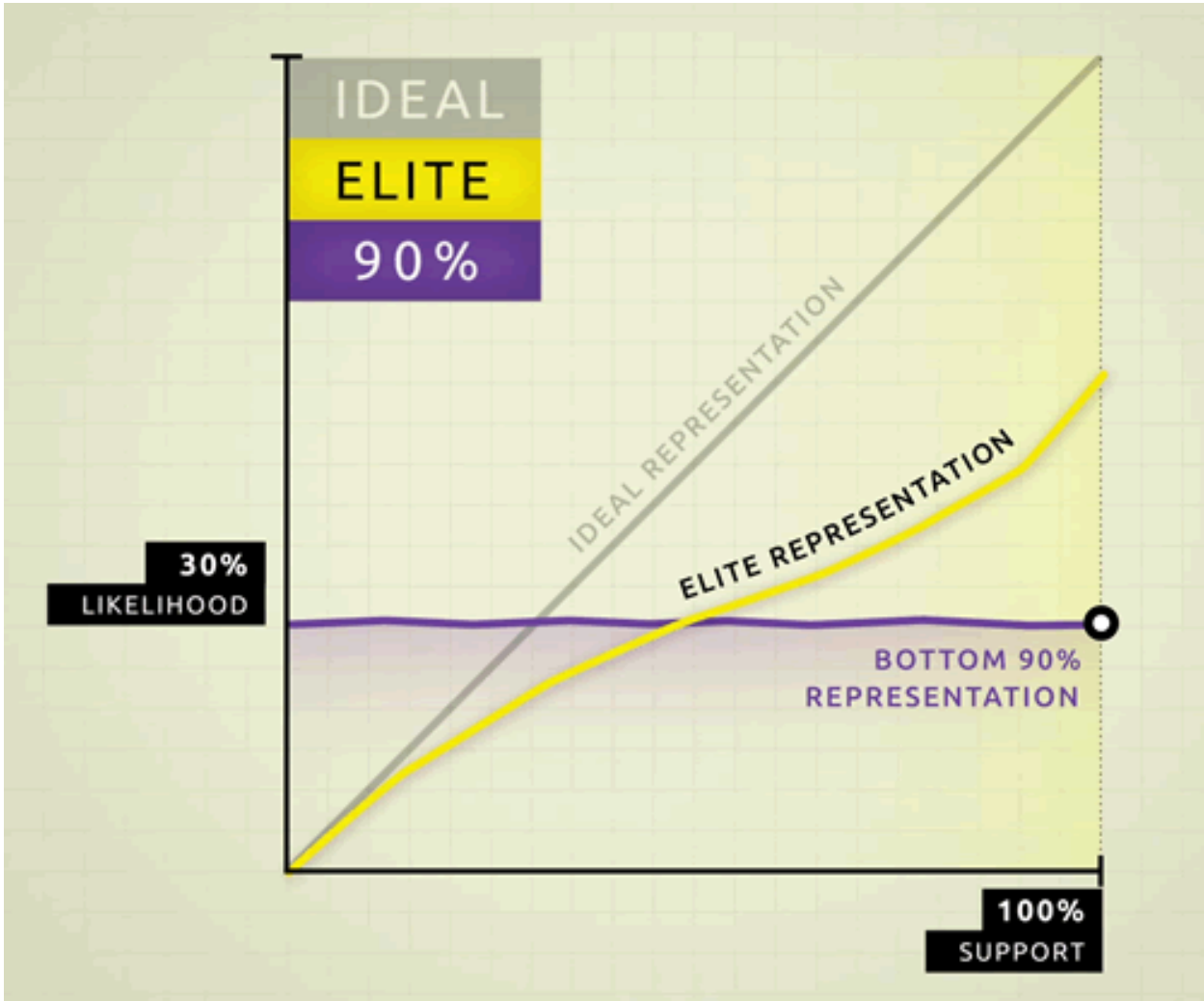


Democracy in Peril

A. Stephen Van Kuiken
North Congregational U.C.C.
Columbus, OH
May 7, 2023



Graph by Represent.Us

After the Constitutional Convention of 1787, as he left Independence Hall, Benjamin Franklin was asked, "Well, Doctor, what have we got—a Republic or a Monarchy?" Franklin famously responded, "A Republic, if you can keep it."

Ancient Witness: Proverbs 31:8-9

Friends, there are strong anti-democratic forces in this country, working to maintain minority rule. In Ohio, we have some of the worst gerrymandered districts in the nation, and you have a majority of state representatives determined by a minority of voters. And the recently enacted voter ID law will disenfranchise many poor and elderly voters who do not drive. Instead of encouraging voting, there are massive efforts to place obstacles and suppress voting and registration.

