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POL 380

American Democracy Futures

This project consists of selecting a location and looking into a crystal ball of the future to see how democracy is working or perhaps not working in that area. I selected my hometown – Sea Isle City, New Jersey. I imagine my grandfather standing on the beach many years ago, looking out over the ocean and I wonder how often his thoughts turned to the future of Sea Isle City.

Before we become clairvoyant we need to examine the general definition of democracy. In principle the U.S. is a democratic republic, citizens govern themselves by choosing their leaders by closed ballots, and the leaders in turn make the rules. It’s interesting to reveal that the Romans also embraced democracy in the form of a republic. They believed that a republic belonged to the people. As Rome conquered new lands well beyond the city itself, it offered Roman citizenship with all of its rights and privileges to the people who where inhabitants of those lands. They were permitted to speak out on issues and even vote on them. However, there was a small problem – most of these people lived well beyond Rome, making it impossible for them to travel to offer suggestions or concerns. Consequently, many of them were denied the right to participate in the democratic process.

Similarly, Sea Isle City has a group entitled Sea Isle City Non-Resident Taxpayers Association. While travel is not the primary concern for most of its members, they feel that their voices cannot be heard since Sea Isle City is not their primary domicile. They
pay taxes and own property but they are denied the right to vote because they must make a choice of where they officially call home and vote from that location.

Some folks believe that democracy should mirror the interests of its citizens and remain open and responsive to the concerns of its constituents, while others feel that democracy is about protecting its people from unsavory rulers who look out for their own interests and that of their friends, at the expense of others.

The general definition of a democracy is a form of government where people have the right to control their own destiny. The term comes from the Greek word demos, meaning people, and kratos, meaning authority. Professor Robert Dahl, Professor of Political Science Emeritus at Yale University and author of five books on democracy helps us to understand the two basic forms of democracy:

Direct democracy – This is where everyone is given the opportunity to participate in making all policy decisions in countries and large organizations; direct democracy is rarely utilized.

Representative democracy – This approach entails people voting to elect representatives in a free and fair electoral system to make policy for them under a wide range of checks and balances to help ensure leadership accountability.

Professor Dahl believes that there are at least five ways to help determine if an organization is democratic.

• Effective Participation: Before a policy that impacts the members is adopted, all the members must have equal opportunity for making their views known.
• Voting Equality: Every member must have an equal and effective opportunity to vote and all votes must be counted as equal.

• Enlightened Understanding: Within reasonable limits, each member must have equal and effective opportunities for learning about the relevant policies and their likely consequences.

• Control of the Agenda: The members must have the opportunity to decide how and what matters are to be placed on the agenda.

• Inclusion: All members must have full rights that are implied by the first four criteria listed above.

A working democracy needs two parties, preferably balanced, with men of ideas on both sides. We will further explore Professor Dahl’s ideas as we continue, but now allow me to give a brief history of Sea Isle City and how this town views democracy.

Sea Isle City is a city in Cape May County, New Jersey. It’s an island connected to the mainland by a small bridge. The Lenni Lenape Indians were the first to come to what is now known as Sea Isle City. They came for rest and relaxation and to get away from the hot weather on the mainland. They gathered quahog shells for wampum, the currency of the day.

Later, the story goes that Joseph Ludlam first purchased the island now known as Sea Isle City from a Quaker group back in 1692. He split it into three parts and named the central part after himself, Ludlam’s Island and the other two Townsend’s Inlet (the southern end) and Corson’s Inlet (the northern end). Records show that the island had few permanent residents in its early history. The island was covered with large red cedars and native holly, as well as having good grazing land for sheep and cattle that lived there.
The woodlands have been depleted by people’s need for wood and storm tides continually rushing over the land to the bay, but until 1895 cows were quartered on the island. My great-grandmother was born in Sea Isle in 1900 and her family had a milk business. My family has a receipt marked 1909 with her family name marked on it, selling milk for 9 cents a quart.

In 1880, Charles Landis decided to buy the island. In the 1870’s, he had visited Venice and was charmed by that city of canals. He envisioned his new town as one that would be similar. Landis was already responsible for establishing Vineland as the largest community in the state. In Sea Isle he had canals dug and positioned pieces of statuary in various locations. Soon after he built a railroad and established a trolley system. In 1882, the island left Dennis Township (the offshore community) and became a political entity of its own, and was given its own post office. The entire beachfront was deeded to be kept forever free. During this era Sea Isle City was a borough. In 1884, the Philadelphia and Reading railroad had brought tracks from Winslow Junction to Sea Isle, which later continued all the way to Townsend’s Inlet.

