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The United States Is an Oligarchy, Not a Democracy

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[Rich Bussom](#) · 12 days ago 🗨

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?

↑ 2 ↓ · flag

[Gary Romer](#) · 12 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?

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[Rich Bussom](#) · 12 days ago 🗨

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

↑ 0 ↓ · flag

[Carol A. Kichen](#) · 11 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.

↑ 3 ↓ · flag

Rich Bussom · 6 days 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.

↑ 2 ↓ · flag

Anonymous · 5 days 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 · 6 days 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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[+ Comment](#)



Alec D. Rogers · 6 days 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."

↑ 2 ↓ · flag

Rich Bussom · 6 days 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.

↑ 1 ↓ · flag

Anonymous · 5 days 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 · 5 days 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 · 5 days 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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[+ Comment](#)

William F Harley · 6 days 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 · 6 days 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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[+ Comment](#)



Alec D. Rogers · 6 days 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 · 6 days 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 · 6 days 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 · 6 days 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 · 6 days 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 · 6 days 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 · 6 days 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 · 6 days 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 · 5 days 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 · 5 days ago

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

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Michael Moats · 5 days 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 · 5 days 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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Michael Moats · 4 days ago

In responding to the original point of America turning into an Oligarchy, I was trying show that unelected officials make decisions with which the public needs to comply. Congress has given regulatory authority to these bureaucracies and now we are living by rules written by these unelected people. That, I believe, approaches an Oligarchy. Sorry that I was unclear.

Too bad that you think Animal Farm is just a good yarn. True that it has nothing to do with the function of our American Constitution. However, Animal Farm deals with a living, breathing set of rules. There is a political class that literally gets drunk with its own power. The majority populace that live under the Animal Farm system has little influence over its rule. Maybe this falls under the "Unwritten Constitution" but it sounds much like the problems we are having today.

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Charles Stimler · 23 minutes ago

Michael has hit the nail on the head and identified the fundamental problem that America faces, a problem that is not well known among most of its citizens. The vast majority of "laws" that are passed in the United States are not passed by Congress (elected officials) but rather are written by unelected officials - namely members of federal agencies (if you doubt that, compare the volume of the Federal Register to that of Congressional legislation). These federal "rules and regulations" have the weight of law and require only the approval of the federal agency itself; there is no legislative body or executive body that can "veto" the laws written by a federal agency (the only exception is by judicial review, a process that can take decades and hundreds of millions of private citizen dollars and is only occasionally successful as judges usually side with the federal agency [after all, they too work for a federal agency]). Many "laws" passed by Congress these days are "enabling acts" which permit the federal agencies to amass more and more power and shift more and more law making power to the federal agencies. Since the officials in the federal agencies are not accountable to the people (you can't vote them out - in fact you usually don't even know who they are, they are usually in the agency for life, they are protected by some of the strongest immunity laws that exist in the WORLD [something Congressmen wish they had]) and the lawmaking process is anonymous (does anyone know who in the HHS wrote the hundreds of thousands of pages of Obamacare?) there is a potential huge disconnect between the will of the people and the stuff that gets cranked out of these agencies. These rules and regulations are characteristically liberally peppered with numerous novel misdemeanors and felonies to support them thereby adding more and more muscle behind their "decrees", and this adds to the growing burden to the court system and may be one reason why the US has the highest incarceration rate per capita of any nation today. Federal agencies even have their own individual court systems in which they can try and mete out punishment to offenders. This creates a governing body in which the legislative system, executive branch, and judicial system are all combined in one agency - with no separation of powers. Federal agencies run the economy and determine the direction of policy, but they are basically self-directed. To me the analogy to the Communist Party of China is most appropriate; China has been an administrative state for thousands of

years. Admission to the Chinese "administrative state" has always been based on merit, and their notoriously difficult civil service exams have been the subject of many books and theses. The modern day Chinese Communist Party operates in a very similar manner to the administrative state of old (minus the monarch), and Chinese continue to compete vigorously through scholastic competition in hopes of becoming one of the elite. In the United States, the same process occurs whereby admission to Ivy League schools or other prestigious colleges act as a gateway into the rarefied world of the American administrative state. One notable difference between the two nations is that while approximately 5-6% of Chinese belong to the Communist Party, only approximately 0.5% of Americans work for the federal government; this could be interpreted as showing that the proportional representation of Chinese in their government is actually 10 times greater than in the US per capita.

