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Title

The Future of American Democracy

Permalink

<https://escholarship.org/uc/item/5w30x51q>

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Publication Date

2000-06-01

CSD Center for the Study of Democracy

An Organized Research Unit
University of California, Irvine
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Tonight I will talk about the future of American democracy, and then we can open the discussion for questions.¹

First, there is the issue of the confidence of citizens in government. Every poll shows this is a declining reality, and anyone who is serious about our government has to be concerned. There are three answers to these trends. One is to change the way we finance campaigns, including having free TV and radio time available for candidates. Not just 30 second commercials, but 5 minute contributions where the candidate himself or herself has to speak. If United Airlines ran a 30 second commercial saying "Don't fly American Airlines" and showed the plane crashing in Little Rock, and Northwest ran a commercial "Don't fly TWA" and showed the CIA mock-up of a TWA plane blowing up, and Delta ran a commercial saying "Don't fly United Airlines" and showed the picture of the crash in Iowa-soon we would lose all confidence in the airlines. That is precisely what has happened to our government. If candidates themselves have to get on the radio or in front of that camera, many of the negatives are going to disappear. For instance, if I am running against Jack Peltason for Governor of California, I don't get up and say "Jack Peltason is a so-and-so." I get your Chancellor in blue jeans or bib-overalls (I can just see you in bib overalls, Chancellor) at a service station filling that gas tank and saying "Oh, that Jack Peltason is a so-and-so, but Paul Simon is such a nice guy." The candidates rarely do this personally. If the candidate is required to speak, you will have an appreciable diminution in this negative type of abuse.

Second, there is no question that our present system distorts democracy badly. One of the last days that I was in the Senate, (and I have nothing against this company, but they are just taking advantage of our system), we had a conference of committees between the House and Senate. (A conference occurs when the House and the Senate do not agree on details of a bill and you have to get together. A lot of the mischief that takes place in any legislative body takes places in conferences). Federal Express managed to get an amendment to classify 40,000 truck drivers as pilots for labor management relations. I will not go into the full impact of that, but it was a bonanza for Federal Express. The *Washington Post* said that during the last two-year cycle we were in session, Federal Express contributed \$1.4 million dollars to incumbent members of

¹ **PAUL SIMON**, Illinois' former senior U.S. senator, has enjoyed a long and illustrious political career. Elected to both the Illinois house and senate, he also served a term as lieutenant governor. He spent 10 years in the U.S. House before his 1984 election to the U.S. Senate. Simon has also authored more than 18 books, including his most recent works: *Freedom's Champion: Elijah Lovejoy* (1995); *The Dollar Crisis* (with Ross Perot) (1996); *Tapped Out: The Coming World Crisis in Water and What We Can Do About It* (1998); and *P.S. The Autobiography of Paul Simon* (1998). Simon now teaches political science and journalism at Southern Illinois University's Carbondale campus, where he also heads the [Public Policy Institute](#) that he founded.

Congress for their campaigns. Three of us, Ted Kennedy, Russ Feingold and I tried to stop it on the floor. We were overwhelmingly outvoted. I got up during the Democratic caucus and I am sure this could have happened in the Republican caucus, although I have never been invited to a Republican caucus and I said "We shouldn't just be knuckling under to this special interest. Maybe there is merit to this amendment, but then let's hold hearings, let's have research, let's find out about it." One of my senior colleagues got up and said "Paul's always talking about special interest, special interest, special interest. We have to pay attention to who is buttering our bread." That is what it is all about.

Anyone who has been a candidate for major public office and says "Campaign contributions don't affect you" is simply not telling the truth. In my last campaign for re-election in 1990, I spent \$8.4 million dollars. I have never promised anyone a thing for a campaign contribution. But, when I was still in the Senate, if I arrived at a hotel in Chicago at midnight there might be twenty phone calls waiting for me. Nineteen of them are perhaps from people whose names I did not recognize, and the twentieth is someone who gave me a \$1,000 campaign contribution. At midnight I am not going to make twenty phone calls. I might make one. Which one do you think I am going to make? You are right. It means that the financially articulate have inordinate access to policy makers. You are less than human if you do not recognize that. And this happens in every walk of life. I do not mean to be picking on you, Chancellor Cicerone, but if a potential student comes here whose parents had given \$500,000 to the endowment of this school, I have an idea that student is going to get a little extra special attention.