In 1885, the population had reached 558. In the next few years many houses and at least 30 hotels were built on the island. In 1913 Sea Isle City was incorporated as a city and a commission form of government was established. Over the next several decades, an election would be held every four years, as constituents elected a mayor and three commissioners who would govern the town.

The island has been the victim of three major storms in the last half century, and has had tremendous damage inflicted on it. The last of the storms in March 1962, commonly referred to as “the Ash Wednesday Storm”, is the “big one” that many people
still talk about. The storm lasted three days with continuous rain. It was categorized as a “100-year storm” Most of the island was wiped out, with houses scattered over the meadows. Fortunately many people evacuated in time to save their lives. The only way out of town was the causeway, and when that flooded, citizens had to be evacuated by helicopter. My great-grandfather was one of those people moved off the island by helicopter. When the rescuers found him, he was lying on his living room couch with water rushing into the house. Sadly, he died a few weeks later from complications of pneumonia. With hard work and sheer determination by the population, the destruction caused by the storm no longer exists. Our dunes are restored, and a seawall and a very popular promenade have been built.

It should be noted that Sea Isle City is a popular resort town primarily visited by Philadelphia, Northern New Jersey and New York vacationers. The approximate number of year-round residents is 3000, and yet on any summer day that number swells to over 30,000! Tourism and the money that comes along with it are very important to Sea Isle City. Billing itself as “The Sea and Sand Family Vacation Land”, Sea Isle City is a friendly resort that caters to families.

The residents and city fathers are proud of the town’s five miles of clean, white, sandy beaches. The promenade that runs along the beach is jammed during the summer months with young and old alike.

Famous for its fleet of charter and fishing boats, Sea Isle City is often referred to as “a fisherman’s paradise”. Fishing boats leave the docks daily on four, six and eight hour fishing trips. With all of the abundant fresh seafood available, tourist flock to various local restaurants.
Now, in 2007 - almost one hundred years after the commission form of
government was established in Sea Isle City democracy prevails! In November 2006,
voters approved a referendum that will change the current three-member commission to a
five-member council and a popularly elected mayor. To become a Referendum on the
November ballot a petition requiring 25% of the city’s registered voters (544 signatures)
was circulated and signed by 634 voters. The city’s entire government will change in the
middle of one of the biggest weekends of the summer season. Officially the new form of
government will take charge at noon on Sunday, July 1st. The date is set based on non-
partisan guidelines provided under the Faulkner Act.

This “change” will not come about easily for some of the town’s residents. Many
of the “old timers”, meaning families that have lived in Sea Isle for decades are not ready
for this new form of government. They were quite happy with the commission form and
fought hard to keep it that way. It’s interesting to remember the definition of democracy
quoted on the first page “people have the right to control their own destiny”. Last
November the townspeople did just that and at the same time utilized direct and
representative democracy. Direct - because everyone (that is to say all eligible voters)
were given the opportunity to participate in a policymaking decision regarding the change
of government, and Representative – because on May 8th they will be electing
representatives to make policy for them.

Sea Isle has become a divided town by the results of this last election. Actually,
staggered might be a better word, a fact evidenced in the twenty people who are running
for the five council-at-large seats. The “newcomers” as they are often referred to are the
group that want change and have put up their own slate of candidates. There is now an
“off-shoot” of the Sea Isle City Non-Resident Taxpayers Association – simply titled Sea Isle City Taxpayers Association. They are very vocal in their dissatisfaction of the current government. To retaliate the “old timers” have also selected their personal favorites as candidates. My father, being one of those old timers, is a candidate for council-at-large. Dad spent four years on city commission and he thought that the commission form of government worked just fine. His feeling is that any form of government will fail if the people within that government don’t do the work required of them.

With the present commission form of government three candidates were elected to a four-year term and the mayor was selected from among their own members. The last commissioner’s election was held in May 2005, so obviously the current commissioners will not be fulfilling their four-year term. Of the three current commissioners, only the mayor is seeking re-election.

Each commissioner is the administrative head of a department; Finance, Public Works and Public Safety. The commissioners also prepare and adopt the city budget.

Sea Isle City officially adopted the Commission form of government in 1913, under the provisions of the Walsh Act. The Walsh Act was signed by New Jersey Governor Woodrow Wilson on April 25, 1911. As demonstrated above, this act permitted municipalities to adopt a non-partisan commission form of government. The commissions in these municipalities are made up of 3 or 5 members elected for 4-year concurrent terms. The commissioners elect one commissioner as mayor and he/she is responsible for his or her department and also serves as the chair of the commission.

