

A Democracy Built Upon Infertile Soil

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Abstract

Americans are conditioned to believe that they live in a democratic system of government. Starting at a young age, children learn about how their government is organized to encourage democratic ideals by ensuring that every branch of government will be held accountable in the event of corruption. However, this system only functions if a nation maintains a fertile soil for democracy. The United States of America continues to show troubling signs that would make us believe otherwise. American democracy is built upon infertile soil as demonstrated by an unstable middle class, a decline in citizen participation, and a poor education system. As a result, politicians are becoming increasingly less representative of the people leading to more corruption. Only by addressing these problems will Americans be able to cleanse the soil of their democracy and build a more representative republic.

A Democracy Built Upon Infertile Soil

Democracy is one of the most unique political systems to ever exist on our planet. Unlike most other forms of government, democracy does not encourage a ruling class but instead prefers citizens to rule themselves. Yet we frequently see ruling elites deciding the fate of our so called ‘democracy’. This forces us to contemplate the reasons behind why our Democracy is failing. Could it be that the democracy of the United States of America has been usurped by these ruling elites? The truth may actually be even more frightening. Political theorists generally believe that a democracy will thrive if built upon fertile soil. In this instance, fertile soil refers to a society that has a strong middle class, active citizen participation, and a superb education system. When one or more of these aspects become absent, democracies will begin to decline. It would be logical for us to infer that this is the case for the United States. However, nearly all of these aspects have been missing throughout the entirety of our country’s history. This forces us to conclude that democracy has never truly existed in the United States of America because we lack the fertile soil needed for democracy to thrive.

Political philosophers have always viewed a strong middle class as being essential to maintaining a democratic society. Before we can examine why a middle class is so important to a nation’s stability, we must first define the middle class. A columnist for *The Atlantic* and co-founder of the New America Foundation, explains that “when Americans talk about the middle class, they are not talking about burghers or the bourgeoisie. What makes the United States and similar societies middle class is the economic predominance of the middling sort, no matter what their major source of employment happens to be” (Lind, 2004). There are a couple things that must be clarified in Lind’s statement. First, when Lind says ‘the middling sort’, he is referring to people of modest economic status. This may seem like a given, however it is important to

emphasize that America's majority maintains a modest lifestyle. The second thing we must address involves employment. Unlike other middle classes, America's middle class is not exclusively mercantile. This means that one can maintain middle economic status without having to be involved in trade. With this definition of a middle class established, we can now begin to examine why a middle class is important to democracy.

Gabriela Ramos, the Chief of Staff at the OECD, states that:

A strong and prosperous middle class is crucial for any successful economy and cohesive society... it drives much of the investment in education, health and housing and it plays a key role in supporting social protection systems through its tax contributions. Societies with a strong middle class have lower crime rates, they enjoy higher levels of trust and life satisfaction, as well as greater political stability and good governance (Ramos, 2019).

Ramos' statement makes clear that the middle class has wide reaching effects across society, but why is this the case? The answer is simple: money. The definition we used from Michael Lind made clear that the American middle class maintains a comfortable lifestyle. This means that the majority of people have an abundance of resources they can use to influence the government's decisions. In a strange way, this allows the American people to buy representation from their government. This purchase of representation results in the beneficial effects explained by Ramos. But something does not add up; we do not see these benefits in American society. In fact, history would indicate that we have never seen these benefits for all Americans. This is because our middle class is not strong but instead unstable and underrepresented.

The instability and lack of representation of our middle class is a direct result of the government's interference and the shrinking economic power of the average American. As established earlier, the abundance of wealth within the middle class encourages our government

to act in our favor. However, the American government has been able to circumvent acting in favor of all Americans by determining who can be a part of the middle class. Let's start by examining one of the most blatant ways the United States government has deprived people of their wealth and middle class status. In February of 1942, President Roosevelt issued Executive Order 9066, which authorized the internment of over 93,000 Japanese Americans. Not only were Japanese Americans forced into decrepit prison camps, but were also deprived of all wealth and property. When the camps were finally closed in 1945, no stolen property would be returned to those unjustly imprisoned. Instead, the government would largely ignore discrimination and violence against Japanese Americans following the end of the war (Cherny, 2005). The United States government abused their power by openly robbing 93,000 Americans of their wealth and forcing them into inhumane conditions. Although the victims of internment were eventually given \$20,000 each and a formal apology, the total economic loss of Japanese Americans still ranges between \$2.5 billion to \$6.2 billion (Pippert, 1983). This is an extremely troubling example of how our government can meddle with the middle class. Executive Order 9066 set a risky precedent that permits our government to deprive Americans of their property so long that it takes place during a time of war. Japanese internment proves that the wealth that ensures equal representation for the middle class can be lost in an instant. How can we trust our government to act in our best interest if they have the ability to completely strip us of our wealth? This shatters the idea that our money encourages our government to provide us with representation. To make matters worse, our government has found a new way to deprive people of their middle class status.

