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In Pursuit of a More Perfect Union

The democracy of the United States under the current Constitution began with a commitment towards ‘a more perfect union, establish justice, insure domestic tranquility, provide for the common defense, promote the general welfare, and secure the blessings of liberty.’ Although our Constitution is a written document that established a democratic republic, the United States has experienced a perplexing dilemma twice in the last generation. Both George W. Bush (2000) and Donald Trump (2016) captured the presidency by losing the popular vote, but prevailing in the Electoral College. The past presidential election in 2020, where Joe Biden prevailed over Trump in both the popular and electoral vote, resulted in a great deal of acrimony, largely due to a false narrative that the election was “stolen” from Trump by pro-Biden entities. This calendar year began with violence on the part of Trump supporters on January 6, 2021, which threatened the very essence of democracy in the United States. The current state of democracy in this country is becoming more perilous and America’s stature in the world has diminished. By presenting a series of recent domestic events, international events, and identifying how current U.S. history is being taught, I will highlight the inherent dangers of democracy. From presenting how democracy has evolved in American history, I will propose a methodology to make it more effective. Democracy can be made more effective, now and into the future, through education reforms which can be implemented at Lehigh University as well as other institutions of higher education.

An increase in the diversity of the student population at Lehigh University poses a dilemma, which is certainly not unique in nature. The challenge at Lehigh is to find constructive ways to integrate people with different perspectives so that the campus will have as much social interaction between and among individuals with different cultures, languages, traditions, and a host of other factors. In my own experience, the situation at Lehigh differs from my first community which was made up of individuals from all across Latin America. Although there were different styles of Spanish spoken in my initial community, as well as different perspectives based on cultures, regions and traditions, there was a strong unity. Instead of individuals being divided over their differences, there were bridges. The community members built bridges by accentuating what brought everyone to the United States and the common goal to remember their home together. This allowed everyone’s voice to be heard as there was a stronger sense of community and common purpose. However, at Lehigh University, the culture is very different in that some perceive it as a predominantly white institution that offers little to no resources for minorities by students. Each group's wall between one another grows and a sense of ‘us and them’ expands leaving voices shunned in an assumption that they would never be willingly heard by others. This impacts democracy because, for students, there appears to be a strong hesitation in asking for help or seeking resources, especially by minorities and students who are the first of their family to go to college. Students are unwilling to speak up for help due to the assumed possibility of being ignored. If democracy is questioned by an assumed view of a majority white population silencing the minorities, then students hesitate in other areas as well. A hesitation before even asking for assistance is disconcerting, particularly if it is due to a feeling of being treated unfairly due to possible assumptions around the university. Democracy is impacted at Lehigh University as assumptions, regardless of validity, impact the extent to which Lehigh has an open and inclusive campus environment. Divisions that exist on the Lehigh campus may also have a spillover effect on the city of Bethlehem as well.

Democracy is challenged outside of campus as well. Lehigh’s appearance also pushes the institution to be perceived as a castle on the hill by the residents of Bethlehem through the influx of large donations. For the residents of the city of Bethlehem, especially South Bethlehem, as Lehigh expanded its campus, the result is that the city lost part of its territory. The exchange of land is noticeable in the creation of the imaginary border between Bethlehem and Lehigh. The imaginary border can be witnessed depending on the time of day which presents which group, Lehigh University or the city residents, dominates a specific area. The imaginary border is also tangible with names such as ”townies” for Bethlehem and “castle on the hill” for Lehigh that divides the city. In the time that the university has existed since 1865, there has been little interaction between both groups. An example is the university band not participating in the annual city parade in the 150 years it has been present at college sports’ games. There is a present sense of superiority which needs to be equalized and rendered neutral. How can the University and the city of Bethlehem find ways to coexist in a manner that is democratic to both entities? Failure to address this local challenge in democracy creates a sense of weak democracy as students and residents feel that they do not have enough of a say in what occurs in their own areas. Lehigh is certainly not unique when it comes to issues of imbalanced power in democracy, for such examples exist all across the country.

In the United States, democracy is in peril, especially evident with the presidential election outcomes in 2000 and 2016. This turmoil of division still exists, as the results of the 2020 presidential election were disputed by Trump supporters on the basis of vote tampering and other conspiracy theories. The dangerous dilemma prompted a group of individuals to attempt a coup by invading Capitol Hill with the desire of changing the election results. Compared to other democracies, Americans have fewer choices. Although overall there are many political parties present in the United States, none are more dominant in the country’s politics as the Democratic and Republican Party hold virtually all the seats in Congress. As witnessed in the most recent election, many citizens view the act of voting for a minor party candidate to be wasteful. A vibrant democracy should afford more concrete choices to its citizens. American democracy in this sense can be described as antithetical to capitalism. In theory, the more actors, the more competitive the political market becomes, and the tangible result is that the voices of the people become more diversified. However, the smaller the number of actors present in the political field renders more power to the existing actors. The reason is that with fewer political parties participating, voters have fewer options available to choose from in order to have their voices heard. This accumulation of division led to direct attacks against specific ethnic groups, whether it be due to assumptions of stealing jobs or being responsible for the current pandemic. This current state of political affairs makes some people frightful of speaking out or subjects them to being silenced altogether.

