

LECTURE / DISCUSSION / DEBATE
POLITICS IN A CHANGING SOCIETY

Terms and concepts to know:

Laissez-Faire government
Democratic theory
Pluralist theory
The “One-Party” state
Ideology

Activist government
Elitist theory
Types of political resources (pluralism)
“Critical” approaches
Liberalism

Study and discussion questions:

1. Many critical scholars who see themselves as “structuralists” have suggested that the U.S. has become a “one-party” state. What do they mean by that statement? Do you see any validity in such a perspective? Why or why not?
2. Structuralists also acknowledge the theory of pluralism, but in a seemingly pejorative sense. They use the term “pluralist incrementalism” (along with the concept of “resignation” from political affairs), to describe how *not* to make sense of your contemporary political life. Their approach challenges existing power relations in America. Do you agree or disagree that this is a good idea and why?
3. Some political scientists and sociologists also suggest the importance of going beyond just *describing* (empirical theory) politics in America, and discuss where we *should* (normative theory) be heading as a nation. What do you think? Which of the two perspectives is more important to you? Which is more interesting?
4. Hightower notes that “democracy is control.” In what ways does corporate power interfere with popular sovereignty or control? Why does he describe corporations as “legal fictions”?
5. What does Lindblom mean when he says, “The prison is strong enough to incarcerate not only popular thought but professional thinking in the social sciences”?
6. According to Hochschild, what are the key tenets of success in the American Dream, and in what ways might the American definition of success be considered narrow?
7. Bellah and his coauthors contend that the ideology of individualism—the foundation of our political beliefs—may well have grown “cancerous.” Explain this disease in our belief system. Do you agree that this may be a serious problem today?

Readings:

Heineman. *American Government*, Chapter 1.
WEB – Readings from “Politics in a Changing Society” links.

Video:

America Great Divide (Part One).