The United States' government has found a way to effectively shrink the power of the middle class by creating a society where being middle class is no longer normal. For the past

several decades, one could stay in the middle class by working hard. This once was so common that families with single incomes could easily afford a home, insurance, education, retirement, and luxury items (Nasser, 2015). This meant that any American could live a truly prosperous life—so long as they were allowed to be in the middle class. However, we have seen a shift in recent years that is starting to produce an environment where being middle class is difficult to achieve for all groups throughout the country. For instance, the recession of 2008 saw 4 out of 5 Americans struggling to stay above the poverty line resulting in the median net worth of middle class families dropping 38.9% (Whitney, 2013). To be fair, this is an extreme example of how the middle class has changed in the 21st century. However, the middle class has struggled to rebound since the 2008 recession. In 2015, Pew Research Center reported that only 120.8 million adults were members of the middle class while 121.3 million adults were a part of the lower class. This disturbing statistic demonstrates how the lower class now outnumbers the middle class which completely destroys our definition of the middle class being the most populous economic group in America. Meanwhile, assets controlled by the 1% has nearly doubled since 1980 (Smith, 2015). Our government has allowed for the middle class to weaken to the point where the lower class is now the most populous group in society. This makes us wonder why our government would allow this to take place. After all, we have established that our government provides the middle class with protections because of the economic incentive. The only logical conclusion we could make would be that the government has found a new source of funding—the bloated embodiment of greed known as the top 0.1%.

Money in politics is a massive issue that has wide reaching effects throughout society, but of particular interest is the effect money has on middle class representation. Underrepresentation of the middle class is nothing new; especially for minorities. Historically,

we have seen women and people of color drastically underrepresented in government. However, we often overlook how underrepresented the middle class is in Congress. For starters, salaries for members of Congress are kept purposefully low to help ensure the wealthy remain the predominant group within Congress (Heineman, 1995). This is further demonstrated by the fact that the median net worth of the members of the 115th Congress was \$511,000 which is nearly four times higher than that of an American household. Sadly, this is just a conservative estimate given that members of Congress are not required to disclose the value of their residences or contents (Hawkings, 2018). How can we trust the representatives of Congress if so many of them are not members of the middle class? It is true that one can be represented by someone who is not a member of their group, but the fact that wages are purposefully kept low and there is a high disparity indicates that the chances of the middle class receiving proper representation is low. To make matters even worse, we are seeing the 0.1% interfere in elections to ensure the government acts in the interests of the rich.

In a recent Seattle city council election, Amazon spent more than \$1.5 million in an attempt to prevent the reelection of Kshama Sawant. Sawant attempted to pass a bill that would place a \$275 tax per employee on companies making more than \$20 million per year. This measure ultimately failed due to Amazon's efforts to repeal the tax (Semuels, 2018). These actions alone were enough to demonstrate the rich interfering in our elections, but Amazon wasn't done yet. When Sawant originally ran for her city council seat in 2015, Amazon only donated \$25,000 against her campaign. But in her 2019 reelection campaign, Amazon donated a whopping \$1.5 million to Sawant's opponent, Egan Orion (Rosenberg, 2019). Luckily, Sawant was able to barely win her reelection campaign. However, this attempted interference by Amazon is a part of a larger effort, by the wealthy, to undermine middle class representation.

During 2018, Californian voters had to decide the fate of Proposition 8 which involved increased regulation of dialysis companies. Naturally, Fresenius and DaVita—the two largest dialysis companies in California—could not allow the government to regulate profits. This resulted in Fresenius and DaVita donating more than \$101 million dollars to the no on 8 campaign, making it the highest funded campaign for a proposition in United States history (Dayen, 2018). This union backed proposition ultimately failed due to the interference by Fresenius and DaVita (Kendall, 2018). This is yet another example of election interference by the wealthy. How can the middle class run successful campaigns if the 0.1% has far more resources? Fresenius, DaVita, and Amazon all spent ludicrous amounts of money to kill legislation backed by middle class representatives.

