peace, stability, and predictability but also and perhaps more importantly as a bargaining ploy to protect the advantage of previously legitimized interests. Understandably then, established interests may be willing to change and to consider previously excluded issues and demands only under the threat of a severe disruption of prevailing conditions. To make such a threat both credible and visible, underrepresented or unrepresented groups may have to demonstrate a willingness to use extra-legal or even illegal means, such as resorting to violence. As Bachrach and Baratz observe: "Subordinate groups, because of their insufficient power resources in relationship to the restrictive political system, are often unable to convert their demands for change into important political issues. As their grievances grow . . . such groups not uncommonly back their demands by the threat of violence or by actual violence."[29] The likelihood of success in such outbursts is not high; indeed they may even result in a repressive response from the affected decision makers. It is one of the few resources, however, that deprived groups lacking other means of access to the system can utilize. As Walker has noted: "Through such [violent] trials, as tumultuous as they may be, the agenda of controversy, the list of acceptable, 'key' issues may be changed."[30]

The fourth and final observation is simply a recognition based on the first three observations: namely, that pre-political, or at least pre-decisional, processes are often of the most critical importance in determining which issues and alternatives are to be considered by the polity and which choices will probably be made. What happens in the decision-making councils of the formal institutions of government may do little more than recognize, document, and legalize, if not legitimize, the momentary results of a continuing struggle of forces in society at large. To understand the dynamics of democracy, it is thus necessary to consider what Nieburg calls the "informal polity, which underlies and gives vitality to the formal institutions of the social process."[31]

From this perspective, the critical question is how an issue or a

[29]Bachrach and Baratz, *Power and Poverty*, 105.
[30]Walker, "Elitist Theory," 294.
[31]Nieburg, "Violence," 196.

demand becomes or fails to become the focus of concern and interest within a polity. In other words, how does an issue come to be viewed as an important and appropriate subject of attention? How does it come to command a position on the agenda of legitimate political controversy or how is it denied that status? Clearly, agenda status is attained through a fairly elaborate process and will not necessarily result from any single decision or action. In fact, the fate of an issue may hinge as much on "nondecisions" as on formal decision-making. Nondecision-making has been described as the process "by which demands for change in the existing allocation of benefits and privileges in a community can be suffocated before they are even voiced; or kept covert; or killed before they gain access to the relevant decisionmaking arena."[32]

Through the manipulation of bias and prevailing values, those who wield power may stifle, or reinterpret an issue and thus prevent it from gaining agenda status. Clearly, an advantaged group is tactically remiss if it fails to seek minimal accommodation—within the acceptable bounds of its interests—with groups presenting issues that are otherwise likely candidates to become agenda items on their own. Thus, under normal circumstances, prevailing social forces will follow something like the "rule of anticipated reaction,"[33] claiming the right to interpret the demands of subordinate groups, and acting accordingly. The effect is to deny the subordinate group full entry into the pressure system by denying it the basis of a claim to legitimacy and to preserve the general content of and control over the existing agenda. In the words of Walker: "It is in this constellation of influences and anticipated reactions, 'the peculiar mobilization of bias' in the community, fortified by a general consensus of elites, that determines the agenda of controversy."[34]

There is a growing awareness on the part of deprived groups concerning the importance of crystallizing their objectives into clear proposals so that they can claim agenda status. Indeed, in the continuing struggle to assure equality to blacks, some have realized that

[32]Bachrach and Baratz, *Power and Poverty*, 44.

[33]Carl Friedrich, *Constitutional Government and Democracy* (Boston: Ginn and Company, 1946), 589-590.

[34]Walker, "Elitist Theory," 292.

inclusion of the issue on an agenda is a prerequisite for any type of ameliorative action upon it. This can be seen in the following appeal: "Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr. once said, 'I have a dream,' but today he is history. Black students today will not come to you and say, 'We have a dream.' We have an agenda. At the top of our agenda is an end to racism and its immediate manifestation, white skin privilege."[35]

Given the overwhelming importance of such problems in the contemporary world, it is imperative that political scientists develop perspectives from which they can deal more adequately with these phenomena. One means of developing such a perspective is to focus on the notion of agenda, as alluded to earlier by other analysts. A perspective could then be developed that focuses on the ways in which groups articulate grievances and transform them into viable issues that require decision makers to provide some type of ameliorative response.

