The Semisovereign People Book Review

Political Science 150-03

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Schattschneider’s book is a critique of the pluralist system used in American politics. The first chapter opens with an anecdote about the Harlem Race Riot. The point of this anecdote was that the fight was not all between whites and blacks, it started that way but turned into a fight between any and every one. He then precedes to say that any fight is between a few individuals, but “the outcome of every conflict is determined by the extent to which the audience becomes involved in it”.[[1]](#footnote-1) By this, he means that the audience of a conflict can tip the scales and determine the winner. This idea of conflict relates to politics because the result of political conflicts is determined by the amount of voter involvement. His other main idea in the first chapter is about private vs social conflict. If two people have a conflict and know which side the audience will side with, then they will either have a privatized (the audience is not involved) or socialized (the audience is involved) conflict.

The second chapter focuses on the idea of pressure politics. In pressure politics, a pressure group is a special interest group pushing for their particular cause. He talks about how the interests and intent of pressure groups derives from the members within the group. Some of the groups are fighting for policy that benefits specific people, not necessarily members. An example that he provides of this is the A.L.A.C.P, which opposes capital punishment. The members are not all prisoners on death row, but they are all working to benefit those specific people. Other groups, like the World Peace Foundation, are working to have world peace for everyone, not just specific groups.[[2]](#footnote-2) Groups like the two previous examples are considered public groups, as opposed to private groups that are based off of businesses. This leads to his next point that upper-class citizens and businesses are more likely to join pressure groups. Businesses dominate the pressure group arena and businesses tend to be run by the upper class. This means that there is an upper-class bias within the pressure group system. Schattschneider then mentions that those business interest groups work with the Republican Party.[[3]](#footnote-3)

The third chapter opens by discussing how pressure groups have voted in past elections. The data shows that business pressure groups vote Republican and organized labor groups vote Democratic.[[4]](#footnote-4) This leads Schnattschneider to introduce the idea that a two-party system establishes two parties that monopolize the political system. Due to the fact that the two parties monopolize politics, the thousands of pressure groups have to choose a party to side with in conflicts. He goes on to say that pressure groups are prisoners to the political parties because they can’t negotiate between the sides of the conflict. The fourth chapter discusses how “what happens in politics depends on the way in which people are divided into factions, parties, groups, classes, etc.”[[5]](#footnote-5) These conflicts can divide or unify the people all within the same process.

The fifth chapter explains the history that led to the nationalization of politics. It began with the 1896 election when the southern democrats and northern republicans revived their “old sectional conflict” in order to split the populist vote and eliminate the radicals.[[6]](#footnote-6) Before 1896, competition between parties in the states was greatly decreasing, but the revival of the conflict between the two parties recreated competition. The next big step in the nationalization of politics was in 1932, when the democrats pulled off the greatest reversal of public policy in American political history. By reversing their policy, the number of one-party states declined and politics were nationalized. Politics being nationalized is important according to Schnattschneider because it has increased the alternation of power between parties.

The sixth chapter is about voter turnout. Schnattschneider states that 4 out of every 10 adults do not vote.[[7]](#footnote-7) This concerns him because these people are not voting voluntarily, not because they are unable to. At the time the book was written, many minority groups had just earned the right to vote and Schnattschneider is saying that despite all these people now being able to vote, they still are not. The seventh chapter is about the conflict between government and businesses. He talks about how everyone either works for the government or for a business, so everyone has a side to take in the conflict. Schnattschneider also states that politics “developed as a consequence of the separation of the economic and the political powers”, meaning the government and businesses.[[8]](#footnote-8) Finally, chapter eight was a summary of his points throughout the book, including his major idea that democracy is based on a system of conflict.

Schnattschneider has an argument that conflict is socialized by the losing side because they want to gain support to try and reverse the outcome of the conflict. An article from the *New York Times* discusses the current issues with the discrimination law passed in North Carolina. A law was passed that eliminated anti-discrimination protections for LGBT people.[[9]](#footnote-9) In an attempt to get this law repealed, many protests have occurred within the state. It has risen to a national level because many major companies, political figures, and celebrities have refused to enter the state and have publicly stated that they don’t agree with the law. This is an example of Schnattschneider’s theory of the losing side socializing the conflict to try and reverse the outcome.

