

Pluralism is the theory that a multitude of groups, not the people as a whole, govern the United States.

- ↳ These organizations, which include unions, trade and professional associations, environmentalists, civil rights activists, business and financial lobbies, and formal and informal coalitions of like-minded citizens, influence the making and administration of laws and policy.
- ↳ Since the participants in this process constitute only a tiny fraction of the populace, the public acts mainly as bystanders.
- ↳ Some pluralists believe that direct democracy is not only unworkable; it is not even necessarily desirable.
- ↳ Besides the logistical problems of having every citizen meet at one time to decide policies, political issues require continuous and expert attention, which the average citizen does not have. If Americans do not decide major controversies themselves or indirectly through elections, how are such matters resolved?
- ↳ Pluralists are convinced that public policy emerges from competition among groups.
- ↳ Since relatively few people participate actively in this process, power (it might seem) would be concentrated in few hands.

Theory of Pluralism  
Applicable to American Government  
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Three of the major tenets of the pluralist school are . . .

- ↳ Resources (and hence potential power) are widely scattered throughout society;
- ↳ At least some resources are available to nearly everyone;
- ↳ At any time the amount of potential power exceeds the amount of actual power.

*For all these reasons power cannot be taken for granted. One has to observe it empirically in order to know who really governs. The best way to do this, pluralists believe, is to examine a wide range of specific decisions, noting who took which side and who ultimately won and lost. Only by keeping score on a variety of controversies can one begin to identify actual power holders.*

The Pluralist View of Power

- ↳ Everyone recognizes political power when they see it.
  - ↳ Example: Congress raises taxes; the president sends troops; etc.
- ↳ In each instance a group or person makes others do something they would not otherwise do.
- ↳ The term “Power” is loaded with implications that must be fully grasped to understand Pluralism.
- “Resources”.....
- ↳ Power is not an identifiable property humans possess in fixed amounts. Rather, people are powerful because they control various resources.
  - ↳ Resources are assets used to force others to do what one wants.
  - ↳ Politicians become powerful because they command resources that people want or fear or respect.
    - ↳ legal authority, money, prestige, skill, knowledge, charisma, legitimacy, experience, celebrity, and public support.
    - ↳ *Civil rights activists in the 1960s relied mainly on their numbers and the legitimacy of their cause to get their way whereas corporations depend on access to officeholders, control of information, and campaign contributions.*
  - ↳ Pluralists emphasize that power is not an entity which individuals either have or do not have, but flows from a variety of different sources (listed above).
- “Potential versus Actual Power”.....
- ↳ Actual power means the ability to compel someone to do something.
- ↳ Potential power refers to the possibility of turning resources into actual power.
  - ↳ A particular resource like money cannot automatically be equated with power because the resource can be used skillfully or clumsily, fully or partially, or not at all.
- “Scope of Power”.....
- ↳ Pluralists insist that no one is all-powerful. An individual or group that is influential in one realm may be weak in another.
  - ↳ Military contractors influence defense matters, but have no sway on agricultural or health policies?
  - ↳ A measure of power, therefore, is its scope, or the range of areas where it is successfully applied. Pluralists believe that with few exceptions power holders in America usually have a relatively limited scope of influence.

Overview of James Madison’s writing  
Thesis: A good government is one that controls “the violence of faction”  
Message: Factions can ruin good governance because they bring instability, a disregard for the public good in the conflict between rival parties, and that the largest faction always wins regardless of justice or rights

- ↳ Faction is defined by: a number of citizens who are “united by some common impulse of passion, or of interest, adverse to the rights of other citizens, or to permanent and aggregate interest of the community”
- ↳ There are two ways to eliminate faction:
  - ↳ Remove the cause of factions, which is liberty; “Liberty is to faction what air is to fire” (implies liberty is bad)
  - ↳ Give every citizen that same opinions, same passions and same interests (but that is impractical because people have different opinions, are self interested, and vary in wealth and property so factions are natural)
- ↳ These factions naturally clash over their own interests and one cannot always trust there will be an enlightened statesman to balance them; so if the factions can not be eliminated, then how should they be controlled?
  - ↳ If it is a minority faction then democracy handles that problem
  - ↳ But if there is a majority faction the public good and private rights must be maintained while preserving popular government.
- ↳ So what to do?
  - A pure democracy can’t do it; but a Republic can, because...
    1. The delegation of government to a small group of people contains factions
      - ↳ Representatives are better able to discern the interests of the state
      - ↳ But what if representatives are bad?
        - ↳ They key is in getting the right number of reps. (too few and it’s a cabal, too many and it’s a confused mob)
      - ↳ So the Constitution is great because the national legislature will tend towards the big questions of the entire nations while local interests will be handled by the state legislatures
    2. A Republic’s size (capable of serving a large population and territory) may contain faction.
      - ↳ The larger a country the more factions and opinions it holds so the possibility of some permanent majority faction is lessened.

