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Parties and Elections 255  
Professor Chris Chapp  
December 13th, 2016

### Liberty and Justice for Some

Some would say that the United States of America was founded on the principles of freedom, liberty, and justice for all. This is an optimistic and fairly naive outlook on the country when one takes into account its initial and continued mistreatment of Native Americans and their land, its reliance on slavery until 1865, its voting restrictions on African Americans until 1870 and on women until 1920, its continued gender wage gap of an average of 80% (aauw.org 2016), and its ruling of the Citizens United v. FEC case in 2010. America is marketed as the land of the free, and yet blacks are incarcerated at a rate nearly 6 times higher than whites (naacp.org 2016). With such prevalent civil rights issues and a growing gap between the rich and the poor, it is difficult to see the United States as very united at all, and this only continues to bleed into the “democratic” system of government. For something to be broken implies that it was at one point intact and functional, but US politics were never in such a state to begin with. Because of this, American democracy remains a flawed system that benefits an elite demographic of people as it always has, through voting restrictions and big money in campaigns.

The ability to vote is intended to be the primary fundamental right as an American citizen, and yet there are continued attempts to restrict that ability from underprivileged people of color. Voter identification laws are a long-contested issue, and one that continues to be explored and researched. Some claim that they solely protect elections from voter fraud and have no other significant consequences. Voter fraud, however, has proven to be almost nonexistent and most definitely inconsequential to any election (Lipton et al. 2007). Opponents of the ID laws argue that they affect voter turnout. While there may not be a huge drop in turnout in the average American public, studies show that there is a disproportionate effect on turnout rates for

racial minorities who typically vote democratic, thereby giving Republicans an election advantage (Hajnal et al. forthcoming). Obtaining identification is often an economic barrier for minorities who do not have the means to pass a driving test or pay for a state ID, and Hajnal et al. note this disadvantage and its parallels to voting restrictions in the past. “The effects of voter ID laws that we see here are eerily similar to the impact of measures like poll taxes, literacy tests, residency requirements, and at-large elections which were used by the white majority decades and centuries ago to help deny blacks many basic rights (Keyssar 2009, Kousser 1999, Parker 1990, Filer, Kenny and Morton 1991).” After the results of the 2016 election were revealed, a claim was circulating the internet that 300,000 voters in Wisconsin were turned away at the polls due to a lack of photo ID, and that those votes could have swung the state in Hillary Clinton’s favor. While this statement has proved to be inaccurate, it is true that in 2014 US District Judge Lynn Adelman initially struck down a voter ID law due to 300,000 registered voters in Wisconsin not possessing the necessary identification to vote under those circumstances (the law was reinstated in 2015) (politifact.com). Green party candidate Jill Stein is suspicious about the election results due to voter suppression as well and is funding an effort to recount votes in states that were very close. While there is no reliable way to determine exactly how many voters were turned away due to voter ID laws, it can be concluded that they have the ability to suppress minority voters and undermine basic American democracy.

Another disparity in the campaign process and the government itself is the prominence of corporate and personal money in politics. The *Citizens United v. FEC* case certified that corporations can act as individual people, and money is a form of political speech. Sides also comments that “While corporations and unions are not literally people, the majority argued that ‘associations of persons’ also have a right to free speech” (Sides et al. 2014). This allows for large corporations to donate to candidates in hopes of them eventually winning the election and

promoting the corporations' ideals. Large corporations typically have a much larger sum of money to support candidates than an individual person does, and this is problematic when there is supposed to be an equal opportunity for candidates to win. The Supreme Court's ruling in *Buckley v. Valeo* claims that restricting candidates on how much they can spend on their own campaign is unconstitutional, and therefore gives the extremely wealthy and elite a greater chance of winning seats in government. Money translates into political ads aired on TV, campaign workers who can do groundwork, and the general size and longevity of the campaign itself, and it is almost impossible for a candidate to win an election if they are outraised/outspent by the other candidate (however this did not prove true in the 2016 presidential election, as the Clinton campaign outraised and outspent the Trump campaign but did not win). According to [OpenSecrets.org](https://www.opensecrets.org), Donald Trump spent over \$56 million of his own money on his campaign, while Hillary Clinton spent just over \$1.3 million. When millionaire candidates are able to fund their own campaigns without restriction, the American population's choice of candidate is limited as well as what they are exposed to in the media. It is difficult for average citizens to battle millions of dollars with their one vote, and this is where the concept of American democracy is flawed.

American democracy has never been flawless, and most likely never will be unless major aspects are uprooted and changed. Voter ID laws discriminate against and suppress the voices of people of color, while campaign finance reform has made it all the more difficult for non-millionaire citizens to be heard. These trends only strengthened in the 2016 election cycle, and until people on large platforms across the country stand up to this corrupt system, people will continue to be silenced, uninformed, and wronged by the governmental system into which they place their trust. The idea of American democracy continues to be a beautiful one, but it is up to the current and future generations of the country to fight for its intended form.

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