This is a failure of our government because they have allowed major companies to gain so much influence over our elections. Without laws to limit campaign financing, the interests of the middle class are now doomed. This lack of representation has led directly to the instability of the middle class. Without middle class representation, our government has allowed the lower class to become the most numerous group in America. Meanwhile, the 0.1% now owns more than the bottom 90% of Americans (Monaghan, 2014). It would seem that the American government has become beholden to the wealthy and is content to no longer represent the middle class. This should not be surprising. As we established earlier, the only reason the middle class is represented by the government is because of the power of the shared wealth. However, the power is now useless since the middle class has shrunk to the point where it can no longer compete with the 0.1%. In this aspect, our soil of democracy has become infertile because this instability in our middle class. With this lack of representation, it's no wonder citizen participation has been on the decline.

Active citizen participation is seen as another major pillar of democracy, but why is this the case? Simply put, a more active populace will result in a better governed society. This may be true for other countries but it is definitely not the case for the United States. We have established that money is the only way to get government's attention. In this sense, the only citizen participation that matters in the United States is the one that affects money—voting. We have discussed how companies—like Fresenius, DaVita, and Amazon—are terrified of people voting on measures that could implement regulations, yet we do not see many people caring about these issues. It seems strange that the only remaining weapon we have against the 0.1% is so rarely used by the American public. So why is this the case? Perhaps it is because the United States government has always discouraged democratic elections.

During the birth of our country, the Founding Fathers intended to make a society that promotes freedom from the king—not the rich. In fact, the vast majority of the Founding Fathers were members of the elites (Heinman, 1995). This is the likely explanation as to why free, land-owning, men who were members of the predominant religious group, were the only people with voting rights at the founding of our country. As a result, only 10%-20% of the country's population made up the electorate. To make matters worse, elites in early America would issue freeholds to landless men in order to sway elections (Constitutional Rights Foundation, 1991). This is further evidence of ruling elites controlling elections to ensure the government acts in their favor. Since this blatant control over the American public has been implemented since the founding of our country, there is no way we could possibly trust our government to not act in favor of the elites. Even today, our government is actively seeking to undermine the voice of the public.

Partisan gerrymandering has been a plague against the American public for decades. In recent years, conservatives have led the effort to prevent gerrymandered districts from being redrawn. In July of 2019, the Supreme Court refused to issue a ruling on gerrymandering in a 5-4 decision made strictly upon party lines. The conservative justices argued that partisan gerrymandering is not necessarily unconstitutional (Rao, 2019). This blatant refusal to address government meddling in the public's voice clearly demonstrates how little our government cares about citizen participation. To add insult to injury, the Supreme Court went on to throw out another case regarding partisan gerrymandering only three months after their initial ruling (Williams, 2019). It is clear that the American public is passionate about the issue of gerrymandering, yet the government continues to ignore this problem. It sends a troubling message that government doesn't care even when we are actively participating in democracy. Sadly, this is not the only way the United States' government has been attacking citizen participation.

States are now taking actions to manipulate votes directly by passing voter ID laws and purging electoral rolls. Voter ID laws are created with the intent to limit civic participation amongst groups who struggle to acquire government identification. The ACLU estimates that there are over 21 million Americans who lack ID— that is 11% of all U.S. citizens. To make matters worse, the effects of voter ID laws disproportionately impacts African Americans. It is estimated that nearly 25% of African Americans lack photo ID. These restrictive laws that target people without government ID is believed to reduce total voter turnout by 2-3% (Oppose voter ID legislation, 2017). It is hard to see our democracy as being representative if our government is taking action to prevent 21 million citizens from participating in elections. How can these

Americans be properly represented if their voices cannot even be heard? Sadly, being registered vote still will not guarantee that the government will listen to our voices.