THE POLITICS OF AGENDA-BUILDING

In its most elementary form, we are raising the basic question of where public-policy issues come from. We are concerned with how issues are created and why some controversies or incipient issues come to command the attention and concern of decision makers, while others fail. In other words, we are asking what determines the agenda for political controversy within a community. How is an agenda built, (i.e., how is an issue placed on it), and who participates in the process of building it? Assuming that the balance of social forces influencing, if not controlling, the content of the political agenda at any point in time is necessarily biased to the advantage of some and the disadvantage of others, how may this balance be changed and with what consequences?

It should be noted that we have used the term "agenda" to refer to a general set of political controversies that will be viewed as falling within the range of legitimate concerns meriting the attention of the polity. This, of course, is only one meaning of the term

[35]David Anderson, Philip Parkman, Ardina Seward, and Robert Scott, "An Agenda for Involvement," *The MBA*, 7 (April-May 1970), 34.

"agenda." It may also be used to denote a set of concrete items scheduled for active and serious consideration by a particular institutional decision-making body. Examples would be legislative calendars or the docket of a court. Such institutional agendas, as well as what may be called the systemic agenda for political controversy, are the major focuses of pre-decisional political processes. Of primary concern is the relation between the two types of agendas.

The systemic agenda will always be more abstract, more general, and broader in scope and domain than any given institutional agenda. Moreover, the priorities in this systemic agenda will not necessarily correspond to the priorities in institutional agendas. There may be, in fact, considerable discrepancy between them. It may be offered as a general hypothesis that the greater the disparity between the two types of agendas, the greater the intensity and frequency of conflict within the political system.

Because of the inertia present in any system, institutional agendas will always lag to some extent behind the more general systemic agenda. This means that there will be a modicum of social conflict in even the most responsive and harmonious system. The extent of this lag will be magnified in periods of severe system discontinuities such as depression, war, and technological change. If the lag becomes too great, the system will cease to function effectively and may even be destroyed. Thus, a corollary of our earlier proposition is that the viability of a polity is a direct function of its ability to cope with the lag between the two types of agendas and to keep the magnitude of the lag within tolerable limits. This arises from the fact that legitimacy, unlike legality, is always conditional and must be earned and sustained if the system is to retain popular confidence and vitality.

Sources of Bias in Institutional Agendas

The composition of institutional agendas will vary over periods of time. There are, however, consistent and identifiable biases in all agendas which limit both the types of questions that will be considered and the groups and interests that will be heard. One prominent source of such a bias is the tendency of decision makers to give priority to "older items." These items include those that have

previously reached the agenda but that either have never been resolved or having been resolved are subject to periodic alteration. The recurrence of the medical care issue on the congressional agenda throughout the 1950s and early 1960s until its passage is an illustration of the former, and the history of Social Security legislation is an example of the latter. "Older items" tend to dominate institutional agendas that are necessarily limited by time and the attention capacity of decision makers. The net effect is that it is very difficult to get "new issues" on the agenda.

A second source of bias in institutional agendas is the decision makers themselves. For an issue to attain agenda status, it must command the support of at least some key decision makers, for they are the ultimate guardians of the formal agenda. It must always be remembered that political leaders are active participants in the agenda-building process and not simply impartial arbiters of disputes. As Bauer, Pool, and Dexter note with respect to Congress: "Congress is not a passive body, registering already-existent public views forced on its attention by public pressures. Congress, second only to the president, is, rather the major institution for initiating and creating political issues and projecting them into a national civic debate."[36]

The strategic location of these leaders not only assures them of media visibility when they want to promote an issue, but it also places them in an excellent position to bargain with other decision makers over the content of an institutional agenda. Because they have fairly direct control over what will appear on the institutional agenda and considerable freedom to choose among the many issues competing for attention, they can insist that an issue of concern to them be considered in return for agreement to consider a dispute that is important to another decision maker or set of decision makers.

