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A Review on E. E. Schattschneider's *'The Semisovereign People'*

Democracy can be defined as “a system of government by the whole population or all the eligible members of a state, typically through elected representatives”.¹ In E. E.

Schattschneider's *The Semisovereign People: A Realist's View of Democracy in America*, the author's main focus is to describe the functionality of democracy in America. By utilizing real-life and historical examples, diagrams, and numerical figures to emphasize his points, he is able to properly convey ideas and opinions about American Democracy. Schattschneider does this in an upfront analysis on the role of the public in politics, and demonstrates the inter-relations of the political organization and conflicts, as well as the process of change in our government that are all focal points of democracy today.

The author first begins with the theme of the “Contagiousness of Conflict”. When introducing this chapter, Schattschneider wrote that “parliamentary debates, jury trials, town meetings, political campaigns, strikes, hearings, all have about the same of the exciting qualities of a fight; all produce dramatic spectacles that are irresistibly fascinating to people. At the root of all politics is the universal language of conflict”. These ‘fights’ consists of two parts: the few who are actively engaged in the conflict, and those who are members of public, who are ‘irresistibly attracted to the scene’ (Schattschneider 1). Overall, the main point of this is that the

¹ Oxford Dictionaries. "The Definition of Democracy." Oxforddictionaries.com. Oxford Dictionaries, n.d. Web. <<https://en.oxforddictionaries.com/definition/us/democracy>>.

result of every conflict is determined by the degree to which the public becomes involved. In other words, the outcome of the conflict relies upon the 'scope' of its contagion. This scope of conflict, which is a main strategy of politics, refers to the number of people that get involved, as any change in the number of members changes the nature of the conflict. Schattschneider demonstrates the scope of conflict as an equation, for example, by stating that "the contagiousness of conflict the elasticity of its scope, and the fluidity of the involvement of people are X-factors in politics" (Schattschneider 3), and goes on to explain how every change in scope of conflict stems from bias, as most that align themselves purposefully on one side of conflict, so every change in the scope has an impact on this equation. The relevance of the term 'scope of conflict' to the author's interpretation of American politics is the question of whether or not politicians in reality try to rearrange power by manipulating the scope of conflict. The author goes on to cite James Madison's "Federalist Paper No. 1" to explain the scope of conflict from the framer's view, using Madison's statement "the smaller the society, the fewer probably will be the distinct parties and interests composing it, the more frequently will a majority be found of the same party". Even further, the author mentions the longstanding conflict between the privatization and socialization of conflict. This means that one would desire to 'restrict the scope' by keeping the conflict out of the hands of the public, and includes the views of individualism, and free and private enterprise. On the other hand, the socialization of conflict involves utilizing widespread ideas (such as equality, justice, civil rights, etc.) to socialize conflict.

In the second chapter titled "The Scope and the Bias of the Pressure System", as well as in the third chapter "Whose Games Do We Play?", Schattschneider speaks of the role of political organization, such as special interest groups and the party system, and how political competition affects the scope of conflict. First, the author explains that the issue between the two pattern of organization is due to size and scope of conflict. Interest Groups, deemed pressure groups by Schattschneider, are small-scale organizations, while political parties are large-scale, which leads

to each partisan group having a much different affect towards the public. This chapter also explains the distinction between public and private pressure groups by describing the difference of public and private interests. Public interest can be defined as the “general or common interest shared by all or substantially all members of the community” (Schattschneider 22). An example of a public interest, would be the common interest in national survival. In contrast with this, are special interests, which are shared by a fraction of the community, “in the nature of things a political conflict among special interests is never restricted to the group most immediately interested. Instead, it is an appeal (initiated by relatively small numbers of people) for the support of vast numbers” (Schattschneider 27). Another point that effects the scope of conflict is whether the pressure group is organized or unorganized, as the author stated that organization itself is the mobilization of bias in preparation for action (Schattschneider 29). The bias that he mentions in the pressure groups, is that these special interest groups seem to have an upper-class bias, as pressure politics consists of pressure groups whose members predominantly of the higher socioeconomic class, which has also caused Schattschneider’s apparent dislike of pluralism. The author continues on to demonstrate the limitations of the of pressure politics as a form of political organization, and describes how much of the special pressure groups solely rely upon socialization of conflict in order to receive any attention for their conflict. Even further, Schattschneider states the importance of the pressure groups during the presidential elections in relations to party alignment

