Lecture goals: Discuss the ethical responsibility of (gasp horror) citizens! The central premise of the lecture is that, as suggested by cartoonist Walk Kelley’s Pogo comic strip on Earth Day in 1970 (for the full strip), much of the cause of problems plaguing this, and most societies, is the fault of we citizens.

*Some examples of this malady have been implied already in this course, with perhaps the paradigmatic one the fears of many in the US that we are facing an Armageddon of losing our freedoms on the road to communism. The left has been as bad at times, take Ralph Nader:

“When you see the paralysis of the government, when you see Washington, D.C., be corporate-occupied territory, every department agency controlled by overwhelming presence of corporate lobbyists, corporate executives in high government positions, turning the government against its own people” (source).

Yet data presented in Table 1, in our first lecture indicates that America is as free as anywhere in this world. This has not changed after eight years of Barack Obama.

But first: Thompson & Leidlein

Chapter 14 (the Peter, Paul, and Mary Principles at work in the fine burg of Brighton (of which there are apparently many in the world), and chapter 15 (“Elected officials at work and/or play”).

Luiz Carlos Bresser Pereira

Luiz Carlos Bresser Pereira is a Brazilian economist who has bounced between the academic, business and government worlds, most recently having been in the government of President Fernando Henrique Cardoso. Here he was the Minister of Federal Administration and Reform of the State (from his bio, linked from his webpage). The interesting thing about Bresser Pereira was that he (and Cardoso) were left-leaning folks who argued for less government, largely on the grounds that Brazil’s government was both too large, and too ineffective.
Pragmatism = ethical. So they were pragmatists which, for PAD6436 purposes, can be seen as a synonym of ethical. The pragmatist rejects what Dimock termed ‘middle range objectives’ like party (or ideology); and instead maintains loyalty to “obligation to the public interest or general welfare”¹ (from our lecture 3, page 2).

Citizenship. Bresser Pererira’s central point in the book from which our chapter is taken is structured around citizen rights. He identifies four (p. 14):

- Civil – the result of a ‘liberal’ (in the European sense of pro-liberty) revolution, this gained citizens rights relative to the state.
- Political – the result of a democratic revolution, this gained citizens rights to select government.
- Social – the result of a social revolution, this gained citizens the rights to basic services from the state.
- Republican – a central point of his research.

Republican rights. In another work (Bresser Pereria 2002), he describes Republican rights as:

The rights all citizens have to the res publica or the public patrimony – whether the historical, the environmental, or the economic patrimony – if essentially public, that is, of everybody and for everybody. (p. 145)

To clarify, his concern was especially with preventing capture of that public patrimony by private interests.

The republican state is a state strong enough to protect itself from private capture, defending the public patrimony against rent-seeking; it is a participatory state in which citizens organized in civil society take part in defining new policies and institutions and in exercising social accountability; it is a state that relies on government officers who, although self-interested, are also concerned with the public interest… (2004, p. 115)

Indeed, he and ally Cardoso once ironically turned around the meaning of privatization (generally understood as the selling off into private hands of a public entity), as de-privatization.

As a result of selling of state-owned assets, these

...will be more permeable to the aspirations of society and less susceptible to be controlled by sectoral, private interests. (Cardoso 1997, p. 7)

So combating corruption (the capture of the public sector by private interests) is central to Bresser Pereira’s Republican rights. Citizens have an obligation to promote this, keeping an eye on their government (generally through civic groups).

Capacity to tax. Another dimension of this, for Bresser Pereira, is the capacity to tax (2004, pp. 127-30). A key qualification of this capacity to tax is that the state have “the necessary legitimacy” my emphasis “to tax citizens” (p. 115). In this he is referring more to dysfunctional societies where citizens get few services from government in return for those taxes, and so my have a legitimate gripe about paying for nothing. We’ve seen, way back in Table 1 of Lecture 1, that the US does not have these characteristics. It ranks 18th in the world in terms of low

¹ Crikey! Imagine that: being loyal to the general welfare rather than party? Surely this is un-American, communist, and helps the terrorists win, all at once. After all, find a word searchable copy of the Constitution (this one will suffice) and search for ‘party’ then ‘general welfare’.
corruption (source), 20th in effective public services (source\(^2\)), taxes collected relative to GDP (behind only Chile, Mexico, and South Korea -- source) and even ranks high (top 5-ish!) in the efficiency of tax collection (source).

