

Living under the Pretense of Democracy

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### Abstract

Social scientists and political theorists have created four theories of American government: Democracy, Pluralism, hyper-pluralism, and elite theory. Society claims that the United States functions under a Democratic government with a capitalistic economy, however, this can be more theoretic than it is a reality. This essay examines some of the key elements of a functioning democracy and how prevalent they are in American society. By analyzing the evidence about citizen participation, the education system, and the strength of the middle class a conclusion about which of the four theories American government truly functions as will be drawn. The paper will also look deeper into the question of what can be done to change these systems to create a more democratic society. Books, web articles, journals, studies and documentaries provided the information included in this paper.

## Living under the Pretense of Democracy

### Introduction

Leo Tolstoy once wrote that, “There are no conditions of life to which a man cannot get accustomed, especially if he sees them accepted by everyone around him”. The most unanimously accepted idea in the United States is that we have a governmental system known as democracy and an economic one of capitalism. Like any unquestioned seemingly universal truth, this single-minded view of the world we live in has morphed in meaning. No one stops to consider that the definition of a democratic form of government and the basic structures of American society are not synonymous. Indirect Democracy is when a country is governed by the influence of citizens on policymakers. This was the basic idea that the founding fathers had in mind when they set up the beginning systems of government. During the eighteenth century, many believed that the average citizen was not capable of effectively governing, making direct democracy impossible. The key to this system was that the elected officials would represent the desires and needs of the commoners. Once this system fails, once the officials no longer represent the public, democracy is lost. This is what has happened.

Evidence shows that public opinion is largely ignored. Policy after policy is passed that goes directly against the popular majority. Meanwhile, laws proposed by wealthy individuals or corporations breeze through the system. Universal health care has been deemed “politically impossible” because large pharmaceutical companies lobby against it, despite the fact that it is one of most supported policies by average citizens. Environmental protection policies are reduced to protect the limitless profits of large corporations. Education budgets are cut, against the public outcry for better school systems. It is ignorant to believe that these issues can exist in a

society that is actually democratic. Anyone who takes the time to glance at the basic systems that define American policies will realize that this definition needs to undergo critical review.

The main question that then follows is, “What actually defines the United States government if not democracy?” There are three other theories created by political scientists to define this system. One is pluralism, which says that groups of people, rather than individuals, compete for control of public policy. Through a balance of bargaining, trading, and compromising these opposing groups work to create policies that benefit the most people. In this system the majority of voices are still heard, with a little less equality than under a democracy. This theory is still rather optimistic about how much influence public opinion has. A better definition of what is reality in the U.S. is hyper-pluralism. This is a less functional form of pluralism. The groups compete and cancel out each other. They prohibit the government from functioning properly by creating stagnation through chaos. No ones opinion can be heard at all because everyone is yelling at once. This created a roadblock in the path of government policy. This was exemplified when the government “shut down” in 2013 (Yan, 2013). The process of compromising generally works better in theory than in practice. Hyper-pluralism suggests that nothing ever gets done but this is not entirely true. Policies are made, just not in the interest of the public.

The final theory is elite class theory, a modern day definition of an oligarchy. The wealthier class has a vast amount of power that undermines public opinion. The upper class has a disproportionate amount of the nations wealth, which they use to influence public policy. This creates a class based society with a massive gap between the upper and lower classes that continues to grow. This underlying theme is currently masked by vaguely democratic actions. Noam Chomsky defined this as a “Plutocracy with democratic forms” (Martin, 2016). The public

is ignored and representatives only represent a fraction of the people who chose them. This is most evident in the platforms of political candidates. In a democracy, they would span a wide range of opinions because they represent a diverse group of people. However, political candidates become more indistinguishable from one another year after year. The debates are no longer a discussion of key issues to show what the candidates stand for, they are a televised parade of different faces, representing the same ideas. They propose platforms that are meant to show who has the interest of the average citizen at heart but then act in the favor of corporations and the wealthy.

Looking at key elements of democracy, such as citizen participation, the educational system, and the strength of the middle class, reveals common themes that suggest the United States no longer functions in a democratic way. A deep analysis reveals that the interests of the elite are heard above all else and the middle and lower classes are rapidly falling off the radar of the political leaders. The government creates systems to leave the lower classes at a disadvantage and appease those with the money. The average citizen is pacified by the idea that they have the chance for upward mobility and that they have a say in the creation of policies. The public blindly assumes that government exists in the same form that it did over one hundred years ago. The only hope of progress in a more positive direction is through the education of the masses.

### **American Voter Apathy or a Flawed System?**

Charles B. Rangel, a member of the House of Representatives highlights the general ideals behind a perceived American democracy when he says, “Full participation in government and society has been a basic right of the country symbolizing the full citizenship and equal protection of all”. Throughout the centuries of creating and refining the political structure of the

United States a debated has persisted about whether this level of citizen participation actually exists and whether it is necessary or not. Analyzing data about citizen participation in various political activities reveals that it has declined over the years. There are many theories as to why participation has declined or never truly existed that can be used to determine what is necessary to change this fact (Rangel, n.d.)

Over the years political participation had declined, as revealed by the lack of voter participation, involvement in political organization, and number of people running for political positions. Voting has been described as the most basic and common form of political participation because it involved little effort from the public. People do not need to even be informed about political issues or the candidates to place their vote, yet even this simple act of involvement is declining. In the last thirty-six years, participation in presidential elections alone has decreased by approximately a quarter (Putnam, 2003). In 2012, nearly 85 percent of those of voting age in the United States registered to vote but only approximately 54 percent actually voted. This is one of the lowest voter turnouts of first world countries. Three of the top five countries with the highest percent of voter turnout, Belgium, Turkey, and Australia, have a system of compulsory voting where the failure to vote results in a repercussion such as mandatory community service or a fine. (Desilver, 2015). This idea would violate the general ideas behind the American Constitution that protects its citizens' freedom of speech and right to remain silent (Amendment 1 and 5), and other countries including Sweden and Denmark manage to have high voter turnout without such a policy (Desilver, 2015). This suggests that the US can increase voter participation without making it mandatory. In the 2002 mid-term Congressional elections only 39 percent of the voting-age citizens participated. Similarly, in the quadrennial presidential elections, less than half the electorate cast a vote (Street, 2002).

A decrease in voter participation in local elections has also declined across the country by around 25 percent. According to researchers at the University of Wisconsin, who conducted a study of 144 large US cities, participation in local elections has been reportedly significantly lower than the participation in national elections but has declined even more rapidly in the past few years. In 2001, local participation was around 27 percent but by 2011 had dropped to 21 percent (Maciag, 2014). Researchers found that in fifty-seven US cities there was an average turn out rate of 34 percent for city election and across thirty-eight large US cities there was only a 27 percent turn out rate for mayoral elections. This lack of voter participation in the most direct form of government for citizens has been reported as “signaling a crisis in American democracy” (Holbrook and Weinschenk, 2013).

