The Future of Democracy: A small town analysis
Democracy in America is being tested. The fabric of society is undergoing severe changes which threaten the principles and values which have built this great nation. Small towns all over the United States are facing similar economic, social, and political problems as a result of globalization, market economy, and social class distinctions. The future of democracy is dependent on citizens’ desires to live in a better community, collectively solve problems, and hope for a better tomorrow. In setting the stage for an examination of the future of democracy, we will examine the small, middle class borough of Exeter Pennsylvania, its history beginning in colonial America, culture encompassing race, ethnicity, and age, government including the Exeter borough council, and the economic situation stemming from small businesses, and other indicators of wealth and well being within the borough. An analysis of these characteristics will help indicate the apparent health of democracy by allowing us to understand how democracy began in Exeter, how citizens interact with each other to help improve the community, and by constructing the proverbial economic painting of the borough. How do people act and how do their actions affect the level of their participation and interest in government? These characteristics and questions can also illustrate if the state of democracy is failing if they indicate conflicting groups for political power, a disparity of wealth between social classes, and a shortage of jobs. In Exeter, democracy is a word which has many uses. Some of which would include a type of government, and others would interpret it as a way of life.

While on our journey, two theories of democracy, both pluralism and participatory will be discussed and applied to our borough in an attempt to help predict what the future of democracy will be in this small town in Northeastern Pennsylvania. The pluralistic approach will entail discussion on topics related to competition between groups to attain political power and how this Madisonian theory is not correct, as well as how the political culture of Exeter is
personified by classical republican theory of competition stemmed from pluralism. Detailing the participatory component of the democracy in Exeter borough will include an examination of the weak voting behavior of citizens, and how participatory democracy leads to classical pluralism. Each of these theories of democracy is important and will be outlined and discussed as they relate to the citizens of Exeter borough.

The historical significance of Exeter and of the Wyoming Valley is often overlooked by those who study colonial America. The seed of democracy, however, has grown there ever since the earliest settlers began to live there. The early colonial development of the town of Exeter began as English settlers developed the area using fortifications along the banks of the Susquehanna River to protect against attacking Native Americans. Early on, the fortifications were influential in the period of history during the Yankee-Pennamite Wars which took place in the Wyoming Valley as Connecticut settlers fought Pennsylvanians for control of the land from 1769 through 1799. This conflict was the only real conflict to touch the area for the rest of the Revolutionary War. Once the Wyoming Valley was established as territory belonging to Pennsylvania, the rest of the area began to flourish around the centers of Scranton and Wilkes-Barre. Exeter, along with the other Wyoming Valley towns, slowly developed into small river commercial areas. The access to the Susquehanna River made trade possible, but the real economic boost for the area would come in the form of something totally different: something hidden deep under the soil. The people of the Wyoming Valley would make their economic legacy by mining Anthracite Coal.

The Borough’s rich history of coal mining has left a scar not only upon the land once used to gather the resources, but has scared the local inhabitants. Coal was king in Northeastern Pennsylvania. Its economic thunder was heard throughout the east coast of the United States. The
future of Exeter and the surrounding communities was coal dependent. This would change in 1959 when the River Slope Mine of the Knox Mine collapsed and millions of gallons of water from the Susquehanna River flooded the mine shafts. As a result of this disaster, coal mining in the Wyoming Valley ended.

Rebuilding an economy after the ruined coal mining industry was difficult. The Borough almost exclusively exports workers to work in neighborhoods outside of the borough with the exception of small localized industry. Without the support of king coal, the borough relies on non-industrious jobs such as teaching at the Wyoming Area School District, or workers who build mobile wheel-chairs at Pride Mobility incorporated. These jobs are sufficient but only help a marginal number of people in the borough. Other sources of income can be attributed to the many small businesses which are present in the borough. Small pizzerias, restaurants, bars and taverns, banks, gas stations, and supermarkets all help support the local economy.

As a result of its history, Exeter borough is a slowly developing community. In the future, the borough will need to expand services to its citizens and attract more economic opportunity. The borough is a very rich historical area and might want to consider capitalizing on such historical value. The following discussion of the future of democracy will entail how Exeter borough will look in ten, twenty, and even thirty years. Although theories of democracy will be applied to the borough, they will not accurately portray every small town in America.

