Schattschneider Book Review

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The book, *The Semisovereign People* by E. E. Schattschneider, is summarized into eight chapters. The first chapter is focused on conflict within the people. An example he used was the conflict of an African American soldier and a Caucasian policeman. A dispute between the men caused a fight in the lobby of a hotel. From this, a riot of African American people broke out in the streets and caused what we know today as the Harlem riot of 1943.[[1]](#footnote-0) A quote from the same page states, “Nothing attracts a crowd so quickly as a fight. Nothing is so contagious.”[[2]](#footnote-1) He then goes and sets the message of this chapter that conflict is the root of our political system. It causes an involvement of the people and creates a fluidity between the political system and the people it represents.It discusses a power struggle between privatization and socialization. People want to keep their lives to themselves, but also want to be out there to address grievances publically.[[3]](#footnote-2) The audience wants to be involved and there is not a fine line between how far is too far.

The next chapter focuses on who can get involved and who is left out. To put that into one term is defined as scope. It then goes into two contrasting forms of politics called pressure politics and party politics.[[4]](#footnote-3) Pressure politics focus on the smaller side of organizations, while party politics sound just how it is labelled, big party organizations. To understand the influence it discusses political theory. It then sums up that bias and scope cause limitations. An example would be between organized and unorganized groups. He then goes to put together how biases are applied through organizations. The example he used revolved around upper-class biases and business organizations. The quote on pages 34 and 35 describe his agenda. It states, “The flaw in pluralist heaven is that heavenly chorus sings with a strong upper-class accent.”[[5]](#footnote-4) Pressure politics leave out most of the population and makes it a selective process. He then goes and criticizes group theory, claiming the weak calls for socialized conflict. The chapter ends with a section claiming to never find an equilibrium between the parties.

The chapter after focuses on the limitations the pressure system have on organization. It is set up in a game style manner on who will succeed in the end. The focus of this is that when there is extra room for change in voting, it is clear that it is rare to turn pressure politics to party politics.[[6]](#footnote-5) It is the public against the political parties. It is all about the simplification of our electorate to create the ending that wins. The organizations get close to what the people want to create a new understanding of the community’s focus, whether it be in the present or the future.

Chapter four discusses the displacement of the conflicts between the people. What can be accomplished is based on how divided the people are. Conflicts have a competition between each other, so it is important to keep aspects of the old while creating the new.[[7]](#footnote-6) It is all about which conflict has presidents at the time. It states on page 70 that,“There is no more certain way to destroy the meaning of politics than to treat all issues as if they were free and equal.”[[8]](#footnote-7) Politics cannot be changed if there is no where for it to go. It needs power to make policies go anywhere causing the displacement between the policymakers and the public.

Chapter five discusses the shifts between the political parties and the creation of nationalization of politics. A big date in this section is 1896. It was the rise of the Republican party due to an alignment of the party from market stability and power.[[9]](#footnote-8) By getting rid of alternatives and having economic power, the Republicans had the upper hand. Due to the alignment, it created if the best example of a substitution of one conflict to another by getting rid of the Radicals.[[10]](#footnote-9) From Nationalization of politics, it increased the likelihood of alternating which party is in power and who gets to remain in power.

The next section of the book focuses on the limits that our political system has. The purpose of ou system is to represent the people, but a good chunk of our population does not vote when they are eligible. It causes a strain on how our political system is supposed to operate versus how it does operate. Ballots do not cover representation or the voice of the people anymore. The value of voting is now questioned and it is not an issue with the ability to vote, but how our system is organized to do so.[[11]](#footnote-10) The agenda must be altered to fix the system and fix the representation issue. The focus of the political system is no longer catering to the interests of the minorities, but focusing on the people who vote.[[12]](#footnote-11) The solution is present, just not acted upon.

In the last chapter, it is stated that, “ The idea that people are involved in politics by the contagion of conflict does not resemble the classical definition of democracy…”[[13]](#footnote-12) There is a crisis in the theory of how we go about democracy. It focuses on the people aspect of democracy, other than the other way around. The issue relies on the leadership, organization, alternatives, and the responsibility.[[14]](#footnote-13) Democracy thrives on competition and without it, the people have no power or say in politics.[[15]](#footnote-14)

In critiquing his work, I found that he had many good arguments, but did not necessarily say how to fix them. He just put them into the open and left them there. If there is an issue with voting, are their ways to fix it? In an article on the *Washington Post,* it discusses an ulterior method to voting in elections. The method it refers to in the article is by a lottery setting.[[16]](#footnote-15) Representatives would be appointed through the lottery almost like the selection of jury duty. It would eliminate the need for a campaign and the political backlash that comes with elections. Another way to combat elections is to elect experts in the field of legislation to represent the people.[[17]](#footnote-16) It would counter all the easily swayed candidates in the crossroads that is a campaign.

