The Future of American Democracy: 
Northeast Philadelphia

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**Background of Mayfair**

The community of Mayfair is in the Northeast section of Philadelphia. It was developed and settled primarily after World War II. Mayfair, at first, was a section of the city where veterans could settle down and start their lives again after returning from the war. Many residents were mainly middle-class and either of Irish-Catholic or of Jewish descent.

Mayfair was a section of the city where people came home to lay their heads after a long day of work at the Navy yard in South Philadelphia or other jobs in Center City. They would leave their work troubles in the shipping yard and come home to their huge families waiting for them at home. Many residents attended and then sent their own children to Catholic schools which decorate the neighborhood. Of those born in the section of the city between the post-World War II period to the early 1970s, many chose to stay and raise their own families.

For instance, both of my grandfathers were Navy veterans from World War II and the Korean War. Both moved from other sections of Philadelphia to Mayfair where they raised their families and worked in the industrial sections of the city. My mother and father went to Catholic school, married and raised our family in the neighborhood. Both of my parents went on to become Philadelphia police officers. My brothers and I attended Catholic school.

Aside from that example, there was a growing trend in the late 1980s and 1990s. Many residents began moving out of the neighborhood. Some moved to other parts of the
city, but most moved to either Southern New Jersey or the outlying suburbs of Philadelphia. What was the reason for this sudden out surge of population from a neighborhood that was once flourishing with people?

The children of these middle-class Irish Catholics or Jews who moved into neighborhoods of higher economic status were replaced by those hoping to fulfill the same dream the first residents of Mayfair accomplished: an economically stable and safe place to raise their family. These new residents, though, tended to be from poorer neighborhoods and brought their lifestyle from those neighborhoods with them. This lifestyle includes a lack of preservation of property, crime, and drugs. Many long time residents of Mayfair are furious at this movement and have begun a backlash. Residents are desperately trying to preserve the neighborhood the way it was when they were growing up.

Is this preservation a necessity or is it just residents being nostalgic and wishing for the “good old times?” Will longtime residents be able to keep their hold on the neighborhood or will it become a place for a newer low-class population? A bigger question to ask would be will Mayfair be democratic in the next 35 years? This paper hopes to answer these questions by applying classic theories of democracy to Mayfair, interviewing pertinent members of the neighborhood, and looking at statistics.

**Democratic Theories**

Democracy has been defined by many and the term has been around since the days of Aristotle and Plato. Democracy today still being applied by its true definition is a different story. Some see the negative in the word and others, positivity. Aristotle for instance has listed democracy among the three “perversions” of true forms of
government, calling it “the most tolerable of the three.”¹ The United States Department of State defines democracy as “government by the people in which the supreme power is vested in the people and exercised directly by them or by their elected agents under a free electoral system.”² These definitions are exceptionally general and the original theory of democracy has evolved since its first inception during ancient times.

To better apply democracy to the theme of this paper, it might be appropriate to more narrowly define democracy. Two types of democracy that would be apt to the future of democracy in Mayfair would be performance and participatory. Both, at a glance, would seem to describe Mayfair and the type of democracy that thrives there.

Joseph Schumpeter lists three conditions for the success of a democracy: the human material of politics should be sufficiently high quality, the effective range of political decision should not be extended too far, and democratic government is to include the services of a well-trained bureaucracy of good standing and tradition, endowed with a strong sense of duty.³ Schumpeter believes that there is no real common good in the modern form of democracy, but rather voters putting their own good first. “If the government performs well, that is, serves their immediate well-being, then they retain it; if not, then they vote to replace it.”⁴

Schumpeter describes voters as being easily manipulated, almost eerily like consumers in a marketplace. “The question candidates ask themselves in this theory is not what is best for the country but what will attract enough voters to win.”⁵ Another reason

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¹ Aristotle, Selections from Politics, 335-323 B.C.
³ Joseph A. Schumpeter, Capitalism, Socialism, and Democracy, 1942.
⁴ Ronald J. Tercheck, Thomas C. Conte, Theories of Democracy: A Reader, (Maryland: Rowman and Littlefield Publishers, Inc.), pg 141.
⁵ Ibid, 142.
why Schumpeter believes there is no common good is that the word common good itself could mean different things to different people. “There is no such thing as a uniquely determined common good that all people could agree on…This is due not primarily to the fact that some people may want things other than the common good but to the much more fundamental fact that to different individuals and groups the common good is bound to mean different things.”

Schumpeter’s counterpart in the study of performance democracy is Anthony Downs. He also describes voters in a performance democracy as highly self-interested. “Voters reference politics to their own well-being and that leaders search not for a common good but a strategy that will get them elected or reelected…Acting as political consumers, citizens try to get the best deal they can for themselves.”

