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## The United States Is an Oligarchy, Not a Democracy

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From an [article](#) about an upcoming paper in the Journal "Perspectives on Politics": "the preferences of the average American appear to have only a minuscule, near-zero, statistically non-significant impact upon public policy." The full paper is [here](#).

To me it appears that the researchers make a strong case. If your vote doesn't impact policy does it have any value?

 1  · flag[Gary Romer](#) · 7 days ago 

It is a well established principle that those who have the most to lose or gain in respect to a political action are the most likely to take an active part in the deliberations. If a law to give the Koch brothers a tax break of \$10 billion was proposed, would you be surprised to see the Koch brothers trying to influence the outcome?

 0  · flag[Rich Bussom](#) · 7 days ago 

No, but I'm disappointed in a system that allows it.

 0  · flag[Carol A. Kichen](#) · 7 days ago 

The reason the American people don't have an impact is that they do not participate. Going into the voting booth to vote for people and issues you know nothing about is not participation. People have to let their representatives know that they do not like what is happening. They do listen to people who are persistent and who appeal directly to them. I have seen it happen.

 2  · flag

Rich Bussom · a day ago

That implies that our representatives are out of touch with what their constituents want. Isn't it their job to be aware of the feeling of their community? I've never been fond of the "squeaky wheel gets the grease" style of dealing with issues.

↑ 1 ↓ · flag

Anonymous · 36 minutes ago

Carol, I agree. The US has very low voter turnout except for the presidential election. The people with strong views and opinions get out and vote but most people don't bother. Local elections are lucky to get 10 to 15% of the electorate out;

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Joel Kovarsky · a day ago

Regarding the article by Gilens and Page, today's NY Times has a "Room for Debate" discussion about the issue of wealth and political influence: <http://www.nytimes.com/roomfordebate/2014/04/21/do-the-rich-call-the-shots-13>. The section by Scott Winship stipulates that more often than not the wealthy and middle class agree with respect to policy preferences. He points out that, at least based on his interpretation, the referenced article is not saying that the US is an oligarchy. Winship briefly mentions known problems with the interpretation of polling preferences. The Winship piece is very short but does point out some issues that complicate interpretation of the results. Stimson's section also questions too-broad acceptance of the Gilens and Page report. The other two essayists in the group appear more concerned with what many feel is an increasingly plutocratic government.

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Alec D. Rogers · a day ago

Part of the problem is that the average American doesn't do much. They don't learn about the issues, they don't talk to their neighbors about politics, they don't even vote. We barely get a majority in presidential races. Non-presidential turnout is virtually non-existent.

One could argue that this reflects that the US is a centrist country without the real extremes that exist elsewhere, and that people are largely satisfied with the viable choices. And I think there's something to that. However I wouldn't say this makes us an "oligarchy."

↑ 1 ↓ · flag

Rich Bussom · a day ago

An oligarchy is when a small group controls the government. That seems to be exactly what the study found.

Isn't it the elected representatives job to know the feelings of the "average American" in his/her district? That's why they're called "representatives". The fact that they are not representative of their constituents is the issue.

↑ 0 ↓ · flag

Anonymous · 20 hours ago

"The average American doesn't do much "I would have to disagree with you Alec, the average American realize that money controls power and politics, and or to busy working in 3 jobs just to get by and taking care of the house holds and concerned about there children being safe in school. I can understand why you believe that the average American doesn't do much working in the capital during the Clinton impeachment. The average American is tired of the two political parties not working for them

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Alec D. Rogers · 20 hours ago

For the record, I think you misunderstood my comments entirely. I agree that people are more concerned with such things as putting food on the table than what is going on in Washington.

↑ 0 ↓ · flag

Rich Bussom · 6 hours ago

If those are their concerns then it's the job of their elected representatives to create legislation that helps those goals. Instead our government has a demonstrated penchant for assisting corporate and wealthy interests instead. The paper referenced above makes a convincing case that where the general public and wealthy interests do not coincide the wealthy come first in the eyes of the government.

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William F Harley · a day ago

Americans are only involved when something threatens to upset their daily routines. Then they can become involved, determined, and concerned with how things work. WWII caused all citizens to be involved since their way of life was threatened. The "Cold War" caused people to get involved, their children were doing 'duck and cover' drills at school. The Vietnam war affected families whose men were drafted. The debate about the war became violent. While natural disasters are regional, people will

become involved when their lives are upset. Today, most people are caught up with 24 hour news cycles (who to believe?), social media, job security, gun violence. The American citizen will become involved when it becomes necessary to maintain his way of life. That has been the past and will be the future.

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Rich Bussom · a day ago

I'm not sure I understand your point. Are you saying it's OK that the preferences of the average citizen aren't taken into account except during times of crisis? Or is it that during times of crisis their goals align with the wealthy/powerful?

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Alec D. Rogers · a day ago

My own experience working on Capitol Hill for over a decade is that on most issues of real concern to ordinary voters, their preferences matter a great deal. Perhaps too much.

You'd be surprised at what people care about. There were only a handful of issues that stuck out as generating a huge out pouring of constituent communication. Besides some obvious ones such as the government shutdown in the mid 1990s and the Clinton impeachment, they included:

- Whether Credit Unions would be forced to disgorge parts of their membership
- Whether a satellite company could broadcast the local Fox network signal.

That's what ordinary Americans care about: their bank accounts and televisions.

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Rich Bussom · a day ago

That observation is not in keeping with the referenced study. What you're describing are what people complained to their congressman about. That's a tiny fraction of the electorate.

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Alec D. Rogers · a day ago

Yes - it's the tiny fraction that cared enough to send a post card to their Congressman.

Those who didn't bother to do that can't really be said to have a significant preference, except as that constructed by a political science study.

