

**The Impoverished Soil of American Democracy**

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### Abstract

The United States of America has long served as a successful example of a democratic, republican government. Ingrained deep into the American psyche is the idea that democracy is the best of any political system, and that the American form of republican democracy is the best version of democratic self-rule. Constitutionally, everyone is thought to be provided the same opportunities for participation — there is equality at law — and if there is not, then at least there is continual progress and improvement toward democratic governance. What is taken for granted is that for democracy to thrive, it must be nourished on fertile soil. By exploring key factors such as the education system, citizens' participation, and the state of America's middle class, in this paper we evaluate whether the soil of American democracy is fertile or impoverished. Though the basic tenet of democracy entails rule by the many, it is evident that the American government favors the few — plutocrats and oligarchs. If the U.S. is to reverse this undemocratic trend, Americans must delve deep into the political, economic, and social issues and turn the soil so that the U.S. government will address with equal weight the concerns of *each and every* American citizen.

## **The Impoverished Soil of American Democracy**

“Throughout history many nations have suffered a physical defeat, but that has never marked the end of a nation. But when a nation has become the victim of a psychological defeat, then that marks the end of a nation.”

— Ibn Khaldun, 14th century Islamic scholar

The United States has long presented itself as the highest example of democracy — a country that values the voice of each and every one of its citizens. To determine whether the United States is a democracy or not, this key question must be posed: do the people of our country hold equal access to political and governing power? Generally, political theorists believe that a democracy will flourish if nourished by an adequately fertile soil. Fertile soil refers to a society that has a sizable middle class, active citizen participation, and an inclusive educational system that feeds the preceding elements. If any of these factors is weak or absent, it bodes poorly for robust democratic rule. This paper examines the sufficiency of those basic constituent elements for democracy in the United States by analyzing the above-mentioned functions with a view to explaining the resulting relationship between citizens and their government. Explain these elements, and you will know whether democracy is flourishing or deteriorating.

One of the primary reasons for the United States’ predicament can be identified at the very beginning: the educational system. The U.S. boasts a widespread public education system because it was decided long ago that quality education should be a right held by all citizens. Primary and secondary education were meant to provide a basic civic education, sufficient to mobilize civic participation and upward economic mobility. It is no surprise that education has served the purpose of job training preparation, but its purpose in providing a basis for civic society has been hollowed out, and most high schools do not require the teaching of civics. The flaws of the system do not end there — even a higher education has become something

increasingly difficult to attain. At the same time, the costs of public education have risen and education has become big business.

In addition, it is important not only to consider the actions of those controlling American politics and society, but also the lacking contributions of the average American citizen toward sustaining a democratic political structure. In particular, the lack of civic participation as a result of alienation and a general disinterest in government affairs contributes to increasing concern regarding the government-citizen relationship.

The weakening of the middle class in America can also be found to blame for the crumbling of America's democratic soil. Our government no longer represents the common American citizen but instead is under the control of our country's millionaires and billionaires. The role of our government has now become an interest to serve the wealthy, while leaving everyone else to suffer the repercussions of this greediness. America is increasingly seeming to lose its democracy to a plutocracy. The relationship between capitalism and democracy, which, in America, are each taught as the best systems as they are both based on the idea of freedom and will therefore work well together. But it is essential to note the difference: democracy equates with a "we" perspective, while capitalism is a "me" system. Therefore, capitalists will always try to gain control of the political system to become wealthier, which cannot align with the values of democracy.

While it is important to understand that these three factors are critical to a functioning democracy, it is also necessary to recognize that these factors are not placed in neatly drawn lines; there is constant overlap between these three facets of democracy. In all three aspects, however, the United States evidently lacks the fertile soil needed for democracy to thrive.

## **Widespread Education**

The erosion of America's soil of democracy can be blamed, in part, on our education system. More specifically, the lack of civic knowledge regarding political, economic, and social issues has recently become a concern in education. Unfortunately, it appears that the focus of the American education system has shifted from necessary civic education to mere job training. As a result, the lack of knowledge regarding public occurrences has made citizens more susceptible to manipulation through political propaganda, as well as allowed for the wealthy to dominate what does and does not happen in the government. Yes, we have public school education, but what is being taught that will actually educate American students in their government?