He critiques past attempts to define democratic government that serves a so called “common good.” “Every such attempt fails to face the fact that governments are concrete institutions run by men, because it deals with them on a purely normative level.”

He later on echoes the sentiments of Schumpeter when he writes, “From these definitions and axioms springs my central hypothesis: political parties in a democracy formulate policy strictly as a means of gaining votes.” He calls the leaders “persuaders” and says that they are not interested in what the voter wants, but how these voters will aid their cause. “Therefore, they provide only those facts which are favorable to whatever group they are supporting.” Both the ideas of Schumpeter and Downs are summed up as

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6 Ibid.
7 Ibid, 142.
9 Ibid.
10 Ibid.
“a political dynamic in which citizens have come to expect their government to be responsive to their individual interests.”\textsuperscript{11}

An additional theory of democracy is known as participatory democracy. This theory has been described as encouraging “late-twentieth-century American thinkers to active, collaborative participation in great campaigns of democratic reform.”\textsuperscript{12} This theory moves away from the original concept of just voting leaders into office. “Participatory theorists want to move beyond voting and other conventional ways of formal democratic expression to make room for additional modes of political activity that can help to retrieve the substantive promise of democratic life.”\textsuperscript{13}

John Dewey has written articles with the theme of participatory democracy. He believes that, similar to the definition stated above, that democracy should not be restricted to only voting. If one expands on their intelligence, then they can effectively participate in democracy. “The essential need is the improvement of the methods and conditions of debate, discussion, and persuasion. The level of action fixed by embodied intelligence is always the important thing.”\textsuperscript{14}

Dewey feels that venues of participation need to be expanded. He writes “that only by reclaiming public arenas for the practice of localized self-government can citizens hope to govern themselves freely and wisely.”\textsuperscript{15}

Benjamin Barber also offers some incite into participatory democracy. He offers us what he believes to be “a desirable alternative to purely representative or ‘weak’ models of democracy, which look to remote forms of representation to solve

\textsuperscript{11} Ibid, 142.
\textsuperscript{13} Ibid, 165.
\textsuperscript{15} Ibid, 166.
organizational problems.”\textsuperscript{16} He clearly defines participatory democracy as the following: “it is self-government by citizens rather than representative government in the name of citizens. Active citizens govern themselves directly here, not necessarily at every level and in every instance, but frequently enough.”\textsuperscript{17} He favors citizens being active within their community which in turn improves democracy. “Barber works with the idea that it is democratic deliberation and action create democratic citizens.”\textsuperscript{18} Both believe that inducing participatory democracy on a basic community level will resonate with citizens up to a higher national level.

\textit{Methods and Research}

With both theories of democracy evidently defined in this paper, it is appropriate to hypothesize if either is prevalent in Mayfair and if either will be prevalent in its future. To effectively study this question, some statistical information compared to a similar area might be helpful.

Mayfair is described by its Community Development Corporation as a “great place to live and work.” The total population in 2000 was approximately 48,483. Of that total, 74.3\% was 18 years and over while 16.7\% was 65 years and older. The racial percentages are as follows: White, 81.8\%; Black, 6.5\%; and Asian, 5.7\%. The number of housing units total at 19,947. Of those units, 21.3\% are considered renter-occupied units. Most residents of Mayfair hold only a high school graduate degree, 76\% of the residents. Only 13.5\% have a bachelor’s degree or higher. 19.6\% speak a language other than English at home. 60.8 \% are in the labor force while 8.3\% are families below the poverty

\textsuperscript{16} Ibid, 166
\textsuperscript{17} Benjamin Barber, \textit{Strong Democracy}, (1984).
\textsuperscript{18} Ibid, 166.
level. The median age is 35.7. The average household size is 2.55 and the median household income in 1999 was $37,210. The highest number of first ancestries reported is Irish with 11,144.

Mayfair could most likely be compared to the New York City borough, Queens. Regarding population size, in 2000 Queens boasted 2,229,379 residents. Out of that number, 77.2% are 18 years and over, whereas 12.7% are 65 years and older. Compared to Mayfair, those percentages are around the same. The racial percentages within Queens are: 44.1% are White, 20% are Black, and 17.6% are Asian. These percentages are more evenly matched compared to Mayfair’s racial percentages, which tended to have minorities more isolated and scarce. The total number of housing units are 817,250. Again compared to Mayfair, the size is substantially larger. However, like Mayfair, 74.4% of the residents of Queens hold only a high school diploma. Out of the population of Queens, 53.6% speak a language other than English. This is a comparatively larger percentage than Mayfair’s. 58.4% are in the labor force and 11.4% of families are below the poverty level. These statistics are relatively the same compared to Mayfair also. The average household size is 2.59 with the median income being $42,439.

