UNIT 5: POLITICAL PARTICIPATION

Governing is achieved directly through citizen participation and indirectly through institutions (e.g., political parties, interest groups, and mass media) that inform, organize, and mobilize support to influence government and politics, resulting in many venues for citizen influence on policy making.

The principle of self-government is dependent on both citizen participation and the operation of the various linkage institutions that help citizens connect with the government. These institutions help people become a part of the policy-making process.

Playing an important role in this process, the media report public opinion data and can sometimes influence the formation of that opinion as well. The accuracy of public opinion data is dependent upon the scientific polling methods that are used, and the results of these opinion polls are often used as a means of political influence. The role the media play in this process is at times criticized for the bias demonstrated in the format, context, and content of information distributed as well as the manner in which that bias impacts public understanding of political information. Social media poses both opportunities and challenges for democratic participation.

Social movements, political parties, and interest groups also serve to connect the electorate with the government by influencing the manner in which people relate to and participate in its composition, functions, and policy-making agenda. Various social movements develop in response to conditions perceived as negatively impacting specific groups of people; their political strategies are aimed at changing public policy in a way that benefits the adversely impacted group. Political parties run campaigns in an attempt to win office and make policy consistent with their platform and goals. Over time political parties respond to election results, campaign laws, and changes in the way information is disseminated to the public. Even though political parties are designed to connect the people with government, there are various barriers that interfere with this connection, even to the extent of preventing candidates who represent interests outside the two major parties from being elected. Finally, interest groups exist as a form of political participation for people with particular policy concerns. While these groups exist for different causes, they are sometimes criticized for wielding a disproportionate impact on the policy-making process based on their organized pressure tactics and allocation of money for campaigns and lobbying.

Like political parties and interest groups, elections connect citizens with government. The number of eligible voters has expanded over time based on various constitutional provisions, court rulings on voter access and campaign finance, and legislation. The Fifteenth, Nineteenth, Twenty-Fourth, and Twenty-Sixth Amendments, each a response to a specific social/political concern, serve to eliminate political discrimination against people due to a citizen's race, sex, age, and ability to pay a poll tax. Voter turnout is impacted by the various provisions that states implement regarding voter requirements and qualifications that involve issues not addressed in those amendments. Voter turnout varies widely from election to election, and political candidates have taken advantage of technology and campaign finance laws to communicate their platforms more effectively to the voting public. The data regarding voter turnout in the United States provides a foundation for interesting analysis when compared to voter turnout in other democracies, and political scientists periodically study why voter turnout in the U.S. falls below that in other similar republics.

Essential Questions:
- How have changes in technology influenced political communication and behavior?
- Why do levels of participation and influence in politics vary?
- How effective are the various methods of political participation in shaping public policies?

UNIT 5A: POLITICAL PARTIES

Political parties, interest groups, and social movements provide opportunities for participation and influence how people relate to government and policy-makers.

1) **Students will be able to:**
Describe the linkage institutions
Students will know that:
a) Linkage institutions are channels, such as the following, that allow individuals to communicate their preferences to policy-makers:
- Parties
- Interest groups
- Elections
- Media

2) **Students will be able to:**
Explain the function and impact of political parties on the electorate and government
Students will know that:
a) The functions and impact of political parties on the electorate and government are represented by:
- Mobilization and education of voters
- Party platforms
- Candidate recruitment
- Campaign management, including fundraising and media strategy
- The committee and party leadership systems in legislatures

3) **Students will be able to:**
Explain why and how political parties change and adapt
Students will know that:
a) Parties have adapted to candidate-centered campaigns, and their role in nominating candidates has been weakened
b) Parties modify their policies and messaging to appeal to various demographic coalitions
c) The structure of parties has been influenced by:
- Critical elections
- Campaign finance law
- Changes in communication and data-management technology
d) Parties use communication technology and voter-data management to disseminate, control, and clarify political messages and enhance outreach and mobilization efforts

4) **Students will be able to:**
Explain how structural barriers impact third-party and independent candidate success
Students will know that:
a) In comparison to proportional systems, winner-take-all voting districts serve as a structural barrier to third-party and independent candidate success
b) The incorporation of third-party agendas into platforms of major political parties serves as a barrier to third-party and independent candidate success

UNIT 5B: INTEREST GROUPS

Political parties, interest groups, and social movements provide opportunities for participation and influence how people relate to government and policy-makers. The impact of federal policies on campaigning and electoral rules continues to be contested by both sides of the political spectrum.

1) **Students will be able to:**
Explain the benefits and potential problems of interest-group influence on elections and policy making
Students will know that:
a) Interest groups may represent very specific or more general interests, and can educate voters and office holders, draft legislation, and mobilize membership to apply pressure on and work with legislators and government agencies
b) In addition to working within party coalitions, interest groups exert influence through long-standing relationships with bureaucratic agencies, congressional committees, and other interest groups; such relationships are described as "iron triangles" and issue networks and they help interest groups exert influence across political party coalitions

2) Students will be able to:
Explain how variation in types and resources of interest groups affects their ability to influence elections and policy making
Students will know that:
a) Interest group influence may be impacted by:
- Inequality of political and economic resources
- Unequal access to decision makers
- "Free rider" problem

3) Students will be able to:
Explain how various political actors influence public policy outcomes
Students will know that:
a) Single-issue groups, ideological/social movements, and protest movements form with the goal of impacting society and policy making
b) Competing actors such as interest groups, professional organizations, social movements, the military, and bureaucratic agencies influence policy making, such as the federal budget process, at key stages and to varying degrees
c) Elections and political parties are related to major policy shifts or initiatives, occasionally leading to political realignments of voting constituencies

4) Students will be able to:
Explain how the organization, finance, and strategies of national political campaign affect the election process
Students will know that:
a) Federal legislation and case law pertaining to campaign finance demonstrate the ongoing debate over the role of money in political and free speech, as set forth in:
- Bipartisan Campaign Reform Act of 2002, which was an effort to ban soft money and reduce attack ads with "Stand by Your Ad" provision: "I'm [candidate's name] and I approve this message"
- *Citizens United v. Federal Election Commission* (2010), which ruled that political spending by corporations, associations, and labor unions is a form of protected speech under the First Amendment
b) Debates have increased over free speech and competitive and fair elections related to money and campaign funding (including contributions from individuals, PACs, and political parties)
c) Different types of political action committees (PACs) influence elections and policy making through fundraising and spending

UNIT 5C: MASS MEDIA

The various forms of media provide citizens with political information and influence the ways in which they participate politically.

1) Students will be able to:
Explain the media's role as a linkage institution
Students will know that:
a) Traditional news media, new communication technologies, and advances in social media have profoundly influenced how citizens routinely acquire political information, including new events, investigative journalism, election coverage, and political commentary
b) The media's use of polling results to convey popular levels of trust and confidence in government can impact elections by turning such events in to "horse races" based more on popularity and factors other than qualifications and platforms of candidates

2) Students will be able to:
Explain how increasingly diverse choices of media and communication outlets influence political institutions and behavior
Students will know that:
a) Political participation is influenced by a variety of media coverage, analysis, and commentary on political events

b) The rapidly increasing demand for media and political communications outlets from an ideologically diverse audience have led to debates over media bias and the impact of media ownership and partisan news sites
c) The nature of democratic debate and the level of political knowledge among citizens is impacted by:
- Increasing media choices
- Ideologically oriented programming
- Consumer-driven media outlets and emerging technologies that reinforce existing beliefs
- Uncertainty over the credibility of news sources and information