Democracy in America 2005: Does West Philadelphia have a Healthy Democracy from the Participatory Theory Point of View in Comparison to Swarthmore, a Neighboring Suburb?

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In America today, the popular answer to the multitude of issues that plague communities nationwide is the increase in citizen participation, in areas including volunteer organizations, neighborhood initiatives, local political parties and civic organizations. Through my research, I have assessed the local democratic institutions, which exist in two very close yet differing communities, one is a community, located in the West side of Philadelphia and the other is the suburb of Swarthmore, and is located right outside of Philadelphia. Through interviews with residents, analysis of statistical data, historical research and attendance of neighborhood and civic organization meetings, I will asses and compare the democratic health of the two communities.

Although Swarthmore is a borough and has an entirely different political system from the West Philadelphia community, my justification for choosing the two communities for comparison is that they both demonstrate participatory democracy but they are exhibited in entirely different forms. The juxtaposition of the two communities will serve to provide two different models on which I can apply the theories of democracy, without coming to a narrow result.

Historically, Philadelphia was a city known for its rich roots in history. The largest city in the country in the 1880’s, Philadelphia hosted elite scientists, businessmen and intellectuals from all over the country and abroad at the Centennial Exposition of 1876. Extravagant hotels, a convention center, an art gallery, a women’s center, three agricultural centers and a horticultural center were built in the heart of West Philadelphia, earning the area a reputation of high living. Over several hundred years West Philadelphia has evolved dramatically from woods, to wealthy estates to a middle class suburb, ultimately becoming an inner city ghetto.
The first community I came to encounter in my research was the Mill Creek / West Park neighborhood, located in West Philadelphia. Not unlike any other urban community, the people of Mill Creek / West Park had seen a steady deterioration of their neighborhood over the span of their lives. The neighborhood was named after the Mill Creek, which was once a scenic body of water that flowed across West Philadelphia into the Schuylkill River. In the late 1880’s Mil Creek was channeled into large pipes, where it currently serves as a sewer. Because the neighborhood is built over a creek, the natural flowing water underground causes the foundations of the homes to become unstable, leading to property damage and ultimately declining property value. Other factors that contribute to the steep decline in the communities’ property values are crime rates, demographic changes (which I will address further) and the neglect in aesthetic care that many homes suffer from.

The area, which was once populated by early Quaker settlers, saw a number of racial and ethnic groups come and go. Most of the homes were built by Swedish settlers between 1900 and 1910. In the early 1900’s Irish and Italian immigrants began to pour into the area, driving out the Swedish into what were then more rural parts of town. By the 1930’s Jewish immigrants had settled in the neighborhood and the Irish and Italians fled to different parts of Philadelphia. In the 1950’s and 1960’s Blacks began to flock to what was then a popular part of town to live in, needless to say, their Jewish neighbors slowly sold their homes and moved into the nearby suburbs. From the 1950’s to the 1970’s the property value in the neighborhood was relatively stable.

Around 1980 a crack cocaine epidemic emerged, bringing along with it numerous serious problems, which plagued the community and left long lasting effects. During the
1980’s crime rates in West Philadelphia rose to an all time high, making it no longer a desirable place to live. The symptoms of new drug addiction were detrimental and widespread, including arrests, parent abandonment of children, rises in petty theft, burglary and prostitution. After crack nearly wiped out an entire community, 20 years later the people are still picking up the broken pieces. Those who were hardest hit by the epidemic were the children, now in their 20’s many of whom were raised in broken homes or with grandparents. The Mill Creek / West Park now struggles with the task of the reconstruction of what was once an involved community with a rich culture.

A few determined members of the Mill Creek/West Park community are steadily working towards improvement. The Olive Community Improvement Association, O.C.I.A. (formerly the 4600 Block Club) was formed in the 1960’s, primarily to organize neighborhood social events. At that time, the neighborhood had a community center in which residents could swim, bowl and skate along with regularly held parties which were very popular among teenagers. Over the years, along with the depletion of the neighborhood, the community center has turned into a privately owned dilapidated building, threatened regularly by the Philadelphia Department of Licensing and Inspections to be condemned by the city. The O.C.I.A. has made several failed attempts to regain control of the community center, but because it is privately owned there is nothing that can be done.