The issues confronting democracy at Lehigh and the rest of the nation thus leads me to describe a proposal that I advocate to be effective to help make democracy more effective, now and in the future. Transparent nationalism, I believe, is a complete understanding of diversity within a certain region or country. I argue that democracy can become stronger if new reforms are taken of the education system regarding how history is presented in the United States. This proposal was motivated by individuals who travel to the United States, witnessing the country as a beacon for liberty and prosperity. The country provides opportunities for all those who are willing to work towards achieving it. I was raised in a predominantly immigrant community where I was the only child out of five who was born in this country. Nevertheless, as a natural born citizen, I was not taught what it meant to be a U.S. citizen. The members of the community spoke highly about the United States as being immensely different from their own country. They described rampant discrimination and corruption within the political systems external to the United States. The American democracy was revered and symbolized. This symbolism also motivated many immigrants to teach the children to be loyal to the United States as they were afforded a second chance at life. My endorsement of transparent nationalism can be understood through this example. The children of the predominantly immigrant community that I was raised in realized that although democracy is common in the United States, it is still being pursued in other countries. This is one primary goal of transparent nationalism; illustrating the importance of democracy by explaining why others have traveled to the United States and describing what they experienced in other countries. There are a number of countries currently being challenged by violence and political tension (e.g., recent events in Myanmar, Honduras, El Salvador, Guatemala, and Nicaragua).

Democracy cannot be made effective only by using symbols and the presentation of history in a distorted manner. Transparent nationalism also proposes a move away from one-sided portrayals of the United States (e.g., the depiction of American exceptionalism in the teaching of U.S. history). U.S. exceptionalism did not promote the cause of democracy, particularly during the Mexican-American war. The war resulted in the expansion of the United States’ territory, but I contend that it is best to understand the other side of historical events such as this one. Ulysses S. Grant, a U.S. general from the Civil War, described the war as the most wicked war waged by the United States on Mexico. In U.S. public school systems, the war is mentioned as a victorious moment in the history of the United States rather than presenting the impact it had on Mexico. I argue that this impedes democracy as exceptionalism creates a bubble. People are unaware of the extent to which U.S. policy affects the cause of democracies in other countries. There is no mention of what occurred to Mexico after the war, such as an increase in poverty and division after the loss of territory. The negative consequences associated with the war led to rising tensions in Mexico, culminating in a civil war, and was then followed by the French invasion. History is further blurred in a Eurocentric manner as there is mention of European countries aiding the United States in its quest for independence. Yet, there is no mention of the war against Mexico by the French which could have endangered the United States’ security and welfare. This lack of presenting another side of history is a factor in the existing divisions in the United States. A lack of transparency can oftentimes create assumptions between groups without a complete understanding and appreciation of the history between the United States and other countries. In the present context, discriminatory stereotypes have been made, especially in recent months, and a false conclusion that Asian Americans in particular are to blame for the global epidemic. A similar stereotype perpetuated against people in the Hispanic community when it comes to perceptions of violent criminal activity. In reality, people in both categories have made many contributions to the democracy of the United States.

The argument on how democracy impacts the international community goes further than the United States’s neighbors but non-neighbors as well. In teaching transparent history about the United States, democracy can be more effective in teaching about international democracy. By teaching transparent history, it will help students to learn about the impact their democracy has on other countries. The teaching of history, particularly with regard to different cultures, must be reformed in the United States, for each state can have a different approach. In spite of the reality of federalism in American education, history is still taught mainly from a one-sided point of view. The emphasis on exceptionalism in the United States behind infringing on other countries and their people has weakened democracy. Akin to the nature of Eurocentrism, history in the United States is presented in a manner that glorifies the enlightenment and development by the global north while criticizing the global south. The global north describes the global south as undeveloped and in need of assistance. This differential suggests and reinforces stereotypes about citizens in both hemispheres, to the detriment to the cause of democracy and the celebration of diversity. Teaching people, especially at a young age, about the essence of democracy, how it was gained in the United States, and how democracy can be made more effective is essential in the oldest democracy on earth. Through education reform, people with different perspectives will understand the need to treat all citizens equally and avoid the politics of marginalization. Citizens in this country need to not only understand the true evolution of U.S. history for all groups, but also attempt to understand, and respect, different cultures and their own respective historical evolutions. In so doing, the mistakes of the past can be heeded and American citizens can not only champion the cause of democracy here, but in the rest of the world as well, understanding that people do not have to have the same historical and cultural experiences in order to be staunch advocates of democracy and a more perfect union for all.