Voter purges is a process where the government removes voters from electoral rolls. This is usually done to remove people who have moved out of the district or died. However, politicians have been using this power to prevent people from voting who still remain eligible. Between 2016 and 2018 alone, over 17 million eligible voters were removed from electoral rolls (Rao, 2019). This completely undermines our faith in the government because these purges prove the process is meaningless. Some might excuse Voter ID laws as something you can avoid if you follow the bureaucratic processes, but why should we trust these processes if we can still be removed from electoral rolls even after going through proper channels. These purges, coupled with gerrymandering, proves that our government does not encourage active citizen participation. So if our voices do not really matter, why should we even try to participate in society.

This brings us to the largest issue facing citizen participation in our country—apathy. It's hard to not be disillusioned by democracy when our government has purposefully placed roadblocks to prevent our voices from being heard. We have discussed how our government largely disregards the middle class because the 0.1% can pay for more representation and how this has led to the weakening of the average American. Considering that the lower class is now the most populous group in America, voter ID laws will likely begin to affect more people. Even if we can maintain a middle class status, we still have to face the problems produced by electoral purges, partisan gerrymandering, and the resources of the 0.1%. We cannot trust our representatives to truly act in our favor when most of them receive funding from the 0.1% or are members of the elites. It is always frustrating to hear people ponder about why there is such low

voter turnout in the United States when the evidence is right in front of us. Our society has been owned by the elites since the beginning of our country and it has only gotten worse. This dystopian society has crushed the foundations of democracy that we hold dear and there is nothing else to do besides become apathetic. By ignoring all these problems in society, the pain becomes easier. This embrace of apathy has led to the destruction of citizen participation in our society, which is exactly what our government wants. If we ignore the problems facing society, we might not attribute them to our government. This is the exact case with education.

Education, the last remaining aspect of the soil of democracy, is at the forefront of the elites' attacks on the American public. In this battle, we are watching the elites attempt to make education a for profit company. This has been particularly troubling for the higher education system. Colleges in the United States were once seen as a way to advance in society, however they have now become widely inaccessible and overpriced. At 38 of the top universities, students from 1% are the most populace on campus (Carey, 2019). This creates the picture that higher education is only meant to help the elites stay wealthy. Some might consider this coincidence, but the rising costs of college indicate that classism in education is intentional. Among private schools, tuitions have increased from \$17,000 to over \$35,000 throughout the past 30 years (Carey, 2019). At public institutions, tuition has increased by 37% between 2008 and 2018 (Hess, 2019). These are the highest costs for education in United States history and they do not appear to be changing anytime soon. If college has become so unattainable for the American public, why has not our government intervened? Probably for the same reason it has not saved the middle class or supported active citizen participation—money.

Our government's greed has led it to allow millions of Americans to struggle to receive a higher education. This greed is most clearly seen with regards to student loans. There is now

over \$1.6 trillion dollars in student loan debt which is affecting 44 million people throughout the United States. Of this \$1.6 trillion in debt, \$1.1 trillion was loaned by the federal government (Campbell, 2019). The United States government is failing to address the issues of overpriced higher education because they are profiting off this problem. In fact, the average student loan takes over 18 years to pay off (Friedman, 2019). That is nearly two decades that our government can spend profiting off the interest of the loans they gave. Why would we expect our government to help us face a problem they have engineered? Much like issues facing the middle class and citizen participation, the government has chosen to act against the interest of the public and instead support the elites. The utter lack of concern our representatives give towards education has led to the erosion of this final aspect of our democracy. So what do we have left?

Conclusion

The soil of American democracy has always been infertile and today's society is a direct result of the decades of corruption that ensued. Our government never truly wanted to watch out for us; they just wanted our money. We have once again approached a point where the elites have more resources to buy our government's representation. This is why the problems facing the soil of democracy have dramatically worsened. This has led to the middle class becoming a shadow of its former self, people adopting apathetic attitudes towards citizen participation, and education becoming a shameless cash grab. Without these foundations, our democracy is doomed to fail. The only thing we can do now is to ask ourselves how much more of this nonsense we can take. Some might be content to accept that our democracy is doomed, but we cannot abandon hope. Americans are taught to believe in the ideals of freedom and prosperity. Even if these ideals were built upon a lie, it does not mean we cannot make them a reality. When our government is failing the people of this country, it is our civic duty to stand in opposition.

We can make a society where the middle class is prosperous, where people gladly participate in our democracy, and where education is not only attainable, but a right. All it takes is the courage to stand against the representatives of the ruling elite. Only one question remains—will you stand?

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