The next sections of the book describe the displacement of conflict as well as the nationalization of politics. When explaining the displacement in politics, Schattschneider is referring to the ‘game of politics’ in which a certain conflict gains the dominant position in politics, and says that a shift from one dominant conflict to another “involves a total reorganization of political alignments” (Schattschneider 40). Schattschneider demonstrates this shift through the use of a diagram, in which the circle represents the political universe and the intersecting lines (AB and CD) represent to lines of cleavage (two completely different

competing conflicts) that are fighting for dominance. The movements of these lines show the percentage of the people in alignment with the conflict, and every shift affects the nature of conflict. An important factor mentioned in the topic of displacement, is the fact that unification and division are part of the same process in politics, and that for one conflict to come to the forefront of politics, the other must accept to be subdued (Schattschneider 63). Also, importantly, is that this democratic society is still successful due to its ability to prioritize conflicts- despite the use of exploitation to bring certain conflicts to the forefront. When looking into the nationalization of politics, Schattschneider highlights the importance of party realignment in the political organization of our democracy. In doing this, he describes the election of 1896, and also, he cites the election of 1932, and its result as the “largest party displacement of American conflicts and greatly enlarged the scope of party competition” (pg. 87), as it created an extreme sectional alignment throughout the country, save for the South. As a result of the nationalization of politics, there has been an increased trend in the frequent switching of the party in power, which has greatly improved the importance of the presidential election (Schattschneider 90).

Next, the author shows the limitations of the political systems by analyzing the trend of low-voter participation, which has completely undermined the importance the change in public policy and the presidential election. In his book, Schattschneider wrote that the “American political community consists of about one hundred million adult citizens”. However, the author goes on to state that forty percent of this population are nonvoters, despite the fact that the right to vote had been extended to nearly all citizens, and “the right to vote might reasonably be taken as a mark of membership into the political community” (Schattschneider 95). In efforts to configure the reason as to why the political system ‘depresses’ participation, the author says that the trend in nonvoting as a contradiction in the political system between “the movement to universalize suffrage, and the attempt to make the vote meaningless”, which means that the public has shown a lack of political efficacy, which he states is a common thought among those of the lower socioeconomic class, and as a result, change in public policy is needed to fix this.

Lastly, Schattschneider discusses what change looks like in the political system, and finally, he establishes what the semisovereign people are, and what their role is in American democracy. When explaining the changes in the political system, Schattschneider uses the example of the 'unresolvable conflict' between government and business in order to showcase how big of a role that business has played in our government since it was established. Today, for example, business is a big portion in government relating to the two-party system, and the difference in ideals between the Democratic and Republican parties (regulation/socialization, v. privatization). Despite the tensions between business and governmental institutions, the process of change has not been inhibited (Schattschneider 115). Even further, the author shows the change in the system of checks and balances by stating that the erosion of the checks and balances is due to the shift in dominant cleavages in our society, and that 'we are substituting a new separation of powers for the old one' (Schattschneider 124), which is alluding to the fact that the significant rise in power of the executive branch. To finish his book, Schattschneider ends by defining the role of the public in our democracy, with his final remarks in his chapter "The Semisovereign People". He states that "the idea that the people are involved in politics by the contagion of conflict does not resemble the classical definition of democracy as 'governed by the people'" (Schattschneider 128). He even goes on to give a definition of democracy which is "democracy is a competitive political system in which competing leaders and organizations define the alternatives of public policy in such a way that the public can participate in the decision-making process" (Schattschneider 138). However, he explains that this is not an accurate definition, as people are not completely capable of doing the work of that system. The government is supposed to be both for and by the people; however, the term 'semisovereign people' is meant to show that the public is not able to be as involved in government as some thought. In his view, Schattschneider believes that democracy is a "political system in which the people have a choice among the alternatives created by competing political organizations and leaders" (Schattschneider 138).

In *The Semisovereign People*, Schattschneider establishes his opinion on the concept of pluralism and interest groups. He states that “The flaw in the pluralist heaven is that the heavenly chorus sings with upper-class accent”, establishing his views against pluralism. He furthers this sentiment by saying “the notion that the pressurized system is automatically representative of the whole community is a myth fostered by universalizing tendency of the modern group theory” (Schattschneider 35). This is the direct opposite of the intentions of the framers, who thought that while not exactly desirable, the establishment of factions, or interest groups, would bring the public together, and be able to form within themselves an accurate representation of the general public’s ideals. However, even the use of his own terminology of ‘pressure groups’ in place of ‘interest groups’ creates the negative connotation that Schattschneider seems to intend to inspire, in regards to the fact that the interest groups are not an accurate representation of the entire American public- only the rich portion is. In an article from *The Washington Post* titled “Rich People Rule!”, Larry Bartels wrote that “...analysis suggests that we need a lot more research on “Economic Elite Domination” and “Biased Pluralism”. Stronger empirical tests of the political influence of economic elites will require better evidence regarding the political preferences and activities of wealthy Americans” (Bartels, 2014).² Bartels continues further to state that narrower studies must be held to examine the specific channels of political influence, so that the fact that the rich have much more influence in interest groups is proven. This shows how E. E. Schattschneider’s ‘anti-pluralism’ sentiment is shared by others, as well.

