**Introduction to Political Science Lesson Key Points**

* 1. What are the major concepts of classical political theory in American democracy and political culture?
     1. Politics exist because people have differing opinions on two core issues:
        1. Who should govern based on the effect they will have on the American public
        2. How big of a role government should play in our society’s everyday life
     2. Politics – the process by which we select our government’s leaders and what policies they pursue. Politics produces authoritative decisions about public issues (Edwards, Wattenberg, Lineberry, 2011)
     3. The Framers of the Constitution devised a government system based on several underlying concepts and characteristics that sometimes conflict with one another
        1. Liberty and Equality
           1. These characteristics are the most important characteristics of a democratic form of government
           2. Personal liberty allows citizens to engage in a variety of practices without government interference or discrimination

These liberties are outlined in the first 10 Amendments to the U.S. Constitution, also known as the Bill of Rights

* + - * 1. Political debates occur regarding how much the government should do to guarantee these rights and liberties
        2. Personal equality is the principle that all citizens are the same in the eyes of the law. The concept of personal equality has changed over time:

1800’s – slavery

1900’s – “separate but equal”

2000’s – rights of same sex couples

* + - 1. Popular Consent
         1. The principle that government must draw its powers from the consent of the governed
         2. The central notion in the Declaration of Independence
         3. Works only if the citizens allow the government to function
      2. Majority Rule
         1. A core political value which means officials are only elected and policies are made into law if a majority of citizens (50% of total votes cast plus 1) allow them
         2. Defined as the central premise of direct democracy in which only policies that collectively garner the support of a majority of voters will be made into law
         3. Protects the rights of minorities so that the Bill of Rights is applicable to all citizens of the US
      3. Popular Sovereignty
         1. The concept that claims the ultimate authority rests with society (i.e. society can create, abolish, or alter government)
         2. Exhibited in the U.S. through the act of voting
      4. Natural Law
         1. The doctrine that society should be governed by certain ethical principles that are a part of nature
      5. Individualism
         1. A principle that was first highly valued by the Puritans who escaped religious persecution in England
         2. Emphasized in the US through the protection of the rights of individuals
         3. Not emphasized in other democracies, such as Canada, which is a more group-focused society
      6. Religious freedom
         1. Originated from religious conflict in Europe that brought many settlers to the “New World”
         2. Is guaranteed by the Constitution
         3. Is different from religious tolerance which

Has not always been present in the US, such as in the relationships between

The Puritans and Catholics during the early settlement

Christianity and Islam recently

Often a controversial topic in U.S. society

* + - * 1. Something that most Americans need because most Americans profess to having strong religious beliefs (O’Conner, Sabato, Yanus, 2011)
    1. Together these characteristics comprise American political culture
       1. Political culture – commonly shared attitudes, beliefs, and core values about how a government should operate
       2. Although these values are widely shared among Americans, there has been a sharp polarization of political culture in the US in recent years
       3. Political scientists argue three ways in which Americans are losing their political culture:
          1. The loss over time of traditional values such as religion and family life
          2. An unfavorable comparison with citizens of other countries in terms of key values like patriotism
          3. The division of society into opposed groups with irreconcilable moral differences
       4. However, political scientists have found that little evidence supports the fact that the overall American values are changing in society; society is just becoming more “centrist” (Edwards, Lineberry, Wattenberg, 2011)
    2. Traditional democratic theory relies on several key principles that specify how governmental decisions are made in a democracy
       1. Equality in voting
          1. One person, one vote
          2. Voting must be representative
       2. Effective participation
          1. Citizens must have adequate and equal opportunities to express their preferences in government
       3. Enlightened understanding
          1. Citizens must be able to express their ideas
          2. Free speech and free press are essential to civic engagement
          3. If one group controls the information, citizens cannot truly understand the issues
       4. Citizens control the agenda
          1. Citizens should have a collective right to control the government’s policy agenda
          2. The agenda can often be distorted by groups

