**False Democracy**

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*Assignment Description: Respond to the following question: Is the United States a functioning democracy?*

In America, political socialization starts from a young age. We are taught government is good, we should support and respect our leaders, we should love our country—and we do. We proudly would stand up every morning placing our right hand over our heart and recite our nation’s pledge from memory ending with, "... and to the Republic, for which it stands, one nation, under God, indivisible, with liberty and justice for all." With our political socialization in mind, as we grow older we pride ourselves on living in a country that is full of freedoms: freedom of speech, freedom from oppression; the freedom to have life, liberty, and the pursuit of happiness. But this begs the question, are we really as free as we think we are? After all, we live in a democracy, right? To some democracy and freedom are almost synonymous. We are free to live the life we want, therefore we must live in democracy. Despite having recited the Pledge of Allegiance hundreds of times over the course of our lifetimes, we fail to notice we are pledging to a republic, not a democracy. This small detail that we overlook is principal to the foundation of our government, because a democracy and a republic are two different things. In America we live in a constitutional republic that practices democratic theory, but forgoes completely upholding political equality, majority rule, and universal participation, therefore America cannot be called a democracy.

It’s important for Americans to realize the distinction between a republic and a democracy. To be put simply, a republic is one that is governed by law, whereas a democracy is one that is governed by majority rule. “A republic need not be a democracy, and this was fine with founders; at that time, democracy was associated with mob rule and instability.”[1] Our government was set up with the idea that we would self-govern within a given set of laws—otherwise known as our constitution. If we were a true democracy there would be no need for a constitution because all issues would be solved through majority rule which is why our founders were careful not to set up a democratic society. In one, if 50 percent plus one of people decided they wanted to take away someone’s life, liberty, or property, they could—no questions asked. There would be no laws set in place to prevent them from doing so.

So why have Americans grown up with the belief that we live in a democracy? Most likely because in our in the small part we play in the political process it feels like we do. We all get to vote, right? But here’s where it gets tricky. In both a democratic and republican society the people hold the power, however in a republic we choose to give up some of the power for the greater good of the group.[2] “The framers of the U.S. Constitution had their own conception of democracy. They instituted representative democracy, a system in which citizens participate in government by electing public officials to make government decision on
their behalf.”[3] We vote for someone who then votes on issues for us. We just have to trust that the person we voted for will make the same decision we would have made. Voting in the presidential elections is merely an opportunity for the constituents to let the Electoral College know who they would like to win, but they do not get a direct say—the Electoral College does. “The idea was to take the risk out of democracy in a society where the majority of potential voters may not be sympathetic to the idea that government’s job was first and foremost to serve the needs of big businesses and the wealthy few.”[4]

Set up in Article II, Section I of the Constitution, the Electoral College is comprised of 100 votes from senators, 435 from representatives, and three extra votes provided by the Twenty-third Amendment for the District of Columbia with a grand total of 538 votes. According to the United States Census Bureau in 2012 there was an estimated 313,914,000 people living in the United States.[5] Isn’t majority rules supposed to be 50 percent plus one? 538 isn’t even a half, of a half of 313,914,000. Of that, 76.5 percent of the population is of voting age, meaning that in order for it to truly be a majority rules victory, a candidate would have to receive 240,144,242 votes.[6] That is a large gap from the 270 votes they need to win in the Electoral College. However, those numbers are based on every person who was eligible actually voting. Since the 1970s, the presidential vote has rarely gone over 70 percent while, “Most other elections are lucky to get 40 percent turnout, which means one can get elected governor of Virginia [...] or mayor of Chicago or countless other state and local offices with the votes of fewer than one in five voting-age adults.”[7] These numbers are scary, because after all, those are the people who are making decisions for us.

The genius behind the Constitution is our founders knew exactly what they were doing when they set it up. With a republic, they would be able to control the government, but in a way that made it feel like a better option than a monarchy to the people they were governing. The founder’s jaws would drop to the floor if they saw our voting system today. Women? Black people? Poor people? The uneducated? Anyone, so long as they have a valid state issued identification card? This is insanity! We all should just give up and let are our state fall into a state of anarchy that is surely inevitable! How could we let people who are clearly unqualified make these important decisions? But here’s the key, we don’t. There is no universal participation, decisions are still being made by those in an elite category. “On average during the past four presidential elections, despite increasing low-income voter turnout, for every ten voters from the lowest income quintile there are sixteen votes in the highest income quintiles.”[8] Universal participation is impossible, because regardless of their political affiliation our government is run by a group of elites. “It is a game played by and for elites, where tangible issues of import can be in play. But it is a spectator event for others, who are seen by the elites as objects to be manipulated.”[9] Perhaps this fact is what will keep universal participation from ever happening.

The lower class isn’t oblivious to this either. “The evidence suggests that most people, especially working-class and poor people have no influence over politicians and policy so to the extent people understand their real status they will lose incentive to participate.”[10] As this gap continues to grow, the chance of there being any sort of political equality drops significantly. If the vast majority of the population fails to act on one of our most
basic rights then where will our state be ten, twenty, or thirty years down the line? Will our government morph into an oligopoly where decisions are made and we don’t even get a chance to voice how we feel? At least in a republic there is a chance for our voice to be heard. “Because voting is the most common way citizens can voice their opinions and exert control over the government.”[11] Whether that voice acts as a scream or a whisper is up to the politician making the decision. It’s clear that having a democratic society where there is majority rule, universal participation, and political equality is nice in theory, but in practice would make a highly un-functional, unstable governing system that is bordering on Socialism, social conservatives have even more incentive to ensure that we keep democracy as much out our system as we can. “Paul Weyrich, [...] one of the greatest organizers of the corporate right since the 1970s, put it bluntly in a 1980 speech to conservative activists, ‘I don’t want everybody to vote... our leverage in the elections quite candidly goes up as the voting populace goes down.’”[12] If everyone were to vote along with the majority of their given socioeconomic class, a large portion of the country would be voting Democrat, and “With voting equalized across class lines, Democrats would likely have dominant, possibly veto-proof, majorities in congress.”[13] Even if the roles were reversed, having a system that is so heavily controlled by one political party is detrimental to the functioning of our society be it Republican or Democrat. We would actually be able to accomplish something in a timely manner with little or no debate? The idea is ludicrous for even the best of all ideas and policies have to be debated to find the flaws. Herein lies the genius of the Constitution.

By setting up a republic system where there was little political equality, majority rule, and universal participation, our founders were able to ensure that their positions are safe from the control of the majority. But, since that fateful summer of 1787, there have been many changes made to push our government into a democratic society. “The constitution, however it has been bent and twisted, still maintains a fundamental structure that provides a foundation for government.”[14] Despite the majority of American people believing that we will in a democratic society, we never have, and we probably never will. Every morning the children of America will still stand up and declare their allegiance to their “republic, for which it stands, one nation under God, indivisible, with liberty and justice for all.” So long as you have a valid state issued identification card.
Bibliography


[2] Ibid., 56.


[6] Ibid.


[8] Ibid., 22.

[9] Ibid., 21.

[10] Ibid., 22.