American Politics 010

POSC 010 Section 029

The Democratic Theory; An Analysis of the Link Between Elected Officials and Citizens

The “Theories of Representation” are an ideal aspect in the American political spectrum that often define the actions, decisions, and political judgements of the United State’s elected officials in formally representing their constituents. As much as individuals would rather define our elite officials as “Politicos” who often balance the scale between acting as “Delegates” and Trustees,” it is important to develop the correlation between Congressmen and constituents to understand their ability to make informed political judgements and decisions. Contextual discussions formulated from Larry Bartels, Berelson, and Samuel Popkin, develop the natural engagement of the average American citizen towards political judgements, thought, and decisions. Congressmen, alongside other elected officials, should adopt themselves towards acting as a trustee to a great extent in order to represent constituents according to their views but implement their own judgements when necessary based on their knowledge and experience in public office. This notion of adapting a delegate position is recognized through the notion that personal identification, educational influence, and political involvement of constituents is limited but simultaneously valued which allows politicians to make decisions as a delegate to a severely limited extent to maintain proper representation of voters.

The significant link between political officials and that of the average American citizen varies according to Bartels’ argument based on opinions, income, and political action. He argues that the link between these two subjects exists to a certain and limited extent. Throughout Bartels’ argumentative context, he highlights the idea of “public opinion and elite opinion” in order to express the contrast between voters towards Congressional leaders (p. 281). In Chapter 9, he portrays and describes an analysis done based on the 101st, 102nd, and 103rd Congresses, where the overall results were that Senators were “responsive to the ideological views of their middle- and high-income constituents” (p. 260). On further notice, Bartels highlights that the views of low-income constituents had no significant impact on Senator voting behavior (Figure 9.2). Although Bartels juxtaposes this idea by stating that individuals with higher income are “more likely to contact government officials” maintains some support and simultaneously proves that “the role of money in shaping public policy” is suited to more precise analysis and examination. Bartels’ analysis defines how income is not necessarily a main factor, but a contributing factor whereas voter participation and engagement counts as well. Although, he still highlights that low-income voters are overlooked due to probable lack of campaign contributions, political engagement, and direct communication.

In Chapter 9, Bartels states that opinion measures have a “consistent positive effect” and that “each reported contact with a senator increased the weight attached to...the constituent’s views” (p. 279). This incident of contact would directly correlate with the idea that Congressmen would often be acting on a Delegate model because their awareness of constituent’s issue is highlighted and expressed, as opposed to no contact. He exclaims this notion by concluding that the general “assumption that the rich are more influential” than lower income individuals “receives no support in [his] analysis” (p. 280). Although, despite delegate actions taken by the government, the overall chances of contact with elected officials is relatively low, and therefore limit the necessity to focus on delegate decisions. From a personal viewpoint, Bartel seems to be implementing and developing the idea that political activism and political action are the more influential factors in contributing to Congressional decision, rather than political knowledge and judgement. As much as Bartels’ discussion revolves around the concept of high and low incomes of constituents, many times income is not a main contributing factor, but rather a minor concept in a multitude of causes towards political judgement and decision making. It is comprehensible that Bartels would exemplify the notion of direct contact with Senators, as this form of communication maintains higher value and significance. As a result, constituents that make an effort to engage with congressional leaders and their staff, eventually see results they would like in the decisions of the government. Therefore it is appropriate to assume that there is a limited relationship and link between elected officials and average citizens as Bartels demonstrates how political involvement is a key factor in the influence of congressional decisions. Without the implementation of weighted opinion, congressmen are pushed towards trustee decisions due to the lack of communication with constituents.