with extreme wealth and power

* + - 1. Inclusion
         1. The government must include and extend rights to everyone subject to its laws
         2. Citizenship must be open to all with people within a democratic nation
    1. Only if a political system satisfies these criteria can it be considered a democratic political system
  1. What are the three contemporary political theories of American democracy?
     1. These three theories answer the essential question of who has the power and influence in American society
     2. The Pluralist Theory: Government by Groups
        1. The policymaking process is open to the participation of all groups with shared interests
           1. Contemporary examples of such interest groups include: National Rifle Association (NRA), National Organization for Women (NOW), and United Auto Workers (UAW)
        2. No single group dominates
        3. Pluralists tend to believe that public interests will prevail
        4. Interest groups provide structure for political parties and help ensure that individuals are following the rules when participating in society
           1. Use positive channels for government action rather than extreme tactics like assassination
        5. Organized groups and public officials can compete with one another for control over policy
           1. Grassroots activism can offset other resources like money
           2. Examples: The American Petroleum Institute which contributes large amounts of money compared to Green Peace which has a large membership base
        6. In recent years the number of interest groups has risen significantly, which is a positive occurrence according to pluralist theory
     3. The Elite Theory: Government by a Few
        1. The upper-class elite holds the power and makes policy, regardless of the formal governmental organization
           1. The upper-class consists of assets like property, stocks, and bonds
           2. Other powerful institutions control government power, such as universities, the military, and media outlets
        2. There are at least four ways of describing political elites:
           1. They reflect a dominant social class
           2. They are a group of business, military, labor union, and elected officials that control all decisions
           3. They are appointed bureaucrats that run everything
           4. They are representatives of large interest groups that are in charge
        3. Elite theorists believe
           1. One percent of the American population controls most of the policy decisions because they can afford to finance election campaigns
           2. These elites do not just control policy; they are the policymakers
           3. Elite status can be obtained by anyone living in a democracy, unlike an Aristocracy

All societies in the world are divided into classes and unequal distribution in society is normal

* + - * 1. America is not governed by the majority
      1. A prime example of the Elite Theory is the government bailout of 2008 when a few members in the Federal government decided to provided billions of dollars to corporate executives to save certain financial institutions
    1. The Bureaucratic Theory: Government by Administrators
       1. Power resides in the hands of government bureaucrats
       2. First argued by sociologist Max Weber
          1. He argued that all large organizations tend toward the bureaucratic form with all decision-making power devolving to career administrations whose experiences exceed that of elected officials
       3. All institutions fall under the control of a large, growing bureaucracy which carries out policy using standardized procedures
          1. Bureaucratic agencies include

The Department of the Treasury

The Federal Reserve Board

The Department of Homeland Security

And many more

* + - * 1. These agencies can affect issues like interest rates, mortgage rates, and travel procedures
      1. Bureaucrats
         1. Can become dominant because of their tenure in office and expertise in a field
         2. Largely permanent in their positions, unlike elected officials whose positions are determined by elections
         3. Like the elites, favor policies that support their own agencies, as opposed to those that favor the majority
      2. Bureaucratic Theory can be effective because for the most part bureaucrats are invisible to the American public
  1. What are the challenges that political theories face in a democracy?
     1. Increased complexity of issues in American society
        1. Traditional democratic theory argues that ordinary citizens can reach political judgment on their own
        2. However, today, issues have become so complex that they exceed the general knowledge of the public
           1. Examples

Taxes (who should be taxed? why?)

Diplomatic relations with foreign countries (is there a war on terrorism, or a war against countries that harbor terrorists?)

The federal budget

* + - 1. Democratic societies do not demand that citizens know everything
      2. For this reason, the founding fathers believed that the real power of the government should lie with the educated, male property owners, or representatives
      3. Although people in society have greatly increased their knowledge of politics in American society, informed decision-making still lies with the representatives
    1. Limited Participation in Government
       1. Americans do not take full advantage of the power that they can have over government
       2. There is a trend of low voter turnout in several different demographic areas
          1. Young people (18–24)
          2. Hispanic community
          3. African American community

Although there was a significant increase in the African American voter turnout in 2008 (Harrison, Harris, 2011)

* + - 1. Since the 1960’s America has seen a decline of trust in the government
      2. Many Americans believe that “big government” is not the solution to social problems because it is wasteful and impractical
      3. Political cynicism dropped briefly following the terrorist attacks on September 11, 2001, and showed Americans that the nation will support the government in a time of crisis
    1. Diverse Political Interests
       1. The diversity of the American public is reflected in the diverse political interests in America
          1. American society is often referred to as a “melting pot” society
       2. When persons’ and/or groups’ interests conflict with one another, it is often hard to establish policy
       3. Policy gridlock is often the result of conflicting opinions
          1. Policy gridlock – a condition that occurs when interests conflict and no coalition is strong enough to form a majority and establish policy; nothing gets accomplished
       4. A major challenge to democracy in America is to overcome the stalemate created by diverse interests and deliver policies that are responsive to all citizens’ needs
  1. How has political theory changed in American society?
     1. The role of economic interests, powerful elites, bureaucrats, interest groups and individuals’ roles in shaping of government and policy
        1. The true changes in government and policy have come from
           1. The increased size of the federal government
           2. The increased scope of the government’s involvement in the lives of Americans
           3. Continual creation of government institutions