A lot more could be said, but I will end my comments with the observation that the discussion above tries to posit a reason for why it is that people are not participating in their government. My opinion is that people do not participate because there is no need. The administrative state is taking care of everyone, and ensuring that only experts are making the important decisions. Many, many people are fans of the administrative state and believe it is the pinnacle of civilized government. Perhaps that is so, but at least one thing cannot be disputed - it is not a democracy.

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[+ Comment](#)

[Danielle Carr](#) · 5 days 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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[Gary Romer](#) · 5 days ago

I don't see logically why term limitations would reduce the influence of wealthy people on the government. There may be other advantages but imposing term limits on Congress would probably weaken that institution's power vis a vis the President. Is that a good thing? That would probably depend on your view of the current holders of the respective offices.

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[Danielle Carr](#) · 5 days ago

I think that taking the money-making ability away from politicians, except for living expenses,

would make it a less attractive means for getting wealthy. We do not need unfettered power in congress anymore than we need it in the presidency. More time is spent by congress people raising funds for their re-elections than doing what they need to do to represent their general constituencies.. I am not advocating limiting the terms of those elected officials of those that I like but all of them. I do not believe that the framers intended that people should spend decades in the House and the Senate. It leads to all sorts of mischief over a longer period of time.

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Anonymous · 5 days ago

I am just falling in to your debate so excuse me if I am a little confused! But can anybody tell me what percentage of the population voted last time in FEDERAL elections?!

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Rich Bussom · 5 days ago

57.5% of eligible voters according to the Bipartisan Policy Center.

<http://bipartisanpolicy.org/library/report/2012-voter-turnout>

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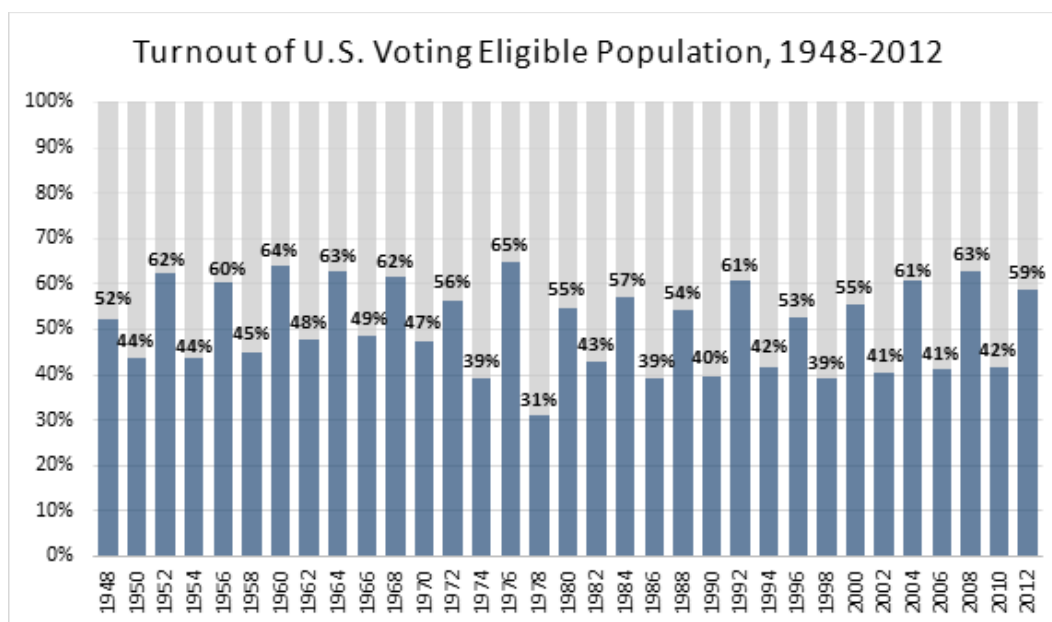
Anonymous · 5 days ago

Thank you! That means that if hypothetically 50% + 1 of 57% is governing this country our government represents a minority. (27.5 %) And you guys are expecting this to be a democracy?! If "the people" don't participate there is no democracy! Basically representatives are complacent because the same partisan voters turn out at every election voting for the same representative.