United States Route 11, a north/south stretch of federal highway, snakes its way from the northern most tip of New York and ends it’s nearly 1,600 mile long journey in Louisiana. If you’ve ever traveled on this highway through the miles and miles of rural Pennsylvania you’ll pass a myriad of small American towns. These towns and boroughs are located in some of the most pristine territory of our nation. Our borough of Exeter is conveniently situated in Luzerne
County in the Wyoming Valley, one carved by massive glaciers decades ago and throughout history has seen English colonists, revolutionary Americans, farmers, business owners, and families. One thing may people do not recognize and acknowledge about the residents of Exeter Borough is that they are an extraordinary group of people who are just “as American” as any other group of people in the nation. The people of Exeter borough value democracy. They value its principles, its exercise, and its historical significance to the United States. It is not queer to say that democracy in Exeter Pennsylvania is failing, in fact, it is quite the opposite.

Historically, the residents of Exeter borough define the very meaning of participatory democracy. In Exeter, democracy is not a word used only to describe voting behavior, demographics, or economic statistics, but it is an institution defined by many other things. Freedom perhaps, would be a word more likely to describe how the residents of Exeter borough feel about their democracy. If there was ever a clearer example of how the residents of Exeter feel about freedom, I would suggest taking time out of your day to travel to the nearby town of West Pittston Pennsylvania to the West Pittston Armory where Company A, 2nd Battalion, 103rd Armor division of the Pennsylvania Army National Guard is located. There are many residents of Exeter who serve as part of this unit of the United States military. Participatory democracy to these young men and women means duty to God, duty to unit, and duty to country. For a more accurate cross-section of military service people in Exeter, there is also the local Veterans of Foreign Wars post and American Legion which has many members. These veterans participate in their democracy by serving in the common defense of the nation they love so dearly. The presence of such veterans’ organizations in Exeter is very powerful in helping to explain what type of impact the veterans have on the community. The mayor of Exeter borough, Joseph Coyne, is a member of the Veterans of Foreign Wars post in Exeter. Mayor Coyne is a
figurehead of the Exeter borough council and is what would be considered a weak mayor. Although his power as mayor is limited by the Exeter borough council, he extends a different political power: the power of persuasion and image. Mayor Coyne can be seen at any type of public event as a member of his VFW unit. It is because he is such an apparent figure in the social activity of Exeter that he is relatively popular. Having a mayor who is popular because of his military service and who diligently supports and advocates for support of local National Guard troops, is a true representation to one element of what it means to participate, and encourage other people to participate in your democracy.

Knowing that there is a high degree of loyalty to democracy from the National Guard troops who serve from Exeter, it would be appropriate to ask the question do those who serve in the military succumb to certain values in order to preserve others. In this case, the comparison would come between modifying personal behavior by adopting military values and lifestyle in order to become a soldier or remaining regular citizens with no military background and training. I will not argue that military service is important, it most certainly is, but military service turns citizen soldiers into soldier citizens, hence modifying the very nature of what it means to be free thinking independent citizens. Benjamin Barber, noted author, historian, and political theorist, might relate military service as a form of thin or weak political participation like voting, in a way that suggests service men and women trade “their values, beliefs, and actions…such as the western values of freedom, equality, and social justice” for military values, beliefs, and actions. Although it is entirely possible that these values overlap, they could most certainly be virtue, duty, honor, and respect, but not all regular citizens possess these qualities. Barber relates these two points because his feelings toward political participation suggest that people are never truly free unless they are voting on Election Day. It may also be related considering the training and
obedience soldiers feel toward their government after they have enlisted. Relating the ideas of Barber to participatory democracy through military service would require an analysis of what attracts someone to join the military. Barber might see military service as a necessary evil in relation to democracy in that the collective defense is extremely important even in the face of forfeiting individuality and original thought to become transformed into a soldier vexed by the country he or she serves. This comparison is one which is unique, and although not overwhelmingly present in Exeter borough, it is still an element which needs to be analyzed. It takes a very special person to become a member of the United States military. It attracts citizens who already have a defined sense of direction about their life. It transforms them and shapes them into the leaders of tomorrow. This valuable training and personal alteration of a normal citizen into a military tool, and equipping them with the skills, knowledge, and pride that a soldier possesses, can and usually does attract people to the military. Also, a sense of duty to country and to our fellow men, attracts people to serve. The military is one way in which citizens can participate in their government; it is not, however, the only way which deeply plays to the emotional fabric of a society. The news media presents stories and has coverage of local, national, and world events that can influence us to either willingly participate in our democracy, or persuade us otherwise. It too, like military service, is valuable when determining how the future of democracy will play out in Exeter borough Pennsylvania.

