

Democracy and American Politics

The best argument against democracy is a five-minute conversation with the average voter.

Winston Churchill





The Struggle for African-American Voting Rights

- ▶ The right to vote in meaningful elections is fundamental to democracy.
- ▶ Despite Constitutional protections, voter registration among African-Americans in the South was almost nil until the Civil Rights Movement pressed the passage of the Voting Rights Act of 1965.
- ▶ Despite great progress, the struggle for democracy still continues in our society.



Student Nonviolent Coordinating Committee (SNCC)



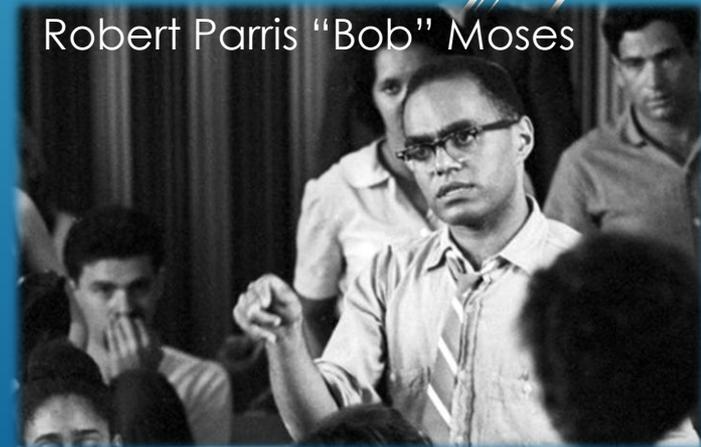
- ▶ ...one of the most important organizations of the Civil Rights Movement in the 1960s
- ▶ Played a major role in sit-ins and freedom rides, the 1963 March on Washington, Mississippi Freedom Summer and the Mississippi Freedom Democratic Party.
- ▶ Its major contribution was in its field work, organizing **voter registration drives** all over the South, especially in Georgia, Alabama and Mississippi.





Robert Moses

- ▶ ...an American educator and civil rights activist, known for his work as a leader of SNCC on voter education and registration in Mississippi during the Civil Rights Movement
- ▶ developed as one of most influential black leaders of the civil rights struggle ... had a vision of grassroots and community-based leadership
- ▶ initiated and organized voter registration drives in the South, sit-ins and Freedom Schools for SNCC





Voter Education Project (VEP)

- ▶ ...raised and distributed foundation funds to civil rights organizations for **voter education and registration** work in the southern US from 1962 to 1968
- ▶ Federally endorsed by the Kennedy administration in hopes that the Civil Rights Movement would shift focus away from demonstrations and more toward support of voter registration. (The former were embarrassing to the government's global image.)
- ▶ Unfortunately, in the Deep South, white resistance to black voting rights turned out to be even more of a problem than black demonstrations.





Voting Rights Act (1965)

- ▶ ...goal to overcome **legal barriers at the state and local levels** that prevented African Americans from exercising their right to vote under the 15th amendment (1870) to the US Constitution
 - ▶ banned use of literacy tests
 - ▶ provided for federal oversight of voter registration in areas where less than 50% of nonwhite population had registered to vote
 - ▶ authorized US attorney general to investigate use of poll taxes in state and local elections
- ▶ Considered among the most far-reaching pieces of civil rights legislation in US history.

President Lyndon B. Johnson, Martin Luther King Jr and Rosa Parks at the signing of the Voting Rights Act, 08/06/1965





Democracy

- ▶ ... government by the people, especially rule of the majority
- ▶ a government in which **the supreme power is vested in the people** and exercised by them directly or indirectly through a system of representation usually involving periodically-held free elections
- ▶ the idea that ordinary people want to rule themselves and are capable of doing so





Advantages of Democratic Government

- ▶ protects the interest of citizens
- ▶ prevents monopoly of authority
- ▶ promotes equality
- ▶ makes for a responsible and stable administration
- ▶ gives a feeling of obligation by the ruling authorities toward citizens
- ▶ politically educates the public
- ▶ helps make good citizens
- ▶ based on public will so there is little chance of revolution
- ▶ promotes change



Disadvantages of Democratic Government

- ▶ might allow misuse of public funds and time
- ▶ facilitates corruption when those elected take advantage of authority for personal gain
- ▶ risk of the wrong choice of public servants
- ▶ allows not exercising the right to vote
- ▶ may put more emphasis on quantity rather than quality
- ▶ can take a long time to make decisions
- ▶ may open the door to immoral practices during elections



Democratic Origins

- ▶ *demos*: the people
- ▶ *kratein*: to rule
- ▶ pre-18th century: skepticism among Western philosophers and rulers
- ▶ Yet, democratic practices existed in many localities around the world.





