

**DEPARTMENT OF POLITICAL SCIENCE
AND
INTERNATIONAL RELATIONS**

**POSC 105
PUBLIC'S UNDERSTANDING OF GOVERNMENT**

- I. THIS MORNING:
 - A. Parliamentary government
 - B. The advantages and disadvantages of separated power.
 - C. The “quality” of public opinion.
 - D. The mass media

- II. AN ALTERNATIVE SCHEME: A “PARLIAMENTARY” SYSTEM:
 - A. The British model.
 - 1. A unified or parliamentary system
 - a. Legislature and executive branches merged
 - b. Prime minister: chief legislator **and** executive and party leader.
 - 2. Parliament is primarily a deliberative and oversight body.
 - 3. Minority party forms a shadow government
 - B. Advantages:
 - 1. Party in power can be held responsible.

- III. AN EVALUATION OF THE CONSTITUTIONAL SYSTEM:
 - A. Reprinted from the last set of notes.
 - B. Advantages
 - 1. Protects political rights
 - 2. Give individuals and especially groups **multiple points of access**.
 - 3. Examples: civil rights, women’s groups, regional interests
 - C. Disadvantages
 - 1. Frequently thwarts majority preferences.
 - a. The concept of **intense majorities**
 - b. Example: gun control, civil rights
 - 2. A system in which the strongest survive and flourish.
 - 3. Hinders decisive action.
 - 4. Makes the assignment of responsibility difficult.
 - a. Who do we blame for government’s actions and inactions?

- IV. THE QUALITY OF PUBLIC OPINION:
 - A. Views of public opinion
 - 1. Read the essay “Two Views of Public Opinion”
 - 2. The “Hamilton school” see the public as misinformed, apathetic, self-centered, irrational, not to be trusted with the reins of power.

- a. *Hence deference is “functional” for the system.
- 3. The “Jefferson school” has greater faith in the common person.
 - a. People are capable of self-government
 - b. Whatever faults they have as citizens political institutions and practices are to blame.
 - * The mass media
 - * The conduct of campaigns and elections
 - * The nature of political discourse in America
- B. Main point: when discussing the “quality” of citizenship keep political institutions and practices in mind.

V. THE MASS MEDIA - MAIN ARGUMENTS:

- A. The elite versus mass press
- B. The media do **not** have a meaningful liberal bias.
 - 1. If anything they are conservative, conservative in the older sense of the term.
- C. The media inadvertently discourage enlightened understanding, political participation, and hence democracy through accountability.
 - 1. These are the effects of news presentation

VI. CHARACTERISTICS OF NEWS PRESENTATION:

- A. The media do not supply a direct, unadulterated photo of “reality.”
 - 1. Instead they must **choose what** stories they will tell and **how** they will tell them.
- B. In this sense, the media inevitably “create realities” (note the plural) as well as describe it.
- C. Here are some generalizations. Check them by looking at the “popular” press (network news and local newspapers) to see if they are accurate. Also, compare them with the network and local news stories that may be shown today.
 - 1. **Government point of view:** official interpretations of events and issues are the primary source and topic of most news stories. One seldom finds independent accounts or analysis.
 - 2. **Personalization:** news stories are most frequently reported in personal terms. How individuals are affected by an event. Who won, who lost, who was hurt or helped, etc. Compare the number of statements about or by individuals with the number about policy content.
 - 3. **Fragmentation:** stories are usually short, superficial, devoid of contextual explanation (i.e, they do not show how one issue relates to another or how it depends on prior history, etc.).
 - 4. **Drama:** Wherever possible the story's dramatic and emotional elements are emphasized. As the narrator talks what visual images are portrayed. What feelings does the story arouse? Are you angered, saddened, gladdened, etc. or are you “informed.” Is coverage dispassionate or does it arouse your

feelings?

5. **Politics over substance**: the "political" aspects of news (who did what to whom) frequently overshadow the "why" parts of the matter.
 6. **Remoteness**: there is usually little effort to show the individual how a controversy relates to his or her personal life or interests.
 7. **Mystification**: reports usually do not explain issues or policies or controversies to the reader or viewer. Because emphasis is on personalities and drama, the substance is often left out.
- D. The coverage of elections
1. Horse races and handicapping.
 2. Political debates
 3. See the essay on the web site.
- E. The consequences:
1. Confusion, cynicism, misperceptions
 2. The media (unintentionally) create quiescence and apathy.

VII. NEXT TIME:

- A. The electoral system.
- B. Reading: "Two Views of Public Opinion," "The Mass Media and Enlightened Understanding" (Two essays.)
 1. Start, *There Are No Children Here*

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