Lauren Genn

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“Democracy in Reading, Pennsylvania: 2005”
Introduction

In beginning this paper, it is best to define the concept of democracy, a term used by many to depict freedom, liberty, and most commonly the general ideals of the United States of America. In today’s every-changing world however, democracy is beginning to take on its own meanings and intimations. In conducting my own search for democracy in America today, I have found that there are numerous definitions of the term both personal and institutionalized, but also that it is beginning to become a mystified principle that is imperfect in some areas of the country. I chose to research in greater detail democracy within the City of Reading, Pennsylvania to allow for a sample of democracy in action as it stands today in America. In 2005, democracy in the City of Reading, Pennsylvania is slowly beginning to disappear and become a jaded term.

History of Reading, Pennsylvania

Reading, Pennsylvania began as many areas did within Pennsylvania, founded by the sons of William Penn in 1747. Thomas Penn named the city after his own county seat, Reading, in Berkshire England, and in 1752 it became the county seat of Berks County. It is located almost sixty miles north of Philadelphia, just south of Allentown. The City itself is roughly ten square miles, and is roughly 250 feet above sea level.\(^1\) Reading over the years held an integral role in periods of war due to its successful iron industry, as well as the advent of the Reading Railroad in 1833. The impact of the Reading Railroad has left lasting impressions on the area, due to the intense levels of development that occurred throughout Berks County in direct correlation of the Railroad.

\(^1\)“Reading,” 1.
Over the years the Railroad served as a means of transportation out of Reading, provided numerous jobs and services to the community, as well as gave a positive reputation to the citizens of Reading for being associated with the Railroad and its magnificent power. It is through this establishment that the City of Reading, Pennsylvania began to grow and prosper. Even though the Railroad has since become a pastime of Reading’s history, it still played a significant factor in its development.

Throughout history Reading has afforded its citizens many opportunities to participate and have a voice in the decisions within their community. Today Reading has a number of civic organizations that help to promote and educate its citizens regarding issues across a wide spectrum. Organizations such as the League of Women Voters, Olivet Boys and Girls Club, Rotary Club, and the Puerto Rican Latino Association each serve specific needs to the community, but offer them a place to enjoy kinship, intellect, and opportunities to participate in those areas directly affecting their lives.

Historically, these organizations have always thrived in Reading. Most notable is the establishment of the Y.M.C.A. in Reading in the 1920s. This was established so that the Railroad workers at the Reading Railroad would be provided with a place to relax and enjoy their free time. Over the years the Y.M.C.A. has grown to encompass numerous other activities and age groups, and has served the City of Reading as a place for families to grow together as well as strengthen the community overall. This is just one example of the historic ties that Reading has to the commitment of their community.

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2 Fultz, 14.
3 Fultz, 13.
Party Politics in the City

As a city, Reading has maintained a tight party alliance with the Democrats. Typically, cities are generally democratic and operate as such. This is well noted in the recent mayoral election of 2003 in Reading. Democratic candidate Tom McMahon won the election with 7,629 votes. The runner-up Republican candidate Robert F. Brookins received a dismal 1,919 votes. Another area of democratic dominance is within the City Council, where in the same election of District 2, Democratic candidate Marcia Goodman-Hinnershitz won with 1,125 votes. Runner-up Republican candidate Rebecca Acosta received only 264 votes. Since 1976 the Mayor of Reading has been a Democrat, minus the exception of Paul Angstadt who served from 1996-1999. It is a highly Democratic area. In speaking with the City of Reading Managing Director, Leon Churchill about this dominance, he offered a positive outlook. He spoke of the need for political competition in a community to maintain interest and accountability towards the government. Generally, people begin to get comfortable with old habits and continue to elect Democratic candidates into office, without thinking twice about the possibility of a Republican viewpoint. Churchill pointed out that if Reading were to increase competition between and among the parties, it may help to increase participation.