A 2019 survey, conducted by the Annenberg Public Policy Center, found that 2 out of 5 American adults (39%) correctly named the three branches of government (executive, legislative and judicial) — the highest in five years (see figure right). In addition, when asked to name the five rights protected by the First Amendment, 73% of Americans named freedom of speech, which was up from 48% in 2017. In fact, Americans' ability to name all five rights increased significantly since the survey was given in 2017 — perhaps as a result of controversies that have highlighted those rights in the news media recently (APPC, 2019). On the other hand, it is also important to note that almost a quarter U.S. citizens could not name *any* branch of government. These survey questions focused on the government setup of our country but not on actual understanding of political affairs. The resilience of our democracy is best protected by a well

informed citizen population — and civic education and attention to news increases that likelihood (APPC, 2019).

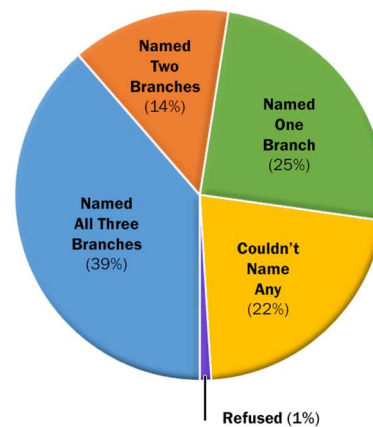
Not only does the current primary and secondary education system fail to adequately educate students on American government and politics, but the cost of pursuing a higher education further widens the gap of understanding the political system. The privilege of attending college should be a right provided to every student in the United States, but the soaring tuition fee and college debt presents American students with barriers diminishing their potential to contribute fully as American citizens.

One author notes that “School trains children to be employees and consumers... [and] to obey reflexively.” The mandatory education system serves students only in passing — its real purpose is to turn them into workers who conform to their societal roles (Gatto, 2004). Lack of knowledge on the basics of the structure of our democratic republic essentially creates an increasingly ill-prepared electorate which overtime has, and will continue to, contribute to a weakened democracy (APPC, 2019).

### **Active Citizen Participation**

Although there is no right to vote explicitly stated in the Constitution, voting is the most widely recognized form of citizen participation. Yet, over the course of history, since the first colonists arrived in America, women, people of color, and even groups of men have long struggled to gain the right to vote. By providing these groups the right to vote, a whole new

**Percentage of people who can name the three branches of government**



Source: Annenberg Constitution Day Civics Survey, August 16-27, 2019  
 (Note: Does not add up to 100% due to rounding of decimals.)  
 ©2019, Annenberg Public Policy Center

population of minority groups participate in government decisions. Today, even given the struggles throughout history to gain the opportunity to vote, a surprisingly low percentage of people actually participate in elections. It is essential that we ask ourselves — why are so few people voting in our country that has long fought for the right? A recent FairVote survey estimates that only about 60% of eligible voters cast a ballot in a presidential election while as few as 30% chose to vote in midterm elections. In many districts around the country, the number of non-voters actually exceeded the number of people who voted. By international standards, voter turnout in the U.S. is extremely low, and further statistics from FairVote indicate that “In countries with compulsory voting, like Australia, Belgium, and Chile, voter turnout hovered near 90%...” (FairVote, n.d.).

One of the primary factors contributing to the decrease in voter turnout has to do with inconvenience and general disinterest. According to a study just prior to the 2020 presidential election, some of the reasons why registered voters do not always vote include lack of interest, not being able to get off work or find a location to go vote, as well as a general feeling that the system is broken and their vote will not matter in the end (Thomson-Deveaux, et.al., 2020). Besides disinterest or alienation, many people want to vote but cannot. Numerous people reported they did not receive an absentee ballot on time, were told their name was not on the registered voter list, did not have an accepted form of identification, or could not receive help filling out a ballot. It is essential that we identify these problems that are rooted deep in the individual views of government but also in the flaws of the system. If America seeks to uphold its true image of a democracy, it must look toward reigniting citizens’ interest in causes that they can truly make a change by contributing to. It has reached a point where many Americans feel

that the current form of government no longer encompasses their political goals and interests, further retreating them into a state of disinterest and alienation.