Schnattschneider argues in his second chapter that there is an upper-class bias in the pressure system and therefore in the government. This is a common feeling among many Americans currently and is displayed in an article from *The Washington Post*. The article discusses how many Americans are becoming increasingly angry with the government because things are not getting done. One of the people interviewed for the article stated that “they haven’t done anything for the people as much as they’ve done for the wealthy and for businesses”.[[10]](#footnote-10) Other people who were interviewed in the article agreed with the previous statement that the government was not benefitting the common people.

Straight ticketing voting is when a voter votes for all the candidates from a specific party for every level of the election. In chapter five, Schnattschneider makes a point that by having nationalized politics, elections carry more power. In Schnattschneider’s argument, he does not reference straight ticketing voting in his discussion of the power of elections despite this being a very prominent and common occurrence. An article in the *New York Times* is about different developments in politics that are pushing the country to the right, or a conservative view. The article says that nationalization of elections is a development due to straight ticketing voting.[[11]](#footnote-11)

In Schnattschneider’s sixth chapter he discusses how adults are not voting voluntarily. In some cases this is true, however in the current election, this is untrue in many cases. An article from *The Washington Post* discusses how a judge is going to hear from voters about the Arizona presidential primary. These people are angry because the lines at the polling place were so long that the polls closed before they were able to vote. The article states that the long lines decreased voter turnout by 12 percent.[[12]](#footnote-12) Another reason some people do not vote is due to complex voter registration rules. An article from *The New York Times* discusses the voter registration rules in Kansas. In Kansas one must “provide proof of citizenship” to be able to vote, meaning they must show a birth certificate or other proof of citizenship in order to vote.[[13]](#footnote-13) For some citizens, producing their birth certificate can be a difficult task, especially for low income families. These articles demonstrate that low voter turnout is not always a voluntary thing.

1. E.E Schnattschneider, *The Semisovereign People* (New York, P.F. Collier & Son, 1975), 2 [↑](#footnote-ref-1)
2. Ibid, 26 [↑](#footnote-ref-2)
3. Ibid, 42 [↑](#footnote-ref-3)
4. E.E Schnattschneider, *The Semisovereign People* (New York, P.F. Collier & Son, 1975), 56 [↑](#footnote-ref-4)
5. Ibid, 60 [↑](#footnote-ref-5)
6. E.E Schnattschneider, *The Semisovereign People* (New York, P.F. Collier & Son, 1975), 79 [↑](#footnote-ref-6)
7. E.E Schnattschneider, *The Semisovereign People* (New York, P.F. Collier & Son, 1975), 95 [↑](#footnote-ref-7)
8. Ibid, 119 [↑](#footnote-ref-8)
9. Motoko Rich, 03/24/16, North Carolina Gay Bias Law Draws a Sharp Backlash, *New York Times, http://www.nytimes.com/2016/03/25/us/north-carolina-law-antidiscrimination-pat-mccrory.html?\_r=0* [↑](#footnote-ref-9)
10. Tammy Webber and Emily Swanson, 04/18/16, Poll: Americans angry with federal government, happy at home, *The Washington Post*, https://www.washingtonpost.com/national/poll-americans-angry-with-federal-government-happy-at-home/2016/04/18/4ce9b0cc-053c-11e6-bfed-ef65dff5970d\_story.html [↑](#footnote-ref-10)
11. Thomas B. Edsall, 09/29/15, What If All Politics Is National?, *The New York Times,* http://www.nytimes.com/2015/09/30/opinion/what-if-all-politics-is-national.html [↑](#footnote-ref-11)
12. Bob Christie, 04/19/16, Judge to hear from voters about Arizona presidential primary, *The Washington Post*, https://www.washingtonpost.com/national/judge-to-hear-challenge-to-arizona-presidential-primary/2016/04/19/2652e780-05e6-11e6-bfed-ef65dff5970d\_story.html [↑](#footnote-ref-12)
13. Julie Bosman, 10/15/15, Voter ID Battle Shifts to Kansas, *The New York Times*, http://www.nytimes.com/2015/10/16/us/politics/kansas-voter-id-law-sets-off-a-new-battle-over-registration.html [↑](#footnote-ref-13)