The pluralists' view of power underlies their interpretation of how the American political system operates. These characteristics . . .

↳ **It is dominated not by a single elite but rather by a multiplicity of relatively small groups, some of which are well organized and funded.**

↳ While a few are larger and more influential than others, the scope of their power is restricted to relatively narrow areas such as defense, agriculture, or banking.

↳ **The groups are politically autonomous, or independent.**

↳ They have the right and freedom to do business in the political sphere.

↳ Because US society contains so many potential factions, political autonomy guarantees constant, widespread, and spirited competition among these organizations.

↳ **The power of one group tends to cancel that of another so that a rough equilibrium results.**

↳ Group memberships overlap as well. Members of one association might belong to another, even competing, group.

↳ Overlapping memberships reduce the intensity of conflicts because loyalties are spread among many organizations.

↳ **System is 'open' in two senses.**

1. Most organizations are seldom completely shut off from the outside.
2. The availability of unused resources constantly encourages the formation of new groups.

↳ Stimulated by threats to their interests or sensitized to injustices, individuals frequently unite for political action.

↳ Example: any Supreme Court action's may scare or anger groups, which then accelerate their organizing efforts in opposition.

↳ The fifth characteristic of the system is **the endless quest by groups and office seekers for public support.**

↳ Even though the masses do not govern directly, their opinions are a resource that can be used by one organization against another.

↳ In a country where the belief in popular control of government is so deeply ingrained, people feel compelled to sell their causes to the public, and are judged winners or losers by their standings in the polls.

↳ What else explains the millions of dollars spent on advertising or public relations consultants? A group with popular backing has an important advantage over one that lacks it,

The public also exerts influence by choosing leaders, most of whom back and are backed by organized groups.

↳ So important is this responsibility that one scholar defined democracy as "an institutional arrangement for arriving at political decisions in which [groups] acquire power to decide by means of a competitive struggle for the people's vote."

The final characteristic of pluralism is consensus on the "**rules of the game.**"

↳ Consensus, or widespread agreement, among political activists and leaders on democratic principles and values holds the system together.

↳ These people accept regular and open elections, the right to vote, majority rule, political equality, free speech, the right to assemble, and the other rules that make peaceful and orderly politics possible.

↳ They tolerate differences of opinion. And, of utmost significance, they abide by the outcomes of elections.

Some pluralists contend that, since this acceptance of democratic norms is higher among leaders than the general public, political disagreements are best settled at the top, where they can be dealt with fairly and dispassionately.

↳ Keeping the intolerant and shortsighted masses at bay helps ensure the system's safety and stability.

↳ The theory, in short, argues that American government stays free because its main participants, the individuals who actually make policy, agree on a code of conduct that is not always shared by the public at large.

## Theory of Pluralism

### Applicable to American Government

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Pluralists judge society not by its actual equality but by its equality of political opportunity.

↳ Americans, they contend, have a comparatively equal chance to participate in government.

↳ By mobilizing resources (collecting signatures on a petition, for example) they can make existing groups share their influence, or they can create new organizations that will compete with established ones

## CRITICISMS OF PLURALISM

↳ Robert Dahl: in societies like ours "politics is a sideshow in the great circus of life." Most people concentrate their time and energies on activities involving work, family, health, friendship, recreation, and the like.

↳ Other pluralists go further. They worry that the common person lacks the virtues – reason, intelligence, patience – for self-government and that direct democracy leads to anarchy and the loss of freedom.

↳ Nor do Pluralists think representative democracy works as well in practice as in theory.

↳ Voting is important. But Americans vote for representatives, not for specific policy alternatives. A candidate's election cannot always be interpreted as an endorsement of a particular course of action.

↳ Politicians frequently win office with only a "plurality" of the votes -- that is, they receive more votes than their opponents, but not with a majority of the total eligible electorate.

↳ Reagan (1980) received 51% of the ballots cast, but his total constituted 25% of all potential voters, since only 55% of eligible voters voted.

↳ Furthermore, a first choice among candidates is not necessarily the same as a first choice among policies.

↳ Voters for Clinton (1992) did not all agree with his positions on health care., national defense, taxes, Bosnia, and environment.

↳ Many of them, in fact, were voting against his opponent, Bush Sr., rather than for Clinton himself.

Members of special interest groups tend to be wealthy, educated professionals and because special interest groups are rising in importance that means those values dominate

Of the nearly 7,000 special interest groups that were represented in Washington in 1976, more than half were corporations, a third were professional or trade associations, 4% were public-interest groups, fewer than 2% were civil rights or minority groups – the oil industry alone has 170 groups that represent its interests