Though voting and following the current political events are important forms of government, they are relatively undemanding of citizens. Citizen can vote and watch the news without discussing or meeting within and outside of their community. As the population of high school and college graduates has grown larger, civic participation at every education level has declined (Galston & Levine, 2003). A detached community does not lend itself to political involvement. This phenomenon works in a continuous loop: Citizen participation increases community involvement while an increased sense of community increases citizen’s chances and motivation to participate. In the 1970s Americans were twice as likely to attend a political speech or rally or work for a political party as in the 1990s. On the other hand, political parties are growing in size and wealth. This further shows that voter participation is decreasing because the parties are driven to push harder than ever to get voters on their side. In other words, they must be more competitive to win the majority of continually decreasing votes. Election campaigns used to be a source of community involvement that sparked discussions of major political issues

but have shifted to a spectator event in which the citizens simply watch the candidates parade around, never fully understanding what each one stands for or how they differ from the rest (Putnam, 2003).

Participation in community activities and groups has also declined in the past century. People with high school diplomas and no college education have become approximately 32 percent less likely to join any community organizations while an increasing population is not joining any associations at all (Galston & Levine, 2003). Union membership has dramatically declined over the past 40 years. Members of these types of organizations are eight percent more likely to vote and join more voluntary organizations than nonmembers. Since 1974, fraternal organizations and women's auxiliaries, which traditionally were deeply involved in community activities, have declined in membership. Unlike the growing professional associations of today, these groups offered men and women of different classes to meet and communicate with each other on generally equal terms. Churches and other religious affiliations help lower income people gain access to a source of civic participation so that they can gain the skills needed to actively participate, however these organizations often increase the hate between groups of people which incidentally increases voter participation but only on issues that the groups view differently. Mailing-list associations have been a source of increase participation however this shift may ultimately be detrimental because there is less face-to-face interaction and hands-on learning of civic skills (Galston & Levine, 2003). "The more socially isolated our citizen become, the fewer chances they have for the kinds of civic conversations that fuel involvement in crucial public concerns" (Loeb, 2003). Attending meetings or organizing a grass-roots campaign increases citizen's knowledge, skills, and communication more than joining a mailing-list organization. In some cases, these mailing-list groups may take on a more active role by

organizing events and meetings much like other civic groups, unfortunately this is less common. Overall, the last decade and a half has been the scene of a dramatic decline in the amount of people who belong to committees and serve as officers of local groups which parallels the trend of the general decline in local political activity (Galston & Levine, 2003).

Another way that citizens can participate is through actually running for local, state, and national government, the question is whether or not this is still possible for anyone outside the upper class. The local governments are still fairly accessible to the public, however the power of these individuals to institute major changes in their community is severely limited by state and federal government regulations. Though major political positions are supposedly available to anyone willing to run, the reality of the situation is very different. The people who come from well-known families or are sponsored by large corporations have greater influence over the general public. When citizens go to vote they are more likely to choose the name they have simply heard the most and recognize, whether they agree with that candidate's political platform. The people who are more qualified to represent the public have a very slim chance of winning. This is evident in the case of Shirley Chisholm who ran for president in 1972. Though she represented the public interest, many large organizations refused to back her. She said, years after her campaign, "When you realize what goes on behind the scenes. When you realize how people bargain for votes. How people make a deal in order to get three more delegates to a convention. It's not Democracy. It's participation. It's participation but at what a cost". She realized that the government was not protecting the interest of the people but working through a system run by trading and money and deals. She fought to get a portion of the electoral votes, instead of one candidate receiving all the electorate votes from a state, so that the people who voted for her would have some representation but lost that struggle at the democratic convention.

All of the public ideas she embodied went unrepresented. This is a small-scale example of the widespread lack of representation of most of the public's view that exists in American government (Lynch & Bertelsen, 2004). Jeff Smith is another example of an average citizen who ran for the Missouri Congress seat in the House of Representatives after Dick Gephardt's retirement. He lost the primary election by a nearly insignificant percent to Russ Carnahan despite the fact that he had been more directly involved with the community of St. Louis before and during his campaign. He created a strong grass-roots movement that drove him almost to victory. Carnahan had a name that many recognized from his mother, a junior US senator of Missouri, and his father, the former governor of Missouri, which most likely contributed to his victory (Popper, 2007).

Not only is voter participation decreasing, the percent that does participate is not an accurate representation of the entire population. The majority of voters are of a higher socio-economic class and better educated while the average non-voter is worse-off and less educated (Piven and Cloward, 2006). Weak voter interest emphasizes the disproportionate political influence of the highly organized pressure groups and enhances the influence of the upper and middle class people because they are more likely to vote (Street, 2002). Many of the policies that representatives vote on revolve around local, state, and federal spending. If the lower class does not vote the elected officials are not likely to share their views and thus the lower class's needs and opinions are not represented in political decisions (Piven and Cloward, 2006).

Many assessors say that the current lack of participation is the result of the cultural phenomenon of apathy and cynicism alone. One states that, "We need to understand our cultural disease of callousness, shortsightedness, and denial, and learn what it will take to heal our

society” (Loeb, 2003). America has developed into a society that teaches its citizens to ignore the problems and let others solve them, namely the political elite. This provides a thriving environment for cynicism, perceived naivety for caring about other people or the planet, and demeaning idealism. People are taught that they cannot make a difference and to leave decisions to the “more qualified” members of society. One political theorist, Putnam, concludes that as Americans watch more television they become less involved in civic activities and more pessimistic about human nature. This can be viewed as a product and cause of our declining society (Loeb, 2003).

Other evidence about the lack of citizen participation in politics is the general lack of knowledge. Studies show that despite the increase in education over time, citizens are not more informed about the governmental issues and events. “The average American college graduate of today knows little more about current political affairs more than the average high school graduate of the 1940’s” (Putnam, 2003). While scandals and war still arouse attention from the public but other forms of news about political affairs, such as new laws being discussed, fail to interest the public. Politics has taken on a role of entertainment more than a force that influences and shapes individuals’ lives. As a result, fewer US citizens pay attention public affairs than they did a quarter century ago. This trend appears to be generational, with a younger less-informed generation replacing the older more-informed generation. “Today’s under- thirties pay less attention to the news and know less about current events than their elders do today or than people their age did two or three decades ago” (Putnam, 2003).

The reason for the decline in political participation by citizens is the system of government that inherently underrepresents portions of the population (Verba, 1996). For one,

voting only includes the more educated people in higher classes. Voting takes place during the week and the polls close before many citizens get off of work thus excluding most of the working class. Actually becoming informed about candidates and what they stand for both in local and national elections is not easy because the mass media is owned by the two major parties and only shares certain information and ignores the majority of candidates. The national election system also excludes third parties from having any chance at representation. The wealthy control the campaigns and thus very few candidates are even able to fund their campaigns if they only share the views of the lower and middle class citizens. Campaigns become a representation of only the upper class. For citizen with lower incomes, the idea of “one person, one vote” becomes a myth because taking the time to vote is not worth their scarce time (Street, 2002).

The Founders specifically designed our original government to exclude the general population from having any say in politics. Alexander Hamilton’s colleague, John Randolph, even said, “When I mention the public, I mean to include only the rational part of it” meaning the landowning elite. This is the definition of elite democratic theory, stating that only a certain group should get to influence the government. However, amendments to the original constitution have been made to protect the rights of the many. The Declaration of Independence specifically states that:

Governments are instituted among Men, deriving their just powers from the consent of the governed, — That whenever any Form of Government becomes destructive of these ends, it is the Right of the People to alter or to abolish it, and to institute new Government (Chomsky, 1996).