The Department of Homeland Security and the Transportation Security Administration were both created within the past 10 years

* + - * 1. The direction of policies is reflected in the complex changes in society and the role that government plays in society
    1. The role of government in citizens’ lives has changed dramatically since its creation in the late 1700’s
       1. Until the 1920’s the government played a small role in the lives of the American citizens
       2. The role of government began to change in the 1930’s when the federal government created several programs to help citizens during the Great Depression
          1. The Works Progress Administration (WPA) employed millions of people during the Great Depression
          2. Citizens were hired to carry out public works projects, which included building roads and public buildings
       3. Until the late 1970’s the federal government felt that it was responsible for solving any economic or social problem that existed in the United States
       4. In the 1980’s the federal government had the reverse assumption under President Ronald Reagan. The Reagan administration
          1. Cut taxes that were levied by the federal government
          2. Cut the federal budget
          3. Cut the number of regulations that were imposed on businesses
       5. There is no simple theory of politics, the theory of big government in the 1930’s and the theory of smaller government in the 1980’s both pulled America out of economic hardships
    2. The role of foreign affairs
       1. America has taken an interest in foreign affairs during certain periods in American history
       2. The U.S. first had an interest in foreign affairs when it sought to expand the nation into lands that were already claimed by Canada and Mexico
          1. The Republic of Texas

Had land that extended from Texas all the way into modern day Colorado

Joined the nation in 1836 after the defeat of Mexico at the Battle of San Jacinto

* + - * 1. Louisiana Purchase – the US acquired more land
        2. Manifest Destiny – the theory of land expansion and promoting democracy
      1. In the late 1890’s America began to expand its territory into the Caribbean and the Pacific to rival the power of the British Empire
      2. Since the end of World War II in the 1940’s, the US has assumed the role of “world police”
         1. Some political theorists believe that playing this role leaves the U.S. vulnerable to attacks and that more focus should be spent on domestic issues
         2. Others believe that it is the duty of the American government to protect our nation and its allies
      3. Foreign affairs have changed dramatically over time; what began as fears of foreign expansion, turned into fears of communism and most recently threats of nuclear terrorist attacks
    1. The nature of politics
       1. The way in which the federal government handles issues like social welfare differs from other democratic nations around the world
       2. Americans must remember our federal government has not always operated in the way that it does today; changes can and will occur in the political process
       3. Political change is not always explained by new laws and policies; it is often determined by who is governing
  1. How has technology affected political theories in American society?
     1. Technology has revolutionized the political process
        1. The Internet allows citizens to get their information through web-based news sites
           1. Most Internet news sources, however, report biased information which can often mislead voters (i.e. blogs)
        2. Social networking sites have also revolutionized the way that voters can connect with their representatives and organizers
           1. Some candidates have used them as tools for grassroots organizations
           2. Some are favorable during campaigns because they are inexpensive and most of the time free
           3. Video sharing websites are often used by politicians to broadcast speeches, press conferences, and political advertisements
        3. Over the past 10 years the term e-campaigning was established to identify the mobilization of voters using the Internet
        4. The Internet influenced politics like the effect that the radio had when President FDR began his series of “Fireside Chats”
        5. Since the creation of the Internet in the early 2000’s, youth involvement in the political process has increased dramatically
     2. The negative political impact of the Internet
        1. The explosion of the Internet in politics has also created a problem for the political process, misinformation
           1. Unlike newspapers, magazines, and television networks, the Internet is not responsible for accuracy and fact-checking
        2. The Internet is almost entirely unmonitored
        3. Bloggers and message boards seek to destroy the reputation of opposing candidates
           1. This kind of information can be devastating to a politician’s campaign
           2. Lies and slanderous accusations can often come with no consequences on the Internet
        4. Although computers have revolutionized the political process, computers are still subject to hackers
           1. Computerized elections leave voters susceptible to the theft of personal information
           2. Hackers could potentially falsify election results