**Civic responsibility.** In short, citizenship is not just about civil, political and social rights, but it is also about responsibilities:

“Modern democracies are liberal because they are based on individual freedom and market competition, social because they try to assure social rights or offer social protection, and republican because, on the one hand, they are supposed to protect the public patrimony and, on the other, because its citizens have obligations to promote the public interest… Citizens in democracies are supposed to have some degree of commitment to the common good or public interest… It is impossible to understand modern democracies as made up of individuals who are exclusively looking out for their own interest.” (p. 7)

**Some examples of civic irresponsibility?**

**Attitudes to government.** While on the topic of legitimacy and capacity to tax, contrast attitudes to government of many Americans (second paragraph on page 1) with the reality of an effective, honest, government just presented. Do we have a responsibility as citizens to hold intelligent, and therefore actionable views about our government?

**Deficits and debt.** Take the current budget imbroglio: by reasonable assessments of how we got here, we fell for an enticing story that taxes were too high, so much so that they have stifled economic activity. So if we cut tax rates, it would paradoxically increase tax revenue: a smaller slice from a larger pie will yield more pie, if the percentage cut in the size of the slice is smaller than the growth in the size of the pie. The record:

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Year (Presidential budgets)</th>
<th>Tax cuts, economic growth, and budget balances</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Federal revenues (%GDP)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1947-1960</td>
<td>18.0</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1961-1974</td>
<td>17.9</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1975-1981</td>
<td>19.4</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1982-1989 (Reagan)</td>
<td>18.0</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1990-1993 (Bush I)</td>
<td>17.7</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1994-2001 (Clinton)</td>
<td>18.8</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2002-2009 (Bush II)</td>
<td>17.0</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2010-16 (Obama)</td>
<td>14.4</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Sources:

\(^2\) An indicator I like to use for this is the ‘Public Services’ score from the Fragile State Index, which is linked. The Fragile States Index rates how fragile countries are, or how likely they are to spiral into civil war, or ‘fail’, with Somalia being the paradigmatic case. The Public Services score gets, then, precisely at Bresser Pereira’s legitimacy to tax. The US, again, is well within the cluster of rich, ‘first world’ societies.
Evidence for the success of this approach does not jump out at one. For instance:

- The economy chugged along at growth rates of about 3.7% from 1947 through 1974, during which period we more or less balanced the federal budget.
- The rate of economic growth slowed to 3% during the unsettled oil price hike 1970s.
- This growth occurred with highest marginal tax rates of between 70 and 90% during this period.
- President Reagan cut this highest marginal tax rate dramatically, yet through his eight budget years averaged no higher growth rates than the preceding 35 years. In short: we took a smaller slice from a pie that stayed the same size, and deficits grew.
- The Clinton/Gingrich years (to give a pragmatic Republican Congress equal credit) raised the highest marginal tax rate slightly, revenues increased, economic growth was as good as the Reagan years, and the federal budget returned to balance.
- The GW Bush years brought tax rates down again, saw the worst economic outcomes in 60 years, and the return of deficits.

‘Stimulus’ and long term sustainability. I’d argue that the issue above should be clear to most folks just through simple common sense: lowering tax rates is not going yield more revenue. That it was tried in the Reagan/Bush I administration, and deficits rose; and that the opposite was implemented in the Clinton/Gingrich years and deficits disappeared; should have made everyone especially suspicious when the GW Bush administration argued for the same old Reaganomics. The shallowest of engagement with public affairs, and simple common sense should have been enough.

Take, on the other hand, the Democratic argument that deficit spending to stimulate the economy is what we need. The logic is sound: the economy slows, and government steps in to maintain adequate levels of demand. The logic of government spending to stimulate an economy should also be evident in the reaction of every military town to news that a unit is going to be transferred out. The stimulus would seem especially strong if borrowed. When we borrow from China, especially, demand is sucked out of the Chinese economy and pumped in to ours.

The (again) simple common sense problem with this logic, though, is that if doing this now stimulates our economy, when we have to pay back the loans the reverse occurs. In terms of intergenerational equity (discussed in week three), this would seem especially unethical.