Nevertheless, the Founders worked around this idea by creating the theory of “consent without

consent” or “the ends justifying the means” meaning that the government could impose changes or plans that the public did not agree with as long as later the public agrees it was the right thing to do. In essence they were to protect the public from itself, however this is an easily corruptible system, as was soon learned. Madison noticed that the elite were “substituting the motive for private interest in place of public duty”. This was possible because the citizens had no say in the government and it slowly began to represent a monarchy more than a democracy. This system has now shifted so that the political officials do not have as much control as they used to but a new group is beginning to dominate: Big Business. Against Madison’s warning they have grown to such an extent that their interests are profit-driven more than by public interest. This has driven the working and lower classes to the point that they can hardly have a say. This makes participation in politics seem futile to them so naturally the eagerness to get involved has declined (Chomsky, 1996).

One obvious example of this is the presidential debate. Up until the debate in 2000, citizens in the audience were allowed to ask the candidates questions about their positions on specific political issues. The candidates could also ask each other questions to challenge the views of their opponent(s). From the 2000 election forward, candidates were unable to ask questions of one another and the audience had to submit their questions beforehand so that the candidates would not be caught off guard, as George Bush was in the 1996 debate. The Democratic and Republican candidates now know all the questions in advance and agree on the topics before the actual debate. This televised event used to serve as an opportunity for voters to compare the candidates and challenge them; now it is a choreographed spectacle, which citizens have no influence over and receive little information from. This event represents a political structure that aims to control who participates in and who is represented by the government. This

debate also keeps the viewers from ever hearing the opinions of third-party candidates, despite the fact that they may represent opinions of a large portion of the population (Moyers, 2004).

Another example of the exclusion of a proper representation of the public is the system of the Electoral College. In most states, there is a “winner-take-all” system where a particular candidate simply has to get more of the votes than any other individual candidate to receive all of the electoral votes. They do not even have to win the majority. This means that the Electoral College only represents a small portion of the population when they vote for the president. In a few states the Electoral representatives are divided proportionally to the percent of the votes that the candidates receive. Hypothetically, if a state has 10 electoral votes and the candidate who won got 40% of the votes that candidate gets 4 of the electoral votes in this system, but in the “winner-take-all” system the winner gets all 10 electoral votes despite the fact that they did not win the majority of the popular vote. The common system excludes many citizens from representation despite their level of political involvement. Most noticeably third-party candidates are excluded from ever being represented in the Electoral College because while they may gain a large portion of the votes they have a very small chance of beating all the candidates so they will not get any of the electoral votes. The people who these third parties represent then have no representation. This makes it “hard to muster much energy to challenge the parties that dominate the nation’s leading representative body” (Street, 2002). America is the only major democratic nation where the electorate underrepresents the lower class, young, and minority citizens. The issue of voters being well educated and nonvoters having a lower average education has actually worsened in the last three decades. It has been stated that the right to vote is meaningless “unless opposition parties can compete for power by offering alternative programs, cultural appeals, and leaders; and unless diverse popular groupings can gain some recognition by the parties”. In this

system entire portions of the population have no representation. The less well off are continually constrained by the weak party system that is largely influenced by moneyed interest groups. If this group was accurately represented they could at least moderate the harshness of the capitalistic system. They may have also been able to decrease the amount of regulations put on unions and their rights to organize (Piven & Cloward, 2006).

Americans are so disheartened by the obvious political corruption in the country that they feel that their votes and participation will not hold up against the influence of the economy. Polls about the 1996 election showed that public interest had declined to record lows and that voters disliked the candidates and expected little from either of them. It is understandable that the majority of people feel this way because some of the most influential political elite embody this idea. For instance, Secretary of State John Foster Dulles stated to that National Security Council that the US is “hopelessly far behind the soviets in developing controls over the minds and emotions of unsophisticated peoples”. This idea of controlling the public would lead the average citizen to understand that there was something amiss in the governmental structure. In 1990, Washington declared that “democracy will be less threatening if policy choices are closed” when they were attempting to lock Mexico into “Democratic reforms”. It is easy to see that the political elite have been trying to control the voice of the public since they created this system and now it seems like an insurmountable task to Americans to even attempt change (Chomsky, 1996).

In earlier years, half of the public believed that the government benefitted the special interest groups and not the majority of people. Unfortunately, in recent years, this belief has grown to be held by more than 80% of the population. The same amount believes that working

people do not have a lot of say in what goes on in the country and that the economic system is “inherently unfair”. More than 70 percent believe that business has too much power over many aspects of the public’s life. A large percent also believes that some profit should be sacrificed for the benefit of the people. This shows the growing gap between public opinion and policy. For example, social spending is often cut while the Pentagon’s budget increases, which the public opposes but business supports. Propaganda is used to persuade the public that they are voting in their best interest when in fact the wording is vague and misleading so as to disguise the true interests of those who created the law (Chomsky, 1996).

Analyzing why Americans are continually participating less shows some fundamental changes that need to be made to the political structure and electoral system. One suggestion is to reform campaign financing so that it is publically funded and freeing media time for the candidates so that money has a lighter influence on which candidates the public become familiar with. Proportionate representation, rather than winner-take-all, will allow third and fourth parties to challenge the major parties and ensure that the majority of the population is represented. Because these reforms will naturally make representation more equal, an increase in voter interest and participation will increase (Street, 2002). Another suggestion is to make better use of surveying methods by selecting a random sample that would provide governing officials with the information they need to provide equal consideration to all needs and preferences of citizens. Since surveys only involve much effort on the part of the surveyor, they will be accessible to even the lower class citizens. A well-conducted survey does not let people be quiescent nor does it exclude portions of the population, unlike voting. This suggestion is by no means saying that we should abandon the voting system; it is suggesting the combined use of it with a more scientifically accurate one. Even with the use of surveys a greater equality in the basic structure

would be needed for any real change to be made (Verba, 1996). Making the electoral more representative is one way and making polls easier to access is another. For starters, to include more of the middle and lower class voters, voting days should be made national holidays. Also every citizen should be automatically registered as they are in other countries so that it does not impede the motivation of voters by creating an extra process (Street, 2002 and Putnam, 2003). These are basic changes that can be rather easily instituted as an effort to increase citizen participation.

By questioning the amount of civic participation in this country, it becomes apparent that the system of our claimed “democracy” should be scrutinized. Civic participation is declining but this is just a symptom of a larger disease. Whether one believes that citizens are uninformed, lack the necessary resources, or simply have lost interest, the problem can be traced back to the roots of our governmental system. Lack of active citizen participation has led to the corruption and mutation of a representative government, but abundance of participation can force our current system to change. Any form of government needs citizens that it can represent, protect, organize, control, or lead. Ultimately the power is in the hands of the majority; as soon as they act together toward a common goal, little can be done to stop them. Our decline in active citizen participation is caused by the suppression of the lower classes by the government and the lack of motivation of those people to stand up for themselves, whatever their reasoning may be. American Democracy is supposed to be “Government of the people, by the people, for the people” as stated by Abraham Lincoln. If the people are no longer a part of it then the system has diverted entirely from the basic structure and no longer represents our definition of Democracy.

