VOLUME II - SUMMER 2025

ZINE

A JOURNAL OF STUDENT THOUGHT



BILL of RIGHTS INSTITUTE

FOR RACHEL DAVISON-HUMPHRIES

Thank you for the opportunity you have created for students across our country to engage in meaningful, productive conversations about democracy, civic life, and the American Experiment.

A NOTE FROM US

Dear Reader,

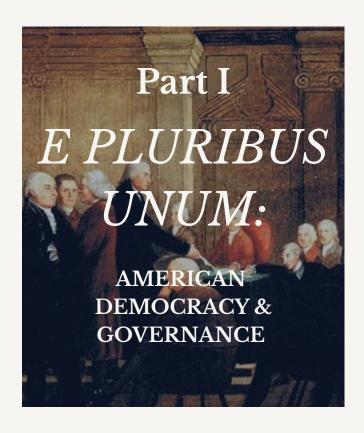
Welcome to the Zine! As the culminating project of the Bill of Rights Institute's 2025 Student Fellowship, this "journal of student thought" focuses on a wide range of issues that have a profound impact on the lives of many, from America's role in the world to civic education in our nation's classrooms. As you read through our student contributors' pieces, we encourage you to consider and reflect upon the following questions:

- 1. What is civil society, and why is it important in America?
- 2. How can we have an influence on our communities?
- 3. What is the role of government in civil society?
- 4. What is good civic leadership?

No doubt, these questions are difficult, and at times controversial. However, we hope that the Zine will facilitate productive dialogue about issues that young people care about. Civic engagement is the lifeblood of our democracy, and readers like you, individuals willing to confront challenging issues, is what allows our nation to carry on.

Happy Reading,

- The Zine Team at the BRI Student Fellowship



Reinterpreting Federalist No. 78

By Bella Fajardo



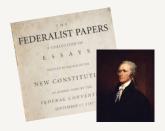
${ m T}$ he federalist papers, a collection of 85 essays

urging Americans to support the new Constitution, are of the utmost importance in our nation's history. Although not official law, their arguments continue to be utilized by all branches and levels of government. *Federalist No.* 78 for example, is Alexander Hamilton's defense of judicial review and the outlined appointment process for federal judges.

Judicial independence is an argument made by Hamilton. Throughout the essay, he uses it to defend lifetime appointments. In Hamilton's view, judicial independence is only brought through lifetime appointments rather than elections. He explains that judges should hold their position through good behavior, and that this makes them apolitical and unswayed by typical partisan points of view. In Hamilton's view, "nothing can contribute so much to its firmness and independence as permanency in office."

However, justices frequently reflect the ideological viewpoints of the presidents who appointed them. As partisanship grows, so does the divide between the constitutional interpretations of the justices on the Supreme Court. This can be seen throughout history, but especially on the current Supreme Court. Currently, the divide between conservative justices Clarence Thomas and Samuel Alito and liberal justices Sonia Sotomayor and Elana Kagan is becoming increasingly apparent with verdicts on abortion in *Dobbs v. Jackson Women's Health Organization* and *New York State Rifle and Pistol Association Inc. v. Buren.* It is not just these decisions that indicate this issue of polarization; the number of unanimous decisions has decreased from 49% in 2016 to 28% in 2022 (Farivar). This issue of polarization has increased over time and illustrates the dangers of today's political state in the judiciary.

Federalist No. 78 states, "The judiciary, from the nature of its functions, will always be the least dangerous to the political rights of the Constitution: (Hamilton). This is true as seen in Noem v. Abrego Garcia; their verdict protects the rights of many, but they were not granted the power to enforce it. But when their decisions are enforced, they have the potential to make significant change within the United States.



"The judiciary, from the nature of its functions, will be the least dangerous to the political rights of the Constitution."

Alexander Hamilton

Moreover, the judiciary's power has increased over time. The pivotal case that established the judiciary's ability to perform judicial review was Marbury v. Madison, a case that's majority opinion often cites Federalist No. 78. Post Marbury, the court has taken a larger role. This is somewhat due to the increasing amount of judicial issues and how the addition of constitutional amendments has led to a myriad of potential cases and topics that could violate the Constitution. For example, the 14th Amendment led to the doctrine of selective incorporation and a variety of equal rights cases, such as Obergefell v. Hodges and Board v. Board of Education. The 15th, 19th, 24th, and 26th amendments led to an increase in voting rights related cases. The power may be due to the increasingly controversial topics of cases such as affirmative action, abortion, and gun rights, but the application of judicial activities to any issue gives the court more power and gives its decisions the ability to create widespread change throughout America.

When the Supreme Court was established, the majority of its cases related to contract disputes and issues arising between two states. But today, the amount of cases relating to social issues continues to increase. Many believe that the rise in social issue cases reflects the growing power of the executive and legislative branches over time, which prompts the judicial branch to act as an essential check. Others disagree and argue that judicial activism is the cause of these verdicts. Often considered an insult to the validity of a court's decision, judicial activism is defined as "the practice of judges making rulings based on their policy views rather than their honest interpretation of the current law" ("Judicial Activism"). Judicial activism, when practiced, may run contrary to Federalist No. 78, which states, "A constitution is, in fact, and must be regarded by the judges, as a fundamental law" (Hamilton). The accusations of judicial activism largely emerge due to an individual disagreeing with a decision on a political basis, rather than a legal one. But for many cases that have a widespread social impact, allegations of judicial activism have been validated by legal scholars on both sides of the political spectrum.

Another way the court's power is notably larger than previously stated is the lack of an enforced honor code for justices. Hamilton believed that "The standard of good behavior for the continuance in office of the judicial magistracy ... is certainly one of the most valuable of the modern improvements in the practice of government," but this standard of good behavior often remains ambiguous. In 2023, the Supreme Court issued the Justices' Code of Conduct, which are five guidelines for justices. The code is self-enforced and it is not legally binding. Currently, the impeachment process is the only way for a justice to be removed from office or punished for their misconduct. There is no way to sanction a sitting justice short of initiating impeachment, which is only for serious misconduct.

Overall, Federalist No. 78, continues to be a relevant document, and its analysis leads to a critique of the modern Supreme Court. As the power continues to increase, its adherence to the framers' intentions continues to decrease. The power of judicial review described in Federalist No. 78, has been applied to cases that shape America and effectively create policy. While the court's power provides an essential check on the legislative and judicial branches, scholars continue to debate whether the court adheres to Hamilton's vision.



All Hail ... the President?

By Albert Cai



${\bf A}$ federal court just dealt a major blow to

presidential authority. In late May, the United States Court for International Trade (CIT) ruled that President Trump's global tariff exceeded the bounds of lawful executive action under the International Emergency Economic Powers Act (IEEPA). Rarely discussed outside of select Beltway circles, this little known piece of legislation has become one of the most important tools in creating the separation of powers crisis we're faced with today. The Court's decision didn't just rein in a specific policy – it's the first step in reaffirming a crucial constitutional boundary that has been quietly eroding for decades.

The IEEPA was never meant to give the President a blank check to flout Congress. In fact, it was passed in 1977 as a post-Watergate effort to bring discipline to emergency powers, not enable new ones. The law specifically dictates that "The authorities granted to the President by section 1702 of this title may only be exercised to deal with an unusual and extraordinary threat ... and may not be exercised for any other purpose."

Yet over the past two decades, presidents of both parties have used it against not just hostile foreign states, but on entire economic sectors, companies, and individuals – often with minimal oversight and in the absence of any declared war or armed conflict. Although President Trump is the first to use the law to justify tariffs on imported goods, it has been invoked by leaders ranging from Bush to Obama to enact a litany of trade restrictions.

