Democracy has seen growth, set-backs, and many changes. While many of the theorists have different views and ideas on how and what makes the best democracy healthy, there are many similarities to what a democracy needs. A democracy is run by the people, for the people. The people elect representatives to work in their best interest. Also that all people be treated as equal within the system but there is a problem that the government can not please everyone. Carbondale shares many of the same problems that other towns have in Northeastern PA, I selected Carbondale because of its recent political problems, but the area as a whole is in danger not just Carbondale. Carbondale has a proud history, but today is having problems with its economy and its education system. A new mayor with new plans maybe able to help turn Carbondale around, but time will tell.

Carbondale is the forth oldest city in Pennsylvania, and is located in Lackawanna County. It was founded and prospered on “black gold”, Anthracite Coal. The use of coal helped to lead to railroads and cannel systems starting up to move the coal in and out of the state, Carbondale would send coal to Philadelphia and New York. There was an economic boom in the area. Many workers were needed to set
up the mines, mine the coal, and build railroads and so on. Carbondale had even gained its charter before Scranton, and even before Wilkes Barre, which are considered the main areas in northeastern Pennsylvania for commerce today. In Northeast Pennsylvania there was a massive influx of immigrants. In a small part of the state “representatives of twenty-six different nationalities” (Roberts p3) With many people moving into the area, homes were built and other business began to open up. The town had a very strong economy and was able to flourish.

Once the coal industry started to fall in the 1960’s, Carbondale did also along with many other cities so deeply having there economy rooted in coal. People quickly found themselves without jobs and without the skills to perform new ones. Building a whole community on one industry was now the reason the whole community was looking for a new direction. Textiles and other factories started up, but struggled to have the impact the coal industry once had.

In recent years Ames Department store has closed, which employed about 70 workers. Many other small businesses have moved away or simply just shut down. In a small town every job is important. Today many of the businesses that have stayed in the area have to do with heath care, like hospitals and nursing homes. Also there
are many manufacturing jobs in the area, which help to employ the community.

It is not just businesses closing in Carbondale, there is also a school. Carbondale has a small private catholic high school that after the school year will be closing its doors. Small enrollment and lack of funds are the reasons for the closing.

A democracy needs to have a peaceful transition of power from one official to the next. Elected officials must be held accountable for there actions and conduct. When officials are dishonorable and deceitful it hurts democracy. John Stewart Mill said “the rulers should be identified with the people; that their interest and will should be the interest and will of the nation.” (Terchek p35) Also “Let the rulers be effectually responsible to it, promptly removable by it, and it could afford to trust them with power which it could itself dictate the use to be made.”(Terchek p35) Carbondale voters felt like they could not believe in the system. When people feel there vote can not help to make change, it is a loss for democracy. In 1999 Mayor Joe Vadella plead guilty to absentee ballot fraud and was banned from running for any public offices, though he tried to get on the ballot again and even said that his wife would run if he could not. (2) With the
stain Mr. Vadella left on the voting system, turn out was low for the 2003 mayor race, only about 2,400 voters. Justin Taylor was elected mayor in November 2003 easily beating incumbent Mayor John "Jigger" Jordan by 950 votes. Mr. Taylor was a city councilman before winning the race and was only 25 at the time he won. (1) Mr. Taylor beat a man more then twice his age and won very convincingly, showing that those who did come out to vote believe it is time for a new start. Mr. Taylor was the director of economic development for Susquehanna County and has been looking at different changes and new directions that need to be made to save the town. Also in 2004 he was named full-time city manager. This was voted on by the seven person town council and was the first time it had happened. This allows for Mr. Taylor to have more of a say in what can be done to help Carbondale rebuild. This shows that they do trust him with this power because of the work he has done in the past. Thomas Paine believed that democracy was at its best when it was kept small. (Terchek p4) Carbondale is not that big that it cannot take in all of the input given by their citizens. Good leaders are needed to help find out what ideas are best for the community.