A potential solution to the common inability to access voting sites could be the implementation of mail-in voting, which would prevent voter disenfranchisement and racial bias at polls and ballots. For starters, in-person voting can be difficult for some people, and absentee ballots are troublesome to obtain, especially in states where people have to provide extensive explanation and proper ID as to why they need an absentee ballot. In-person voting takes place on a work day and many poorer Americans cannot afford to miss work hours. A new survey from The Atlantic shows that black and Hispanic citizens are more likely than whites to face barriers at the polls. The numbers suggest that policies such as voter-ID requirements and automatic voter purges not only have strong racial and ethnic biases, but also that there are more subtle barriers for people of color that exacerbate the effects of these laws. Black and Hispanic respondents were twice as likely as white respondents to have been unable to get time off of work for voting. Another data point displayed that 10% of black respondents and 11% of Hispanic respondents reported they were incorrectly told that they were not listed on voter rolls, while just 5% of white respondents said the same. This would not be as concerning an issue if mail-in voting ballots were sent to everyone instead of only by request (Newkirk, 2018). Studies show that “Turnout rates [in 2020] increased in every state compared with 2016, but of the 10 states where it rose the most, seven conducted November’s vote entirely or mostly by mail...” (Desilver, 2021). While the COVID-19 pandemic instigated this major shift, it is evident that providing mail-in voting gave the opportunity to vote to those previously unable to do so as a result of schedule constraints. In addition, further study shows that Americans actually do support mail-in voting: a recent Pew Research Center poll found that “more than 70% of



Americans think any voter who wants to vote by mail should be able to do so” (Parks, 2020). By failing to address the obstacles that make voting more difficult and tedious for Americans to engage in, the desire to increase citizen participation through the basic act of voting can never be addressed.

While voter participation is a major issue in the United States, it is important to understand that even if citizens had and took the time to educate themselves, it has become increasingly difficult to find reliable sources. Behind every vote, there is an opinion — this opinion is formed when people interpret the information that they have access to. But what happens when this information is inaccurate or fake? How does one make a valid conclusion based on false premises? The adverse effects are everywhere — political occurrences, mass hysteria, and global trends can all be shaped by falsified information (Djordjevic, 2021). People, more often than not, set aside their intrinsic rationality to follow the larger group. One of the factors that has contributed to this is the shift in the media to a standard where misinformation reigns supreme. While social media can be seen as a gift of connection, it is also used to rapidly spread news, whether true or false, leading people to blindly follow the masses. On the internet, anyone can post anything. Even if it is not fake news, implicit biases can paint incorrect images of certain events and groups of people. For example, the media coverage of the Middle East in the 21st century is especially relevant. Stories about terrorist attacks or the American tragedy in the Middle East were and still are instantly headlined by the press. However, the stories of families, villages, and whole cities being torn apart by American troops hardly, if ever, reaches the attention of the average American.

Recent 2021 studies showcase just how alarming the prevalence of fake news is. Many Americans fail to realize that news organizations exaggerate or entirely fabricate information to

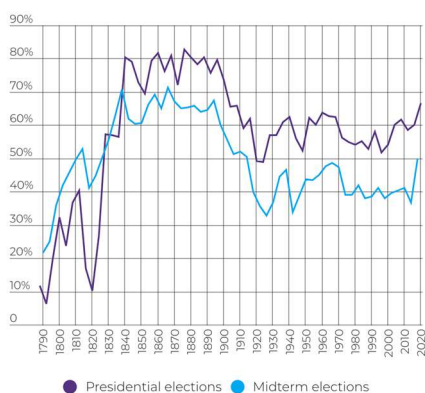
support their respective ideologies. Hemsley, an Associate Professor of Information Studies, argues that many instances of fake news, such as those spread by former President Trump, for example, were really just propaganda — distorted information published for political gain (Syracuse University, 2021).