This isn't how the Constitution is supposed to work. Article I explicitly gives Congress – not the President – the power to regulate international commerce.

"Executive unilateralism has generally failed to advance our national interests"

However, Congress's inexplicable ceding of authority to the Executive has led to an inverted system: the President gets to set the rules, while Congress sits silently watching. Beyond that, there is a pragmatic reason to check broad executive powers. Harold Koh, a leading constitutional scholar and professor at Yale Law School, wrote in 2024 that "executive unilateralism has generally failed to advance our national interests," increasing the risk of "militarism and catastrophic outcomes."

by putting our entire nation's foreign policy in the hands of one man, we not only defy the very principles that founded it, but also risk escalating conflicts and alienating our allies abroad.

The judicial check must not stop at tariffs. The same logic used to invalidate the President's unconstitutional tariff authority must now be applied to another area where executive overreach has flourished unchecked: economic sanctions. These sanctions, often indefinite and levied without Congressional authorization, have produced real-world harm: from compounding humanitarian crises to undermining diplomatic engagement. Worse yet, may now persist long after their original justification has expired.

Since the IEEPA was passed, it has been used to invoke 69 national emergencies, with the vast majority being used for sanctions. 49 are still in effect today. That is absurd. As the House Committee on International Relations succinctly put it: "A state of national emergency should not be a normal state of affairs." When the President is allowed to punish any country he wants, for any reason he wants, we no longer live in a democracy.



The CIT's ruling is a reminder that courts can and should play a role in checking the political branches. The past fifty years have seen a stunning rise of executive power, with the vision of a "unitary executive" being driven by the presidencies of Ronald Reagan, George W. Bush, and Donald Trump. With the executive becoming more powerful day by day, and the legislative branch unwilling or unable to reclaim its power, the Courts must fight to preserve our constitutional democracy. In her 2022 Virginia Law Review article "The Runaway Presidential Power Over Diplomacy." Professor Jean Galbraith of Penn Carey Law School wrote that "Without the courts, the executive branch can always win if it really wants to." Only the binding ruling of an independent judiciary can compel the President to obey the Constitution.

Command of the world's largest economy and all of the international responsibilities that go with it must not be treated thoughtlessly, being faux-legislated through executive orders and proclamations. It must be intensely deliberated by our elected officials.

"Without the courts ... the executive branch can always win if it really wants to"

In a world increasingly mired by geopolitical uncertainty, our government must exercise caution. Wantonly declaring national emergencies that punish our very own allies is entirely incommensurate with the measured, law-bound foreign policy that the international order needs. As we face rising threats from an increasingly aggressive China, a resurgent Russia, and a whole host of other recalcitrant states, including Iran and North Korea, the United States cannot afford to base its foreign policy on the unstable foundation of sole executive authority. The Constitution demands better. So should we.

Democracy Through the Years

By Yu-Cheng Liang



\mathbf{D} emocracy, that's what our founding fathers

wanted to base our nation on. Democracy. Not an aristocracy. Not a monarchy. Not a dictatorship. Democracy.

However, what truly defines democracy? If you consult Webster's dictionary, they define "democracy" as a government ruled by the majority. If you ask the American people, their definition of "democracy" varies greatly based on their background and personal beliefs.

What did the Founders envision for our country's democracy? Our founding fathers sought to create a representative democracy – a republic. The people were to elect representatives to govern, make laws, and represent the needs of the people.

In a true representative democracy, every vote carries equal weight. In addition, voters shouldn't be oppressed or discouraged from voting. Everyone's voice should matter when making decisions for our country.

Has the idea of democracy improved throughout the years? Has the United States been able to reach a "true representative democracy?"

Our nation has experienced significant changes since the era of the Articles of Confederation, which followed the Revolutionary War. Voting rights and election policies in the U.S. have continually evolved from the compromises in the Constitution to the expansion of people's ability to vote. Yet, the nation still faces threats to the representative democratic process through actions such as racial genrymandering and voter discrimination.



The Constitutional Convention kicked off with many delegates concerned over the balance of power. Many saw the Articles of Confederation as ineffective, with federal power limited. However, others feared for the potential of a strong federal government to exert too much power. This would be a factor in helping to establish the checks and balances system with the framework of the three-branch system: the Legislative, Executive, and Judicial branches. Our Founding Fathers aimed to prevent excessive power being given to any one individual. The Constitutional Convention also established the Electoral College, where states have a certain number of electoral votes, which are determined by population using the number of representatives a state has in Congress.

However, some problems did occur during the Constitutional Convention. There were debates over how the legislative branch would work. In particular, a divide emerged between the larger states, population-wise, and the smaller state, population-wise, on how Congress should be run. The Virginia Plan proposed a bicameral legislative branch, with both chambers being based on state populations. New Jersey, not wanting the more populated states to dominate Congress, proposed the New Jersey Plan, a unicameral legislative branch with the same number of representatives from all states. Eventually, this lied to the Connecticut Compromise - also known as the Great Compromise - that saw the legislative branch split into two chambers with one being based on majority - the House of Representatives - while the other, the Senate, allotted each state two representatives in that chamber, no matter the population. The compromise was made to please both sides. While it did ensure that parts of each plan were introduced, the states having the same number of Senators no matter the population meant that people in certain states would have "less of a vote" than those with smaller populations. Although people elected representatives, unequal voting power undermined democratic ideals of equal representation.

In addition, in the Senate in particular, the general population could only elect Senators indirectly through voting for the state legislators who would, in turn, choose the Senators. While the indirect election process itself wasn't inherently designed for corruption, it nonetheless provided fertile ground for the wealthy to exert undue influence on becoming Senators. These wealthy people often bribed the state legislators into giving them the position, no matter how unqualified they were, leading to the reputation of the Senate being the "millionaire's club." However, this would change in 1913, with the passing of the 17th Amendment, which allowed for the people to elect Senators. This illustrates an improvement towards a true democracy in that now people have a bigger say in the election of their Senators, rather than bribes from the rich to the state legislators.

"We can either have democracy in this country, or we can have great wealth concentrated in the hands of a few, but not both ..."

- Justice Louis D. Brandeis

However, the influence of wealth would simply shift forms. While the 17th Amendment would help to eliminate bribery in the Senate, it wouldn't prevent the rich from being the dominant proportion of Congress. Politicians nowadays both go on campaigns as well as spend millions advertising, making campaigning for any position rather expensive. Since many of the politicians are rich, it may be a misrepresentation of the people. As the wealthy have an advantage in campaigning for different positions, they more frequently take these positions, leading to certain demographics, income areas, and experiences being left out of Congress and state legislatures, influencing opinions and possible decisions.

An evolution that has taken place, which presents the evolution of democratic ideals, is the expansion of the people who were able to vote. Our founding fathers had made it so that only white land-owning men could vote. The number of people able to vote would slowly expand. During Andrew Jackson's presidency, the right to vote was expanded to all white male U.S. citizens. By 1870, during the period of Radical Reconstruction after the Civil War, the 15th Amendment was passed, allowing African American men to vote. Four years after that, in 1924, Native Americans were allowed to vote. The expansion of the people who can vote illustrates the growing democracy of the United States as the centuries have progressed, as now a majority of the population can express their opinions and views on certain topics, rather than the minority of white land-owning men who were allowed to vote in the 18th century.