Churchill also spoke of the need for the Hispanic community to become more mobilized to ensure that their voices are heard. They make up as stated before nearly forty percent of the City, and as such should mobilize their efforts to become a loud and noticeable voice within the City. In Reading there is a Hispanic Center in existence since 1977, but due to the rising Latino population and the extreme density found in Reading,

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4 “Reading Election 2002 Results,” 1.
5 “Mayors of Reading,” 1.
the Center will need to expand and offer more services and outreach programs to the citizens to ensure the voice of the community is heard.\textsuperscript{6}

**United States Census 2000**

In analyzing the level of democracy in a city the size of Reading, Pennsylvania, it is difficult to decipher what, if any area will provide visible weaknesses or successes. An issue that has affected the democratic vitality within Reading deals with the federal government Census of 2000. The census is performed every ten years by the government to provide for an accurate and complete account of every person residing within the United States of America.\textsuperscript{7} Reading launched a large campaign in the months leading up to the census to ensure that citizens understood the reasoning behind such a census, and the ramifications that would erupt if all citizens did not respond. The campaign ran under the slogan, “Everyone Counts in Berks,” and encompassed billboards, mailings, television ads, bumper stickers, and articles in the newspaper. In an interview with Donna Reed, who played an integral part in this campaign, I found that there is a rich history surrounding the need for a census.

The census dates back to the time of the bible with the great Roman Emperor, Caesar Augustus ordering the first census of the Roman world around 6 BC.\textsuperscript{8} It is intended to serve as a means to account for every person residing in the United States. It has been administered every ten years since 1790 to help produce a useful demographic profile of the United States. However, the Census not only affects the amount of federal funding that a municipality may receive from the government, but it also affects the

\textsuperscript{6}Hispanic Center, 1.  
\textsuperscript{7}Brudereck, “Issues” 1.  
\textsuperscript{8}Forester, “Everyone” 1.
eligibility of that area for legislative representation. In Berks County, the underlying task at hand was to make certain that everyone was accounted for to ensure that the numbers were as close to reality as possible, and to guarantee that everyone was counted to account for federal funding possibilities.  

Typically in a Census, an individual equals roughly $1,000 in federal funds that are available to that area. If people are undercounted or misrepresented, that particular county or municipality then stands to lose money that it in reality needs to support its actual population. One of the fears of undercounting in the 2000 Census was that Reading would lose parts of the Sixth District, which in fact became a reality. The Census has very real and lasting effects that many do not consider until they are actually experiencing the downfalls.

Following the Census, Berks County achieved an initial response rate of 73 percent, a rate eight points higher than that of the national average. Berks County also achieved among the top seven counties in terms of the initial response rate showing that their efforts to reach the majority of Berks County residents was successful. However, due to the success of the campaign, many were upset to see that this affected their legislative representation. Today the City of Reading, Pennsylvania contains just over 80,000 inhabitants, nearly fifty percent of which are female. Of this 80,000 nearly forty percent indicate that they are Hispanic or Latino (of any race). These results of the Census shocked many in the community because they had expected a larger percentage of this particular race. One of the reasons for this seemingly low number is that a number

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9 Interview with Donna Reed, March 18, 2005.
10 Interview with Donna Reed, March 18, 2005.
11 U.S. Census Bureau American Fact Finder, 1.
of the Hispanic or Latino population did not respond to the Census, thereby affecting the results.

The original function of the Census was to guarantee that the representatives in the House of Representatives were relative to the population of each state through the process of apportionment. This is where the Census plays an integral part in the redistricting of legislative districts, and had a direct affect on the City of Reading. Even though the population from Pennsylvania grew, it wasn’t enough to retain the twenty-one seats in the House of Representatives, and as a result Pennsylvania lost two seats. These two seats were Democrats, and thus the House gained Republican control, enabling the party to redraw the districts to their greatest benefit.12

**Democrats v. Republicans**

In an article from The Reading Eagle dated April 1, 2003, it was noted that in January of 2001, the U.S. District Court panel in Harrisburg ruled that, “a revised congressional redistricting plan dividing Berks County into four districts was constitutional.”13 The Democrats argued that the Republicans knowingly were violating the one-person, one-vote principle outlined in the Constitution. The Republicans counter to this argument was that politics is part of redistricting and should be allowed to play an integral part in the decision-making process.14 The Supreme Court upheld the decision thereby dividing Berks County into four congressional districts. None of these four districts carry a large majority of Berks County, and the two that are representative of Reading are not necessarily on the same page either.

