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April 14, 2022

The Economics of Flourishing: A Pragmatic Approach to the Crisis of the American Middle-Class

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## Abstract

### The Economics of Flourishing: A Pragmatic Approach to the Crisis of the American Middle-Class

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In this thesis, I argue that the American middle-classes' ability to flourish is being actively hindered by contemporary economic conditions with resulting socioeconomic, political, and relational consequences. Section I of my thesis sheds light on I) why we should care about the concept of human flourishing, II) the historical relationship between philosophy and human flourishing, and III) contemporary models of human flourishing used in the field of positive psychology. I assess the strengths and weakness of dominant models of flourishing, then offer the definition of flourishing I find most useful for this thesis: Isabel V. Sawhill's five core elements of a good-quality life. Section II of my thesis explores the relationship between capitalism, democracy, and flourishing in contemporary American middle-class life. I examine whether the American middle-class experiences each of Sawhill's five elements, ultimately concluding that this demographic is lacking in each. Section III of my thesis is devoted to exploring one potential solution that seeks to address the polarization, inequality, and lack of opportunity for the American-middle class: expanding publicly-funded media platforms.

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## **Section I: Human Flourishing**

How to gain, how to keep, how to recover happiness is in fact for most men at all times the secret motive of all they do, and of all they are willing to endure. —William James<sup>1</sup>

Section I of my thesis sheds light on I) why we should care about the concept of human flourishing, II) the historical relationship between philosophy and human flourishing, and III) contemporary models of human flourishing used in the field of positive psychology, namely the well-being theory and accompanying PERMA model introduced by Dr. Martin Seligman—the founder of positive psychology—in his 2011 book *Flourish: A Visionary New Understanding of Happiness and Well-Being*.<sup>2</sup> I identify several problems with existing accounts of human flourishing, such as a lack of conceptual clarity, insufficient attention to the pluralistic nature of human flourishing, and relational insensitivity.<sup>3</sup> My criticisms of existing accounts of human flourishing in this section are included for the purpose of explaining why I find certain accounts of flourishing more or less useful than others: I do not mean argue that one account is more or less accurate than any other, simply that some accounts are more holistically useful than others. In good pragmatic spirit, I conclude by offering an alternative definition of flourishing by Isabel V. Sawhill, which will be used consistently in the next two sections of my thesis.

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<sup>1</sup> James, William. “The Religion of Healthy-Mindedness.” *The Varieties of Religious Experience*, v. 15 (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press 1985 [1901-1902]), 71.

<sup>2</sup> Seligman, Martin. *Flourish: A Visionary New Understanding of Happiness and Well-Being*, 1st edition (New York, NY: Atria Books 2011).

<sup>3</sup> For more on relational insensitivity—a concept I discuss later in my thesis—see José Medina’s “Relational Insensitivity and the Interdependence of Flourishing and Withering,” *Philosophy and Human Flourishing*, ed. John J. Stuhr (New York: Oxford University Press, in press 2022), 14.



## I. Introduction: why flourishing matters

Today, there is an urgent need to investigate human flourishing and well-being. Everywhere people are dying from disease, addiction, suicide, and neglect. They are crying out for help to their family, friends, government, and communities in the hopes that someone—anyone—will listen to their pleas and alleviate their suffering. They want life to get better. They are praying for life to get better. They want to understand what they need to do in order to live longer, healthier, happier lives full of rich experiences and lasting relationships. Today, there are more people than ever before who want—or perhaps, *need*—to learn some basic strategies, practices, and habits which can help reduce their suffering and improve the quality of their life experience.

Unfortunately, most people don't know how to do these things instinctually. As a result, they have had to evolve coping mechanisms for dealing with the varying degrees of distress, unhappiness, and suffering they endure during their lives.<sup>4</sup> These coping mechanisms take different forms, and I'm sure some—perhaps religion, meditation, exercise—end up working well for people. However, many do not. If you go for a ten-minute walk in any major city in the United States, you'll see exactly what I mean by this. You'll see people with untreated mental illness. You'll see veterans sleeping in cardboard boxes on the street. You'll see people addicted to drugs and alcohol. You'll see human beings who are treading water, gasping for air, trying not to drown in the harsh and unforgiving conditions of contemporary life.

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<sup>4</sup> For more on what positive psychologists refer to as “evolved distress mechanisms” see Seligman & Csikszentmihalyi, “Positive Psychology: An Introduction” in *American Psychologist* (2000), v. 55, n. 1, 9-14.

So, what should be done about this? How can people lead better lives? Well, the answer to that question depends on who you ask. If you ask an addiction counselor, they will tell you that we need more funding for treatment centers. If you ask an economist, they might talk about closing the wealth gap or reducing the number of people living below the poverty line. If you ask a clinical psychologist, they might point you to the latest DSM manual and explain how mental illness and other psychiatric conditions are frequently undiagnosed and untreated. If you ask an epidemiologist, they will probably say that we need to get COVID-19 under control before thinking about any of this.

None of these answers are wrong—in the sense that each would probably aid in relieving human suffering to some degree—but notice that each of them shares an important assumption. That assumption is as follows: in order to flourish, we must first eliminate any potential barriers to flourishing. In other words, instead of championing the ways in which we can lead good lives—flourishing, happy, meaningful lives—the objective is to stop us from living miserable lives. If one pays attention to how often this assumption is made across time periods, disciplines, and cultures, a question naturally emerges: does removing the negative automatically bring about the positive? What, if any, are the prerequisites to human flourishing? Is it a matter of having certain quality, liberty, attitude or resource? Or is flourishing simply a lack of economic, social, political, and environmental stressors?

## **II. Positive Psychology & Dominant Accounts of Human Flourishing**

These types of questions led to the birth of positive psychology as a revolutionary new field of scientific inquiry. If you asked a positive psychologist this question today, they would

say that removing the negative does not always bring about the positive, and precisely because it does not do this, we need to learn additional strategies and practices to move from a life *without* the negative to life *with* the positive. Positive psychology’s mission is not to diagnose diseases or examine health abnormalities, but to identify, dissect, and optimize the multiple dimensions of human experience in order to improve our lives. This focus on the positive aspects of life makes psychology so unique as a scientific discipline and gives it the power to change the world for the better. Perhaps, one day, the evidence-based practices of positive psychology will be adopted by millions of people. Perhaps that world would have far less violence, anger, fear, hatred, racism, systemic oppression, and polarization than the one we live in right now. This is why we—why *you*—should care about positive psychology and its mission. Above all else, positive psychology seeks to improve the human experience by figuring out how best to support flourishing in individuals and in communities.

For many years, positive psychology’s foundational theory was “authentic happiness theory,” its topic was happiness measured through self-reported life satisfaction, and its end goal was to increase life satisfaction. But in 2011, the founder of positive psychology Dr. Martin Seligman wrote a book called “*Flourish: A Visionary New Understanding of Happiness and Well-Being*” in which he claims to have changed his mind “about what positive psychology is.”<sup>5</sup> He identified three inadequacies with authentic happiness theory—namely, that happiness is an overly narrow and unscientific concept, that it is usually associated with one specific kind of cheerful mood, and that it cannot be measured via self-reported life satisfaction—and proposed that positive psychology switch to using his well-being theory instead. Well-being is defined by Dr. Seligman as a “construct” made up of five measurable elements, with “the gold standard for

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<sup>5</sup> Seligman, Martin. “Preface.” *Flourish: A Visionary New Understanding of Happiness and Well-Being*, 1st edition (New York, NY: Atria Books 2011).

measuring well-being” being to measure the five elements of flourishing (PERMA). Thus, the new goal of positive psychology was “to increase flourishing.”<sup>6</sup> Dr. Seligman does not give his own definition of what flourishing is. Instead, he cites a definition from Felicia Huppert and Timothy So, two researchers from the Wellbeing Institute at the University of Cambridge. Dr. Seligman claims “their definition of flourishing is in the spirit of well-being theory: to flourish, an individual must have all three of the ‘core’ features below and three of the six ‘additional’ features.”<sup>7</sup> The table Dr. Seligman is referring to lists the three core features of flourishing as positive emotions, interest/engagement, and meaning/purpose. The six “additional” features are self-esteem, optimism, resilience, vitality, self-determination, and positive relationships.

The PERMA model accompanied Dr. Seligman’s new well-being theory. PERMA is an acronym for the five measurable elements of flourishing: positive emotion, engagement, positive relationships, meaning, and accomplishment.<sup>8</sup> Each element contributes to—but does not exhaustively define—the construct of well-being. The first two elements, positive emotion and engagement, are assessed independently from the other three elements using subjective methods, such as relying on self-reported data from surveys, interviews or first-person narratives. The third element is positive relationships, which can be studied by both subjective and objective methods in order to examine how our social interactions and relationships—or lack thereof—affect our sense of well-being. The fourth element is meaning, defined by Dr. Seligman as “belonging to and serving something that you believe is bigger than the self.” Meaning can be measured subjectively from the first-person perspective, but according to Dr. Seligman, meaning

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<sup>6</sup> Seligman, Martin. *Flourish: A Visionary New Understanding of Happiness and Well-Being*. 1st edition (New York, NY: Atria Books 2011), 13.

<sup>7</sup> Seligman, Martin. *Flourish: A Visionary New Understanding of Happiness and Well-Being*. 1st edition (New York, NY: Atria Books 2011), 13-14.

<sup>8</sup> Note that Seligman’s five measurable elements of flourishing are not the same as Huppert and So’s six “core features” of flourishing, though he uses their definition of flourishing.

can also be an objective state: “the dispassionate and more objective judgment of history, logic, and coherence can contradict a subjective judgment.”<sup>9</sup> The fifth element of the PERMA model is accomplishment—which Dr. Seligman periodically also refers to as “achievement”—which can be measured subjectively via self-reports of positive emotion and engagement during or after accomplishment and objectively by studying the correlation between accomplishment and wellbeing from a third-person perspective.

It’s worth noting that Dr. Seligman was explicitly clear as to why he wanted to phase out authentic happiness theory in positive psychology—he explains that the term “happiness” is narrow and confusing, so trying to measure and study it has not worked in his experience as a positive psychologist for the last 20-odd years—and thus, I have no qualms with the first part of his proposal to shift away from authentic happiness theory. My critique is of Dr. Seligman’s proposed well-being theory and PERMA model of flourishing.

### **III. Confusion, Communication and Conceptual Clarity in Positive Psychology**

It cannot be overstated just how dire the need for conceptual clarity is in the field of positive psychology. Let’s start with an obvious example of the problem: “*Flourish: A Visionary New Understanding of Happiness and Well-Being.*” The title of Dr. Seligman’s book already contains the three distinct concepts in positive psychology—flourishing, happiness, and well-being—that sound indistinguishable to anyone unfamiliar with positive psychology. This is already problematic, but unfortunately, the contents of the book don’t do much to clear up the confusion generated by its title. In essence, Dr. Seligman’s explanation of his well-being theory and PERMA model goes something like this: positive psychology is no longer about *happiness*,

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<sup>9</sup> Seligman, Martin. *Flourish: A Visionary New Understanding of Happiness and Well-Being*. 1st edition (New York, NY: Atria Books 2011), 17.

because *positive emotion* is not a complete picture of how someone is doing. Now, positive psychology is about *well-being*, which is a construct made up of certain measurable elements. The gold standard for measuring well-being is by measuring *flourishing*. Flourishing is measured using the *PERMA* model, which is an acronym for the five *measurable elements* of flourishing. But the definition of flourishing comes from other researchers—who have a completely different model of flourishing that measures its *six core features*—which are not the same as the five measurable elements of flourishing in the *PERMA* model.<sup>10</sup> Let's unpack exactly which parts of Dr. Seligman's explanations are unclear. First, I'm going to talk about the practical meaning of Dr. Seligman's "construct of well-being." Second, I will discuss how the *PERMA* model has resulted in confusion among positive psychologists.

So first, what exactly is the construct of well-being? When can we be said to have achieved well-being? Dr. Seligman repeatedly emphasizes that well-being is not defined exhaustively by any one of its measurable elements, but he spends more time explaining what it isn't than clarifying what it is. For example:

“Here then is well-being theory: well-being is a construct; and well-being, not happiness, is the topic of positive psychology. Well-being has five measurable elements (*PERMA*) that count toward it. No one element defines well-being, but each contributes to it. Some aspects of these five elements are measured subjectively by self-report, but other aspects are measured objectively.”<sup>11</sup>

It's difficult to tell exactly what Dr. Seligman wants the term “well-being” to denote. Note an inconsistency: here, he says that *PERMA* refers to the five measurable elements of well-being, but earlier, he claimed that “the gold standard for measuring well-being is flourishing, and that

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<sup>10</sup> Huppert, Felicia & So, Timothy. “What percentage of people in Europe are flourishing and what characterises them?” *Institute for Positive Psychology and Education*, (Cambridge, UK: University of Cambridge 2009) 1-7.

<sup>11</sup> Seligman, Martin. *Flourish: A Visionary New Understanding of Happiness and Well-Being*. 1st edition (New York, NY: Atria Books 2011), 24.

the goal of positive psychology is to increase flourishing.” Well-being and flourishing appear to be used interchangeably. Are they the same? Or is flourishing just the measurable dimension of the well-being construct? Where does well-being occur? Is it always an individual concept? Is it purely psychological? Is it physical? Is it both? The five measurable elements of flourishing in Dr. Seligman’s PERMA model also are different from the six measurable elements in the definition of flourishing he cites. Which ones are the right ones? A successful account of well-being should be able to answer these questions about its most fundamental concepts.

Second, how exactly is Dr. Seligman proposing we measure flourishing (or well-being)? It appears that since Dr. Seligman introduced the PERMA framework in 2011, positive psychologists have misinterpreted what this model is intended to measure to varying degrees. For example, in their study “A multidimensional approach to measuring well-being in students: Application of the PERMA framework,” Kern et al. claims that “Seligman recently introduced the PERMA model with five core elements of psychological well-being: positive emotions, engagement, relationships, meaning, and accomplishment.”<sup>12</sup> But in Dr. Seligman’s book *Flourish: A Visionary New Understanding of Happiness and Well-Being*, the term “psychological well-being” is never once used. There is no indication that PERMA or well-being theory denotes a merely psychological phenomenon. The word “flourishing” is also never used in relation to the PERMA model and what it measures. In another study of PERMA, “A Multi-Study Examination of Well-Being Theory in College and Community Samples,” Coffey et al. claims, “well-being theory (WBT) proposes five indicators of well-being [i.e., positive emotion, engagement, relationships, meaning, achievement (PERMA)] that are, independently,

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<sup>12</sup> Kern et al., “A multidimensional approach to measuring well-being in students: Application of the PERMA framework.” *The Journal of Positive Psychology* (2015), v. 10, n. 3, 262-271.

empirically supported predictors of flourishing.”<sup>13</sup> Now we see that some positive psychologists see PERMA as measuring “predictors” of flourishing, not flourishing itself. Again, Dr. Seligman never specifies this in his book; there is no distinction drawn between the measurable predictors of flourishing and the measurable elements of flourishing itself. Dr. Seligman has also made confusing modifications to the PERMA model since 2011. For example, in his new Certificate of Positive Psychology Course, he teaches the “PERMA-V” model, with the extra “V” standing for “vitality, or physical health.”<sup>14</sup> This is more than a little confusing: does he now consider his old PERMA model incomplete? Does flourishing include vitality or not? Whose interests did it serve to add a sixth measurable element to PERMA? It appears that most, if not all, positive psychologists still use the original PERMA model from 2011 for their research.

