Democracy in America 2005: Fleetwood, Pennsylvania

When first looking at Democracy in 2005 and how it works in the communities we live in today we must first look at the term democracy and give a definition to it. Democracy is not something that a person can do, it is not something that can be given to someone either, it is something that needs to be dissected into how democracy works within an area. Democracy within the communities of 2005 can be evaluated by looking at the people who live there, their jobs and activities in the community, and how knowledgeable the citizens of these communities are of their own local governments. These three areas are what I am going to focus on when looking at the community of Fleetwood and how democracy is working here as well.

Fleetwood is a small community located in northeastern Berks County. Fleetwood is surrounded by farming country on all sides and is a borough located in-between the two major cities of Reading and Allentown. These cities supply the Borough of Fleetwood with many resources and act as places for the residents of Fleetwood to work and earn a living.

Fleetwood is a community where the borough and the many organizations in Fleetwood service the community by providing many activities and associations for its citizens to take part in. Fleetwood has many youth organizations and activities which are all run by volunteers. Volunteers are going to be key figures in any community, but are abundant in Fleetwood. All of these organizations which I looked at feature volunteers
who take time out of their schedules to make this community a better place to reside in. Volunteers are what make democracies stronger, healthier and more effective.

A healthy democracy is what every community is looking for. Healthy democracies have an active participation by its citizens, this includes voting and being knowledgeable of the politics in the community. Being active in politics is not the only way to judge a healthy democracy. Healthy democracies also produce for their citizens by giving back to the communities they service in many ways. Citizens in these communities will tell you that they base the effectiveness of the communities they live in by what they are able to see being done. As long as citizens see their tax dollars at work, they will remain happy.

When I first started to investigate Fleetwood I was unable to find a webpage for this borough. I thought to myself, “How can a community function in this age of technology without a simple homepage for their community to be exposed to the rest of the country?” Then I went to the borough hall, which I found to be just one office located in a huge building of other local organizations. I then found the answer to my question that Fleetwood is not as advanced of a community in terms of technology and resources as many others in Pennsylvania are. They do not service their own cable or internet services but, they do however have their own electric and sewer services.

I wanted to see what the citizens of this community thought “Democracy in 2005” meant to them. You can answer this question by looking at it in many different directions. I chose to question those people who reside here in Fleetwood and those people who also work here. I went to many of the local organizations who serviced the community of Fleetwood and asked this question to the leaders of these organizations.
I chose to focus on the organizations of this community because it shows people being active in their community and creating a healthy environment. De Tocqueville writes on community organizations when he said, “Americans of all ages, all conditions, and all dispositions, constantly form associations. They have not only commercial and manufacturing companies, in which all take part, but associations of a thousand other kinds,-- religious, moral, serious, futile, general or restricted, enormous or diminutive” (Heffner, 198). This is true of all communities across the United States where citizens join and form groups based on their interests which make the community a better place. De Tocqueville feels that civic organizations are good for a democracy, they give people a chance to create change in their communities and promote a healthy and active democracy.

I started out by looking at the major business partnership that services this region of Berks County, which is the Kutztown Area Chamber of Commerce. This organization services the general economic trading region encompassing Northeast Berks County (KACC, 1). I conducted an interview with the president of this organization, Konnie Miller, and she describe her organization as one that serves this community but the majority of business that is done is conducted by the citizens of Kutztown, Topton, Lyons, and Fleetwood. I asked her the question of what her views were of Democracy 2005 here in this region today. Like I assumed before the interview her answer was not going to be anything close to what I was looking for. Her reply was, “Democracy has not changed much over the years. I would have to say that citizens care about what affects them, and that most citizens will not take part in the business of what the borough does...
until it affects them in some way such as increased bills or some type of change in the school districts.”