Behind every social media pop-up — whether it be a YouTube recommendation, Facebook ad, or Twitter page — is an algorithm designed to keep users scrolling by noting preferences and providing content that is in line with one's tastes. By default, social media algorithms take the reins of determining which content to deliver to you based on your behavior (Barnhart, 2021). This personalization of algorithms not only sustains the spread of false information but also further perpetuates polarization and creates narrow points of view. For instance, if a user's political interests indicate a leftward leaning tendency, that person's recommendations may eventually be dominated entirely by liberal content. If the individual is constantly presented with content that directly aligns with their interests, it gives a rather skewed version of reality (Wu, 2019). Unfortunately, not many users have the habit of making an active effort to flag down polarizing content. In fact, social media statistics show that when it aligns with their beliefs, "56% of Facebook users can't recognize fake news." Due to this so-called confirmation bias, people will trust the news that confirms their existing beliefs and values, which inevitably isolates people from diverse perspectives (Djordjevic, 2021).

Another aspect of citizen participation that is important to take into account is that people generally only engage in civic activity when they feel it is absolutely necessary. For example, the late 1800s showed the greatest voter turnout in the history of the United States (see figure left). Voter turnout did not really boom until there were candidates that made voters truly want to show up at the polls. Pressing social issues of the time, such as eight hour work days and child

labor were lightening for the voting public. It is evident that citizens did not feel the need to

Voter Turnout Rates, 1789 - 2020



National estimates of voter turnout expressed as a percentage of the voting eligible population.

contribute to change until it personally affected them (FairVote, n.d.).

In the most recent presidential election between Donald Trump and Joe Biden, many American citizens had strong feelings regarding their support or opposition towards each presidential candidate and sought to do anything they could to make sure their vote made a difference. According to a report by NPR, “the 2020

Presidential election saw 66.5% of the voters casting a ballot, the highest percentage since 1900” (Montanaro, 2020). A pre-election survey found a record share of registered voters (83%) saying it “really matter[ed]” who won (Desilver, 2021). Experts say we can see a parallel to 2020 in the polarization and anger that drove high turnout in the mid-1800s. Throughout history, we see citizens participate when there is a flashpoint or sense of self-interest. In the recent Black Lives Matter movement ignited by the murder of George Floyd, the fire of the movement burned strong and reached its height near the time of the election date. It is important to realize that if the BLM movement began farther away from the election date and did not burn as long, the average American citizen would not have been as inclined to participate in civic activity. On the one hand, it is reassuring to see that Americans are willing to participate by educating themselves on political movements and events. On the other, it is disheartening to know that citizens feel a stronger need to participate only when there are flashpoints in political activity. Gronke, a professor of Political Science, notes that “That’s what really drives people to the ballot box: they cared” (Waxman, 2020).

This leads me to explore another aspect that undermines a true democratic system in the United States: the inability of the citizen to voice and implement their individual interests. Our two-party system is often found to lock out voters as a result of the fact that republican or democratic ideals often do not align with individual wants. Nothing in the Constitution requires a two-party system and if the American government truly sought to represent the average citizen, then they would move to break the binary hyper-partisanship that is at odds with self-governance. In order to better address the needs and wants of American citizens, the political system must become a multiparty democracy (Drutman, 2020).

What leaves so many of us sitting on the sidelines is not only a lack of understanding of the complexities of our world but also an absence of apparent ways to begin public involvement. We, as American citizens, need to decide for ourselves whether causes are beneficial to the greater good of our country — whether they be policy reform, the growing gap between rich and poor, or efforts to address the ever alarming issue of climate change. Americans need to become aware of how to participate, whether locally or globally. But before anything else, it is essential we believe that our individual involvement is worthwhile and that our contribution to the public sphere will not be in vain (Loeb, 2003). Until, and only until, citizens of the United States make this realization, we will not be capable of achieving a key aspect of true democracy.