The Mayor-Council form will go into effect July 1st. The council members will have staggered terms with an election every two years. The council will work as a group,
enacting ordinances and passing resolutions to establish the policies of the city. The Mayor may veto ordinances, but the veto may be overridden by a 2/3 vote of the council. The council is legislative only; council members may deal with employees of the administrative departments solely through the mayor or his designee.

The council will select one of its own members to preside at meetings as President of the Council. Council will appoint the city clerk and approve or reject the Mayor’s nominations for department heads. They may veto the Mayor’s removal of a department head by a 2/3 vote and may remove department heads for cause. The council will receive the proposed budget from the mayor and may reduce items by majority vote or increase items only by a 2/3 vote. The council also adopts the final budget.

The Mayor will be elected to a four-year term of office. Our current Mayor is now serving in his 14th year and in this election he will face two opponents. Under the new form of government the Mayor may attend council meetings but is not required to do so, and has the right to speak yet cannot vote. He will act as the chief executive and will be responsible for enforcing the charter and all general laws. The Mayor will supervise all departments and appoint department heads with advice and consent from the Council. He will also prepare the budget for Council consideration.

There are 566 municipalities in the state of New Jersey and they can be classified under 12 forms of government. The Mayor-Council government is most commonly used in modern municipal governments. The Mayor-Council form can be broken down into two main types; ceremonial or weak mayor form and executive or strong mayor form. In fact, two towns that border Sea Isle - Avalon to the south and Ocean City to the north -
both use the mayor-council form of government and their elected officials and constituents all seem quite happy with this form of government.

**Ceremonial or Weak Mayor Form** – In this form of government the council possesses both legislative and executive authority. The council can appoint officials and must approve nominations made by the mayor. This weak-mayor plan is based on Jacksonian democracy. Jacksonian democracy makes reference to a political philosophy of President Andrew Jackson. Jackson and his followers believed in promoting the executive branch and the Presidency, while also hoping to strengthen the public’s participation in government. They believed in the right of all white men to vote, not just the propertied class. Jacksonian democracy supported the belief that if politicians have few powers and many checks, then they can do relatively little damage.

**Executive or Strong Mayor Form** – This form of government gives the mayor almost total administrative authority, with the power to appoint and dismiss department heads without council approval and little public input. In some strong-mayor governments, the mayor will appoint a chief administrative officer or administrator, who will supervise department heads, prepare the budget and coordinate departments.

Yet another “first” for Sea Isle City will be the hiring of a city business administrator. Last October, the city Commissioners bowing to the voices of their constituents, passed an ordinance that created the position of a business administrator. This administrator will assist in preparation of the budget, and administer to a centralized purchasing system. He or she will also administer the personnel system and if authorized by the Mayor, will supervise all departments. While this position has not yet been filled,
the Commissioners are considering contracting for a temporary business administrator that would lead the city through the pending change of government on July 1st.

Benjamin Barber, in selections from his “Strong Democracy” seems to have a keen knowledge of the importance of small-town/local politics. Barber advises that “freedom, equality, and justice are in fact all political values” and that “they must be generated and conditioned by politics.” He is very persuasive in applying the importance of citizenship and how it is closely linked with active participation in affairs of the community. He further points to the fact that when representatives make laws in which the citizens truly did not participate, by doing so they unlawfully strip their constituents of their civic functions. Barber believes that the strong form of democracy is the only form that is genuinely democratic. In our readings, Barber strengthens his thoughts on a strong democracy by sharing with us a Theodore Roosevelt quote that, “the majority of the plain people will day in and day out make fewer mistakes in governing themselves than any smaller body of men will make in trying to govern themselves.”

In a recent article in the Atlantic City Press it was noted that Sea Isle expects to spend $207,600 more for operating a new, larger government, according to the city’s 2007 proposed budget. There is more money for a business administrator and three more elected officials on the city’s payroll. The $16.3 million budget reflects the change of government that we have been discussing that will follow the May 8th election and be sworn in July 1st. Planning for the budget involves anticipating that half of the year the city will operate under new expenses that will be set by a new government. It’s interesting, that this new government could conceivably be entirely composed of people
who had no input in this year’s budget. Yet, they will have to work under its spending plan for more than six months.