As a candidate, you are thankful to people who are generous enough and obviously wise enough to contribute to your campaign. But the system is warped. In 1990, my \$8.4 million campaign budget, on a per vote basis among Senate candidates who had serious contests, was the second lowest expenditure for incumbents. In the last campaign for the United States Senate in Illinois, the winner spent \$17 million dollars.

A second thing that has to happen to restore the confidence of citizens is that political leaders need to stand for something. We have this culture of pandering. At every Democratic Senate caucus (we meet for lunch every Tuesday at noon), and they tell us the same thing happens at the Republican caucus, we get the latest polls on what is happening. We are driven by polls. Pat Buchanan is being laughed about a great deal today, and I have to say I would hate to see Pat Buchanan as President of the United States. But I have to give credit to Buchanan, whom I have known since he was a writer for the St. Louis *Gold Democrat* way back when. Pat does not take *any* polls. He does not have a focus group to decide what he is going to do. He acts from conviction. I give him credit for that. I think his conviction takes him in the wrong direction, but he is not moved by polls.

Some people say "It's the only way you can win." If I may be immodest, and you have learned by now that modesty is not one of the virtues of those of us who hold public office, early in my 1990 race *Roll Call* had an article that said that one of the sure seats for the Republicans was Paul Simon's seat in Illinois. Lynn Martin, who was going to be heavily financed, was running against me. I had taken a stand opposed to capital punishment and said that instead of tax cuts we should be talking about tax increases at least until we get the budget balanced. I was leading the opposition to the constitutional amendment against burning the flag, which I might add is a thing still rustling around out there and has passed the House and is one of the most meaningless things I can imagine. *Roll Call* said it looked like Paul Simon was one of those future has-been Senators. I ended up winning by the biggest plurality of any candidate for Governor or Senator in the nation of either political party who had a serious contest. I remember

running into this man in Chicago who came up to me when my opponent was running ads saying what a "wild-eyed radical" I was; this man said to me "I think I disagree with you on every issue, but I trust you and I'm going to vote for you." People are tired of the pandering. We have a culture of pandering that is doing us harm.

Social Security provides another example. Anyone who looks at Social Security for fifteen minutes knows we are going to have to make changes. But neither political party is willing to talk about it because there are no popular answers. President Clinton has had forums in Kansas City and Albuquerque on how to change Social Security and he said there are just two things we should not talk about: one is reducing benefits and the second is increasing taxes. Well, there are only two ways to solve Social Security; one is to increase taxes or the other is to reduce benefits.

The third thing that reduces confidence in government is the excessive partisanship. People see us playing games too often. I am a Democrat and proud to be a Democrat, but most issues like higher education issues, really do not involve political philosophy. They are practical problems. How do we get practical answers for these problems.

The Role of the Media

Another general area I would like to discuss is the media. I have talked about the culture of pandering. There is a good California illustration. Look at the amount of time spent by national television or newspapers or radio on the O.J. Simpson trial and compare it to the amount of time spent on the fall of the Berlin wall: many, many times as much on the O.J. Simpson trial. Even the *Los Angeles Times*, a respected journal, follows this pattern. I remember picking up the *Times* one day when I was out here, and there was something about one juror being questioned and it made headlines like Russia was about to send nuclear weapons over here. The media need to focus attention on real problems, and that includes attention to the international arena.

You are fortunate in this area to have the *Los Angeles Times* to give you coverage that, frankly, most newspapers do not give. The *New York Times* and *Los Angeles Times* have international coverage like no other newspapers in the United States. Garrick Utley has written an article for one of the foreign policy journals that analyses what is happening on network television in terms of international coverage. Except for emergencies where American troops may be involved, there has been a steady downward trend in international coverage, and that is not good.

An example of the media's attention to the trivial: I am old enough that when the reporters asked me at one point during one of my campaigns "Have you ever used marijuana or cocaine," I could honestly say "Not only have I never used it, no one has ever offered me any marijuana or cocaine." But we now pay a huge amount of attention to G. W. Bush and whether or not he, at some point in his life, has used some cocaine. Where does he stand on the Comprehensive Test Ban Treaty? Where does he stand on some of the major issues that he will confront if he becomes President of the United States?