However, some groups, particularly African Americans, were often hindered and threatened away from voting. Literacy tests, poll taxes, and intimidation were often causes that prevented a majority of African Americans from voting. It was a factor that led to the Civil Rights movement. Eventually, the movement would lead to the 24th Amendment in 1964 that banned poll taxes that had barred many citizens from voting. A year later, the Voting Rights Act of 1965 was passed. Passed by President Lyndon Baines Johnson, it ensured citizens the right to vote no matter their race.

Yes, while there have been shifts towards being more inclusive towards certain groups, there are still countless people without a representative in Congress. Sometimes, these groups of people can number in the millions. Before the American Revolutionary War, many American colonists started disliking the King's control over them. Now, it would be the U.S.'s turn to deal with territories. With years of growth and development, as well as with the help of

the Spanish-American War, the U.S. gained territories in places such as Puerto Rico. Despite Puerto Ricans being citizens, they have no say in the Presidency nor any representatives in the legislative branch. Despite having a population of over 3 million people, their voices aren't effectively heard by the country, despite those votes having the potential to affect them. Closer to U.S. soil, the issue of Washington, D.C., remains a significant challenge. Washington, D.C., has faced decades of debate over its representation and electoral power. The electoral college issue was solved with the 23rd Amendment, which allowed Washington, D.C. to have electoral votes in the Presidential elections. However, Washington, D.C., remains a city with no representation in Congress, despite having a population bigger than Wyoming and Vermont. This limits the ability of any of Washington D.C.'s approximately 700,000 people from being able to express their votes. Although the U.S. has made strides towards a true representative democracy through the expansion of voting, there are still certain groups who have little to no power in terms of voting and representation.



While modern times have presented most United States citizens with the right to vote, there are still aspects that hinder the U.S.'s ability to be a true representative democracy. For example, there are issues such as gerrymandering. Gerrymandering is where politicians redraw district boundaries to give certain parties better chances while hindering to the other parties. This is often carefully calculated and drawn out, and this process takes away from the value of a person's vote, as gerrymandering artificially designs borders to make sure a party's votes hardly count. Issues such as gerrymandering are still prominent today, and make it so there may be an inaccurate representation of the population's opinion and votes, further impacting the process of becoming a representative democracy.

So, have democratic ideals changed and improved over time? That depends.



"We in America do not have a government by the majority. We have government by the majority who participate."

— Thomas Jefferson

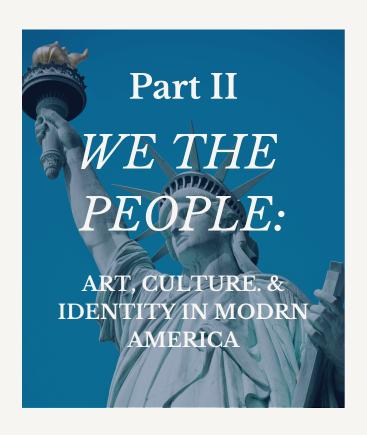
In some aspects, democratic ideals have improved, with the majority of the population being able to vote, a stark contrast to the white land-owning men who were able to vote at the beginning of the U.S.'s time as a country. As more people can vote, it brings in more views and opinions from various standpoints, further enhancing the country's position as one that is ruled by the majority rather than one ruled by a certain group.

On the contrary, there are still aspects of the political world impacting these democratic ideals. For example, gerrymandering creates issues in reaching a true representative democracy as districts are arranged to try and limit one party's power. These aspects are hindering some developments of democratic ideals, as it shows politicians attempting to forge ways to make certain groups and parties more powerful while limiting the effectiveness of other groups; essentially controlling how impactful one's voice can be.

Has the United States reached a "true representative democracy?"

Not quite.

While the U.S. has improved in helping the greater majority of the population have a voice in their representatives, certain limitations prevent the U.S. from becoming a true representative democracy. Not everyone has the same voting power: gerrymandering, for example, results in certain parties and their voters having less effective votes towards their representatives; the Senate, through the Connecticut Convention and the 17th Amendment, favors the states with smaller populations, meaning states with half a million people versus states with 40 million people have the same number of delegates, disproportionately affecting a person's voting power; in Washington, D.C., while through the 23rd Amendment the citizens of the capital can vote for the Presidency, their delegates remain non-voting ones, meaning over 700,000 people are without say in Congress; overall, illustrating that while the United States has made strides towards a true representative democracy, not every vote has the same power; some votes are worth more than others.



A Democracy That Dances

Celebrating Culture, Identify & Democracy Through Art

By Aisiri Prasad



THEY CALLIT A DANCE.

But to me, it has always been a declaration.

Each time I tie the bells around my ankles – anklets that echo centuries of history – I am not just performing, I am participating in democracy. In a world that doesn't always hear girls like me, girls with sandalwood-scented stories and names wrapped in vowels, I speak through movement.

In Bharatanatyam (an Indian classical dance form), the eyes tell myths. The hands hold truth.

The feet - pounding the earth - demand to be heard.

This is my freedom of speech.

I grew up in a town where diversity was a checkbox, not a community. But even there, in gymnasiums turned states and festivals tucked between food trucks, I carved space.

At the 2024 AAPI Festival in Howard County, under Maryland's humid May sun, I performed a ten-minute group dance – not just for the crowd, but for every girl who had ever been told that her story didn't belong here.

I danced in a language older than colonizers, older than borders, older than silence.

And somehow, everyone understood.

That's the power of democracy.

Not just the right to vote - but the right to be seen. To be loud. To be you.

Through over nine years of classical training, temple performances, and opening acts for legends like Hariharan and Shankar Mahadevan, I've learned that art isn't a soft thing.

It's bold. It's civic.



Where Her Anklets Spoke

By Aisiri Prasad Oil Paint on a 8"x10"in canvas

It's the way we, the underrepresented, write ourselves into the nation's narrative – not in textbook, but in rhythm, color, and conviction.

And I don't stop at dance.

My hands – when not in mudras – are often stained with gold oil paint and colored pencils.

I draw divine stories and justice-seeking figures.

Peacocks perched beside poems.

God's resting among protest signs.

I sell art not just to sustain my practice, but to support educational facilities, identity, and healing for communities like mine.

Because freedom is most powerful when shared.

In classrooms, on stages, and in sketchbooks, I raise my voice for the ones who whisper.

For the ones who've been overlooked in the crowd.

For every kid who thought they had to shed their culture to fit in.

My art is my resistance.

My dance is my democracy.

And these anklets?

They jingle with the sound of justice - one beat at a time.



Storytelling Hands

By Aisiri Prasad

Graphite Sketching Pencils, Colored Pencils, Gold Acrylic Paint, & White Gel Pen on a 9"x12" Illustration Board

The Politics of Art

By Naomi Obasa



${f I}$ AM ENAMORED BY THE SOULFUL TUNES OF SAM COOKE

and Nina Simone. While I cook my favorite meal, my voice permeates through the kitchen, trying to emulate them. As their melodies move my feet, they are also walking me through the footsteps of how music can elicit change. Their songs, their voices, were a political expression of self, and I am inspired to learn the many ways music can continue to move people.

Politics is found everywhere. Our leaders' impacts are seen in anything from the roads we walk on to the pains and triumphs our communities experience. These lived experiences are the muses for art. Thus, politics is intrinsically

embedded into art, whether it be through the mediums of music, film, portraits, and photography.