It is important to remember that positive psychology has also made a conscious effort to separate itself from traditional psychology so that it may continue to partner with other disciplines, adapt its methods and areas of focus to the needs of the real world, and avoid the use of confusing hyper-technical scientific jargon. When scholars from other disciplines—perhaps looking to partner with positive psychologists on an interdisciplinary project—review published research in positive psychology, it’s easy to see how they could become confused and possibly even annoyed at the sloppy use of terms. Thus, conceptual clarity is a precondition for positive psychology to be a successful and respected field in the scientific community. Science requires a consensus among researchers on terminology and consistent use of these terms so that experiments and other forms of inquiry may be replicated in the future.

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<sup>13</sup> See “About the C.A.P.P Program” at <https://theflourishingcenter.com/capp/>

<sup>14</sup> I have yet to find a study which uses Seligman’s new PERMA-V framework to measure six elements of human flourishing.



#### IV. Positive Psychology & Relational Insensitivity about Human Flourishing

America loves to talk about “the self.” The American Dream is that the self is some all-powerful agent which—if it works hard enough—can accomplish anything it wants without limitation or interference from the powers that be. This distinct brand of American individualism plagues positive psychology in general and is especially evident in Dr. Seligman’s well-being theory and PERMA model. Take, for example, his five measurable elements of flourishing: positive emotion, engagement, positive relationships, meaning, and accomplishment. Positive emotion is a first-person experience which occurs at the individual level. Engagement is a first-person experience which occurs at the individual level. Meaning is experienced from a first-person perspective and occurs at the individual level. Accomplishment refers to individual achievements and the positive emotions, engagement, and meaning they bring to that individual’s experience.

Positive relationships are the only measurable element of flourishing in the PERMA model which seems to recognize that we are irreducibly social beings whose ability to flourish doesn’t stand outside culture, time, place and environment. But these positive relationships are social in what we might call “the narrow sense” of the social. By “narrow,” what I mean here is that the primary reason positive relationships are included in Dr. Seligman’s PERMA model is to stress how relationships can aid *the individual self* in its journey towards flourishing. This is evident through Dr. Seligman’s explanation of why he chose to include positive relationships as one of the measurable elements of flourishing:

“When was the last time you laughed uproariously? The last time you felt indescribable joy? The last time you sensed meaning and purpose? The last time you felt enormously proud of an accomplishment? Even without knowing the

particulars at these high points in your life, I know their form: they took place around other people. Other people are the single best antidote to the downs of life and the single most reliable up.”<sup>15</sup>

Though “positive relationships” is a somewhat vague concept—Dr. Seligman didn’t give any criteria regarding which relationships count as “positive” ones—it sounds as though he intends positive relationships to mean *close* relationships: familial relationships, relationships with friends, relationships with romantic partners. Taken at face value and without critical reflection, there’s nothing inherently wrong with the PERMA model’s focus on close relationships—except that it doesn’t reflect real life.

A complete account of human flourishing would acknowledge that flourishing is always dependent on both the internal and external conditions of life. Flourishing is a multi-dimensional concept which cannot be winnowed down to focus only on the self. It cannot be isolated from community, government, education, religion, natural environment, geographic location, time. It cannot include positive and exclude negative relationships. In everyday life, we cannot avoid or ignore these things so that we may flourish according to our individual preferences. Dr. Seligman’s well-being theory PERMA model feels tinged with privilege and elitism: they are written for people who can flourish without accounting for race, gender, socioeconomic status, physical health, or cultural restrictions. What follows from this incomplete and overly individualistic account of flourishing is the same old American Dream, but slightly revised to appear as a new concept in positive psychology: “the notion that human flourishing and happiness are readily available to all.”<sup>16</sup>

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<sup>15</sup> Martin Seligman, *Flourish: A Visionary New Understanding of Happiness and Well-Being*, 1st edition (New York, NY: Atria Books 2011), 20.

<sup>16</sup> Becker, Dana & Marecek, Jeanne. “Dreaming the American Dream: Individualism and Positive Psychology.” *Social and Personality Psychology Compass*, (2008), v. 2, 1767.

Dr. Seligman’s PERMA model and well-being theory do not answer one of the most important questions in all positive psychology: how do we flourish without impeding or interfering with the ability of others to do the same? Human beings as a species have arguably flourished since the Industrial Revolution, but at the cost of the environment. The top 1% in America flourish at the cost of the bottom 99%. Companies like Apple, Google and Facebook flourish at the expense of their competitors. How do we account for the interpersonal and intrapersonal nature of flourishing when the PERMA model and well-being theory do not even mention the word “community”? The only social relations included in Dr. Seligman’s account of flourishing are those which the self can take advantage of as an “antidote” to protect and promote flourishing at the individual level. Not only does this perpetuate the vicious cycle of American individualism, it sends a far worse message: that people are autonomous entities who will be happier if they turn their focus inward and interact with others only as it benefits their personal well-being. In this sense, positive psychology is frequently plagued by what Jose Medina calls “relational insensitivity.”

“As the insensitivity rooted in the alienated familiar shows perspicuously, our *relational insensitivity*—i.e. our inability to relate properly to the experiences, meanings and truths of others—is intimately related to how we relate to our own experiences, meanings and truths. Undoing our relational insensitivity and the affective disconnect between our perspective and those of others involves more than simply reconsidering facts about these others; it involves a deep interrogation of how our life experiences relate (or fail to relate) to theirs, a critical inspection of our own perspective—as it relates (or fails to relate) to that of others—and its habits and defense mechanisms.”<sup>17</sup>

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<sup>17</sup> Medina, José. “Relational Insensitivity and the Interdependence of Flourishing and Withering.” *Philosophy and Human Flourishing*, ed. John J. Stuhr (New York: Oxford University Press, in press 2022), 14.

Dr. Seligman’s PERMA model and well-being theory ignore most of our everyday relations within our communities and physical environments, but worse yet, they encourage us to ignore them too. As Medina notes, relational insensitivity is something we must actively fight against to close the gap between our “experiences, meanings, and truths” and those of others. By championing the idea that flourishing can be achieved on an individual level, and by failing to account for the inevitable tension which arises between each individual as they strive to flourish, the PERMA model and well-being theory keep relational insensitivity and hyper-individualism intact. And so long as positive psychology does not produce a more inclusive model of flourishing—one which accounts for interpersonal and intrapersonal relations, environmental conditions, socioeconomic statuses, races, religions, cultures, genders, countries, and any other factors which could potentially affect one’s capacity to flourish—it will remain saturated with what William James called “A Certain Blindness in Human Beings.”

“I tried to make you feel how soaked and shot-through life is with values and meanings which we fail to realize because of our external and insensible point of view. The meanings are there for the others, but they are not there for us. There lies more than a mere interest of curious speculation in understanding this. It has the most tremendous practical importance. I wish that I could convince you of it as I feel it myself. It is the basis of all our tolerance, social, religious, and political. The forgetting of it lies at the root of every stupid and sanguinary mistake that rulers over subject-peoples make.”<sup>18</sup>

What this translates to for positive psychologists is that a conscious and continuous effort must be made to radically pluralize their account of flourishing so that it can be useful for all people, not just those who can simply ask “do I want to flourish?” and then do so without regard for external conditions of any kind. Thus, when I consider the following question: are well-being

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<sup>18</sup> James, William. “On A Certain Blindness in Human Beings.” *Talks to Teachers on Psychology and to Students on Some of Life’s Ideals*, vol. 12 (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press 1983 [1899]).

theory and the PERMA model are truly the clearest, most inclusive account of flourishing possible to use for the purposes of this thesis? The answer is, not really.

As I have stressed repeatedly, positive psychology has the power to do some real good for the world and the people living in it, but that power comes with responsibility. Because its mission is to improve the lives of *all* people, positive psychology must take a radically pluralistic and inclusive approach in its research on human flourishing. Its researchers must take special pains to be clear and consistent when communicating their findings to relevant audiences (which, incidentally, is everyone that wants to live a better life). People will not use the strategies or practices developed by positive psychology if they can't make heads or tails of its most basic concepts. As is the case with every other scientific field, positive psychology should be able to self-correct the issues brought to its attention via constructive criticism—whether that criticism comes from someone within their field or outside of it—such as the ones brought to its attention in my thesis.

To recap: I have demonstrated that there are problems with Dr. Seligman's well-being theory and PERMA model. Serious problems. The PERMA model is not a complete, inclusive, holistic account of flourishing. Turning again to William James, consider whether well-being theory and the PERMA model accounts for our human blindness and relational insensitivity:

“The first thing to learn in intercourse with others is non-interference with their own peculiar ways of being happy, provided those ways do not assume to interfere by violence with ours. No one has insight into all the ideals. No one should presume to judge them off-hand. The pretension to dogmatize about them in each other is

the root of most human injustices and cruelties, and the trait in human character most likely to make the angels weep.”<sup>19</sup>

The upshot of this is that positive psychology needs a new account of flourishing altogether. Period. Dr. Seligman’s theory of well-being and PERMA model do not account for the tensions produced by flourishing of some human beings at the expense of others in the real world. They are not clear in theory or in practice. They do not actively fight the blindness of human beings to the needs, wants, and experiences of each other. And most importantly, they are so vague that they are frequently misunderstood even by researchers within the field. Since the most well-qualified experts in positive psychology cannot manage a clear understanding of Dr. Seligman’s well-being theory and PERMA model, for the purposes of this thesis, I have decided not to expend any energy trying to do so.

## **V. Pragmatism about Flourishing: towards conceptual clarity and pluralism**

The problems I have identified with positive psychology’s dominant account of flourishing plague many of the accounts given by self-help books, authors, researchers, and scientific organizations outside the field. However, there are a few accounts of flourishing which are useful for the purposes of this thesis within a subdiscipline of philosophy called pragmatism. As it turns out, pragmatism has a lot to offer positive psychology—after all, philosophy and psychology were nearly identical disciplines until the 21st century.

The intimacy between philosophy and psychology is reflected beautifully in the works of William James, who many consider to be the original founder of positive psychology. James’

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<sup>19</sup> James, William. “The Gospel of Relaxation.” *Talks to Teachers on Psychology and to Students on Some of Life's Ideals*, vol. 12 (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press 1983 [1899]), 150.

pragmatic method of inquiry stresses conceptual clarification—making terms and ideas clear in theory and in practice—as the first step in formulating a theory or disputing the meaning of an idea. So, for example, when one positive psychologist thinks that Dr. Seligman’s PERMA model is used to study “psychological well-being,” another thinks it measures “independent predictive elements of flourishing,” and then Dr. Seligman begins teaching PERMA-V instead of PERMA, pragmatism can help. It can say “hey, there is some disagreement and misunderstandings regarding what flourishing means to those who want to study it. Let’s clear that up before doing anything else.”

Returning to William James, I want to begin by looking at his account of flourishing as habit. To James, flourishing is not about an individual action, feeling, or state of being. Flourishing is reflected in those unconscious, daily processes which seem to make up the more mundane parts of our lives. James believes we are simply “walking bundles of habits,” and that most of our actions are unconsciously performed in the routine manner to which we have become accustomed.<sup>20</sup> Thus, determine which habits are conducive to flourishing, adopt them, and you can flourish in everyday life. Education is critical as a habit-forming institution according to James:

“The great thing, then, in all education, is to make our nervous system our ally instead of our enemy. It is to fund and capitalize our acquisitions, and live at ease upon the interest of the fund. For this we must make automatic and habitual, as early as possible, as many useful actions as we can, and guard against the growing into ways that are likely to be disadvantageous to us, as we should guard against the plague. The more of the details of our daily life we can hand over to the effortless custody of automatism, the more our higher powers of mind will be set

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<sup>20</sup> William James, “Habit” in *Principles of Psychology*, vol. 12 (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press 1983), 130.

free for their own proper work. There is no more miserable human being than one in whom nothing is habitual but indecision, and for whom the lighting of every cigar, the drinking of every cup, the time of rising and going to bed every day, and the beginning of every bit of work, are subjects of express volitional deliberation.”<sup>21</sup>

In other words, James believes flourishing can be achieved via the formation of useful, flexible, intelligent habits. These habits are in their most critical period of formation when we are young, but they have the potential to change throughout the course of our lives. Making the leap from a miserable life to a happy, fulfilling, rich one is a matter of changing the habits which led one to that state of misery in the first place. Unfortunately, changing one’s habits is incredibly difficult: especially if you are devoid of time, money, and resources. Habits tend to become deeply engrained because they are shaped by our beliefs about the world, which themselves are determined by the environment in which we live, work, play and interact with others. This phenomenon explains quite a bit about the American middle-class, many of whom want America to “become great again” because the habits they developed over the past 100 years are no longer working for them in 2021. Jobs are moving overseas, mines are shutting down left and right, and opportunities for advancement are indeed quite limited for much of the American middle class. This has created a cycle of economic hardship which has made it difficult for them to flourish. Habits are socially, politically, and environmentally determined, but for the purposes of this thesis I will be focusing on the economic components of habit. I must wonder: how does simply telling people whose economic options are so restricted to just “change their habits” get us anywhere at all?