Direct vs. Representative Democracy

- ▶ **direct participatory democracy:** To the ancient Greeks, democracy meant rule by the people exercised directly in open assemblies.
- ▶ **representative democracy:** rule by the people, exercised indirectly through representatives selected by the people

In a **DIRECT DEMOCRACY**, citizens themselves choose their laws, while in a **REPRESENTATIVE DEMOCRACY**, elected representatives do this for them.





Fundamental Principles of Representative Democracy

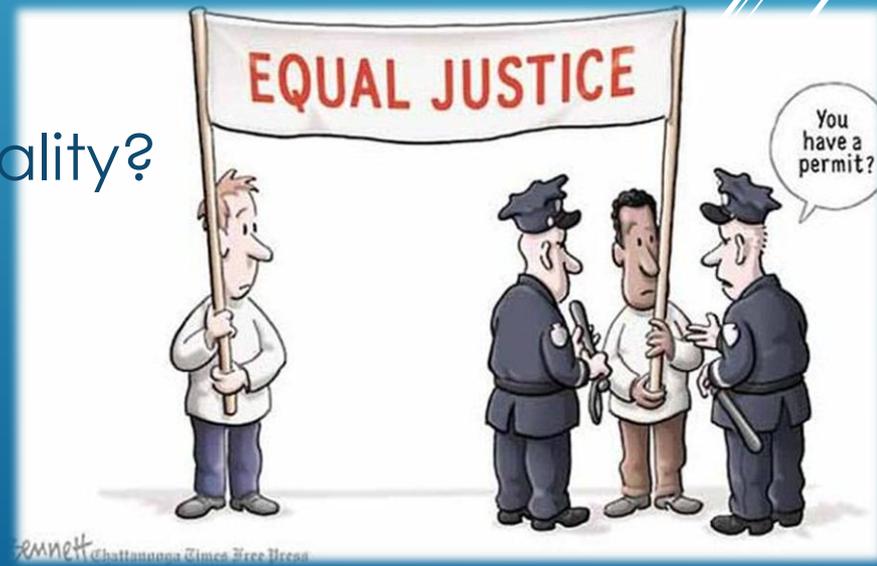
- ▶ **popular sovereignty**
 - ▶ Government policies reflect the wishes of the people.
 - ▶ Government leaders are selected in competitive elections.
 - ▶ Elections are free and fair.
 - ▶ People participate in the political process.
 - ▶ High-quality information is available.
 - ▶ The majority rules.





Fundamental Principles of Representative Democracy

- ▶ **political equality**
 - ▶ equal voice
 - ▶ equal protection
 - ▶ equal justice
 - ▶ relative economic equality?





Fundamental Principles of Representative Democracy

- ▶ **political liberty**
 - ▶ freedom to form and express opinions
 - ▶ Can liberty be threatened by democracy?





Objections to Majoritarian Representative Democracy

- ▶ **Tyranny of the majority** threatens liberty.
- ▶ The people are irrational and incompetent.
- ▶ Majoritarian democracy threatens minorities.





Democracy As an Evaluative Standard: How Democratic Are We?

- ▶ **questions about popular sovereignty:** Does government do what citizens want? Do citizens participate in politics? Can citizens be involved when they choose? Are political leaders responsive? Do groups such as political parties and interest groups effectively transmit what citizens want to political leaders? What is the quality of public deliberation on the major public policy issues? Do the media and political leaders provide accurate and complete information?



Democracy As an Evaluative Standard: How Democratic Are We?

- ▶ **questions about political equality:** Do some have persistent and substantial advantages over others in the political process? Is the political game open to all equally? Do government decisions and policies benefit some more than others?
- ▶ **questions about political liberty:** Are rights and liberties universally available, protected and used? Are people free to vote? Can they speak openly and form groups freely to petition their government? Do public authorities, private groups or the majority threaten the liberty or rights of minorities?