The O.C.I.A. holds open meetings every 3rd Sunday in the chapel of the Stephen Smith Home for the Aged, to discuss neighborhood issues. Currently the organization has only about 17 regularly attending members, most of whom are elderly. General community knowledge of the group and participation is low. During monthly meetings
the O.C.I.A. follows strict formal procedure. Several of the younger attendees suggested during interviews that the formal nature of the meetings intimidates newcomers and discourages young people from getting involved. Currently their most pressing community issues are in order from the most serious to the least are; abandoned houses, suspected drug activity, abandoned or broken down cars occupying parking spaces on the street and people who put out their trash before trash day (the stray cats and dogs tear it up, littering the driveways behind the houses). Other issues discussed at the meetings were dates and times for “Clean up Days” and the planning of social events.

Over the years, the majority of the community efforts to form local media outlets have failed due to lack of organization, lack of patrons and many honest efforts have been discounted by the community due to shoddy writing and unprofessional appearance. Several successful Islamic papers have appeared promising to the community as a source of local organized media, but the religious attitudes prevalent in the neighborhood, have prohibited Christians from accepting the media sources. The 8.4% of the West Philadelphia population that is Muslim has significantly larger levels of community involvement and local initiative than the rest of the population. Inherent in the Islamic faith are principles of community service, charitable giving and self determination. The failure of Christians and Muslims to make cooperative efforts towards change is a contributing factor to the lack of organization faced in the West Philadelphia community.

The residents of the Mill Creek/West Park community as stated in the 2000 U.S. Census are 77.1% African American and 17.6% white. The percentage of people within the community who have bachelors’ degrees is 23.5%. That is less than 1% lower than the national average of 24.4%. Although the community is comparable to the rest of
America in education, their income is lagging far behind at a median family income of $38,184 dollars per year, while the American median is $50,046 dollars per year. The median value of residential homes in the neighborhood is a mere $51,900, while the American median house value stands at $119,600. By assessing these figures, it is obvious that the Mill Creek/West Park community is seriously economically disadvantaged.

The residents of the Mill Creek/West Park community largely attend or have in their youths attended one of the cities 264 Public Schools. On a grand scale the School District is failing. The average publication date of a Philadelphia public school library book is 1974, and the majority of schools do not even have a librarian. Over 82% of Philadelphia school students are minorities. It is prevalent knowledge among community members that the schools in Philadelphia are highly segregated. The schools of West Philadelphia in particular are less than 2% White and up to 8% Asian, other than that, African Americans comprise the majority of the students. In 2002, the School District agreed to hand over 20 failing schools Edison, a private corporation. Although the citizens were upset by the deal, they did not mobilize and protest the privatization of their schools. Many continue to support the local government although they disagree with its policies. Although the School District has released several reports, which claim that the privatization of schools has been a success, and plans to privatize more schools in the near future, the general consensus among local communities in West Philadelphia is that schools are getting worse from the combination of privatization, diminishing funds and the sentiments of hopelessness trickling down from the current administration.

In March of this year for example West Philadelphia University City High
School, which had previously boasted of no serious violent incidents since the early 90’s, had a student led riot, in which it was reported that the swat team had to be called in to extinguish. When I asked community members why they thought it happened, I was surprised that they did not blame the students, but the anxiety which was plaguing the community at the time. As posted March 16th on NBC news, there had been a total of 23 murders in 7 day in Philadelphia leading up to the school riot. Community members believed that the surge in violence within the city may have deeply affected the psyche of the students causing them to lash out. Again the community did not make an effort to mobilize, neither to quell the uprising within the school, nor to combat the violence within the community.

The Philadelphia Education Fund however, has made an effort to implement change within the School District of Philadelphia, through the execution of Local School Councils (LSC’s) as a part of chapter V. of the Report on Bringing School Reform to the Public; Public Engagement in Initiatives 1995-2000. LSC’s involved a 4 parent panel elected from the school’s Parent Teacher Association (PTA). The LSC was intended to become an influential force in school decisions, having an administrative voice in issues dealing with school security, transportation and facilities. Although it was an optimistic plan, the Philadelphia Education Fund also planned for LSC’s to have an advisory role in the school’s budget, their teaching decisions and in addition, LSC’s were to inform the surrounding community about school related concerns. Although the plan for LSC’s was a good plan, which has previously helped in other school district reform efforts, it was highly unsuccessful in Philadelphia for two reasons. The primary and most important reason that LSC’s did not assume the influential role envisioned for them by the
Philadelphia Education Fund is that the school administrators are not willing to share any of the power, which they have worked hard and long to obtain, with parents whom the administrators view as largely uneducated and incompetent when it comes to school decision making. The second factor that led to the failure of the LSC’s was a lack of parent involvement.