In both the article and the book, it stresses the importance of representative democracy. These options to rid our election system may make things run smoother, but it illuminates the “by the people, for the people” clause. The equality among the people are gone in this form of selection. It states in the article that, “Lottery ultimately turns into self-selection, with lack of diversity and legitimacy.”[[18]](#footnote-17) The interests of the people who want to be politically active are the only ones invested in this system. Although both the options keep things open for new policies, there can be a level of inexperience of the new appointed. In response to that, a mentorship can take place to acquaint the newly appointed members.

Personally, these methods to fix our voting system goes against our foundations. As it was brought up in Schattschneider’s novel and presented in this article,“There is no escape from the problem of ignorance because *nobody knows enough to run the government*”.[[19]](#footnote-18) No matter what, there will always be corruption and someone who thinks they hold all the power. The only way to mend our system is to focus on bringing the rest of the population in on voting. Ignorance will always be in the political system, it is not the matter to hide it, but to work around it and make it better.

In the next article by Jacob Levy, it discusses the actions of ‘dual loyalties’ and pluralism that was also mentioned in Schattschneider’s novel. As it is currently known that President Donald Trump is getting investigated for impeachment due to the phone call between himself and the Ukrainian President, a man by the name of Alexander Vindman testified last tuesday on the affair.[[20]](#footnote-19) There is a conflict of interest between Ukraine and the United States due to the advice given to the Ukrainian President for dealing with Trump’s lawyer.[[21]](#footnote-20)

The question is, who is Vindman going to be loyal to? To the United States or his original homeland? That is when ‘dual-loyalty’ comes into play. Being loyal to both countries does not mean one will be stabbed in the back later. It is more of an added respect for both without choosing one or the other to identify with. The concept against pluralism is focused on choosing one membership and attachment to identify with over many.[[22]](#footnote-21) The fear that comes with pluralism is when both identified countries are at war, which side do you choose? In my opinion, I do not think the people have the right to make another person choose what side to be apart of for the rest of their life. People are born with varying backgrounds and cultures and without knowing who they are, no one can determine who they should be. Pluralism provides a unique experience that can translate into our political system and create a voice for the minority.

The book by Schattschneider provides a candid view on the issues with our political system and its interactions with the people it represents. It is blatant with issues and sometimes provides ways to fix it, but it does not always address it for every aspect. It is more of showing the information and leaving it for interpretation for the reader. All the problems are there, but there are no answers to combat the issues.

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1. E. E. Schattschneider, *The Semisovereign People: a Realists View of Democracy in America* (Hinsdale, Ill: The Dryden Press, 1975). p.1. [↑](#footnote-ref-0)
2. Ibid. [↑](#footnote-ref-1)
3. Ibid. p.7. [↑](#footnote-ref-2)
4. Ibid. p.20. [↑](#footnote-ref-3)
5. Ibid. p.34-35. [↑](#footnote-ref-4)
6. Ibid. p.52 [↑](#footnote-ref-5)
7. Ibid. p.63. [↑](#footnote-ref-6)
8. Ibid. p.70. [↑](#footnote-ref-7)
9. Ibid. p.76. [↑](#footnote-ref-8)
10. Ibid. p.79-80. [↑](#footnote-ref-9)
11. Ibid. p.100. [↑](#footnote-ref-10)
12. Ibid. p.105. [↑](#footnote-ref-11)
13. Ibid. p.126. [↑](#footnote-ref-12)
14. Ibid. p.135. [↑](#footnote-ref-13)
15. Ibid. p.137. [↑](#footnote-ref-14)
16. Tom Van Der Meer and Eric Schliesser, “New Proposals Would Let Lotteries or Experts Replace Voting. Here's What's Wrong with That.,” The Washington Post (WP Company, April 18, 2019). [↑](#footnote-ref-15)
17. Ibid. [↑](#footnote-ref-16)
18. Ibid. [↑](#footnote-ref-17)
19. Ibid. [↑](#footnote-ref-18)
20. Jacob Levy, “There's Nothing Wrong with 'Dual Loyalties.',” The Washington Post (WP Company, November 1, 2019). [↑](#footnote-ref-19)
21. Ibid. [↑](#footnote-ref-20)
22. Ibid. [↑](#footnote-ref-21)