### **Favorable Economy**

Political scientists have always viewed a strong middle class as essential to maintaining a democratic society. Before exploring the deteriorating state of the middle class in the United States, it is important that we begin by establishing a clear definition of “middle class”. As defined by the Oxford Dictionary, the middle class is “The economic group between the upper and lower classes, including professional and business workers and their families” (Oxford

Dictionary, n.d.). Historically, the middle class has been interpreted to mean having a stable income, a modest home, college savings, and a comfortable retirement. People are told that if they work hard enough and spend consciously, they will be able to make a good living and take care of themselves and their family. While this sentiment comes from a genuine belief in the upwardly mobile nature of America, the truth is more nuanced than that (Diversyfund, 2020).

The American Dream that is deep rooted in the individual American mind, fosters the idea that with hard work, one can be successful. The American Dream provided individuals from all across the country the invitation to pursue a new life of hope and prosperity. Therefore, it was branded into the American psyche that people ought to be doing something productive with their time, and moral guilt should attach when they are not working hard. And so, America became a place where anyone who worked hard could dream of a better life. Enter the 20th century, when Max Weber posited that the Protestant work ethic fostered modern economic development. Although psychologists disapproved of this new work ethic, Capitalism embraced it. As one therapist said: “Workaholism is the one form of addiction that is worn as a medal rather than a ribbon that says ‘dysfunction’” (Su, 2020). This is one of the most firmly ingrained myths of the American Ideology — that the U.S. is a “middle class society” and a “land of opportunity” where anyone who works hard has the opportunity to achieve the standard of living which has made America “the envy of the world” (Nasser, 2015). Now, many Americans, especially those living in the middle and lower classes, have grown to realize just how polluted this American Dream is. Rather than advocating that with hard work one can be successful, it appears the message is now that if you are not successful, it is because you individually have not worked hard.

According to a study by the Pew Research Center, “about half (52%) of Americans live in a middle-class household” (Kochhar, 2018). Despite forming a majority of the American

society, the middle class is less financially secure than ever before. There are a few factors that come into play: incomes that do not keep up with the increasing cost of living, a decline in the value of assets causing drops in personal savings, as well as diminishing health and pension benefits for employees. The instability and lack of representation of our middle class is a direct result of the government's interference and the shrinking economic power of the average American. The middle class size has been shrinking since the 1970s, and the wealth gap between middle class and upper class has been continuously widening. Most middle class Americans now have a smaller safety net than ever before — they are working more and getting paid relatively less for it with less job and life security. Years of financial instability and wealth building gap have thus given rise to a host of other problems such as distrust in the community, rising crime levels, and mental health issues linked to financial stress (Diversyfund, 2020).

Another example contributing to a stagnating middle class is a term known as the “middle-class squeeze”. The middle-class squeeze, a term coined by Nancy Pelosi, refers to “negative trends in the standard of living and other conditions of the middle class of the population.” Increases in wages fail to keep up with inflation for middle-income earners, while at the same time, this phenomenon fails to have a similar effect on the top (and even bottom) wage earners (see figure right). The Center for American Progress reported in September 2014 that “the real cost of healthcare for middle-class families had risen by 21% between 2000 and 2012, versus an 8% decline in real median household income... [and] that the real cost of higher education for middle-class families had risen by 62% between 2000 and 2012.” These debts have a long-term effect on middle-class Americans (Wikipedia, n.d.). People belonging to the middle class find that inflation in many goods and services — such as education, housing, child care, and healthcare — essentially prevent them from maintaining the desired middle-class lifestyle,

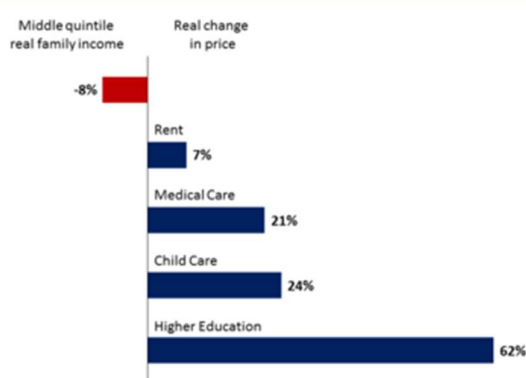
further undermining aspirations of upward mobility promised by the American Dream (see figure left). For middle-class families, that means two earners must now be engaged in the labor market to maintain the same level of income once achieved by a single earner. They are working more hours for limited income growth, thus further contributing to rising inequality and making it substantially harder for families to afford key aspects of the middle-class lifestyle (Maciolek, et.al., 2021).