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Joel Kovarsky · 5 days ago

If you want a sense of historical fluctuation, see: http://elections.gmu.edu/voter_turnout.htm . Those are for presidential elections. In terms of adding midterm figures, to see the flux, see: <http://www.fairvote.org/research-and-analysis/voter-turnout/> (image below).



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Anonymous · 5 days ago

Thank you Mr. Kovarsky! What this tells me is that since 1948 the American citizens are barely interested in the political process. It still doesn't contradict what I wrote before. If you want a democracy you need the public to participate! Other ways the political process is left to the party members and parties are swayed by money. Hence whoever called America an oligarchy has a point. Add to this the intensive lobbying and the influence of big money is undeniable.

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Joel Kovarsky · 5 days ago

I have heard your presumptive conclusion before, but do not think things are that simple: http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Voter_turnout. I use that Wikipedia entry because it does give an expansive overview, but it would not be the best for looking in depth at issues within the USA. It is clear that a more educated voter base does not guarantee a better turnout: that is not unique here. Even the presumed benefits of high voter turnout are subject to debate, as we have heard, for example: <http://www.washingtonpost.com/opinions/george-will-federal-voting-drive-makes-a-mountain->

out-of-a-mo.... I am not making a case for Will's particular perspective, but do think his comments are part of a range of educated opinions on the subject.

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Anonymous · 4 days ago

Thanks!

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[+ Comment](#)

Anonymous · 4 days ago

No I don't think things are simple at all. You may have heard this conclusion before, but may I ask what makes it "presumptive" ? And how is it **clear** that a more educated voter base does not lead to higher turnout? Maybe educated alone is not enough, the voter must also be interested in the result. And the next statement is totally confusing. There are no benefits in a high turnout? !

A voter turnout of 95% (Wikipedia example for Belgium and to my knowledge in most European countries) is less desirable than 65%? Am I missing something in the definition of "democracy"? Of course it may be less desirable for special interests, or for the political parties but how is it not good for the people? As I set before, how can you claim a country being ruled by a government representing a little more than 25% of the population, is a democracy? That is not even a plurality, let alone a majority!

True the "winner takes all" election system contributes to the issue and so does the College of Electors, but a higher voting turnout would definitely improve the ratio of representation.

Or if, as somebody argued that the country should be "administered" by professional administrators, what do we need politicians for? Let's spare the expense and get rid of the entire circus. That would leave us with exactly what the complain at the beginning of the discussion was: An oligarchy!

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Joel Kovarsky · 4 days ago

The turnout rates in Europe fluctuate a good bit: <http://www.idea.int/vt/viewdata.cfm#prebuilt=yes&countries=35,23,60,100,140,179,189,191,202,228,63,6...> . Belgium has one of the oldest compulsory voting laws in the world: <http://www.theguardian.com/politics/2005/jul/04/voterapathy.uk> . Like most other nations with high turnout, it has nowhere near our numbers and diversity.

↑ 0 ↓ · flag

Anonymous · 4 days ago

I agree, diversity is a big factor in voter turnout. and will become even bigger as multiculturalism makes more inroads into America. When the slogan was "Melting pot" immigrants were doing their best to become Americans and participate to the process. Common interests were considered more important than parochial differences. Multiculturalism is a dividing ideology so group interest take priority. If your groups issue is not at stake, you don't participate **as a group** Add to this the different attitudes toward the political process newcomers bring with them and do not attempt to change due to the multicultural brainwash and the ghetto is readily formed.

What is wrong with mandatory voting laws? If I look at the link you suggested among the old European democracies the voter turnout is much higher than ours (with the exception of France) France is interesting since it has a mandatory voting law for the senate.