I looked at her responses to my questions and saw that this organization can be looked on as a democratic organization because it is up to its members, who are citizens of the community, to conduct the business that goes on. This is a great example of democracy working in 2005. If you look at how she answered the question when she said that, “people only care about what affects them directly,” this is true with many issues across American today. I feel that this is part of what Democracy in 2005 is all about. Things have to be in people’s everyday lives in order for them to care about them.

Next I looked at the Fleetwood Area School District. I attended the school board meeting which took place on February 15th. I could tell by the attendance at this meeting that people either did not care to voice their opinions or that there was nothing of great importance that was going to be discussed. The main issues that was brought up at the meeting was the upcoming job vacancies that were going to be taking place at the end of the school year, the scheduling changes that will take place because of the school closure due to snow, and also an issue with the transportation company they use. None of these issues were debated heavily by the public. The meeting was basically conducted by the school board’s president, Tim Heffner. Business seemed to flow quite easily without trouble showing that the citizens seem to let business get conducted by the experts that they have elected into these board positions.

By looking at the Chamber of Commerce and the school district I can say that this community would fall under a Pluralist Democracy. If you look at a Pluralist’s view on Democracy, they focus on the fact the people care about what directly affects them and
look out for their own interests (Terchek, 125). This Pluralist view is based displayed by the works of Athur Bentley in his writing *The Process of Government*. Bentley talks of interest groups and how they look to instill their interests in politics and do not care about anything else.

This is exactly how the school board functions. If there is an issue that people care about, citizens will come out to the meeting an express their views and interests on the topic. This is how a democracy works in Fleetwood and in most communities across Pennsylvania and the United States. This is especially true in the neighboring community of Kutztown where I reside. I can show this by looking at my family. We do not really pay attention to the local government except when it pertains to us. The borough here a couple years ago made all of the people on our street pay for new sidewalks because they had to install new piping in the road. The people on my block went to complain to the borough about this and in tern we got the borough to pay for some of the sidewalk that had to be replaced.

I researched this in some of the old copies of “The Patriot”, which is the local newspaper for this area, if there was anything like what happened in Kutztown. I found that in June of 1998, the Fleetwood Borough had a project where they were going to re-pave a street in Fleetwood, but the citizens on that street would have to pay for sidewalks that would be installed (Patriot, 3). This seemed like the government was taking an authoritarian approach by making the citizens pay for something that was not necessary. The citizens appeared to have the same view as I did because by looking at the minutes from the next couple borough meetings, I found that the attendance was way above normal (Library, 6). This was exactly what I was looking for as a great example of a
Pluralist Democracy. The people came out and expressed their concerns on this issue to the local government.

Then I looked into this even deeper and found that there were no sidewalks there in the first place and this street was close to where the Fleetwood Schools are located and it was for safety purposes. This showed how the borough was looking out for the safety of the children and other pedestrians who passed along this street, even though it was at the expense of those property owners who lived along this street. In the end, the residents had to pay for the sidewalks, but it made the community better.

When I went to look for the Fleetwood Borough Hall I came to find a wealth of resources. At the location of the borough office there was also the Fleetwood Public Library, Fleetwood Historical Society and the offices of the Tri-Valley YMCA all of whom service the community of Fleetwood in some way, shape or form. All of these organization see volunteers from the community come out and work in these organizations in order for them to functions. Volunteer organizations are essential aspects of healthy democracies as they operate in 2005. Fleetwood also has a volunteer fire company which services the borough and the surrounding municipalities if needed. By having volunteer organizations you are seeing the citizens of Fleetwood come out in their own spare time to help make their community a better place to live and work.

By looking at what each of these organizations functions are in the community, you will see that each of them has a specific purpose. When looking at the Tri-Valley Branch of the Reading YMCA, this organization works with the youths of Fleetwood and the surrounding communities, this is according to Veronica Arehart who is the Branch Director. I actually am fully aware of what the YMCA does for the youths of this area
because I attended its Pre-school, swam for nine years on their swim team and also coached for their swim team. The YMCA looks to instill good ideals and values into the lives of the youths that are part of this organization.