My political mentor was a distinguished former professor, Paul Douglas, who was United States Senator from Illinois. One day when I was in the State Legislature, Paul called me and said "Will you introduce a resolution calling on me to introduce a resolution to make the corn tassel the national flower?" Because I had so much respect for Paul Douglas I said "Yes, I'll do it." I thought about it all day and I concluded, "I don't want to introduce a resolution on the corn tassel." So, I called him that night and said "Paul, are you sure you want to introduce a resolution

on the corn tassel?" He laughed and he became Professor Douglas again and responded, "Just remember this, Paul, the substantial things you do in public life receive very little attention. The trivial is what receives attention. You introduce your resolution, I'll introduce it, and it will be in every newspaper and radio station and television station in the state of Illinois. It won't pass, but no one will be angry with us and you will have done something to help you survive in politics." I learned a little about politics and journalism that night from Paul Douglas: The attention to the trivial.

The media need to stress the substantial. Be skeptical, but not cynical. Stress the international issues much more. And finally, do not let the bookkeepers dictate your activities. Try to serve the community and, ultimately, you will serve yourself well.

The Role of the Academy

A final point in terms of how we move in terms of the future of our democracy: educators and public officials must be willing to lead. This is not simply for those who hold public office. Those of you in the Academy have to be part of this. The evidence is overwhelming that the Comprehensive Test Ban Treaty should have been approved. Incidentally, if any of you have questions about that, read today's *New York Times* (October 28, 1999). Paul Nitze has an op-ed piece about what it would mean if we just decided to discard all of our nuclear weapons. You can say that President Clinton did not handle the issue very well and I would agree with you. The administration did not do the preliminary work that it should have done. But there should have been academicians from around the country with op-ed pieces stirring us up and saying this is something that is essential for the future of stability in the world. That just did not happen.

We need your involvement, those of you in the Academy. I know you have excuses, you have to grade papers, and I am teaching two classes at Southern Illinois University. You have tests and you have to do many other things. But democracy does not run on excuses. We need your involvement.

And we need your involvement on a larger problem; the Comprehensive Test Ban is just an indication of it. That is the need to examine our international role. We recently celebrated the 50th anniversary of the Marshall Plan. George Marshall and Harry Truman very courageously said to desperate nations, "We want to help." The first poll taken after it was proposed showed 14 percent of the American public supporting it. It was overwhelmingly unpopular. It turned out to be probably the most generous act by any nation in the history of the community of nations. We were leading. Today, in terms of percentage of national income that we use to help the poor beyond our borders, among the twenty-one wealthy nations we are now twenty-first-dead last in percentage terms. Even in absolute dollars-Germany, France, Japan, all three nowhere near our population or wealth-are doing more than we are doing. The President has just vetoed a bill that Congress passed that cut his requests for foreign developmental assistance by \$2 billion. But even the President's request was too modest.

In 1985 Ronald Reagan was President. If you add in the inflation factor and go to where we are this year, foreign economic assistance is down 50 percent since the 1985 budget. The last word I have is that Fulbright and other international exchange programs are likely to be cut an additional 6 percent. I do not hear any outcry from the academic community, but this is a great disservice to the academic community and to the nation and to the world. Should members of Congress be standing up? Yes. Should the academic community be stimulating and speaking up? Yes. We are not doing it as we should.

Madeline Albright is in Africa today and I am pleased to see that. When President Clinton made his trip to Africa, he was quoted in one of the newspapers I do not know if it was accurate or not as saying that he wanted to increase aid to Sub-Saharan Africa, the poorest continent in the world, by \$30 million dollars. In view of what Congress is doing in cutting back aid, that looks good. But \$30 million dollars is one-fortieth of what we get from one cent of a gasoline tax. It is almost nothing. It is trivial. We ought to have enlightened selfishness. We owe the United Nations \$1.4 billion dollars in arrears. Operation of the United Nations for one year outside of peacekeeping costs \$1.2 billion dollars. Eighty-one percent of the arrearage in the United Nations is from one country, the United States of America. I am not proud of that fact.

And you can go on with other statistics, but I learned a long time ago statistics do not persuade people. When I am asked about foreign aid, I frequently tell about visiting in Malawi, a country in Southern Africa. When Mozambique right next door had a civil war, Malawi then had 7 to 8 million people and about a million refugees. It would be like the United States having 35 million refugees. I went to a refugee camp in the southern part of the country, the biggest refugee camp I have ever visited, with 40,000 people. The Director of the camp asked, "Would you be willing to talk to some of the people?" I said, "If you want me to, I'd be happy to." He had them in three groups: men, women and children. Each group, maybe ten or twenty times the number gathered here tonight, no PA system, they were sitting on the ground, very primitive. I shouted. The interpreter would shout after me. When I spoke to the children, about 15 feet from me was a little boy, perhaps 10 years with a badly infected eye and insects on his eye. Afterward, I said to the camp Director that I hoped someone would help that little boy. The camp Director responded, "We can only take care of emergencies." I have never forgotten that little boy. I do not know how his future ties in with the future of my four grandchildren, but I instinctively know that it does. And you know that it does. Humanity is not divisible ultimately. We have to be more enlightened. And the Academy has to help show the way.

