

The Elite Democracy

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## Abstract

The United States of America was founded on the principles of a democracy in which every citizen has a say in how the government is run. While this concept was met with much success in the country's early years, subsequent centuries have seen it reshaped into the government we recognize today. A very important question has resulted from this change: Is America's government still the same, familiar democracy that textbooks it to be, or has it been fundamentally altered? Various political thinkers have argued different views and have formed them into four theories of American government: traditional democratic theory, pluralism, hyperpluralism, and elite class theory. An examination of the basic principles of America's government is key to understanding which theory truly represents America. Active citizen participation, the effects of widespread education, and the middle class all play an important role in the success of the middle class, and must be present for America's democracy to function as originally planned.

## The Elite Democracy

### **Introduction**

*“Let us never forget that government is ourselves and not an alien power over us. The ultimate rulers of our democracy are not a President and senators and congressmen and government officials, but the voters of this country.” - Franklin D. Roosevelt*

The Founding Fathers of the United States of America set out to establish a fair and equal government as a response to the oppression that the colonies received under the rule of the British monarchy. After decades of unfair treatment, the early citizens of America were tired of having little to no say in the way in which they were being ruled. Because of this, a democracy was established so that everyone could take part in governing. In response to worries about the people’s ability to govern both efficiently and smartly, a representative democracy was instituted in which the people choose political officials to “represent” their views in the government. This gave people a voice without putting all of power in their hands.

For many years, this process worked well. The people made decisions based on their own political ideals, and voted for the candidates that they felt best represented them. As time went on, however, the country became more complicated and connected. The influence that the powerful had on the average citizen grew, and the balance of power began to shift towards the upper class. Over time, citizen participation in government has lessened to the all-time low of today. The constant reforms that America’s education has been put through has left it a mangled and unbalanced failure to the students. Furthermore, America’s once prosperous and impactful middle class is shrinking by the year. The results of these three issues have a profound impact on

the way that the American government is structured today. From this, political analysts have created four theories of the what kind of government America is today.

The first theory, the Traditional Democratic Theory, maintains that the American government is almost identical to the way in which it was originally conceived. This follows that the average American citizen has both the capability and desire to participate in government. Under this theory, the American public has a major hand in making the decisions and thus would have to participate a lot in the government. Because of this, they would also have to have a strong education system that teaches them how this democracy works and place them in a solid financial situation.

Pluralism, the second theory, states that people form groups that fight for the political causes that fall in line with their views. These groups use a variety of political techniques to convince those with power to support them. In order for this theory to work, these groups would have to be well educated on the running of the American government and be willing to get deeply involved with the lobbying for what they want. The third theory, Hyperpluralism, is an extension of pluralism in which it has ruined the system. It argues that all of the groups arguing over their competing causes basically shuts down any processing of government.

The final theory of American government is the Elite Class Theory. This theory states that socioeconomic distinctions have torn the country apart and placed the power with the elites, or the people with the most money. This type of government is categorized by a largely uneducated mass of lower income citizens who do not participate much in government. As a result of this, the elites that control the country tend to make decisions based on their own interests. Based on an examination of the foundations of America's government through its citizens, it becomes clear that the Elite Class Theory is the closest representation of what the

American government looks like today. The elites of the United States government no longer value the people who once impacted its processes and decisions.

### **A Passive America**

At the inception of the United States of America, the goal was to have a government in which the people ultimately controlled how the country was run instead of being dictated by a rich minority that had no stake in the well-being of the people. As such, an indirect democracy was established in which a representative body is chosen by the people to formulate public policy (Shea, 2016, 13). With this system, it is of utmost importance that the citizens hold even the most basic knowledge of how the government is run. Without this understanding, people cannot express their opinions on the state of the government and voters are not able to make good decisions on important political matters. This was not a problem in the 1700s, a time in which a democratic system of government was a pretty easy one to uphold. The country was more disconnected during this period, and governing was more commonly done at a local level. As the United States grew and expanded, so did the need for a more centralized government. With that, the world of politics became a great deal more complicated. Similarly, the once simple lives of the individuals became chaotic with the advent of industrial processes and world conflicts (Miroff, Seidelman, & Swanstrom, 2003). Consequentially, the post-war generations took a firmer interest in their personal responsibilities (e.g., care for oneself, care for one's family, and taking part in personal pleasures) (Shea, 2016, 30). With these new pursuits came a waning focus on politics, and what little free time that remained for public was concentrated on enjoying life rather than being active citizens.

Presently, Americans are less politically active than they have ever been in the history of the country. But this lack of attention cannot be labeled as simply being a result of Americans

finding politics “boring”. This is shown quite clearly by the fact that, as a nation, Americans seem to be spending less time together in social activities. Over time, the American public has become more and more secluded. People are so caught up in the stresses of everyday life (higher work hours, lower wages, increasing taxes, complicated healthcare system, etc.), that they can’t make the time to get involved in the community (Loeb, 2003). Putnam (1995), notes that membership in once-thriving organizations is dropping. Church-going, at one time a well-practiced American tradition, has lessened over the decades despite the influx of various other religions to American society. As American government evolved, the amount of unionized workers fell dramatically to 11.3 percent today. Even smaller volunteer associations such as PTA’s, Boy & Girl Scouts, and Women’s rights groups do not see the attendance rates they once did. It is further noted that:

More Americans are bowling today than ever before, but bowling in organized leagues has plummeted in the last decade or so. Between 1980 and 1998, the total number of bowlers in America increased by 10 percent, while league bowling decreased by 40 percent (Putnam, 1995).