The failing trend within the West Philadelphia community, which surmounts various arenas of public life, is insufficient or total lack of community participation. When members of the Mill Creek / West Park community were asked why they didn’t attend neighborhood meetings, many responded that they had too much to do. I have found that a primary factor in the areas seemingly social apathetic appearance is that their primary focus is on going to work, paying bills, and feeding children. When received along side an eviction notice, an invitation to a Parent Teacher Association will likely appear frivolous. The economic instability, in which many residents of the neighborhood learn to survive in, breeds a culture in which civic participation is viewed as trivial. An additional contributing factor to the lack of community involvement especially in political matters is the dogma that any efforts put fourth by an under privileged group of minorities will be in vain. This attitude is often learned by a lifetime of dealing with failing institutions such as corrupt city governments, poor schools and ineffective community organizations.

Many Initiatives for change in West Philadelphia were part of a program of the University of Pennsylvania, which is located at the perimeter of the community. The majority of the programs are aimed at young children, because a consensus exists that the root causes of poverty among communities start at childhood. University of
Pennsylvania’s Center for Community Partnerships (CCP) helps sponsor an array of public programs, volunteer services and Non-Profit Organizations, using university, funds, students and other resources. The CCP coordinates with Penn Urban Education majors in developing progressive curriculum for Philadelphia schools, and community development plans. One of the downfalls, however which was not foreseen by the program was the effect that it would have on the students. Although the optimistic Penn students brought creativity and energy to the classrooms, the temporary and varying experiments tested on the children, would ultimately leave them confused and with a feeling of instability.

CCP in cooperation with the University of Penn Dental School also created a non-profit program called Penn Smiles. It consists of a large tour bus, which is equipped with dental supplies and tools. The Penn Smiles Bus tours the community, providing dental exams for children who otherwise may not receive them on a regular basis. Neighborhoods can receive a visit from the Penn Smiles bus at random or make a special request.

The programs created by the University of Penn are welcomed and appreciated by the community, however my research has lead me to believe that the overwhelming assistance from outsiders that takes place in West Philadelphia, causes a public sentiment of non accountability. Some parents in the area, for instance have the impression that their children are being cared for, when the programs enacted by Penn are for the most part student run experiments, for which they may receive a passing or a failing grade.

Another downfall of the CCP programs, is that in quite a few cases, the impact of the Penn students on the public school students can be over influential. An example of
such influence is when the Penn Students, in an effort to help the underprivileged urban youth, inform them that their way of living is incorrect and try to assimilate the youth to their own Ivy League standard of living. The public school student will then return to his community, in many cases offending his parents by insulting their diets, careers, religions and overall way of life, thus becoming alienated from his community. “The man who wears the shoe knows best that it pinches and where it pinches, even if the expert shoemaker is the best judge of how the trouble is to be remedied.” This quote is from John Dewey in his selection from *The Public and its Problems* on p.169 text. By this statement Dewey infers that it is the community which can best solve its own problems, not intellectuals from afar. In this instance if Dewey were to asses it, he would conclude that it was in the best interest of the children that members of their own communities address their problems hands on through increased community participation. The extreme infiltration of outside culture and values may in some cases counteract existing culture and values, which may not have needed to change. For instance, in West Philadelphia and many other African American Communities, it is custom that children do not have a place for input within the household. Therefore outside ideas of household democracy are often seen as unwanted and even threatening. The aspects of African American culture, which deal with childrearing, although often looked down upon by White America are in many cases help to perfectly sustain the family structure in the traditional manner.

An additional oversight in the programs enacted by the CCP is that although parent involvement is encouraged in the majority of the programs, the pride of the parents and the lack of cultural understanding (on both sides) makes it difficult to cooperate.
When faced with taking orders from the often brilliant and young Penn students, parents often feel like they are compromising their dignity. In addition to the previous point, it is humiliating to the parents to feel that someone from a remote comfortable living feels that your children’s situation is so deplorable that they need to provide charity aid.