The two most outstanding statistics are the fact that 76% of Mayfair residents hold only a high school degree and that 19.6% speak a language other than English at home. These and other statistics correlate with an interview given by a Philadelphia Police Officer and longtime resident of Mayfair, Eileen McGilloway. When asked if in the past 10-20 years has democracy deteriorated or grown and is the neighborhood the same or has it changed greatly:

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20 City-Data.com
“Unfortunately, Mayfair has changed greatly in the past five years alone. Residents are not caring for their property (i.e.- up keep, sweeping pavements, home improvements) like they used to. There does not seem to be as much pride in the neighborhood as there used to be. Democracy has definitely deteriorated due to a lower class of people starting to move in and as I said previously, do not have pride in the neighborhood that they live in.”\textsuperscript{21}

When Officer McGilloway was asked if she saw Mayfair being democratic 35 years from now, she had this to say:

“No I do not see Mayfair democratic 35 years from now. I have lived in Mayfair for 18 years now and I have seen a steady decline in political participation and voter turnout. As of now, it seems as though it is still a middle class economic neighborhood but I can see that it is very slowly changing to a lower class status because some of the middle class people are starting to move out of the city due to the high crime rate, therefore selling to lower income people moving up from low class neighborhoods.”\textsuperscript{22}

Tom Waring a writer for the \textit{Northeast Times} gave a slightly different perspective on the neighborhood and democracy within the area. When asked if democracy in Mayfair has changed for the worst or the better in the past 10-20 years, he responded with:

“In the last 10 to 20 years, Mayfair has been stable. Property values have doubled this decade. Democracy is strong because both Democrats and Republicans compete for the votes in Mayfair. The neighborhood is represented in the Pennsylvania House of Representatives by John Perzel, who formerly served as

\textsuperscript{21} Interview with Eileen McGilloway, given by Kristin Gushue, April 2, 2007.
\textsuperscript{22} Ibid.
speaker and majority leader. He brought back a lot of money for the Mayfair Community Development Corporation, local schools and other neighborhood projects.”

When Mr. Waring was asked if he believed democracy would be prevalent in Mayfair in the next 35 years he said, “there is no way of knowing what Mayfair will look like in 35 years. Unfortunately, many middle-class neighborhoods in Philadelphia have become rundown, and it's taken a lot less than 35 years for it to happen. Mayfair is largely a rowhome neighborhood, and surrounding communities already seem to be in decline.”

Both interviewees gave some incite into crime trends in Mayfair. Officer McGilloway and Mr. Waring mutually agreed that crime has been on the rise in the past few years. Mr. Waring was somewhat vague in his answer saying, “As for your questions, there is no way of knowing what Mayfair will look like in 35 years. Unfortunately, many middle-class neighborhoods in Philadelphia have become rundown, and it's taken a lot less than 35 years for it to happen. Mayfair is largely a row home neighborhood, and surrounding communities already seem to be in decline.”

Officer McGilloway, naturally, was more verbose in her answer regarding crime in Mayfair.

“Crime has dramatically increased in the neighborhood. I think the reasoning is a few years ago the police department started a program called ‘Safe Streets’ which was a program in the worst areas in the city where police officers were assigned to walk beats in drug infested areas to keep the drug dealers off of the streets,

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23 Interview with Tom Waring, given by Kristin Gushue, April 4, 2007.
24 Ibid.
25 Ibid.
therefore they moved their ‘business’ to other areas of the city, and along with drugs comes robbery, aggravated assaults (shootings), homicides and many other crimes. These crimes just kept creeping up into the ‘nicer’ neighborhoods and have made the crime rate increase in Mayfair. And unfortunately the entire city it seems has had an increase in crime. As a police officer I would say the most prominent crimes in my area have been robberies with and without weapons and aggravated assaults.”

Mayfair’s Democratic Future

With crime on the rise and dramatic changes occurring, it is difficult to believe that Mayfair or any other part of Philadelphia will be democratic in years to come. The two theories presented previously on democracy (participatory and performance), combined with the evidence presented, could possibly be the most efficient way to predict democracy in Mayfair.

In a performance democracy, according to Schumpeter, success would have to rely on the voter’s self-interests. If the government in place is not serving their interests, then they vote this government out. This is true in Mayfair on the most local level with their State Representative John Perzel. He has reduced traffic accidents by installing

26 Ibid.
27 Note: The “Safe Streets” program in Philadelphia is no longer in effect.
“red-light cameras” at traffic lights, opened and funded two community centers, lead the state take over of Philadelphia’s notorious public school system, along with many other attempts to keep the community of Mayfair alive. Perzel has held his office for nearly 30 years as Mayfair’s Pennsylvania State Representative. This proves that on the local level, Mayfair residents believe that their interests are being met by Perzel. He has played the so-called “political consumer market” well in retaining his seat for that substantial period of time.