War. The deficits and debt might be too complicated, though. Besides, the most important public policy issue through much of the 2000s has been the wars: the central front in the war on terror in Afghanistan, and our military involvement in Iraq. Yet despite all the heat generated in discussions of these wars, the quality of this participation has often left a lot to be desired. For example, a year after the United States invaded and overthrew the Afghan government that harboured the terrorists responsible for the mass murders of September 11, 2001, a National Geographic survey found that only 13% of Americans aged 18-24 could locate Afghanistan on a map (National Geographic, 2002). Similarly, over two years after the US-led ‘coalition of the
willing’ invaded Iraq, barely 30% of Americans aged 18-24 were able to locate Iraq on a map (National Geographic, 2006).

This is just one of many commonly offered bits of evidence that citizens are woefully uninformed, sometimes willfully so. Think, for instance, of the recent concerns, expressed by many, that the US is increasingly becoming anti-science.

My point is that these refusals to engage reality is not in the best interests of the country.

**How not to overcome this problem:**

From this point, especially, I’ll draw heavily on a couple of things that Our Esteemed Colleague Dr. Dumont and I have published (2010).

*Participation.* ...is often offered as a solution for dad policy: get people together, talk it out. This is a bit of a panacea, and our worry is that in the face of civic irresponsibility, the public manager is supposed to go in and miraculously create consensus. Participation suffers from some fundamental problems:

- **Unrepresentativeness:** Given that most people do not (and many cannot) engage in direct participatory events, an unrepresentative minority will have excessive influence.
- **Capture by ‘special interest’ groups:** Woodrow Wilson’s old politics/administration dichotomy was based in part on the fear of small, influential groups capturing policy through interacting with administering agencies.
- **Lack of expertise.** Just as we don’t want airplane passengers voting on whether an engine warning light represents a serious problem, or whether to fly through or around a storm front, there are limits to what non-trained citizens can opine on.

*Education.* This is another oft-offered solution to civic responsibility: civics classes, or public officials educating citizens on what good policy should be. Problems:

- Citizens can’t be forced to learn.
- There are inherent risks in letting government educate citizens on good government.

**How to help ameliorate this problem:**

*Civic responsibility.* This is the root of the problem. It is infeasible to expect public administrators to educate a public that doesn’t want to learn; or to us the jargon, to expect politicians to ‘lead’ a public that refers to practice responsible citizenship, and votes for those who offer pleasant, painless lies, rather than someone who takes the hard choices we currently face.

*Public administrator communication.* Still, citizens are more likely to make responsible decisions if information is presented to them. Bill McGregor especially makes this point. He first identifies the problem as:

“...an extraordinary knowledge disparity exists between public service *careerists*... and a *civitas* that wants problems solved. The gap is not only large, it appears to be growing and the effects can only be worrisome. The knowledge gap may well contribute to
mistrust of institutions by citizens to know when things are not working but not able to say what the possibilities for successful intervention are. The gap may explain some of the measured contempt public bureaucrats have displayed toward an unknowing and disrespectful public." (1984, p. 127)

McGregor's solutions:

- Relying on professional ethics to give the public administrator the courage to 'educate' the public, in the sense of challenging them with the hard choices that he implies above.
- Devolving "responsibility for service delivery and production back to the communities where the problems reside" (p. 128). It is much easier to avoid hard choices if the local community doesn’t have to pay for these bad decisions (i.e.: costs picked up by the state or federal governments).
- "...nurturing a potentially argumentative public... a dominant ethic of public service must be that careerists keep citizens fully informed about the possibilities for public service... The democratic point is that the public need is for intelligently organized information presented so that informed decisions can be made. Stonewalling public scrutiny by dumping masses of unintelligible data into the laps of inquiring citizens is as bad as shredding public records" (p. 128). More broadly, I think the American public is adequately argumentative.
- "Three goals essential to the reconciliation of civism and career public service.
  o "One is to defend career administrators. Only a secure service will be willing to make itself vulnerable to the experimentation recommended in this discussion...
  o "A second goal is that of civic capital formation. Here the goal is to enhance the knowledge base of public affairs so that citizens can understand how real public affairs operate, how practical problems affect public affairs, what the action options are, and what the criteria are by which options can be judged...
  o "A third goal is to broaden the meaning of public service" (p. 130). This last point refers more to the blurring of public and private (for and nonprofit) lines in the provision of public services.

Beyond this: better communication skills, beyond just more effective writing and speaking, to include an understanding of the theory of communication.

References