### **Failed Education System**

The foundation of democracy lies in the education of the masses. It is simple logic that a

group can only govern itself if it is educated enough to identify, understand, and work to solve major problems that it faces. Despite considering itself a democracy that is governed “for the people by the people”, the United States has one of the worst education systems of the developed world. Jean Piaget, a cognitive psychologist, said that “The principal goal of education in the schools should be creating men and women who are capable of doing new things, not simply repeating what other generations have done”. However, all evidence suggests that the American education system seeks to crush creativity and produce compliant, unquestioning citizens who have been sheltered from a comprehensive curriculum that covers diverse and controversial topics. The key to creating and maintaining a strong democracy begins with the strength of the school system and availability of higher education (Piaget, n.d.).

American education has fallen victim to the corporate system. With much of the curriculum and value based on standardized tests, the companies such as Pearson, Kaplan, and Houghton Mifflin, and McGraw-Hill, who claim to be non-profit, continue to obtain ever-expanding lucrative contracts and return on their investments. They continue to encroach upon student privacy by intensely monitoring their social media in an attempt to prevent cheating, however they seem to be going beyond the reasonable limit in insisting that the privacy of the test material should come before the privacy of the students. They also make incredibly large profits by selling materials needed to prepare for their tests. Many impoverished school districts cannot afford these materials and thus their students are at a disadvantage compared to other students taking the test. Ideally, any test used to determine the effectiveness of an education system should be based on whether the student has learned the information necessary to succeed not simply been affluent enough to access the tricks that can boost their scores. These companies also lobby school officials by sending them on all-expenses-paid trips for conferences in Europe

and Asia so that they can pass legislation that institutes more standardized tests despite the proof that it does not accurately represent the overall academic achievement of students (Persson, 2015). Finland, one of the best education systems, reduced the hours students and teachers spend in a classroom, increased extracurricular activities, and reduced the number of tests which changed the path towards collapse that it was originally facing (Choi, 2014). The CEO of the Educational Testing Service received 1.3 million dollars in compensations in 2012 while the average high school teacher makes around 58 thousand dollars a year. A system that pays millions to the people in charge of instituting tests rather than those actively educating students is flawed (Persson, 2015).

The most evident examples of the flawed system are the bans and intense monitoring of the curriculum. Global warming and evolution are strictly forbidden from appearing in Common Core testing (Persson, 2015). The content of textbooks is highly monitored by the government. High school history and government textbooks omit many of the cruel and harsh events in history that the United States caused while highlighting the tragedies of other countries. Civic literacy is also avoided. Societal issues and public policy of the present are not discussed and teachers struggle to find the time to incorporate it without falling short of state and federal requirements. One theory suggests that the government does not want students to focus on what needs to change or to learn to critically reason because it would lead to a more unruly populace that would pose a challenge to control. In this case, the education system is directly contributing to the decline in democratic ideals. It is undisputable that civic literacy is essential to effectively participate in self-governance and yet it is excluded from curriculum and never included in standardized testing. If the true goal of standardized testing is to see how proficient students are in the most important subjects, then since civil literacy and history are not included it can only be

concluded that the government deems them inferior. A truly democratic government that is dependent on citizen participation would emphasize the essential skills needed to participate effectively, which are critical thinking and an awareness of public policy decisions (Marciano, 1987).

Another symptom of the failed system is the outrageous tuition for colleges and universities. The price for an education that was originally designed to be free denies access to a large part of the population. At the same time, a majority of the students who do attend college fall into debt, which in many cases they cannot ever pay off. Student debt has surpassed credit card debt and reaches a net worth of over one trillion dollars. This leaves those who are supposed to be the next leaders of society at a disadvantage for the rest of their lives. Crippling the youth of the United States with debt sets the nation up for failure and an unstable economy. It is also unclear, just as with lower education, whether these schools are teaching the right skills. Business ideology is promoted while civic responsibility is neglected. Less and less college graduates turn up to vote year after year. No system rooted in democratic principles would neglect to stress the importance of such a basic form of civic participation (Rossi, 2014).

The victim of this corrupt system is not only the future of society, but also the students themselves. School environments can facilitate an increase of mental health issues. For example, the lack of a sense of community or connectedness at school can contribute to symptoms of depression. This, in turn, can cause the student to perform worse in school (Kidger, Araya, Donovan, & Gunnell, 2012). Students are also subjected to disciplinary pressures, crippling debt, and pressures to conform. They are punished for not showing up to school or being late by being suspended, this simply promotes the original issue. For the students who do decide to show up they are often unjustly punished for clothing or questioning the ideas promoted in the classroom.

The job of a school is not to punish children and teach them to bend to authority without question, but to teach them to question the world around them and wonder what they are capable of improving. Data based subjects are deemed more important than those that do not have direct answers or methods while non-data-based subjects are reduced to multiple choice tests and single interpretations. Programs that cannot be simplified or quantified struggle against the threat of collapse. Technical electives have diminished over the years and the few existing technical colleges, such as ITT Technical Institute and Heald College, are privatized.

It is widely recognized that the education in the United States is failing but the causes for such a decline remain largely debated. Some believe that it is the fault of the students, claiming that students have low test scores because students have no motivation to succeed on tests that have no effect on their academic carrier (Starr, 2005). This does not address the low performance on tests that do have high stakes or the fact that tests do not determine the intelligence or success of a student.

The solution to the failure of public education is nearly impossible to answer without the definition of what is considered failure. Low test-scores are one perceived symptom of a failing school, however, this may not be an accurate representation of the students ability to learn. These tests only prove that, in those subjects, students did not perform well on that test, nothing more. Their creative thinking, ability to solve world problems, and skills in diplomacy go unmeasured thus undermining the importance of these skills. Students who score well on these tests might not even have learned how to apply these principles in their everyday life. Under the No Child Left Behind Act (now the Every Child Succeeds Act) schools are deemed failing with no consideration of what the school is actually accomplishing. If a school teaches its students to have a desire to learn and an understanding of how a community grows and functions, those

students will be much better citizens than those who only teach to the test. Other empirical evidence, such as number of graduates who are accepted to college or employed in a technical profession, declining suspensions, and commitment of the teachers to improving their teaching methods, is ignored when schools are declared to be failing. Subjective assessments like presentations, writing papers, and participation in class discussions should be given more emphasis because they show how a student is progressing rather than their ability on a single day (Wilson, 2015).