12 “County,” 1.
13 “Intervention,” 1.
14 “Redistricting,” 1.
Originally, new districts created by the Republicans were to be used in the 2002 election. After the Republicans presented the original breakdown, Democrats challenged the maps and they were declared unconstitutional under Act 1 of 2002. A panel made up of three federal judges declared the Congressional plan unconstitutional, but allowed the plan to be used during the 2002 elections, so as to prevent any disruption of the election schedule. This original Act 1 plan was only to be used for the 2002 election.15

The ensuing redistricting plan termed Act 34 was accepted by this panel of three federal judges, but was appealed by the Democratic Party to the United States Supreme Court. This case would also decide the fate of other states facing the same issues as Pennsylvania. The Supreme Court ultimately decided in the case, Vieth v. Jubelirer, that the Act 34 plan was constitutional and that the boundaries could stand as drawn by the Republicans. Justices Antonin Scalia, William Rehnquist, Sandra Day O’Connor, and Clarence Thomas stated that, ”Democrats who challenged the districts did not provide a manageable standard for the court to judge when political gerrymandering goes too far.”16 House Minority Leader H. William DeWeese (Democrat) stated, “the fact is there are hundreds of thousands of Pennsylvania Democrats who are being represented by Republicans primarily because of the tortured nature of the new political boundary lines.”17 This is true in Reading, where under both the 6th and 16th Districts a Republican is in power over a largely Democratic area.

In effect the Supreme Court closed all doors on pursuing political gerrymandering cases with the above four judges wanting to overturn part of the 1986 ruling that allowed challenges of this nature. Five other justices on the Court disagreed with them; however

15 McCarty, 4.
16 Worden, 1.
17 Worden, 2.
it makes for a difficult case in the future if you know that four of the nine justices have stated that they are against political gerrymandering cases. The decision by the Court means that for the next five years the districts will stand as drawn, not to be considered again until after the 2010 Census.

Effects of Census 2000

The Supreme Court decision has had a direct impact on the City of Reading, which faces a phenomenon it has not seen for many years. It now stands split between the 6th and 16th Districts. This presents Reading with two congressmen – both an advantage and disadvantage to the citizens residing in each district.

One of the largest problems facing Reading after this redistricting is getting this information to its citizens. In the past, Reading fell completely under the jurisdiction of the 6th district, more recently led by Tim Holden. After speaking with a number of citizens of Reading, some believe that he is still their representative, though he is now the representative for the 17th District, which does not encompass any part of Reading today. It is even more difficult to explain to an already baffled citizenry that it depends where they live in Reading – down to the street corner – to decipher who their representative is. Even if all incumbents were re-elected in the past 2004 election, thirteen voting districts in Berks County alone would have a new Congressman due to the new boundaries.

Seven precincts within Reading simply flip-flopped between 6th and 16th Districts. These occurrences alone are enough to confuse the average citizen.

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18 Holland, 1.
Conservative Stronghold

In the 2002 Election both the 6th District and the 16th District were decidedly won by Republicans, Jim Gerlach and Joseph Pitts respectively. Gerlach won the 6th District with fifty-two percent of the vote over Democratic party candidate Dan Wofford. Joseph Pitts won the 16th District with an overwhelming seventy-three percent of the vote over Green party candidate Will Todd, and Constitution party candidate Kenneth Brenneman.19 As stated before, cities generally tend to be Democratic in nature, however due to the fact that neither of these candidates’ districts encompasses a large part of the City, the Republican influence of the surrounding townships plays a factor in the election.

Now that Joe Pitts and Jim Gerlach are the representatives of the City of Reading, I thought it best to explore their availability and commitment to the people of the City. Jim Gerlach has an office in Wyomissing to provide service to his constituents in Reading. This is advertised on his website on the opening page, so there are no added clicks or distractions. Joe Pitts advertises on his website under the sub-heading, ‘Contact,’ with two offices in Unionville and Lancaster – nothing close to the City where a large portion of his constituents reside. Upon further investigation with the secretary in the Mayor’s Office, Maria Baez, I came to discover that Joe Pitts does maintain an office in City Hall, but he only has a representative there on Monday mornings from 9 a.m. until 12 p.m. This fact is not advertised on his website at all. The phone number listed to contact Joe Pitts connects to an answering machine that his representatives respond to at a convenient time, but nonetheless there is no immediate action taken for a resident of the City.