Thus, I want to turn next to the five-dimensional account of flourishing modeled by John J. Stuhr. After identifying the ten pitfalls in the way positive psychology tends to conceptualize,

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<sup>21</sup> Ibid, 126.



define, and study flourishing, Stuhr offers positive psychology the research agenda it needs. He proposes that flourishing be conceptualized along five axes—epistemic methodology, semiotic content, normative judgment, temporal duration, and scope of target population—depending on the time, place, purpose, people, and context it is situated in.<sup>22</sup> Taking seriously Stuhr’s research agenda would be much more difficult than sticking with James’ flourishing as habit or Dr. Seligman’s PERMA model, I’m afraid. It would mean asking lots of questions: remember that the practical meaning of each axis must be made clear in any given context. For Stuhr, flourishing is not and will never be a five-letter acronym, a measure of strictly psychological well-being, or a method to measure some other construct. This is a mammoth task, and one I do not have the ability to take up in this thesis, for I am looking specifically at how economic conditions, agents, and institutions affect human flourishing for the American middle class. Thus, I want to turn now to the most relevant account of flourishing to this specific aim: that which is introduced by Isabel V. Sawhill in her latest book, *A New Contract with the Middle Class*. Sawhill, like Stuhr, uses five elements to determine flourishing. Each is measurable, distinct, and most importantly, each element can be applied to an individual, a group, or perhaps an economic class, such as the American middle-class. The five elements which I will investigate in the following sections are as follows: money, time, relationships, health, and respect.<sup>23</sup>

This section of my thesis was intended to preface the rest of my argument regarding the American middle-classes’ ability—or rather, inability—to flourish given contemporary economic conditions. I want to be clear again that I did not intend to argue for one account of flourishing over another, nor did I intend to suggest that the entirety of my thesis is going to be

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<sup>22</sup> Stuhr, John J. “Flourishing: Toward Clearer Ideas and Habits of Genius.” *Philosophy and Human Flourishing*, ed. Stuhr (New York: Oxford University Press, in press 2022), 24-33.

<sup>23</sup> Sawhill, Isabel V., and Reeves, Richard V., “Introduction.” *A New Contract with the Middle Class*. (Washington, DC: Brookings Institution Press 2020), 9-10.

devoted to defining human flourishing. That is another can of worms which I do not wish to open for the purposes of this thesis. Rather, I wanted to begin by being very clear as to which definition of flourishing I am choosing to utilize, and what purpose I am utilizing it for. So, in the next two sections, I ask the reader of this thesis to keep in mind these five elements of well-being enumerated by Sawhill—money, time, health, relationships, and respect—when evaluating the American middle-classes’ ability to flourish.

## **Section II: Democracy, Capitalism, & The Economics of Flourishing in America**

The U.S. is a middle-class nation. Since our nation’s founding, the American Dream has always been based on an implicit understanding—a contract, if you will—between individuals willing to work and contribute, and a society willing to support those in need and break down the barriers in front of them. —Isabel V. Sawhill<sup>24</sup>

Section II of my thesis explores the relationship between capitalism, democracy, and flourishing in contemporary American middle-class life. I begin the section by defining what I mean when I refer to the American “middle-class.” Next, drawing on the perspectives and research of two authors, Isabel V. Sawhill of the Brookings Institute for Economic Studies and American philosopher John Dewey, I argue that American capitalism is eroding the middle classes’ ability to flourish in two distinct but irreducibly interrelated ways, as follows; first, American capitalism prohibits its middle class from realizing Sawhill’s 5 core elements of a good life; and second, our existing free-market policies fail to champion, and may even be eroding, what John Dewey referred to as “democracy as a way of life.”

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<sup>24</sup> Ibid, 1.

## I. Defining the American Middle Class: who are they?

I'd like to be clear about what I mean when I make empirical or descriptive claims about the "American middle class." This term is tricky to define, since it may be considered both an objective economic category with certain parameters for who qualifies as "middle class" --i.e. income, tax bracket--but also a matter of self-described economic standing. For example, a report by the Brookings Institution discovered that while most Americans say they belong to the middle class, there is nothing near a universal consensus among economists about what it means to be "middle class" in America.<sup>25</sup> No definition is necessarily right or wrong, but some definitions contradict one another, and if all are considered accurate, "nearly nine out of ten U.S. households" are middle class.<sup>26</sup> For the purposes of my thesis, it is impractical to try to cover such a wide economic range of our population. The definition I use is thus that which is most useful for the question I am trying to answer; it should be noted that I'm not arguing for one definition over another, or even claiming that the definition I use is more accurate than any other. But pragmatically, the instrumental and operational value of defining the American middle class in my thesis is that it narrows the scope of my argument and allows for more precision when discussing the economic challenges this group faces, many of which prevent them from flourishing. However, as I mentioned earlier, the boundaries of what constitutes being "middle class" go beyond mere economic parameters. Thus, I have decided to use a set of three

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<sup>25</sup> Reeves, Richard V., et al. "Defining the Middle-Class: Cash, Credentials, or Culture?" *Brookings Institution*, (Brookings Future of the Middle-Class Initiative: May 2018), <https://www.brookings.edu/research/defining-the-middle-class-cash-credentials-or-culture/>.

<sup>26</sup> Reeves, Richard V., et al. "A Dozen Ways to Be Middle Class." *Brookings Institution*, (Brookings Middle Class Memos: May 2018), <https://www.brookings.edu/interactives/a-dozen-ways-to-be-middle-class/>.

guidelines created by the Brookings Institution to define the American middle class: cash, credentials, and culture.

“Cash” is the most objective component of this definition, which I will use to refer to both household income level and overall wealth (including assets, savings, and debt). In modern America, the median household income is \$67,521; this average represents the reported incomes of married-couple, single-parent, and non-family households alike.<sup>27</sup> It’s important to note that I’m focusing specifically on the middle--or “working class”--Americans in my argument: those who are not necessarily wealthy or thriving financially but are not living below the poverty line either. What constitutes being in “poverty” is another subject up for debate, but for the purpose of simplicity and since this thesis does not deal directly with poverty-related issues, I will simply define poverty according to the U.S. Census Bureau’s method of calculation: the income threshold based on the number of related children and overall size of family unit. For example, a family of four with two related children has an income threshold of \$26,246.<sup>28</sup> Thus, the general economic parameter I want to use to define “middle-class” is a household income level of between \$20,000-\$50,000 and \$70,000-\$100,000 annually, with the \$30,000 variable accounting for household size, since a 1 or 2-person household has a lower income threshold to be considered middle-class than a 4 or 5-person household. My selected range of annual household income will perhaps be considered too narrow by some people, and perhaps not broad enough by others. But again, my mission here is not to argue for one definition of middle-class that is more or less correct than any other; it is to look at the economic conditions of a particular demographic group and how those conditions impact their ability to flourish. Household income

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<sup>27</sup> “Income and Poverty in the United States: 2020.” *Census.gov* (US Department of Commerce: Sept. 2021), 1-4. <https://www.census.gov/library/publications/2021/demo/p60-273.html>.

<sup>28</sup> *Ibid*, 52 (see “Appendix B”).

serves merely as one kind of metric, and the range given will constitute the “cash” prong in my three-prong definition of “middle class.”

The second factor to consider when clarifying who the term “middle class” applies to in America today is “credentials.” Credentials can refer to anything one might put on a résumé--work experience, education level, special skills and training--or the ability to access these things.<sup>29</sup> For example, if an elementary school-aged child does not yet have a college degree, it still matters whether he or she has the realistic chance of obtaining one when considering what economic class he or she belongs to. Economic mobility is determined by one’s credentials, which are of course irreducibly linked to the “cash” component of this definition. I should note that although work experience and promotions bring opportunity for advancement, in contemporary America, credentials mean one’s education level. Most people who own a business in America today have at least a 4-year college degree.<sup>30</sup> Today, the differences between someone who never finished high school and someone with a bachelor’s degree are staggering: their average annual income is roughly \$29,000 and \$107,000, respectively.<sup>31</sup> Moreover, credentials are tied to cash because most education beyond the high-school level is obtainable only if one can pay an astronomical amount of money upfront, or willing to take on hundreds of thousands of dollars in debt. In 2022, the average total cost of attending a 4-year in-state college

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<sup>29</sup> For more specifics on “credentials,” see Reeves, Richard V., et al. “Defining the Middle-Class: Cash, Credentials, or Culture?” *Brookings Institution*, (Brookings Future of the Middle-Class Initiative: May 2018), <https://www.brookings.edu/research/defining-the-middle-class-cash-credentials-or-culture/>.

<sup>30</sup> “Most Business Owners Have a Bachelor's Degree.” *census.gov*. (US Census Bureau, Annual Business Survey: August 2021). <https://www.census.gov/library/visualizations/2021/comm/most-business-owners-have-a-bachelors-degree.html>

<sup>31</sup> “Income and Poverty in the United States: 2020.” *census.gov*. (US Department of Commerce: Sept. 2021), 3. <https://www.census.gov/library/publications/2021/demo/p60-273.html>.

was around \$102,000, while out-of-state student tuition was approximately \$172,000 total.<sup>32</sup> But there are more private than public universities in the United States today, and the average cost of these institutions is about \$213,000 over 4 years.<sup>33</sup> Of course, there is the less expensive option of 2-year community and junior colleges, which still come in around \$32,000 total.<sup>34</sup> Education is thus both a barrier and an opportunity for economic advancement, making it an especially relevant factor when considering someone or some group’s holistic “credentials.” Since fewer than 1 in 3 Americans believe a college degree is needed to join or remain in the economic middle class, I will follow suit and agree that college degrees are often sufficient--but not necessary--for someone to achieve at least a middle-class economic status in America today. Most Americans have not completed any education above a high school diploma (55%), and thus that much of the middle class--perhaps half or more—so for the purposes of my argument, we can assume that most middle-class Americans have not finished college.<sup>35</sup>

Other credentials refer to those obtained via occupational or social status, such as one’s position within a company--generally lower-level equates to lower pay--or the prestige of their position. High-paying positions, which often require post-secondary education, are also associated with increased social prestige; for example, a doctor enjoys more prestige than a plumber. This portion of my definition of the American middle class reflects a longstanding, widely held sociological view that credentials such as occupations are “the most powerful single

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<sup>32</sup> Moody, Josh. “How Many Universities Are in the U.S. and Why That Number is Changing.” *usnews.com*. (US News & World Report: April 2021). <https://www.usnews.com/education/best-colleges/articles/how-many-universities-are-in-the-us-and-why-that-number-is-changing>.

<sup>33</sup> Hanson, Melanie. “Average Cost of College [2022]: Yearly Tuition + Expenses.” *educationdata.org*. (Education Data Initiative: March 2022). <https://educationdata.org/average-cost-of-college>.

<sup>34</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>35</sup> “Educational Attainment in the United States: 2019.” *census.gov*. (US Census Bureau: March 2020). <https://www.census.gov/content/census/en/data/tables/2019/demo/educational-attainment/cps-detailed-tables.html>.

indicator of levels of material reward, social standing and life chances.”<sup>36</sup> After all, our credentials are on display for the world: whether on LinkedIn or our résumés. Rarely are our incomes made publicly available, or even discussed in a public setting. The way we feel about ourselves is largely a reflection of how we are received by others around us, and for the American middle class, credentials and status will play a significant role in determining overall economic well-being.

The third and final component I will consider when defining who the American middle class consists of is “culture.” Culture encompasses a variety of subjective and objective factors: self-perception and temperament, attitude towards life and work, societal and local norms, the time and geographic location one lives in, as well as personal and professional aspirations are all included in my use of the term “culture.” Meliorism--believing that one’s life and the world can be improved via human action--plays a strong role in culture, as does attitude towards one’s country. To make clear what I mean by “culture,” you can think about it in the form of questions. To everyone who has ever resided in The United States of America; what comes to mind when you think about this country? Which ideas, experiences, historical events, and moral values are called forth? Do you see a bald eagle flying over an American flag as it waves triumphantly in the wind? Do you feel the excitement of Super Bowl Sunday? To you, is America the land of freedom and equal opportunity? Or systematic oppression and economic inequality? Do you think about kids in cages and mass shootings? Do you see Fox News or CNN? Does your day-to-day life feel stable and secure? Or is it tinged with cultural, economic, and political anxiety? What, if anything, has America done for you? For most people who have ever lived in America,

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<sup>36</sup> Connelly, Roxanne, Vernon Gayle, and Paul S. Lambert. “A Review of Occupation-Based Social Classifications for Social Survey Research.” *Methodological Innovations* 9. (SAGE Journals Publishing: January 2016). <https://doi.org/10.1177/2059799116638003>.



the answers to these questions will depend upon several factors: geographic location, race, gender, socioeconomic status, level of education, preferred media sources, friends, relatives, and so on. The way they feel towards their country will be determined by their perception of the status quo in America--politically, economically, and culturally--and whether that status quo actually works for them in experience. Some people will answer that they feel antagonistic towards America, others will announce that they're proud to live here. The way people answer these questions reflects the cultural component of my definition of the American middle class.

When we define the American middle class along these three axes--cash, credentials, and culture--we see that the status quo is not working for most people living in America, most of whom belong to the middle-class. The existence of economic inequality is a fact. Polarization is worse than ever. Media bias is unavoidable. Public belief in our democratic process, and in American democracy itself, is arguably on the decline. But it is important to understand that all these problems are not occurring in isolation; they are deeply connected by virtue of two systems which were supposed to go hand-in-hand to make America the freest, richest, most opportunistic country in the world. Those systems are capitalism and democracy, and I will turn next to the relevance of the relationship between these systems to the American middle classes' ability to flourish.

## **II. Capitalism & Democracy in Contemporary American Life**

To understand the challenges--economic or otherwise--facing America's middle class, we must first understand the relationship between capitalism and democracy, and the effects of this relationship on various aspects of contemporary American life. I begin this part of my argument

by demonstrating why capitalism is eroding democracy as a way of life in America. Then, I explain how the friction between these two systems directly impacts the American middle classes' ability to flourish in accordance with Isabel V. Sawhill's 5 core elements of a good life.

For reference, there are two main reasons why I chose to include works by Dewey and Sawhill in this section. First, both authors give compelling accounts of what it means to live in society whose political and economic systems are not only highly intertwined, but often contradictory in terms of the values they champion. Second, Dewey identified and wrote about the growing tension between capitalism and democracy as a philosopher roughly 100 years before Sawhill wrote about the same issue as an economic and policy researcher. But although Dewey and Sawhill lived in vastly different time periods, held different careers, and had access to varying levels of information, the call to action they present to modern-day America is strikingly similar. I employ Dewey and Sawhill as my guides in approaching the massive topic covered in this short section of my thesis, which examines the consequences of capitalism on two institutions fundamental to our American democracy: our government and our systems of inquiry and communication, or "media." Of course, this is not an all-encompassing account of how capitalism interacts with our democratic institutions. But for the purposes of this section being concise and each point it makes having adequate support, the effects of capitalism on our democratic government and systems of media will take center stage.

The next several pages are devoted to exploring whether modern-day America meets Dewey's three conditions for democracy as a way of life, examining what role capitalism plays in our ability or inability to achieve that ideal, and whether the relationship between capitalism and democracy impacts the American middle classes' ability to flourish (pursuant to Sawhill's 5 core elements of a good quality life: money, time, relationships, health, and respect). But before I

proceed with the main argument of Section II, I would like to define the terms “capitalism,” “democracy,” and “American middle class” as I refer to them throughout the rest of my thesis.