The time constraints of testing also reflect a flaw in how well they can report a student's ability. Three hours of intensely focused testing with limited breaks can pressure a student into not performing as well as they would at their own pace. Students also only get credit for their answer rather than the process of solving the problem. This should not be the main focus of learning. If a student can figure out the direction and the information needed to solve a problem then they have proven that they can solve other similar problems and they actually comprehend what is being asked of them. Getting the right answer only shows that a student can answer that particular problem and possibly not even that since there is a chance that they can guess the correct answer. The essay portion of the SAT is even less reasonable. Rarely outside of school is a person expected to write a well-organized, nearly grammatically flawless essay in twenty-five minutes on a random topic. This particular skill shows nothing in comparison to being able to write a longer essay with time to edit and review. Long essay writing shows critical thought and analysis of a topic and the ability to take criticism whereas timed essays show that the student can quickly analyze and then spit out a page or two of coherent thoughts. The purpose of writing is that a person has time to review and organize what they are trying to communicate and that they do not immediately need to sort it all out. Currently, the education system demands students

view works in a shallow way without any deep consideration or further exploration into the content (College Board, 2015).

A major issue in schools is the cutting of programs that promote critical thought outside of the traditional courses. For example, civil rights, visual and performing arts, and music programs fight to keep enrollment and funding up. They are forced to follow unreasonable standards that call for more writing and reading than actual creating. A strong culture and community is dependent on these forms of expression and has been since the beginning societies. Books are banned because of their progressive content or ideas that deviate from the status quo. The idea that every student will pursue an academic career is illogical. A specialized society cannot function without technical occupations. Experts on engines and plumbing are needed just as much as theoretical physicist if not more so since they can apply a skill and produce a result.

One suggested solution for the crumbling education system is a switch to charter schools and privatization. In fact, charter schools are easier to corrupt than public schools systems and their results are not actually higher. Part of the reason that charters can bring up their test scores is because they can exclude students with disabilities and students from lower income families. When the pressures of survival in everyday life are reduced, students naturally score better so children of higher income families typically have high test-scores. A report from the US Department of Education found that the impact that charter schools have on middle school student's achievement varies greatly. Despite offering smaller class sizes and more individualized classroom learning methods, the unreliability of charter school effects should be seen as a reason to look at other possible solutions (Gleason, Clark, Tuttle, Dwoyer, 2010).

Another suggestion is per-student funding which has been successful in San Francisco, California and Edmonton, Alberta. Both districts give public schools a general fund that covers

the cost of the principal's salary and a clerk's and the rest of the funding is allotted based on the number of students. Some extra money is given for each child from a low-income family, or those with learning disabilities. Parents also have the "right to choose" their child's school by applying to up to seven schools. This system has a free market idea behind it, the more students the school attracts the bigger the budget and those who do not attract enough students will close and be replaced or their students absorbed while making sure there is an incentive to serve students with disabilities, language learners, and other difficulties, which charter schools lack. The staff of the failed school also do not lose their jobs unlike under the No Child Left Behind Act, they are moved to other schools.

Many other cities are beginning this program only without the school choice. In Oakland, California, they use this system but instead of using the average district-wide salary for the teachers they use an individual based system that accounts for each teacher and thus saves money and reduces the tendency for higher paid teachers to get stacked in one school and the lower paid teachers in another. Studies on cities with decentralized school districts showed that these schools had less fraud, more money at the classroom level, and higher student achievement than charter schools. Also, when more control over the budget was given to the principals they managed to institute tutoring programs that helped kids that were behind by setting up tutoring stations in every hallway and arranging one-on-one tutoring for those who need it. The cities that have moved toward this system are still constrained by the No Child Left Behind Act and useless state laws like the banning of classroom treats. While this system is not unflawed, it can lead to some improvements and a shift away from real estate driven school districts. The decentralization also allows for more parental and community involvement in how school funds are spent (Snell, 2006).

The Department of Education claims that their mission is “to promote student achievement and preparation for global competitiveness by fostering educational excellence and ensuring equal access”, but their actions suggest that they are easily swayed by corporations and tests more than actual education (U.S. Department of Education, n.d.). One question that has been posed is why we need institutions for education and mandatory ones especially. Many homeschooled children lead fulfilling and successful lives without attending school. They have better sleep schedules and access to a larger variety of educational opportunities in terms of electives and extracurricular activities. This is a reasonable thought if one assumes that the school system cannot be saved, at the same time it fails to acknowledge the disadvantages for lower income families. Not everyone has the time, money, or the dedication to homeschool their children; this is the foundation of public schools. Schools also offer a large pool of ideas if they are instituted in the correct way and with the right motives. Our current education system seeks to control the masses by creating obedient consumers and easily lead citizens. This is not a system that promotes democracy, despite its claims. School is too structured to stimulate thoughtful discussions and critical analysis; there is barely time for the mandatory material to be covered. Students come out as employees rather than leaders. “Our schools are really laboratories of experimentation on young minds”, they do not breed thoughts and original ideas they promote those of the past (Gatto, 2004).

Education also needs to deal in the questions of ethics in society. Teachers must initiate discussions that bring into question the violence in television, the capitalistic system, and the ethics of the country’s foreign policy. This will help avoid the antisocial tendencies that media currently promotes (Boyer, 2003). Civic accomplishment can only occur in healthy united communities that work towards common goals. If the idea that we live in an “every man for

himself” environment is instilled in children from a young age they will never learn to unite later in life. “Divide children by subject, by age grading, by constant rankings on tests...and it was unlikely that the ignorant mass of mankind, separated in childhood, would ever re-integrate into a dangerous whole”. The current school system numbs children to the unethical practices of the country by teaching them fixed habits, obedience, and conformity. They are never taught to question because this skill would pose a threat to those in power. They are also made more moldable to the wills of corporations. There is no better consumer than one who does not critically analyze the facts and blindly accept what they are told. Society suppresses the full potential of its citizens because it has not figured out how to manage them. If democracy existed in practice more than theory these people would not need to be managed, they would lead themselves (Gatto, 2004).

One of the most shocking aspects of the public education system is the lack of consideration for student’s privacy. Not only does Pearson closely monitor their social media, the military has access to their contact information. This is a provision included in the No Child Left Behind act that demanded schools give military recruiters full access to their records and facilities or lose all federal funding. It appears that schools have a choice but for most it is a “gun to the head” situation since they cannot afford to lose any government funding. Students have the option to withhold their records but this is rarely mentioned to them. Recruiters also say that they will aggressively pursue families with mailings, phone calls, and visits regardless of the parents’ objection. A call to Congress or the death of the child is quoted to be the only thing that will stop them. It appears distorted that an act stated to be about the improvement of education focuses so heavily on this near harassment of families and ignores problems such as the lack of funding to maintain elective programs (Goodman, 2002). At the same time, teachers are being

replaced with drill sergeants and public schools are replaced with military schools. In Chicago five military high schools and twenty-one military middle schools have opened. It is evident that a system designed to kill is deemed more important and valuable than teaching critical thinking or civic responsibility (Cooke, 2010).