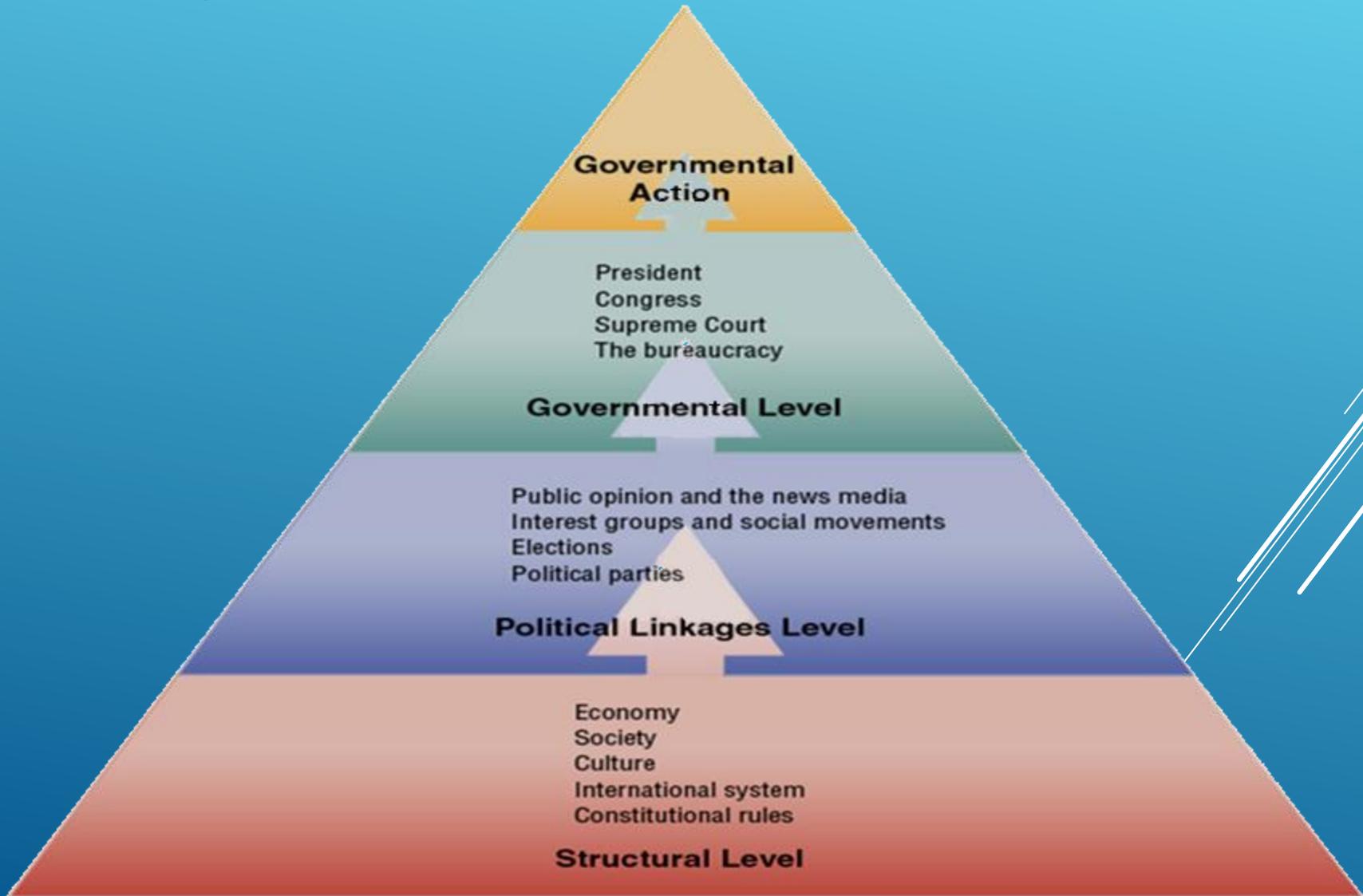
A Framework for Understanding How American Politics Works



- ▶ **structure**: fundamental and enduring factors that influence government and politics
- ▶ **political linkages**: political actors, institutions and processes that transmit public wants and demands to government officials
- ▶ **government**: all public officials and institutions that have formal, legal responsibilities for making public policy
- ▶ **government action**: making laws, rules and regulations; waging war; settling civil disputes; providing order