The City Council Representatives who serve West Philadelphia are Jannie Blackwell and Michael A. Nutter. From a participatory democracy point of view, representation is a means to the loss of freedom. Benjamin Barber demonstrated that point when he said “Men and women who are not directly responsible through common deliberation, common decision, and common action for the policies that determine their common lives are not really free at all…” that quote was from a selection from *Strong Democracy* p. 171 text. The meaning of Barber’s quote is also evident in the situation that West Philadelphia faces in regards to their City Council Representatives. Most neighborhood organizations in the area believe that they have access to their representative; however the amount of influence that the community holds over City Council is minimal. Through a survey of residents I learned that most community members do not even know who their representative is. The few who voted for City Council in the last election reluctantly admitted that they didn’t know much about the race but they either voted for a democratic incumbent or just choose the name that they had heard the most about. Many of the projects envisioned by the different committees within the City Council have failed due to a lack of funding or a lack of comprehensive planning. The O.C.I.A. members reported to me that they have had difficulty in the past attempting to contact their representative Jannie Backwell.
In contrast to the Mill Creek / West Park Community, the Borough of Swarthmore, which is located just minutes outside of Philadelphia, is much wealthier. Although the two communities are quite different today, they began with similar historical roots. The Borough was officially founded in 1893, around the existing Swarthmore College. Like Philadelphia, Swarthmore had been settled around the 18th century by Quakers. The same branch of Quakers who were granted land by William Penn started Swarthmore College to serve as an institute of higher education for their young students. The Quakers of Swarthmore were very politically active, having been involved in the abolition of slavery and the Underground Railroad. Eventually, the area surrounding the College was purchased by people associated with Swarthmore College and became known as Swarthmore. Around 1900 builders began to erect homes which would attract city employees who would rather commute than live within the crowded boundaries of the city. At this point the history of Swarthmore becomes very distinct from that of West Philadelphia.

Today Swarthmore is a quiet town with a friendly personality. It is characterized by its spacious homes nestled deep in between very old well groomed trees. Residents of Swarthmore are 86% White, 5% African American, 5% Asian and 4% Multicultural or other. They have very little crime and have a median household income of $82,653 per year. The median residential property value in Swarthmore is 240,200, that figure is significantly higher than the American median, which stands at 119,600.

Swarthmore has what has been referred to as some of the best schools in the region. In 2004, Philadelphia Magazine listed Swarthmore’s Strathaven High School as the top school, in their top 20 high schools article. The Wallingford – Swarthmore
School District is characterized by its small class sizes, highly qualified teachers, high
parent involvement, innovative teaching techniques and motivated students. In 2003 the
U.S. Department of Education Character Education and Civic Engagement Technical
Assistance Center granted the Wallingford – Swarthmore School District $2,840,809 to
implement a program which would bring to the school district a curriculum vitae
designed to; nurture character development, produce positive emotion, and promote
citizenship. The very same year $1,995,777 was granted to Philadelphia for the same
program, but as opposed to helping all of Wallingford – Swarthmore’s 1,080 students, the
Philadelphia grant allotted was only enough to effect 30 students chosen at random from
each of the 264 schools. This is just one of the many examples of the privileges that the
schools in Swarthmore have. Children of Swarthmore have a variety of interests, which
they are assisted by their parents to peruse. Some of the most popular hobbies among the
children are soccer, Hebrew, the trade and collection of Yu-Gi-Oh cards and basketball.
During the summers most of the children attend sports or other special interest camps.
They also enjoy new athletic facilities, coaches, music classes equipped with instruments,
art supplies, healthy lunches and state of the art libraries equipped with computers in their
schools. In addition to having sufficient funds, much of the success of the Swarthmore
schools is due to noteworthy parent involvement.