The concept of people not bowling together may seem inconsequential, but the more serious issue lays beneath the surface. Bowling is a popular recreational way to get people together and to have a great time. This time with others allows people to let off some steam and distress after a long day at work. The ability to talk to other people about daily life allows one to better articulate his or her feelings about society as a whole, and this only aids in having stronger formative views about government.

Citizens cannot be expected to take an interest in political activities if they refuse to even do so in everyday activities. At the same time though, taking note of the importance of

government involvement should be enough to get the public to realize that it is something that needs more focus. But that is clearly not enough, for political awareness is at an all-time low in America and still dropping. The theory that dictates the basics of active citizen participation claims to yield many advantages to both the citizens and the government. The citizens receive the benefits of a stronger education, a more direct line to contact the government, and to have the ability to fight powerfully for their causes. Because of those advantages, the government gains the power to be better representatives, make real decisions that help the people, and make the system run smoother (Irvin & Stansbury, 2004). Yet, quite plainly, citizens pay no mind to these potential improvements, and the causes of this are helpful in understanding people's views of government as a whole.

In initial observations, it seems that Americans take a "someone else will do it" or "bystander" approach to issues in politics. It now looks as though it takes someone with iron resolution to even get a proposition submitted to local government. This backseat approach to getting things done in the political sphere is a prime example of how passive American citizens now are (Loeb, 2003). Perhaps though, it is not that Americans are too lazy to take action, but that they are too ignorant to see it as a rational option. The concept of rational ignorance is that United States citizens see being "smarter voters" as the only positive effect of being educated in political issues. This is compounded by the view that their votes do not really matter. As a result, it is not a "rational" choice to spend time studying politics (Somin, 2013). This is a very possible explanation for the lack of political knowledge in America. As previously stated, personal time is precious to the public. Getting involved in a system that produces no instant pleasure for most would not make sense to the average person.

As a result of this political ignorance, knowledge of the most basic ways in which the United States government works is severely lacking. A 2014 survey showed that only 36 percent of those surveyed knew all three branches of the United States government. Furthermore, a whopping 35 percent of them could not even name one of the branches. Only 27 percent knew it takes a two-thirds vote in the House of Representatives and Senate to overrule presidential vetoes. Lastly, only 38 percent knew that Republicans controlled the House of Representatives and that Democrats controlled the Senate (Annenberg Public Policy Center, 2014). These are decidedly dismal numbers, and a vast majority of Americans lack the basic understanding of how their own government works. If they are not able to get informed about issues affecting their lives, then they will not be effective voters. Another concern is voting in America, which brings up a whole new layer of evidence supporting the idea that American citizens are no longer active participators.

Another form of citizen participation is going out and voting on Election Day. If Americans have already fulfilled the most basic form of participation, gaining knowledge, then they should naturally use that knowledge to make their reactions to this information heard. Of the nearly 240 million American citizens of the voting age of 18, only about 133 million (56.5 percent) voted in the 2012 presidential election. Even fewer, 122 million (50.8 percent) voted to fill the House of Representatives seats in the same election (Shea, 2016, 440). These numbers are clearly not enough to accurately reflect the wants and needs of the people in a government that is supposed to be partially controlled by them. In the following off-year federal election in 2014, “Just 36.4 percent of the voting-eligible population cast ballots...The last time voter turnout was so low during a midterm election cycle was in 1942, when only 33.9 percent of eligible voters cast ballots” (DelReal, 2014). As shown in the data, voter turnout in national elections is



incredibly low. In fact, voting rates are at the lowest point that they have been in decades. Since the 1960 presidential election the voting rates have been on a steady decline, dropping nearly 10 percent over that time (info, 2015).

The most shocking evidence supporting the lack of active voter interest is the extremely low voter turnout rate in local elections.

University of Wisconsin researchers provided *Governing* with elections data covering 144 larger U.S. cities, depicting a decline in voter turnout in odd-numbered years over the previous decade. In 2001, an average of 26.6% of cities' voting-age population cast ballots, while less than 21% did so in 2011 (Maciag, 2014).

These results are the most important in determining the public's views on voting and their participation levels. Ballot fatigue, the concept that the lower the position officials receive less votes than the higher ones, is particularly apparent when analyzing voting rates in America (Shea, 2016, 441). Local elections have the most effect on the voters' everyday lives, yet the public seems to care more about the popular positions. The representatives that are elected have a direct impact on the goings-on of local government. Any buildings that are built, parks that are planned, or ordinances that are decided upon are controlled by these representatives of the city or county government.