According to James Terruso, the city’s chief financial officer, the city is spending nearly $200,000 more on salaries and wages this year. While spending is up, city revenues are down more than $100,000. Building permits were down more than $100,000, highlighting a trend in a slowing real estate market.

Which leads us to another city cost that is spiraling out of control. My former grade school – Sea Isle City Public School. My grandfather also attended this same school from 1927 through 1935. Not actually the same building but the same school system on the same location. I would be willing to wager that he would be shocked to learn the latest per pupil cost, actually everyone is in shock at this point. Ponder this question – How does a school district spend almost $34,000 per student? Primarily by having approximately 100 students (K-8) with grade sizes in single digits.

Listed in the Department of Education’s 2007 Comparative Spending Guide, Sea Isle City has the distinction of having the highest per-pupil cost in the state of New Jersey - $33,805.00! Yet, it has a very low local school tax rate because the town has a lot of ratables, but so few students. It’s sad to say that this is another issue that is tearing the town apart. With the high per-pupil cost many residents would like to see the school closed and have the students bused to the closest neighboring community. Yet, the young families with children attending the school hate the thought of their little ones traveling so far to school each day. Unfortunately, there aren’t too many young families left, most were forced out of town around the turn of the 21st century when property costs soared in
seashore communities. Many of these young families simply could not afford the high price of island housing and moved offshore.

This little town is changing at a dramatic rate with dazzling speed. When the polls finally closed after fourteen hours in the November election 1,511 votes had been cast, or 69% of registered voters. 767 voted Yes to change the form of government and 659 voted No to keep the old government. Others voted on separate issues and not the change of government, bringing us to the 1511 total.

Fasten your seat belt and let’s imagine the effects that democracy will have on the future of Sea Isle City. Not just the residents but also one of our most important commodities – our visitors.

We previously mentioned Robert Dahl and touched on some of his writings mentioned in *Theories of Democracy*. Dahl feels that the term “democracy” can be either an ideal or specifically an actual regime. Democracy can mean many things to many people. In fact there is more than one nation which uses that in the name of the country and for which democratic government is not the form of government. Regarding pluralist democracy Dahl explains that the word “democracy” throughout history has been applied to two types of government – (1) relatively democratized city-states and (2) relatively democratized nation-states. In a pluralist democracy, the term “democracy” refers to an ideal or a specific type of government.

Some historians believe that a Pluralist Democracy is one designed to protect and promote diversity. They noted that most people are apathetic toward politics. Politicians handle the day-to-day affairs of government and power rarely drifts into the hands of the people. In order for Pluralist politics to succeed they need a base of social diversity.
Pluralists feel that special interest groups are important to represent the opinions of the people, believing that not every individual will want to have a voice. One fear is that politics might become so remote that the ordinary “Joe Smith” citizen might have a difficult time in expressing his views to his community leaders.

Alexis de Tocqueville worried over the fact that Americans would much rather be in charge of their own lives rather than be directed by civil leaders. It appears that de Tocqueville would have had the voters in Sea Isle in mind when pondering this idea.

Further studies in *Theories of Democracy* are contained in excerpts from William Connolly’s “Democracy and Normalization”. Connolly states “democracy is the pride and the hope of modernity”. He empathizes that democracy holds the state accountable to its citizens. Connolly believes that a democracy truly treats its members as citizens. In such a state people are treated with respect, and in receiving this respect they are better equipped to demand dignity from other sources where it is sometimes denied. Connolly makes the observation that democracy makes a better citizen out of you and me. He feels that the “democratic citizen” is more likely to participate in important community decisions, and to make certain that the effects of the common good continue into the future.

Okay – let’s pull out that crystal ball and look into the future of Sea Isle. My view is that, like everything else in life, some things will change drastically while many others will remain the same. I would like to add that my some of my observations are based on conversations that I have had with my Dad. As I mentioned earlier he is a candidate for council in the May 8\(^{th}\) election. By going door to door and talking with many of the town’s voters I feel he has some keen insight on what the citizens of Sea Isle
feel are important issues. It’s important to remember that Sea Isle City belongs to its citizens and not just the people who hold public office. Let’s start by reviewing some things that most likely will not change or at least not by a large degree.

**Roads** – Most people might feel that roads would not be a major issue in such a small town. Yet, the condition of the roads in Sea Isle City is something that many voters feel needs improving. Currently, the roads are a sod base with asphalt laid overttop. In reviewing this problem it seems that to proper correct the issues an 8” stone/aggregate base, followed by an 8” road gravel on top and finally covered with asphalt. Unfortunately, even with this costly undertaking there is no guarantee that the roads can ever be what we would like them to be, straight and smooth. Remember – Sea Isle is an island and after drilling just a few feet down, you will find water. So, my thinking is that the future roads of Sea Isle will remain bumpy and rough – without much change.

