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**An Experiment in the Development of Novel Republican
Institutions**

Bachelor's Thesis

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Study programme: PPE, Politics, Philosophy, & Economics

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Year of the defense: 2024

Declaration

1. I hereby declare that I have compiled this thesis using the listed literature and resources only.
2. I hereby declare that my thesis has not been used to gain any other academic title.
3. I fully agree to my work being used for study and scientific purposes.

In Prague on
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Abstract

This thesis first employs analysis of key statistical data which points toward a palette of discontent in the United States. The subsequent section utilizes a descriptive analysis of the current identity-oriented construction of American politics as an explanation for the rise of American discontentment within the context of the rise neoliberal politics. Following the conclusion of the first chapter the second begins with a historical exploration of civic virtue in America's past. The historical accounts explored, are followed by revitalization attempts which positively point towards core principles which have succeeded in transforming civic life in the country towards "virtuous cycle[s] (Taylor, 2020 p. 34)." Section 2.2 attempts to synthesize the matrix of discontentment and identity-based construction of politics because of declining civic virtue. This matrix then is utilized as a recommendation toward an institutional proposal which would attempt to quell American turmoil at the smallest division of the republic. The third and final chapter addresses potential concerns of its design, arguing for the necessities of a minimum design to be presented, along with subsequent development to follow and organic grass-roots approach.

Abstrakt

Tato práce nejprve využívá analýzu klíčových statistických údajů, které ukazují na paletu nespokojenosti ve Spojených státech. Následující část využívá deskriptivní analýzu současné konstrukce americké politiky založené na politice identity jako vysvětlení vzestupu americké nespokojenosti v kontextu vzestupu neoliberální politiky. Po uzavření první kapitoly druhá začíná historickým zkoumáním občanské ctnosti v americké historii. Na prozkoumané historické zprávy navazují revitalizační pokusy, které pozitivně směřují ke klíčovým principům, které uspěly v transformaci občanského života v zemi směrem k „ctnostným cyklům (Taylor, 2020 p. 34).“ Část 2.2 se pokouší syntetizovat matici nespokojenosti a na identitě založené konstrukce politiky jako důsledek upadající občanské ctnosti. Tato matice je následně využita jako doporučení k institucionálnímu návrhu, který by se pokusil utlumit americké nepokoje na nejmenším rozdělení republiky. Třetí a poslední kapitola se zabývá potenciálními problémy souvisejícími s tímto návrhem, argumentuje nutností minimálního návrhu, který má být prezentován, spolu s následným vývojem a organickým přístupem na nejnižší úrovni.

Keywords

American civic virtue, democratic decline, political polarization, republicanism, neo-Athenian thought, institutional reform, Hall of Commons, liberalism, neoliberalism, critique

Klíčová slova

Americká občanská ctnost, demokratický úpadek, politická polarizace, republikánství, neo-athéňané, institucionální reforma, Hall of Commons, liberalismus, neoliberalismus, kritika

Název práce

Experiment s vývojem nových republikánských institucí

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Introduction

I am highly concerned about the future of my country. I fear America is stuck in decline, struggling with a complex matrix of factors creating a disharmonic reinforcement of civic and democratic decline. On the level of the social, Americans have fewer friends (Daniel A. Cox, 2021) while socialization spheres are disappearing. (Finlay, Esposito, Kim, Gomez-Lopez, Clarke 2019). Overall, social mobility has stalled, and inequality has risen to heights not seen since the 1920's. (Sandel, 2022) When looking at education as a tool for economic enfranchisement, Millennials are one of the most educated generations ever, (Fry 2019) although hold some of the least amounts of wealth. (The Fed - Table: Distribution of Household Wealth in the U.S. since 1989, 2023) Polarization is also on the rise (Political Polarization in the American Public, 2014) while most Americans have lost faith in the future of the American political system. (Pew Research, Center, 2023) A growing sense of disengagement from politics is creeping up on the nation, as many Americans remain frustrated and unrepresented by the two-party system. (Cbaronavski, 2024) Throughout this thesis, I speak of the American political predicament when I do- I mean to refer to the almost schizophrenic nature of American political life, where polarization increases, but disengagement from politics creeps upon the nation as well. Or how education is on the rise, but so is economic inequality. The American political predicament is something that is hard to put a finger on, its pulse is elusive, yet its impacts are undoubtedly strong.

Thus, the first chapter of this thesis begins by dissecting this American political predicament by showing how its effects have led to American political life being stuck in decline. Section 1.1 does so by first looking at how the current front runners of the 2024 election remain unpreferred by most Americans. (Nadeem 2024) Consequently, it is argued that while material conditions have resulted in America's widespread feelings of discontentment, little tools remain available for the average citizen to contest such material conditions. Section 1.2 attempts to explain how America's trend towards identity-oriented politics is compounded by the lack of adequate mechanisms for an average citizen to change their material reality. Furthermore, section 1.2's charting of how the socio-economic shifts within the political economy of the United States have led to a breeding ground for the nation's current flavor of identity politics, an argument that the nation has entered a civic 'cycle of vice' is

presented. Section 1.2's argument of a 'civic cycle of vice' is explained by how economic conditions under neoliberalism have increased disparities of wealth inequality, which in turn has led to many voters across party lines beginning to feel unrepresented and disenfranchised. Resulting in the emergence of identity politics as a response to an inability to shift political and economic decision-making towards the citizen. Where reference to the American political predicament is concerned, I mean to discuss all factors, material, economic, social, and political. Whereas my usage of 'civic cycle of vice' refers to the express manifestation of the American political predicament within inappropriate domains.

As a whole, I fear, that if the nation continues to fail at addressing the root cause of either the shared political predicament or the civic cycle of vice, hopelessness and fear will run rampant. Consequently, political violence as in the case of the January 6th riots, or the attempted assassination of Trump, will increase as our civic life and democratic practices will decline. I am not alone in this fear, Michael Sandel opens *Democracy's Discontent* with the sober sentence: "Our civic life is not going very well (Sandel, 2022, p. 1)." Charles Taylor, opens *Reconstructing Democracy* with a similar sentiment: "There is a widespread belief in Western societies that our democracies are in trouble (Taylor, 2020, p. 1)." Having been sufficiently convinced by the works of Sandel and Taylor as leading Republican theorists, I set out this thesis to add to the Republican debates on American civic and democratic decline. Like Sandel and Taylor, I argue in chapter 2 that the key to civic revitalization within America lies within "devis[ing] new ways of encouraging and inciting local communities to take their fate in hand (Taylor, 2020, p. 97)." Perhaps by doing so we can "summon the conviction and restraint to make sense of our condition and repair the civic life on which democracy depends. (Sandel, 2022, p. 283)" what makes this thesis unorthodox, is that following chapter 1's diagnostic, chapter 2 works towards a presentation of an institutional design to reinvigorate civic life within America. However, regardless of how unorthodox some parts of this thesis may be, it serves as an honest attempt to diagnose, and present novel solutions to the nations ongoing struggles.

Working towards an institutional design, chapter 2 of this thesis (beginning with section 2.1) reviews past civic forums and way of life within America. This is done primarily by analysis of *Democracy in America* and *Democracy's Discontent* which showcase via historical accounts mechanisms and methods for citizenry to engage with the material conditions of

their life. Section 2.1 shows that as these mechanisms have previously existed as meaningful tools to contest economic and representative power. Modern applications of similar tools like the ones found in *Reconstructing Democracy* have shown to have both emerged and demonstrated success in cultivating re-invigorated senses of civic life. Synthesis of historical accounts within Tocqueville's *Democracy in America*, and Michael Sandel's *Democracy's Discontent*, with modern applications of Charles Taylor's *Reconstructing Democracy*, point towards how an institutional arrangement could act as the best tool for cultivating renewed senses of "virtuous cycle[s] (Taylor, 2020 p. 34)" within America. Subsequently, section 2.2 presents following the synthesis of 2.1 as a minimally viable institutional arrangement for catalyzation of civic virtue referred to the Hall of Commons. The presentation of the Hall of Commons is broken down as such: Section 2.2.1 presents a broad overview of the institution and how it functions over three sessions. Sections 2.2.2, 2.2.3, and 2.2.4 give a detailed look at the function of the three sessions. Section 2.2.5 overviews the institutional functions of the Hall of Commons via exploration of the potential effects on the social sphere and how it addresses the issue of civic decline. Sections 2.2.6 and 2.2.7 both exist to address potential misuse of the design and outline protections necessary to safeguard the social advances made under liberalism. Section 2.2.6 does so through a proposal of a unique tool referred to as a rotating veto. Section 2.2.7 sets out to provide the absolute minimum rules regarding the use of the Hall of Commons to further safeguard against misuse. As a whole chapter 2 exists as an argument for how it is possible to meaningfully induce cycles of civic virtue, within an institutional arrangement following an analysis of past precedent and present applications.

The final chapter of this thesis, chapter 3 begins with section 3.1 analyzing what is referred to in Fishkin's work as the "trilemma of democratic reform (Poblet, Plaza 2017, p. 3)" and how the Hall of Commons stands to address the crucial tradeoff of the dilemma by existing primarily at the smallest division of a republic possible. Section 3.1 asserts that regardless of the exact implementation of the Hall of Commons, by turning its constituents into lawmakers, even failures of the institution prove valuable for the cultivation of positive civic virtue. Section 3.2 expands on this argument by advocating for this thesis's presentation of the Hall of Commons to remain as a minimally viable product and to have its constituents remain responsible for its exact implementation. This argument is made primarily by showcasing how by creation of the institution via a grassroots path allows citizens to become engaged in a common project, which aids in the legitimacy of future decisions. Following

chapter 3, this thesis concludes by summarizing how creative applications of republican theory and via respect to precedent, the American political predicament can in part be solved. Although this prospective solution does so not through broad sweeping decisions at the federal or state level, but by providing and equipping citizens with the tools required for self-government at the site of a town, or village as opposed to a city or state. In turn, this thesis argues that by allowing the citizenry to take ownership of their decisions and political life, sensations of control while cultivating positive senses of civic virtue. This in turn, stands to help break down partisan barriers, reduce levels of polarization, and encourage better understandings of politics and civic life, all without infringing upon the existing political structures already present within the United States of America.