Research into why voting rates in the United States are dropping is paramount in aiding the understanding of the lack of citizen participation. Some of the most common answers that people give when they are asked why they do not vote are: long lines, bad weather, and loss of work time (Shea, 2016, 442). These excuses are not acceptable reasons for not participating in elections though. There are a few main underlying causes of voter apathy, and one is the

influence of the media in the perception of government. The process of an election is a vicious cycle of lies and corruption that ultimately corrupt the democratic process. “Such is the case in the United States, where less than 9 corporations own more than fifty percent of all media (including both print and electronic) ...” (Street, 2002). In this system, the corporations that own the media skew their reporting to make it act in their own best interest, not the public’s. By controlling the way government and politics are discussed in media, these corporations are able to win support for the candidates that will in turn back them. This results in a government that is not representative of the people’s voice, but of the capitalist one-percenters whose singular interest is to make money. In order to fix this problem, the private financial support of candidates and policies must be abolished. This would help to put an end to elections won by money and influence, thus allowing constituencies to have a real sense that they are making smart decision in voting.

Another cause of lowered voting rates is the convoluted nature of the campaign for office. The circus of the campaign system is defined by insults, debates, and infighting (Piven & Cloward, 2006). Because of this, the public’s focus on the issues that matter is obscured by the celebrity of the political race. As the 2016 presidential election looms, American citizens are beginning to research the candidates. However, they are not looking into the candidates’ foreign policy or their stances on immigration and the economy. Instead, voters turned their focus to “Hillary Rodham Clinton’s age, Jeb Bush’s height, Chris Christie’s weight, Donald Trump’s net worth, Carly Fiorina’s marital status and Bobby Jindal’s birthplace” as the most Google-searched topics for each candidate (Bauder, 2015). The fact that the public is most interested in the surface information on the candidates shows a critical lack of understanding of the important political

issues that have an impact on the country. Citizens are not taking an active role in the gathering of political knowledge and the application of that knowledge through voting.

Other smaller problems that negatively impact voting in America are straight-ticket and bandwagon voting. Straight-ticket voting is the practice of voting for all candidates of a particular party in every position on the ballot. Some states even provided a single selection to vote straight-ticket for in an election. In fact, “A total of 10 states allow or offer straight-ticket voting...These states are: Alabama, Indiana, Iowa, Kentucky, Michigan, Oklahoma, Pennsylvania, South Carolina, Texas, and Utah” (NCSL, 2015). This method of voting is not only lazy, but a prime example of how inactive citizens are in elections. If those that are voting straight-ticket are not doing so because they cannot be bothered to take the time to carefully fill out the ballot, then they must be blindly supporting a party. Doing this is not being active in government, since they are not taking into consideration that there are other candidates outside their own party that might be better for the position. By removing the straight-ticket voting option from the ballot, citizens will be forced to really take an effort in choosing. Similarly, bandwagon voting provides uninformed voters with an easy choice of who to vote for in elections. In this process:

A small but significant number of swing voters tend to support whichever side seems to be winning, partly because they want to be identified with a winner and a party because of a sense that whoever seems to be winning might well be the best person for the job for that very reason. Bandwagon voters are unlikely to make a decisive difference in an election where one side has an overwhelming edge to begin with. But they can be decisive in a closer race (Somin, 2015).

The act of bandwagon voting is clearly a prime example of passive participation in government. This act comes as a result of the United States government allowing the release of early poll results while the polls are still open in some states. By delaying the release of these results until later, lethargic voters would not have the ability to bandwagon vote.

One of the most viable ways to increase voting rates is to introduce an automatic voter registration system. The current registration system is fractured, causing almost 2.2 million votes to go uncounted from inaccuracies and misfiled data in registrations. An automatic registration system would take any information provided to a government agency (DMV, Social Security, etc.) and data-mine it to create profiles for every American voter. As information is updated, these profiles would be too (Gerken, 2013). It is every citizen's constitutional right to vote; so it should be made as easy as possible to do so. Other countries, specifically European democracies, have found great success with automatic voter registration systems. France and Sweden have voter turnout rates of 71.2 percent and 82.6 percent respectively, with both having an automatic registration system in use (Keyes, 2013).

Ultimately, the key to getting American citizens to take part in more active citizen participation is to indoctrinate the concept in them at a young age (Somin, 2013). Currently, the core standards for Social Studies involves a heavy focus on history. World and U.S. History are taught from the end of elementary school all the way up until the junior year of high school, with very little focus on the way the United States government works. The introduction of these ideas to students at a younger age would allow them to internalize the importance of being active citizens. By comparing and contrasting the current U.S. government to the history studied throughout school, students would be able to determine their views on political issues at a

younger age. This critical analysis in school would increase the number of active citizens in America.

