

Reaction Paper #2: Educational Legacies

I remember it very clearly. It was junior year of high school, and I was in AP comparative politics-the most advanced government course offered there. I got up to present on the French constitutional system, and I remember thinking, ‘the French have an awkward and strange constitutional system. I explained to the class what I thought at the time was the incredibly unusual role ascribed to the president, how the prime minister was not directly elected, how the constitutional council bickered on partisan differences, how there were 6 major parties, how the constitution was not amended, and how the President could declare martial law and take control of the country at any time. I could not help thinking as I presented, ‘*man*, our political system was so much better than theirs is –it made more sense, was better at protecting civil liberties, better reflected the peoples will, and a host of other things.’ It has taken several years, a few classes, and many books to find out that this opinion is blatantly not true.

At the time I thought, as I had been taught in school, that the American political system worked nearly flawlessly. Balance of powers meant no group became too powerful, the Supreme Court was non-partisan, the Constitution protected and encouraged all of our civil liberties, Congress almost always looked out for the public good and was an efficient, professionalized institution made of mostly of well-meaning actors, and that capitalism was good for all involved- or at least better than the alternative. Times have changed, I now accept that the Presidency has been eroding the balance and centralizing power for 60+ years, the Supreme Court effectively denied civil rights to large amounts of the population for large stretches of our history and frequently

acts in a partisan fashion, that our Constitution may not be the best institutional setup to promote liberties and debate, that Congress is in fact a very inefficient organization, and that capitalism has many negative impacts across society- and that there is a better alternative.

These last three points are especially important, for this week's reading has thrown them into a much sharper relief. Taylor, Justice, Grimbaldi, the Center for Government and Democracy, Birnbaum, and especially Zakaria highlight the role that money plays in Congress. Zakaria in particular struck a chord with me. He described the scene that happens everyday in Congress: A lobbyist sits in during deliberation, and if a Congressman even suggests changing a bill in a way detrimental to that lobbyist's interests, the Congressman will get hundreds of faxes just seconds later threatening a withdrawal of campaign funds, or even giving campaign funds to the opposition next election cycle. So where is the incentive for a member of Congress to act boldly? There is none; if the Congressman chooses to act in defiance of Lobbyists, he (she)'s chances of reelection will go down significantly, while if he (she) does nothing, there is a 98% chance of getting reelected. Additionally, even if they are 'safe' electorally, the money can come in handy in the form of contributions to other members, and in the process advancing that Congressman's own political ambitions.

This scene plays out so many times, that lobbyists now can effectively block cutting nearly *any* governmental program. The costs continue to accumulate, and the amount of discretionary spending drops every year, as Birnbaum convincingly demonstrates. Money is so significant in Congressional politics, that all attempts to limit it in the form of campaign finance reform has failed, as Taylor, the Washington Post,

Justice, and Grimbaldi demonstrate. All this taken together creates an ominous overtone for the ostensible “people’s chamber,” and makes one question its very legitimacy as a democratic organization.

These points in themselves are incredible challenges to democracy, but there is more. The American Political Science Association, Verba, and Phillips states that the voice of underprivileged and poor people in the American political system is nothing more than a whisper and that their wants are systematically excluded. Money buys power in America, so it seems. Stigler, Lindbloom, Heertz, and Lichbaum, speak about the political-industrial complex, and how politics moves to complement and help industry, even to the detriment of the mass of citizenry. Businesses play politicians and states off one another to extract maximum concessions in exchange for the promise of economic growth. These goals almost always are against democratic values, and the principle of majority rule. Putman talks about the general decline of American civic culture and associations, Jackle talks about the enormous social and environmental cost incurred by capitalism, and Polyani says that free-enterprise capitalism is not sustainable.

These things combine truly put into greater focus the question: just how strong of a democracy do we have? For most people, the answer is obvious: very strong. Indeed, as my beginning analogy states, I once thought that, until I began to peel back the layers to show the dilapidated core of American democracy. The problems are enormous, the question is; can they be solved? That, I can not say.