Let us begin with capitalism. It is important to understand that the capitalism I am referring to here is distinctly American; like Dewey and Sawhill, I see American capitalism as much more than a certain kind of free-market economic system. American capitalism is not like capitalism anywhere else in the world--rather, it is what Sawhill described as “a mindset that has treated markets as the ultimate arbiter of human worth” in her 2019 essay *Capitalism and the Future of Democracy*.<sup>37</sup> The capitalism I am talking about is like the mindset Sawhill described in 2019, but it’s also like the American cultural characteristic described by John Dewey in his 1930 book *Individualism: Old and New*. Dewey’s book--written just a year after the Great Depression began--pays careful attention to the same problematic “mindset” that Sawhill sees in American capitalism today. But Dewey described it as “the pecuniary culture characteristic of our civilization,” a characteristic that emerged as American democratic institutions became increasingly susceptible to the monetary forces and individualistic principles of post-industrialization capitalism.<sup>38</sup> “Capitalism” in my thesis is all of these things: it is the designated word used to signify a pecuniary culture characteristic, a mindset, a distinctly American dependence on private financial gain to stay alive as individuals, to stay in business as corporations, and to get elected as politicians. It trickles down into every nook and cranny of American life.

The other term that needs to be made clear is “democracy.” The meaning of democracy as I refer to it here is once again more than just a name for a certain governmental structure;

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<sup>37</sup> Sawhill, Isabel V. “Capitalism and the Future of Democracy.” *Brookings Institution Press*. (Economic Studies at Brookings: July 2019), 1. [https://www.brookings.edu/wp-content/uploads/2019/07/Sawhill\\_Capitalism-and-the-Future-of-Democracy-.pdf](https://www.brookings.edu/wp-content/uploads/2019/07/Sawhill_Capitalism-and-the-Future-of-Democracy-.pdf)

<sup>38</sup> Dewey, John. *Individualism: Old and New*. (United Kingdom: Minton, Balch, 1930), 9.

instead, it comes from John Dewey's 1927 book *The Public and Its Problems*. Here, Dewey defines democracy not just as a democratic government but as "an ideal in the only intelligible sense of an ideal: namely, the tendency and movement of something which exists carried to its final limit, viewed as completed, perfected."<sup>39</sup> When that ideal is realized, democracy is a way of life for its people; "from the standpoint of the individual, it consists in having a responsible share according to capacity in forming and directing the activities of the groups to which one belongs and in participating according to need in the values which the groups sustain. From the standpoint of the groups, it demands liberation of the potentialities of members of a group in harmony with the interests and goods which are common."<sup>40</sup> Dewey is careful here to point out that these groups must also be able to live harmoniously with one another, as most individuals are members of several groups and should not have to compromise membership in one group to gain or retain it in another. But democracy is not just mechanical systems of human interaction. Dewey's ideal democracy--like all ideals--is never finished or perfected, but actively and consistently sought by those who believe we can get closer to realizing it.

Dewey argues that three conditions must be met before democracy as a way of life can occur. First, on the most basic level, democracy requires a democratic government. The structures and institutions which constitute a democratic government are, of course, fundamental to the meaning of democracy; however, as Dewey wrote, "they are not the whole of the democratic idea, but they express it in its political phase."<sup>41</sup> Thus, Dewey's second condition for democracy is continuous, free inquiry into public issues such that the democracies' citizens are aware of the contemporary conditions which affect their lives and their community. Finally, and

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<sup>39</sup> Dewey, John. *The Public and Its Problems: An Essay in Political Inquiry*. (Greece: Ohio University Press 2016), 505.

<sup>40</sup> *Ibid*, 504-505.

<sup>41</sup> *Ibid*, 504.

above all, Dewey's democracy requires communication, not just of truth, but of meaning and significance among and between its citizens. Dewey draws a distinction between human association and organized activity, which "is physical and organic," and "community life," which "is moral, that is emotionally, intellectually, consciously sustained."<sup>42</sup> Communication is how Dewey believes we can sustain moral community life, but without it, we continue to operate in a mechanical system of human interaction.

To answer these questions, we must examine each of Dewey's three conditions for democracy as a way of life, then decide whether they are true for American democracy. I want to start at Dewey's first and simplest condition for democracy to exist in its purely political phase: the existence of a democratic government. Dewey's democratic government requires "general suffrage, frequent elections of officials and majority rule are sufficient to ensure the responsibility of elected rulers to the desires and interests of the public."<sup>43</sup> So, by this definition, do we have a democratic government in America? We arguably do have general suffrage. In America, if you are a mentally competent person over 18 years old who hasn't been convicted of a felony, you can usually vote. We also elect our candidates with relative frequency; every four years we can elect a new president and vice president, a third of the Senate, and the entire House of Representatives. In my experience, canvassing for more than one political candidate, holding elections more frequently than we already do would be exhausting and unnecessary. However, I would argue that America right now is not ruled by the majority. Rather, our political systems are controlled by those who control much of the wealth and resources in America, people whose political interests often oppose most Americans' political interests. If this is the case, what follows is that we don't have a government which is responsive to the will of the people, we

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<sup>42</sup> Ibid, 506.

<sup>43</sup> Ibid, 508.

have a government that is responsive to the will of the economic elite: and thus, Dewey's first condition for democracy as a way of life is not fulfilled.

Isabel Sawhill's *Capitalism and the Future of Democracy* offers helpful yet depressing insights to this end. She tackles the common capitalist defense to this argument, which is that the free-market model does an excellent job of allocating resources but it's still the government's job to step in when needed to minimize economic inequality, prevent monopolies from forming, and ensure equal distribution of other resources amongst its citizens. There is nothing fundamentally wrong with this argument, Sawhill writes, "except that it doesn't exist in the real world."<sup>44</sup> The capitalist narrative here is not based on lived experience or experimental social inquiry; in practice, the US government simply has not done enough to control the grave socioeconomic inequality being produced by capitalism. There is also plenty of evidence which demonstrates how capitalism perpetuates the cycle of inequality it creates, like the 2014 study by Princeton University Professors Martin Gilens and Benjamin Page cited in Sawhill's essay, which demonstrates the outsized influence of wealth in elections and political decision-making. In this study, "Testing Theories of American Politics: Elites, Interest Groups, and Average Citizens," Gilens and Page perform a multivariate statistical analysis on nearly 1800 US policy issues to see whose interests win out most consistently: most American voters or the economic elite (corporations, organized interest groups). Here is what they found; "in the United States, our findings indicate, the majority does not rule – at least not in the causal sense of determining policy outcomes. When most citizens disagree with economic elites or with organized interests, they generally lose. Moreover, because of status quo bias built into the U.S. political system,

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<sup>44</sup> Sawhill, Isabel V. "Capitalism and the Future of Democracy." *Brookings Institution Press*, (Economic Studies at Brookings: July 2019), 9. [https://www.brookings.edu/wp-content/uploads/2019/07/Sawhill\\_Capitalism-and-the-Future-of-Democracy-pdf](https://www.brookings.edu/wp-content/uploads/2019/07/Sawhill_Capitalism-and-the-Future-of-Democracy-pdf)

even when fairly large majorities of Americans favor policy change, they generally do not get it.”<sup>45</sup> While she does not cite the specific legislation that Gilens and Page examined in their study, Sawhill identifies one example of a policy issue that she watched play out in the favor of the economic elite despite strong public opposition. Over the past 25 years, many Americans have wanted to tax corporations at a higher rate; but “the tax law of 2017 took the country in just the opposite direction.”<sup>46</sup> Could the public simply be more fiscally conservative than the polls show? Maybe. But based on her experience as a well-respected economist for more than 60 years--during which, I should mention, she managed more than 1/3 of the federal budget for the Clinton Administration--Sawhill thinks this is a problem with our democracy, a problem involving “the difficulty our political system has in translating public preferences into legislative form.”<sup>47</sup>

Returning to Dewey’s first condition for democracy as a way of life, we see that his criteria for what constitutes a “democratic government” is not met because capitalism in America “has led to ever-rising inequality and a government that has been captured by business interests and the wealthy.”<sup>48</sup> In other words, the majority do not and cannot overrule the interests of the economic elite when it comes to political decision-making and thus, elected officials are not responding to the desires and interests of the American public. Capitalism plays a clear role in this cycle and is exacerbating it increasing frequency and intensity over time; “the feedback loops between economic and political institutions makes the threat to democracy that much greater. More inequality leads to more capture and more capture leads to more inequality ad

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<sup>45</sup> Qtd. in Sawhill, Isabel V; “Capitalism and the Future of Democracy.” *Economic Studies at Brookings*, (Brookings Institution: July 2019), 14. [https://www.brookings.edu/wp-content/uploads/2019/07/Sawhill\\_Capitalism-and-the-Future-of-Democracy-.pdf](https://www.brookings.edu/wp-content/uploads/2019/07/Sawhill_Capitalism-and-the-Future-of-Democracy-.pdf)

<sup>46</sup> Ibid, 13.

<sup>47</sup> Ibid, 13.

<sup>48</sup> Ibid, 1.

infinitum until a crisis of some sort ends the process.”<sup>49</sup> This is only one way in which capitalism is eroding American democracy, but it is arguably the most devastating of all; for when a government is not responsive to the will of the majority and is listening instead to the interests of economic elites, it is not by definition a democracy anymore. It is a plutocracy.

I would like to talk next about the second and third conditions for Dewey’s democracy as a way of life: free public inquiry and meaningful communication. These two conditions will be discussed at the same time because they go hand-in-hand with one another. Without inquiry, there is nothing meaningful to communicate, and without systems of communication in place, the results of inquiry are useless to the public. Together, they constitute the public’s stance of contemporary issues; “communication of the results of social inquiry is the same thing as the formation of public opinion.”<sup>50</sup> When we look at whether modern-day America has these systems intact, we see that Dewey was absolutely correct in predicting that inquiry and communication constitute “one of the first ideas framed in the growth of political democracy,” yet “one of the last to be fulfilled.”<sup>51</sup> In America, despite the unprecedented levels of potentially valuable information and countless platforms through which we can access or distribute that information, we still do not have meaningful public inquiry nor systems of effective communication. Our largest systems of communication, including news networks like CNN or Fox, are blatantly biased for/against certain ways of looking at the world and the information they report to the public reflects those biases. People have literally created new phrases to describe the incompetence of the American media in this respect; they say we live in a “Post-

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<sup>49</sup> Ibid, 14.

<sup>50</sup> Dewey, John. *The Public and Its Problems: An Essay in Political Inquiry*. (Greece: Ohio University Press 2016), 515.

<sup>51</sup> Ibid.



Truth America,” an America where we are saturated with “fake news” that furthers the “agendas” of those who report it.

*Fake news?! Dewey would be horrified, but unsurprised, at the current state of America’s systems of communication if he were still alive. Anyone unfamiliar with Dewey’s work could read what he wrote in 1930 and think it was written last week; “of course there has been an enormous increase in the amount of knowledge possessed by humankind, but it does not equal the increase in the number of errors and half-truths which have gotten into circulation. In social and human matters, especially, the development of a critical sense and methods of discriminating judgment has not kept pace with the growth of careless reports and of motives for positive misrepresentation.”*<sup>52</sup>

By Dewey’s standards, our public’s ability to seek out and distribute sentient information on contemporary issues is clearly inadequate. Capitalism is a consistent motive for the positive misrepresentation of the actual conditions, whether economic, political, or social, of American life. This is nothing new. Economic interest has played a role in determining the information we do and don’t know since Dewey’s time, during which he was gravely concerned by “the gathering and sale of subject-matter having a public import is part of the existing pecuniary system,” because he realized that “as long as interests of pecuniary profit are powerful, and a public has not located and identified itself, those who have this interest will have an unresisted motive for tampering with the springs of political action in all that affects them.”<sup>53</sup> Unbiased inquiry and meaningful communication are so important to Dewey’s democracy as a way of life because without those systems intact, the democratic public cannot accurately locate itself in

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<sup>52</sup> Ibid, 510.

<sup>53</sup> Ibid, 516.

relation to the issues and decisions it needs to make. If the information it receives and digests is skewed, incomplete, or just plain false, the public cannot act in its best interest.

Before proposing any solutions or quick fixes to this problem, let us examine it a little more closely. Of course, the argument can be made that we live in an age of too much inquiry and too much communication. One could say that the American public is already drowning in a sea of information, that the last thing we need is more inquiry done or more frequent communication about public issues. To this, I would respond in good pragmatic fashion; what do you mean when you say that we have too much “information?” What kind of information is it? What methods were used to obtain it? Who is distributing it? Is it accurate? Is it meaningful? How many people are actually reading it? Do the people who read the information believe it is true? Whose interest does the information serve? Dewey would respond by asking about the practical consequences of the news we are receiving so frequently; “‘News’ signifies something which has just happened, and which is new just because it deviates from the old and regular. But its *meaning* depends upon relation to what it imports.”<sup>54</sup> He might also point out that our systems of communication and inquiry should be working continuously to paint a fuller picture of American life, rather than cherry-picking certain events and reporting on those. A theoretical example of what Dewey’s argument might be here; if a national news platform reports every instance of crime in its country, but neglects to mention everything that happens between, before, after, and between each instance of crime, then that information is not meaningful: it does not provide any concrete knowledge to those watching or reading it. Dewey believed that although this tactic--selectively emphasizing certain stories in the media--was regarded as “the *new* par excellence,” it was misleading and harmful to the people reading it; “only the date of the

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<sup>54</sup> Ibid, 516.

newspaper could inform us whether they happened last year or this, so completely are they isolated from their connections.”<sup>55</sup> Now, as I have mentioned before, in America, we have the kinds of biased news platforms Dewey was so worried about. Media bias is certainly no big secret. But what are the practical consequences of this for American democracy? Does American capitalism play a role in media bias?

To answer these questions, let us look at some relevant examples of when things went wrong: when the media was for profit instead of public interest. A fitting example of the relationship between capitalism, media, and American democracy is identified by Sawhill in her 2018 book *The Forgotten Americans: An Economic Agenda for a Divided Nation*. Sawhill’s *Forgotten Americans* provides some much-needed context to an event which shocked many Americans back in 2016: the election of President Donald Trump. In this book, Sawhill illustrates why Trump’s victory was socioeconomically far more predictable than most people might realize. She identifies a demographic of people that she calls “the forgotten Americans,” many of whom ended up voting for Trump in 2016. According to Sawhill, the forgotten Americans are white, usually without a four-year college degree, and make up about 38% of the middle-class.<sup>56</sup> Sawhill explains how post-industrialization economic policies lowered their wages and sent their jobs overseas; but she also examines the political and social changes that have left them feeling ignored and unimportant and the extensive media coverage of those changes, which was intended to exacerbate their frustrations with modern-day America. For these reasons, the forgotten Americans were vulnerable to the populist appeal of a candidate like Donald Trump and his “Make America Great Again” slogan.