The success of America's democratic system of government hinges on the participation of its citizens in it. Through examining American citizens' social and political activities, governmental knowledge, and voting rates, it becomes evident that active citizen participation is the lowest it has been in the history of the country. Individuals are more isolated and self-centered than ever, with people participating in fewer group events (both societal and administrative). Political ignorance is rampant in the U.S., for Americans lack the basic knowledge of the running of their democratic system. All of this culminates in the most damning evidence: the lowest voting rates in America's record. A dramatic overhaul in both the way Americans are educated on the political system and the political system as a whole is the basis of reigniting citizens' drive to become active participators.

### **The Failure of School Reforms**

From the late 1800's to the early 1900's, America saw a dramatic growth in the number of public education institutions and the students attending them. As interest in these schools spread, so did the influence that they had on the youth attending them. Over time, people began to develop ideas about what these schools should do and what ideas should be represented by them. One of the most steadfast of these concepts was that schools should instruct students in a way that promotes the ideals of a democratic society. This concept has evolved through the decades to become a well-known process that is defined in *Magruder's American Government* by:

From the first day, schools teach children the values of the American political system.

They work to indoctrinate the young, to instill in them loyalty to a particular cause or

idea. In fact, preparing students to become good citizens is an important part of our education system.

Students may salute the flag, recite the Pledge of Allegiance, and sing patriotic songs. They learn about George Washington, Abraham Lincoln, Susan B. Anthony, Martin Luther King Jr., and other great Americans. From the early grades on, they pick up growing amounts of specific political knowledge, and they are often required to take a course in American government and even to read books such as this one. (Shea, 2016, 461).

This idealistic description of the American education system's role in democracy may seem promising on paper, but there are many different layers to inspect in order to uncover whether the system still really follows these principles. Other evidence points to the fact that the American education system has lost its way, and that it no longer values its students learning about the United States government. By taking all of this information into consideration, it becomes apparent that the once thriving public school system has been soiled by policy reforms from both sides of the political spectrum.

The first pieces of this system were chipped away under the administration of President George W. Bush when he introduced the "No Child Left Behind Act", or NCLB, in 2001. This act, which enacted reform through the setting standards by each individual state improve the education of (specifically failing) students (U.S. Department of Education, 2001). This act came as a response to international comparisons of standardized test scores that showed that American students were underperforming when compared to other countries. Upon the introduction of these new standards came a wave of testing craze that swept through the school system. Yearly, and sometimes quarterly, standardized exams began to be administered to root out the lowest

scorers. Those that fell into the bottom portion of schools were deemed as “failing” and were put under strict sanctions. If these schools did not improve to “satisfactory” levels, they could face budget cuts, restructures, and even closures (U.S. Department of Education, 2001).

By reviewing the subsequent National Assessment of Education Progress (NAEP) test results, it is clear that American students were lacking the skills required to succeed on standardized tests. U.S. students had the ranked among the lowest on international scales as a result of faltering high school scores, despite elementary school scores strengthening. It has been proposed though that instead of looking at these results as a national failure, they should be viewed as a wake-up call that standardized testing is not the most effective way to determine the intelligence of America’s Democratic Society (Starr, 2005). Perhaps the reason that high school students are underperforming on these exams is that they pose no personal risk or reward to the lives of and world around these students. After having been tested for the better part of a decade, these teenagers are simply tired of the process. They do not want to only memorize facts to help them fill in the correct multiple-choice letter bubble. They are imbued with the natural desire to seek out and analyze information, an essential skill for the success of a democracy, which is being stifled by standardized testing.

Furthermore, the implication that many “low performing” schools are labeled such because the student bodies in them are struggling and falling behind that of “better” schools is a flawed point of view. In reality, these schools are simply lacking in their passing rates of standardized tests imposed on them by NCLB. These tests only serve as big-picture determinations of student performance on basic ideas and concepts. They are being tested on a year’s worth of material and standards on a one-day assessment. These tests fail to take a student’s day-to-day performance and understanding into account. Therefore, students who

simply do not do well with multiple-choice tests are punished in areas that they would ordinarily thrive in (Wilson, 2015). This constant testing kills the individuality of the learning process. A casualty as a result of this are the critical-thinking skills that are necessities of democracy. These “failing” schools are further punished with penalties that continuously threaten student success.

Another problem that plagues this standardized testing structure is the threat of testing corporations strongly lobbying for testing contracts. These publishers, who also release the textbooks used by many schools, employ a variety of legal and illegal practices to gain the support of schools nationwide. These tactics include “wooing school officials” with gifts, trips, and fancy dinners as well as breaching student privacy rules. These lead to unprecedented amounts of revenue for the test companies (with Pearson PLC’s revenue at \$9.43 billion in the 2013 fiscal year) from these contracts (Perrson, 2015). These shady business deals reflect a major disinterest in the well-being of the students to which these tests are being administered. The bottom line of this setup is the gains that the schools, government officials, and corporations are getting. Because of this, students suffer the consequences by not receiving the best resources to fully evaluate their apprehension of that year’s standards.

