“Many important observations suggest themselves upon the social condition of the Anglo-Americans: but there is one that takes precedence of all the rest. The social conditions of the Americans is eminently democratic: this was its character at the foundation of the colonies, and it is still more strongly marked at the present day (De Tocqueville p. 49).”

When Alexis De Toqueville wrote his book Democracy in America, he examined the condition of Americans and their relatively new form of democratic government. In his analysis, De Toqueville offered many questions about democracy. Questions of majority rule, questions of the effectiveness of democracy, and if democracy is in fact the rule of the people or rule by the people. This paper will also examine democracy in America, specifically Muhlenberg Township, Pennsylvania. The examination of democracy in Muhlenberg Township will begin by looking at the history of the township along with the structure of government, followed by an analysis of participation in local affairs and government, including voting levels through a citizens survey, along with personal interviews of the average Muhlenberg citizen.

Muhlenberg Township is located in Berks County, Pennsylvania bordering Reading. In 2001, Muhlenberg township celebrated its’ 150th anniversary. Today, Muhlenberg Township is a much different place then it was when it was formed. Muhlenberg Township was once a rural farming community, which has now transformed into a residential commercial suburban community. Muhlenberg Township is situated in
the Pennsylvania Dutch region and is surrounded by fertile valleys used for fruit growing and dairy farming (MTA). Muhlenberg Township has many employment opportunities including the production of clothing, hardware, communication equipment, pretzels, brick, candy, batteries, railroad equipment, textile machinery, and specialty steels (MTA). Muhlenberg Township also has a completely self-sufficient primary and secondary public education system. The township has one police force and two fire companies and is provided electrical service by GPU Energy Company, gas service by United Gas Improvement Company (UGI), and telephone service by Bell Telephone Company (Berks County). The community has come a long way since its roots back in the 1850’s when the township formed.

The formation of the township began in 1849 when residents of the first township in Berks County, Alsace Township, had a dispute over taxes. Alsace Township refused to pay taxes for the roads in the Eastern part of the township while at the same time having to maintain their own roads. By 1850, the taxpayers in the Western part of Alsace Township formed a 69-member vigilance committee to form their own township (Hunsberger, p.9). A few months later the court approved the division of Alsace Township and the western division was newly named Muhlenberg Township. By 1851, an act of assembly was passed granting Muhlenberg Township the ability to hold general and township elections. At the time Muhlenbergs’ population was only 1672 people, according to the 1860 census. By the turn of the century the population had grown to only about 2069 residents (Hunsberger, p. 9) However, the Industrial Revolution allowed Reading to grow causing Muhlenberg to grow as well. According to the 2000 U. S. census, Muhlenberg Township now has about 16,305 residents.
Obviously, the township has grown since the time it was first formed. Many other changes have occurred in the township as well.

In 1850, when Muhlenberg township broke away from Alsace township, its’ residents decided that the township would be a second-class township. This system included three elected supervisors who would regulate and administer the new township. In 1965, Muhlenberg townships’ status changed from a second-class township to a first class township with an elected five-member board of commissioners to regulate the township (Hunsberger, p. 256). The difference between the first class and second-class township deals specifically with the population and the structure of government. First, in order to be considered a first class township, the population density must be greater than 300 people per square mile. Second, first class townships have elected commissioners with four year overlapping terms, while second-class townships have three supervisors that are elected at large. For this classification change, the voters must approve the change in a referendum (Upper Saucon Township). The classification change for Muhlenberg Townships’ had few but significant changes which stipulated that no other neighboring municipality could purchase Muhlenberg townships land and that the elections for commissioners would be at large elections, rather than ward elections.

Today, there are six non-profit boards that serve the community. First, the Civil Service Board which oversees tests and promotions for police officers; second, the Zoning Hearing board which hears petitions for the townships’ zoning rules; third, the Parks and Recreation board which initiate programs for the youth; fourth, the Health board which reviews all matters concerning health, including inspection of food serving facilities; and lastly, the Planning Commission which approves and disapproves building developments.
in the township. Five elected commissioners who regulate the public safety and welfare of the township head the above boards (Hunsberger, p. 256). The five commissioners also elect a chairman and vice-chairman as well as a secretary to run the government. The structure is as follows:

