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The 2020 Election as a Triumph for Democracy? Hold the Hosannas



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In *real* horse races — races that actual horses run — the winners go on to run other races. Racehorses do races. They have no other responsibility.

In our *political* horse races, winners do have another responsibility. We expect them to go on and govern, to make and execute policy decisions. Horse races don't give us democracy. We have democracy when those we the people elect make choices that reflect what we need and feel.

Our pundits, unfortunately, regularly overlook that distinction, as they did once again on Election Day 2020. They beheld the spectacle of a national voter turnout up by tens of millions and hailed the resiliency of our democracy, as imperfect as that democracy may be. Meanwhile, just before Election Day, two researchers released compelling new evidence that by the metric of governing — the only reason we hold political horse races — the United States no longer operates as a serious democracy. We have become something else altogether. In our current political system, their data analysis shows, the rich, not the people, almost always win.

The two analysts behind this new research, the Seattle-based Shawn McGuire and Charles Delahunt, have built upon the pioneering political science of UCLA's Martin Gilens and Northwestern's Benjamin Page, scholars who've been probing how democracy does — and does not — play out in the policy choices America makes.

The big question the Gilens and Page work raises: At what point does a democracy cease to be democratic? A difficult question. In the social sciences, after all, neat lines seldom separate one phenomenon from another. But if we start from “the premise that democracy means a government that responds to the wishes of the average citizen,” as Page [explained](#) after he and Gilens published their [landmark research](#) in 2014, we can find it “quite feasible to investigate this question objectively.”

To do that investigating, to find out how much influence average citizens have on what their government does, Gilens and Page made a deep dive into a database of federal policy decisions that Gilens had spent ten years compiling. In all, the two political scientists analyzed the outcomes from 1,779 policy disputes and battles. And their conclusion?

“Average citizens have no detectable influence at all,” [sums up](#) Page, “upon federal policy.”

Who does have influence?

“If you look at affluent people,” says Page, “they get what they want almost all the time.”

Enter Shawn McGuire and Charles Delahunt, and at this point things get a little wonky.

Gilens and Page put their data on federal decisions through the standard scholarly tools of multiple regression analysis. McGuire and Delahunt have gone back to that same database with analytical tools from the emerging new worlds of artificial intelligence and machine learning.

Their new working paper, just [published](#) by the Institute for New Economic Thinking in New York, gives a rigorously technical analysis of what these tools reveal, and the Institute's research director, Thomas Ferguson, has helpfully [fashioned](#) an introduction to — and a historical context for — the McGuire-Delahunt analysis that lay readers will find easily accessible.

Ferguson, himself a pioneer in social science research on political decision making, points out that “the idea that public opinion powers at least the broad direction of public policy in formally democratic countries like the United States has been an article of faith in both political science and public economics for generations.”

Gilens and Page upset that apple cart. McGuire and Delahunt confirm that upsetting and, notes Ferguson, open the way to “exciting extensions.”

Gilens and Page, for instance, locate real influence over public policy within the ranks of the most affluent 10 percent, but suggest that opinions in this top tenth most probably reflect attitudes within the ranks of the top 1 or 2 percent.

McGuire and Delahunt go further. Their research moves our focus from what our richest have on their minds to what they're doing with what they have in their wallets. They see “the

transfer of large amounts of money to policy makers from the wealthiest sources focused intensely on particular policies” as the “lodestar variable” for understanding how our policy makers make policy.

Opinions among America’s influencers, concurs Ferguson, amount to “noisy” byproducts from the mobilization of big money, what we get from big money’s “comet-like trail of social networks, subsidized op eds, subservient think tanks, and journalists seeking applause and better positions.” Our democracy has become, in Ferguson’s phrase, an “affluent authoritarianism.”

“McGuire and Delahunt’s reassessment of the [Gilens] data makes it much easier to see how far from reality ideas that average voters drive politics really are,” Ferguson goes on to note. “To make progress on understanding the mainsprings of actually existing democratic systems like the United States, the fixation on public opinion has to change.”

And who has the power to make that change, to shift our nation’s political dialogue off winsome narratives about America as democracy’s eternal fountainhead? On this key question, our most serious researchers — on the presence and absence of democracy in contemporary American life — seem to agree. Only mass mobilizations can beat back mobilizations of big money.

“I’d like people to see,” [says](#) Ben Page, “that things can change — because, in fact, things did change in the United States, in two big waves of political action, the first during the Populist and Progressive period that started in the late 19th century, the second in the New Deal era.”

Elections do matter, [adds](#) Thomas Ferguson, but making real change like taxing the rich and passing Medicare for all requires “a real mass movement not dependent on the good will of the super rich.”

McGuire and Delahunt most certainly agree. They find it “strange to observe the fight for ‘democracy’ currently playing out on screens across the country,” the two observed to Inequality.org earlier this week, “while the underlying disease — money-driven policy outcomes — leading to present-day symptoms goes mostly unspoken.”

“The current election is of critical importance,” they continue, “but a society that pins its hopes for democracy on quadrennial extravaganzas heavily funded by wealthy interests will be disappointed, as these players will perpetually win the game.”

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Sam Pizzigati writes on inequality for the Institute for Policy Studies. His latest book: [The Case for a Maximum Wage](#) (Polity). Among his other books on maldistributed income and wealth: [The Rich Don’t Always Win: The Forgotten Triumph over Plutocracy that Created the American Middle Class, 1900-1970](#) (Seven Stories Press).