Another person who is fully aware of the success of the Tri-Valley YMCA is Dan Pfost. Dan is a friend of mine who has also swam for their swim team, coached for their swim team and has also life guarded at the Fleetwood Pool. When I asked Dan, “How do you see democracy working in Fleetwood today?” He responded by saying, “I don’t know. I guess people don’t really pay attention to politics that much. I stay interested in politics by reading the paper and watching the news, but that’s more with the national government and not municipal or state news.” His response is consistent with that of other that I have talked to. I can say that this is most likely how most people in Fleetwood view the municipal government and don’t pay much attention to it.

One of the main operations that the YMCA overlooks is the running of the Fleetwood Community Pool every summer with the Borough of Fleetwood. Usually local pools are run by the local governments of the municipalities but, in Fleetwood’s case the pool is maintain by the YMCA with a financial backing coming from the borough. This is a great example of democracy at work with a local organization helping a local government service the public. If more local governments would look for help from local organizations, it might help the local government function more efficiently by having some of their time and resources being freed up.

The Tri-Valley YMCA also has a swim team which is run by parents who volunteer their time and efforts to see their children succeed and have fun in a competitive environment. The only people who are paid for the time they put in here are
the coaches. This is an excellent example of a successful volunteer organization in this community.

By seeing how the Borough and YMCA work together to run the community pool, this shows how democracy is working properly with a community organization working with the local government to give something to the community. By running the pool like this, the community has a place to go and relax in the summer and the community can see the tax dollars that they give to the government being given back to them.

Another youth organization in Fleetwood is the Fleetwood Youth Athletic Association which oversees a baseball program for children in the summer and a basketball program in the winter. These organizations work with the borough and the Fleetwood School District to supply fields and courts for these activities. This an all-volunteer organization as well with the coaches and the leaders of this organization all being volunteers. Fleetwood also has a youth soccer association which is run by parents. As you can see Fleetwood looks to create an environment in which the youths of this community are very active in different groups leaving them little time to cause trouble. This is also a good indicator of a healthy democracy by having a community create a healthy and active lifestyle for their youths.

With all of these athletic activities for the youths of Fleetwood I found there to be a tremendous amount of town spirit for the high school sports at the Fleetwood Area High School. The school’s soccer and softball teams have recently been in the state playoffs each of the last five seasons (FASD, 5). Many citizens speak highly of their hometown Tigers, the schools mascot (FASD, 1). Dan Pfost said, “The high school
sports are so successful because children learn the fundamentals when they are young and are able to mature into great athletes when they get into high school.” I would have to agree with this. The success of these high school athletes is directly related to the youth sports that are available because of these volunteer organizations which creates these athletes.

When I talked to Tim Flannery, a father of five children who are involved in many activities in the Fleetwood community, he said the best part of the community was all the youth activities that are available for children. He also said that he enjoys “Community Days” that the borough sponsors for its citizens to come and have a good time (Flannery). This would be another borough sponsored event when the citizens can come together and show town and community spirit, which is a big part of Fleetwood.

If you look at the Fleetwood Area Historical Society and the Fleetwood Public Library, these are two places that I went to where there is a tremendous wealth of knowledge mostly focusing on the history of Fleetwood. I should also mention that both of these organizations have a webpage then can be accessed. This should show that the borough either has the lack of technology or lack of funds to be able to maintain a webpage which would get your community exposure out into the public. At the public library I was able to find borough meeting minutes, borough records and old issues of “The Patriot”. I used some of these sources previously when I talked about Fleetwood having a Pluralist Democracy.