VOTERS

5- MEMBER ELECTED BOARD

OF COMMISSIONERS

POLICE

PARKS AND RECREATION

FINANCE AND ADMINISTRATION

HEALTH

ROADS AND ENGINEERING

Muhlenberg Township is a representative government. This form of government has many critics because the people are not very involved in the decision making process of government. Rather, the citizens just vote for a representative who then makes the decisions. Participation theorists believe that only high participation in government and civic duties will produce the most benefits for a democracy. Participatory theorists disagree with representative democracy and would cite Muhlenberg Township's representative form of government as being inadequate to the needs of the average citizens. Participatory theorists believe that a citizen is not truly free and their views are not properly heard when they are represented by someone else. Participatory theorist, Benjamin Barber believes that a representative government is unhealthy (Conte, Terchek
p.173). He believes that if man is represented then he is not free. He cites political theorist Jean Jacque Rousseau that “the instant a people allows itself to be represented it loses its freedom” (Conte, Terchek, p. 174). A people’s sovereignty and freedom is lost through representation because citizens are not really thinking for themselves, rather they are being thought for. A citizen becomes subject to the will of the politician. In other words: “Politics has become what politicians do, what citizens do is vote for politicians” (Conte, Terchek p. 174). Benjamin Barber further states that although the representative principle steals from individuals the responsibilities of their values, beliefs and actions, the people do benefit from security, private rights and freedom from interference with a form of representative democracy (Conte Terchek p.172). This is why representative democracy can flourish in many present day democracies, including Muhlenberg Township.

The merger of the borough of Temple into Muhlenberg Township in 1999 may give an indication of the level of participation in Muhlenberg Township. In 1998, the merger of Temple into Muhlenberg Township was a controversial issue for the November elections. The number of Temple residents who voted on the issue was 458 citizens compared to the 4115 residents of Muhlenberg who also voted on the issue (Hunsberger, p.257). The 2000 census showed Muhlenberg townships population to be approximately 16,305. This means only about 25 % of the population voted for this issue in the November election. Hence, the number of people who voted in this election was probably around 25 % too. This indicates that not even half the population voted in the November election, this would be deemed unhealthy by participatory theorists.
In addition to this data, I surveyed citizens from two different areas in my township. The first area is Muhlenberg Park, which is a higher income suburban residential neighborhood. The second area is Cherokee Ranch; which is a lower income post-WWII veteran’s housing development and commercial area. From these two areas I surveyed 30 people from Muhlenberg Park and 19 people from Cherokee Ranch, for a total of 49 people surveyed. The survey (next page) asked questions regarding the citizen’s involvement in community organizations, their voting participation, along with questions about attendance at municipal and school board meetings, if they had a neighborhood watch, who their local government official is and if they had any issues regarding their community. The survey was taken from a random sample of the population and the results are as follows: when asked how involved they are in community activities, both areas had the same results, with 37% of the population having no involvement, while 46% were somewhat involved and 15% were very involved. While this may not be as much involvement as participation theorists would deem to be a healthy functioning democracy, the data shows that voting is a form of participation that most Muhlenberg residents hold as a high priority in their lives. In fact, 83% of Muhlenberg Park residents along with 84% of the Cherokee Ranch residents hold voting as a high priority in their lives. Out of these people, 79% of Muhlenberg Park residents and 65% of the Cherokee Ranch residents vote in the primaries. When asked if they knew who their State Representative is, 67% of Muhlenberg Park residents knew it was Dante Santoni Jr. while 33% did not know. For Cherokee Ranch, the results were identical with 67% knowing and 33% not knowing. Another level of measurement of community involvement was if the residents of each area knew if they had a
neighborhood watch. In Muhlenberg Park, 58% of the residents said that they did have a neighborhood watch and 36% said that they didn’t and 5% said they didn’t know. In Cherokee Ranch, 59% of the residents said they did have a neighborhood watch while 35% said they didn’t and 4% said they didn’t know. Once again, the results for both areas are almost identical. This pattern continues for many of the surveyed questions, for instance: when asked how often they attend Muhlenberg school board meetings, only 17% of Cherokee Ranch residents and 26% of Muhlenberg Park residents claim that they sometimes attend. None of the residents said that they regularly attend the school board meetings and 65% of Muhlenberg Park residents and 66% of Cherokee Ranch residents claim that they never attend the school board meetings. These statistics concur with what I observed when I attended a school board meeting. The only people who were at the meeting were the school board members and some faculty members that I recognized. The fact that almost half of the people I surveyed complained most about increasing school taxes, I thought I may have encountered more people at the meeting, but this was not the case. When I asked the residents if they attended municipal meetings only 4% of both the Muhlenberg Park and Cherokee Ranch residents said that they attend regularly. While 29% of Cherokee Ranch residents and 28% of Muhlenberg Park residents say they attend sometimes and 46% of Cherokee Ranch and 45% of Muhlenberg Park residents say that they never attend.

This low attendance for both school board meetings and municipal meetings would support the representative structure of government of the township. In his piece, Considerations for a Representative Government, John Stuart Mill claims that the reason attendance is so low is because mans interest and duty is absorbed in the individual and in
the family (Conte, Terchek p.45). The average citizen identifies with the public but doesn’t think about the common good because he doesn’t benefit from the common good and therefore, he is in competition with the community. Mill reasons that:

“A neighbour, not being an ally or an associate, since he is never engaged in any common undertaking for joint benefit, is therefore only a rival (Conte, Terchek p. 45).”