It is easy then to understand why access to one or more key officials is so important to political groups. As Truman notes: "The development and improvement of such access is a common denominator of the tactics of all of them, frequently leading to efforts to ex-

[36]Raymond Bauer, Ithiel Pool, and Lewis Dexter, *American Business and Public Policy* (New York: Atherton, 1963), 478.

clude competing groups from equivalent access or to set up new decision points access to which can be monopolized by a particular group."[37] Some groups have a greater ease of access than others and are thus more likely to get their demands placed on an agenda than others.

Differential responsiveness thus arises from a variety of factors. First, the decision maker may be indebted to a particular group or identify himself as a member of that group. Second, some groups have more resources than others or are better able to mobilize those resources. Third, some groups are located so strategically in the social or economic structure of society that their interests cannot be ignored (e.g., big business, agriculture). Fourth, some groups are held in greater public esteem than others and thus can command greater access to decision makers (e.g., doctors, lawyers, church leaders). As a consequence, certain groups are more likely than others to receive attention from decision makers when they present new demands. Farmers have an inherent advantage over minority groups in getting the system to respond positively to their needs because there are many decision makers who identify with farm groups and the pivotal position of agriculture in the American economy.

The biases reflected by decision makers will not necessarily be uniform across different governmental units. A group may encounter different types of responses from various levels and/or branches of the government. When the National Association for the Advancement of Colored Peoples first started to press its demands, it focused on the Congress and the Presidency, but received no support. The group was much more effective, however, when it focused on a judicial strategy of making gains in civil rights through a series of court cases. Thus, differential responsiveness may result from the type of governmental unit petitioned as well as from differences among groups themselves.

In addition to direct access to decision makers, access to political-party organizations and the media are important resources for a group seeking to promote an interest. Political parties play a

[37]David Truman, *The Governmental Process* (New York: Knopf, 1964), 264.

significant role in translating issues into agenda items. To assure support they often seek out and identify themselves with issues that are important to large portions of the populace. Typically these issues are presented in general terms and with considerable ambiguity in the party platform. However,

> . . . the significance of preparing a platform lies primarily in evidence that the negotiations provide concerning what groups will have access to the developing national party organization . . . Interest group leaders are aware that the real settlement of the issues they are concerned with . . . will take place later; in the platform, they seek tentative assurance of a voice in that settlement. To maximize this assurance, political interest groups normally seek recognition in the platform of both main parties.[38]

Certainly, recognition on a party platform is at least indicative that an issue has attained standing on the systemic agenda of political controversy.

The media can also play a very important role in elevating issues to the systemic agenda and increasing their chances of receiving consideration on institutional agendas. Certain personages in the media can act as opinion leaders in bringing publicity to a particular issue. Examples of persons who have exhibited this ability to enlarge the audience of a dispute include Walter Lippman, Jack Anderson, and Drew Pearson. In addition, other persons who have acquired an audience simply by constantly appearing in the news can effectively publicize an issue. Ralph Nader, for example, has a ready-made constituency stemming from his many attacks on various inefficient and unscrupulous business practices.

Sources of Bias in the Systemic Agenda

The problem confronted by any newly-formed or newly-mobilized group is often more that of legitimizing the group and the interest it represents than that of legitimizing a particular issue position. The legitimacy of the group will be greatly enhanced by the status and community standing of its members. In other words, people without resources (e.g., lower-income groups) will have

[38] *Ibid.*, 285.

greater difficulty attaining legitimacy than their higher-status counterparts. The antiwar movement, for example, initially promoted by student groups who traditionally have little political standing, received little public support until more socially prominent persons and groups entered the fray (e.g., business groups, military leaders, clergymen, and senators).