Teachers are constantly blamed for the underachievement of students. They serve as the perfect scapegoat for a failing system. Very few realize that teachers cannot entirely compensate for what happens outside the classroom. Students who are struggling to survive in dangerous parts of towns or are malnourished make school a second priority and a teacher cannot solve, or be held accountable for, these much larger societal issues alone. Furthermore, they often lack the funding or professional development opportunities needed to improve their classroom and teaching. When companies like Tech America buy and privatize schools they replace teachers with individuals who undergo only five weeks of training before they enter a classroom. This person is not meant to educate students, they are meant to train them for high test-scores. Teachers cannot be blamed for the low test-scores when they are told to educate students and not “teach to the test” (Cooke, 2010). Creating a society full of people who only know how to pass standardized tests is useless for the future. On the other hand, it is not the fault of the students either, as some believe. Students are not just lazy when it comes to standardize testing. Whether the tests are high stakes or not they appear on a student’s permanent record for future educators and employers to see. The majority of students do not enjoy wasting time taking tests that they do not succeed on. If the test was an accurate representation of what they learned then they would not need to spend a large amount of time preparing, nor would they need to try as hard to succeed. They would be relying on what they know rather than what they can recall so the test would automatically take less effort. Korea and Germany encourage students through

celebrations and rallies however these education systems do not demonstrate that they educate their youth in a democratic way, only that they have high test scores (Starr, 2005). If the United States needs to compare its education system to another country it should choose one that focuses more on day-to-day learning rather than test taking as the measure of student achievement such as Finland (Choi, 2014).

The key to solving the issues within and surrounding the education system in the United States lies in the revolution of the American thoughts on education as an institution. Firstly, we need to abandon the idea that, “the problem with our schools are too complex, they’ve been broken for too long, and it’s impossible to fix” (Olorunda, 2010). To continue this mindset is to abandon the ideals that fuel democracy; that people choose how to control themselves and work together to fix their current situation. Though the problems are vast and varied they were created by public policy and they can be undone in the same way. If parents, teachers, students, and local officials work together they can create an public education where students have equal access and they are taught to be participating, productive citizens. Student’s realization that they are responsible for demanding a useful education is essential to drastically change the nation’s school system. They are the most directly affected by the current flaws in a system supposedly designed to aid them. They will be forced to suffer the consequences of an uneducated society if education continues as it is. On a similar note, the general community will have to support these students to create a force strong enough to challenge corporate America. To be a truly democratic process, school reform will need to begin at the local level.

### **An Economic Divide**

For centuries people coming to the United States have been aiming to achieve the “American Dream”. They were filled with the promise of the opportunity for upward mobility,

civil liberties, and the idea of a better life. These are the principles that the United States was founded on. Unfortunately, time and time again people have realized that this dream did not always become reality. Most waves of immigrants were met with a backlash that often resulted in discrimination and persecution. The reality is that the American Dream was never an equal opportunity goal, but the middle class have survived on the idea that they have the opportunity to move up in society if they work hard enough. It has always been a fragile position to be in the middle class; they are faced with the threat of slipping down and the endless struggle to rise above their current position. As the American economy grew, the allure of being middle/working class grew. People living way below and way above the middle still insisted on claiming they were in fact lower or upper middle class. Political scientists theorize that a functioning democracy needs a strong middle class (Alvarez & Kolker 2001, Krugman, 2003). They are low enough in economic status that they cannot buy public policy but are high enough to have the time to dedicate to civic responsibility. Unfortunately, the American middle class has become too weak to support this system which is symptomatic of a failing democracy.

The middle class is necessary for a thriving democracy because they fill the gap between the rich and the poor. A capitalistic society is always going to have the upper and lower class because those who do jobs with more qualifications and more responsibility are going to make more and those who work under them are going to make less. There is an inherent gap in this economic system but the middle class acts as a bridge between those at the very top and very bottom. The “American Dream” is based on the existence of the middle class because it spans the gap between the poor and the rich to show they are not so far apart and one can travel along the path of social upward mobility through the middle class to the top rather than just jumping straight from one to the other. This economic inequality is largely accepted as long as people

believe that they have the chance to move up (Younge, 2013). They do not feel pinned down by the group that they are born into and they believe that hard work will lead to their success.

This ideology creates a society elevated by hope and determined to grow and succeed.

Democracy can only exist in an environment of citizens who care about their success as a society. Those born into the middle class already have the freedom for citizen participation but also the desire for progress and movement up in society. This class must thrive so that the people too disadvantaged to see any hope of progress and those too well off to desire life to be any different are not the only possible driving forces toward governmental change (Madland, 2013). Throughout the history of the United States, it is the middle class that has sparked change. They are the people that were daring enough to leave England in hopes of a better future. They created the labor movement that created better living standards. They are the reason that America has continued to progress and evolve. The destruction of the middle class is a symptom of the destruction of American progress.

Many make the argument that the lower class could take the place of the middle class as the foundation of society because they see the inequality between their lives and others and they would be motivated towards change. However, there are too many factors they have to overcome first before they can challenge the class system. For one, they are continually targeted by the legal system in such a vicious way that they can barely survive, let alone deal with other social problems. Through every stage of American history they have been moved to areas outside of the desirable living areas so that they are more easily ignored. Every lower class, from the Eastern Europeans to the blacks, has been segregated to slums and ghettos. Society takes every opportunity to ostracize them. Government programs such as Welfare and Social Security are cut to keep federal spending within the budget while big corporations receive massive government

subsidies so that they do not go bankrupt. Banks are awarded the security of taking risky bets without the threat of any consequences, while part of the population cannot even get food security (Street, 2013). The newest form of class discrimination is the war on drugs. Drugs that are often found in lower class neighborhood have higher penalties than the drugs most common in upper class societies. Locking them away in jail then further segregates the less fortunate. We have criminalized nonviolent behavior instead of finding the reason most people choose such a life-ruining action. We no longer have programs in jail that help inmates recover and become functioning members of society, we just build massive cages for the less desirable people that provide corporations with millions of dollars, while the upper class can pay for better lawyers and trials to keep them out of jail or reduce their sentence. The people in jail are more likely to learn to be better, more violent criminals than better citizens. Judges' rulings that make the sentences for all forms of a drug equal are over turned. Instead of spending money on programs and services that will elevate people in society we build more structures to keep them segregated. It does not stop there. These people can no longer participate in the most basic form of citizen participation, voting. They also cannot find jobs as easily which creates a slippery slope toward economic failure that normally causes the involvement in illegal activities, such as selling drugs, to make ends meet. If serving time in jail means that these people have properly been punished for their crimes, why do they continue to be punished afterward? (Barnes, Fraser, & Glover, 2012)

On the other hand, the upper classes are exempt from being held responsible for their actions. They not only have lower penalties for equally damaging activities, they are also able to escape the system faster. The wealthy individuals at the heads of corporations are no longer held personally responsible for their decisions. Everything becomes a cost-benefit analysis. They

make decisions based solely on what will yield the highest profit. For example, Volkswagen knew that cheating on the air quality test for their cars would make the value of the cars go up so that people would over pay. The profit they would make from this outweighed the cost of any lawsuit that could come from the lie. No one would be personally targeted since they were protected by the Supreme Court ruling that companies should be viewed, in the legal system, as people. They focused on the profit with little or no regard for public and environmental safety or the injustice to the people who were not getting what they paid for (Hotten, 2015).