Recently, this year, I have researched the zombie genre, which has confirmed my realization about the relationship between art and politics. In my exploration, I learned that the definition of a zombie is one that is ambiguous - sometimes zombies are known as the walking dead, while other times they're known as virus infected monsters or beings under a voodoo spell. However, one thing that will always remain consistent with zombies is their job as a vessel of socio-political commentary. Interwoven into the story of every zombie is a criticism that reveals the true monsters at hand in our society. So while the question of "what is a zombie?" may be hard to answer, especially as the genre evolves, the far more interesting question is "why a zombie?" and "how are these zombies meant to reflect the cultures at hand?" For example, the concept of a Zombie originated from Haitian folklore in the 17th and 18th centuries - a time when the trans-Atlantic slave trade yielded a black community in Haiti scared of inescapable oppression. The Haitian slaves knew that death could be their only comfort. But to kill oneself, according to the Voodoo concepts they brought with them from Africa, would mean that, as punishment, their corpses could be brought back to life as the walking dead through Zombification. Such an existence would only mean that, even in death, they could be exploited for free labor, never escaping the theft of their agency as they sought. It turns out that the Haitian slaves' fear of what would happen to them in death, though in a twisted form, was relatable to many; this made zombies perfect for the horror genre. The zombie movies that came out in the 19th century played with those themes of life and death, creating the "traditional" image of the "walking dead" that were often slow, with decaying skin and a vocabulary limited to just "brainssss!" Such a depiction of zombies is intertwined with pop culture in itself and can be seen in Michael Jackson's iconic Thriller music video. With the concept of zombies being rooted in the

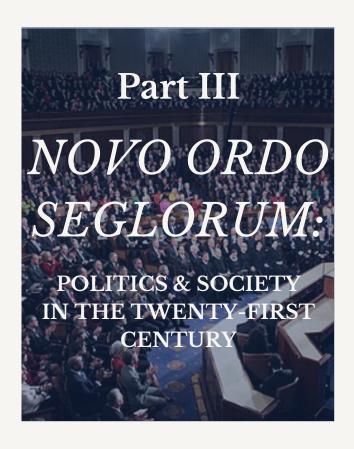
Institution of slavery, the birth of the zombie genre is one that is inherently political. As stated by Jordan Peele, the director of *Get Out (2017)*, "[he] define[s] 'social thriller' as thriller/horror movies where the ultimate villain is society."

Politics is everywhere, and I am inspired to continue exploring how art and politics can intersect, whether it be in music or film.



"If art is to nourish the roots of our culture, society must set the artist free to follow his vision wherever it taken him."

— John F. Kennedy



Democracy in the Age of Algorithms

By Jonah Horowitz



A CENTURY AGO, DEMOCRACY HAPPENED PRIMARILY IN

town halls, pamphlets, and newspapers. Ideas were spread through printed publications and word-of-mouth discussions. Engaging with your democracy beyond this was a privilege limited to a lucky few with access to technological resources and financial capital.

Today, democracy is occurring in a different place entirely. Through 60-second TikToks, Twitter threads, and Instagram comment sections, Americans from across the nation are now interacting with and discussing political issues in digital spaces. The public forum has moved online, which has widespread implications for our democracy. We now must grapple with the benefits and consequences that social media has for our democracy.

On the surface, social media appears like a substantial win for democracy. It has enabled the creation of online communities for individuals to receive, share, and create content, which has exponentially increased both the amount of information and the number of conversations about our government. Democracy thrives on the participation of constituents; it relies on citizens being able to access, understand, and deliberate on issues. In theory, anyone with access to social media can speak, be heard, and drive social change. Furthermore, social media has given a voice to minorities, allowing demands for equality and democracy to reach global dimensions. It has augmented forces for political dynamism and pluralism within our society.

Social media has become a force for mobilization as well. Movements like Black Lives Matter and Me Too began in communities on social media as hashtags before catapulting to national prominence as major activist movements. In this way, the internet cultivated massive social change and empowered people to take a stand for issues they believed in, effectively reshaping public discourse and influencing policy on a new level. This can occur not only on a national scale, but at a local one too. In my community, the George High School Voter Project began as a social media campaign, but has now engaged thousands of high school voters across my state. Social media has made change approachable and removed many institutionalized barriers that once separated everyday citizens from political power. Before, engaging in activism often meant navigating bureaucracies, gaining media attention, or physically showing up in spaces dominated by elites. Now, anyone with a phone and a message can reach millions with a single post.

This is the echo chamber social media creates, where content that confirms one's preexisting beliefs is more likely to be shown again, while opposing viewpoints are filtered out. In these bubbles, complexity is flattened, and the

"other side" becomes an enemy whose perspective is portrayed as dangerous. In this sense, social media does not just reflect polarization; it accelerates it. And political compromise, a foundational aspect of our democracy dating back to the creation of American foundational aspect of our democracy dating back to the creation of American foundational documents, appears to be a weakness instead of a beautiful strength.

"Liberty is to faction what air is to fire, an ailment without which it instantly expires."

— James Madison

Federalist No. 10

Social media's impact on politics extends far beyond the United States. It is fueling a global wave of populism. Across the world, from Jair Bolsonaro in Brazil to Viktor Orbán in Hungary, political figures have embraced the logic of social media: short, emotional, direct communication that bypasses traditional institutions and their standards of truth and civility. Appealing directly to the people.

Populism thrives on the creation of "us vs. them" narratives, and social media's constant feedback loops incubate this version of politics. Populist leaders are often skilled digital performers: tweeting out inflammatory messages, broadcasting rallies live, and milking trends to their advantage. They don't just use platforms; they exploit their weaknesses and the people that use them to fuel their own personal goals.

The populist wave has come with real democratic consequences. Traditional checks and balances, constitutional courts, and media institutions are painted as enemies of "the people." Gradual erosion of civil liberties, minority rights, and freedom of the press, known as democratic backsliding, can be perceived as acceptable. When politics are manipulated as a tool for consolidating personal power, instead of empowering all people, democracy is at risk.

A simple solution to this problem has been proposed, yet the moderation of online databases is a hot-button topic. The First Amendment guarantees individuals the right to free speech and the press, yet it does not guarantee immunity from the consequences of that free speech. Social media platforms exist in a murky zone between private enterprise and public utility, often utilizing free speech as a defense against government regulation while simultaneously curating and promoting certain content to drive engagement and profit. It is difficult to determine whether digital platforms should be treated like the public square, where speech is protected and accessible, or like publishers, responsible for the content they create and circulate.

Striking a balance is no easy task. Heavy-handed regulations risk infringing on civil liberties and stifling dissent, which ironically harms the democratic ideals reformers seek to protect. But doing nothing allows the unchecked spread of disinformation, the manipulation of public opinion, and the erosion of democratic norms. The solution may lie not in silencing voices, but in restructuring incentives. Instead of rewarding outrage and sensationalism, platforms must be pressured to reward accuracy, transparency, and constructive discourse.

Education also plays a pivotal role. Media literacy must become a core component of civic and general education in the 21st century. Citizens need

the tools and understanding to navigate information critically, recognize manipulation, and engage with opposing views thoughtfully. Empowering individuals with the ability to discern fact from fiction and resist algorithmic manipulation can restore key facets of the democratic process.

Ultimately, democracy is not a static institution; it is a living system that must adapt to the tools of each era. Just as the printing press and television reshaped government in centuries past, social media is reshaping it now. The challenge we face is not simply technological, but moral and political. We must continue to preserve the foundational ideals of democracy, including deliberation, pluralism, and accountability, in a digital system built for spectacle.

The future of democracy in the age of algorithms will be determined by the choices we make as citizens, voters, and leaders. We must decide whether these platforms will remain tools for polarization or be reclaimed as tools for progress. The algorithm may define what we see, but it should not define who we become.