19 Berks County Election Services, 1.
It seems that out of the two representatives, Jim Gerlach does a much better job at reaching out to his citizens and letting them know where he is and when he can be reached. When I called both offices for a comment, Pitt’s office did not offer me much help, only that if I left a message with a specific complaint that they would try and help me as best that they could. Gerlach’s office volunteered to help me find out what district I lived in, and offered numerous other services to me as a constituent. Overall, I felt more supported and that my concerns would be addressed with Gerlach. Unfortunately, as a resident in the City, you don’t get to choose your representative necessarily. The only other option is for a challenger to unseat the incumbent in the next election.

**Fritz Island Sewage Treatment Plant**

The importance of this relates to one of the larger issues that Reading faces today involving the revitalization of the City’s sewage treatment plant. For a number of years, spanning as far back as the early 1940s, residents surrounding the plant have complained about the unpleasant odor, and the state has repeatedly fined the City for polluting the Schuylkill River, as well as a number of other infractions totaling upwards of $200 million.\(^\text{20}\) In 2003, the Federal Government became involved and informed city officials that they were authorized to sue the City for negligence of the plant. Under this pressure, the City now has until October 2006 to decide whether to replace or repair the current sewage treatment plant.

However, this decision does not have to be made public due to an agreement signed between City Council and the U.S. Department of Justice promising to “not divulge the terms of a settlement concerning the future of the sewage treatment plant until

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\(^{20}\) Brudereck, “Big” 1.
after Council has voted on it.” The underlying issue is that for the City to receive the state and federal funding necessary to finance such a large undertaking, its representatives must be of the same mindset, fighting for the same issues. Pitts and Gerlach must work together and cooperate to work towards receiving the funding necessary for the City to complete this project – not only for the betterment of the City, but for the environment as well. At this time, it is not decided what the City will do whether it be repairs or rebuilding, but the fact remains that either way the City will need some super-financing to achieve this.

I attempted to contact both Pitts and Gerlach to obtain their stance on the Fritz Island issue. I called Pitts’ office in Lancaster because it is the closest office to Reading to see what his thoughts would be. His representative did not know what Fritz Island was or where it was located, and advised she could only give me information on pending legislation; nothing else. I called Gerlach’s office in Wyomissing to get his opinion on the issue, and his representative was very helpful. She transferred me to the Washington D.C. office where another representative offered to find out information for me. She had heard of Fritz Island and the problems associated with it, but wanted to find specific information for me. Unfortunately I wasn’t able to get the information back in time for this paper, but Gerlach’s office was very helpful in attempting to find this information for me.

**Democratic Interpretations**

In assessing the level of democracy in Reading, Pennsylvania I found it useful to find what the inhabitants of Reading perceived democracy to mean. In an interview with

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21 “Openness,” 1.
Bill Evans, Chairman of the Democratic Party in Berks County, he explained democracy as a “society wherein every citizen is able to live freely and be treated with equality and respect under a government who is elected by a majority of the people.”

I also spoke with a woman by the name of Azuri Marcano, who is a resident of the City of Reading. Her views towards democracy were simply that it is a political system wherein the people have the upper hand in electing representatives to voice their opinions. Azuri has lived in the City for the past few years but she noted that she did not know who the Mayor was, or even when elections were held in the City. These varying views of a democracy show that each individual person has a unique view of what the purpose and goals of a democracy should be. It is only through interactions with one another, and the success of elections and representation that we begin to understand the interlacing web of connections each person in a community possesses.

**Democratic Theory Application**

One way to analyze democracy in Reading is to compare it to what Alexis de Tocqueville found in his writings compiled in, “Democracy in America.” He focuses on a number of different aspects of democracy, but outlines his findings on very specific topics. Take for example the use of the Court System during the boundary disputes in Reading. De Tocqueville would view the prying judicial system utilized during the boundary dispute as providing a counterweight that affords balance and order to the citizenry. Tocqueville states that, “when the American people are intoxicated by passion or carried away by the impetuosity of their ideas, they are checked and stopped by the

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22 Interview with Bill Evans. March 2, 2005.
23 Interview with Azuri Marcano, March 21, 2005.
almost invisible influence of their legal counselors.\textsuperscript{24} This ensures that the passions of the average individual are not pursued against the success of the democracy.