Benjamin Barber also raises another critical point in his analysis of Strong Democracy. He asserts that “strong democracy is self government by citizens rather than representative government in the name of citizens.” This point is true, but is very hard to actually find and observe in practice. Exeter borough is the type of community where feedback from citizens is reinforced by newspaper coverage and television stories. In a way, citizens hold their
government accountable by public outcry. It is a generally accepted fact that governments do not like to be portrayed negatively by the news media. However, some governments use the news coverage as positive exposure. In any case, the citizens of Exeter although not directly governing, are highly influential in the formulation of policy.

In reference to participatory democracy, residents of Exeter participate in many different committees and organizations which have power in the local government. This is the nexus between participatory democracy and pluralism. One outstanding example of a participatory organization which relates to pluralistic democracy is the Hick’s Creek Watershed Association. Hicks Creek is a tributary of the Susquehanna River which runs lengthwise through Exeter and the Wyoming Valley. There are some very persuasive, outspoken, and energetic members of this association whose persistence is able to influence the Exeter borough council. In a way, it is appropriate to say that organizations like the Hicks Creek Watershed Association have an indirect ability to formulate legislation and acquire money from the Exeter borough council. Participatory democracy is directly influenced and practiced when citizens organize themselves in organizations which collectively have decision making power.

In contrast, participating in democracy has many more elements than just military service and local citizens’ organizations. In order to understand what they are, it is important to first analyze Exeter borough in greater detail. Discussing demographics, economic situations, and other elements relevant to participatory democracy is important in understanding how the residents of Exeter Pennsylvania truly participate in their democracy.

The main population statistics from the United States Census Bureau estimate that the population for Exeter Borough in the year 2000 was approximately 5,559 persons. 3 Of these citizens, the borough is dominated by white-non Hispanics and has a very small percentage of
Hispanics, Latinos, African Americans, and other races. In light of this information, the cultural backgrounds of the citizens of Exeter Borough include Irish, Polish, Lithuanian, Slovak, German, and others. This information about race and ethnicity is important because it allows us to analyze other important demographics of the area such as age. In Exeter Borough, the median age is approximately 40 years old but the age of citizens varies significantly throughout the borough.

The majority of Exeter borough residents are registered democrats, but the margin is small and does not have an overwhelming impact on election results. Historically, Exeter borough and the Wyoming Valley have been part of the democratically dominated 11th congressional district for many years. Their participation in the 2004 presidential election helped Democrat John Kerry capture the electoral votes from Pennsylvania. The voting behavior of Exeter residents is not unlike the voting behavior of any other small American town. You can usually find a large ratio of older voters to younger voters. This proportion is relatively consistent across the United States. Once again, all of these statistics are important to help better understand participatory democracy, but if a pluralistic approach is used to define how Exeter borough residents view their government a clearer picture can be painted of the small valley neighborhood which regularly participates in the government. Pluralism offers a more simplistic Aristotelian perspective as to why it is beneficial in a democracy. Multiple interests lead to competition for power, and as more competition arises, more citizens are likely to get involved and participate in their government.

Arthur Bentley, American philosopher and political scientist, once described the pluralist theory of democracy as “interest groups competing with each other over scarce resources and whose competition leads to an equilibrium that remains stable until disturbed by the arrival of a
new group discontented with the present arrangement.” In Exeter borough, the prevalence of multiple groups competing for power is evident, in fact, it is very noticeable. It is noticeable not only for borough council, but also through the election of the Wyoming Area School Board, and the elections in various local social organizations.

Relevant to Exeter borough council, Mayor Joseph Coyne is a member of the Exeter VFW post. Some of the borough council members are accredited attorneys, businessmen, and regular blue collar workers. The elections for the Wyoming Area School Board are usually politically motivated. The citizens who run for office as members of the school board also represent a variety of interests including small business, education, fire and police services, and a general interest for the residents of the school district. It is easy to see that there are many competing interests in Exeter borough.

Arthur Bentley also asserts that “there is no group without its interest.” This is true although some groups who compete for political power have different intentions in relation to what they plan to achieve from their winning political office. It is for this reason why the statement Arthur Bentley makes about special interests balancing each other is not correct. No matter how many special interests are competing for political power, they will never balance each other because to some degree the level of interest in political power is different from one group to the next. Depending on how large or small the membership of certain organizations is will greatly influence how much power that organization has. James Madison argues in Federalist 10 that factions in American democracy are groups of people who gather together to promote special political and economic interests. However, Madison failed to foresee the development of factions at the state and local level in addition to the federal level. Localized interests have proliferated ever since the time of Madison. The sheer numbers of local pluralist
factions makes it extremely difficult to reach a collective decision between them. Their interests are so broad that it is important to remember what, if any, causes that special interest group advocates. Usually organizations affiliated with a moral obligation such as the church have greater membership than groups advocating for new park benches. In Exeter borough, the level of interest is varied between groups seeking power. Competing interests are good for society, but depending on the number of interests, decisions are sometimes never made because an agreement cannot be reached. This is one problem Exeter borough will need to correct in the future if their pluralist approach to government is to be maintained without conflict.

