
IS AMERICAN DEMOCRACY ENDANGERED?

SYMPOSIUM DISCUSSION: STEBENNE

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Tom Ginsburg: This phenomenon of blue city–red countryside in states is one that we observe around the country. I hear you saying it was almost like a defense of the fact that we have this malapportionment in the state legislatures. Wisconsin is the best example as a 50/50 Trump/Clinton state; 67 percent of the legislature is Republican and that’s having various affects in the way policy goes. So to me as someone who thinks about democracy, about competition, I would like those things to be aligned, and there are ways to do it. And that’s to have a neutral commission that draws the boundaries. Fourteen American states have them, and we know in political science that those elections are more competitive and more responsive to changes in the electorate. Outside the United States, a lot of countries have those. I guess I’m trying to say: would that be a good thing if we could somehow adopt those? It would obviously affect the partisan nature of those moving to the extremes, right?

David Stebenne: Well, I’m more comfortable explaining what ordinary middle three-fifths people think about this than giving my own personal opinion. In other words, for them, the idea would be what you’re describing and a state legislature resulting from that, for example, that passes laws that are family friendly for families like theirs. And not all families are like theirs, right? If you’re following me. So, they are frustrated by having to choose between the two. In other words, given what Ohio is now like, if you do what you’re suggesting the biggest metro areas would dominate the legislature, and the social legislation they would likely produce, especially given who is in charge of the two major parties, as a result of the primary system is not one that middle Ohio likes. Again, I talk to a lot of audiences and groups around the state as well as to Ohio students, and they do have this sense that there is something wrong with malapportionment, if you want to call it that. It’s not the same as the old malapportionment because they are all equal population districts. The old version was way worse from that point of view. But the point is they are frustrated by the inability of legislative bodies to be more protective of folks like that, right? And so that’s the problem with what you’re suggesting.

Audience Member: During your presentation you spoke about the different classes of American citizens. In addition to the lower, middle, and high classes, you also mentioned a few gray areas, like the lower middle class. And those are terms one hears quite a bit. But, I'm curious, what criteria do you use to distinguish the different classes?

Stebenne: Right, well what to call people has become more complicated with the decline of basic manufacturing. And also America has an egalitarian culture. So being called lower middle class may be objectively true, but can often sound like a put-down to others. Right? So, how do I do this with Ohio State students? I say middle. The American and increasing the international conception of who is middle class is people who are indisputably neither rich nor poor. And that's a pretty big group, and there's a variety of ways to make an income that way and to organize a family. And so, from the point of view of many citizens, our upper middle-class, professional people, especially now given what they make are not middle class. But most upper middle-class people think they are. And so you can see the confusion that results from that. And so, the point I'm making is that people in that middle three-fifths by any definition aren't poor, right? Although weirdly there are different definitions of poverty or what's the struggle? One of the ways the middle class has shrunk is [that] its level of economic security has gone down, especially in the form of savings. So, by 2013, the best estimates that we have are that roughly half, the bottom half of the income distribution in their country has a net worth of zero or less if you take everything they have and subtract everything they owe. And when was the last time that was true? 1929, right? And so we are back in a way to where we were then. And the big middle-class upsurge or increase took place in the '30s, '40s, '50s, and '60s as a result of the Great Depression and other social problems. And so, it's harder to see this problem than it used to be.

I was talking last night over dinner with my colleagues from the conference about how strange it is to live in Columbus, which is a lot like Des Moines. Are we a prosperous 21st century place in Columbus, full of knowledge workers? We are. And the same is true in Des Moines. How far do you have to drive in any direction before that ceases to be true? I don't know how many counties Iowa has? 99, great. So Ohio has, I believe 88. Franklin County, greater Columbus, which just became the most populous county in the state passing Cuyahoga greater Cleveland for the first time since 1840, Cuyahoga has been dethroned. We're feeling good about that in Columbus. Donald Trump's vote share in Franklin County was 88, and Franklin is usually a swing jurisdiction. So, Hillary Clinton actually

won Upper Arlington, Ohio, the old money suburb of Columbus. She is the first Democrat ever to win Upper Arlington. And Upper Arlington was created in 1918, so that will really tell you something.