The inequality in America's class system is becoming apparent. It is impossible not to notice the growing gap between the middle class and the top one percent. Between the eighties and the early two thousands the middle class saw their annual income increase 21 percent while the top one percent saw an increase of nearly 256 percent (Packer, 2011). In 1994, the top five percent of the population had 20.1 percent of the national income, since then their share has only grown. Between 1970 and 1994 the middle class actually experienced a decrease in their share of the annual income from almost 18 percent to below 16 percent (Krugman, 2003). The 400 most affluent people possess more wealth than the bottom fifty percent of the population, composed of 150 million people. Furthermore the typical American family lost nearly 40 percent of their wealth in the last recession while wealthier individuals, such as the members of the family that founded Walmart, gained enormous amounts of wealth. This economic failure widened the gap between the upper and middle classes further. The middle class is fundamental to the survival of democracy and yet the top percent of the population is gaining massive amounts of wealth while the middle class quickly falls behind.

The current, most prolific economic theory, the trickle-down-effect, states that when companies have large profits they use the money to create more jobs and expand production. The

lower classes will benefit from these gains proportionally to those at the top and the economy will grow (Madland, 2011). If this theory actually worked the gap between the classes would remain relatively stagnant, yet statistics and studies of the United State's economy shows that this is not what is happening. The increased profits that companies are generating are being used to finance stock buybacks and more focus is given to the return on the shareholder's investment than the employees well being (Whitney, 2013). The basic principles of capitalism, that increased investment leads to larger markets, higher profits and more investment, has fallen apart as corporations focus solely on investing and consolidating the market (Lind, 2004). Large companies buy out their competitors, shrinking the market and creating dominating monopolies. The concentration of wealth at the top never reaches below to the classes whose work is exploited by the system (Whitney, 2013).

Candidates continually run on the platform that they will represent the middle class, the average working class citizen (Krugman, 2003). At the same time unemployment has barely changed, college graduates cannot find jobs and the wealthy are taxed less, and corporations are treated as people. Elected officials constantly vote against the desires of the middle class like lower taxes and public programs such as less expensive health care, social security, and an increased minimum wage. Despite the fact that a large majority of American citizens favor a system of a nation health care system similar to the Canadian model, elected officials, have passed legislation that drives the price of health care up and gives pharmaceutical companies the ability to drive up the prices of medication to extreme levels (Street, 2013). "Obamacare" not only gave drug companies the ability to be more profit driven it also forced companies to give their full-time employees health coverage. This may sound like a positive movement toward universal health care, however, instead of giving their employees coverage, some large

corporations simply cut the hours of the employees so that they were only part-time and thus did not qualify for health care (Casselmann, 2015). The U.S. could reduce its fiscal deficit by replacing its privatized, dysfunctional health care system with a universal public model similar to other first world countries. This system could cut costs nearly in half while delivering better results. However, the investments from large pharmaceutical companies override this logical explanation because they have more say in the political arena (Street, 2013).

The labor movement used to drive political elites to create policies in the favor of the middle class but they have declined over the years. During Regan's presidency he worked to reduce unions, one of the few systems limiting corporations from exploiting their employees. "Unions now represent less than 12 percent of the private workforce". Not only have they decreased in size, their power has also seen a significant decline over the years. During the height of the labor movement, unions were able to gain higher wages for workers and increase safety standards and benefits. The unions were not necessarily the answer since they can cause other side effects but they were a counterbalance to growing capitalism. They could be corrupt and increase wages at the consumer's expense but they held corporations and wealthy individuals somewhat responsible for their employee's well being. This counterbalance kept America a middle class society. With the decline in unions, there has been paralleled decline in the middle class while corporations continue to grow (Krugman, 2003).

Political parties and elected officials are heavily influenced by the wealthiest percent of the population. The well-off have a disproportionate political weight because they are more likely to vote and fund campaigns. This has lead parties to compete for the support of the upper class, which means that the interests of the middle and lower classes are largely ignored (Krugman, 2003). This was further expanded when the Supreme Court ruled that corporations

have the same rights as people and thus can fund campaigns. This caused candidates to focus more on the desire of the private sector than the public (Totenberg, 2014). The affluent Americans who donate to political campaigns do not represent the views of the larger population. For instance, 71 percent of the population supported a significant increase in the minimum wage, but the House of Representatives blocked this motion. Similarly, a 2013 Gallup Poll showed that 91 percent of people supported background checks for gun owners however it met strong opposition in the Senate (Street, 2013). Evidently elected political figures are no longer bothering to listen to the desires of the public, despite the fact that they are supposed to represent them.

Another founding principle of the country is the separation of church and state, which was founded on the idea that the Church had a disproportionate influence in government policy and after leaving England, the American people desired to get away from that idea. In a similar way, the wealthy class has grown to be disproportionately influential over today's government. Getting rid of lobbyists will be the first step in this effort. There were only 145 lobbyist-represented businesses in Washington in 1971; by 1982, there were over two thousand represented. Not all lobbying was done by corporations, however they became the most effective at this practice. This shift led political parties to focus more on the interests of big businesses. The most obvious example is the amount of energy and time spent on raising money to run for office by candidates. They are too busy trying to play to the people who will give the donations to look at the bigger picture of everyone's opinions. Anyone truly running on the platform of supporting lower class people never gets a chance because they cannot raise enough money because their policies conflict with the desires of the elite. This political domination directly conflicts with the principles of democracy. If one group is heard above all the others because of

their money then the government is not being run by the majority of people but by the economic elite (Packer, 2011).

We should look back toward past forms of government to try and solve current problems but we should not aim to recreate those times. Though the 40s and 50s had many problems and inequalities they also had a strong government, value in moral business practices, and labor activists, the means of solving the issues that existed. In the past, people acted to change the way things were without thinking of the consequences. Systems that had issues should have been revised rather than demolished (Packer, 2011). Government restrictions on big business did a lot to protect the lower class people, however, they limited profit, which went against free market principles. The same ideology persists today in a contradictory fashion. For example, there is a cap on certain job wages such as teachers, while other professions like CEO are free to make as much as possible. How is a wage cap restricting the CEO's liberty but not the teacher's? Beyond that, teachers and CEO's usually have about the same amount of formal education, which should make them even more equal (Krugman, 2003). A system that appears to regard human freedom as more important than government regulation creates its own definition of who deserves which rights.

Inequality is one of the most destructive elements of an economy. To grow and progress everyone needs to believe that improvements are possible and necessary. Inequality makes it harder for people of different classes to think collectively and understand that there is common ground between the two groups (Packer, 2011). Studies have shown that when a society is largely middle class people tend to be more trusting of one another and more likely to work toward innovative solutions to problems. The government is less corruptible when there is a strong middle class because they have a larger say in what goes on in the political world and they

advocate for the less fortunate because they are closer to those issues than the upper class (Madland, 2011). The middle class is both created by and a driving force in the capitalist society (Lind, 2004). Middle class people are taught to value hard work and also consume at a rate higher than that of the upper class. When the majority of people are financially content then crime is reduced and cheating is less rewarding (Madland, 2011).