Analytical Framework



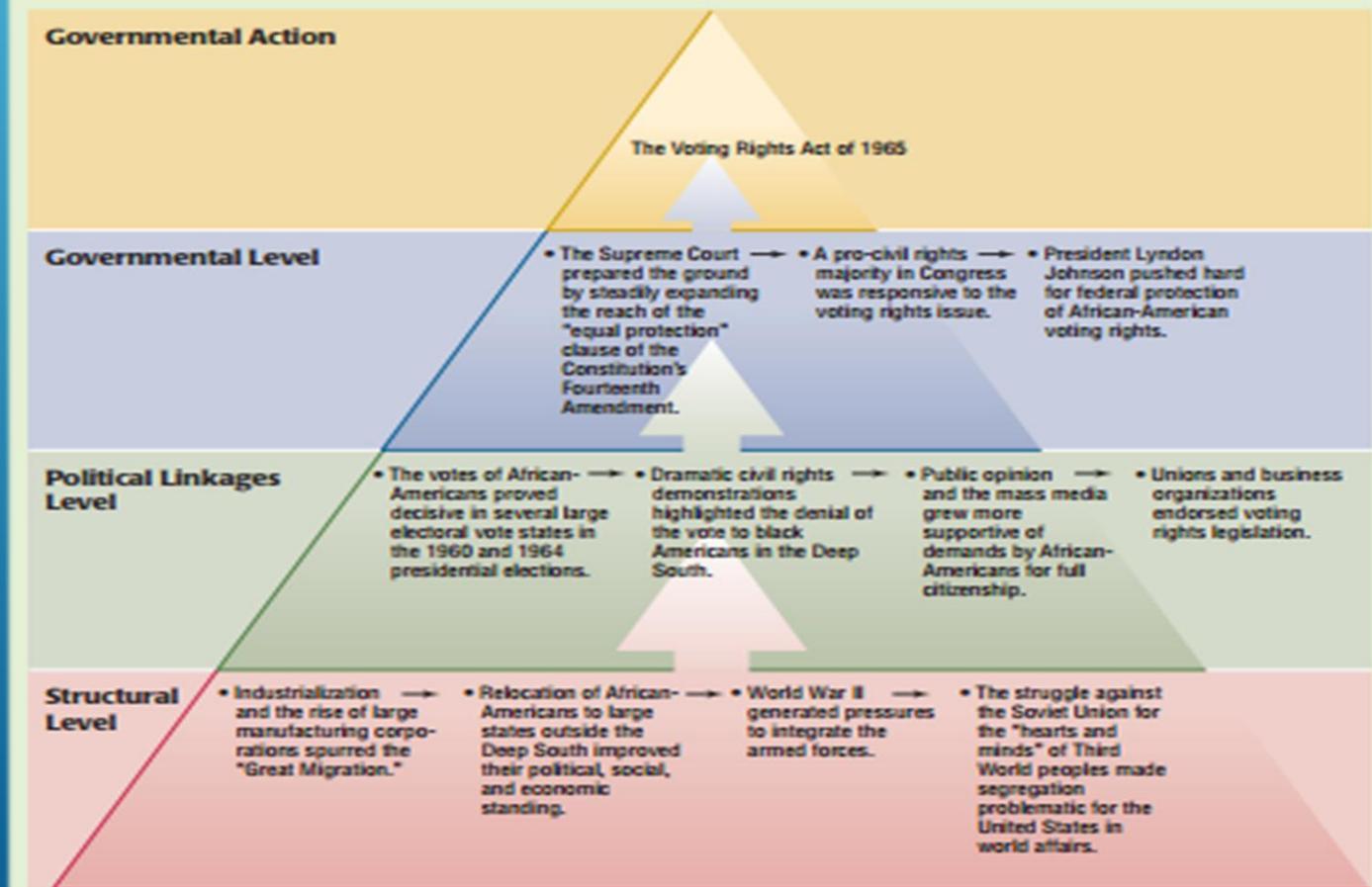


Using the Framework: The Voting Rights Act

How was it possible to overcome Southern resistance to black political participation?

Background: The Voting Rights Act of 1965 transformed the politics of the American South. Under federal government protection, the Act permitted African-Americans to vote and run for elected office in states where a combination of violence, economic pressure, and state and local government

rules made political participation difficult if not impossible prior to 1965. We can understand how such a momentous transformation happened by examining structural, political linkage, and governmental factors.





Connecting the Main Factors of Political Life: The 1965 Voting Rights Act

- ▶ **government**: Congress, President Johnson, Supreme Court
- ▶ **political linkages**: growing electoral power of African Americans, civil rights movement
- ▶ **structure**: great migration of African Americans, shift in electoral college votes, African-American combat service in Korea and WWII, Cold War politics



Understanding American Politics Holistically

- ▶ What goes on in government can only be *understood* by considering structural factors, political linkage factors and governmental factors.
- ▶ **feedback**: sometimes influences flow from governmental level to the others



The End