In contrast, Popkin recognizes the personal connections and development constituents make towards political knowledge through a discussion of the repercussions of education. Popkin directly states that “education affects politics...by *broadening*...the number of issues that citizens” see as significantly important while simultaneously “increasing the...connections they made with their own lives.” Popkin’s analysis reveals that educating the average American through the media, allows any normal constituent to “make connections between their own lives and their government’s actions” which develops a personal link between politicians and their voters (p. 36). The connection between personal lives and political issues is often targeted in the media, and Popkin expresses this by mentioning the significant effects this has on voter engagement with political activism. The notion of personal development with politics is another reason for elected officials to adapt to a trustee position in order to prevent political bias from their constituents’ desires. This notion of using trustee decisions is derived specifically from topics that the average constituent wouldn’t be experts at. Popkins provides an example to this notion by mentioning that educated voters that “pay more attention to foreign news” does not mean they have a educational “background in civics information about the subjects” they are consistent with (p. 37). Popkin’s discussion reveals that educational sources that are provided through news outlets such as the media and newspapers, have the capacity to manipulate personal politics with personal lives, which ultimately leads to elected officials being encouraged to represent their voters as transparently as possible. The average constituent is generally interested and engaged in political judgement to a certain extent, but enough to influence the decisions of governments.

At the same time that Popkin highlights the personal engagement of constituents, he also mentions the aspect of “Party Identification” which juxtaposes the effects of media education. Popkin mentions that “Party loyalties were not easily changed” and had “reflected past political battles” that ultimately framed the way Americans perceived the political spectrum (p. 50). Constituents primarily associate themselves with a political party which influences their political decisions and personal politics. In other words, Popkin describes this notion as “an information shortcut to the vote decision” which is what congressmen and elected officials consider as an excuse to limit themselves to the adoption of a trustee position. Unlike education, party identification has its own influence on voter decisions and knowledge about topics, therefore the position of an acting Delegate is not in the best interest of voters in the long run. For example, Popkin states that “Parties use ideologies to highlight critical differences between themselves” which develops the idea that political ideologies would be placed above a voter’s full understanding of an issue or topic at hand. Ultimately, party identification is a lens which fogs the political judgement of constituents and is an appropriate reason for elected officials to make trustee decisions to a minor extent depending on the circumstances.

Berelson’s approach to the discussion of a constituent’s ability to sufficiently demonstrate genuine interest and knowledge on political judgement revolves around the concept of personal principle and motivation. Like Popkin, Berelson recognizes the importance of personal attachment and connotations to the discussion of political ideas and judgements for constituents when it comes to voting. Although Berelson highlights the human limitations of attaining knowledge and understanding when he states that a voter may find it “difficult to make decisions on the basis of full information” (p. 308). In regards to congressional decisions between acting as a delegate or a trustee, elected officials take the route of a trustee as “voting behavior...for large numbers of people...is weak” in terms of motivation (p. 308). The author mentions that as much as discussion and involvement is relevant of the “democratic citizen,” many individuals “vote without real involvement in the election” which further supports the recurring motif of “genuine indecision” among voters (p. 309). The idea of “genuine indecision” can be tied back to Popkin's discussion of party identification where voters may simply vote on issues or candidates that align with their political party simply for that reason. The general idea of rationality among voters and the lack of interest towards political discussion drives congressional leaders to make decisions not in accordance with direct representation as a delegate but rather as a trustee, because of the lack of trust and communication with constituents. Berelson ultimately demonstrates the lack of relationship and connection between congressmen and their constituents, which is supportive of the argument that it is reasonable to make trustee decisions to a greater extent than delegate decisions based on the circumstances of the policy discussion. The rationality and unawareness of voters reflects their lack of knowledge and understanding for a variety of issues and allow elected officials to make insightful decisions in government.

The adaption of trustee decisions is more beneficial to congressional leaders to a great extent as their knowledge and experience in public office is necessary whereas a delegate stance recognizes that personal identification, educational filters, and limited political involvement manipulate the knowledge and understanding of political discussion among constituents. As valued and relevant the political involvement and discussion of voters is, constituents are often influenced through media bias, primary party affiliation, and simply the lack of political activism. These factors encourage political leaders in congress to engage in trustee decisions the majority of the time. The balance between trustee and delegate stances are significant, where the use of delegate decisions may be implemented to a very limited extent depending on the circumstances and the importance of the issue at hand to a number of constituents. The trustee decisions made by the government take into account the representation of constituents but simultaneously consider professional knowledge and experience. Popkin, Berelson, and Bartels define that the political engagement, knowledge, and judgement of the general public maintains positive intentions for government decisions but lack the information necessary to fully comprehend issues. Congressional leaders represent voters to a certain extent as a delegate, but make decisions on their behalf according to their personal judgement to a greater extent as a trustee.

Word Count: 1660

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