America's Foreign Policy Shift: Implications for Ukraine and Beyond

By Abby Huffman



${f F}$ OR DECADES, AMERICAN FOREIGN POLICY HAS BEEN

shaped by the defining political philosophy of the nation: liberalism. Following World War II and throughout the Cold War, the United States' increased involvement in global affairs has reflected the country's enduring commitment to individual rights, democratic governance, and open markets. In today's polarized political climate, stances made by prominent figures are often sensationalized and in great opposition with one another. Nonetheless, foreign policy is typically an area of continuity for the U.S. government, as major geopolitical actions resemble one another across administrations and party

lines. American support to Ukraine is a testament of these principles, as providing financial and miliary aid to Ukraine is essential to deterring Russian aggression and upholding democratic ideals in Eastern Europe while being widely supported by both major political parties.

Enter President Trump. An undeniably controversial presence, President Trump has changed aspects of politics forever: how we interact with politicians, how we view leaders of our country, and perhaps most consequentially, how power is exercised and decisions are made. A billionaire and former businessman, Trump attracts voters with his transactional outlook on politics. Rather than implementing the traditional relations policies of the United States, President Trump seeks the best *deal*. In fact, Trump proclaims himself as the "dealmaker-in-chief", a name that encapsulates his tendency to prioritize national profit.

The president's recent trip to the Persian Gulf states of Saudi Arabia, Qatar, and the United Arab Emirates drew headlines as he signed an arms deal with Saudi Arabia worth a reported \$142 billion. The most expensive weapons deal in U.S. relations with Saudi Arabia, the forthcoming investment supports the U.S. as a corporation, but not necessarily a country. Saudi Arabia's absolute monarchy restricts almost all of the civil liberties the U.S. is founded on and it is likely these American weapons will be used to further inflict human rights violations the kingdom is currently accused of. Economic deals with nations the United States politically clashes with are not unheard of, but the situation surrounding Trump's weapons deals in the Gulf is more abnormal, considering the Israel-Hamas war.

The shift to a negotiation-based approach is further signaled by the Trump administration's engagement with Russia amid the Russia-Ukraine war. In

In February of 2025, Trump hosted a peace talk for the conflict, attempting to make good on his campaign promise that the war would be ended within the days of his taking office. Ukraine, however, was not invited. A senior Ukrainian government official told the BBC he had never received an invitation, and Ukrainian President Volodymyr Zelensky has adamantly rejected any peace deal made without Ukraine's involvement. Besides the questionable effectiveness of Trump's peace talks, the diplomatic actions of his administration have also been notable, with Secretary of Defense Pete Hegseth suggesting that Kviv would have to permanently cede some territory illegally seized by Russia and Trump himself suggesting that Zelensky was to blame for the invasion. These statements signal a stark departure from the Biden administration's unwavering support for Ukraine, which was rooted in the United States' long-standing commitment to democratic sovereignty and international law. Trump's policy reversals is not only heard through comments from his administration, but seen through actions of the United States at the United Nations. In a striking switch, the U.S. joined Russia in voting against a U.N. General Assembly resolution condemning the invasion of Ukraine, marking a dramatic break from its traditional alliances and demonstrating a new willingness to align with authoritarian powers on the global stage.





Proponents of America's diminishing support to Ukraine argue that the prolonged U.S. involvement is a waste of resources, and that the country should shift its focus to countering increasing Chinese influence in the Indo-Pacific region. However, this argument fails to recognize the larger, global message of America's broken promises to Ukraine. Sidelining Ukraine risks expanding authoritarianism in Europe while simultaneously deteriorating trust with other American allies. The United States, a nation known as a protector of freedom and democracy across the globe, breaking its geopolitical commitments may encourage adversarial nations to further test the U.S.'s limits.

The ramifications of Trump's Ukraine reversal are not limited to Europe, as the issue is raising concerns among long-term U.S. allies and beneficiaries in Asia. Countries like Japan, South Korea, and Taiwan – who rely on firm American commitments in the face of growing Chinese aggression – are beginning to question whether the U.S. would honor its defense promises under a Trump administration. A perceived willingness to abandon democratic partners for the sake of short-term deals or transactional interests threatens to destabilize long-standing alliances and could accelerate regional arms races or shifts in diplomatic alignment. As America's foreign policy pivots from principle to pragmatism, its global credibility hangs in the balance – not just in Kyiv, but in capitals across the world that have long looked to Washington as a bulwark against tyranny.

Ultimately, the evolution of U.S. foreign policy under Trump raises fundamental questions about America's role in the world. Will the United States continue to lead as a promoter of democracy, human rights, and collective security? Or will we abandon our principles and allies alike, favoring

profit to principle? The answer will determine the outcome of the current global affair and leave a permanent mark on the geopolitical landscape for years to come.



Civic Engagement: The Good and the Ugly

By Taylor-Marie Hailstalk



IN OUR EVERYDAY LIVES, CIVIC ENGAGEMENT IS

something that is quite often looked past, considering its importance. Voting and voicing our opinion in local, state, and federal elections is something that affects all of us. Local policies shape how your local area looks; state policies can shape the amount of state taxes you pay, the quality of your roads, etc., and federal policies shape the future of our country. Performing acts of civic engagement like doing cleanups or other forms of volunteering, can greatly help the wellbeing of our communities.

First is the good civic engagement. In our current time, participation in elections and civics is growing. Many individuals find themselves volunteering more and more. I've seen this doing various cleanups around my area, with

many people, both old and young, attending to help keep my community clean. People are also turning out more and more (for the most part) in federal/state elections. In 2020, we saw 66 percent of the population turn out to vote, the highest rate we've seen since 1900. Meanwhile, according to the University of Florida the 2024 is the 2nd highest at 63,9 percent turnout, which is still quite impressive. I believe that this is great, with people voicing their concerns in the ballot box more and more and helping add their voices to the future of our country. If this continues, this will allow our nation to improve and have a more diverse viewpoint/perspective as more people engage in the ballot box. Currently, we also see a large amount of civics being taught in school. For example, my school pushed registering to vote very heavily, even when you are an underclassman. They also teach civic engagement, hosting a mock election, encouraging discussion about elections, as well as facilitating a field trip to vote for the school budget. Having this taught is helping not only civic engagement, but is also encouraging younger people like myself to get involved and improve our community and voice our concerns.

Now, the ugly. While yes, I believe that civic engagement in the country is definitely improving, it doesn't come without many problems and hurdles. One of these is that many people don't turn out to vote in local elections. Even in my school budget election, only a couple of thousand people turned out, in a district that has over 100,00 people living in it. These elections are largely overlooked, but still hold importance. For example, said school budget increases property taxes, which are already quite high in my area. Local elections also determine your local government, which is responsible for the roads around you, zoning laws, etc. In our society, these are viewed nowhere near as important as the presidential, congressional, or other elections in higher levels of government, but honestly, local elections are similar, if not more important, when it comes to your day to day life. Even with increasing

voter turnout though, many people, especially young people are not adding their ballots to the ballot box. Many people still choose to not get involved civically, when it is something that is so important to their lives.

Now, how do I think we can improve civic engagement? I believe that increasing education in schools about elections, and even potentially making it curriculum can help make more and more younger people turnout. Teaching people in schools, for example, how to research and decide what candidate aligns with your views can help young voters feel less intimidated when turning out for the first time and encourage them to do so. I believe we also, through forms of communication like traditional media, social media, etc., should stress the importance of local elections. Rather than having the discussions be all about the President's race, or the house race more discussions should be had about local elections. I believe that local debates should be televised, and advertised to the community. I also think that having voting guides (which many states already have) on a federal level can help voters decide the candidate they agree with, which can also help more turn out.