I want to now give a brief history of Fleetwood dating back to its first incorporation as the Borough of Coxtown in 1815 (FAHS). From then Coxtown was a small town with little in it as it lay between the big urban areas of Allentown and
Reading. Between 1857 and 1859 the Reading and Lehigh Railroad Company built the rail lines that are still functioning through Fleetwood today (FAHS). This railway brought business into Fleetwood as transportation between the big cities became more accessible. Two of the major business that formed because of this railroad was the Fleetwood Metal Body Company and Fleetwood Building Block Company (FAHS). These businesses saw a boom take place in the population of the town from farmers to an industrial village. On March 22, 1869 the name of the town was changed to from Coxtown to the modern name of the town which is Fleetwood (FAHS). Then on October 4, 1873 Fleetwood was incorporated as the Borough of Fleetwood (FAHS). The first volunteer fire company in Fleetwood was formed in 1914 and then in January of 1930 the first police department was formed in Fleetwood as well (FAHS).

Next I would like to focus in on the make-up of the population of Fleetwood. This information was provided by the United States Census Bureau from the 2000 Census. In 2000, Fleetwood reportedly had a population of just over four-thousand citizens (U.S. Census, 1). The majority of the population lives in a household consisting of a married couple with two children. The bulk of Fleetwood’s population is between the ages of eighteen and sixty-five showing that they have a strong workforce here in this community. This also creates a scene in Fleetwood of a family oriented community where couples come to raise their children and work in the surrounding areas.

Looking at the labor force of Fleetwood during the 2000 Census you will notice that the unemployment rate is relatively low being at two and a half percent (U.S. Census, 2). This compares to the unemployment rate of Pennsylvania which was three and a half percent (U.S. Census, 2). You can see that Fleetwood’s citizens are contributing to
democracy by being active in the workforce. When looking at employment, one of the biggest factors that affect employment is that of the education of the labor force. This census focused its questions towards the members of the work force who are over the age of twenty-five. When looking at the work force over the age of twenty-five, eighty-five percent of those citizens attained at least a high school diploma or a higher degree and seventeen percent of those attained a bachelor’s degree or higher (U.S. Census, 3).

This compares to Pennsylvania where eighty-two percent of the population attained at least a high school diploma or a higher degree and twenty-two percent of those attained a bachelor’s degree or higher (U.S. Census, 3). Looking at the same statistics for the entire United States, eighty percent of the population attained a high school diploma or a higher degree and twenty-four percent attained a bachelor’s degree (U.S. Census, 3). These statistics show that the work force of Fleetwood is a very educated group of the population with roughly all but fifteen percent graduating from high school. You will notice though that the percent of the population who furthered their education after high school is much less than that of the populations of Pennsylvania as a whole and the United States.

However a high school education can only get you so far. That is why the median household income is at only forty-eight thousand dollars (U.S. Census, 3). The majority of households in Fleetwood bring in an annual household income of between twenty-five thousand and one-hundred thousand dollars (U.S. Census, 3). I would say then that the wealth is distributed evenly or roughly evenly over the population. Of course there is a small portion of the population who is living under the poverty level and there are those
families who are better off than others. You will see this in most communities across the United States as that is part of a democracy.

Fleetwood is a community which relies on its citizens to help the community prosper and in return the community will help its citizens. Over the course of this paper I have shown that Fleetwood’s organizations and volunteers help create a community that provides a lot of activities for its citizens and their children. Volunteers are what small communities like Fleetwood need to have in order for them to succeed in America in 2005 and that is how democracy functions in Fleetwood as people do their service to the community and the community in return services its citizens.

Fleetwood is truly a Pluralist form of Democracy where the citizens look to groups to get their interests expressed. From my findings I can not say that Fleetwood is a Participatory Democracy. Citizens are not actively involved in the politics that go on in Fleetwood. I can say this based on the attendance that I witnessed at both the borough and school board meetings that I attended. It is hard to say that citizen pay close attention to politics when I go to the meeting and there are ten or so other people in attendance. I can say that the citizens though do turnout to these meeting when there are issues that affect them based on the research that I found on the sidewalk project that went on in 1998.