1. Americans Political Predicament

1.1 Socio-Economic Shifts Within Americas Political Economy

Trust in the American government is the lowest it has been within two decades (Pew Research Center, 2023) Consequently, America has witnessed a growing problem with political polarization (*Political Polarization in the American Public*, 2014). Meanwhile Populistic anti-politics are running rampant in the United States. Rhetorically, Biden’s “Save the Soul of America” shared a marked similarity to Trump’s “Make America Great Again”, hinting towards a vague political awareness of the current American palate of discontentment. Yet in 2024, having had both as presidents, they again emerge as their respective parties’ front runners, carrying failed returns to a greatness, and a nations soul still shattered. In part, this explains the lack of historic approval between the candidates¹.

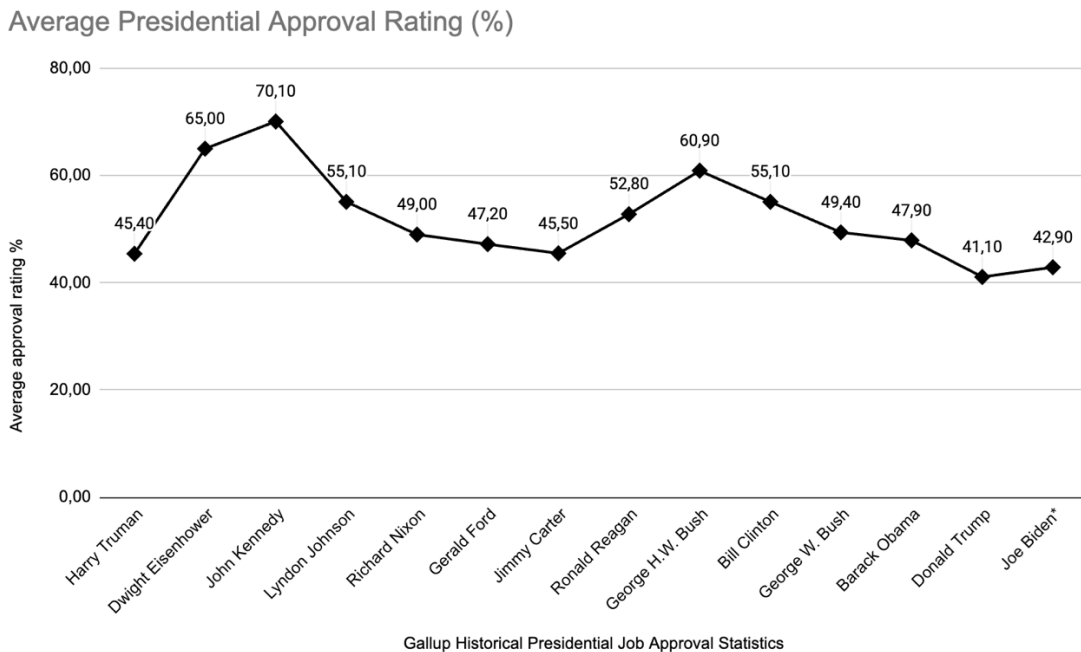


Figure 1 Presidential Approval Ratings -- Gallup Historical Statistics and Trends (2023)

The other half of these historically low approval ratings likely lie within the material conditions of the modern American. As “Four decades of neoliberal governance had brought

¹Data provided by Gallup, (Inc 2023) although Joe Bidens average approval ratings were omitted. According to Gallup (Inc 2024), Bidens approval ratings are overall trending downward, having the lowest 13th quarter approval rating ever. Furthermore, from the data provided a term average rating of 42,9% can be calculated.

inequalities of income and wealth not seen since the 1920s (Sandel, 2022, p. 2).” Exacerbated by Covid-19 “the pandemic [had] disproportionately affected workers at the bottom of the earnings distribution (Abdelwahed, Czurylo, Campbell, Ohannessian, 2020, p. 2).” Small business faced closure, and service workers layoffs- Meanwhile, following the rebound period: “the Top 1%, increased 2.2 percentage points in the Rebound periods after falling 1.1 percentage points in 2020q1 (Batty, Deeken, Volz, 2021).” Conversely, “Despite their wealth growing at the fastest pace, the small wealth level for the Bottom 50 results in their share only increasing by 0.2 percentage points between 2019Q4 and 2021Q1 (Batty, Deeken, Volz, 2021).” What this means to your average voter in America, is they watched companies like Amazon and Walmart score record high profits, while they watched their local business shutter, all while being told by the government who at the time took extraordinary paternalist measures- they were being kept safe. Undoubtedly adding to the American palate of discontent.

Furthermore “Under relentless pressure from corporations and their political allies, labor unions went into decline (Sandel, 2022, p. 2).” But not only have labor unions gone into decline- almost all typologies of establishments which can be considered as a ‘third space’ have declined, or are predicted to decline. (Finlay, Esposito, Kim, Gomez-Lopez, Clarke, 2019) Additionally, Americans have less friends than previous generations (Daniel A. Cox, 2021)- whether as an isolated variable, or a consequence of the decline in capital in tandem with the loss of socialization and politically mobile spheres, the political ramifications are obvious; the less Americans can socialize, the less conversations around the conditions which we share are had, the more likely we are to fall victim to scapegoating rhetorical tools, and remain ignorant to our shared socio-economic challenges. Especially considering the intense degree of ideological siloing in current day America (*Political Polarization in the American Public*, 2014). Put simply, these shared socio-economic challenges in America stem from the condition of its current political economy where “[p]roductivity increased, but workers received smaller and smaller share of what they produced. [While] finance claimed a growing share of corporate profits but invested less in new productive enterprises than in speculative activity that did little to help the real economy (Sandel, 2022, p. 2).” As Regan-Thatcher neoliberal policies strengthened corporations, and weakened workers social standings and economic footings, inequality and unrest grew. However, “[r]ather than contend directly with inequality and stagnate wages the mainstream parties told workers to

improve themselves by getting a college degree (Sandel, 2022, p. 2).” Within this political reality- millennial’s despite being the most educated generation (Fry, 2019), hold historically low amounts of wealth (*The Fed - Table: Distribution of Household Wealth in the U.S. since 1989*, 2023). Undoubtedly, this matrix of populist rhetoric, unprecedented wealth inequality, and the death of the American dream, breed a political hopelessness. Such a hopelessness, that again becomes a catalyst for further populist decrees.

Following the ‘great consensus’ on neoliberal hegemony in the United States, the American notions of ‘liberty’ have undoubtedly changed. We must bear in mind that, while yes, “neoliberalism is an economic experiment, it is unavoidably a psychological experiment as well. Its underlying economic theory includes a basic conception of psychology: that collectively, human beings thrive under conditions of free competition, a meritocracy of wealth in which rewards go to each according to his ability (Beattie, 2019, p. 89).” When considering the decline of political mobility tools like labor unions and protests in tandem with how citizens are told to compete freely, it is not hard to see how Trump and his rhetorical tools won the 2016 election. As, wages stagnated, wealth inequality rose, and polarization increased as socialization and mobility spheres declined. However, it is simultaneously true that “[s]ome of Trump’s supporters were drawn to his racist appeals but he also exploited anger born of legitimate grievances (Sandel, 2022, p. 2).” American liberty having been sold as tied to notions of free and fair competition, become de-liberating when said competition begins *to feel tied to an unfair and unequal playing field*. To elaborate, when looking at something akin to the Kantian notion of freedom as: “Freedom (independence from being constrained by another’s choice), insofar as it can coexist with the freedom of every other in accordance with a universal law (Rauscher, 2022).” We can extrapolate the feeling of liberty in modern American politics as freedom to choose between preset constraints on choices. I.e., family background, previous economic status, neighborhood, political policies ext. However, as economic and political power becomes concentrated, these preset constraints on liberty expressed as choice become to feel more powerful, as influence moves away from the choices the individual can make given his pre-constrained socio-economic conditions. This explains how, when considering the many economic policies which are elevated upwards towards the site of the nation- (as opposed to the state, the city, the region, township etc.) Americans have ended up in a situation where: “notwithstanding the extension of the franchise and the expansion on individual rights and

entitlements in recent decades, there is a widespread sense that, individually and collectively, our control over the forces that govern our lives is receding rather than increasing. This sense is deepened by what appear simultaneously as the power and the powerlessness of the nation-state (Sandel, 1984, p. 92).” Consequentially, Americans live a life where, while being told competition within the domain of economics and politics is the key to a secure life, the constraints which inform the choices regarding competitions for security *become equally unlevel and out of control*. When addressing these issues, determination of these notions as factual or feeling based offers little aid. As civics is a public pursuit, one in which many competing ‘truths’ and feelings are expressed in unison. Both of which reliant on informing the other, as such without tools to bring both into each other, neither will offer a way out.