Another striking blow to the already fractured American education system came when President Barack Obama launched his plans for education reform. Spring boarding off of the Bush Administration’s increase in nationwide standardized testing, Obama introduced “Race to the Top”, a teacher incentive program to increase student test scores. This only widened the perceived gap between “good” and “bad” schools within an area. Furthermore, his plan included the launch of a massive campaign to increase the number of charter schools in the U.S. Charter schools, like many other proposed reforms, seem promising in theory, yet lack the positive results needed to make them advisable. This is because charter schools jump to the extreme end



of the control spectrum, allowing most of the decisions to be made by the school itself (Weil, 2009). To remedy this issue, there needs to be a stable balance between democratic self-governing and government regulation in regards to daily operations of a school. Charter schools have low accountability for their actions while intense government regulation sets outrageously high and generalized standards. As is evident, placing too much power in either side's hands is a recipe for failure.

“Race to the Top’s” fixation on charter schools relies on the dismantling of the public school system. Schools that are deemed to be “failures” as a result of “incompetent” teachers and staff have their funding cut and are eventually shut down, leaving teachers without jobs and students without schools. Following the shuttering of the public institution, a charter school is built. These charter schools are often populated by inexperienced and sometimes uncertified “teachers” and a non-local student body. These practices are rewarded with extra funding, driving more and more schools to follow suit. This in turn frees up tax payer money for the government to spend on other political endeavors (Cooke, 2010). But as with anything that reaches the peak of the figurative mountain, these charter schools are left to balance precariously between remaining at the top or tumbling down into pieces. In order for this set of reforms to be a success there should have been a marked increase in student test scores, signifying that students were becoming more intelligent. If one is to follow the ideas laid out that a more intelligent student base means a more democratically-inclined nation, then “Race to the Top” was a very important piece of legislation to get right.

In the years that have followed the introduction of “Race to the Top”, a multitude of research has been conducted to look at its effects. The results of these investigations lined up with previous reports. A 2004 study from the *New York Times* showed that charter schools were

performing at lower levels than public schools (Democracy Now!, 2004). Additionally, an investigation by the Thomas B. Fordham Institute observed the number of and effects of charter school closures in the urban areas of Ohio. It showed that a significant number of charter schools that closed displaced students into local public schools. On average, these students ended up performing better in their new public schools when compared to their old charter schools (Carlson & Lavertu, 2015). Ultimately the positive outcomes from “Race to the Top” have not been clearly strong enough to make the system useful. The negative effects of this program, however, have caused issues for schools across the country. This takes away a lot of the focus from improving the lives and education of the students, while also detracting from the democratic system of governing.

Since the reforms enacted by the last two presidents appear to have demolished the notion that widespread education in America aims to make good people and citizens who have reached their peak potential and aid in the formation of democratic values in these citizens, it is important to look at the rubble that is left in their wake. Many experts now believe that the claims that democratic ideals are taught in school is simply a façade. One newly refocused claim suggests that the goal is “simply to reduce as many individuals as possible to the same safe level, to breed and train a standardized citizenry, to put down dissent and originality” (Mencken, 1924). It is further established that in its current state public schooling breaks resistance to authority, promotes conformity, places your social status, puts a barrier on your understanding, puts down the less successful, and picks out those who are prime to become elite leaders. In general, these goals are carried out in plain sight, but students’ views are redirected to the “important” causes such as grades, test scores, and homework (Gatto, 2004). The monotony of these tasks leads students to be blind to the true nature of their education system. They are so preoccupied by the

busywork that they do not have the time to break down what is being promoted. In fact, these “secret goals” are indoctrinated in students at such a young age that by the time they are actually capable of questioning the process, they do not even think to. Ultimately, these students are fed a false sense of democracy in which they are lethargic to the true importance of their roles in it.

Consequently, it has become apparent to professional educators that there is a serious lack of political and civic knowledge in students by the time of graduation. A conventional thinker might assume that this is a result of a broad lack of interest by those students or the incompetence of their teachers. Another theory proposes that those elite few at the higher level who control what students learn, adjust the curriculum in order to block out a student’s ability to learn the basic principles of civic responsibility. Because understanding one’s place in the decision-making process of this country (civic literacy) is being blotted out from above, students lose the distinction of the importance of government participation. As civic illiteracy grows, the democratic ideals of the nation crumble (Marciano, 1987). This concept of the shrouding of civic duties gains credence from the fact that there is not a class devoted to American government until students reach high school. Even in U.S. History classes, few connections are drawn to modern-day politics outside of the very basic concepts (e.g., the Declaration of Independence, Congress, the Constitution and the President). A deeper curriculum that derived links and compared past events to the present day would allow students to get a deeper understanding of the American government at an earlier age.

Another side-effect of this system is a new type of segregation that is impacting inner-city students. In inner-city schools across the country, underprivileged minorities have been socioeconomically forced into segregated schools. Out of necessity, these students attend their local public schools that are rundown and underfunded. This is the consequence of the low test

scores of previous classes that suffered from this vicious cycle. As the cycle continues, funding drops and good teachers are moved to “better schools”, weakening the school even more (Kozol, 2006). This constant drop in the quality of the schools only causes the students to suffer more. This all leads to the impossibility for students to have the materials to learn and participate in a democracy. The reintegration of students is key to breaking up these failing inner-city schools. A more organized funding system and a local democratic view of reform are essential to helping fix this problem.