Participatory Democracies are supposed to have their citizens actively taking part in the political process. A good example of a Participatory Theorist is John Dewey. Dewey says that, “Every citizen is his own politician.” (Terchek, 169) Dewey also says that politicians need to be informed by the citizens in order for them to represent them effectively. Without participation by the citizens in this form of government, it can not
work. This does not just mean going to vote when it is time for an election, but rather coming out to meetings and voicing their concerns and issues to the local government. I was not able to get voting records for Fleetwood in election, but from what I know about other communities and the United States as a whole, I can conclude that the turnout at elections can not be more than twenty percent.

Fleetwood can also be looked on as a Performance Democracy. This can be best described by looking at the works of Joseph Schumpeter and Anthony Downs. Schumpeter’s view of a Performance Democracy looks at work being done in the community for the common and public good, participation in politics for immediate gratification and interest groups as a means of persuading government to do something. All of these are seen in the Fleetwood Democracy. Schumpeter writes, “It is then held, that there exists a Common Good, the obvious beacon light of policy, which is always simple to define and which every normal person can be made to see by means of rational argument. There is hence no excuse for not seeing it and in fact no explanation for the presence of people who do not see it except ignorance—which can be removed—stupidity and anti-social interest.” (Terchek, 143) Examples of this would be that be people only turnout at meetings and participate in politics when there is something that effects them directly. I would like to go back to the sidewalk project as a perfect example of this where people voiced their concerns and saw that this was being done for the public good and the safety of the citizens.

Anthony Downs discusses his view of Performance Democracy in a slightly different approach in his work, An Economic Theory of Political Action in a Democracy. His view is based on the idea that it would not be rational for people to participate in a
democracy because it requires people to make the effort to become informed of politics and that takes effort. People would not mind making the effort if everyone would think and vote like the. People all have their own views and opinions though. Downs says that because of all the work and effort, there are not enough results, and that is why people do not participate. Downs says, “As long as we all retain the assumption of perfect knowledge, no citizen can possible influence another’s vote. Each knows what would benefit him most, what the government is doing, and what other parties would do if they were in power.” (Terchek, 156) This is also very true of Fleetwood as people do not feel that their voice will be heard at meeting or in the voting process because it is based on the rest of the population as well.

Democracy works in many different ways and in Fleetwood I would say that it works effectively. The community of Fleetwood supplies its citizens with a lot of activities, associations and organizations for its citizens to become active in the community. Through these civic groups democracy can be seen as being healthy and contributing to an effective democracy. The citizens are active in many of these organizations and also show strong pride in the community and show pride in what they do in these groups.

As I showed earlier, Fleetwood is considered a Pluralist and Performance Democracy. Citizens are active in interest groups and look to have their interest heard on issues that they personally care about. The sidewalk issue was a great example of how democracy works in Fleetwood where the citizens were directly affected by something the borough was doing and they did not understand it, so they rose up against the local government. This is how democracy works in Fleetwood.
The only reason that I would have to say that democracy is not working in Fleetwood is that the citizens are not knowledgeable of what is going on in the politics of the local government. For whatever reason they only care about what directly affects them, and nothing else in local government. This I am sure is consistent in every community across the United States making Fleetwood just like every other community.

Fleetwood or a community like it would be a place where I would like to reside when I start a family. It is the ideal place for a family with it being located between to big business sectors, it is a family oriented community and its citizens seem happy with the local government. Fleetwood is an ideal community within the United States where democracy exists and works effectively.
Resource List

1. Fleetwood Area Historical Society. Dennis Becker, President. www.fleetwoodpa.org

2. Fleetwood Area Public Library. www.fleetwoodlibrary.org


   School Board Meeting Tuesday February 15, 7:00pm.


   Council Meeting Monday February 14, 7:30pm.


6. Interview with Dan Pfost

7. Interview with Tim Flannery


11. Tri-Valley YMCA. Veronica Arehart, Branch Director.