↑ 0 ↓ · flag

Rich Bussom · a day ago

Agreed, and I also agree that many of them are the last person a Congressman should be listening to. (I assume that's what you meant by "perhaps too much".) So is it a Congressman's job to represent the opinions of the vast majority of their constituents who don't write in? If not, then he/she is comfortable to be one of the handful running an oligarchy.

And, for the record, I don't think that's necessarily a bad thing. Bread and circuses is the end result of too much pandering to the ordinary citizen. But are we comfortable with a society in which only the rich and powerful have a say in their government?

I do disagree with "those who didn't bother to do that can't really be said to have a significant preference". Most people are quite capable of reaching the rational conclusion that the chances of their input making a difference is not worth the time and effort of a letter.

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Alec D. Rogers · a day ago

Rich, I wonder how much of a "say" most people really want or need. Some unspoken premises here is that the rich and poor have divergent interests such that if the government is doing what "the rich" want, then the poor must be hurt, and that "the rich" all want the same thing.

Truthfully, much of what the federal government does does not impact ordinary people in a way they care about as much as what night the Cub Scout meeting is or whether their local school is going to close and they're going to need to pick their kids up somewhere not on the way home from work. What's going on in DC is mostly a show to them. Not all of it, of course. But most of what gets people like us riled up about doesn't register with most people. That's why I'd question the notion that their preferences are being ignored - it presupposes something that likely doesn't exist in any meaningful way.

Next, many of the big donor types are on different sides of the fence. There's no "rich person's lobby" on most issues (excepting carried interest, I'll grant you that one). For every Warren Buffett or Hollywood film mogul backing one side there's a Koch Brothers on the other.

How much "say" any of them has at the end of the day remains to be seen. I sense they largely cancel each other out...

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Rich Bussom · a day ago

I agree that most people neither want nor need a say. Should that absolve their elected

representatives from putting forward their desires?

I can't agree with you that those desires don't exist in a meaningful way. They are certainly less intense than those held by activists of one stripe or another but "quantity has a quality all its own".

On most issues the interests of the wealthy/powerful are in alignment. You generally see "Buffet vs. Koch" only when it comes to getting "their guy" elected. When it's about what legislation is passed, which was the subject of the study, then there appears to be much less "intra-wealthy" fighting.

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Alec D. Rogers · a day ago 🔒

All I can say is It's hard to really know what their desires are. Much harder than people realize.

And what if they're out of touch with reality? Do you do what they say they want (lower taxes, more spending, less borrowing)?

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Rich Bussom · a day ago 🔒

All which emphasizes that living in an Oligarchy isn't all bad. I just prefer to call a thing what it is. As much as I've enjoyed this course it's major impact for me is to emphasize just how irrelevant the Constitution is to the way the United States is governed today.

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Anonymous · 20 hours ago 🔒

The American desires are simple: having a career that enables a person to raise a family in a nice neighborhood where the schools are safe and the children aren't killing each other. That is reality.

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Rich Bussom · 6 hours ago 🔒

True. Do the actions of our government assist in those desires?

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Michael Moats · 2 hours ago

When I think of this country as an Oligarchy, I think of it in terms of the Administrative State. I see the link takes us to a progressive website, and an Administrative State should be welcome news as early progressives like Wilson and Dewey spoke very fondly of such an arrangement. They said that with a strong and vibrant administrative bureaucracy, it wouldn't matter which political party was in charge.

We see with the alleged IRS targeting of conservative groups, there is really no recourse for Congress to pursue. Aside from the recent Bundy Ranch episode, the BLM and the EPA can simply dictate how certain land can be used based on the rules that they wrote themselves. We see that HHS and the President can selectively enforce or not enforce certain ACA provisions. All of these departments are making decisions based on their own criteria, likely influenced by those with money and power and certainly NOT by the average American. Even the elected representatives of the average American are likely part of a "political class" which hardly makes these congressmen average at all.

I just happened to have a family discussion over the book and movie "Animal Farm" that my nephew had read. The most instructive thing I came away with at this time was the attitude of the working animals. They allowed the pigs to lead, discuss, and debate to the point where the rest of the animals became disengaged with the whole process. When Napoleon finally took over, they knew that something was wrong but they never sought the knowledge nor practiced the skills necessary to stop what was happening. I'm afraid this is the reality of many Americans who are not doing things like taking Constitution classes from Coursera!

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Joel Kovarsky · 41 minutes ago

Michael,

From the outset, I disagree with your aggregation of "facts" for almost all your points. It will do no one any good to attempt a response here. Most of us tend to talk and listen (online and in person) with those who agree with us--or get variably annoyed with those faceless internet folk who do not. Animal Farm is a very interesting book, and Orwell spins a good yarn, but it is hardly scriptural or convincingly prophetic, and it does not deal with the history and function of the American Constitution.

The point can be made that people listen to partisan news shows because they are partisan. No surprise that it would be a cause of mass confirmation bias, whether at the website of a progressive or conservative viewpoint. Our polarization arguably started long before the explosion of media outlets: <http://www.washingtonpost.com/blogs/monkey-cage/wp/2014/02/04/why-you-shouldnt-blame-polarization-on...> . I know, it is the WP, but maybe take a look at the article, which is trying to explain political polarization, and point out why many current explanations do not work.

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Danielle · 13 minutes ago 





This may not make much sense, but I think that the best remedy would be to establish term limitations on congresspeople and senators, even those that we, as individuals, like. As long as elected politicians see holding office as a career, the issue of money and personal gain will be their priority. The average American, even as an aggregate, cannot compete with the will of large corporations or the uber-wealthy who have the means and the will to buy the votes of our politicians. I have no problem with wealth; I am all for it, but not at the expense of what is good for the welfare of the American people.

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