Whether this concept of “good” or “bad” schools is a result of the demographic of the student bodies or the test scores registered to those schools, the surface appearance of a school can negatively affect student success rates. As a result of this, a San Francisco-based organization *Parents for Public Schools* pioneered a revolutionary system to increase the public outlook and proficiency rates of all San Francisco schools. This goal was accomplished through a reformation of the layout of governmental funding distribution. Instead of the typical staffing ratio model, in which higher-up government offices dictate where money is to be spent, decentralized funding was introduced. Under this system, specific factors of each system are taken into account such as English speaking ability, financial situations, grade level, and the need for special aid. Based on a student’s profile of these criteria, the student is allotted a certain amount of funding. The student then decides which school to attend through open enrollment. Because students that require more assistance get more funding, schools vie to have these children enroll with them.

This levels the playing field for all students to succeed while dismissing the artificial segregation of minority and low-income students. Furthermore, each school is able to decide how they want to spend their funding outside of standard salaries and predesignated funds. This

leads to a push for varied and personal programs to help students. San Francisco's piloting of decentralized funding produced a marked increase in both test scores and student and satisfaction (Snell, 2006). This process shows how the decisions that affect the success of students should be made on lower levels. A political figure sitting at a desk in Sacramento does not know about the needs of low-income students in San Francisco as well as the principals of the schools. A personal response to issues is always preferable to one produced by a figurehead, as that is more fitting with America's political ideals of democracy as opposed to an oligarchy.

The final step in removing the U.S. education system's backseat approach to politics is putting a multilevel reform into place to keep the democratic power with the students. Teachers should not simply act as fact reciters, but as interpreters of information to guide students through the complicated political landscape. Furthermore, the concept of objectivity, or staying neutral and fact-based on topics, in a classroom is deeply flawed. By being subjective (giving different opinions) but unbiased, students are introduced to various perspectives of topics. This allows students to form ideas more easily in the political sphere. By applying current political issues to historical events, and vice versa, students learn to critically think about issues that afflict the past, present, and future. This systematic approach to history allows students to appreciate the democratic concept of having a say in the running of government (Boyer, 2003). By giving students this base for comparison, their minds are allowed to form more complex thoughts. This is in deep contrast to the current focus on memorizing facts about history for test and subsequently expunging the information from their minds. By building up critical thinking techniques, students internalize their viewpoints and solidify their civic profiles to participate in America's democracy.

The thorough education of America's youth in the standards of the U.S. democratic political system is vital in helping it to thrive. Even though the typical belief that the American education system carries out these goals is held by most, upon deeper analysis it becomes apparent that the system has become flawed as a result of many failed reforms. From Bush's "No Child Left Behind" to Obama's "Race to the Top", schools across the country have been torn apart by sanctions that cut funding and shut down schools. Thus the lack of money, a helpful government, and a steady politically-minded curriculum has led to a shift away from teaching the necessary skills. Civic education of American students has taken on the lower priority than the benefits of the elites that make the decisions. Ultimately, without funding and program reform in all schools, the democratic principles of this country will be lost to future generations.

### **The Middle Class Crumbles**

Since the formations of the earliest governments throughout history, the greatest debates within their leadership have been centered around how to structure them. One such establishment was a democracy, a system of government in which the people have a say in the matters and judgments of the government. From the creation of the democracy, many subsets of this branched off, shifting the power of who has the biggest voice in the system. Despite this shift in the decision-making power one detail remained consistent, the average people always had an important say in the democratic process of choice. In order to make that happen, the population must be composed of a strong middle class. The middle class is a section of the populace that represents the typical American who has a common interest of the people at heart. It was with these principles in mind that the United States of America was founded, creating a representative democracy in which the regular citizens choose elite politicians to make decisions in

government. The power of the people has diminished over the decades though, weakening the democracy as a whole.

The creation of the concepts that were shaped into the form of government that we now know as democracy dates back over thousands of years ago. The theory of an organized democracy was first conceived as far back as ancient Greece by philosophers such as Plato and, more specifically, his pupil Aristotle. Through the teachings of and discussions with Plato, Aristotle led the charge to form a balanced and fair government. With that, he developed democracy as his ideal form of government. The basic layout of his guiding principles follows that:

[The] best constitution is one controlled by a numerous middle class which stands between the rich and the poor. For those who possess the goods of fortune in moderation find it “easiest to obey the rule of reason” (Aristotle, Ed. 1831). They are accordingly less apt than the rich or poor to act unjustly toward their fellow citizens. A constitution based on the middle class is the mean between the extremes of oligarchy (rule by the rich) and democracy (rule by the poor). “That the middle [constitution] is best is evident, for it is the freest from faction: where the middle class is numerous, there least occur factions and divisions among citizens” (Aristotle, Ed. 1831). The middle constitution is therefore both more stable and more just than oligarchy and democracy (Miller, 2011).

