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Intro to American Politics

Reflection Essay 2

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Democratic Realism

Robert Dahl provides a blanket definition of democracy as being the “continuing responsiveness of the government to preferences of its politically equal citizenship.” In theory, the American democratic system would channel these preferences into policy and elected officials would reflect on the ‘common good’ prior to implementation; however, as John Dunn argues, “to suggest that we could ever hope to have the power to make them act just as we would wish them to suggests that it is really we, not they, who are ruling.” Drawing on such concepts, Achen and Bartel challenge this romanticized view, or illusion, of our democratic system. They claim that “voters... typically make choices not on the basis of policy preferences or ideology, but on the basis of who they are—their social identities” and if “voting behavior primarily reflects and reinforces voters’ social loyalties, it is a mistake to suppose that elections result in popular control of public policy” (Achen, Christopher H, and Larry M Bartels.

Democracy for Realists : Why Elections Do Not Produce Responsive Government. Princeton, Princeton University Press, 2016). Although this perspective may not be attractive to the general public, given our growing political polarization in the country, perhaps there is some truth in their sentiment.

They argue that in reality, policy preferences and personal ideologies are not as *fundamental*, whether that is positive or negative, to democracy as group and partisan loyalties. This reliance on a certain ‘group think’ is reiterated by Zaller’s RAS model, which rejects the idea of true, or individualistic, ideas. In this theory, elite-driven communication, via the media, impacts public opinion, unless it is intercepted by political awareness. Hence, political parties use this manipulation tactic to their advantage, particularly to pass legislation, elect an official

into office, or to *rebel* against a candidate. Take, for example, the most recent ‘No Kings’ Protest against our current president, Donald Trump. The ‘No Kings’ mission statement reads: “America has no kings, and the power belongs to the people. Now, our task is to stay vigilant, stay united, and continue to push back.” However, the irony lies in the fact that the *American people* elected an official who is currently implementing the changes in which his candidacy ran on. Due to the Democratic population, through social media and news outlets, pushing the sentiment that Trump is a dictator who wants to “take away our rights,” an opinion I’ve heard expressed from many of my college peers, they will encourage the impeachment of an elected representative. In dismissing the idea that voting is based on policy preference, instead of loyalism to a movement such as *Maga*, the public is subconsciously straying away from such democratic romanticism. Politicized media may support a narrative just to retaliate against policies or preferences they do not agree with, and, consequently, pursue anti-democratic principles. This is the reality of our democratic system.

Achen and Bartel state that “the political ‘belief systems’ of ordinary citizens are generally thin, disorganized, and ideologically incoherent;” however, the limitation to *just* ordinary citizens dismisses the reality that political agents are just as chaotic in their ways of thinking. For example, although we’d expect the Supreme Court to uphold path dependence and maintain rulings based on precedent, there are exceptions to this idealistic judgment. In *Citizens United v. Federal Election Commission* (2010), the Court reversed a decision made in *McConnell v. Federal Election Commission* (2003) and overturned *Austin v. Michigan Chamber of Commerce* (1990). According to Jeff Brindle, “both *Austin* and *McConnell* upheld the 1947 ban on independent expenditures by corporations and unions while *Citizens United* allowed such spending” (Brindle, Jeff. *US Supreme Court Reversed Some Precedents in Citizens United but Not Those Involving Disclosure*. 2020). By diverging from the doctrine of precedent, the Supreme Court introduced a violation in political norms and the possibility that even government institutions may be contradictory in their opinions and decision-making. This case was

monumental in exemplifying that citizens and government officials alike can be unpredictable in political environments.

But what would lead these agents to disrupt political traditions and ultimately interrupt our romanticized democracy? Achen and Bartel reflect on political philosophers Reinhold Niebuhr and Fritz Albert Lipmann to explain that “human judgment is not just overwhelmed by the complexity of the world..., but in addition is profoundly warped by self-interest and the will to power.” SCOTUS found in *Citizens United* that corporations are to be treated as people, and I would extend this to other institutions including the Court itself. Thus, just as ‘human’ judgment can be clouded by such entities and motivations, ‘corporations’ may experience similar lapses as well. Our authors identify that Niebuhr “perceived clearly that the idealistic justification of democracy as human rationality in pursuit of the common good serves only too well to provide cover for those who profit from the distortions and biases in the policy-making processes of actual democracies.” Therefore, the Conservative majority of the Supreme Court decreased government regulation on expenditures despite the public, and previous members, consistently channeling opposite preferences. In the last decade or so, the ‘common good’ has henceforth been replaced by party/ideological incentives - with conservatives leaning towards policy which benefits their specific demographic as opposed to a holistic public. If an idealistic democracy were to exist, this bias within the political system would not prevail; however, it’s becoming an all too common approach for our institutions in policy making.

Thus, as long as our country continues on the path it’s been on for the past couple decades, we will perpetuate this ‘realistic’ democracy which Achen and Bartel call for us to accept. Given that their work was published in 2016, I believe that this dissent from democratic romanticism has already rapidly occurred, as doubts in government institutions rise with each election and court ruling/overturning. How can we idealize American democracy when we don’t even trust it? How can we idealize America when we don’t even trust each other? Perhaps this romanticism and hopefulness was the glue maintaining our social and political norms - believing

in ourselves and the country in which we reside. Now that we have accepted our fate in democratic realism, how do we move *forward*?

Works Cited

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