Thus, in attempt to validate this civic psychosis, we can look back towards a long-standing tool of American civic virtue. Protests. Or more specifically boycotts. “[B]oycotts [which] the colonists [had] hoped not only to retaliate against Britain but also reaffirm republican virtue (Sandel, 2022, p. 37)[.]” The most recent organized boycott within the US would be the BDS movement, which describes itself as: “The largest coalition in Palestinian society that is leading the global Boycott, Divestment and Sanctions (BDS) movement, salutes activists, organizations and institutions worldwide that have expressed meaningful solidarity with our urgent struggle to stop Israel’s unfolding genocide in Gaza by escalating boycott and divestment campaigns (*Act Now Against These Companies Profiting from the Genocide of the Palestinian People*, 2023).” As presumably, these boycotts had assumed some degree of success, a bill was quickly passed. Specifically the IGO Anti-Boycott Act, which is described as: “protecting U.S. companies from being forced to participate in boycotts against allied countries, Congress is firmly stating our proactive opposition to the Boycott, Divestment, and Sanctions (BDS) movement and other foreign boycotts that stand counter to American ideals (*Congressman Mike Lawler Heralds Passage of IGO Anti-Boycott Act Through House Foreign Affairs Committee*, 2023).” With this move, the government of the United States reaffirmed that the path of neoliberalism, with the final decision being held furthest from the demos, meaning it was solidified at the national level. The Federal government while the least accessible to the average American has become the final arbiter of any real economic policy making. When a tool like protests are being used to interrupt globalized economic decision making, and as such neoliberal values, they are deemed un-American. Furthermore, when looking at the Black Lives Matter protests, whose core

messaging was around defunding police, and later- defunding then rebuilding policing practices, quickly devolved into riots. This is partially due to the unfeasibility of the demand, threatening such a militarized apparatus of the state in the Patriot Act era would never have occurred. It is also partially due to the nature of such political engagement being restricted to a point violence- seemed the only option. Not dissimilar to the storming of the Capitol on January 6th. In the case of the Capitol riots, Trump in his upcoming bid for re-election became martyred, (perhaps even further following his convictions), and gained a potent rhetorical tool of pardoning those who were placed in jail. In the case of the BLM protestors, reform of the policing apparatus never came- in its stead symbolic gestures a-kin to renaming streets. Something which ultimately does little to solve the unfair brutality which many black Americans face. A gesture which again reaffirms that Americans, regardless of their material struggle, have little actionable tools to shape their material world. Put another way, modern Americans have no voice within informing the *constraints on their choice expression of liberty in the pursuit of their respective good lives*. These factors are further compounded by existing within a domain where education returns debt, politics returns populists, and economics consolidate corpocracy, Therefore, it is reasonable to assert that America can be considered as entering a ‘cycle of vice’. Furthermore, when looking at protests- a once respected tool of political mobility of the masses, have in the case of the Black Lives Matter movement- devolved into riots, with series of symbolic gestures being offered as recompense. In the case of the boycott movement following Israel's war on Hamas, Congress swiftly attempted to quell its effects. In both cases, little systematic change came, and the average citizens attempt to change their material conditions were ultimately rendered futile.

Thus, while Americans remain frustrated due to the empirical conditions of their lives, lacking abilities to attain basic securities like housing, healthcare and education, due to the insecurity being created because of decision making at the site of the nation in tandem with a hegemony of ideals, many political mechanisms have escaped the grasp of the demos. While indeed neoliberalism has allowed social protections like equal rights between men and women, protections of minority groups, and freedoms of expression, it has also put said values in jeopardy by ignoring the material conditions which have created America's potent pallet of discontentment. What historically would have been a part of an active civic body, the demos of modern America remains in a sort of rage induced stupor. As such, mechanisms which both preserve the sanctity of rights established under liberalism, while also offering

ways to inform pursuits of liberty regardless of pre-constrained conditions should become the focus. The American people, while lacking the precise wording of the tools of the political philosophy I am using in this thesis *feel this* some, may even *fear this*. Consequently, Americas political apparatus has devolved into one which has shifted away from free engagement and constituent of the political economy, and as a result I argue Americans demos has trended towards a symbolistic system as a sort of ‘coping mechanism’. For if one will likely never own their own home, may struggle with attaining healthcare, and can do little to change the economic and political forces which may very well dictate the extinction of their offspring. Perhaps the best one can do is put a lawn sign in their garden, a flag in a social media biography, or try and have streets renamed or statues removed. Grappling with potential remedies to this climate of discontentment at the site of the nation is a project which contains far too many variables and machinations to adequately address the American ‘cycle of vice’. Although, I propose that if we tread backwards, towards the smallest division possible, and borrow from past precedents akin to townships, there may be a chance to transform our shared ‘cycle of vice’, into one of virtue by equipping citizens with the tools to once again construct their own breed of political engagement. Shifting our current symbol first system, toward a policy first one, at least on the lowest level of the republic. Culminating in a spark of a ‘virtuous political cycle’, which if successful, could create a novel American political identity steeped in trickle up civic virtue. Although new tools would be needed, and as such, a deconstruction of the current identity-oriented politics remains necessary.

1.2 Putting the Identity in Political Identity

In 2014, two years before the election of Donald Trump, one of the most polarizing presidents in American history, 28% of Americans reported they would prefer to live in a place with people who share similar political views. (*Political Polarization in the American Public*, 2014) 35% say most of their close friends share the same political views, 50% are consistently conservative, 35% are consistently liberal. (*Political Polarization in the American Public* 2014) Ten years later, “most [Americans] are frustrated with the two parties (Cbaronavski, 2024).” All these Americans live in a world where a middle class has dwindled, while hallmarks like housing and education have expanded outward from them. Undoubtedly, most Americans have experienced some degree of economic

disenfranchisement, due the hegemonic nature of neoliberal policy. Although, having simultaneously been sold a notion of free and fair competition as the means to achieving their *self-prescribed Goodlife*, while also facing insurmountable systems to materially shift their disenfranchised selves into refranchised selves, a consequence emerges. Americans in response, misuse the condition of competition they had been given. Unable to compete economically, unable to meaningfully shift politics back towards the site of their lives-Americans sort themselves into 'us' and 'them'. This is only further compounded through looking at social preferences as we did prior. In a sense, nearly all Americans have become a variant of a Havellian 'greengrocers'. Whose "slogan is really a sign, and as such it contains a subliminal but very definite message. Verbally, it might be expressed this way: 'I, the greengrocer XY, live here and I know what I must do. I behave in the manner expected of me. I can be depended upon and am beyond reproach (Vaclav Havel, 1978, pp 7-8)." What varies between the Havellian greengrocer to the comparison of an American one, is that Americans variation is comprised of an abundance of signals which informs the appearance of an abundance of identities or 'signs'. However, they both share the purpose of blanketing material conditions to easily understand, and as such, prescribe solutions to the faltering material reality. In the liberal world, these signals which blanket material conditions take the form of various flag emojis within social media biographies, lawn signs in liberal / conservative neighborhood's, bumper stickers, etc. In other words, while Havel alludes to how a single state driven ideology under totalitarian rule blankets material conditions through fear. Application of the greengrocer allegory to liberal America illuminates that various identities, ideologies, and symbols blanket the material conditions as a sort of patchwork quilt sewn together by citizens through a hopelessness. This comparison between Havel's critique of the totalitarian regime of 1970's Czechoslovakia, and the current day American political predicament has its obvious limitations. However, independent of the way a top-down totalitarian regime, or a bottom-up liberal regime creates and blankets symbols over material conditions, a commonality can be found. They are both in essence-tools to construct a moral and political identity which is easily identifiable to the observer. They signal 'I am X type of person', 'you are in X type of neighborhood', 'I am affable to X type of individual'. If we look deeper at this moral and political signaling we recognize that: "To wandering humankind it offers an immediately available home: all one has to do is accept it, and suddenly everything becomes clear once more, life takes on new meaning, and all mysteries, unanswered questions, anxiety, and loneliness vanish (Vaclav Havel,

1978, p. 4).” In regard to the greengrocer allegory within contemporary America, the symbols which blanket the material reality of the country becomes dangerous when the population begins to believe that: ‘if only I lived in X place, with X people, and X people would run the country, our problems would be solved’. In other words, politics oriented under identity exist as a means of moral, political and existential opium. An opium which eases the anxiety stemming from a lack of control an individual may have over the structures which govern their respective pursuits of life. Thus, identity-oriented politics in America can be understood as coming out of as a neoliberal economic condition where the influence of the primary structures which govern citizens lives, has coalesced toward ‘Big Business’ and ‘Big Government’. However, as this condition expands and continues to expand, Americans have grown discontent with the government which upholds it. As such utilization of symbolic means to manifest individual competition over resources necessary for a good life become apparent in non-economic and non-political domains. However, as the individual utilizes a symbolistic approach within the interpersonal domain, government begins to use symbolistic approaches as the method of communication and prospective satiation of its constituents. In conclusion, as the identity-oriented construction of politics informs citizens who then inform governments, a cycle is found. One where it is increasingly popular to blanket material conditions via symbols which construct both the constituents and governments identities. The relation of both to each other within the American political apparatus and its cycle is precisely what I mean by stating how the country has entered a ‘cycle of vice’. What this argumentation helps us to understand is why politics in contemporary America has become increasingly targeted towards symbols and their expression towards ‘us’ vs ‘them’ identities in exchange of real political or economic change.

When looking at the American G.O.P for example, it has recently spent considerable amounts of energy on attacking the previous protections for women and minority groups. Take for example the repeal of *Affirmative Action* or *Roe vs Wade*. As democratic and republican economic positions are harmonized under hegemony, little political tools are available to provide material change. As such, groups who have been identified with specific symbols, allow the G.O.P to administer ‘corrections’ to the ‘causes’ of perceived disenfranchisement. Black Americans, for example, have risen in terms of wealth, the same is true for woman when looking at closing in on upper-class wealth achievement. (Pew

Research Center, 2015) Obviously, race and gender are not symbols, but demographic categories. Although, woman who are making economic gains due to education gains, do to an extent become associated with the symbol of ‘being democratic’. When it comes to party affiliation, women are more likely to be democratic, this is especially true for educated women. (Pew Research Center, 2015) With black Americans, overall they are likely to be in lower income brackets but have ‘won out’ over uneducated white Americans. (Pew Research Center, 2015) Black Americans are also more likely to be Democratic². As these groups have seen economic gains in the past few years, democrats, especially educated ones, and ones who have come to be *perceived* as educated and democratic, become the ‘target’ of G.O.P policy under an identity-oriented conception of politics. Thus, as democrats are the target, they then become the scapegoat of being the cause of the perceived decline in status and material security among the uneducated white base the G.O.P holds. As such the G.O.P can administer political ‘corrections’ to the ‘causes’ of these feelings of disenfranchisement. Furthermore, through repelling affirmative action, Roe vs. Wade, and removing books with LGBTQ+ content. These culturally relevant acts, which are steeped within identity and symbols, allow the G.O.P base of white, religious, uneducated voters who view the expansion of liberal values as being threatening to their perception of materially declining conditions to be provided a ‘win’. These acts all provide the perception of actionable victories to a base that mostly shares the conception of ‘it doesn’t matter if I vote red or blue, I am still poor.’ In turn, circumventing the addressment of material conditions which likely created the sensation of disapproval of government. In essence, the G.O.P has weaponized identity to administer attacks to specific groups, and as such administer potent ‘victories’ to its voting base. Obviously, these perceived causes and subsequent scapegoats of disenfranchisement in the U.S. are not due to women having access to abortion, or with Minorities being able to utilize affirmative action. But a fundamentally flawed and biased economic system in which access to resources like higher education and family wealth dictate future outcomes. While access to abortion for all women allows them to maintain autonomy over their lives in the advent of pregnancy, and affirmative action for minorities to utilize a more level playing field for pursuits in education, neither contest the larger economic apparatus. When looking at events which can be seen as contesting the economic