Schattschneider also established his other opinions on special interest groups, that were set aside from his views on pluralism. First, Schattschneider describes pressure groups as “small

² Bartels, Larry. "Rich People Rule!" *Washington Post*. *The Washington Post*, 8 Apr. 2014. Web. Nov. 2016. <<https://www.washingtonpost.com/news/monkey-cage/wp/2014/04/08/rich-people-rule/>>.

scale organizations”, and continues saying that “one need not be surprised, therefore, that the partisans of large-scale and small-scale organizations differ passionately, because the outcome of the political game depends on the scale on which it is played” (Schattschneider 22). This can be interpreted to mean that due to pressure groups being so small, they have little to no effect on policy and nowhere near as much sway in public policy as a political party can. However, a way that Schattschneider states that pressure groups can affect public policy and the scope of conflict the most, is through the matters of public interest. This is shown when he states “at a time when nationalism is described as one of the most dynamic forces in the world, it should not be difficult to understand that national interests do exist...The reality of common interest is suggested by demonstrated capacity of the community to survive. There must be something that holds people together” (Schattschneider 23). This notion that the pressure groups can be more effective through using issues of public relevance is supported by an article from *The Washington Post* written by Danielle Douglass-Gabriel, which emphasizes the gathering of pressure groups over the issue of education, and the racial disparity in regards to receiving scholarships for higher education. In this article, the author states that “A coalition of 40 civil rights, legal-aid and public-interest groups is urging the Education Department to track and monitor the effect of student loans on people of color, who are shouldering the burden of education debt” (Douglas-Gabriel, 2016)³. With this amount of interest groups together, and the fact that the cause is for a public interest in education of the youth, these pressure groups were able to give rise to their conflict.

Lastly, another point that Schattschneider focuses on is the nonvoter participation, and its effects on the outcome of public policy, as well as the presidential election. As previously stated,

³ Douglas-Gabriel, Danielle. "Public-interest Groups Are Calling on Education Dept. to Track Racial Disparities in Student Lending." *Washington Post*. *The Washington Post*, 15 Sept. 2016. Web. Nov. 2016.

Schattschneider said that though the American political community consists of one million people, all of which having the right to vote, “the difference between public and theory is shown by a single datum: about forty million adult citizens do not vote in presidential elections” (Schattschneider 95). The author then furthers his examination of the low voter turnout by stating that the lack of voters is affected by the ‘attempt to make the vote meaningless’ (which means to believe that one’s vote does not affect the system), and he then provides the fact that “...nonvoting is a characteristic of the poorest, least well established, least educated stratum in the community” (Schattschneider 103), as also the reason that the rich show more participation is that they are more economically motivated. This is supported in an article in *The New York Times*, written by Alicia Parlapiano and Adam Pearce, that examines the presence of low-voter turnout as of the past presidential elections. Not only does this article have the same ratio of nonvoters, as seen in the article’s title “For Every 10 U.S. Adults, Six Vote and Four Don’t. What Separates Them?”, but the article shares his same idea of the rich being more inclined to vote, when the authors state that “...what distinguishes voters from nonvoters can be only partly explained by demographics. Experts say individuals tend to be motivated by a combination of their priorities, their group culture, how competitive their state is, and how easy or hard it is to vote. The richer, older and more educated you are, the more likely you are to vote” (Parlapiano and Pearce, 2016).⁴ However, the article deviates from Schattschneider’s ideals when the authors said that some experts are inclined of that low-voter participation isn’t a problem, and “Some prominent studies have concluded that 100 percent participation would not result in significantly different election outcomes” (Parlapiano and Pearce, 2016).⁵ On the other side, Schattschneider

^{4,5} Parlapiano, Alicia, and Adam Pearce. "For Every 10 U.S. Adults, Six Vote and Four Don't. What Separates Them?" *The New York Times*. *The New York Times*, 13 Sept. 2016. Web. Nov. 2016.

concluded that the increase of voter turnout was necessary for the fact that policy is needed to change, and the voters are needed in elections to do that.

Conclusively, E. E. Schattschneider's *The Semisovereign People* focuses upon the aspect of democracy in America, and the role of the people within the democracy in regards to the changes seen in the American political system. Schattschneider emphasizes the conflict between the political organizations of the pressure groups and political party system, the interworking between the government and the political organizations, such as the business sector. Through explaining the presence of groups in democracy, the scope of conflict, as well as other concepts such as public and special interests, and the issue with low-voter turnout, one is better able to understand the role of people in the political system—whether it is as a member of the 'audience' or as a member of the political organization- and the fact the American public can be referred to as a 'semisovereign people'.

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