If one indicator of healthy democracy is a strong economy, then Carbondale is not a healthy democracy in this
part. Carbondale has fallen on hard time as shown before with all the jobs leaving, but the new young mayor has quickly bought new ideas to the table. Carbondale Redevelopment Authority (CRA) was unused for over 25 years. It is has been started back up, it can “condemn a building, take it and pay fair market value to the owner, and then turn around and sell it to a private developer.” (3) The city has also “taken advantage of a state Department of Community and Economic Development program”, which fixes up broke down homes and sells them cheap. This helps to keep people and bring in new residents. Other projects are the reconstruction of the Shannon building, renovation of the Hotel America and Majestic Theater. They are also looking to constructed of two parking decks and River Front Park. These projects will help to bring in new business and attract tourist. Community development is an indicator of a healthy democracy, and Carbondale is heading in the right direction. These are project that almost everyone in the community can benefit from. Along with Mr. Taylor there are other politicians in the area who are trying to help. State Representative Jim Wansacz, of the 114th district that includes Carbondale, has helped Carbondale secure many grants to better itself. In February, Representative Wansacz and State Senator Robert J. Mellow announced that
Carbondale received a $500,000 HOME Program grant through the Pennsylvania Department of Community and Economic Development (6) “The HOME Investment Partnerships program is the largest federal block grant to state and local governments, and is designed exclusively to create affordable and safe housing for low-income families. Each year it allocates approximately $2 billion among the states and hundreds of municipalities nationwide.” (6) With this money the Carbondale will able to fix up old homes and help first time buys afford them, giving people a feeling of pride in their homes and their community.

“If Citizens are civically virtuous, the republic can be expected to thrive, but if they are self-involved or lethargic, we should anticipate a politics of fragmentation and corruption leading toward decay.” (Terchek pXV) Both Tocqueville and John Stewart Mill felt that having a lethargic civic body was troubling and Carbondale had just that. While the community as a whole did not show support for the voting system in 2003. They may soon start to regain some trust in the new mayor. The people saw that they had been voting and little had been done, and once the voting system was found out to be corrupt many were turned off to the system. They sent a message I feel is used in many places, and that is to not vote. By not voting people
can say that do not believe in the system and do not want to par-take in it. I feel many people blindly believe this works, but you are leaving it up to others to choose the outcome.

The people had turned to the view of Schumpeter, in that they were not voting for the good of the community, but there own good. While this was going on they were being taken advantage of by past leaders. When the people do not closely follow what is going on it allows for leaders to further there own agenda. The community seemed to fall into an idea of “performance democracy”. This is the idea that people vote for themselves and not what many be best for the community. It also starts to look at the new way candidates begin to treat campaigns. We see this much more as the stakes become higher, it becomes more about what they can offer instead of then sitting back and seeing what needs to be done. I feel that Carbondale did vote this way, people looking at what was best for themselves but then the officials did not follow though on there offers. They did not look to the future or how they were affecting others around them. They have learned a valuable lesson, and now are trying to find what is best for the common good, which is to save the area and bring it back to a powerful city.
It is hard to blame people who turn to this view, when you see the area around you falling, voting to better yourself seems like a good idea. "The typical citizen drops down to a lower level of mental performance as soon as he enters the political field. He argues and analyzes in a way which he would readily recognize as infantile within the sphere of his real interests." (Terchek p147) This is according to Schumpeter.

The school of thought that is against "performance democracy" is "participatory democracy". "Participatory democracy" is a lot like direct democracy, where citizen involvement is fundamental, and indispensable. Many people feel that just voting is participating, but in this school of democracy much more is needed. The current model "inevitably turns citizens into increasingly disinterested spectators.", (Terchek p165) according to participatory theorist. In Benjamin Barber’s “Strong Democracy” he points out that it needs to be more than voting, the citizens need to be involved in agenda-setting, deliberation and legislation. (Terchek p174) The citizens do not necessarily need to be overly hands on, but they should try to help determine the general direction of the democracy. This can be done in Carbondale with the small size and the open meetings.
“Participatory democracy” also stresses the idea that good things come from civic pride. When people come together and work toward a common goal the whole community wins. Carbondale does have a strong sense of civic pride. The high school has a very good football program, which brings many people to the games. They have also enjoyed success on the basketball court, and in the early 1990’s made it to back to back state championship games, winning one. (8) The whole community had rallied behind its high school athletics and still does today.

Carbondale has only one small, local newspaper. The focus of the paper is very community based with dates of upcoming events and other things that are going on in the town like sporting events. The Carbondale news does serve as an outlet for the town meetings. The paper has a section on what went on and what will happen at the next meeting. With meetings being small and attended by citizens that are directly affected by what the council is discussing, the paper helps to keep the citizens aware of what is happening in the community. It also serves as a “check” to the power of the council, people can attend the meetings if they do not like what council has done or is planning on doing. This is a healthy part of the democracy in Carbondale. The main paper in Northeastern Pennsylvania is the Scranton
Times, form reading the paper for many years growing up I never noticed a bias in either direction. The paper has covered the whole area and has had it share of stories on the Carbondale area, both good and bad but they seem to be fair. The Scranton Times also helps to educate the people about surrounding communities and their issues. As stated before Carbondale shares many of the same problems as the rest of the area. If people can see how others fail and succeed they can learn and better themselves.