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<sup>55</sup> Ibid.

<sup>56</sup> Sawhill, Isabel V. “Chapter 1: Introduction.” In *The Forgotten Americans: An Economic Agenda for a Divided Nation*. (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2018).

When the forgotten Americans voted for Trump back in 2016, so many non-forgotten Americans (myself included) could not understand why. Sawhill explains how that discrepancy is a perfect modern-day example of what happens when our systems of communication breakdown by pointing to a fact that most of us are quite aware of, or at least not too surprised by: that advertisers spend billions of dollars every year to manipulate our emotions and opinions for private financial gain. Sawhill wants to bring more attention to the fact that “politicians and their allies in some parts of the media have learned to do this as well.”<sup>57</sup> She cites a study from the *American Economic Review*; “Fox News viewership increased the Republican Party’s share of the vote by 6 percentage points in 2008.”<sup>58</sup> The study demonstrates how Fox News encourages their viewers to support economic and political policies which are more harmful than helpful to them. The average Fox viewer does not benefit from more corporate deregulation, higher minimum wage, or tax cuts for the uber-wealthy, but media conglomerates like Fox News inspire their viewers to vote for these policies. However, as time goes on, viewers inevitably become frustrated by the lack of economic or political progress in their daily lives. Their news platform remedies this by informing them that these problems occur because of other reasons--like an influx of immigrants or too much big government interference in business--not because of any special-interest group full of economic elites or any big corporations. Oftentimes, Sawhill points out that news platforms avoid reporting on those who are responsible for monopolizing the viewer’s industries and shutting down their mom-and-pop businesses to avoid losing those groups as financial allies. This is the story of too many middle-class Americans today, who continue to get their information from in media sources that are openly anti-government, antitrust, and anti-financial regulation. Then, these Americans vote for economic policies which

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<sup>57</sup> Ibid, “Chapter 2: The Forgotten Americans.”

<sup>58</sup> Ibid.

are against their own self-interest. It is a vicious cycle, propagated by capitalism and destructive to the American public's ability to believe in our democracy.

### **III. Capitalism, Democracy, & Sawhill's 5 Elements of a Good-Quality Life**

In my previous argument, I attempted to provide a few reasonable explanations--through the lens of Sawhill and Dewey--as to why capitalism is a driving force in the erosion of American democracy. My aim here was to demonstrate that our democracy meets none of Dewey's three conditions for democracy as a way of life: we do not have a government that is necessarily responsive to the will of the majority, and we do not have systems of communication which distribute information based on free, public, unbiased social inquiry. What this means is that there is no more urgent time than right now to restore faith in our democracy; if we wait too long, capitalism will continue bleeding into every nook and cranny of American life, while trust in democratic government and media will continue to decline among the American middle-class demographic. The American middle classes' ability to flourish--in terms of money, time, health, relationships, and respect--is inextricably linked to both economic challenges propagated by capitalism and the erosion of our democracy. If we examine each of Isabel Sawhill's 5 core elements for a good-quality life (which again, are money, health, time, relationships, and respect) we can see why this is so.<sup>59</sup>

Let us begin with money. This element is bound up with the "cash" component of my three-prong definition of the American middle class; how does the erosion of democracy via

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<sup>59</sup> For a refresher on why these five elements of well-being are discussed--in both Sawhill's book, and in my argument here--see [Section I: Human Flourishing](#) of my thesis and "Introduction" of *A New Contract with the Middle Class*, (Washington, DC: Brookings Institution Press 2020), specifically 9-10.

capitalism affect the middle classes' general income level, assets, and overall wealth? We know money is a key factor to consider when measuring well-being because while money does not necessarily buy happiness, it can provide stress relief, security, and stability for American families. Money is a cumulative asset; the tighter your spending, the more difficult it is to save and plan, such as by investing in your children's college education or a retirement fund. Money can buy time, rest, leisure, and a comfortable place to live. In short, money matters. A lot.

When we look at the wage growth and income trajectories of the American middle class over the past several decades, we see that capitalism plays a key role in their position today. Unlike the poorest members of our society--who were increasingly aided by social safety nets and welfare programs--and the richest ones--who enjoyed increased wages, shares in the stock market, and skyrocketing salaries--the middle-class has experienced stunted economic growth.<sup>60</sup> Data from the Congressional Budget Office demonstrates how those incomes in the middle 60% have, over the past 30 years, increased half as quickly as those in the top or bottom 20% of incomes.<sup>61</sup> This is what capitalism has done to our economy; the richest 20% now hold over 75% of total excess wealth, while the bottom 80% share what is left.<sup>62</sup> But unlike the poorest members of society, the middle-class misses out on many of the social safety nets we have in place. This means that although the average middle-class family has about \$4,000 in liquid wealth, they do not qualify for as many financial aid programs or free services as those whose income levels fall

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<sup>60</sup> Sawhill, Isabel V., and Reeves, Richard V., "Chapter 1: Money." *A New Contract with the Middle Class*. (Washington, DC: Brookings Institution Press 2020).

<sup>61</sup> "CBO Distribution of Household Income: 2016." *cbo.gov*. (Congressional Budget Office: July 2019). <https://www.cbo.gov/system/files/2019-07/55413-CBO-distribution-of-household-income-2016.pdf>.

<sup>62</sup> Sawhill, Isabel V., and Christopher Pulliam. "Six Facts about Wealth in the United States." *Brookings Institution Press*. (Brookings Middle Class Memos: June 2019). <https://www.brookings.edu/blog/up-front/2019/06/25/six-facts-about-wealth-in-the-united-states/>.

below the poverty line.<sup>63</sup> This leaves middle-class Americans with extraordinarily little economic power--something that is becoming increasingly important as wealth continues to concentrate among the most powerful members of society at the expense of workers. Wages used to be determined by productivity, but more recently, they are a product of economic power; unions are less common, and worker share of economic output has fallen over the past several decades. The accumulation of power by high-powered firms, large corporations, and mega-conglomerates are a result of capitalism operating in a distinctly American way.<sup>64</sup> We pretend not to notice monopolies forming, or the consequences these giant organizations create for average people. Instead, we thank our lucky stars that the prices of goods are falling, often without examining the consequences this has for the middle 60% of our wage-earners.

The second element that contributes to the well-being of the American middle class is time. Time to enjoy one's family, time to rest, and time spent doing hobbies or leisurely activities is a luxury many in the middle class can no longer afford. More women than ever are a part of our workforce, which is both a wonderful achievement and a dilemma for middle-class families. A family of four must work around the school schedules, after-school activities, birthday parties, parent-teacher conferences, tutors, playdates, and meal-prep for two children. If both parents work full-time--which is the case in many middle-class families--when do they enjoy time to rest or relax? Can they afford full-time childcare? If not, who is looking after their kids while they're at work? Time spent outside of work is crucial for both mental and physical well-being and is fundamental to building healthy relationships. Half of American adults say

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<sup>63</sup> Sawhill, Isabel V., and Reeves, Richard V., "Chapter 1: Money." *A New Contract with the Middle Class*. (Washington, DC: Brookings Institution Press 2020).

<sup>64</sup> For more on consolidation of economic power, see Author, David, David Dorn, Lawrence F. Katz, Christina Patterson, and John Van Reenen. "The Fall of the Labor Share and the Rise of Superstar Firms." *The Quarterly Journal of Economics*. (Oxford University Press: February 2020). <https://economics.mit.edu/files/12979>.

they do not have enough time to do these things, which lines up with the number of people who make up our middle-class economically (60%). Middle-class Americans work longer hours now than ever before, nearly 2 days longer per week than we did, on average, in 1975.<sup>65</sup> This is due in part to the fact that many households now have two wage-earners instead of one; but then, returning to the money element, we must wonder why middle-class Americans work more hours with twice as many people per household--and yet experience terribly slow income growth. This is again a function of capitalism; as companies grow and economic power accumulates at the top, workers lose the ability to determine their own wages via unions or protests. Jobs that do not require an expensive college degree are scarce; so, if you will not accept these wages, the corporations say, we will easily find someone else who will.

Next is relationships. As social beings, our relationships contribute a great deal to our well-being; we are created, molded, and sustained via our relationships with others. As you can probably guess, having little free time and money puts a great cumulative strain on the American middle classes' ability to maintain healthy relationships with family, friends, and intimate partners. If you are stuck financially--without any serious economic mobility--as the middle-class is, you are also limited in the amount of social capital you can acquire via relationships with others in your industry or community. This makes relationships tied directly to the "credentials" aspect of my three-part definition of the American middle-class; if your credentials are limited, so will your relationships be. The most important of all relationships, however, are those within the family. This is especially true of families with children, since children's relationships with their parents play a strong role in who they will eventually become as adults.

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<sup>65</sup> Sawhill, Isabel V., and Reeves, Richard V., "Chapter 2: Time." *A New Contract with the Middle Class*. (Washington, DC: Brookings Institution Press 2020).



Relationships are difficult to “measure” in a quantitative sense, so economists at Brookings have spent the past several years conducting focus groups across America to understand the challenges and anxieties of the middle-class. As part of their Future of The Middle-Class Initiative, these researchers wanted to learn how the financial struggles of America’s largest economic demographic played out in their day-to-day lives. What they found were enormous difficulties in sustaining healthy relationships among the American middle-class, both familial and non-familial.<sup>66</sup> Before COVID-19 allowed for a bit more work-schedule flexibility for some participants--who were now allowed to work from home or remotely--many people reported trading off day and night shifts with their spouse to maximize financial gains for the household, while still having someone home to look after the kid(s). For example, one participant describes how he is “thankful” for his work schedule--“9:00pm to 5:30am”--because it allows him to be more involved with his kids during the day. Of course, this comes at the expense of his sleep, relationship with his wife (who works the day shift at her job), and time for leisure activities.<sup>67</sup> Another participant, Elijah, describes how he and his wife both tried to work normal hours during the daytime, but the cost of childcare for their daughter was like “an extra rent each month,” and the burnout each faced led to them spending less and less quality time together outside of work. This financial strain eventually caused his separation from his wife; “you only have so much bandwidth...both people burnt out from work and from very stressful long hours...then it’s like, home is also super stressful. And then you’re also kinda stressing each other out and hurting each other.”<sup>68</sup>

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<sup>66</sup> Silva, Jennifer M., Isabel V. Sawhill, Morgan Welch, and Tiffany N. Ford. “What If Something Happens?: A Qualitative Study of the American Middle Class before and during the COVID-19 Pandemic.” *Brookings Institution Press*. (Brookings Future of the Middle Class Initiative: November 2020), 9. <https://www.brookings.edu/essay/what-if-something-happens-a-qualitative-study-of-the-american-middle-class-before-and-during-the-covid-19-pandemic/>.

<sup>67</sup> *Ibid*, 9-11.

<sup>68</sup> *Ibid*, 11.

After relationships, it's important to consider this group's overall health. Physical health is, obviously, an essential component of well-being; being free of disease--mental and physical--and pain are vital if one wants to flourish. You can't flourish from a hospital bed, or if you can only walk a few steps without getting winded. This once again presents a problem for the American middle-class; their health is worse than ever. In particular, their mental health is suffering. Participants in the Brookings' focus groups report that middle-class anxiety has been at an all-time high for the past several years. In every distinct group, the phrase "what if something happens?" was used to describe the impending sense of dread participants felt about some sort of emergency occurring that they could not afford to deal with. One factory worker from Pennsylvania explained in his focus group how his family budget had "no margin for error," so if "the roof blew off in a storm, and insurance wouldn't cover it, we're in trouble."<sup>69</sup> And it's not just natural disasters that the middle-class needs to contend with; now more than ever, we know that health crises can strike anyone at any time, and the American healthcare system has become a capitalist enterprise of its own. Healthcare costs drain life savings and drive American families into debt on a regular basis. Another man in the Brookings focus group describes what happened after his son was bitten by a mosquito and contracted a rare disease; after years trying to get a correct diagnosis, and during that period spending over "\$1700 a month on out-of-pocket medication," he states "we (his family) went broke."<sup>70</sup> Now, his family has fallen below the poverty line and qualifies for welfare and Medicaid. And despite his reliance on government support, this participant remains a hard-core Republican who supports the

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<sup>69</sup> Ibid, 6.

<sup>70</sup> Ibid, 8.

economic policies championed by Ted Cruz and Donald Trump; mostly, he says, because he wants better jobs and to stop politicians from “screwing us over.”<sup>71</sup>

The last of Isabel Sawhill’s 5 core elements of a good-quality life is respect. Respect--or at least the feeling that one has respect from others--goes hand-in-hand with work in America. Respect matters in our everyday lives; it determines how we interact with our partners, our friends, our families, our bosses and co-workers, and the community at large. Recently, we have seen an outpouring of disrespect towards the American middle-class, particularly those who voted for Donald Trump. In the media, on twitter, and in interpersonal conversations, many Americans classify this group as “hicks,” “white trash,” “racists,” “uneducated,” or even just “Trump voters,” a new insult which carries along with it stereotypes and prejudices. Those who feel disrespected tend to exhibit disrespectful behavior in response; we see more hate speech, violence, and riots on the news today than we have in over 40 years (since the Civil Rights Movement). This is due in large part to a feedback loop of disrespect coming from both sides, but middle-class Americans also face the problem of unemployment, something liberal elites or those on welfare may not have to contend with. Lack of respect is directly associated with unemployment; studies have found that “two in five people out of work for more than six months report a loss of self-respect.”<sup>72</sup> Loss of respect due to unemployment was also found to directly impact familial relationships, with almost half of those interviewed for the study reporting strained relations because of their unemployment.<sup>73</sup>

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<sup>71</sup> Ibid.

<sup>72</sup> Morin, Rich, and Rakesh Kochhar. “Lost Income, Lost Friends – and Loss of Self-Respect.” *Pew Research Center's Social & Demographic Trends Project*. (Pew Research Center: July 2010). <https://www.pewresearch.org/social-trends/2010/07/22/hard-times-have-hit-nearly-everyone-and-hammered-the-long-term-unemployed/>.

<sup>73</sup> Ibid.