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Joel Kovarsky · 4 days ago

Regarding mandatory voting laws, you can find and read the varied editorial pros and cons on your own. I have no personal objection to the idea. There are arguments that it has helped (or not helped) civic matters in Australia and other countries. There are a number of economic papers on either side of the issue. I have my doubts that you could get the votes to do this, in the entire USA, from the start. Would this be something that could be tested in our "state laboratories"? There might well be federal litigation, very early, to determine the constitutionality of the issue.

http://www.idea.int/vt/compulsory_voting.cfm

<http://harpers.org/blog/2012/10/the-democratic-argument-for-compulsory-voting/>

P.S. Here is a 2011 "Room for Debate" segment from the NY Times: <http://www.nytimes.com/roomfordebate/2011/11/07/should-voting-in-the-us-be-mandatory-14>

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D.Smalls · 4 days ago

In order to debate America and politics one must examine the hidden hands. They are hidden hands in government and in politics that control everything from the media to financial stability for the United States of America. In addition to examine politics an examination needs to start before the Great Depression. There is a two tier system in place. Republican and Democrat yet if we pay closer attention we can see there are many issues these two parties actually agree on. The distraction is to make voters believe it is an us against them mentality.

As of right now John Boehner wants a keystone pipeline vote in exchange for extending unemployment benefits and guess what the Democrats do not bend there will be no extension of benefits. Politicians are sales people. They sell an agenda for voters to vote them in and once they get in they keep political promises and promote their own agenda. In Canada you have a Mayor who smoked crack on video and told the world he would run again for his seat.

We have become a society that lacks morals. Cheating, stealing, lying and hustling has become the way for many. Yet we have generations of children who will be lost if we don't get back to the basics. Money is and always has been a motivator. What is sad is every time I see a politician arrested it makes me think they kept crossing the line and thought they would not get caught.

Voters go to the poll and vote yet here is an example of power :If we replay the last Presidential Election many believe Obama was the key candidate yet they called the race even before the votes were even counted. All media outlets started running the news stating he won the election. Yet if I think back with George Bush and the Florida counting of the votes they went to court.

Keeping in mind the media controls everything we see, hear, and read. It is important to form your own critique of the news. I have a friend who is a news reporter. He stated its like a brainwashing technique. They will play all of the negative stories first to get a reaction from the viewers. As he said they don't make money promoting positive news. So negative news stories it is. The New York Times although I read it I must admit sometimes the writers are bias in many of their conclusions.

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Joel Kovarsky · 4 days ago

Measuring corruption is not a simple task. Transparency International tries to do this, but their index is understandably based on perceived corruption, but they do explain what was done. When you look at the US in those terms, we do not fare so badly: <http://www.transparency.org/cpi2013/results> . Take a look at other countries with very large populations and diverse ethnic populations. Canada has about 35 million people, Australia about 23 million. We are approaching 9 times the size of Canada.

There is a massive literature on law, politics and morality/ethics. A couple of more recent books (subject to whatsoever bias one chooses to apply):

The Virtues of Mendacity: On Lying in Politics by Martin Jay, University of Virginia Press, 2010: <http://books.upress.virginia.edu/detail%2Fbooks%2Fgroup-4221.xml?q=author%3A%22Jay%2C%20Martin%22>

Common Sense: A Political History by Sophia Rosenfeld, Harvard University Press, 2011:
<http://www.hup.harvard.edu/catalog.php?isbn=9780674284166> (this is for the more recent soft-cover release)

I am sure someone has a few recent favorites concerning politics and the news. As to writer bias, media partisanship and customer base, that is not lost on some NY Times essayists:
<http://www.nytimes.com/2006/12/07/business/media/07scene.html> .





As to whether we are or are becoming an oligarchy, I am not sure. The scholarly paper used to start this thread has gotten a lot of press, and headlines appear everywhere that this is what is occurring. I am more fearful of the increasingly concentrated wealth than many other hot-button issues discussed in our course threads. Can our Constitution help protect us? That may not be clear for quite some time; one could doubt that it can do it alone. There is a recent essay in The Economist, "What's Gone Wrong With Democracy," that discusses a number of unanswered questions: <http://www.economist.com/news/essays/21596796-democracy-was-most-successful-political-idea-20th-cent...> . They are not so pessimistic about our chances.

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