Even if an issue is promoted by a group that is perceived to be legitimate, its appearance on an institutional agenda may be problematic because of the cultural constraints on the range of issues that are considered legitimate topics for governmental action. The question of federal aid to education, for example, was long considered by many to be an inappropriate area for federal governmental action, a fact that precluded active and serious consideration of the merits of the issue for decades. Legitimizing issues that are considered to be outside the governmental realm is difficult and will normally require an extended period of time to change. The net effect of this is that new demands, particularly those of disadvantaged or deprived groups, are the least likely to receive attention on either the systemic agenda of controversy or the institutional agenda.

Implications for Democratic Theory

It has been suggested that the processes of agenda-building are a critical, but largely unexamined, aspect of democratic politics. What implications does this often overlooked dimension of political behavior have for democratic theory? At least three important implications go to the very heart of modern democratic thought. They center on: 1) the social requisites of democratic rule, 2) the nature of popular participation, and 3) the prospects for social change. These implications serve not so much to refute existing theory as to extend and elaborate it.

With respect to the social requisites of democratic rule, modern theory correctly recognizes that the stability of a democratic system depends heavily on the social context in which it operates. Thus, modern theory typically emphasizes the importance of social pluralism which serves at least two vital functions. First, it permits the operation of a laisser-faire system of social checks and balances that

tends to prevent any single group or interest from totally dominating the system. Second, through overlapping group memberships and cross-cutting solidarities, social pluralism acts to mitigate the intensity of conflict and to prevent the superimposition of one conflict upon another.

Note that these social precursors are seen primarily as providing a setting in which democratic government can operate—a setting that promotes the stability of the overall system. Stability is of paramount importance, and attention is focused upon social *conditions* but not on the social *processes* that impinge upon and determine the concerns of political decision makers. Moreover, modern theory tends to overlook the inherent bias that will be present in any system and does little to explain how this bias developed and how it might be changed. Further, by taking the setting as a given, it posits an essentially static social environment and tends to ignore the mutual interdependence of social and political processes. The agenda-building perspective, however, alerts us to the importance of the environing social processes in determining what occurs at the decision-making stage and what types of policy outcomes will be produced. These processes are very strongly related to the question of bias in the system and to the range of issues that will be considered legitimate items of public controversy. The agenda-building perspective further assumes an inextricable and mutually interdependent relation between the concerns generated in the social environment and the vitality of the governmental process.

With respect to the nature of *popular participation*, modern theory has correctly noted that direct participation in the decision making of a large-scale democracy is necessarily limited. Nonetheless, modern theory insists upon the importance of providing the opportunity for widespread mass involvement at fairly frequent intervals. As Dahl has noted: "The election is the critical technique for insuring that governmental leaders will be relatively responsive to non-leaders."[39]

The agenda-building perspective, however, suggests that the importance of popular participation may go well beyond simply voting or participating in the selection of political leaders. It em-

[39]Dahl, *Democratic Theory*, 125.

phasizes the crucial role that various publics may play in shaping the very substance of governmental decisions. It thus reopens what Litt has called "a fundamental, although ancient, question of political analysis, namely, the extent to which politics is merely a device for determining the composition of the governing entity and the extent to which it is a device for evolving new and durable mechanisms for distributing more fully the social goods of a society."[40]

By its very nature, participation in the agenda-building process is open and widespread. Such involvement may be more important to the long-run stability of the system than electoral participation. While elections may fortify the short-term stability of a system, this will be of little value if the content of formal agendas does not reflect the substance of the systemic agenda or is not responsive to changes in the latter. As Litt notes: "The failure of the policy elites to channel participation into creative institutions producing more social valuables in tax, welfare, and employment policies will produce the violent outbursts that undermine polity and the aspirations of its disadvantaged members."[41]

Thus, modern democratic theory suggests minimal popular participation, while the agenda-building framework makes allowances for continuing mass involvement. In the latter, passive acceptance of the prevailing conditions is a critical input, fortifying the existing mobilization of bias, and limiting the development and formulation of public-policy issues. Mass participation, moreover, is viewed as one of the major innovative forces in developing new issues and redefining "old" issues that have remained on the formal agenda for some time. In sum, the agenda-building perspective serves to broaden the range of recognized influences on the public policy-making process.