The Rise of the Political Influencer

By Iago Macknick-Conde



A SEISMIC SHIFT IN POLITICAL DISCOURSE WILL ARISE

within the next two election cycles that will greatly affect the political landscape. Namely, nearly all Gen Z Americans will be of voting age in the next two years, and because Gen Zers receive their information and news in a significantly different manner than previous generations, politicians will have to change their strategies accordingly. The root cause for this will be Gen Z's preference for bite-sized short form content, such as TikToks, Instagram Reels, and YouTube Shorts. But I predict that it will not be the length of these modes of communication, per se, that will force the coming changes. That is, whereas the duration of such "short videos" typically lasts no more than 60 seconds, this is not a significant departure from the length

of political TV commercials that have driven political discourse for the several lest few generations. Rather, the difference with Gen Z will be the fact, where previous political commercials were commissioned, designed, and presented by the politicians (or parties, PACs, etc.) directly, now viral videos online are highly edited and curated by social media influencers who sculpt each message for their specific viewership. This takes the control of the content away from the politician and gives it to an influencer who may not have the same agenda. I predict that this will have ramifications for effective communication of the political arguments and facts that are delivered to constituents. Moreover, this dilution of efficacy will be transformed by click-bait-heavy propagandized clips that will potentially go viral faster than less exciting and sober discussions of policy. This could lead to sensationalization of misinformation and enhanced vitriol in American politics, widening the divide between both parties as social media algorithms serve to optimize the targeting of messaging to each individual voter.

One potential upside to these effects, however, will be that Gen Z may become increasingly interested in politics over previous generations. This seems to be happening now, for example, with the groundswell of outcry against book bannings rising from American high school students. These kids are fighting on the frontlines of this issue, so to speak, by influencing each other about the right-wing controls on access to information that are being imposed by older generations. It is also young people who are at the vanguard of climate change activism; Greta Thunberg, the most famous climate change activist today—after having risen to worldwide fame as a child—has just turned 22 this year. Another example is that many of those who have protested loudest against the Israeli state's war crimes in Gaza following the October 7 attacks have been Gen Z voters, as evidenced by the fact that college campuses have been the hotspots for the protests against Israel in the United States. This increased political participation by the young may be the direct result of social media's effects

on the young. I am a younger Gen Z myself, but even in what relatively short time I have been alive, I can recall the 2008 market crash and subsequent Great Recession, the Parkland shooting, the 2016 election, COVID-19 pandemic, George Floyd protests, the 2020 election, the January 6th Attack on the Capitol. These were all incredibly formative moments and events for the political culture of this nation, and all occurred while I was a child. I know anecdotally that these moments in history had a large impact on me and my view of the world, despite that I have only rarely read newspaper or magazine articles, or watched the news on TV. Many other members of my generation also learned of these events through social media's lens, and have had their worldviews similarly changed, or even radicalized. In the coming years, electoral politics in the United States will drastically change thanks to the increased participation of a new, more extremist, less willing to compromise voting block. In order to capture the Gen Z vote, politicians will also have to move toward either extremes to appeal to Gen Z voters.

Reinterpreting the Headline:

"Pennsylvania man accused of planning high school shooting around this month's Columbine anniversary"

By Maya Dombroskie



${ m T}$ HE AMBIGUITY OF LANGUAGE AT ONCE FASCINATES AND

frightens me. Despite being forced into compliance with grammatical conventions, dictionaries, and lines on a page, the written word cannot be reliably interpreted across centuries because the rules change with the lives and deaths of those who write them. Supreme Court Justice William Douglas explains the impact of ambiguity in a 1972 opinion, stating:

"A powerful lobby dins into the ears of our citizenry that *these* gun purchases are constitutional rights protected by the Second Amendment,

"A well regulated Militia, being necessary to the security of a free State, the right of the people to keep and bear Arms, shall not be infringed.' There is under our decisions no reason why stiff state laws governing the purchase and possession of pistols may not be enacted..... There is no reason why all pistols should not be barred to everyone except the police."

I first read Justice Douglas's opinion in preparation for a conference, and began to wonder what American life would look like if his words were universally accepted as the truth. What would happen if lawmakers recognized the second amendment as only supporting gun ownership among enforcement officers? A recent active shooter threat at my school in combination with this opinion pointed me to a truth likely as unfamiliar to you all as it was to me a mere month ago: there are more ways than one to read these words that have cost us so many lives.

On April 13th, 2025, I and two thousand of my peers found out that right before school started the next morning, a 20-year-old man planned to shoot up the main hallways of our high school. An anonymous tip mere days before the scheduled incident led to the man's arrest, but the event made the inadequacies of gun control strikingly clear: the shooter, aided by a current student, was an underage graduate of our high school. Without the anonymous report, countless lives would have been lost; maybe my own. Justice Douglas's opinion led me to realize that this and thousands of other mass shootings in the United States share a root cause: the interpretation of the Second Amendment as supporting anyone's right to own any firearm.

"...[T]he right of the people to keep and bear arms, shall not be infringed."

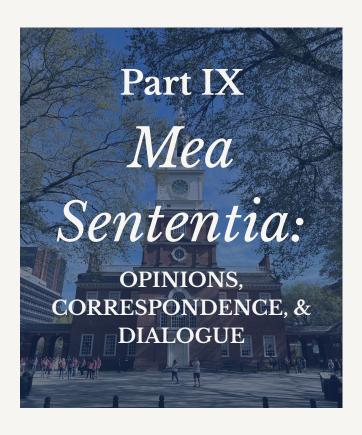
- Amendment II

With these interpretations, the man in custody wouldn't have had firearm access and my high school might not be standing in lines each morning waiting for teachers to search our bags, wondering who was on the shooter's written "hit list" of students to be shot. However, it's now up to us to rewrite gun policy, and I've decided to spearhead that work by getting information about safe gun storage and a pledge sent out to families in my district each year. I'm fighting to redefine firearm safety by asking my community to sign on to safe gun storage, spreading the message that we don't have to be defined by a narrow understanding of the Second Amendment: we can reinterpret and rewrite a safe, hopeful future.



"I do not believe in taking away the right of the citizen for sporting, for hunting and so forth, or for home defense. But, I do not believe that an AK-47, a machine gun, is not a sporting weapon or needed for the defense of the home."

- Ronald Reagan



Either for Profit — Or, for the People

By James Costan



THE UNITED STATES GOVERNMENT IS FACING A LEGITIMACY

crisis. People no longer believe that Congress is working for the common good. Rather, people see their representatives lining their own pockets, schmoozing with billionaires, and cozying up to massive corporations.

So what can be done to restore the general public's faith in Washington? The answer may be surprising: passing a bill that has zero direct effect on the lives of American citizens. A bill that's sole purpose is to help members of Congress regain the public's trust: a bill that bans members of the federal government, their spouses, and any of their dependent children from trading stocks.

But how did we get to this complete lack of faith? To the point where money

and democracy are no longer conflicting separate ideas but practically inseparable?

A point where, Donald Trump, while giving his inaugural address in January, was flanked by not only the usual suspects (past presidents, his wife and VP), but also America's uber-rich. including Bezos, Musk, and Zuckerberg.