Respect is also linked to credentials and culture. Specifically, white middle-class Americans without college degrees have reported feeling “judged” often for their communication and professional skills. According to a Pew Research Survey, many Americans without college degrees report feeling “snubbed” by their better-educated peers, and in turn lose respect for others and for themselves.<sup>74</sup> Within educational institutions, many middle-class Americans also feel as though respect for different viewpoints on politics is withering, and disrespect towards those who express non-majority opinions in an educational setting is prominent. Over half say that disrespect for certain political viewpoints is present in K-12 schools; only 15% surveyed would call U.S. universities “very open” to differing political opinions.<sup>75</sup> As for culture, we live in a nation of highly inflammatory political discourse in which respect has taken a back seat to competition, anger, disgust, disbelief, and name-calling. Both major U.S. parties are guilty of this; while almost 80% of Democrats say it’s important for Republican politicians to be respectful towards their parties’ members, less than half find it important to return the favor by showing respect themselves to Republicans.<sup>76</sup> Though there is an obvious difference between middle-class Americans and Republicans--many of whom are exceedingly wealthy--only 16% of Democrats say their party represents the middle-class, while 60% of Republicans do.<sup>77</sup> This matters because when we have a Democratic President, or a majority Democratic House and/or Senate, lack of respect for the opposing party can lead to a lack of support for policies--economic or otherwise--that support their members. Over time, this leads ordinary people to lose respect

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<sup>74</sup> “Public Highly Critical of State of Political Discourse in the U.S.” *Pew Research Center - U.S. Politics & Policy*. (Pew Research Center: June 2019), 63. <https://www.pewresearch.org/politics/2019/06/19/public-highly-critical-of-state-of-political-discourse-in-the-u-s/>.

<sup>75</sup> *Ibid*, 20.

<sup>76</sup> *Ibid*, 6.

<sup>77</sup> “Chapter 5: Middle-Class Politics.” *Pew Research Center's Social & Demographic Trends Project*. (Pew Research Center: August 2012). <https://www.pewresearch.org/social-trends/2012/08/22/chapter-5-middle-class-politics/>.

for government and democracy itself. If they do not see changes or results in their day-to-day lives, they will inevitably question whether their voice--which is supposed to matter in a Democratic nation-state--is being heard when they vote.

Even just a brief glance at how the American middle-class fares with Sawhill's 5 core elements of a good-quality life allows us to see that things are not going well for this group. They are struggling to make ends meet, to find time for the things they enjoy, to create and sustain healthy relationships, to maintain their own health, and to find respect for themselves and others in this country. The status quo is not working for them, and this is in large part due to the economic challenges brought by American capitalism and its erosion of our democracy. If they are falling behind economically, feeling disrespected in political conversations, and failing to see conditions of contemporary American life improve, it's no wonder we have such rampant anger, polarization, and lack of faith in both the economy and democracy itself. For the American middle-class to flourish, something needs to change. For economic inequality to shrink--or at least, to stop growing--something needs to change. For democracy as a way of life to be realized, something needs to change. In Section III, I offer a proposal for what this change might look like.

### **Section III: What Now?**

When the middle-class is thriving, America is thriving; when the middle-class is struggling, we fear national decline. —Tiffany N. Ford<sup>78</sup>

So, what now? Section III of my thesis is devoted to exploring this question and developing a plausible response to it. There is no one right way to deal with the way we have left the American middle-class behind economically, but there are ways we can offer what Sawhill would call “hand-ups, not hand-outs.” Middle-class Americans need our help; but more importantly, they need the resources to help themselves. Whether or not America is indeed a pull-yourself-up-by-your-bootstraps country, people like to believe that it is. They don’t like welfare, social services, or tax increases. They don’t like to appear lazy, needy, or poor. What’s needed right now to increase their ability to flourish are various mechanisms by which these Americans may learn, grow, and take control over their economic and political well-being.

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<sup>78</sup> Silva, Jennifer M., Isabel V. Sawhill, Morgan Welch, and Tiffany N. Ford. “What If Something Happens?: A Qualitative Study of the American Middle Class before and during the COVID-19 Pandemic.” *Brookings Institution Press*. (Brookings Future of the Middle Class Initiative: November 2020), 9. <https://www.brookings.edu/essay/what-if-something-happens-a-qualitative-study-of-the-american-middle-class-before-and-during-the-covid-19-pandemic/>.

## I. Proposal Introduction: Expanding Publicly Funded Media Platforms

Maybe the solution to fixing our democracy is through Dewey's first condition: democracy saved through more civic engagement with the democratic government. Throw out all the incumbent career politicians and elect new ones, then hope they will follow through on the promises they made to improve the American quality of life and take control over the outsized influence of capitalism on our democracy. This is what a democratic government is designed to do, so it seems like the most obvious solution. But the problem is, we already know that this doesn't usually work. Sawhill recognized this; "the ability of our existing political institutions to respond to ever-rising inequality and the threat it poses to democracy is by no means assured."<sup>79</sup> Why? Because the promises politicians make during reelection campaigns, promises of improvement to the conditions of contemporary life, are almost always a) dependent on who funds that campaign or b) often unsupported by empirical evidence or c) both.

Donald Trump and the 2016 election is the perfect example of the public can't just vote for people they like and then see the results they want. The economic agenda of bringing back manufacturing jobs, restricting trade, curbing immigration, and cutting taxes has been pushed by many Republicans long before the Trump era, and thus far has only led to more inequality. As Isabel Sawhill puts it in *The Forgotten Americans: An Economic Agenda for a Divided Nation*, these are "rhetorically camouflaged policies that deliver new benefits to the most fortunate at the expense of middle and working-class Americans."<sup>80</sup> So in practice, the government has been

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<sup>79</sup> Sawhill, Isabel V. "Capitalism and the Future of Democracy." *Economic Studies at Brookings*, (Brookings Institution: July 2019), 18. [https://www.brookings.edu/wp-content/uploads/2019/07/Sawhill\\_Capitalism-and-the-Future-of-Democracy-.pdf](https://www.brookings.edu/wp-content/uploads/2019/07/Sawhill_Capitalism-and-the-Future-of-Democracy-.pdf)

<sup>80</sup> Sawhill, Isabel V. "Chapter 4: Health." *The Forgotten Americans: An Economic Agenda for a Divided Nation*. (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2018).

unable to protect its most vulnerable demographics from the economic inequality and social alienation produced by capitalism via legislation alone.

But what about Dewey's second and third conditions for democracy: inquiry and communication? After all, Dewey points out that even if a true democratic government--one that was responsive to its the will of the majority--existed, it is still when and only when "free social inquiry is indissolubly wedded to the art of full and moving communication" can true public opinion on contemporary issues be formed.<sup>81</sup> Dewey's argument here has two implications: he poses both a huge problem and a potential solution for American democracy. The problem being, as I mentioned previously, that the commercialization of the news has thus far interrupted the ability for systems of inquiry and communication to work as they are supposed to work. Even if everyone in America who wanted to conduct some sort of social inquiry had the funding and means to do so, it wouldn't matter if the only major channels of distribution for the information they find are media conglomerates who won't report anything that isn't in their companies'—or their own—best interest. On the other hand, Dewey might have been right when he argued that the media is the best place to begin looking for a way to rebuild democracy. The commercialized media industry is relatively young; in fact, there was a time not too long ago when the news was considered a public service instead of a for-profit corporation. The media could be a good starting point in solving the problems of American democracy created by capitalism. If we could distribute free, fair and easily accessible information to all Americans, so too can we create a well-informed public with the know-how to begin ameliorating democracy from capitalism. In other words, Dewey's democracy as a way of life can be realized if we can establish a system of

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<sup>81</sup> Dewey, John. *The Public and Its Problems: An Essay in Political Inquiry*. (Greece: Ohio University Press 2016), 517.



social inquiry and communication that provides unrestricted access to accurate, unbiased information to American citizens about issues of public concern.

Of course, this would not be an easy task. The average American's trust in the media has been steadily declining already since the 1970s, and it's at an all-time low since 2016, when Donald Trump was elected and "fake news" rhetoric spread like wildfire. One Gallup/Knight survey--*American Views 2020: Trust, Media and Democracy*—has demonstrated that most Americans (52%) say they see today's media as trying to intentionally mislead them by misrepresenting the facts. Even more are aware that the media bias they see is influenced by capitalism; 70% of Americans surveyed said that "owners of news outlets attempting to influence the way stories are reported" is a major problem, and 60% reported that it was difficult to be well-informed because of the state of our media today. However, even more Americans stressed the necessary job of the media in democracy; 81% called the media "critical" or "very important" to democracy, and an overwhelming 88% of respondents said the media should be providing "fair and accurate news reports which help ensure that Americans are informed about public affairs."<sup>82</sup>

The results of this survey are not all negative. They actually illuminate a glimmer of hope: hope for one potential solution to the systemic, deeply intertwined economic and political problems we face in America today. Based on these responses, there appears to be a consensus among most Americans that the commercial media is not objective enough; and, even more importantly, there is a shared belief that we need media reform in order to keep American democracy alive and well. It seems that most people, then, want to improve our systems of communication and inquiry. Media coverage is an issue that appears to transcend political party

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<sup>82</sup> "American Views 2020: Trust, Media and Democracy." *knightfoundation.org*. (Gallup/Knight Foundation: August 2020). <https://knightfoundation.org/reports/american-views-2020-trust-media-and-democracy/>.

and socioeconomic status, meaning it's an issue that almost all Americans can finally see eye-to-eye and work together on.

Public broadcast stations and news channels are a good place to start. Since they are publicly funded sources of information, these platforms have little financial incentive for biased reporting. Better yet, public media platforms appear to be much more accessible for Americans of all socioeconomic statuses than are commercialized news sources. According to the Corporation for Public Broadcasting, 99% of Americans already have access to publicly-broadcasted media sources, either through their phones, the radio, or a television.<sup>83</sup> But the problem with publicly funded media isn't whether biased information would be distributed by its platforms, nor whether that information could be communicated in an accessible manner. The issue is whether these platforms have the resources to investigate and conduct relevant social inquiries. To obtain information that the American public wants and needs to hear, non-profit news platforms need their funding drastically increased. They are currently subsidized by the federal government and given public grants by various non-profit organizations, which is a good idea in theory because it creates no obligation for the news platform to their donors. Unfortunately, however, this level of funding is often inadequate for them to do the same caliber of national or international reporting as their for-profit counterparts.

In short, what's needed is a way to increase the overall capital allotted to public media platforms without allowing capitalists to sway the media coverage itself. Dewey's bottom line for American democracy is that until better systems of inquiry and communication are built, and the public becomes well-informed, we cannot form a valid opinion on any matters of public policy at all; "there can be no public without full publicity in respect to all consequences which

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<sup>83</sup> "US Station Finder." *cpb.org*. (Corporation for Public Broadcasting; March 2022, station reports updated daily). <https://www.cpb.org/cpb-station-finder>.

concern it. Whatever obstructs and restricts publicity, limits and distorts public opinion and checks and distorts thinking on social affairs. Without freedom of expression, not even methods of social inquiry can be developed.”<sup>84</sup> I believe that the simplest way to make this happen *would be to revamp existing non-profit news platforms.*

The logistics of my proposal are outlined as follows in the rest of this section. First, I define what I mean by “publicly-funded media platforms.” Second, I describe the practical implications of such a massive expansion of our public media platforms and explain what I envision this to look like in practice. Third, I identify the agent(s) of change for my proposal and clarify what exactly they would need to do to restore life back into publicly-funded media platforms.

## **II. Defining “Public” Media Platforms**

So first; what are “public” media platforms? One way to think about this concept is by looking at its counterpart: commercial media. Commercial media platforms are privately owned and funded by individuals, shareholders, and/or corporations. Netflix, Hulu, HBO, CNN, Fox News, and Amazon Video are all examples of private media; the content they provide is not sponsored or controlled by the state. Instead, funding comes from advertisements, subscriber fees, and investors. For the most part, this gives private media corporations free reign over what content they choose to make accessible to their audience. These platforms can be local, national, or global. The goal of commercial media is overwhelmingly to make money, with new and innovative ways of monetizing content appearing frequently (for example, streaming platforms

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<sup>84</sup> Dewey, John. *The Public and Its Problems: An Essay in Political Inquiry*. (Greece: Ohio University Press 2016), 511.

that used to have no advertisements at all suddenly have two plans for subscribers: one with advertisements, and a more expensive plan without advertisements). On the other hand, public media is not owned or funded by any private entities. The World Radio and Television Council put it nicely when they described the purpose of public broadcasting this way:

“Neither commercial nor State-controlled, public broadcasting’s only *raison d’être* is public service. It is the public’s broadcasting organization; it speaks to everyone as a citizen. Public broadcasters encourage access to and participation in public life. They develop knowledge, broaden horizons and enable people to better understand themselves by better understanding the world and others.”<sup>85</sup>

The upshot of this is that public broadcasting’s content is not dependent on its funding, or vice versa. It is a form of media available to virtually all American citizens for little to no cost. Its main purpose is not to make money, but to educate its viewers about significant people, events, and other happenings in contemporary American life. Of course, public media already exists in many other countries; but for the purposes of my proposal, I will be focusing on media broadcasted on either a local or national level within the United States.

There is no one defining feature of a public media platform other than the fact that it is a tool for universally accessible, relevant information for its citizens. Again, The World Radio and Television Council’s definition is helpful here. They outline a set of criteria for what qualifies as public media:

“Public broadcasting is defined as a meeting place where all citizens are welcome and considered equals. It is an information and education tool, accessible to all and meant for all, whatever their social or economic status. Its mandate is not restricted to information and cultural development—public broadcasting must also appeal to

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<sup>85</sup> “Public Broadcasting: Why? How?” *Unesdoc.unesco.org*. (World Radio and Television Council: 2001), 1. <https://unesdoc.unesco.org/ark:/48223/pf0000124058/PDF/124058eng.pdf.multi>.

the imagination, and entertain. But it does so with a concern for quality that distinguishes it from commercial broadcasting.”<sup>86</sup>

This “meeting place” public broadcasting represents can take the form of television, radio or the newspaper, so long as it meets the stated criteria. It is important to note that just because a given platform is not commercialized does not mean it may be automatically considered “public” media; there are standards of expectation for public media platforms that include lack of bias, entertainment value, and quality reporting.

### **III. Implications & Benefits of Public Media Platform Expansion**

Now that we have our definition, let us examine the implications of expanding publicly funded media platforms. You are probably wondering: how exactly am I proposing we do this? Fortunately, there are existing public media platforms with infrastructure already intact. They are, of course, full of desperately underfunded and over-worked employees who probably cannot create content in the quantity and quality they would prefer. Long ago, the American people decided on three main structures for media broadcasting: state-sponsored, commercial, and public.<sup>87</sup> But we are wary of solely government-sponsored media in this country, so commercialized media absolutely dominated the other models. Corporations appealed to the public’s desire to be entertained, shocked, and validated by their content of choice. Thus, mega-media conglomerates like Netflix and Fox News were born.

The problem, however, was that these commercial media entrepreneurs were just that: *entrepreneurs*. Their primary interest was always to make money, which, they quickly realized,

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<sup>86</sup> Ibid, 2.