² The data provided by Pew for this paragraph comes from two articles both written in 2015. Respectively, they are titled: *The American Middle Class Is Losing Ground* and *A Deep Dive into Party Affiliation*. For continuity purposes the in-text citation are the same, however this footnote exists to clarify the issue for the reader.

apparatus within the U.S, U.S. politics can be seen as ‘proving’ its allegiance to neoliberal hegemony. Whether that be the bailouts of 2008, and 2023, or the passing of the *Anti-boycott bill* which stops movements that “stand counter to American ideals (*Congressman Mike Lawler Heralds Passage of IGO Anti-Boycott Act Through House Foreign Affairs Committee, 2023*).”

However, politics as a contestation tool, is mostly one utilized by upper class educated people, and is generally out of reach to the average American. Especially one who believes in self-government and feels that their interests and material struggles are being ignored. It is understood within republican thought that “Self-government requires that political institutions hold economic power to democratic account. It also requires that citizens identify sufficiently with one another to consider themselves engaged in a common project. Today, both conditions are in doubt (Sandel, 2022, p. 6).” As such, while living within a system where “the global economy mattered more, the nation state, traditionally, the site of self-government, mattered less. The scale of economic life was exceeding the reach of democratic control (Sandel, 2022, p. 4).” Leading us towards a system where political passions and frustrations play out not in a political reality where competing material conditions are addressed, but rather one where identity based symbolic victories are sold back and forth between the parties, and their respective demographics. For a shift to occur, politics on some level must be shifted back down again to a position where civic engagement regarding the material reality of the shared demos of communities is addressed. This is something America has quite a precedent of, although following the neoliberal consensus of the 80’s/90’s, seems to have been lost. Perhaps a key of shifting away from this identity-based conception of politics lies within an exploration of such civic virtue, and its revitalization.

2. Not Without Hope

2.1 American Civic Virtue, Past and Future

To begin this exploration, we will start in 1831, when Tocqueville visited America on a ten-month journey. When describing the nature of the union, he sees first “two distinct societies enmeshed (Tocqueville, 2002, p. 56)[.]” The first he describes as “habitual and undefined (Tocqueville, 2002)” responding “to the daily needs of society (Tocqueville, 2002, p. 56)[.]”

The second he sees as “exceptional and circumscribed (Tocqueville, 2002, p.56)” responding primarily to “certain general interests (Tocqueville, 2002, p. 56).” Codified under what he considers a “complex Constitution (Tocqueville, 2002, p. 56)[.]” Within this observation, lies potential synthesis as historically speaking, it is apparent the *United* within the United States was one of a loose connection extrapolated from local interests towards a common national project. One which was rich with debate on the construction (and reconstruction) of the union. Prior to the debates on industrial capitalism, Tocqueville noted that: “The township is the sole association that is so much in nature that everywhere men are gathered a township forms by itself (Tocqueville, 2002, p. 57).” Furthermore, when looking at such townships, akin to “the Institutions of the township in New England (Tocqueville, 2002, p. 58)” Tocqueville notes them as meeting frequently, being legally strong, and comments on them holding a high degree of influence which is exerted not only through its laws, but through “mores (Tocqueville, 2002, p. 58).” However, the individual and their relation to the community, remains mostly free from institutional influences, and only in cases where the community feels “injured (Tocqueville, 2002, p 62)” or “demands [an individual’s] cooperation (Tocqueville, 2002, p. 62)” does the society, as expressed through the township, maintain the ability to “direct [the individuals] actions (Tocqueville, 2002, p. 62).” When discussing the relationship between the township and the state, it is important to note that the township only cedes power to the state when it becomes “an interest that I shall call the social (Tocqueville, 2002, p. 62)” meaning what is shared with further extensions of community found within the state (Tocqueville, 2002). Distillation of Tocqueville’s observations present a picture of the Townships which we can employ in future analysis.

Distillation of Tocqueville’s Observations on Townships

1. Civic life often did not supersede self governance.
2. Township strength derived from both mores and legality.
3. Township interference was limited to contractual duties between constituents.
4. Township power cedes to state power only in matters concerning cross-community, and cross-state, legislation.

Figure 2 (Tocqueville, 2002)

Firstly, this distillation shows that civic life at the time of writing left room for self-governance. Secondly, the township derived its strength from both “mores (Tocqueville, Mansfield, 2002, p. 58).” and legality. Thirdly, only in matters of contract to each other or

between the community does the township have jurisdiction. Lastly, it notes that the township only cedes power to the state when it concerns matters between communities and matters deemed broad enough for state and or federal governance. With these four primary tenants being described, Tocqueville's work provides a baseline of values which can be utilized as benchmarks for understanding American civic virtue from this historic perspective, as well as its future applications.

However, four decades following Tocqueville's writing of *Democracy in America*, debates on the political economy and its implications for civic life in America were taking place. These debates would permanently alter the shape and future of American civic life. Beginning with the labor debate of the gilded age, the future of the American political economy remained unclear. Beginning with talking points we know that: "The leading labor organizations of the gilded age were the National Labor Union (NLU; 1866-1872) and the knights of Labor (1869-1902). Their primary aim was 'to abolish the wage system' on the grounds that 'there is an inevitable and irresistible conflict between the wage system of labor and the Republican system of government (Sandel, 2022, p. 86)." The concern over wage labor, rested on the grounds that as the nation transitioned toward industrialized capitalism, companies and capitalists would undoubtedly hold more power. As such "the labor movement emphasize two ways in which the wage system of industrial capitalism threatened Republican government – directly, by concentrating uncountable power, in large corporations, and indirectly by destroying the qualities of character that equip citizens for self-government (Sandel, 2022, p. 86)." Sandel's historical account illuminates how the advent of wage labor creates a new point of contact within a community. Wage labor would transform the dynamics of the republic. At the site of the community, the township and the individual would cede power to the company first in the economic domain as time is exchanged for a set wage. Secondly, it would cede social influence towards the company, as the population became reliant on others for employment, they could no longer be considered sovereign over their own affairs. Thus, as the civil war raged between 1861-1865, (a culmination of competing mores) debates on wage labor raged as well. (Sandel, 2022) Confronted with a newly freed populus, America could no longer remain within its agrarian conception of the republican life. (Sandel, 2022) Faced with this reality the iron molders convention of 1865 became "the largest labor convention that had ever assembled (Sandel, 2022, p. 86)." The convention debates circled around how when employees are to enter into

a wage contract with an employer, that the relations between employee and employer begin to look like those between “master and slave (Sandel, 2022, p. 87).” These conceptions then, as they are under wage labor, breed a populus ill-suited for the conditions of self-governance. (Sandel, 2022) Without, a desire to return to the economics of small farming plantations and the necessity for growth under industrial capitalism, the republican alternative to wage labor was a co-operative approach to industrialized capitalism. (Sandel, 2022) As “Such a system would do more than give workers a fair share of the fruits of their labor; it would also restore to workers the independence the wage system destroyed (Sandel, 2022, p. 87).” Contextually, the independence which was destroyed by wage labor, is one where as Godkin; a republican journalist; states is one where: “a man agrees to sell his labor, he agrees by implication to surrender his moral and social independence (Sandel, 2022, p. 89).” In turn, “the accumulation of capital in the hands of a comparatively few individuals and corporations (Sandel, 2022, p. 89)” according to Godkin, creates a situation where the republican conception of government is undermined by an endangered “political economy of citizenship (Sandel, 2022, p. 89).” Through a transformation of thinking into a “servile tone and servile way of thinking (Sandel, 2022, p.89)” via “political and social dependence (Sandel, 2022, p.89).” Although as the debates on wage labor and its ramifications for the American republican way of life- which Tocqueville had written so extensively on continued, a decision on the future of the political economy of America was beginning to be seen by the end of the gilded age. “By 1868 seven states had enacted eight-hour laws, and Congress passed legislation declaring an eight-hour workday for all laborers employed by the federal government. But despite its legislative success, the eight-hour work day, the eight-hour movement did not achieve its broader aims [of undermining wage labor] (Sandel, 2022, p. 89).” Due to loopholes, enforcement issues, and hostile courts labor legislation among similar republican anti-wage labor legislation, almost all victories in the domain were undermined: “by the end of the century, some sixty labor laws had been struck down by the state and federal courts; by 1920, about three hundred (Sandel, 2022, p. 89).” From this perspective, as labor debates become increasingly handled by courts and state and federal governments, the republican township way of life was increasingly unnecessary, for both issues revolving around the social, and the political economy swept out of the hands of Americans.