But this shouldn't be too surprising. They were determined to be viewed favorably and avoid Trump's wrath. Zuckerberg himself decided to remove tampons from male bathrooms at Meta, a move so painfully useless that it can only be understood as shameless pandering.

Surprising or not, the situation is dire. The nation's wealthiest and most exploitative business owners are in cahoots with the man who holds a powerful office that should be used for the common good.

Their troubling and undemocratic alliance is reinforced by the Supreme Court's 2010 ruling in Citizens United v. Federal Elections Commission, in which the court held that limits on individual and corporate political contributions were unconstitutional. Therefore, through super PACs and dark money, these corporations and billionaires have no spending limit on their influence.

The decision has undermined effective democracy in America; it left 87% of Americans believing that there either needs to be fundamental changes or a complete rebuild to the way political campaigns are funded.

Unfortunately, arguing that the United States should overturn Citizens United is impractical. The Supreme Court majority has the same inclinations as the one that issued the ruling in 2010.

The unlimited corporate contributions allowed by Citizens United erodes constituents' faith in their representatives. How are the people supposed to believe that their representatives could argue for fresh air and clean water if ExxonMobil finances their successful campaigns? Hence, the proposal to ban federal government employees from holding stock is a much more realistic step to take to regain the public's trust, and perhaps can be used as a stepping stone for further reform.

Now, I include all of the federal government because, even though this issue is mainly attributed to our legislative branch, a Wall Street Journal study found that from between 2010 and 2018, 130 federal judges unfairly ruled on their cases because of personal financial stake.

The 2012 Stock Act attempted to address this problem. It attempted to make all congressional trading while using information not available to the public illegal. Unfortunately, the act allowed far too much leeway and had small, ineffective pecuniary punishments relating to violations (just \$200!).

If you need evidence of the Stock Act's uselessness, look no further than congressional stock portfolios, which are public information. Katherine Clark, House Minority Whip, and my own representative in MA-05, saw her estimated net worth quadruple from 4 million to 12 million from 2014-2021. All while making a salary of less than 200k per year. In that time frame, she made 771 trades equating to nearly 10 million dollars of trade volume.

"Public confidence in the integrity of the Government is indispensable to faith in democracy; and when we lose faith in the system, we have lost faith in everything we fight and spend for."

- Adlai Stevenson

In fact, Nancy Pelosi's exorbitant insider trading tactics (over \$160 million in trade volume) have inspired investors to copy her exact trades, and many do so to great effect.

In today's polarized political climate, it's nearly impossible to find an issue with so much bipartisan support: 87% of Democrats and 88% of Republicans say that they would be in support of this legislation.

There have been many attempts by members of Congress to introduce legislation resticing congressional stock holding, from both Republicans and Democrats alike. In 2024, Senator Jeff Merkley (D-Oregon) introduced his ETHICS act attempting to ban the practice, as did Senator Josh Hawley (R-Missouri) with his own act in the same year, Neither bill gained traction.

If a bipartisan bill is passed, then it would send a clear message to the American public: as fractured and corrupt as things look right now, we in Congress promise that we're still using our position to advocate for the issues that each of our electorates care about, and not for our own financial gain.



We Should Abolish the Citizenship Test

By Mansi Babaj



$B_{\mbox{\sc fficially became an american citzen, I}}$

knew I was an American. My relatives mock the accent that coats my "मैं ठीक हूँ," and during a conversation on a king sized bed in a small hotel in Yavatmal, my parents' hometown but not mine, my younger cousin told me that I looked American.

In India, I was too American. In America, I was too Indian. In preschool, my peers would laugh at my skin, calling me "chocolate" before stealing my markers. In elementary school, whenever we discussed anything about India, my teachers

would ask me, "Mansi, do you have anything to add?" I used to always shake my head, mumble a quiet "No," because I never did.

I knew I was American, but Americans didn't think so. Now, even as a citizen, people will still assume that I am something else before I am an American.

What does it mean to be American?

Today, people are told it can be anyone: the single-mother in her tiny apartment making enchiladas for her child and the White man on Wall Street are all American.

If anyone can be American, then no single test should be able to define who can be one. The entire existence of a citizenship test is restrictive; by making a citizenship test, "USCIS has implicitly shaped" what it means to be American because even if a citizenship test is "neutral on their face, the questions reflect deep-seated assumptions about citizenship" such as "who can be citizens" and "who is excluded" (Park 1002). A citizenship test fails to test if America is the only place someone calls home. Instead, it reduces the meaning of being American to a couple of questions that test memorized facts.



"...Give me your tired, your poor, Your huddled masses yearning to breathe free..."

— Emma Lazarus

"The New Colossus"

To have a citizenship test in the first place goes against everything that is scrawled on the Statue of Liberty. In recent years, "citizenship requirements have been incredibly 'culturalized' as a means of protecting the 'host' country" (Goodman, 2014; Joppke, 2007; Ryan, 2008; Vink and de Groot, 2010 as cited in Bassel et al., 2021). Modern citizenship tests imply "that access to citizenship should be based on cultural dimensions such as language or the knowledge of 'values'" (Bassel et al. 260). America has been built by the diversity of its immigrants; Chipotle is one of the most popular food franchises, and many Americans will ask themselves if they want Thai or Chinese for dinner. It's completely unfair to celebrate America's diversity while creating a test that promotes one cultural viewpoint. If what President Reagen once declared, anybody anywhere can be American, is true, then America has no right to tell its immigrants that they are not American until they stop being something else.

However, some may argue that a citizenship test is necessary to make sure immigrants are able to fulfill the civic duties assigned to citizens in democratic societies: voting, being a part of a jury, etc. The current citizenship test, some would say, confirms that immigrants are somewhat familiar "with the particular [political and historical] backdrop" of America (Blake 317). It is true that all citizens should have enough knowledge to complete their civic duty properly. However, the idea that a citizenship test is the best way to confirm that immigrants will be able to contribute to America's democracy is incorrect. Immigrants, who are not citizens, have always served America civically. Ernestine Louise Potowski Rose was a Polish immigrant who "lectured in more than twenty states, addressing legislative bodies on the issues of antislavery, temperance and freedom of thought, as well as women's rights." ("Ernestine Louise Potowski Rose"). She was not a citizen when she was campaigning for the ideologies she stood by; she was an immigrant. Furthermore, this line of thinking implies that who can remember how many seats there are for senators (100). Yet,

according to a national survey conducted by the Institute of Citizens and Scholars, "only one in three Americans (36 percent) can actually pass a multiple choice test consisting of items taken from the U.S. Citizenship Test." It is completely unfair to hold immigrants to a higher standard than birthright citizens. If America wants to stay true to its ideology of cultural acceptance that it boasts about on a world stage, citizenship shouldn't be restricted to the people who can remember how many seats there are for senators (100).

Before I was a citizen, I knew I was American. Yet, I still needed to take a multiple choice test to confirm I was. The citizenship test doesn't investigate how American someone is, but how culturally assimilated a person is. For that reason, the citizenship test should be entirely removed from the process of naturalization; Americans are not defined by our knowledge of the Constitution, but by the identity we all share. There is no test that will ever come close to accurately defining this identity.

Immigrants become Americans when they move here; that is what it means to be called the "Land of Immigrants."



