

## Unit 1: Ethical Reform and the Public Sector

### Learning Objectives

#### How does citizen dissatisfaction become protest politics?

After studying this unit, you should be able to:

- Explain why citizens' satisfaction with democracy has declined;
- List some of the ways in which protest politics has manifested itself;
- Give example of protest politics;
- Explain the relationship between the establishment of ethics regimes and protest politics.

### Introduction

Recently, voters' satisfaction and trust in political administrations has declined substantially in due to politicians' irresponsiveness, misconduct, and lack of accountability (Pelizzo and Stapenhurst 2004). Voters have increasingly felt that their role and power to influence the political decision-making process has been diminished and, as a result, they have lost confidence in governments. Furthermore, voters have come to believe that politicians are more motivated by personal power than civic impact (H. Mackay 1998). These negative attitudes have been reinforced in countries around the world by the discovery of corruption scandals and other forms of misconduct.

The establishment of ethics regimes and the adoption of government ethics rules are intended to reconstruct voters' trust in the functioning of political systems. This Unit will consider the impetus for reforming government ethics

standards and ethics regimes, describe how ethics regimes and standards impact the way government functions, and explain how these standards and regime changes might impact civil society. Housed in examples of ethics standards changes, the aim is to provide a complete picture of the government ethics reform process.

#### Impetus for Reform

Citizen satisfaction with the democratic process is helpful for the general functioning of all sectors of the government, citizen morale, and trust in the rule of law, since, in a democratic system, each citizen vote has equal influence in the political process and an equal impact on composition of the government. However, in many countries there has been a decline in citizen satisfaction with democracy.

What impacts citizen satisfaction is difficult to measure. Factors impacting citizen morale include, but are not limited to, the perceived non-responsiveness of politicians, the perceived non-accountability of politicians, and the perceived loss of voters' political efficacy. An increasing percentage of citizens believe that politicians are merely concerned with the retention or the development of power, that politicians do not care about what the people think or about making real impact, and citizens believe that they are unable to affect the political decision making process. In other words, citizen concern has been generated by a belief that the responsiveness of the political system is vanishing, along with voters' perceived political efficacy

This trend is fairly well documented in political science literature. Some scholars have argued that by discounting voters' political demands, political systems now resemble oligopolies in which the voting results are determined by only a few voters (Katz and Mair 1995). The fact that political parties and politicians are perceived to discount voters' demands not only attests to low

political efficacy and limited responsiveness by the system, but it also provides a compelling explanation for the emergence of protest politics. Protest politics has manifested in many different forms, for example, leading to the emergence of protest parties-challenging the system parties, diminishing levels of political participation, the creation of new forms of political participation, and above all else, leading to lower voter turnout during election cycles.

The erosion of voter satisfaction with politics, political parties and politicians has culminated with the discovery of major notable corruption scandals in several established democracies. The discovery of these particular scandals has had a profound impact not only on the affect, or lack, that they have had on the electoral fortunes of several political parties, but the scandals also profoundly influenced voters' perception of the effectiveness of the political system at large.

The lack of parties' responsiveness, perceived loss of voter efficacy and political corruption have eroded the credibility of democratic politics and led to widespread cynicism. A 1998 report noted that in Australia, "Esteem for politicians is so low at the present - and still declining - that voters are dealing with the problem by insulting themselves. They repeatedly talk of the need for leadership, of the mongrels in Parliament, of polities with their snouts in the trough, of the spinelessness of the Prime Minister...conversations about politics are characterized by a sense of bewilderment that things have gotten so bad; a sense of deep mistrust of politicians on both sides; a level of cynicism bordering on contempt," (Mackey 1998). The situation has not been very different in Canada, where Member of Parliament (MP) Donald H. Oliver observes, "There is little doubt that there is considerable public cynicism towards politics and politicians...the public has also become more distrustful of politicians in general. Whether we, as a group, are less ethical today than in the past is unclear and perhaps irrelevant. What is essential is that we

respond to the existing climate by making more efforts than in the past to be, and to be seen to be, men and women of integrity,” (Oliver 1997).

As discontent and cynicism have mounted, politicians have become increasingly aware of and sensitive to voters’ dissatisfaction. Through the creation of ethics regimes parliaments and parliamentarians have been making concrete efforts to gain voters’ trust and confidence. The creation, in turn, has required both an internal and an external strategy. The external strategy requires parliaments to publicize their rules to show not only that they are genuinely committed to creating and enforcing an ethics regime, but also to clarify to the voters what behavior is appropriate and should not be criticized, and to explain what behavior is *inappropriate* and deserving of criticism and punishment. The internal strategy requires parliaments to take several steps to prevent various forms of parliamentary misconduct from occurring, to punish clear instances of misconduct, and to create guidelines that are intended to improve the behavior of parliamentarians.

#### Ethics Regimes & Ethics Standards

When there is a case of great public outcry to improve ethics standards and eliminate ethics violations, ethics regimes are created. A common method for addressing potential misconduct on the part of parliamentarians is through a code of conduct, which is enforced horizontally, by a specific commission acting on behalf of the public. They are created in order to generate more ethical behavior among politicians and to rebuild public trust in political institutions. These regimes have been adopted by several legislatures and generally take on one of the following two forms (NDI 1999):

1. **Ethics codes** – These are general documents that formulate broad principles of behavior, but do not define what is appropriate and what is inappropriate behavior, nor do they establish sanctions for violations of the code. For example

2. **Conduct codes** – These tend to include very specific terms with clear sanctions for those who violate the arrangements of the code.

The success of ethics regimes is dependent on whether the people that are regulated by the code actually share the same ethical standards, have a common understanding of what is appropriate behavior, and a common understanding of what constitutes misconduct (Pelizzo and Stapenhurst 2004).

### **The Impact of Ethics Regimes**

Unless all members of a society share the same beliefs, their understanding of what is appropriate and inappropriate in power positions, and their understanding of what constitutes democratic governance run the risk of being different. Ethics Regimes help create an equal playing field. When misconduct, corruption and other forms of unethical behavior occur, ethics regimes can help eliminate them through legislative training, sanctions, and public pressure

### **Relevant Internet Resources**

<http://www.ipu.org/dem-e/guide/guide-5.htm>

### **Select Bibliography**

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H. Mackay, *Mind and Mood*, June 1998 as quoted by Dr. Andrew Brien (Consultant), A Code of Conduct for Parliamentarians? Research Paper 2, 1998-99, Department of the Parliamentary Library, Parliament of Australia.

Hon. Donald H. Oliver, Code of Conduct. Consideration of Final Report of Special Joint Committee Debate Adjourned, Debates of the Senate, 2<sup>nd</sup> Session, 35<sup>th</sup> Parliament, volume 136, March 20, 1997.

Chris Skelcher and Stephanie Snape, "Ethics and Local Councillors: Modernising Standards of Conduct", *Parliamentary Affairs*, 2001, pp. 72-78.

Legislative Ethics and Codes of Conduct

Richard Katz & Peter Mair, "Changing Models of Party Organization and Party Democracy: The Emergence of the Cartel Party," *Party Politics*, Vol. 1, n.1, 1995, pp. 5-28

Donald Oliver 1997 etc. (from Pelizzo)

NDI 1999 (p.6)