Politicians typically see the middle class as something to create with the gains of

economic growth. But in fact, the opposite is the case: the middle class is the true source of economic growth. A strong middle class provides a stable consumer base that drives productive investment as well as a key factor in encouraging other societal conditions that lead to growth. Empirical research, such as a 2005 study of economic growth in the United States, concludes that “A more vibrant middle class...increased long-run economic growth” as a result of their



Change in U.S. real household income and selected goods and services (2000-2012)



Source Data: Center for American Progress – “The Middle Class Squeeze” (September 2014)

tendency towards stable demand. The wealthy in unequal societies, such as ours, simply do not consume enough to drive a modern economy. This means that when incomes are stagnant or declining for most people, there is not enough demand in the economy to encourage productive investment. The message is clear: In order to stimulate sustainable economic growth,

the middle class must be able to consume; to do that, it is necessary that they see their incomes rise (Democracy Journal, 2011).

In addition, a strong middle class, as thinkers from Aristotle to James Madison to modern political scientists have noted, fosters good governance by helping ensure government is well-run, increasing citizen participation and promoting policies for the benefit of all of society rather than special interests. In contrast, economic inequality and a weak middle class make the political system imbalanced and reduce the political participation of non-wealthy citizens, thus reducing voting, discussion, and general interest in public policy. Even in relatively equal societies, the non-wealthy are less likely to participate in politics than those with greater economic power; therefore, inequality and a deteriorating middle class have a profound impact on who is and is not politically engaged. All in all, a weak middle class essentially just hollows out governing practices and institutions, so that our so-called democracy no longer delivers for its citizens (Democracy Journal, 2011).

By remaining blind to the economic needs of the majority middle class, the U.S. government only further allows for corporations to influence economic policy which only benefits the top 1% of American citizens. As the political interests of our government falters in favor of a more money concentrated political world, the image of an American democracy, by which every citizen's concerns are deemed important and accounted for, washes away. As stated simply by Winston Churchill, "The best argument against democracy is a five-minute conversation with the average voter."

Some potential solutions may include, but are not limited to, increasing the number of jobs through policies that stimulate economic demand, raising the minimum wage, and strengthening the labor movement. In addition, reducing the cost of healthcare, childcare, college



tuition, and rent by either directly reducing the costs of these services or helping middle-class families pay for them by including education grants, debt forgiveness, as well as more generous family leave (Wikipedia, n.d.). If America had a thriving middle class, citizens would have the time to delve deeper into educating themselves on the state of their country when they otherwise may not have had the inclination to do so. It is essential that the citizens of a democracy feel safe and secure economically to participate in the greater interest of the country. For true democracy to be realized, Americans and the government must understand that a strong middle class leads to economic growth as well as a strengthened democracy — not the other way around.

### **Conclusion**

It is a sad reality that the American “democracy” is merely an illusion — a facade to bend the average American mind into believing that their voice matters. But in order to move towards this ideal democracy, we as American citizens must ask ourselves: is our “democracy” built of fertile soil? And if not, will the United States be able to fix these underlying problems and pave the way to become a true democracy resting on fertile soil?

This road to achieving a democracy means we face a winding path that is as much psychological as it is political. Just as the Ethiopian proverb says, “He who conceals his disease cannot be cured.” We, as a society, must understand our political diseases — people having unmotivated attitudes towards citizen participation, the middle class becoming a reminiscence of its former self, and the education system becoming a profit grab for the elite — and learn what it will take to heal our society and our government. Without these essential foundations, our democracy is sure to crumble — rather, continue crumbling — until lasting changes are made. Yes, while it may be easy to give in and accept the fact that our democracy is doomed to fail, it is crucial that we do not falter in our motivation to make change. It *is* possible for our country to

turn around and create a society where the average citizen participates with intention, where the middle class is flourishing, and where a quality education is a right not given to some, but to all. When our government is miserably failing to deliver what the people of this country seek, it is our civic duty to stand in opposition. We must believe that we can make a difference in shaping our common future — one step at a time.

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