The other form of democracy previously presented in participatory democracy. This type may not be as prevalent in Mayfair as performance democracy. Firstly, a statistic mentioned before regarding levels of education echoes the sentiments of participatory theorists that say if one is to successfully participate in democracy then expanding or furthering their education is essential. This aspect of participatory democracy is not aptly applicable to Mayfair seeing as 76% of the population only holds a high school diploma.

Secondly, the level of action in participatory democracy is expanded beyond voting. The residents of Mayfair do tend to vote, but that might possibly be where their political action stops. Longtime residents have much to say regarding the changes in the neighborhood, yet have failed to stop these changes from happening. Many have decided to move out instead of staying and attempting to face the challenges to democracy within Mayfair. Officer McGilloway mentioned in her interview that residents no longer have

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pride in their neighborhood. One would assume that to have a successful democracy in general, residents would have to have some degree of pride and faith in their community.

But what about the future of democracy in Mayfair? Both comments made by the interviewees regarding the future of democracy in Mayfair did not seem too positive. Mayfair seems to be following a trend that most Philadelphia neighborhoods have been following; a trend that could quite possibly turn the neighborhood into a ghetto. When crime is halted by police in Philadelphia, like many other instances, it moves to other neighborhoods in the city where it can hide under the cover of a safe place “to live and work.”

With crime on the rise and many of its most adamant residents moving on to better and safer neighborhoods, democracy in Mayfair in the next 35 years looks bleak. One prediction can be made that if the trend of lower class people, who tend to be not well-educated, moving into the neighborhood rises democracy in Mayfair will not be resilient. Furthermore the most active community organization, the Mayfair Community Development Corporation, tends to focus most of its projects on cleaning up the neighborhood. This might make the neighborhood look nice, but its not actively involving community members to take responsibility themselves to preserve not only their personal property but also their neighborhood as a whole.

In 35 years, Mayfair could be comparable to North or West Philadelphia now. Those who live in Mayfair now will escape to suburban communities or be trapped there as elderly residents. Run down houses that used to be well-kept by the middle-class residents. Drug dealers will sell narcotics on every street corner. Residents will fear for their lives while sitting in their own homes, wondering if a bullet will come through their
window killing them or one of their children. Children will go to schools where they will find no hope in their future, and eventually will turn to crime as a way of life. Mayfair will turn out as a story of past residents telling their own children and grandchildren who look at them in disbelief when they say how nice and safe the neighborhood used to be.

This, as mentioned before, seems to be a reoccurring trend in Philadelphia. The neighborhood continues on a trend of destruction. However when the neighborhood seems to be at its worst it eventually, if actively advocated by community members, turns around and becomes more democratic than before. My father is a police officer in the 26th district of Philadelphia, which covers neighborhoods surrounding Temple University. These neighborhoods are considered the worst of the city. But one part of this area in particular seems to be turning the deterioration around. Members of the community are actively involved with the police district in beautifying and decriminalizing this area called Fishtown. This is just one instance where the threat of the fall of democracy was turned around.

Two things I believe can be done to prevent this fall of democracy in Mayfair from happening. One the residents need to become more actively involved in their community if they are so vocal and adamant about saving it from becoming another Philadelphia horror story. Writing editorials to newspapers and cleaning graffiti off of walls can only take a neighborhood so far. Yes, residents are aware of the problem but they offer no solutions of what can be done about it. Escaping to another area will only prolong the deterioration of democracy. If the residents of Mayfair actively ban together and participate more vigorously in their democracy, then the future looks more optimistic. They could have monthly meetings as a community to discuss and put
discussion into action. More importantly, they need to give the city government of Philadelphia a first-hand account that crime prevention is not stopping crime but is moving it into the only neighborhoods that residents feel safe. A greater coalition between the police officers, city government officials, and community members needs to be built to better effectively protect democracy in Mayfair.

Secondly to prevent the fall of democracy happening in 35 years, Mayfair residents could be more accepting of new neighbors moving into the neighborhood. Members are quick to isolate and ostracize someone who is not like their kind (i.e.- African American). This isolation will not keep minorities out of Mayfair. The neighborhood is becoming more and more diverse, and long time members are lashing out against this change. This backlash is creating a colossal divide in the community which most of the time ends in crime. Again, a sense of community needs to be instated to keep Mayfair stable and to institute a stronger sense of democracy. A democracy that could outlast 35 years and continue on strong past its predicted failure.

Mayfair is the neighborhood much of my family and me included, have grown up and lived in. It is sad to see the way it is turning. I was never afraid to walk the streets, day or night, until recently. How can democracy survive in a place that is continuing on this path? To see democracy survive 35 years in Mayfair at this point will be a shock to most residents. I want to be able to return to Mayfair in 35 years to show my children and grandchildren, proudly, the neighborhood I once called home. If there is no pride, then democracy will have slipped away with that pride.
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