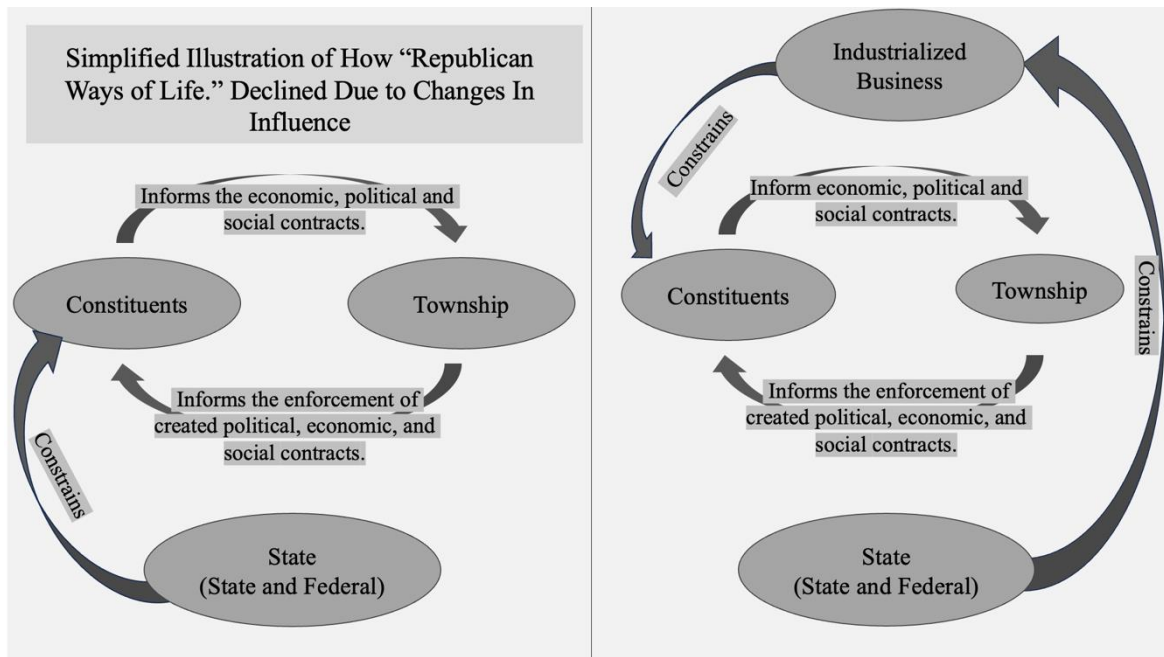


Figure 3 Decline due to changes in influence

From the 1920's to the advent of neoliberalism, corporations in America have continued to gain increasing influence. So much so that in 1932, during his *Commonwealth Club Address* Franklin D. Roosevelt recounted “[p]ut plainly, we are steering a steady course toward economic oligarchy, if we are not there already (Franklin D. Roosevelt, 1932, p. 6).” No longer were the days when “a growing feeling that government was conducted for the benefit of a few who thrived unduly at the expense of all. The people sought a balancing- a limiting-force. There came gradually, through town councils, trade guilds, national parliaments, by constitution and by popular participation and control, limitations on arbitrary power (Franklin D. Roosevelt 1932, p. 2).” As from the 1930's onwards, when checks on the influence of corporations were implemented, they often came from Congress and/or Presidential power (as in the case of the New deal, or Great Society Programs). As such, the need for robust civic engagement and debate around the nature of the political economy in America can be explained as receding. Especially in the case local political and civic bodies. Put another way, as an individual is becoming less in control of the economic conditions around them, dialogues around the precise nature of the economic arrangement can be understood as diminishing. When viewing our present-day condition under a lens where the conceptions of identity and the social have taken the forefront of the political debate. We can understand how by lacking either the means, the skills or the time to engage with the once promised conception of self-government, Americans remain unable to materially shift

the conditions of their lives. These historical accounts help us diagnose our political predicament not as caused by poor presidential outcomes, but rather, as an erosion of poor civic engagement stemming from monolithic economic and political arrangements. Poor presidential outcomes hence should not be viewed as ‘the problem’ but as a symptom of a larger civic problem. However, not dissimilar to the emergence of the wage labor debate in the 1860’s, America is once again re-examining the nature of its political economy and civic wellbeing.

Within Charles Taylor’s work, *Reconstructing democracy*, an example of revitalized civic communities play out in a Wisconsin community know as South Wood. Like many parts of America, in South Wood a papermill had closed, causing an intense economic displacement within the community as nearly 40% of South Wood’s jobs were lost. (Taylor, 2020) Along with these jobs local leaders were lost as well. (Taylor, 2020) As a response, an organization called Incourage, which describes its mission as envisioning “community that works well for all people (Incourage Community Foundation About Us, 2024)” through “User-centered Place-based (Incourage Community Foundation About Us, 2024)” values (Incourage Community Foundation About Us, 2024) becomes involved in the story of Southwood. (Taylor, 2020) According to Taylor’s account, Incourage brought community members together to design their own ideal supports for the community. (Taylor, 2020) The community’s solution, which was facilitated by Incourage was to decrease barriers to information, in the face of the shrinking media coverage and the decline of the papers, by opening new computer access in libraries. (Taylor, 2020) Aside from solving a tangible information problem, an Incourage employee noted “that she ‘saw folks go from small (not believing their ideas made a difference) to big (my ideas can make a difference and I want to learn more)’ (Taylor, 2020, p. 34).” Taylor further recounts that “the same employee noted catalyzing this ‘virtuous cycle’ is a crucial component of Incourages work, because it challenges old habits of disengagement (Taylor, 2020, p. 34).” The story of Incourage through Taylors account illuminates a revitalization of individual civic duty. Consequentially, the demos of the town became involved by some degree in constructing and reconstructing their civic identity through engagement in commonly held material problems. Incourages work harkens back to Tocqueville’s observations on the New England townships where he states that: “The great political principals that govern American society today were born and developed in the state; one cannot doubt” (Tocqueville, 2002, p. 56)

The principles that Incourage looked to bring about remain much related to Tocqueville's observations. Such principles ultimately in both modern iterations akin to those in Incourages works, and in historical observations like Tocqueville's shows how civic virtue lies within a demos of constructed at the site of localities. In other words, they are understandings of bottom-up democracy. With a synthesis of both, insight points towards these republican institutions as being founded in a strong demos, but emerging based on a need, and historically holding strong legislative power. These principles can be surmised by example of how "the Institutions of the township in New England [which] form a complete and regular ensemble; they are old; they are strong by law; and stronger still by mores; they exert an enormous influence on the entire society (Tocqueville, 2002, p. 58)" Tocqueville's use of the term *mores* here is curious, as later in his work he describes that "Savage Nations are governed only by opinions and mores (Tocqueville, 2002, p. 308)[.]" Thus we have what appear to be a contradiction, as his discussion on the township refers to mores being able to strengthen an institution, yet are also able to lead nation into decline. Thus, as such, his observations do assert to a degree that passions and mores in politics are not unwelcome, but indeed must come accompanied by adequate means to vent such passions. If we turn to our distillation of Tocqueville's work earlier, we can see how Incourages work to satisfy the conditions set forth as such.

Distillation of Tocqueville's Observations on Townships

1. Civic life often did not supersede self governance.
2. Township strength derived from both mores and legality.
3. Township interference was limited to contractual duties between constituents.
4. Township power cedes to state power only in matters concerning cross-community, and cross-state, legislation.

Figure 4 (Tocqueville, Mansfield, Winthrop, Tocqueville 2002)

Firstly, by charging the community with solving its own problems, the civic virtue cultivated left room for self-governance. Secondly, by leading the citizens towards a specific issue, both 'mores' and reason were harnessed towards a practical solution. Thirdly, as the task of revitalization was local, the jurisdiction of both personal lives and further governmental interactions were respected. Furthermore, as Incourage gave autonomy over the decision making to the community, Sandals condition of citizens "consider[ing] themselves engaged in a common project (Sandel, 2022, p. 6)" was additionally satisfied.

Furthermore, Incourage's work alludes back to Roosevelt's comments by equipping citizens with the creation of instruments which can help increase local influence on larger economic and political structures, in turn shifting control over their material conditions back to themselves. Thus, as we begin the task of looking towards an easing America's political predicament, it is this synthesis of historical precedent, and modern application which we will use as our guiding principles. Such principles which ultimately guide us towards an institutional arrangement.

Although, one final note on this section is needed before we do so. We will conclude by noting how American civic virtue, when in its most effective form rely not on venting of political mores via constructions of identity, but rather, utilizations of identity as a tool which then can inform constructions of policy which then are made manifest for actionable addressment of material conditions. Consequently, when such civic virtue exists within systems where decision making is elevated away from citizenry, solutions tend to be broad and sweeping, trending towards domains like the social. This simultaneously lowers the effectiveness of policy from a Coarsen perspective, while also stripping the sensation of self-governance and liberty away from Americans. In modern day America, these sensations are made manifest through a lack of adequate mechanisms for a demos to address its material conditions which in turn can explain the increase in populist trends within the nation. While encourages work in encouraging (no pun intended), under neoliberal conditions, such an NGO and profit motive are likely incompatible. Even if organizations like Incourage may find a way to bring about its work without being tied to a profit motive, the underlying necessity to always be 'breaking-even' would in its own way, lead to applications incompatible with republican virtue. In other words, even if Incourage, and non-profits like it, could find suitable donors, it is still subject to the pull of various interest groups, never wholly free in its modes and methods of action. Consequently, if taking the task of creating meaningful 'virtuous cycles' in America seriously, one needs to look firstly towards the smallest divisions of the republic possible and codify mechanisms into an institutional arrangement. Allowing for profit and private motives to be separated out, and a level playing field created. All the while utilizing precedent to guide conversations around methods of construction.

2.2 An Argument for Codification & Model of Subsequent Construction

To take the task seriously of reigniting a cycle of civic virtue in America, first priorities need to be set out. As Havel advocated for an existential revolution to escape a world married by panorama, a primary motive within the American demos would be to shift the currently identity-based construction of political life, towards a material and civic based approach, which in turn would allow for a reconstruction of a new engaged civic identity. As such, civics, an inherently public project, should be allowed to be expressed free from a profit motive. While in the case of Incourage, non-profit organizations are better suited for the task than private enterprise, although as the current economic tyranny maintains its rule in America, wholly outsourcing the project would still breed a sort of dependence. Consequently, a legitimate institution which emerges out of a demos would offer the best solution. However, as all sections of the demos in America vary, providing a sweeping example of such an institution would be unadvisable. It would in that manner- once again be viewed as another instrument which the demos have little control over. Furthermore, knowing that: “People will not pledge allegiance to vast and distant entities, whatever their importance, unless those institutions are somehow connected to political arrangements that reflect the identity of the participants, (Sandel, 2022, p. 6)” construction of a novel institution for the purpose of reconstructing a virtuous civic identity should exist on the lowest level of a republic possible. Thus, when we are looking to codify mechanisms which express allow for construction and reconstruction of civic identity its primary function should be to allow a demos *to feel influential* regarding the material construction of a community. It is for this reason, it should exist at the lowest level of the republic as possible, and any effects regarding creation of ‘virtuous cycles’ trickle up to the site of the nation. As the exact decisions made by the demos would be near impossible to predict, codification of such an institution would allow for ‘rules of the game’ to be set. The importance of such cannot be understated regarding existing within a highly polarized and antagonistic America like the one we are currently seeing. An example institution which would embody these objectives can be seen below.