So, Columbus like Des Moines, is this island of prosperity that seems to be doing just fine. But how far did you have to drive before you saw a sea of Trump signs? At least in Columbus, I asked the students. We had a little auction you know in terms of how many miles. Twenty to twenty-five miles was the consensus of the student body in my Modern American Political History class. And in fact, the way I learned that Donald Trump was probably going to win, was by hearing Republican county chairmen were bewildered, and why. This was about three weeks before the election, and “somethings going on out there.” And I said, well what do you mean? (And I talked to Democratic officials as well; don't get the wrong idea.) So, what do you mean? “Usually we produce a bunch of lawn signs, and we send people out, and we have to twist arms to get them to put out the darn lawn sign, you know.” So, this is a guy from a small rural county who said, “I produced a thousand lawn signs, and they were all gone in a day. And I ordered a thousand more, and they were all gone in a day. What on earth is going on?” In other words, the energy, the most energized people in American politics today are in that middle three-fifths. But there's even a regional dimension. Elizabeth, I'll out you as a native Southerner. I think your accent has already done that. In the '40s and the '50s and the '60s, the South was still poor, right? In other words, what I'm describing in this area is mostly a Midwestern one, a northern one. Never was America more Midwestern, in ways positive and negative, than this era that I'm talking about, and where did Donald Trump decisively defeat Hillary Clinton? From Pittsburgh west to the prairies. Because that is the part of the country where the middle class in most ways, not just economic ways but other ways, has seen its lot decline relative to what it used to be.

So the iconic Donald Trump voter, even his slogan, as a historian fascinated me. How futuristic are Americans? Right? What's the most interesting word in that slogan on the ball cap that never left his head? It isn't “Make America Great.” That's standard, but “Make America Great Again.” Right? That's unusual as a winning message. But the people that flocked to his rallies, and by the way one thing that Iowa and Ohio had in common, are we supposed to be bellwethers? We are. Did Donald Trump ultimately win decisively in both states? He did. He won a majority here; he won a majority in Ohio, a solid one. And that's a real statement about what's going on out there. So how bewildering is this to my relatives and friends in the Northeast? Or my wife's out in California? Utterly,

right? But what I like about it again, and why I was willing to give this talk is it's easier for people in this part of the country to understand this.

So what's the challenge of today? You couldn't possibly re-create the world of 1960 exactly as it was, even if you wanted to, nor would it be desirable. Right? So what's the real interesting question? What would a new and improved version of that system look like? And to the extent that the federal government and states move in that direction, it diminishes pressures against the good norms of the American constitutional democracy that we have. And one of the reasons why we're such a mess at the moment is there is so much fighting.

I have an 11-year-old. What do I like about Midwestern sense? Oh, he's very cute, very sweet, and very nice. He plays, and he loves games. Are the coaches of 11-year-olds good at encouraging sportsmanlike behavior? They generally are. So, how do I put this? The typical Ohio parent I talk to when asked about Congress and the President: "We would not want our children to behave this way." Which is a real statement about where we are, and the one person high up in the establishment who has an Ohio connection is Paul Ryan. Very Midwestern. He's from Wisconsin, but he went to college in Ohio, Miami University of Ohio. My wife went there. She was there when he went there. I said, "Did you know him?" "No, I didn't know him, but I knew lots of guys like him." And in a good way, very Midwestern. And I could see why doing the job that he's doing would be profoundly depressing to him. So that I think is where we are. In other words, part of what is so troubling is there's a sense of impasse in part because the various players in Washington won't play fairly in a sportsmanlike way.

Congressman Neal Smith: I think we ought to recognize that since 1980 we have replaced factory workers with technology. And when you replace factory workers with technology, it will be slow, but the money goes to where the technology is. Between 1998 and 2000, 30 percent of the factory workers were replaced by technology.

Stebenne: The decline of good paying jobs for people who have no more than a high school education. Right? And that is a huge social problem for the middle three-fifths.