Tom Friedman had a column in the *New York Times* during the Rwanda period and he said, I regret to say with some accuracy, "France acts like a great power, but does not have the resources. The United States has the resources, but does not act like a great power."

We have to do better and we need the Academy to lead. It is easy to point our fingers at Congress. We are right to do that. They are not acting responsibly. But they reflect where we are in our country culturally. Higher education has to play a role in changing that. That includes the University of California, Irvine. It includes Southern Illinois University.

We have in the United States today, for example, about 480,000 international students. It is a great thing for us, great for those students, and great for their countries. If you ask about the reverse, how many American students are studying abroad, in absolute numbers it looks pretty good. But when you talk about percentages, as far as I can determine, the only country that has a lower percentage of its higher education students studying abroad is North Korea. Not very good company for the United States. I do not know what you do on this campus, Chancellor and members of the faculty here. I do not know what we do on all of the other California and Illinois campuses. But somehow we have to do better.

It is tied in with our inattention to foreign languages. We are the only nation in the world where you can go through grade school, high school, college, get a Ph.D. and never have a year of a foreign language. I think we are the only nation in the world where you can go through elementary school and not study a foreign language. I know we are the nation in the world where if you take two years of French, you will say "I have studied French."

Why is that significant? When I went to school and forgive me, Jack, when you went to school, when we studied a foreign language these people could have lived on Mars. We did not learn anything about a culture. It is different today to the credit of foreign language teachers. A very interesting study was done in Tel Aviv. A research project was done for first, second and third grade Jewish students in Tel Aviv. One group was offered the chance to study Arabic and the other group was not. Then at the end of three years they were tested. The young people who had studied Arabic were much more open to having a positive relationship with the Palestinians and the other Israeli-Arab neighbors than those who had not studied Arabic.

If in this community and other communities around this nation we exposed ourselves to another language and another culture, we would not see Congress being so short-sided. I do not think we would see administrations doing so little.

And in so many areas we need the long-term look. I met this afternoon with the Orange County Water District people and some of the Mayors and public officials around here. Hardly known to most Americans, including American leaders, is that we are headed toward a calamity in water if we do not do something. In California, you are a little more aware of this. In the United States as a whole, we have 4 percent of the world's population and 8 percent of the world's fresh water. But the Metropolitan Water District of Southern California has said that for the 16 million people they will serve by the year 2010, which is not far off, they will be able to meet only 43 percent of the water needs of this area from current resources. That is serious.

Then take a look at the world situation. In the next 40 to 90 years we are going to come close to doubling the world's population, depending on whose statistics you believe. All our water supply is constant. Nations go to war over oil, but there are substitutes for oil. There is no substitute for water. The United States is not only the great economic and military power, we are the number one research power in the world. We are going to have to provide some leadership.

The World Bank says 300 million people now live in areas of serious to severe water problems. Today, 300 million scattered among 6 billion is not a volatile situation. Twenty to twenty-five years from now, it will be 3 billion people living in areas of serious to severe water shortages. That is volatile.

Where are the academicians who should be prodding public officials to make this a big issue? We need to pay attention to it, for humanitarian reasons alone. UNICEF says 9,500 children die each day because of impure water. These are easily prevented deaths. We were all shaken up at the tragedy in Littleton properly shaken up but six hundred and thirty times as many children die each day from impure water, and we hardly pay attention to it. We have to be looking at that.

And finally, a comment on our domestic situation. I was recently asked to speak at Bloomsberg State University in Pennsylvania. At the dedication of the library there they asked me to speak about the differences between Lincoln's time and our time. There are many differences: automobiles, radio, television and computers, etcetera. But there is one interesting difference. In Lincoln's time, the great military power was England. The great economic power was England. Among the semi-industrial nations, the nation that had the worst slums was England. We look back and say "How could this rich and powerful country have tolerated that?"