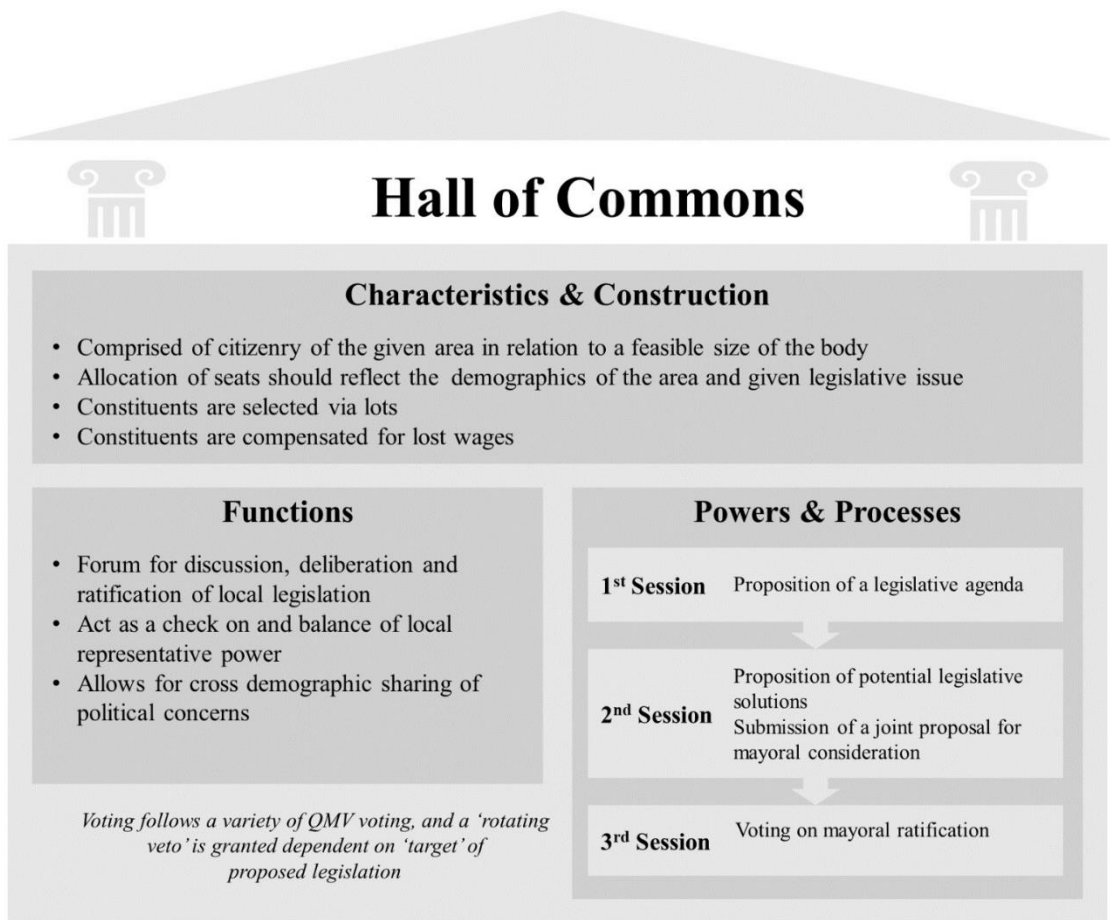


Figure 4 the Hall of Commons

2.2.1 Characteristics & Construction

Regarding its characteristics and construction, a balance must first be struck between justly representing the population of the town which the hall of commons belongs to and being sizeable enough to maintain a degree of efficiency. For the sake of exemplification, let us look at Northampton Massachusetts. The selection of Northampton for exemplification of the Hall of Commons is due to its size, its position in New England, and due to my familiarity of it as a citizen of the town for the better part of my life. Regarding its size, we know from recent population estimates during the calendar year of 2022, that Northampton Massachusetts, holds 29,327 individuals, 15% of which are estimated to be under 18. This leaves us with a voting eligible population of 24,827 individuals. Regarding a demographic breakdown, 57.4% of the population is female, 42.6% male, 85% of the population is White, 7.9% Hispanic, 5%, Mixed race, 3.8% Asian, and 2.1% Black. Notably, 9.2% of the population in Northampton, are foreign born persons. (*U.S. Census Bureau QuickFacts:*

Northampton city, Massachusetts; Massachusetts). Regarding the size of the Northampton's Hall of commons, we can arrive at a reasonable assembly two ways, one would be to set a static percentage of the township who is summoned, the other would be to set a fixed number of seats, whose allocations according to demographic data would be revisited once every census cycle.

If we look at the Athenian Boule for inspiration, we can see that 500 seats were allocated under Cleisthenes (Aristotle, 2008). The primary duty and functions of the Boule were for it to act as a check on the power of the magistrates and Archons via examination. Furthermore, the Boule, while having “no final jurisdiction” is responsible for “preliminary cognizance of all matters brought before the Assembly (Aristotle, 2008)” barring voting “on any question unless it has first been considered by the Council (Aristotle, 2008)”. At the latter half of the 4th century, the citizen population of Athens, is estimated to be around 30,000, and at the end of the 5th century, this figure is estimated to be around 25,000 (Pritchard, 2010). Knowing that Cleisthenes' reforms took place after 507 A.D (Pritchard, 2019), we can use these the estimated size of the citizenry in Athens and the seats allocated to the Boule to begin to shape the size of the Hall of Commons. To solve for the problem of size within Northampton's Hall of Commons, we can admit that we are lucky that classical Athens and Northampton maintain similar sizes regarding a voting population. Thus, we could take the static number of 500 seats which correspond to the Athenian Boule and apply it directly. Although while this would solve the size issue of the Northampton Hall of Commons, it would do little to aid the creation of differently sized communities. Thus, we can find the percentage of citizenry eligible to serve in the Boule as 1.6% at 30,000 citizens and 2% at 25,000 citizens. For the sake of comparison, we will be taking the 1.6% as the metric for our proposal. As the lower percentage would not only create a smaller, and therefore more manageable design, but also serve as a ‘middle road’ regarding the Athenian population estimates. Furthermore, as we have no interest in transplanting Athenian chauvinism into a proposal for modern republican institutions, we state that all residents of Northampton over the age of 18 are considered citizens, so we are left with two important qualifiable numbers, the voting population of 24,827 are to be benchmarked as the demos, and selection of 1.6% would lead to approximately 397 seats being allocated towards the Northampton Hall of Commons.

The exact distribution of these 397 seats becomes dependent on two factors, the first of which is to maintain relevance to the given demographics of the area, (in this case Northampton), the second is to remain relevant to the given legislative issue. Both metrics would need to remain relatively flexible, as to not disrupt the sessional progression. This is to say, if the first selection of constituents leaves us exactly in-line with demographic data, and the proposed legislative agenda has to do with reproductive rights, as 57% of the population are woman (*U.S. Census Bureau QuickFacts: Northampton city, Massachusetts; Massachusetts*) then woman would maintain 226 seats, and would need not utilize the a rotating veto. However, if the subject of the agenda targets commerce, we need to keep in mind that 885 total firms operate within Northampton and if broken apart by demographic data, 482 are male owned, and 197 female owned, 35 owned by Veterans and little to no data available of minority group ownership in the town. (*U.S. Census Bureau QuickFacts: Northampton city, Massachusetts; Massachusetts*) If we assume these businesses are all single owner, we can say that there are 885 business owners operating in Northampton. This means that out of the eligible 24,827 citizens who could be summoned, 3.56% of them are business owners. Thus, if we are to begin the distribution of seats for this convention and use the 397-seat figure that we found previously, 14 seats must be filled by Business owners, of which as 54.52% of Businesses are male owned, 8 seats go the male owned business, and the remaining 7 to female owned business. Care should also be taken to ensure that minority groups ownership is also represented. As such if these minimum thresholds are not met prior to the agenda being set on commence, seats must be reallocated and redrawn to achieve the above minimum thresholds. As Northampton have relatively few businesses, the business owners would maintain the rotating veto following the redrawing.

Regarding the necessity for constituents to be selected generally via lots, while also being compensated for lost wages, they both serve the purpose of protecting against tyrannies where those who have the spare time and can afford to lose a day's worth of work still have a chance to participate actively in the civic life of the community. When considering rising inflation costs and how more Americans are turning to second job in the face of an eroding purchasing power. (Sainato, 2022) It becomes necessary to consider who is able to attend meetings at the Hall of Commons. Time and fiscal constraints when it comes to civic duty are not novel considerations, dating back to Aristotle. Who saw having leisure as an important step towards participating in politics, and the public sphere, and by extent the good

life. “For instance, when discussing different types of democracy, Aristotle comments that the poor have more leisure, ‘for they are not hindered by the care of their own affairs (idia) which often fetters the rich, who are thereby prevented from taking part in the assembly or in the courts’ (P 1293 a 7-9).⁸ The poor will therefore be more attracted by payment to attend the assembly or the courts. By contrast, the lack of payment provides the only chance for a democratic country to be controlled by the wealthy elite (Mulgan, 1990, p. 197).” Consequently, compensating for lost wages, allows safeguards against control of wealthy elites, and simultaneously removes the incentive for showing up just for payment. Furthermore, selecting by lots additionally safeguards against the previously mentioned issues while also placing civic duty in the forefront of the local culture- and by extent civic identity. Not dissimilar to how jury duty acts as a popular arm of the judicial branch.