In light of the current political, social, and economic situations present in Exeter borough, there is always hope for the future. There is nothing stopping Exeter borough residents from collectively deciding that they want changes made to their government. They are strong people, many of whom have lived through some of the most tumultuous periods in American history. Their dedication to the preservation of their democracy is strong and their participation is unwavering. Average citizens and advocacy groups encourage political participation every day and this trend will continue into the future. If a prediction was to be made about the economic future of Exeter borough, it would have to be that local businesses will remain constant. The economic situation in Exeter is not the greatest, but residents lead decent lives. Their sons and daughters receive an above average public education from the Wyoming Area School District for a fraction of what some other public high schools cost. Although many Exeter residents commute to work outside of the borough there may be the possibility of the borough attracting new businesses. The economic future of Exeter borough will be dependent upon residents’ willingness to adapt to new technology and ultimately upon their ability to become re-educated for jobs which may potentially be attracted to the area.
The political future of Exeter borough will be determined by several factors. These factors include the anticipated development of problems surrounding the Luzerne county property tax re-assessment, an increase of illegal immigrants who have left the nearby town of Hazleton, and the ever present risk of flooding from the Susquehanna River.

The Luzerne county property tax-reassessment was originally scheduled to begin in the summer of 2006 but was postponed for political reasons between the Luzerne county commissioners. This is a prospective threat to the democracy of Exeter because it is one issue that many residents are strongly opposed to. Residents in Exeter who have lived there longer than others will experience a greater increase on the re-assessed value of their property than residents who are new to the area. The basic components of this issue will rival individuals of different income levels as well. It is one issue that needs to be seriously considered when attempting to predict the future of Exeter borough.

Secondly, the immigration crisis that is currently taking place in nearby Hazleton will likely cause a migration of illegal immigrants from that town into surrounding neighborhoods including Exeter. There is currently no major problem with illegal immigrants in Exeter. There are individuals in the borough who are legal immigrants and who came to the United States legally. The problems between the immigrant population and the government in Hazleton will potentially lead many of those immigrants to leave and seek a new, more tolerant community. This is a problem for Exeter borough residents because they are very proud of who they are and how they got to where they are. It will not be pleasant to see how residents react to people they see as inherently different from themselves. It will not be a problem which will require intervention from law enforcement, but a problem which needs to be confronted either in the classrooms of the Wyoming Area School District, or on the floor of the Exeter Borough Council.
As the borough of Exeter continues to grow and incorporates more homes and businesses along the banks of the Susquehanna River, the risk of flooding is a constant threat. The Wyoming valley is no stranger to the dangers and devastation caused by one of Mother Nature’s most destructive forces. Memories of the flood of 1972 still linger in the borough. In fact, residents who lived in Exeter during the flood still live there and can tell the tale of hurricane Agnes. Flooding is a concern for the borough because not only does the Susquehanna River threaten the borough, but several local creeks, streams, and low lying areas are as equally threatening to potential floods. Most residents are not frightened by small natural increases in the river levels, but when instances of major flooding occur, such as that of 1972 and of 2006, residents become more concerned and look to their government to help in their time of need.

In an effort to predict how the future of democracy will look in Exeter borough Pennsylvania, it is important to remember that the future can not be predicted. Residents can and have the ability to hope for a better tomorrow. They can rely on their government to act on certain issues and address their needs, or they can combine these two by making their needs known to government officials and working together to achieve a common goal. Exeter borough has a rich tradition stretching back to the earliest founding’s of colonial America. The people who live there are strong, mostly blue collar, hard working Americans living and working together in a community which faces many challenges. It is not the responsibility of the government to ensure the future of democracy in Exeter borough. The citizens must take this task and prepare to meet the challenges ahead. Even if we say the future cannot be predicted, we are certain, however, that the people of Exeter will move forward into the future with high hopes. Living and working collectively in the community will ensure that the residents of Exeter borough Luzerne county Pennsylvania will be prepared for the future of their democracy.
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