

## Types of Democracy

Not everyone agrees about how power and influence are distributed in American democracy. Some theorists believe that individual participation drives our system, others think that groups have the most influence, and some believe that most of the power is held by the elite.

- 1. The Participatory Democratic Theory** – a theory that widespread participation in politics and civil society is essential to democratic government. This includes **Civil Society Groups** - independent associations outside the government's control.

The main idea is that when people join groups, they meet others from their communities, develop new perspectives, and are more than likely to work for the common good.

Participatory democracy, where citizens directly influence policy decisions, is seen in the US through ballot initiatives and referenda, where citizens vote directly on laws, and through mechanisms like town hall meetings and online forums where citizens can voice opinions and engage with elected officials. Examples include state-level referenda on issues like environmental protection or gun control, and online platforms for public input on local budgets or city planning.

Participatory democracy emphasizes broader citizen involvement beyond just voting in elections. It aims to give ordinary people a more direct role in shaping policy and decisions.

Here are some examples of how these manifests in the US:

**Ballot Initiatives and Referenda:** These are mechanisms where citizens can propose and vote on laws directly, bypassing the legislature in some cases. For instance, a state might hold a vote on whether to legalize recreational marijuana or on changes to environmental regulations.

**Town Hall Meetings:** These are opportunities for elected officials, both local and national, to engage with constituents, hear their concerns, and discuss proposed legislation.

**Online Participatory Platforms:** Digital tools are increasingly used to gather public input on various issues. Examples include online forums for budget allocation, where citizens can suggest how public money should be spent, or online platforms for community feedback on local development plans.

**Participatory Budgeting:** Some cities and towns have experimented with participatory budgeting, where citizens directly decide how to allocate a portion of the public budget.

**Citizen Involvement in Policy Development:** In some cases, citizens are directly involved in the development of policy proposals, such as through community workshops or public forums. For example, after Hurricane Katrina, plans for rebuilding New Orleans were drafted and approved by thousands of citizens.

These examples demonstrate how participatory democracy can be implemented at different levels of government, from local to state, and through various channels, both in-person and online. It is important to note that while participatory democracy is an ideal, it can face challenges related to ensuring broad and equitable participation, addressing the influence of special interests, and effectively translating public input into policy.

- 2. Pluralist Theory** – a theory of democracy that emphasizes the role of nongovernmental group-based activism in an effort to impact the policymaking process.

There are literally thousands of interest groups in the United States, each advocating for its own interests. Examples are the **NRA** (National Rifle Association) and **AARP** (American Association of Retired Persons).

As there are so many interest groups, it is impossible for one of them to win every time an issue is met. Groups have many ways to influence the government, such as contacting government officials, donating to political campaigns, and filing lawsuits. Pluralists believe that policymaking is complex and results from bargaining and compromise.

- 3. Elite Theory** – A theory of democracy based on the premise that participation in politics and civil society is limited because elites have a disproportionate amount of influence in the policymaking process.

Supporters of this theory point out that some groups have more money, and more influence than others and that big business has more say than smaller public interest groups.

A major concern is that the top 1% of wealth holders have too much control over policymaking. Rich people and businesses get far more benefits from tax exemptions and lenient government regulations than low-income Americans receive from services such as Medicare. However, those groups with less money can still be effective by filing lawsuits and encouraging their members to vote.

Source: Abernathy & Waples, *American Government, Stories of a Nation*, pgs. 13-15.