2.2.2 Powers & Process: Session One

Regarding the sessional nature of the Hall of Commons, there exist three distinct sessions. All of which should convene for no longer than an eight-hour workday, all of which should contain reasonable breaks throughout. During the first session the allotted constituents are prompted to discuss and debate the towns agenda, those who wish to bring about their own takes on the current affairs of the town will be prompted to come forth and address the body as a whole. Once the speeches have finished, the group may begin to vote on the agenda which is to be set forth in the secondary session. Voting in the first session, follows the voting pattern used in all subsequent sessions aside from the utilization of the rotating veto, which is reserved for the second and thirds sessions. Minority groups (as per demographic and issue) hold a rotating veto, and a qualified majority must be surpassed. Regarding the qualified majority, QMV would serve the purpose of limiting the animosity which is often frequently accompanied by first past the post electoral systems. Furthermore, considering that the constituency holds ratification power over the agenda and subsequent policy adoption, a hard majority clearly above 50% would be necessary to encourage cooperation. This is further compounded by all citizens having to live within the consequences of their decision. When considering the goal of reducing levels of antagonism, having a high level of consensus furthers the objective of creating a collaborative agonistic environment and would require that party divide of Democrats vs Republicans fall out of the discussion in the face of precise policy debate. In the case that that the constituents represent the proposed agenda adequately, the session is finished, and a date is set for the second session. In the

case the constituents are not adequately representative of the proposed agenda, volunteers will be asked to step down, and their seats replaced also via lots in a manner which is appropriate to the proposed legislative agenda. In the case of a lack of volunteers, the seats should be reallocated based on the proposed agenda while maintaining to a degree the continuity of the current body.

2.2.3 Powers and Process: Session Two

During the second session, having had time to think about the proposed agenda, the participants will reconvene with proposed policy solutions in a manner like the first session. The constituents who have proposed policy present it, the next is brought to present their solution so on and so forth until the proposed ideas have all been presented. From there an open debate occurs, with either a winning proposal or a revised synthesized proposal emerging and subsequently being voted on. In the case that a proposal passes the qualified majority, but still infringes on those who hold the rotating veto, the proposal cannot move on to the third session without being re-examined. In the case of no proposal being found adequate by the end of the day, it is expected the representative hear the debate and propose their own version during the third session. If a proposal passes both the qualified majority, and no rotating veto is used, it again falls onto the representative to produce the legislation to be presented during the final session.

2.2.4 Powers and Process: Session Three

During the third session, the final versions of the policy proposal are produced under the representative following the second session and presented to the constituents. From here, a last open debate takes place, with additions and alterations being made, being voted on as they go until a final vote takes place. Assuming the votes pass the QMV and not vetoes are used, it is expected the local representative ratify the policy. If the local representatives fail to ratify the legislation, the constituents, while having no legal recourse, are made aware of the violation from the popular will sheerly by being an active participant of the legislative process. As such, the constituents may act as a check on the position of their elective representative through making a more informed vote during the next election cycle.

2.2.5 Functions

This proposed design functions primary as a body which exist as a forum for discussion deliberation and ratification of local legislature. Focusing in on taking a demos to shift its thinking from “from small (not believing their ideas made a difference) to big (my ideas can make a difference and I want to learn more) (Taylor, 2020, p. 34).” Furthermore, by inviting and to an extent mandating popular participation in politics citizens are bridge demographic and by extent party divides within the community, which in turn can create cycles of civic virtue where citizens shift from thinking about politics as identity to politics as policy and allow for reconstructions of both. Lastly, by having citizens contend and interact directly with their local representatives, a check and balance on representative power emerges. Lastly, while this design is by no means complete regarding the total organization and assignment of various roles which would become necessary in its full creation, it is a meaningful attempt to show that the current American political predicament can be addressed through understanding of the material conditions which have created discontentment in the nation, in tandem with creative applications of theory. In the remaining sections of this thesis, an attempt to show that the imperfect nature of this design is not in fact a weakness of its design but a strength of it. As flexibility in its approach would allow for more efficient implantations across various communities, not just the one in which it had been exemplified.

2.2.6 The Rotating Veto & Establishment of Voting Methods

The use of qualified majority voting in tandem with the establishment of a rotating veto, both serve within the context of the Hall of Commons to disincentivize emergence of a tyranny. While the larger political apparatus within the US contains myriads of checks and balances on the respective branches powers, the Hall of Commons would primarily shift power into the hands of the constituents within a given community. As such, constituents would maintain quite a high degree of political power. This rapid reallocation of political influence towards a polarized demo, whose current political conditioning exists within identity-oriented politics, could very well result in negative, or even chauvinistic decision making. However, the potentiality of these negative outcomes can be mitigated through clever applications of voting conditions. Beginning with the least complicated of these two tools, we will first discuss the importance of an establishment of a variation of a qualified

majority being used to nominate potential legislation for ratification. While the exact quotient of the supermajority required will not be presented within this thesis, anything above 51% would suffice. The higher-level set, the less likely policy is to be passed, although the more likely the policy would be at achieving expression of a popular will. Conversely, requiring a lower voting threshold would likely lead to a more activist expressions within the Hall of Commons, and as such could result in unpopular items being passed with more frequency. While the balance between incentivizing activist or popular expressions should be constructed by the community itself during the construction of the Hall of Commons, ensuring only 'fair deal' policy can be made easier through the rotating veto. The rotating veto firstly is non-absolute. Secondly, it is automatically applied based on the most 'at-risk' demographics affected by relevant legislative proposals. By ensuring the rotating veto is non-absolute, the community is incentivized to understand the opposition's perspective and develop adequate modifications. This in turn, incentivizes a collaborative spirit in which echo-chambers are forced to be deconstructed. Additionally, regardless of the demographic breakdown of each community, it ensures the victories seen regarding the expansion of individual rights within liberalism are preserved. As it is not possible to strip abortion rights of women, when women hold the power to reject legislative proposals which they may see as encroaching on their bodily autonomy. Furthermore, as it would be inappropriate to group all women, all POC constituents, all farmers, all bankers, all LGBTQIA+ identifying constituents, etc. into one group, the rotating veto can be used by any single individual within the cluster which the rotating veto covers. ***Ensuring all participants have a voice within the decision making of the community.***

2.2.7 “Rules of the Game”

With much of the practical development of the Hall of Commons needing to be done within a demo, as the author of this thesis I must contest with the fact that much of what has been written prior to these concluding sections is indeed subject to change if brought into reality as a true experiment. Perhaps, the Hall of Commons strikes a chord not within the community I come from, but from a community within the deep south of America. Perhaps the Hall of Commons would be seen as a tool for the white Christian majority in America to impress religious cultural beliefs on the whole of the community within its jurisdiction. While the rotating veto and qualified majority voting are part of the toolbox necessary to prevent tyrannies emerging, the rules of play must also be established. With respect to a

genuine sense of self-government and cooperative co-construction of a prospective Hall of Commons, it remains best to outline what it not allowed, as opposed to what is allowed within the Hall of Commons. Thus, to preserve peace, order, and pre-established rights the Hall of Commons is forbidden from interfering with the following domains.

1. The Hall of Commons shall not and cannot be utilized to transform the legal boundary of its jurisdiction. It exists within the municipality it was constructed in, and cannot extend artificially its legal decisions, nor its influence outside of the community it is a part of.
2. The Hall of Commons while a political institution for civic engagement, as such it may not interfere private matters such as religious affiliation, sexual orientation, gender or legal occupation. This remains true in all cases, except when providing positive protections based on a need for protections from discrimination. In the case it is deemed necessary to interfere in any of the above domains, it must do so under reasonable argument that the issue is both public, and provably discriminatory.
3. The Hall of Commons shall draw into itself constituents based on legal residency based on a period of no less than one year, and no longer than five years. All legal residents over the age of 18 (including temporary ones) are to be considered by lots. No attempts to amend the qualities of 'residency' besides the time resided within the community is permitted.

Beyond the above constraints, including the mandated rotating veto and a form of qualified majority voting, the Hall of Commons is subject only to its own constituents and municipality it is a part of. Dissolution of it by the state is only permitted in the case of provable violation of any of the set-out constraints.

3. Imperfection Breeds Progress

3.1 Lessons are to be Learned

“James Fishkin, a leading theorist of deliberative democracy, addresses in one of his papers the key question of how to incorporate public deliberation into constitutional processes (Fishkin 2011). In raising this question, he introduces what he refers to as the ‘trilemma of democratic reform’. To Fishkin, there are three basic principles internal to the design of democratic institutions: political equality (people’s views are counted equally), mass participation (we are all given the opportunity to provide in-formed consent), and deliberation (we are all given the opportunity to provide opinions and weigh competing arguments) (Poblet, Plaza 2017, p. 3).” Fishkin further elaborates on this notion by suggesting that when systems stress both mass participation and deliberation, the incentive to become well informed drops. If deliberation is emphasized along with political equality, microcosms of seriously informed actors may emerge, although they would hold little relevant political power in the context of representing boarder issues failing to satisfy general mass participation. (Poblet, Plaza 2017) The Hall of Commons, solves for the “trilemma of democratic reform (Poblet, Plaza 2017, p. 3)” by ignoring the larger political apparatus outside the smallest division of the given area which it is placed. This is possible through limiting *real legislative power* (i.e. codification of laws) into just the jurisdiction of the region where the Hall of Commons is located. However, in the era of mass media, the virtue which is cultivated by the spirit of debate from within the Hall of Commons would likely seep into the broader political reality which contains the rest of the American political apparatus. Although, the effectiveness of this notion of democracy and civics ‘trickling up’ is likely limited by the number of Hall of Commons which would emerge. For example, if only one existed, constituents would likely be made aware of the policy from the state level which hinders their own political vision of their community, although the information gathered which might inform a vote for a state representative would be unlikely to sway a vote. However, if a fair amount of Hall of Commons’ were spread throughout a state, and legislative and policy barriers were met frequently in a similar manner by many local populations, a vote for a state level representative could be swayed. This illustrates how the Hall of Commons can in conjunction with other versions of itself allow for contestation of

representative power, while simultaneously aiding in creation of a more robust civic framework.