Involvement in Swarthmore does not stop at Parent Teachers Associations. The
residents of Swarthmore are highly involved in community affairs. Although town hall
meetings in Swarthmore are attended by a relatively small number of people, when issues
arise within the town, the people mobilize and make their voices heard. The local
government in Swarthmore consists of 7 Council Members and a Mayor. Their current
most pressing issue is zoning. Because of the growth of the college, many new businesses are making attempts to move into Swarthmore. The Borough ordinances however, along with the Mayor and Council protect Swarthmore sufficiently from unwanted business with a comprehensive zoning law. The fact that Swarthmore is the only town in that area not overrun by large chain stores and does not have a McDonalds is due in whole to the high levels of community awareness and activism paired with local government cooperation. Their zoning law not only describes what types of businesses are allowed in the Borough, it also mandates that all businesses must be compatible with the existing townscape, in regards to height, architecture, lighting and color.

Other issues within Swarthmore local government are far less pressing, these include; the debate on whether or not a huge tree should be cut down, which blocks a view of someone’s property, the application for a historical grant to get a map of the Borough professionally printed, the fact that the recycling bin gets too full of paper during the holidays and the adoption of the storm water ordinance. Each of these issues has its own committee, which serves to resolve it by utilizing combined resources of all people on the committee. The committees are usually chaired by a member of the Council but are open to the general public. Once an issue is resolved, that committee dissolves. Many of the past issues of the Borough have easily been resolved through community cooperation and discussion.

The students of Swarthmore College are also civic minded. Because of the overwhelming interest in such matters the College recently opened up the new Eugene M. Lang Center for Civic and social Responsibility. Through this department, Swarthmore students gain education in activism, and come out with a passion for social justice. This
passion was recently featured in the news, when Swarthmore students followed the lead of other schools such as Harvard, Northwestern, Georgetown and Buckeye in protesting for a living wage of all college employees. All of these schools achieved their goal and currently many more schools are having “live ins” and protests to achieve the same means.

Swarthmore College also hosts a plethora of forums, which encourage discussion on topics such as “The War on Terror”, the environment and globalization. A host to activist groups, religious congregations and political organizations, Swarthmore serves as a liberal hub for the community.

The community of Swarthmore is very active in all facets of public and private life, while the West Park / Mill Creek community of West Philadelphia is non active. From a Participatory Democracy the key aspects of health in a community are not only involvement in the political realm, but in the workplace schools and even inside the home. Swarthmore demonstrates diverse participation in all the above mentioned fields. Generally in Swarthmore, children are encouraged to give input in family decisions and are expected to participate in discussion with parents and other adults. Children in the West Philadelphia community are generally not allowed freedom of speech, and are traditionally advised to stay out of what is referred to as “grown folks business”. Community participation in Swarthmore is widespread, as residents feel as though they have a personal investment in the neighborhood. The same kind of feeling of personal responsibility is not present in West Philadelphia.

In conclusion the Mill Creek / West Park Community does not have a healthy democracy in respects to the Participatory theory. Swarthmore on the other hand has a
remarkable participatory democracy, in many aspects much more representative than the
democracy inherent in American Public life in full.

In consideration of opposing views the opposite can be said about the two
communities. If the comparison were assessed by Niccolo Machiavelli, he may contest
that the healthy democracy is inherent in West Philadelphia, because those fit to rule are
in control of the political decisions. I think that he would also say that Swarthmore’s
form of Participatory Democracy will in time degenerate into anarchy.

Hayek may assess the situation differently, by concluding that the overgrown
welfare state, which exists in both Swarthmore and West Philadelphia is in fact limiting
people’s liberty. Hayek’s interpretation of Protective Democracy would lead him to the
belief that all of America has gone astray from the true meaning of liberty.

From a Pluralist Democracy standpoint, the community members of West
Philadelphia are seen as lacking in interest groups, while the residents of Swarthmore are
sufficiently organized into groups which promote their own interests. Bentley may
suggest to the community organizations of West Philadelphia that it is the lack of interest
groups, which continuously leaves their issues unheard. Without the formation into a
group, the community is unable to make demands as a solid interest bloc.

Regardless of what theory of democracy is applied to the two communities, it is
clear that one enjoys the freedom that comes along with “The American Dream”, while
the other is not.


[www.ucityphila.org/home/index.cfm](http://www.ucityphila.org/home/index.cfm) University City Philadelphia

[www.urbanblight.org](http://www.urbanblight.org) Society Created to Reduce Urban Blight


[www.quakerfinder.org/quaker/near/PA/Swarthmore/11815](http://www.quakerfinder.org/quaker/near/PA/Swarthmore/11815) Swarthmore Quakers


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