<sup>87</sup> Ibid, 9.

did not come from reporting dry facts or telling unexciting stories about day-to-day life. Misinformation, exaggeration, and ill-informed media content runs rampant today for a reason, and that reason is American capitalism. But we can't simply dissolve these corporations, nor can we regulate private content to the degree necessary to reinstate Dewey's well-informed public. Yet, most Americans recognize the need for a change. We are sick of the fake news and rhetorical spin carefully placed in every politically motivated news report, TV show, movie, podcast, article and newspaper. Facts are buried, twisted, or ignored altogether because they simply don't sell as well. The truth, at least according to today's commercial media platforms, is just too boring to put out there on its own. As capitalism has slowly but surely eroded our democracy, it has crept into the content we consume daily. We assume what we see is true without critically examining the reason we are seeing it; in this vein, we underestimate the power of market mechanisms to control our idea of modern America. This assumption—the assumption that private entrepreneurs are the best judges of what information the American people should be provided with on a mass scale—has been de-bunked before our very eyes. Though the internet has made information more available than ever before, we're suddenly all aware of the information crisis we live in.

Enter publicly-funded media platforms. What if there were one or two mainstream, popular, largely agreed-upon sources of information the American public could draw from? What if in rural Kentucky, North Dakota, San Francisco, and downtown Manhattan, the same information was being reported without targeted advertisements, unwanted political opinions, and rhetorical manipulation? How much richer and livelier could the public discourse about current events be if our discussions were founded on a strong national consensus about the facts—but perhaps some disagreement related to the *interpretation* or *significance* of those facts?

Would political polarization, hate speech, and violence decrease? Would our anxiety levels taper off? And, most relevant to my inquiry here, would the lives of middle-class Americans tangibly improve?

There is strong evidence to back the claim that public media can fix many of America's present socioeconomic and political ills. First, public media is often consumed on the local level. According to a Pew Research Survey, most Americans get their news from local reporters, radio channels, and TV stations.<sup>88</sup> But without the funding of national corporations, local media sources have been continuously drying up, forcing people to consume content from the larger commercialized platforms. These platforms rarely report on the day-to-day happenings of an individual town or city; mostly, they cover major, headline-grabbing catastrophes or political events that tend to capture the attention of a wider audience. But when our media is boiled down to just a few major sources, we lose touch with the heartbeat of democracy. We forget about the beauty that exists in the ordinary and the mundane: in the act of helping an elderly neighbor or dropping the kids off at school. We become desensitized to what is normal, and come to expect what is shocking, horrifying, and infuriating. Think about it: when was the last time you saw an act of small kindness or generosity--and I should specify that a *small* does not include a charity donation by an actor for millions of dollars—reported on one of your media platforms?

Local media holds a special place for Americans living in an age of misinformation. When we live a reasonably short distance from the things we hear about on the radio or watch on our televisions we can conduct a mini-inquiry to verify what we hear by going to check it out ourselves. Our senses can confirm or deny what our media platforms tell us, decreasing both

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<sup>88</sup> Barthel, Michael, Amy Mitchell, Dorene Asare-Marfo, Courtney Kennedy, and Kirsten Worden. "Measuring News Consumption in a Digital Era." *Pew Research Center's Journalism Project*. (Pew Research Center: December 2020). <https://www.pewresearch.org/journalism/2020/12/08/measuring-news-consumption-in-a-digital-era/>.

their incentive to lie and ours to lose faith in the information they distribute. This kind of mutual trust is precious and should be supported by funding local, public media platforms, which remains as Americans' most trusted media source to this day.<sup>89</sup> There are tangible benefits to this ecosystem of trust; Americans who consume local media sources tend to have more accurate perspectives on their fellow citizens wants and needs, especially those with varying political beliefs.<sup>90</sup> By fostering an atmosphere where local people can connect, discuss, and debate relevant public issues with a basis of shared information, the expansion of local public media platforms would help strengthen democracy's smallest social building blocks: intrapersonal relationships and strong local communities.

National public media faces different challenges. Its content must be diverse enough to make millions of voices feel heard without upsetting millions of other people, whose opinions and experiences—political and otherwise—are highly diverse. On the flip side, if people are not exposed enough to one another's realities, they may never realize or acknowledge the fact that America is just one big hodge-podge of cities and states with vastly different people, living conditions, and socioeconomic opportunities. There are opioid-ravaged former coal mining communities just a few states away from wealthy urban coasts; yet these two worlds rarely collide. This is part of the reason why, as I mentioned previously, it felt like such a shock to so many people when Donald Trump was elected by the quieter, forgotten members of the American middle-class back in 2016. National public media is necessary to ensure that we have empathy for our fellow citizens, regardless of their socioeconomic status or political beliefs. By

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<sup>89</sup> Ripley, Amanda. "Can the News Be Fixed?" *The Atlantic*. (Atlantic Media Company: May 2021). <https://www.theatlantic.com/ideas/archive/2021/05/local-news-media-trust-americans/618895/>.

<sup>90</sup> Ibid.



the time Trump was elected, it was too late for people on opposite sides of the political spectrum to foster that empathy for one another. Instead, political polarization erupted like never before.

So how do we prevent this from continuing to happen? Since the 2016 election, plenty of journalists and media outlets have done some excellent retrospective reporting on what led to Trump's win: economic immobility, shrinking job opportunities, opioids, lack of social services, lack of education, and so on. But social inquiry is intended to be forward-looking; the goal should be to stop bad things from happening before they occur, not simply to reflect on why they happened after the fact. Thus, the implications of expanding national public media are potentially greater than local media, since only *national* public media has the power to get almost every American citizen to pay attention to the social, economic, and political ills that have recently arisen, or are predicted to become problematic soon. Corporations have little incentive to do this kind of forward-looking reporting. Future predictions of crises or social issues do not gain as much traction with consumers and generally don't generate as much money as do here-and-now, shocking, frightening, or exciting content.<sup>91</sup> But if Americans could watch, listen, or read in real-time as our country's problems brew, we could intervene in an expeditious and efficient manner. Would the middle-class have fallen so far behind economically over the past several decades if national public broadcasting had been more widespread and better-funded than it is today? I'd like to believe that we as a nation would not have allowed such a thing to happen.

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<sup>91</sup> See the following report for data on how many Americans are using unreliable sources—such as social media—as means to get information about what's happening in their communities and in their country. Mitchell, Amy, Mark Jurkowitz, J. Baxter Oliphant, and Elisa Shearer. "How Americans Navigated the News in 2020: A Tumultuous Year in Review." *Pew Research Center's Journalism Project*. (Pew Research Center: February 2021). <https://www.pewresearch.org/journalism/2021/02/22/how-americans-navigated-the-news-in-2020-a-tumultuous-year-in-review/>

#### **IV. Identifying Agent(s) of Change**

I need to preface the third part of my proposal—identifying the agent of change—with two normative claims that help make clear why I am choosing to place responsibility on some agents and not others. These are not radical claims; I am not the first to defend them, and I plan to spend little time explaining what I take to be the obvious rationale which legitimizes their normative value. First, people living in a democracy have a right to free information that allows them to conduct experimental social inquiry to figure out what is working and what is not in their nation-state. Second, as the voice of those people, a democratic government has a responsibility to facilitate the flow of that information from unbiased and accurate sources to all Americans, regardless of their political affiliation or socioeconomic status.

The agent of change I am identifying for my proposal is the U.S. government: both federal and local. Few agencies in America have the reach, the resources, and the public funding to make this proposal work; I will admit that I am not thrilled to propose a governmental response in an age of such government mistrust, but there truly is no other existing organization capable of carrying out such a mammoth task. Obviously, commercial entities are out of the running here; commercialization is the enemy of public media, not its enabler. I would have liked to say that individuals, lobbyist groups, scientists, researchers, and even ordinary citizens can scrape together the funding necessary for a widespread expansion of public media, but this has already been tried. Pew Research Center did a report recently on the funding sources for the largest public broadcasting organizations, and the result was dismal. Local public radio is funded mostly by individual donations and private “gifts,” the specifics of which are not made public. Public television is apparently funded by a “mix” and “public and nonpublic” sources, thereby

defeating the purpose of the “public” element in “public television.” Pew was unable to locate the specifics of which public sources funded these organizations, whether funding was rising or falling over the years, and any financial information at all about these media platforms beyond the year 2019.<sup>92</sup>

Though lots of information about the inner workings of the U.S. government is kept private, there is a level of transparency expected by all citizens that works in America’s favor when it comes to taking up such a widespread and important project like the one I am proposing now. The process of drafting and enacting a new law or policy can be scrutinized by the public, who can watch their elected representatives handle the issue and decide whether they appear to be acting in the majority’s best interest. If our politicians fail to do so, we can simply vote for someone else in the next election. This is, of course, simplifying the terribly complex and occasionally corrupt world of U.S. politics, but theoretically speaking, honesty and transparency are supposed to exist in a democratic government. The government is a body most if not all Americans are familiar with, and with the right policy—and the right implementation of that policy—some level of faith could be restored in our democracy if this proposal is carried out successfully.

The government has a responsibility to ensure the social, political, and economic well-being of its citizens. As part of that responsibility, the government is supposed to be aware of any suspicious or potentially criminal activities of its citizens. But the U.S. government is a case study in crime, corruption, and capitalism, and that makes it an interesting nation in this respect. We have mass-incarcerated millions of people—many of them innocent and/or non-violent

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<sup>92</sup> Barthel, Michael, and Kirsten Worden. “Trends and Facts on Public Broadcasting: State of the News Media.” *Pew Research Center’s Journalism Project*. (Pew Research Center: June 2021). <https://www.pewresearch.org/journalism/fact-sheet/public-broadcasting/>.

people—but rarely do we lock away the most sinister and destructive of our citizens (i.e., the members of the Sackler family who lied about OxyContin’s addictiveness, the Wall Street bank moguls responsible—in large part—for the financial crisis of 2008, I could go on). But expanding public media platforms could allow the government to kill two birds with one stone. Increased access to accurate, useful, relevant information about issues of public interest among American citizens would allow them to better identify and express their needs to the agency whose job it is to carry out our will. Public media which reveals the results of inquiries into legal, social, political, and economic issues could act as a pseudo-watchdog for government officials. Shared media also encourages citizens to participate in democratic life via voting, expressing their views on current events, and conversing with one another about mainstream public issues. But perhaps the largest tangible benefit to expanding public media platforms would be the creation of jobs for middle-class Americans, who could staff local and national media agencies all over the country, filling many roles which would not require college degrees. There are mutual benefits—benefits for both the American public and the government—to creating a shared hub of accurate and unbiased information and providing a higher level of educational tools and resources to all citizens. Expanding public media platforms could even restore trust between the public and the government; if they partner up and work together on a large-scale project to repair democracy, citizens might regain some of the faith they’ve lost in government over the past several decades.

The U.S. government could approach this proposal in several different ways, but the following is the route I recommend based on existing research. If public media is to be reliable, stable, and substantial enough to compete with commercial media outlets, it must have reliable, stable, and substantial funding from a consistently present and well-endowed entity.<sup>93</sup> This

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<sup>93</sup> “Public Broadcasting: Why? How?” *Unesdoc.unesco.org*. (World Radio and Television Council: 2001). <https://unesdoc.unesco.org/ark:/48223/pf0000124058/PDF/124058engo.pdf.multi>.

entity's funding and enthusiasm for supporting public broadcasting should be unaffected by the dominant political party, the general political atmosphere of the nation, or capitalist interests. This means that public media must only accept and sustain itself with public funding. What does it mean for funding to be considered "public?" It means that the public—the majority of Americans, who are able to contribute financially—are the *sole source of funding* for these media platforms. No individual gifts, no private donations, no corporate bribes. Transparency around the financing of these media platforms will be crucial in ensuring both the integrity of the content and the trust of the American people in their accuracy.

Both local and national public media should receive their funding from the same source, albeit in different amounts. The amount of funding per local region should take into account several key factors—all of which should be made public for anyone who wants to know how much their local media outlets receive—such as the population size and density of the region, the existing infrastructure for broadcasting content and whether it needs (or will soon need) replacement or repairs, the number of potential new employees and jobs created in the area, and the existing local access to public media via televisions, newspapers, and radios. For example, if Area A has well-maintained media infrastructure, excellent internet connection, low unemployment rates, and most citizens living there have access to media content in their homes, less funding needs to be allocated there than to a region of the same size and population density with poor infrastructure, internet, access levels, and high numbers of unemployed citizens looking for work. Before the platforms in the expansion project begin broadcasting their content, every effort should be made to level the economic playing field between regions.

The FCC—Federal Communications Commission—should work in conjunction with existing public media platforms, local and national, as well as Congressional policymakers to

draft legislation that would require such an expansion to occur within the next 5 years. The policy would detail everything I have previously mentioned, none of which is necessarily partisan or controversial in nature. In terms of funding, the U.S. government would need to do some redistributing and re-thinking about the way it spends the money it collects from Americans via taxes annually. The current amount allocated to public broadcasting, according to PBS, is about \$450 million annually.<sup>94</sup> To compete with commercial media platforms in quality, quantity, and accessibility of content, this number must be increased exponentially. A good reference point could be the annual revenue of a private media corporation like CNN (1.7 billion USD), Fox News (2.9 billion USD), or MSNBC (1.1 billion USD).<sup>95</sup> Thus, to compete with commercialized agencies, I suggest the U.S. government double the amount allocated to public broadcasting to \$900 million annually, not including the upfront expenses of building infrastructure or the ongoing expenses of maintaining it. This will certainly require some creative thinking on behalf of the Treasury, but perhaps they will come to realize that we do not need to be spending \$766 billion annually on the military when we aren't actively engaged in combat with another nation.<sup>96</sup>

At the end of *The Forgotten Americans: An Economic Agenda for a Divided Nation*, Sawhill writes that “anyone concerned about the state of America in the early decades of the twenty-first century should read William Golding’s well-known novel *Lord of the Flies*.”<sup>97</sup> The

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<sup>94</sup> Sikka, Madhulika. “How Do Federal \$\$\$ Get to Your Local Station?” *PBS.org*. (Corporation for Public Broadcasting: February 2018). <https://www.pbs.org/publiceditor/blogs/pbs-public-editor/how-do-federal-get-to-your-local-station/>.

<sup>95</sup> Walker, Mason, and Naomi Forman-Katz. “Trends and Facts on Cable News: State of the News Media.” *Pew Research Center's Journalism Project*. (Pew Research Center: July 2021). <https://www.pewresearch.org/journalism/fact-sheet/cable-news/>.

<sup>96</sup> Duffin, Erin. “U.S. Military Spending from 2000 to 2020.” *statista.com*. (Statista: November 2021). <https://www.statista.com/statistics/272473/us-military-spending-from-2000-to-2012/>.