Some economic theorists suggest that outsourcing work to cheaper labor forces in other countries and an increase in technology has led to this inequality because it reduced the number of available middle class jobs. In the 1970s the United States began sending manufacturing jobs overseas to China and Indonesia. Though this globalization made some goods less expensive it undermined the bargaining power of workers, which further shrunk unions. Correspondingly, the use of technology increased living standards and the convenience of most Americans but it also took low-skilled work away from the middle and lower classes (Lind, 2004). Manufacturing jobs created the middle class but globalization has resulted in companies moving outside the U.S. to find the most cost-efficient labor, which reduces the middle class to compete with people in poverty, which will eventually lead to them sinking into poverty as well (Younge, 2013). The minimum wage has already fallen compared to the cost of living and global competition and the shift toward using more technology in manufacturing will only increase this issue (Krugman, 2003).

There are many proposed solutions to revamp the status of the American middle class. For one, there could be a government policy to redistribute wealth from the upper classes to the lower classes. Sweden has worked toward this system by taxing those in the upper class more than those at the bottom. The issue with this system is that it would increase the amount that the wealthier people would have to pay for services that they do not derive any benefits from. In

turn, this would cause them to avoid taxation or even leave the country (Lind, 2004). Also, this is the opposite of what has been happening through government policy recently. Between the Carter and Bush administrations, the top marginal tax rate was reduced from 70 percent to 35 percent, with the lowest at 28 percent during the Reagan administration (Street, 2013). Some suggest “Universal capitalism” where everyone investing in forms of income-producing financial assets, however, around half of Americans now own some form of stock but the middle class continues to fall behind (Lind, 2004). Another solution is to tax companies’ foreign profits. In recent years this has been proposed but the government has actually worked to make it more desirable for companies to move their manufacturing to other countries. This is yet another example of how large corporations dominate the political area (McBride and Dittmer, 2012). The most extreme proposal is to outlaw inherited wealth (Street, 2013). This would infringe upon parents rights to choose how they spend their money and it would keep many children and struggling adults from gaining any benefits from their family heritage and wealth; both widely accepted and fundamental principles of American society. Most would probably see any policies headed in this direction as an infringement on individual rights. On top of that, it would be nearly politically impossible since those with the most political power are the wealthiest, most of whom inherited their wealth. On the other hand, this development would give children a more equal beginning, though it would also fail to solve the issue of wealthier families still being able to provide more opportunities for their children like a better education. Instituting this policy would cause more problems than it would address.

What is necessary in devising any sort of plan to combat the growing divide in the distribution of wealth is critical thought. We should look at other nations for suggestion on how to change our policies and what is working in reality more than theory. For example, what has

kept the divide between classes from growing in European countries is the extensive welfare systems they have in place (Younge, 2013). This could potentially be a temporary solution before we can institute more permanent policies. The public also needs to think about policies in a critical manner and realize what will have the best long-term effects on the majority of the population. For instance, if a policy will reduce the average income by a small percent but increase the power that the working class has, it should be supported over one that increases the average income minimally and widens the class gap (Krugman, 2003). Furthermore, there should be greater importance placed on creating full-time sustainable jobs than reducing the national deficit by a fraction. These jobs will lead to a more productive economy, which will naturally decrease the deficit with a long-term solution rather than a short term one (Street, 2013). The start to economic rejuvenation will come from the middle class and their deeper analysis of how they are losing ground. The corporations already fear that the middle class will challenge their power and they are working towards minimizing this threat. The middle class must be responsible and stop the progression towards globalization and consolidation of business.

### **Conclusion**

The presence of money in the government is reminiscent of a time when the church had a similar amount of power. This country was founded on the principle that freedom and liberty should come before all else and people had the right to decide how they were governed. There has been a dramatic shift away from these ideas as government works to support the desires of the few over the needs of the many. “We have the best government money can buy” (Mark Twain). The affluent people can buy the policies that will suit their needs the best while the poor are ignored and forgotten. The same relationship exists between the wealthiest percent of the population and the government as there was between the church and state. This simple fact

proves that democracy has been replaced in practice but remains in theory. The elite class theory more accurately describes this system where money can buy candidates and political policies.

The lack of citizen participation is a symptom of a system that does not respond to its population. Whether the population largely agrees on an issue or not seems to have no influence on what policies are passed. This can be seen in every aspect of everyday life, from health care to wages to court decisions. The candidates do not actually represent the public so citizens do not feel the need to vote. Every candidate runs on the same general platform “in the interest of the middle class” but refuses to actually listen to what the public is saying. The public stops feeling heard and thus loses interest in the systems that exclude them. Common democratic actions such as campaigns, elections, and voting have become shows that no longer have the same significance they once did.

Furthermore, the education system, designed to give children the skills they need to become active citizens, is failing. People never learn the critical thought needed to analyze the government and understand what needs to be changed. Children go to school to learn conformity and how to show their worth through testing. This system does not empower them to become the leaders of tomorrow it prepares them to be lead by others indefinitely. The wealthy have the resources to escape and become the ones to lead. Occasionally a story about someone moving up to the top surfaces so that the public’s faith in upward mobility is restored. They believe hard work will pay off when in truth the middle class has always worked harder than the upper classes but they constantly lag behind in privilege. This class divide can be acceptable in a society where everyone has the same chance to move up and equal representation in the government. In reality, some children have a much shorter path to success while others will struggle for their entire life

and never change their status. At the same time, money is so woven into government that the whole system has to be reformed to make any progress.

The middle and lower classes have power in numbers. This is the only threat to the direction that the government system is headed that remains. The large corporations and the wealthy fear that the public will gain a proportional say in policymaking and then they will fail because their success is not sustainable in a democratic society. Capitalism, which is driven by the dedication to increasing profits, is threatened by the idea of being held responsible for the problems that are caused, such as human rights violations, environmental degradation, recessions. They would have to suffer the consequences of risky bets and lose government subsidies.

While the existence of monopolies, and their disproportional political power, is one of the more obvious arguments against the existence of democracy in the United States, more unbelievable evidence is available. For example, President Carter said in his speech to Atlantic Bridge, the organization responsible for smooth relations between the United States and Germany, that “America does not at the moment have a functioning democracy”. He also mentioned that the NSA surveillance “resulted in a suspension of American Democracy”. First of all, he blatantly stated that the system that everyone claims to be the governing principle was not actually in place. It is hard to argue that the leader of the country should probably believe in the existence of democracy in the country if anyone else is expected to. Moreover, if democracy was actually proven to exist in practice, how could it just be put on hold? The system that is supposed to define the government cannot be temporarily disabled while the government continues on. The two are one in the same; a democratic governmental system cannot survive in the absence of

democracy. Carter proved in two sentences that the founding principles of our country had been abandoned (Street, 2013).

Elite class theory is the only theory that could support the systems that exist in the United States. Presently, one group of people is benefitting while everyone else struggles to not fall behind. The democratic principles have been forgotten and the institutions that promoted these ideas, like elections continue only as a formality.

It will take grassroots movements and the power of the masses to redirect the government. There should be a movement toward older principles but without backward progression. Some policies and institutions have improved over the years and should not be destroyed. Democracy will have to be formed from the beginning because it was never fully achieved. The country was progressing in the direction of a more perfect democratic government, but large corporations have derailed it. What remains of the middle class will need to rise to the occasion and help improve the education system and massively increase their citizen participation so that they can no longer be ignored. This is a country founded on the idea that people have the power to change their government and it is time that it came to fruition. Democracy has and always will depend on the people.

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