Last week, Jenn and I were part of a demonstration at the State House sponsored by Ohio Citizen Action and other pro-democracy groups. We were protesting HJR 1 and SJR 2, which would establish a 60% supermajority to amend the Constitution and also make it much more difficult to plan an issue on the ballot. This effort, funded by an out-of-state billionaire, is being rushed through in a special election in August, to prevent an initiative to protect women's right to control their own bodies and have reproductive freedom here in Ohio.

A few years a year ago, I read an article that the United States was downgraded from a "full democracy" to a "flawed democracy," according to the Economist Intelligence Unit's Democracy Index. While this is shocking, I can't say that I was surprised. A democracy index attempts to measure how democratic a country is, and things like free and fair elections are part of it. In just about all of the indexes I looked at, the U.S. ranked lower than most other advanced industrial democracies.

The main reason for the downgrade for the U.S. was a drop in the levels of trust in political parties, elected representatives and governmental institutions. France and Italy also were ranked

as flawed democracies. “Trust in political institutions,” says the EIU report, “is an essential component of well-functioning democracies.”

And it follows that with this lack of trust, there is a low level of participation reflected in voter turnout. And no wonder the American people have lost faith in our political system. Because it doesn't work. Let me explain.

There was a study conducted at Princeton University by Professors Martin Gilens and Benjamin Page. Using 20 years of data, they asked the question, does the government represent the will of the people or not? This seems like a reasonable question, because the central idea of democracy is to represent the will of the people.

And so you have a very important graph on your bulletin (see above) this morning. The vertical axis measures the likelihood a particular piece of legislation would pass, and the horizontal axis shows the support of that legislation. Now in a perfect democracy, there would be an ideal representation, which is depicted by that grey diagonal line that shows that if, for example, 50% support a bill, there would be a 50% chance of it becoming laws. If there were only 20% support, there would only be a 20% likelihood of it becoming law, and so on.

Now, most people would agree that we should be as close to this ideal as possible. But what they found was that the opinions of the bottom 90% of income earners in America has essentially no impact on the likelihood at all!

This is represented by the horizontal purple line on the graph. It shows that no matter what the support of the 90% of Americans, there is a 30% likelihood of the legislation being approved. So if there is a bill with 100% support of average citizens, it still only has a 30% chance of passing. If it has zero support of the 90%, is still has a 30% chance of passage. The study concludes:

The preferences of the average American appear to have only a minuscule, near zero, statistically non-significant impact upon public policy.

And so, if you've ever felt like your opinion doesn't matter, if you've ever thought, “What's the point?” well, you're right.

No wonder people have lost trust in our system.

But there's a third line on our graph, and it represents the economic elite. According to this study, economic elites, business interests, and people who can afford lobbyists carry a major influence. Giles and Page found that the elite have the power to block or to pass things no matter what the 90% thinks. So if there is a zero level of support among the elite, there would be a zero chance of something passing, even if the 90% wanted it! And if the elite wanted particular legislation, it would have a good chance to pass, even if the average Americans were overwhelmingly against it!

What's going on? Quite simply, it is legal to buy political influence in the United States. Special interests hire lobbyists, collect contributions and write laws, which the politicians slip into law. The 200 most politically active companies spent \$5.8 billion in one year, and they got

\$4.4 trillion in taxpayer money. I'd say that was an excellent return on their investment. In the 1970's there were near zero congress persons who became lobbyists after retiring. Now, about 50% of the Senators and Representatives become lobbyists for salaries in the millions of dollars. Deferred compensation for representing the elite, perhaps.

As Chris Hedges said,

Democracy, in this late stage of capitalism, has been replaced with a system of legalized bribery.

And all of this was anticipated by the wise words of former Supreme Court Justice, Louis Brandeis, who said,

We may have democracy, or we may have wealth concentrated in the hands of a few, but we can't have both.

And so, much can be explained and traced back to this graph. A majority of Americans, in poll after poll, are for universal healthcare, for clean energy and climate change laws, for free college education, for less military spending, and for reasonable gun control, but powerful interests are overruling the will of the average American.

Ha-Joon Chang, a South Korean economist wrote that the

market and democracy clash at a fundamental level. Democracy runs on the principle of "one person, one vote." The market runs on the principle of "one dollar, one vote." Naturally, the former gives equal weight to each person, regardless of the money she/he has. The latter give greater weight to richer people. Therefore, democratic decisions usually subvert the logic of the market. (Bad Samaritans, 2008)

And I would add the converse, that market decisions often subvert the logic of democracy.

Speaking several years ago in an interview, former President Jimmy Carter talked about the Citizens United decision of the Supreme Court. He said the United States was now "an oligarchy with unlimited political bribery," adding "we've just seen a complete subversion of our political system as a payoff to major contributors."