**Housing** – As previously mentioned soaring housing cost on the island have driven many families (young and old) to neighboring community on the mainland. While currently there has been a small slump in the sale of houses it was not the drastic decline that many realtors foresaw. According to the census of 2000, there where 1,370 Sea Isle households with 6,622 housing units. Obviously, there are a lot of empty houses! However, those houses are only empty during the non-tourist season. Throughout the spring, summer and even fall these houses are filled with people on vacation. The growing wealth of the “baby-boomers” affords them the opportunity to purchase these homes and then rent them to eager tourists. So my view on housing is that this is something will remain fairly steady. I don’t see a drastic change since new ones have already replaced most of the old homes, and there is only so much room on this island. Of
course, the obvious changes will be made with lightening fast Internet connections to homes and built in computer systems that will control anything in the house.

Now for a couple of things that will change and unfortunately for the most part, not a change for the better.

**School** – It really hurts me to say this but I don’t see a viable way to save the Sea Isle City Public School. The latest projections for the 2007-2008 school year show the anticipated student enrollment will drop to a low of 76. This school houses grades pre-K through 9. This year some classes where co-mingled, combining first and second grade and fifth and sixth grade. Naturally, along with the drop in enrollment comes a significant drop in staffing needs. The building itself is shrinking because part of the school is now closed off to save money on heating and electrical bills. I think the future of Sea Isle City does not hold my lovely old school in its path. Once we lose it, we will most likely never have it again. A huge change for Sea Isle City.

**Global Warming** – Everyone is now aware of global warming and its effects on our environment. Discussions are constantly on TV, the web and even Al Gore has turned into a movie star. Most scientists seem to concur that global warming occurs when certain gases, such as carbon dioxide, get trapped in the earth’s atmosphere. The gases trap heat, instead of allowing it to dissipate away from the Earth – from this situation comes the nickname “Greenhouse Effect.” One result of this increased air temperature is melting ice caps and glaciers. In turn, sea levels rise and changes in climate happen around the globe. If in fact the waters do become warmer under the effects of global warming, that means storms will be able to maintain strength further up the coast during hurricane season. Thinking back to the previously mentioned “100 year storm”, this is a
storm that is so bad that it’s only likely to occur every one hundred years. There have been a lot of storms of this severity in the past few years, which some think may be due to global warming.

A recent case study involving the states of New Jersey and Maryland reported that sea levels rise could be 12 to 28 inches by the next century. Wetlands could be submerged and water could creep closer to homes. The street on which I live is approximately 1000 feet long, with the Atlantic Ocean at one end the wet lands on the other end. At every full moon when the tides swell, the streets flood. This flooding is a current concern among voters; just imagine how things could progress under the effects of global warming.

Rising global temperature impact not just the depth of the oceans but an entire ecosystem living in those oceans. The effects are already appearing across the marine food chain, from plankton, penguins and polar bears to fisheries on which people depend for food. Undoubtedly, global warming will have a huge effect on our future.

So there you have it – a past, present and future look into my hometown, Sea Isle City. It has changed dramatically from the sleepy little fishing village created by Charles Landis and yet in some respects it hasn’t changed much at all.

Some of the kids still walk to the local elementary school; hours after their dads get up before dawn to drive their fishing boats out to the ocean looking for their day’s haul. Many of the moms now work away from the home in an effort to make ends meet, as do the single parents of our community. Much of the social life for teens is centered on the “courts” – basketball that is! And so life goes on in this little town.
During the next few weeks many events are being planned in connection with the May 8th Mayoral and Council election. Dates have already been selected for candidate forums, and town meetings are scheduled. It is my hope to attend at least some of these arenas in an attempt to further my knowledge of democracy at work in Sea Isle City. I plan to expand my project through the use of videotape and private interviews with some of the candidates. During these interviews I would like to question the candidates about their current platforms and to also ask what their plans hold for the future of Sea Isle City.

One thing is certain – that democracy will remain and prosper in Sea Isle City. Time and time again the voters have made clear that they want their voices to be heard and their concerns answered. The Constitution and The Bill of Rights are wonderful legacies that allows our citizens the right to vote to govern his or her own country (or small town) and that should not, and will not be taken for granted in Sea Isle City.