This analysis can also be applied to the neighborhood watch since both Muhlenberg Park and Cherokee Ranch residents had differing opinions on whether or not their area did indeed have a neighborhood watch. If they do have a neighborhood watch it can’t be very effective since an average 40% of the sample population didn’t think it existed or didn’t know it existed. A neighborhood watch is a prime example of a benefit for the common good, but many residents lack knowledge of its existence and many choose to have their own methods of security; which exemplifies the private interests mentality of citizens.

Through conducting this survey I was able to interview various people of different backgrounds to hear their views on participation and democracy in Muhlenberg Township. The first person interviewed was Mrs. Kim Olsen, a resident of Muhlenberg Park and a Junior Women’s’ Club of member. I first asked her what made her want to become a member of the Junior Women’s Club of Muhlenberg Township. She explained that she had wanted to become involved in the community and she thought the Junior Women’s Club was right for her because she learned about it through her mother who is a member of the Senior Women’s Club of Muhlenberg Township. I then asked her what the Junior Women’s Club does to better the community. She told me that the club had actually started the recycling program in Muhlenberg Township a number of years ago
and that they helped fund the building of the Muhlenberg Community library. She also added that the club holds various fundraisers year round to keep contributing to community programs.

The second person I interviewed was a Cherokee Ranch resident named Paul Melnick. Mr. Melnick had only lived in Cherokee Ranch for the past few years after moving there from Levittown Pennsylvania, where he had lived his whole life. Upon learning this I asked him if he thinks there is a difference between the two communities in regards to democracy and community involvement. He responded that it is the same everywhere and the real difference has been time. Mr. Melnick being 80 years old went on to explain how 50 years ago people were more involved in the community and that it was regarded as a duty and privilege to be involved in government and in the community. He continued that now people aren’t concerned with getting to know their neighbors and volunteering in the community because the world has changed. He cited crime as the number one factor for the lack of trust in the community.

The third person I interviewed agreed with Mr. Melnick on the issue of crime. Judge Ann Carroll, whom is an active participant in local government and is currently campaigning for another term in office. Judge Carroll is involved in many community organizations, concurred with Mr. Melnicks views on crime. Being a part of the legal process, Judge Caroll knows the crime rates for the township and she claims that crime is growing in Muhlenberg because it is spreading from the city of Reading due to displacement. She claims that residents in Muhlenberg Township are vulnerable because of the illusion of safety and seclusion.
The last person I interviewed was Mr. Robert Schoener, a Muhlenberg Park resident who is a sales manager at UGI, which supplies the gas service for Muhlenberg Township. Mr. Schoener also claims that time has been the reason why people aren’t as involved in the community. He claims that people don’t respect the community as they did 20 years ago. Mr. Schoener reasons that people around the township have gotten to the point where they don’t even respect littering and residential speeding laws, so they aren’t going to respect participation in the community. These four people I interviewed along with the people I surveyed have offered a plethora of views regarding community involvement and democracy in Muhlenberg Township. Of the interviewees, three of them were most concerned with crime and a general lack of respect for the community. Only two were involved in community organizations and the other two were not involved. This seems to be the case for most of the residents of Muhlenberg Township.

While the average citizen may not be involved in a community organization, they do participate through voting. Although voting is exercised at best twice a year and being a member of a community organization is more time consuming, the average citizen is still doing some form of participation, even if it is not a high level of involvement.

One final question that I asked in the survey was if the residents had any issues that concerned them regarding their community. Both areas had identical results with 47% saying that they were concerned with issues, mostly crime and school taxes and 53% claiming that they weren’t concerned at all. This majority of the sample population must either be very satisfied with their community or they are ignorant to the issues involving their community. Most participation theorists believe that the public is not
informed enough to make any rationale judgments concerning the community. One participatory theorist, John Dewey writes:

“But indubitably one great trouble at present is that the data for good judgment is lacking and no innate faculty of mind can make up for the absence of facts. Until secrecy, prejudice, bias, misrepresentation, and propaganda as well as sheer ignorance are replaced by inquiry and publicity, we have no way of telling how apt for judgment of social policies the existing intelligence of the masses may be.” (Conte, Terchek p.170)