Although, this understanding presents two clear potential realities. For the sake of exemplification, we will refer to these as paths. On path A) The Hall of Commons would be rather activist, where the constituents of the body find themselves passing or attempting to many legislative items, of which sometimes a barrier of state or federal law is reached. Without legal ability for the Hall of Commons to contest what breaches its jurisdiction, the population becomes aware of the failings of its state representative and acts as a check and balance on state level representatives as well as its local ones. On Path B) The Hall of Commons is less activist, or rather it fails to achieve the thresholds of its QMV, and as such becomes mostly just a forum for discussion. If implemented, a hybrid approach between these two paths is likely. However, because the Hall of Commons should in essence be a popular body for agonistic expression, preserve the social gains under liberalism, and maintain its relevance primarily for the community which it inhabits, its conditions are fulfilled regardless of the level of legislation passed. From here it also follows that if legislation which is unpopular passes, and members of the community want to overturn such a prospective policy, as the Hall of Commons only maintains legislative jurisdiction over the region which it inhabits, the conditions set out are also fulfilled, by the ability of the constituents to overturn their own policy. It is for these reasons that regardless of which laws are passed or the activist level of an individual Hall of Commons or the variants between individual Hall of Commons, political power is transferred back to a demos, and as such negative externalities of neoliberal governmentality in America can begin to be reversed. Another way to view these principles would be through Rousseauian philosophy. Take for example how: “Montesquieu separated representation from democracy, and Rousseau representation from sovereignty. Montesquieu argued that a state where the people delegated their ‘right of sovereignty’ could not be democratic and must be classified as a species of mixed government and in fact an aristocracy. Rousseau saw such a state as non-political from the start and illegitimate because the people lost their political liberty along with the power to vote on legislation directly: unless all citizens were lawmakers, there were no citizens at all (Poblet, Plaza 2017, p. 2).” Thus, regardless of the exact policy enacted or the perfection of its implementation, the Hall of Commons, turns its constituents into lawmakers, and as such provides them with the tools to turn their disenfranchised selves into refranchised

selves. Or as Rousseau saw it, sovereignty is handed back towards the demos, and all citizens within the locality where the Hall of Commons is established begin to transform into lawmakers, regardless of the exact policy outcome or implementation.

3.2 An Argument for Organic Development

It is then maintained that providing a full outline of its construction for all areas in which it could develop is inappropriate. Therefore, by focusing in on the enshrined minimum main principles: Forum for local civic cultivation, need for minority interest protection, and mandated participation with compensation, a sort of political minimum viable product is presented. Via these main principles, regardless of the exact nature of implementation, constituents are transformed into lawmakers. It follows then, the first task of the Hall of Commons should be its own development per recommendations of the constituents it is poised to hold. Thus, by limiting the specifics of the Hall of Commons design within this thesis, space is left for a given community to debate on the very nature of its construction. Ironically, this allows for the Hall of Commons to have a better chance at becoming a tangible reality than if it were presented as a more complete theoretical outline. If potential missteps regarding policy or exact voting thresholds are addressed within the first design of the Hall of Commons, autonomy and legitimacy would be stripped from the institution in compared to having these precise discussions take place before its final construction. It is for this reason, when I as the author of this thesis presented specifics on its development, I did so from the perspective of the community I spent most of my life in; advocating for its development outside of a civic sphere I wholly understood would remain irresponsible. Furthermore, for this reason, the first iteration of the Hall of Commons, and subsequent iterations if chosen to be developed should be developed organically from the community which it would serve. If we are to look at the Hall of Commons as a discourse-based institution, construction of it organically would aid in the creation of an active listening and speaking dichotomy. “Discourse in participatory conceptions of democracy is guided by a neo-Rousseauvian ideal of popular sovereignty rooted in the fundamental equality of citizens. Yet in our political discourse (both speaking and listening), the goal is to foster democratic discourse which uncovers commonality – that which unites members of political community, all too often lost within the non-participatory milieu of contemporary large-scale representative democracies (Glover, 2012, p. 87).” Organic development of the Hall of

Commons not only then allows the discussions of its exact design to be efficient from a Coarsen perspective, but also primes the constituents to become attached to a common project, and as such develop the democratic norms necessary for its function prior to the first convention of the Hall of Commons taking place.

Organic development of the Hall of Commons also has moral grounding. As the Hall of Commons stands against the liberal conception of 'the unencumbered self' (Sandel, 1984), so should its development. Knowing that under our current brand of liberalism "we are of course free to join in voluntary association with others, and so are capable of community in the cooperative sense (Sandel, 1984)." We must also contest with the fact that "what is denied to the unencumbered self is the possibility of membership in any community bound by moral ties antecedent to choice; he cannot belong to any community where the self itself could be at stake (Sandel, 1984)." Therefore, to ensure the prior to a transformation of a citizen into a lawmaker, a specific type of a community must need to emerge. "Such a community-call it constitutive as against merely cooperative-would engage the identity as well as the interests of the participants, and so implicate its members in a citizenship more thoroughgoing than the unencumbered self can know (Sandel, 1984)." Thus, by providing the constituents a potential project to grapple onto with a sense of commonality, the unencumbered self is shed, and a forum for a constitutive community begins to become established. Following, by the sheer act of creation and finalization of the Hall of Commons, the constituents begin the transformation into lawmakers. Furthermore, as the key tenants and protections are enshrined within this thesis version of the Hall of Commons, infringements on minority rights along with potential disruptions to the larger representative framework of the United States are avoided. Where already existing local jurisdiction is concerned, mayors, city council members, and townhalls remain small enough to have their roles modified by the community for the Hall of Commons without infringement. For example, the mayor can be assigned as the final legislative authority, the city council as an arbitration body, and the townhall modified as the physical domain for the Hall of Commons. Lastly organic development of the Hall of Commons allows for it to become relatively experimental in its nature, as any implementation of it from the viewpoint of a grass roots approach allows it to adapt to the specific needs of the communities which it is designed to serve. Thus, the approach of outlining the Hall of Commons from this minimal viable product perspective, shields the values it seeks to illicit, allowing for modifications to be

made, and helps ensure its feasibility as a democratic experiment. All of which poise it to become a legitimate tool in the study of democracy, if tangibly developed.

Conclusion

Having shown the transformation of American civic and political decline, this thesis has presented an atypical solution as construction of a novel political institution referred to as the Hall of Commons. The Hall of Commons exists at its simplest form – as an institution to channel political ambitions and cultivate civic virtue within the smallest division of the American republic. Being stationed at the smallest division of the republic allows for the positive effects of the civic virtue it seeks to cultivate, to be expressed in manners which respect the social advancements made by liberal America, as well as the larger political apparatus of the United States. By providing a minimally sufficient design for the Hall of Commons within this thesis, its prospective development is presented in the most feasible manner as possible. While the Hall of Commons exists as a tool for cultivation of civic virtue in America which is poised to aid in the easement of the negative externalities stemming from America's political predicament, it does indeed give a significant amount of power to an average citizen who is living in a highly polarized political environment.

From writing this thesis and debating its content, I am aware that some might rail against the notion that giving political power back to a highly polarized demos which is generally trending towards more extreme forms of authoritarian rule, can or will, lead to poor choices by a population. To respond to this hypothetical objection, it remains relevant to synthesize some of the key conclusions of this thesis. Chapter 1 showed how our current symptoms of decline in American civic life are not the product of a healthy political system, and in the end do result from a real material grounding of disenfranchisement stemming from a disconnection between a given demos, and the material controls they may have over their lives. Chapter 2 showed that the construction of the Hall of Commons has been done with respect to past precedent and contains inbuilt features which protect against misuse. Thus, I ask you as the reader, which is better: To provide the people with a blueprint regarding reconstruction of a healthy democratic system? Or, to attempt to govern the reconstruction of a healthy democratic system by forces which many already perceive as being out of their control? Trade-offs on efficiency, legitimacy, and accountability are always present within democratic systems. Furthermore, most Americans, many of which are becoming detached further from politics are struggling. An attitude of 'something has to give' hangs over the demos of the nation. In the face of our present condition, I have speculated in this work that

any broad policy action stemming from the site of the nation, or the state would do little to quell the general facts of disenfranchisement. I am not alone in this critique, returning to our introduction we can now see that the Hall of Commons exists as an institution which acts as an attempt to “devise new ways of encouraging and inciting local communities to take their fate in hand (Taylor, 2020, p. 97).” By doing so, the Hall of Commons hopes to help citizens “summon the conviction and restraint to make sense of our condition and repair the civic life on which democracy depends. (Sandel, 2022, p. 283)”

As a result, I further maintain that any attempts to quell the American political predicament at the site of the nation would make things worse than they already are. This is to say, until the people of America once again can understand themselves as “We the People”, a people which is self-sufficient, democratic, and robust, as promised by their constitution and their conceptions of self-government, the nation will be continuing to decline. Yet for the totality of reasons presented on the pages prior to this one, I do believe that an approach rooted in the smallest governmental locality, in tandem with key protections like a rotating veto and qualified majority voting, offers the best hope at actionably transforming the American demos. Any mistakes made along the way, while some may fear as a loss, fundamentally offer avenues for growth and accountability, furthermore if constructed organically, the Hall of Commons becomes an institution enshrined in legitimacy. As such, the Hall of Commons exists as a modern democratic body built by the people, for express purpose of elevating the people to a standing which allows them to contest the forces which have for so long, felt out of their control. Thus, if the American political predicament can be surmised in its modern iteration of ‘somethings got to give’ I urge the Hall of Commons to be considered as a tool which may give the American people the power over their lives. Lest we watch the walls of the Capitol give way to the destructive forces such discontentment has and will continue to breed.

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