De Tocqueville also writes of the prevalence of civic organizations in America, as evidenced in Reading. He states that these institutions are created because individuals in a society are weak, and together in an organized group they have more influence and power.\textsuperscript{25} However, he also believes that these groups are necessary because they help to foster an interest in public affairs and the success of the community which is crucial to the survival of democracy.

Another issue Tocqueville sheds light upon is the superiority of women that Americans tend to boast. He believes that the success of a democracy is due to the high positions that women hold both in the public and private sectors. Even in Reading, two of the seven members of City Council are women and exert high levels of influence on the surrounding community. Tocqueville believes that they are necessary for the success of democracy due to their ability to shape the mores of that society.\textsuperscript{26}

Another way to analyze democracy in Reading is to look at specific theories of democracy and compare and contrast them to the City. The theory that coincides most with democracy in Reading is participatory democracy. This study of democracy believes in the participation of the individual both in voting, involvement, and education. A healthy participatory democracy maintains high levels of education and community involvement. Reading maintains a sixty-two percent rate of those who have graduated high school or higher. Only eight percent have earned a bachelor’s degree or higher.\textsuperscript{27}

\textsuperscript{24} Tocqueville, 125. \textsuperscript{25} Tocqueville, 199. \textsuperscript{26} Tocqueville, 234-237. \textsuperscript{27} U.S. Census Bureau American Fact Finder.
This low level of education does not help in the success of the democracy. Without informed and educated citizens, votes cast may be ignorant or unaware.

In a protective democracy communities hold numerous referendums to ensure that the people are getting what they want, have high attendance at council and other meetings, and continually engage in healthy debate. The City of Reading does not partake in these situations. I attended a city council meeting on February 14, 2005 and it was held at seven p.m. in City Hall. Only seven members other than myself were in attendance, and four of them were doing projects for their high school class. There is not a high level of turnout for these events in Reading. Referendums are rare, and debate is generally non-existent, unless it is over a large and current topic such as the Fritz Island dilemma. Generally, Reading is not a protective democracy.

Reading also shows strengths of liberalist theories as well as the participatory theory. Liberalism has a number of media outlets, diversity in religion and race, equal opportunity of employment, and generally high voter participation. As stated before Reading has a lower level of education, but does have a high level of diversity. A number of races are present in Reading, Hispanic topping the list at forty percent followed by African American at twelve percent, and Asian at two percent. The section, ‘some other race’ received twenty percent of the vote.\(^{28}\) The number of media outlets is strong but not fantastic for a city of Reading’s size. There is one local newspaper, the Reading Eagle, but a number of news stations to choose from.

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\(^{28}\) U.S. Census Bureau American Fact Finder.
Future of Democracy in Reading

In general Reading has a fairly educated, low-income, confused citizenry. Looking at the circumstances that have led to this analysis, it is crucial to understand that democracy is a constantly changing and evolving system of government. It is notably different in every area it is employed, and as such achieves different successes and failures. It is in the eye of the beholder to determine the cause of democracy, as is evidenced by the number of theories about democracy.

Reading is a City that has much potential and hope for the future. It will take a driven and inspired citizenry to ensure that Reading continues on the path for success, but the framework exists for democracy to thrive. It is through this populace that issues will be debated, presented, and voted upon for the betterment of the community. It is up to the individuals themselves to take pride in their City and learn about the issues that affect them so that they can make informed and educated decisions.

This project allowed me the opportunity to explore a community that I never thought I would be interested in. I was able to learn from the citizens who put their heart into the daily politics of the City, as well as the citizens whom could care less about what the City decided to do. It has opened my eyes to a world that I once took for granted, but now recognize the potential that each individual can have on the community. It was a unique experience that I am glad I was able to partake in such an exciting time in our nation’s history.
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