Excellence Endangered: The High Cost of Removing Gifted Education Programs



I NOUR CONTEMPORARY EDUCATIONAL LANDSCAPE, A

troubling shift is emerging: the gradual dismantling of programs aimed at nurturing and challenging our brightest students. Schools across the nation increasingly favor egalitarian approaches, emphasizing uniformity rather than acknowledging and fostering individual academic strengths. While the intentions behind such moves - promoting inclusivity, reducing stress, and minimizing perceived elitism-are commendable, the outcomes of these policies inadvertently stifle intellectual potential, diminish the quality of

American innovation, and hinder the cultivation of critical skills necessary in an increasingly competitive global economy.

Firstly, the global marketplace for talent is intensifying. Historically, the United States has been a beacon attracting the most gifted minds worldwide. International students and professionals have flocked here precisely because of our longstanding commitment to excellence, meritocracy, and specialized academic programs that cater to diverse abilities. These programs provide accelerated curricula, mentorship opportunities, and intellectual environments where gifted students thrive.

However, this tradition is under threat. Policymakers and educational authorities, under pressure from various political and social quarters, are incrementally removing programs designed explicitly for high-achieving students. The rationale often cited involves promoting equity. While equity is undoubtedly vital, its implementation need not-and should not-come at the expense of excellence. Excellence and equity must coexist, complementing rather than undermining each other.



"An investment in knowledge pays the best interest."

— Benjamin Franklin Poor Richard's Almanac

Countries like China, South Korea, Singapore, and Finland have recognized the necessity of differentiated education, offering tailored learning environments to maximize the potential of their brightest students. These nations consistently outperform the U.S. in global education rankings. While certain tests like the Gaokao may not be the way to go, it still allows the best to succeed. According to the Programme for International Student Assessment (PISA), American students have slipped significantly compared to their international peers in math, science, and reading literacy. This decline is not coincidental but symptomatic of educational policies that inadvertently penalize high achievers by removing opportunities specifically designed to push them academically.

Moreover, the elimination of advanced programs at the elementary level has long-lasting detrimental effects on students' academic development. Early childhood education shapes lifelong learning habits, setting the foundational behaviors for academic and professional success. Specialized programs at elementary schools such as gifted programs, advanced placement in subjects like mathematics, and enrichment activities in sciences—encourage curiosity, critical thinking, perseverance, and effective study habits from a young age. Removing these critical programs significantly disadvantages students who naturally seek intellectual challenges.





Research consistently shows that gifted students who lack appropriate challenges become disengaged and may exhibit behavior issues due to boredom and lack of stimulation. The National Association for Gifted Children underscores that gifted learners need differentiated education that matches their advanced abilities. Without this support, gifted students risk stagnation, their potential left unrealized, their intellectual curiosity withering away.

Furthermore, an educational system that does not actively foster intellectual rigor in elementary school inevitably diminishes students' preparedness for more advanced educational pursuits later in life. The long-term result is a cascading effect: high school students less ready for demanding curricula, fewer students entering rigorous university programs in STEM (Science, Technology, Engineering, and Mathematics) fields, and ultimately a diminished workforce of highly skilled professionals.

Critics argue that pushing high-achieving students too early creates undue stress and fosters unhealthy competition. Yet this viewpoint fundamentally misunderstands the nature of intellectual curiosity and motivation. Gifted education is not about stress or unhealthy competition; it's about matching educational challenges to students' intrinsic intellectual capacities and ambitions. Properly managed, these programs create supportive communities where intellectually curious students encourage one another, thrive collaboratively, and reach their fullest potential.

Critically, the broader societal implications of reducing intellectual challenges are stark. As the global economy becomes increasingly knowledge-based, driven by innovation, creativity, and technological advancements, critical thinking and specialized knowledge are more crucial than ever. A workforce

inadequately prepared in these skills is detrimental to America's competitive position globally. The jobs of the future highly specialized, requiring advanced cognitive and problem-solving skills demand education systems that identify and nurture talent early and consistently.

Indeed, society at large suffers when education is watered down. Innovation stalls, creativity diminishes, and national progress in fields such as technology, healthcare, and scientific research slows significantly. The remarkable innovations of the 20th and 21st centuries-advances in computing, medical breakthroughs, and renewable energy technologies stemmed largely from educational systems that actively cultivated talent through rigorous, challenging educational environments. Reducing these opportunities compromises future breakthroughs and progress.

Moreover, nurturing advanced learning environments encourages the kind of critical thinking and problem-solving abilities that are essential for informed citizenship. Democracies rely heavily on populations capable of nuanced, critical thought skills often honed in advanced academic programs. Critical



thinkers are less susceptible to misinformation, more capable of participating effectively in civic life, and more adept at addressing complex societal challenges. As these programs disappear, the quality of democratic engagement itself risks erosion.

Some have suggested that gifted programs perpetuate inequality. It's true that historically, some specialized programs suffered from inequitable access, favoring privileged students due to systemic biases or resource disparities. However, the solution isn't to eliminate these programs entirely but to democratize access rigorously. Ensuring all gifted students-regardless of socioeconomic status, race, gender, or geographic location have equal access to advanced programs is the essential corrective measure. Investment in equitable identification practices and broader outreach is necessary, not wholesale elimination.

Indeed, the erosion of educational excellence in pursuit of equality is misguided and ultimately self-defeating. Educational equity should mean equal access to opportunities tailored to diverse needs— not forced homogeneity. True educational equity values every student's unique abilities, providing appropriate resources and challenges to ensure all can succeed according to their potential. Excellence should remain an educational priority alongside equity, fostering a learning environment where high achievers are challenged and inspired, not discouraged or overlooked. America's continued vitality, innovation, and global leadership depend upon it.

Meet the Zine Team



Abigail Huffman

Abigail "Abby" Huffman is a first-year fellow from Grand Rapids, Michigan. Abby is a rising senior at Forest Hills Eastern High School.



Peter Kennedy

Peter Kennedy is a second-year fellow from West Chester, Pennsylvania. Peter is a recent graduate of B. Reed Henderson High School and is an incoming freshman at the University of Pennsylvania, where he plans to study Philosophy, Politics, Economics.

Meet the Zine Team



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Mansi Bajaj is a first-year fellow from Aurora, Illinois and rising senior at Metea Valley High School.



Bella Fajardo

Bella Fajardo is a first-year fellow from Westfield, New Jersey and is a rising senior at Union County Vocational– Technical High School.



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James Constan is a second-year fellow from Cambridge, Massachusetts. James is a recent graduate of the Buckingham Browne & Nichols Upper School and is an incoming freshman at the University of Pennsylvania, where he plans to study Political Science.



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Acknowledgements

THIS ZINE IS THE CULMINATING PROJECT OF THE BILL OF RIGHTS INSTITUTE STUDENT FELLOWSHIP.

WE EXTEND OUR HEARTFELT GRATITUDE TO THE BILL OF RIGHTS INSTITUTE FOR THEIR SUPPORT, GUIDANCE, AND THE OPPORTUNITY TO ENGAGE IN MEANINGFUL CIVIC DIALOGUE.

THIS PUBLICATION WOULD NOT HAVE BEEN POSSIBLE WITHOUT THEIR DEDICATION TO FOSTERING YOUTH LEADERSHIP AND CONSTITUTIONAL UNDERSTANDING.

WE WOULD LIKE TO OFFER A SPECIAL THANKS TO MRS. RACHEL DAVIS-HUMPHRIES, MR. CHRIS JANSON, MS. ALLISON FERRIELL, AND MR. BEN SULASKI FOR THEIR GENEROSITY AND SUPPORT IN CULTIVATING AMERICA'S NEXT GENERATION OF LEADERS, THINKERS, STUDENTS, AND CITIZENS THROUGH THE DURATION OF OUR FELLOWSHIP THIS YEAR.

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