Here's the thing about money for political advertising and campaigning: it works. Otherwise the elite would not be pumping billions of dollars and the politicians would not be swayed by them. It gives the very wealthy and corporations a disproportionately loud voice that drowns out the other voices. And the advertising can mislead, confuse, manipulate, discourage and suppress voting.

You might ask, "Well, Steve, why should we care?" While democracy got its start in Greece in the sixth century B.C.E., Jesus never experienced it or talked about it. The entire Bible assumes a monarchy, an autocratic system of government.

But I'll just be Captain Obvious for a minute and say that from a Christian and faith perspective, democracy is a very important thing! From a spiritual and ethical perspective, democracy is valuable because *every voice is heard!*

In our Judeo-Christian traditions, the voices of the average citizens—especially the powerless and the vulnerable—are absolutely important! Over and over, the widow, the orphan, and the sojourner, the homeless traveler, the dispossessed, the immigrant and refugee are all near and dear to God's heart! And Jesus, himself, embraced the outcasts, the sick, the poor, the prisoners, the hungry, the naked and the homeless. Their voices mattered! Their needs mattered! Their desires and opinions mattered! And like a megaphone, God magnifies these voices while the system tries to silence them and make them irrelevant. And so the promotion of true democracy should be near the top of our list as Christians, in order that all the voices are heard and all the voice matter equally!

So all of these efforts to suppress the voices and suppress democracy should concern us gravely. It should concern us that less than half of eligible voters vote in most elections and that a small minority determine the results. It should concern us that lobbyists and the elite are writing laws to make it even more difficult to vote and to suppress the voice of the people.

Before 2006, no state required photo identification to vote on Election Day. Today, 11 states (including Ohio) have this requirement. But research shows that these laws disproportionately affect minorities, the poor and the elderly, who are less apt to have valid I.D. And there is no evidence of the kind of voter fraud that these laws are supposed to prevent. And the voices are silenced!

In Alabama, after passing a law requiring a photo I.D., the state shut down dozens of DMV offices in minority neighborhoods.

There have been laws passed in some states, such as Florida, that make it more difficult to register to vote. And voices are silenced.

In his documentary, "The Best Democracy Money Can Buy," journalist Greg Palest explains that over seven million voters—almost entirely voters of color—were on the Crosscheck list before the 2016 election. Names such as "Hernandez," "Garcia," "Washington," and "Lee." About 1.1 million voters of color found themselves bumped off the official voter rolls through Crosscheck. And voices are silenced.

Some states purge the voting rolls if someone did not vote in a previous election, silencing voices. Some states, like North Carolina, have cut back on early voting, which is important for those who cannot take time off on a weekday to vote.

In 2004, 5.3 million Americans were denied the vote because of previous criminal convictions. Thirteen states permanently disenfranchise convicted felons. The U.S. is the only democracy in the world that bans felons after they have served their sentences! And voices are silenced.

In many states, elections are severely underfunded, leading to inequality in areas of poor and minority citizens. Voters who cannot wait for hours and hours are effectively disenfranchised, while well-funded areas have minimal or no waiting time. And voices are silenced.

And of course, there is gerrymandering where districts are manipulated to distort representation. Richard Levy at the University of Kansas says political parties in power use sophisticated software to gerrymander districts in their favor with remarkable effectiveness.

And so all of these laws are pushed by the elite, for the elite, to further skew our democracy in their favor. And voices of average citizens, including the poor, minorities, and the vulnerable are silenced. What can we do?

It was Churchill who famously said, “Democracy is the worst form of government except all those other forms we have tried from time to time.” It’s not perfect but still important. Democracy is not itself *sufficient* to usher in the Kingdom of God. But I would argue that it is *necessary*. And not all democracies are equal, calling us to strive for “a more perfect union.” And so we strive.

First, we have to care. It needs to matter to us. We need to educate ourselves and keep informed. We need to engage and participate, helping others overcome all of these hurdles placed in our way.

Second, we can launch voter registration drives. In past elections about 70% of voters between 18 and 23 did not vote. Imagine if we could help and encourage just some of them to get registered.

We need to reform the system! We need to change the graph! We need to stop all this anti-democratic legislation, and like earlier generations, we need pro-democratic legislation. For example, there is the American Anti-Corruption Act that would take the money out of the legislative process. Even if current legislators would not work for this, it can start as ballot initiatives on a state by state basis.

Why should we care?

Because we care about justice.

Because we care about those who have little voice.

Because we care about fairness.

Because we care about the poor, the vulnerable and all God’s children.

(NOTE: The spoken sermon, also available online, may differ slightly in phrasing and detail from this manuscript version.)