

L707 Analysis of the 2012 Election

Lesson 3

Distributive Justice

1 October 2012

The concept of **justice** is at the heart of any moral/ethical code. The preamble of the Constitution lists “...to *establish Justice*...” as one of the purposes of creating the “more perfect union”. Moreover, we pledge allegiance to “*justice for all*”. Quite naturally, people differ in their interpretation of what these words mean and more specifically, the role of the government in meeting that goal. The concept of *distributive justice* asks, “according to what principle should we as members of a society seek to distribute the material goods (e.g., food, clothing, shelter, medical care) of that society?” Listed below are several concepts of distributive justice that might be applied to what we want in our society. Read them carefully and choose the concept that most closely reflects your personal concept of *distributive justice*. **Please note the distinction between *equal* and *equitable***. As you read each theory, which represents more closely the two political parties? Hint: one is a summary of Ayn Rand’s ideology and one is John Rawl’s theory of justice.

1. **Distributive Justice as Equality.** Every person in our society should have an *equal* share of society’s benefits.
 - a. The distribution of these benefits should be left to the private sector and the moral conscience of individuals.
 - b. The government should have a role in ensuring these benefits are *equally* distributed.
2. **Distributive Justice Based on Contributions.** Benefits should be based strictly on one’s contribution to the goals of her/his group (the firm, society, humanity, etc.). Pay and benefits measure contributions. These are used in turn to obtain society’s benefits. If one does not have the means to pay for such benefits, he/she goes without them. The “free market” of economic activities determines who gets what and the government has no obligation, or right, to interfere as long as everyone has a legal opportunity to gain employment (this is usually called “the opportunity society”).
3. **Distributive Justice Based on Needs and Abilities.** Contributions should be required according to people’s abilities and benefits should be distributed according to people’s needs.
 - a. Contributions and benefits should be left to the private sector and individual conscience.
 - b. Government should have a role in establishing justice according to this concept.
4. **Distributive Justice as *Fairness/Equity*.** Each person has a moral right to a *fair* distribution of benefits of a society. This includes, as a minimum, the essentials of food, clothing, shelter, and medical care. The higher expectations of those better situated are

just/fair if, and only if, they work as part of a scheme that improves the expectations of the least advantaged members of society. There must be *fair*, not just *legal*, opportunity to attain advantaged status.

- a. Benefits and contributions should be left to the private sector and individual conscience.
- b. The government should have a role in ensuring a fair distribution of benefits according to this concept.

Referring to those concepts of **distributive justice**, identify the concept which you believe best reflects the values of the following:

	<u>Yours</u>	<u>Constitution</u>	<u>Society</u>	<u>Obama's Policies</u>
1.Retirement Benefits	___	___	___	___
2.Health Care	___	___	___	___
3.Child Subsidies*	___	___	___	___
4.Education	___	___	___	___
5.Income Distribution**	___	___	___	___
6.Equal Opportunity	___	___	___	___

What are the policy implications of your selections?

If the government is to be involved, which level of government is most appropriate?

Where does a progressive income tax policy/estate tax fit in the quest for distributive justice?

Do disadvantaged groups get a fair shake?

Is some sort of affirmative action justified to compensate for circumstances beyond the control of the individual? If so, what circumstances call for such action?

* This includes Aid for Dependent Children and other subsidies for under-privileged children, which Clinton sacrificed to get a deal with Gingrich. It threw 6 million kids into poverty.

** This includes such things as welfare payments, tax-deductible home mortgage interest, minimum wage, etc.