Carbondale has just fewer than 10,000 people living there. The people of Carbondale need better paying jobs, jobs that the youth will also want. Carbondale is not keeping its youth and is not attracting many to the community. By bring in new businesses to the area Carbondale would see a rise in its community on the whole. Education is also another indicator of how healthy a community and democracy are. Carbondale has a recent history of its schools not performing well. As stated before, at the end of the 2005 school year Sacred Heart high school will be closing. Sacred Heart is a private catholic school who’s enrollment is about 130 kids in seventh through twelfth grade.(paper) The decline of people moving to the area helped to see this number fall to where the school was losing money, but also the high price of a
private school in a poor area, with a public school not far. There is a problem with the public school though, recent talks of a teacher strike and low SAT scores. The state level for the SAT’s in 2002 was a score of 987, Carbondale’s average score was well below at 831. (5-page11) Many universities still use SAT scores as a way to choose students for enrollment in their college. “Statewide, only 2.1% of Pennsylvania’s School districts report lower SAT combined scores. During the period examined, the district’s SAT combined score has decreased by an average of 13 points per year. This is counter to the state and peer trends, which show relatively little change over the same time period.” (5-page11-12 quote) While the number of students in the school district who participate in the SATs is at the state level, 63.4%, the number of students that plan to go on to college, 57.7% is well-below the state level of near 70 percent (69.5%) (5-page 12) There needs to be a change in attitude, if the students, who are the next leaders of the area, do not want to better, not only themselves but their community, who will do it for them?

Many households make under the $41,994 per Median household income. (4) Carbondale’s 27,574 per household is far from the national average. (4) The percent of students who live in “economically disadvantaged” homes is 27.8% at
the state level, but a shocking 51.3% at the Carbondale school district. As stated before the area needs to bring in better paying jobs, but it also needs to educate its youth and keep them in the area. While the number of high school graduates is almost even to that of the national level of 80.4%, the number of people with a Bachelor's degree or higher drops well off from that of the national average of 24.4% to that of 12.8%. To look even farther, the percent of the population that has not graduated high school but is over 25 years of age is 21.5%. (4) This is a fair amount of the working class that would not be able to work at a highly skilled job that would require a college education. This is a problem for an area that needs to bring in better jobs to raise the standard of living.

Deborah Meier, author of the book entitled “Will Standards Save Public Education” believes that reconnecting the community, students and the teachers is the key to fixing the education system. She points to low voter turnout as a sign that the people in the communities are not thinking about a group of the population that cannot speak for themselves. (Ford p81) State Representative Jim Wansacz is looking out for the interest of students in his district. He has introduced two bills that would prevent
teacher strikes and set up arbitration. This is a major step in trying to better students’ education.

“Pluralist Democracy” is based on the idea that people will come together and form a group based on similar ideas. It makes sense why people would do this, there is power in numbers. I did not find many interest groups in Carbondale. They do have small clubs and groups, with some power. When people join groups they debate and listen to one another, exchanging ideas and forming new ones. This helps to build the community; debate is a healthy exercise of democracy. There are problems with “Pluralist Democracy”, the group may not be trying to help the whole community, but rather just advance their own cause. When this happens others suffer, like children. Groups also serve many functions like allow for people to express themselves and can even be used as checks against government.

Democracy in Carbondale today is working, but is not healthy. The recent changes have it heading in the right direction. The new plans bought in by Mr. Taylor should help the community. Cleaning up the Main St. area so that new businesses can move in and fixing up old homes and making them easily available are major steps to helping the community and its civic pride. Their media is small, but healthy and along with the towns sense of civic pride they
show signs of a good democracy. The education system is not healthy though, they have many problems that need to be addressed. Do to the voting problems of the past the community may have trouble believing new leaders, but if these leaders can show that they are trustworthy and will fellow though on their word it will restore faith in the system. It will not be easy for Carbondale to rebuild itself, but with strong leaders and an active civic body is can be done. Steps are already in place to make the community stronger, which will lead to a stronger economy. They need to address their educational problems quickly. They can not continue to fall behind, it would only add to the problems they face.
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