

Discussion Questions for 17.317, U.S. Social Policy

Part II: Preferences, Participation, and Representation

- This section of the course focuses on the mass public – what does the public want, who participates in politics, and whose preferences get expressed in public policy. We begin by looking at political participation, which is a key way in which citizens voice their preferences.

Who Participates?

- How can an ordinary citizen participate in politics in the US? What are the modes of participation? Are these similar to or different from other countries?
- What are the ways in which we can differentiate among these activities?
 - some hard, others easy (require more or less inputs)
 - some convey more info to policymakers than others
 - some more unequal than others
- If you were an interest group official who wanted to influence policy, which acts would you urge your membership to take part in?
- Which political acts are the most and least unequal? Why?
- Protests: are they a “weapon of the weak”? Why do affluent engage in disproportionate share of protests?
- What are the factors in participation? What explains why some people participate more than others?
- How much do the factors vary across individuals?
- Where do these factors come from?
- What is the relevance of education for participation? What are the differences between absolute and relative levels of education?
- What is the relevance of income for participation? Of free time?
- What is the relevance of skills, and where can they be gained?
- What are the sources of political interest, information, and efficacy?
- What entities mobilize people to politics? How does mobilization vary over time?
- Compare churches and unions as mobilizing entities
- How can we explain the low participation rates of the young? The high participation rates of the old? Differences by gender and race?
- What kinds of reforms aimed at increasing participation does this model suggest?
- Would full participation matter for policy outcomes? How and why?
- What are the ramifications of political inequality for social policy outcomes?