In its perspective on *social change*, modern democratic theory tends to portray a politics of accommodation that permits incremental response to new demands and slow but ordered social change. As Litt notes: "the essence of accommodation politics . . .

[40]Edgar Litt, *Beyond Pluralism: Ethnic Politics in America* (Glenview, Illinois: Scott Foresman, 1970), 153.

[41]*Ibid.*, 154.

[is] an underlying consensus on the enduring stability of pluralistic politics . . . [It is] a slack system designed to produce selective change within a seemingly stable social order."[42] Problems are dealt with in a piecemeal fashion and those changes that occur never depart markedly from the existing situation. Modern theory says little about the prospects for major social innovation within a democratic framework. It scarcely acknowledges the possibility that major social movements may help "to break society's logjams, to prevent ossification in the political system, to prompt and justify major innovations in social policy and economic organization."[43]

An agenda-building framework, on the other hand, allows us to begin to cope more effectively with the problems of social change and does not presume that existing conditions are the necessary basis or point of departure for all social change. It helps provide an understanding of why major change normally occurs only under conditions of widespread mobilization or "crisis politics." From the agenda-building perspective, for example, it is easy to understand how and why "the riots of the past few summers have caused individual local crises and have collectively led to a sense of national crisis, triggering a concern about the accommodation and political style of urban Negroes . . . Negro demands, although often blocked on the local level, are rechanneled, through leadership and the creation of crises, to the national level."[44]

Implications for Practical Politics

By ignoring the agenda-building process, modern theory may inadvertently foster the view that democratic politics is by necessity more static than it is. This may contribute to despair, frustration, and anger on the part of those who have no apparent means of redressing their grievances or demands. Lacking formal influence or access to the centers of governmental authority, dissident elements may resort to anomic behavior ranging from total withdrawal to violent displays of rage. Although such anomic action may promote general social awareness of the grievance, it can be counter-produc-

[42] *Ibid.*, 157.
[43] Walker, "Elitist Theory," 294.
[44] Litt, *Beyond Pluralism*, 105-106.

tive from an agenda-building point of view and may hamper the mobilization of bias necessary to achieve systemic agenda status. For example, the expressed willingness of groups such as the Black Panthers to embrace violence to protect their interests has probably promoted greater repression and alienated considerable potential support among both blacks and whites.

Nonetheless, violence and the threat of violence remain one of the few political resources available to deprived and disadvantaged groups. It is often their only weapon in the social bargaining process and thus their only vehicle for wresting concessions from more advantaged groups. It is also one of the few means available for commanding attention and giving visibility to their grievances. Almost every major social change and nearly every alteration of the range of groups represented in the American polity has been accompanied by some measure of violence,[45] and we can surely anticipate a continued employment of violence or threats of violence as long as access to the systemic and institutional agendas is restricted.

If a democratic system is to survive and major changes are to occur without full-scale revolution, it is essential that the principal forces for change participate in shaping the agenda of legitimate controversy. Once a grievance reaches this system agenda, formal consideration on a governmental agenda is likely, if not inevitable. This is not to say that the process will necessarily be rapid. Even the most urgent grievances may linger for years before ameliorative action is forthcoming. The wheels of democracy grind slowly, but they can be accelerated through popular participation.

Conclusion

A considerable portion of modern political inquiry has been devoted to the problem of reconciling classical theory with empirical reality. One product of this effort is considerable knowledge about the nature of popular participation and the requisites of stable and effective institutions. Contemporary research tells us little, however, about how these requisite conditions are attained and sustained over time.

[45]Jerome Skonick, *The Politics of Protest* (Washington, D.C.: U.S. Government Printing Office, 1969), passim.

In response to the recognition of this gap in our theoretical understanding and to the need to speak to pressing contemporary problems, the elements of a fledgling theory have begun to appear. Utilizing notions that have been traditionally viewed as predecisional, if not pre-political, we have suggested that a constellation of social forces shapes the concerns of a polity and affects its ultimate vitality. To integrate the diverse elements that appear to be of consequence, one must focus on the institutional and systemic agendas that delineate the legitimate social concerns and prescribe the issues that are to command the active attention of political decision makers.