<sup>97</sup> Sawhill, Isabel V. “Chapter 10: Conclusion.” *The Forgotten Americans: An Economic Agenda for a Divided Nation*. (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2018).

book is about a group of young boys stranded on an island who descend slowly into madness. At the beginning of the story, the boys create their own little government, electing a leader and deciding which principles they will self-govern in accordance with; but eventually, they are divided into conflicting groups and their leader, consumed with power and greed, stops thinking about the interest of the common good. Chaos ensues and a few boys even die at the end of the book. Sawhill compares this to the state of America today; “like the boys in *Lord of the Flies*, we need leaders, rules, and norms that enable individuals and enterprises of all kinds to flourish.”<sup>98</sup> To achieve these conditions, however, Sawhill and Dewey both recognized America’s desperate need for free inquiry and meaningful communication. Sawhill argues that we need more public transparency about capitalism and the economic problems it has caused for most Americans. It may be the most realistic way to restore democracy; “political reform is very difficult; cultural divisions don’t lend themselves to government solutions, but the opinion divide on economic issues is less wide and a solution is more within reach.”<sup>99</sup>

## **V. How Public Media Platforms Champion Flourishing for America’s Middle-Class**

Recall now Sawhill’s five elements of human flourishing: money, time, health, relationships, and respect. Think about how improving our systems of public communication—and thus raising the overall quality of public discourse—could impact those five aspects of an average American’s daily life.

Let’s start with money. When we think about money these days, we think about disagreements: some Americans want tax cuts, others want more social benefits, and some just

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<sup>98</sup> Ibid.

<sup>99</sup> Ibid.

want to be left alone. But, as has been established previously, middle-class Americans are being left behind economically. The question is now not whether they are experiencing slower wage growth, or whether inequality runs rampant in the United States. It does. But who, or what, is responsible for that fact? If 100 different people living in America were to answer to that question right now, we would see quite some divergence in their responses. Their idea of why money is tight for them would depend all too often on the media sources they interact with most frequently. For example, if they respond that immigrants are taking away jobs from Americans, or that college should be free and that would fix everything, you can get a pretty good idea of what news channels they flip to every night. But the problem with these kinds of explanations is that they are distractions, and thus they allow capitalism to plow forth unchecked by the scrutiny of the public eye. When someone's nightly anchorman or favorite talk show host tells them to vote for a politician whose campaign that media platform is a heavy donor to, citizens cannot make financial decisions in their own best interest. A commercial media platform's goal is never to make you rich: it's to get rich themselves by somehow getting money out of you, the consumer.

Time and health are also greatly intertwined with the type of media we consume. In the past year, nearly a quarter of US adults and teens experienced mental health problems.<sup>100</sup> 77% of adults said the future of our nation is a "significant source of stress" in their daily lives.<sup>101</sup> Over 60% of adults say highly publicized issues like mass shootings, healthcare, global warming, the COVID-19 pandemic, and political polarization have also caused them high levels of stress.<sup>102</sup>

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<sup>100</sup> "Mental Illness." *National Institute of Mental Health*. (U.S. Department of Health and Human Services: January 2022). [https://www.nimh.nih.gov/health/statistics/mental-illness#part\\_2539](https://www.nimh.nih.gov/health/statistics/mental-illness#part_2539).

<sup>101</sup> "Stress in America™ 2020: A National Mental Health Crisis." *apa.org*. American Psychological Association, October 2020. <https://www.apa.org/news/press/releases/stress/2020/report-october>.

<sup>102</sup> *Ibid.*



Those who work in the media know the emotional havoc of constantly posting negative, Doomsday-esque articles and ranting at us on our television screens; but, as one journalist—Graham Davey, who also happens to be a professor of psychology at the University of Sussex—openly admitted: "If you're going to be bland, then most people won't be interested in you and will instead get their news from the extreme views circulating on social media."<sup>103</sup> People who get their news from social media are also likely to waste their precious time off work, out of school, or with family to scroll on their own personal devices. When time meant to be used to recover from stress is inadvertently spent increasing overall stress levels—and all because you simply because you wanted to keep up with current events—there's an unacceptable drain of mental and physical resources being placed by our media platforms on hardworking, exhausted, emotionally defeated Americans. The upshot of all this is that right now, existing media platforms are costing us our time, money, and health. And worst of all: after going through the emotional labor of consuming media content, we tend not to learn very much about our local communities.

Our relationships also clearly suffer from the content distributed by existing media platforms. To use a personal example, I can no longer talk about politics with any of my grandparents. They watch Fox News. They listen to old Rush Limbaugh radio shows. Now, they won't get vaccinated, they won't wear masks, and they consistently remind me how COVID-19 is a dangerous hoax: even though I myself have contracted it twice this past year. But when media platforms become echo chambers geared towards validating their consumer's beliefs and opinions, this is the result. Pick a different news channel to watch for a month, or a different account to follow, or a different podcast to listen to: in a frighteningly short amount of time, you

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<sup>103</sup> Plackett, Benjamin. "The Science behind Doom-Scrolling." *ABCnews.com*. (ABC News Network, Inside Science: November 2020). <https://abcnews.go.com/Technology/science-doomscrolling/story?id=74402415>.

can end up living in a seemingly opposite reality to those around you. Our commercialized media platforms operate in a hyper-capitalist nation like the United States; here, monopolies form and power shifts quickly from the people to the profits. On the other hand, a democratic, publicly funded media platform—especially a local one—has little to no incentive to deceive you. In fact, one of the most primary objectives of noncommercial media platforms is to strengthen communities by informing residents about current events that are happening right outside their door: in the place they call home.<sup>104</sup>

When residents feel connected to others in their communities, they can empathize with them better. This strengthening of community relationships also leads to an increase in respect among and between fellow citizens. People treat one another with more respect when they have some level of emotional investment in each other's lives, and it can be hard to step into the shoes of a person or group whose exist hundreds of miles away from you--as we are so often expected to do by commercial media platforms. Likewise, an increase respect from others is perceived on behalf of the individual who develops strong ties to their community. Human beings are social animals; we need validation, support, and acceptance from our peers to reach our maximum potential for flourishing. Research has shown that respect—or at least, *perceived* respect—is critical for our ability to flourish. For instance, feeling respected at work allows us to complete mundane tasks with more enthusiasm and passion, while feeling respected at home allows one to relax and show vulnerability, as opposed to remaining constantly on the defensive.<sup>105</sup>

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<sup>104</sup> “Public Broadcasting: Why? How?” *Unesdoc.unesco.org*. (World Radio and Television Council: 2001). <https://unesdoc.unesco.org/ark:/48223/pf0000124058/PDF/124058eng.pdf.multi>.

<sup>105</sup> Abid, Ghulam, Shazaf Ijaz, Tahira Butt, Saira Farooqi, and Maryam Rehmat. “Impact of Perceived Internal Respect on Flourishing: A Sequential Mediation of Organizational Identification and Energy.” Edited by Jason Harkins. Taylor & Francis Online. *Cogent Business Management*, August 2018. <https://www.tandfonline.com/doi/full/10.1080/23311975.2018.1507276>.

Perhaps my proposal seems too grand, too unrealistic, too optimistic. Perhaps the government would—somewhat unsurprisingly—not want to work on such a large, costly, and daunting project. And even if it did, would the US government *really* be able to start getting things done, efficiently and skillfully, without its usual sluggish bureaucratic temperament? My intent in this section of my thesis was to offer one potential solution to the economic problems facing the American middle-class. Like Dewey, “the object of the analysis” here is to show “that *unless* ascertained specifications are realized, the Community cannot be organized as a democratically effective Public.”<sup>106</sup> After all, American democracy meets none of Dewey’s three conditions for democracy as a way of life; how can we expect an economically and politically broken system to heal itself like a starfish?

My goal in writing this thesis was to zero in on the way in which capitalism is being allowed to operate in this country--to demonstrate how it is eroding our democracy by breeding unacceptable, ever-increasing levels of economic and political inequality. This is not a pretty sight. To be honest, what I have written makes it all too easy to be cynical about the state of our country. But there are ways for us to self-ameliorate from the conditions that inhibit our ability to flourish. We can take steps to confront the economic challenges, the faith lost in our democracy, the political polarization and the deep-seated anger we seem to hold for one another. Imagine: what would America look like right now if we had a responsive and fast-acting government and universally agreed-upon methods of social inquiry? What if every citizen had access to accurate and unbiased information about the state of our country? Would the 2008 market crash have happened? Would Purdue Pharma ever have sold a single Oxycontin? Would we have millions of COVID cases and deaths right now? Would the American middle-class have fallen so far

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<sup>106</sup> Dewey, John. *The Public and Its Problems: An Essay in Political Inquiry*. (Greece: Ohio University Press 2016), 508.

behind—would we have allowed them to? Politicians and citizens of all backgrounds and affiliations have started asking these kinds of questions lately. Fixing our broken system of public inquiry and communication is one of the few issues which has garnered bipartisan support; in fact, less than a year ago, a bill was introduced to Congress that aligns with much of what I am proposing now regarding a massive expansion of public media.

In May of 2021, the “Future of the Local News Act” was brought to the House in a plea by Democrats and Republicans alike to liberate us from an age of dishonest democracy. Much of the language in the Act could have been written by Dewey himself: “democracy demands wisdom and vision in its citizens, and an informed citizenry depends on accurate and unbiased news reporting to inform the people’s judgments.”<sup>107</sup> In the Future of the Local News Act, we find not only a gesture of meaningful recognition by the US government regarding the information problem that currently exists in our country, but also a diverse group of elected representatives taking serious initiative to repair our broken communication channels. If any piece of legislation that dwells on America’s modern political landscape supports the practical feasibility of my proposal, it is this Act.

The Act seeks to establish a “Federal advisory committee” whose job it would be to oversee the expansion of local public news platforms while simultaneously trying to curb the spread of misinformation, which is currently circulating among the American public quicker than the Omicron variant:

“The purpose of the Committee is to:

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<sup>107</sup> Fitzpatrick, Brian K. “H.R.3169 - Future of Local News Act.” Ed. by Susan Wild, Mark DeSaulnier, Eleanor Holmes Del Norton, and Juan Vargas. *congress.gov*, 1. This Act was originally introduced by Rep. Brian K. Fitzpatrick (R-PA) to the 117th Congress of the United States back in May 2021 and has since gained four new Democratic co-sponsors. <https://www.congress.gov/bill/117th-congress/house-bill/3169>.

- (1) examine the state of local news and the ability of local news to sustain democracy by meeting the critical information needs of the people of the United States; and
- (2) provide recommendations on mechanisms that the Federal Government can create and effectively implement to support production of professional, independent, and high-quality local news to meet the needs of the public, which.... may explore the possible creation of a new national endowment for local journalism, or the reform and expansion of the Corporation for Public Broadcasting or another appropriate institution, to make public funds a part of a multi-faceted approach to sustaining local news.”<sup>108</sup>

The Act describes in significant detail how the Committee would take shape and who would choose its 13 members. A system is laid out which reveals an obvious desire for diverse viewpoints in the public forum—one Committee member would be appointed by the CEO of the US Agency for Global Media, two would be appointed by the Chairman of the Board of PBS, two by the National Endowment for the Humanities, two by a Senate majority vote, two by a Senate minority vote, and the last four would be appointed by the House of Representatives in a similar fashion as the Senate appointees.<sup>109</sup> Once on the board, the—hopefully—diverse and dynamic Committee, with its wide variety of journalists, writers, reporters, professors, entrepreneurs, and experienced broadcast media personnel would work together to engineer creative solutions that help mend our ailing our systems of inquiry and communication. For example, this Committee would have the power to secure data directly from the US government regarding Americans’ media consumption habits, needs, and wants, and if anything warrants public interest, the Committee will then write up a report on its findings and post them online for free.

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<sup>108</sup> Ibid, 6-7.

<sup>109</sup> Ibid, 7-8.

I argue that Future of the Local News Act embodies the very spirit of American democracy as a bipartisan piece of legislation that represents a larger, more experimental sociopolitical ideal, one which will always remain unfinished and imperfect. Sure, in a utopian America, we would overhaul our public education system. We would reform our curriculum so that the anti-democratic blindness, ignorance, prejudice, hatred, and inflexibility that plague American adults today could serve as nothing more than a lesson for the next generation, whose education will teach them how to be a better democratic citizen. Improving American education would obviously serve us—as a nation, a society, and a community—in a much more powerful and impactful manner than simply reforming our media platforms. Ideally, as we attempt to restore faith in our democracy of disinformation and rebuild in its place a more Deweyan democracy, American children would grow up with their “convictions as to the state of things re-organized.... revised and extended,” and “the development of distinct capacities would be afforded to all” from a young age.<sup>110</sup> However, as Dewey himself points out, education does not refer only to schooling. Education to Dewey is growth: it is the plasticity of habit, the creativity of inquiry, the “subtle, delicate, vivid and responsive art of communication” among and between free citizens.<sup>111</sup> This is why I am convinced that—at least for now—the Future of the Local News Act is the best chance we’ve got to ameliorate ourselves from the political, economic, social mess we’ve gotten into. Such is the experimental, social, public-oriented inquiry Dewey was so fond of; the Committee is an inquisitive body, comprised of well-informed citizens, whose sole purpose it is to inform us of the conditions of contemporary American life.

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<sup>110</sup> Dewey, John. *Democracy and Education: An Introduction to the Philosophy of Education*. (United States: Macmillan, 1916), 295.

<sup>111</sup> Dewey, John. *The Public and Its Problems: An Essay in Political Inquiry*. (Greece: Ohio University Press 2016), 183.

Granted, the Future of the Local News Act is not perfect. The bill proposes only a temporary Committee be established; backed by only \$1,000,000 in government funding, the Committee would have no choice but to dissolve after serving its purpose once or twice. But in American politics, slow and steady sometimes really does win the race. Do I believe that our government could pass a bill which contains a plan for radical, costly, widespread expansion of public media in the immediate future? Not necessarily. But couldn't one argue that—flaws and all—the Future of the Local News Act might actually pass through our ordinarily gridlocked legislative branch with relative ease, leaving in its wake a pathway for future media reform? Couldn't we say that even if it isn't all we want it to be, this Act is but a step in the right direction? Might it just begin the process of getting folks the information they need to stop bouncing around in their echo chambers of media, and instead start empathizing and critically engaging with others different from themselves? Might it begin America's transformation from the Great Society to a Great Community?<sup>112</sup>

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<sup>112</sup> Dewey's "Great Society" is but a group of individuals engaged in collective action, without a common end or any sense of devotion to the larger community. However, the "Great Community" where democracy comes into its own as a way of life for each citizen as their choices and actions serve the values embodied by their democratic society.