Here, Aristotle lays out that the middle class is a key piece of the puzzle of democracy. He states that a strong middle class is so important to democracy because it is the most level-headed portion of the population involved in the decision-making process. Whereas both the rich and the poor typically only look out for themselves, the middle class lives comfortably enough to want to help others. They are not bitter about those who are better off (like the poor are) and they do not

look down upon the less fortunate (like the rich do). They simply have the best interest of the country at heart.

Aristotle expanded his theory of democracy further, covering almost every facet of both its creation and management. One common notion always permeates throughout his writings though, and that is the continued significance of a resilient middle class in such a democracy. Ultimately, Aristotle's fundamental ideas about the middle class' role in a democracy is aggregated in six central declarations.

1. The middle class obeys reason.
2. The middle class is best suited to rule and be ruled.
3. The middle class enjoys the safest and most stable lives.
4. A large middle class keeps a regime stable and in check.
5. A large middle class makes it harder to separate the people into competing factions.
6. The best legislators come from the middle class (Como, 2015).

Through observation of Aristotle's democratic beliefs comes the focus on the middle class of America. If one of the founders of democracy stresses the importance of a strong middle class, then surely there must be precedence to believe that it is a principle that must be continuously supported. Naturally, this model must be passed down along the generations of America and, of course, taught in schools.

Despite this strong scholarly opinion that the middle class is a vital aspect of the success of a democracy, the U.S. government textbook which is the primary instructional tool for U.S. students almost completely ignores this detail. The only mention of the middle class in *Magruder's American Government* comes from the GI Bill of Rights and its possible connection



to the formation of a “new American middle class”. Instead, this textbook focuses on the differences between the “plebeians”, or the poor, and the “patricians”, or the rich. It chooses to put the spotlight on the elected officials who rule the country as though they rise above the rest of the country. This divide signifies the rich as the decision-makers, and the poor as the followers (Shea, 2016). By not covering the structure and impact of the middle class in a government textbook, students lose an important piece of information that helps them to understand the running of a democracy. This lack of emphasis on the middle class shows that the elites that run the United States either want to stifle the power of the middle class’ voice or sees them as a body that possesses no importance to the running of American democracy.

As previously stated, the role of a strong government in America is an important one, for its central purpose is to protect the citizens that make it up. In order to do so though, the people must aid in the balancing of its power. Through economic differences among a population, the power to control the government is spread out. If there is a democracy in which a rich minority grows more affluent and the poor amass in greater numbers, then the balance of power becomes skewed. Since the poor participate less in government, it is then left to the rich to make decisions (Friedman, 2003). This, in turn, leaves the government unbalanced. As the largest portion of the population would not be participating in government, the focus is shifted away from helping this majority. If the “people” of the middle to lower-classes compose the bulk of the populace, then their lack of involvement only weakens the government.

To determine if the United States is afflicted with this problem, then it is an important aspect of the middle class’ part in democracy. The debate about equal economic opportunities in the United States dates back to its creation, and the arguments of the Founding Fathers such as Thomas Jefferson and Alexander Hamilton. While Thomas Jefferson saw that small farmers

were the key to keeping American democracy in check, Alexander Hamilton said that wealthy industrialists were essential to shield democracy from the potentially harmful masses. Although Hamilton's prediction of industry leading to wealth proved true, the fallout of this did not fully appear until the mid-1900's. During this time, manufacturing and industry shot ahead of the working class economically. As the wages of the working and middle classes fell and their jobs were sent overseas, the profits of the upper class members who owned the companies grew (Miroff & Swanstrom, 2003). This placed a strain in the relationship of understanding between the groups, further pulling down the strength of America's democracy. When the people who make decisions for the masses neither understand nor care about their plights, they are not able to act for them correctly in America's representative democracy.

By reviewing how much money each fifth of Americans make on average, or the distribution of income, it is possible to determine how many Americans fit into the middle class. Furthermore, the distribution of income reveals how wealthy the upper class is and how poor the lower class is.

In 1997, the top 20 percent of American households received almost half of the nation's income. Average earnings among this group are \$122,764 a year. The distribution of income to the four other groups of 20 percent was as follows: The second fifth had 23.2 percent, with average earnings of \$57,582; the third fifth had 15.0 percent, with average earnings of \$37,177; the fourth fifth had 8.9 percent, with average earnings of \$22,098. The bottom 20 percent earned 3.6 percent of the economic pie, or an average of \$8,872 a year (Cox & Alm, 2003).

The fact that the top 20 percent of Americans' incomes account for about half of the total nation's income shows that the rich are growing into a more controlling position in the country.

Additionally, only the second fifth of Americans actually fully fit into the typical middle class income bracket. The bottom three-fifths of the income distribution would typically fall into the range of the lowest section of the middle class all the way down to below the poverty level.

These figures are additionally supported by the 2014 U.S. Census which tracks details about citizens and households all across the country. Two major details that can be extracted from this are the number of people holding jobs and the median household income in that year. “The number of men and women working full time, year round with earnings increased by 1.2 million and 1.6 million, respectively, between 2013 and 2014” (U.S. Department of Commerce, 2015). Yet despite these increased quantities of workers, “In 2014, real median household income was 6.5 percent lower than in 2007” (U.S. Department of Commerce, 2015). These facts reinforce the idea that although there are more people in the U.S. workforce that would typically fall into the middle class, the reality is that the populace is statistically falling short of the level as the years go on.

