**Political Behavior and the Political Economic System**

In the United States, non-business groups and citizens in general are free to formulate or support political positions critical of, and even contrary to, the interests of business. One might expect, then, considerable conflict when policies bearing on business privilege are considered or when the preferences of business are opposed to those of other groups. Sometimes, for example, business leaders might need to deflect the preferences of a democratic majority to ensure governmental response to their particular needs.  
  
Imagine, however, a different sort of situation for business, one in which nearly everyone in society seems to prefer policies that favor business preferences. In this case, business would rarely face political opposition because what it wanted was what almost everyone else in society wanted. When government leaders formulated policy, they would seem to respond to popular preferences, but in doing so, they would be serving the interests of business. To what extent is the coincidence of citizen policy preferences and business preferences genuine? How much does it exist because of business' ability to use its resources to influence public opinion? Regarding the latter, one approach is advertising to promote pro-business views through the use of corporate opinions pieces called advertorials.  
  
The most important indoctrination from business' point of view is that which serves to preserve its privileged position. First, business persuades citizens to overlook that situation by equating it with the preservation of democracy. The media teaches Americans that democracy means free enterprise and that any challenge to the system is equated with a challenge to personal freedom.. Secondly, business molds public opinion by promoting silence on issues of political-economic organization that might raise questions in people's minds about business privilege. The result is an absence of serious discussion about how much autonomy corporations should have, what is an appropriate distribution of income and wealth, the role of labor unions, or worker participation in enterprise decision-making.  
  
The emphasis that American culture places on individualism tends to discourage a sense of urgency about political participation. People give many reasons for not becoming involved; variously, nonactives say that they do not have enough time to participate, that they should take care of themselves and their families, that the important things in their lives have nothing to do with politics, that politics cannot help with their personal or family problems, that politics is boring, that they do not know enough about politics, and that one individual cannot have an impact. Apparently some citizens do not see their material well-being to be greatly dependent on their active political involvement. Political participation takes more than a desire to do so. Even voting, which is the easiest way to participate short of answering an opinion poll or listening to talk radio, takes some effort.  
  
One result is that Americans appear to have a preference for market activity rather than political justice. That is, they seem to favor having benefits distributed primarily through the economic marketplace rather than through government policies. The nation's health care system is an example. America's individualistic culture also contributes to a class bias through its effect on the participation level of lower-income citizens. Those with a lesser capacity to participate effectively in the economic realm are also less likely to be able do so in the political realm. People who delay getting medical care and paying the rent to put food on the table would seem to have a good claim on government attention but they may not know whom to contact, let alone how to be heard.  
  
Political scientists consider it a truism that groups form the basis for American politics. In the pluralist school of political theory, for example, organized interests give common people a chance to influence public policy.  Such groups ostensibly represent channels through which citizens can band together to counteract advantages that the economic elite have in the political system. Thus, the government will necessarily be forced to confront major problems that exist in society.  If any significant number of people, for example, have grievances that go unaddressed, those people constitute a potential interest group.  Moreover, group-based politics is a bulwark against tyranny that supposedly prevents any specific group or a few groups from dominating the policy process.  
  
While groups may form the basis for American politics, from the perspective of lower-status Americans, the group system works to their disadvantage.  First, they are the least likely citizens to belong to political groups.  Almost twice as many high income/high educated persons belong to interest groups as do middle-status citizens. The proportion of the poor belong to such groups then drops off precipitously.  Lower-status and working people are not as likely to experience a socialization that encourages group participation.  If groups are primary vehicles for making demands on the political system, the lack of membership in such groups among lower-status Americans puts them at a disadvantage.  Of course, such people could form their own interest group but on a national level this would be difficult to do given the scarcity of important resources (money, time, connections, information) that they possess.  
  
The upper and upper-middle class bias of interest group membership is compounded by the increasingly important role of policy planning organizations in forming public policy. Groups such the Brookings Institution, the Council on Foreign Relations, the American Enterprise Institute, and the Heritage Foundation derive most of their funding from interest groups, corporations, foundations, and contracts to do research for government agencies.  Their use is a major way for business interests to put their goals on the political agenda.  
  
Finally, the lower-status population's ability to use the interest group process to its advantage has suffered from the weakening of organized labor in the last few decades.There may not seem to be a correlation at first glance since only a minority of lower-status people belong to labor unions. Unions can sometimes be characterized as selfishly seeking economic improvements only for their members, but non-union workers tend to do better when unions are strong.  Comparisons of nations with strong unions such as Sweden and weak unions such as the US indicate that the former have more comprehensive social welfare programs, lower unemployment rates, and smaller income gaps between the rich and the poor.  Even the comparatively weak unions in the United States had a role to play in benefiting lower-income workers through their efforts to pass legislation such as social security, civil rights, Medicare, and Medicaid.