Today, the great military power in the world is the United States. The great economic power is the United States. Among the industrial nations, the nation that has, by far, the highest percentage of its children living in poverty is the United States of America. Fifty years from now, or a hundred years from now, people are going to look back and ask, "How could this rich and wealthy nation have tolerated that?"

How does the Academy get involved? I have some ideas, you have some ideas. But the answer cannot be indifference. I have even thought one of the great things would be if in every university in this nation, all faculty members and administration members lost their health insurance. All of a sudden we would have faculty members and university administrators concerned about the 44 million Americans that do not have any health insurance. But now, we hardly pay attention to that.

Bill Clinton, in one of his State of the Union addresses said, "This is the end of the era of big government." My friends, I do not think the question is whether government is big or small, the question is whether it is good, and whether it is responding to the needs that we have. If we are not paying attention to poverty, not paying attention to health care, not paying to other things, something is wrong.

One more illustration is our prisons. If you want to get rid of big government, I have a good project for you: Reduce the number of Americans in our prisons. We have roughly 618 per 100,000 in our prisons. Russia is second, although statistics from Russia are a little squishy these days. South Africa is third at 311. Venezuela is fourth at 157. Canada has 109. Mexico has 57. There ought to be a better way of handling these things. I asked a U.S. Attorney not long ago how many of his problems have to deal with poverty. Off the top of his head he said eighty percent. That is not a scientific figure, but clearly it is a big part of it. Eighty-two percent of the people in our prisons and jails are high school dropouts. You should not have to be an Einstein to figure out that if we put a little more money into education, we would not have to put so much money into prisons.

I got into a debate which I lost with my distinguished colleague from North Carolina, Senator Jesse Helms, in which we knocked out Pell grants and other forms of federal education assistance to prisoners in federal prisons or state prisons. I did not have these statistics then, but they are interesting. These are federal statistics and I would guess the state statistics are similar. Eighty-four percent of those in federal prisons who have no high school degree are going to return to prison. Fifty-one percent of those with high school diploma will return to prison. Eighteen percent of those who have some college will return to prison. What do you about that here at the University of California, Irvine? It says something about the mission that we ought to have both as public officials and academicians.

Our prisons are disproportionately housing African-Americans and Latino-Americans. Campuses are places where we can reach out, but I am concerned when I see a referendum in the State of California on affirmative action in terms of education. I am concerned by the Hopwood decision by the Fifth Appellate Court that is doing harm. In the greater Chicago area, and I assume this is true in most urban areas, the large majority of African-American high school students go to schools that are ninety percent or more black. The large majority of white students go to schools that ninety percent or more white. The university is a place where people can come together.

When I go through cafeterias on campuses, including my own at Southern Illinois University, one of the things that bothers me is that I see white students gathered together, black students gathered together, international students gathered together, Latino students gathered together. We are not using the opportunities as we should be using them. The lesson from everywhere around the globe is that we have to learn from each other and understand each other.

I headed the international team monitoring the presidential election in Croatia about a year and one-half ago. A man came up to me in Zagreb and said "We want to be part of Western Europe." I said "I want you to be part of Western Europe, but you're going to have to have free

and fair elections and get rid of your ethnic strife." "Well" he says, "the Serbs killed my brother and I'm going to get even." I said, "If you get even, then what do you think the Serbs are going to do?" I did not convince him. But this is happening all over.

I remember when Bill Clinton made his first visit to Northern Ireland. He visited a factory north of Belfast. The last paragraph of the *New York Times* article said the factory had separate entrances for Catholics and Protestants. Think how things can deteriorate. This campus is the place where we have to reach out. And our nation has to reach out.

To the extent that the future of American democracy is inclusive, to the extent that we give opportunity to everyone, we will have a democracy that is healthy.

In closing let me tell you one brief story. The Special Olympics organizes athletic events for people who are disabled. If you want a heart-warming experience, be a volunteer. The day after we had the event in Carbondale, I was driving along and had my car radio on. This was the only time in my life that I got shook up, emotionally choked up, listening to the car radio. They told about nine retarded people who were in a fifty-yard race. One of them stumbled. A girl went over and kissed the boy who stumbled and said "I hope you're all right." Then the nine of them joined arms and walked to the end of the fifty-yards together. They are supposed to be retarded, and we are supposed to be smart. But, my friends, that is what we have to do. Across the barriers of race and creed, ethnic background, sexual orientation, disability and nationality, we have to reach out. That really can make for a healthy world and a healthy democracy. I hope we all will move in that direction.