Overall data of American income values over the last few decades provides the most solid evidence of a shrinking middle class in the United States. A study conducted by the Pew Research Center compared the percent of Americans that took in a certain amount of money (adjusted for inflation) in both 1971 and 2015. The results of this showed that by 2015, the percent of people making what used to be considered “middle income” (a range from about \$35 thousand to \$95 thousand) dropped by about a third. In contrast to this, those in both the poverty and “one-percent” brackets increased. As a result, the middle income range was adjusted to be between \$40 thousand to \$125 thousand (Smith, 2015). Since those making incomes in the “middle” range decreased, the number of the poor and rich increased. This is

clearly indicative of a shrinking middle class since fewer citizens than ever in the history of the United States fit into that classification.

Besides looking at the shrinking of the middle class at a large economic scale, one can see a change in day-to-day lives. In areas all across the country one can see a clearer divide between the “good” parts of towns and the “bad” parts of towns than ever before. This is a prime example of the inequality gap growing larger than in past decades. One possible explanation for this is the growth of globalization and technology in America. The advancement of these processes puts less of an importance on the low-skill workers, depressing their wages. Conversely, higher position employees garner greater pay values today, driving up the income of the already wealthy elite. The trend of labor unions falling apart also takes away some of the fighting edge that lower paid workers once had. While one might expect a government to try to rectify an economic inequality of this magnitude, the United States government has actually taken actions that make the problem worse (Krugman, 2003). The process of fixing the system economically is not a difficult or complicated one. By diverting some government income (from taxes or other sanctions) away from overly-funded programs to social services and financial aid supplements, the income levels can be balanced effectively over time.

The evidence of the shrinking middle class is not purely mathematical or economic though. The feeling of hope in America is at an all-time low. The once optimistic “It will get better!” spirit of most U.S. citizens has disappeared. The ideas of owning a home, owning multiple cars, having children that one can put through college, and the like seem to be more like burdens than rewards. In other words, the “American Dream” is dead. These feelings spring from a largely middle-class population that is shrinking by the day from stationary wages and growing costs of goods and services. For example, health insurance and university tuition rates are at an

all-time high in the United States (Younge, 2013). This sense that Americans can no longer fulfill the “American Dream” is highly suggestive of the faltering of the once strong middle class. The people are losing their spirit as citizens and this, in turn, leads them to rebuke the government and weaken democracy as a whole.

The earliest philosophers of government created the theory of government known as democracy in which every citizen has a say how the nation is run. Aristotle, one of the leaders of this theory, specified the importance of a strong middle class to the successful functioning of such a government. The significance of the middle class is that it acts as an unbiased balancing tool that keeps the government in check. Although America was founded as a democracy with a middle class that was robust for many decades, over time, the power of this group has dwindled as a result of economic inequalities. Consequently, the average person’s voice in the administration of the government has weakened placing more power in the hands of America’s elites. This ultimately leads to the lowered interest in the well-being of everyday citizens and a general weakening of America’s democratic values.

### **Conclusion**

Franklin D. Roosevelt’s words on American democracy represent the ideals of a bygone generation of political thinkers. The days in which the populace had an actual say in the running of the government have fallen to the power of wealth. Now, the wealthy elites have seized control of the government and steered it in a direction that primarily suits their interests. These elites are now the “alien power” that Roosevelt refers to, and they are very much such a force. The average person could not possibly understand the goals of the rich and vice versa. As such, a great divide between the decision-makers and the people that they represent has formed.

When the average citizen does not participate in government, they only serve to weaken the resolve of a democratic society. Whether it be getting involved in the community, education oneself on current events, joining a committee, or even voting, active citizenship participation is key to a thriving democracy. Yet in America, it is clear that citizens are participating less than ever. The effects of this are apparent in the low voting numbers and isolated nature of the average person. When the populace does not act as one, nothing gets done.

The best way to inspire citizens to get involved in government is to teach them about it at a young age. America's education system, although very widespread, fails to indoctrinate in its students this important civil knowledge. Instead of making sure that students have the critical thinking skills necessary to support the government, leaders in education squabble over the perceived standards of reading, writing, and arithmetic. The result of this is a series of reforms that have only torn the education system apart more, leading students in a non-democratic direction of thinking.

All of this can be traced back to the socioeconomic perils of the once robust middle class. The middle class is a piece of the puzzle that makes up the population of America. It is composed of average Americans who have a well-being of the people and country at heart. The strength of this demographic in America has fallen dramatically though, dropping the power into the laps of the rich elite that control the politicians that control the country. Ultimately, the elite class theory is the best representation of America's current political state. The elite rule this country with little regard to what an ordinary person thinks. They only make the decisions that they do to further their own wealth and power. "We" are no longer the government, but rather the "peasants" that elites control.

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