Dewey makes the argument that there is not enough inquiry by the people in the current system of government. He might make the argument that Muhlenberg Township residents don’t have enough knowledge made available to them in order for them to debate key issues concerning the community. This may be the reason for the low attendance at the school board and municipal meetings. However, Muhlenberg Township does have their own official website which announces all times of meetings and includes information on the local government, the fire company and police department, the tax policies, and the public library. The argument for lack of knowledge is negated by the website. Political theorist Joseph Schumpeter disagrees with the participatory theorists over lack of knowledge. Schumpeter, a performance theorist claims that the citizens experience a reduced sense of responsibility on matters of politics. Citizens lack in participation because they don’t have any responsibility to participate (Conte, Terchek p.147). Schumpeter claims that the citizen’s lack of responsibility and participation is not due to a lack of information, it is due to a lack of will. He reasons that the average citizen does have their own opinions on one’s likes and dislikes, but these do not amount to a will, or in other words: “purposeful, responsible action” (Conte, Terchek p.147). Schumpeter continues that while some people do take the initiative and get involved, many don’t. Schumpeter would argue that this is evident in Muhlenberg Township by looking
at the survey statistics on the municipal and school board meetings, the level of involvement in community organizations, the lack of knowledge about the neighborhood watch and the non-interest of issues. Schumpeter would say that the lack of involvement is due to a lack of responsibility. He writes:

“Information is plentiful and readily available. But this does not seem to make any difference. All of this goes to show that without the initiative that comes from immediate responsibility, ignorance will persist in the face of masses of information however complete and correct. It persists even in the face of the meritorious efforts that are being made to go beyond presenting information and to teach the use of it by means of lectures, classes, and discussion groups. Results are not zero. But they are small.” (Conte, Terchek p.147)

This applies to Muhlenberg Township, while not all of the residents lack responsibility for participation, many do. The highest level of participation by the citizens is through voting which is not very often. While voting is very important, it is not very active. Participation theorists would argue that although the information may be available, the public mentality is that of noninvolvement because the community hasn’t grown enough. Hence, participation is very little. Participation theorists also would argue that Muhlenberg Township residents must do more then vote to really participate in their community. Participation theorists believe that involvement has to extend to other parts of the average citizen's lives, including the neighborhood and workplace (Conte, Terchek p.165). According to Participatory theorist Benjamin Barber, the community and the individual are both hurt in this type of situation because the community and participation by the individual should work hand in hand, as participation increases, the community grows and as the community grows participation is possible. Barber writes: “To participate is to create a community that governs itself and to create a self-governing community is to participate.” (Conte, Terchek p.176). Since Muhlenberg township
residents don’t fully participate Barber would probably reason that the community cant
grow to its maximum potentially. However the industrial, commercial, and residential
growth of the township over the past 154 years would seem to negate this theory. While
participation by every individual in the community would obviously help the community
grow, participation is not the only thing that is needed.

Another theory, Democratic Communitarianism also believes that the individual
citizen should be as involved in the community as much as possible. Democratic
communitarians theorist Robert Bellah cites in his piece “Community Properly
Understood: A defense of Democratic Communitarianisms” that individuals are realized
only in and through the community and that participation is a right and a duty. He writes
that:

   “Community becomes positive goods only when they provide the opportunity
   and support to participate in them (Terchek, Conte p. 85).”

This theory reasons that the community can only grow through citizens involvement and
in turn, the individual will grow from being involved in the community. Bellah would
probably reason that Muhlenberg township residents need to become more involved in
the local community organizations and then they will reap the rewards of a healthy
community.

John Stuart Mill also believes that participation in government is the only way a
country can be considered democratic. However, he argues that although high levels of
participation would be ideal, levels of participation can be small (Conte, Terchek p.46).
Mill argues that although it would be ideal for all to participate in the government and
have shared powers; this is not feasible in our society. The average citizen is concerned
with his own interests and sees his only duties to society as obeying laws and submitting to government. Through this mentality Mill writes that:

“It is evident, that the only government which can fully satisfy all the exigencies of the social state, is one in which the whole people participate; that any participation, even in the smallest public function, is useful; that the participation should everywhere be as great as the general degree of improvement of the community will allow; and that nothing less can be ultimately desirable, than the admission of all to a share in the sovereign power of the state. But since it cannot, in a community exceeding a single small town, participate personally in any but some very minor portions of the public business, it follows that the ideal type of a perfect government must be representative (Terchek, Conte p. 46).”

Mills’ argues that the average citizen simply cannot participate in government, even if it is the smallest public function. Mill agrees with the participation theorists and the democratic communitarians that participation should be the top priority in a citizen’s life and that all citizens should participate in the community and government. However, Mill also realizes that human nature will not allow every man to take the role of government into their hands. Mill reasons that participation would not be rational for the average citizen because they are involved in their own private affairs (Conte, Terchek p.47). And individually, one would not benefit from such participation. Schumpeter touches on this when he explains that people don’t take initiative because it is not their responsibility. Not every citizen can be held accountable and therefore not every citizen will take action. In Muhlenberg Townships’ case, the representative form of government seems to suit the needs of the citizens. While every citizen does not participate in community activities, many others do participate through voting. The representative form of government allows the people to be sovereign through a third party, but the citizens have a check on the third party because they elect the third parties. The fact that high levels of the citizens
vote shows that the citizens are keeping their government healthy through the participatory process of elections.
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