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A large, stylized graphic of the American flag is positioned diagonally across the center of the page. The top-left portion is red and white stripes, the bottom-left is dark blue, and the right side is blue with white stars. The graphic is partially obscured by the red speech bubble at the top left and the bottom left text.

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Featuring interviews with the 2021-2022 IPS Military
Fellows and the Master's Thesis Corner

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How Political Engagement Can Overcome Our Downswing

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In his book, *The Upswing*, political scientist Robert Putnam discusses at length how the United States experienced a peak of economic equality and collectivism in the mid 20th century and has since been in decline.¹ The current period of inequality, corruption, and individualism is remarkably similar to the Gilded Age and based on these similarities Putnam argues that we are ripe to begin another upswing like we experienced half a century ago.²

For the last half century collectivism and civic engagement has been in deep decline while individualism has become the guiding principle of American society. Putnam also documents how “social solidarity (membership in civic associations, churches, unions, and even family formation) was at a relatively low point during the first Gilded Age, began to rise during the Progressive Era toward a high point in the 1960s, and then declined steadily into the second Gilded Age.”³ Currently, we are experiencing extremely low levels of civic participation and this is closely tied to the high levels of individualism. In the U.S. today, people are much more concerned with themselves and their individual well-being than their community.

Putnam illustrates this individualism through an analysis of the rise of singular first-person pronouns in literature and media which he calls the I-we-I curve.⁴ The trends of individualism and isolation can often reinforce each other. As people socialize less, they become more focused in themselves and even less likely to engage with their community.

In addition to increased social isolation, political isolation has also increased in contemporary America. Political scientist Morris Fiorina investigates political issues plaguing the U.S., specifically the problem of polarization. While many people believe the US has become more polarized, Fiorina actually argues that it is only the political class, composed of politicians, lobbyists, and activists, who have become more polarized while average Americans have maintained relatively stable positions.⁵ This distinction is important because it exposes how “members of the political class who dominate politics in America not only are unrepresentative of the country at large, but also have the most distorted view of their country.”⁶

The divide between the public and the political class is further exacerbated by the corrupt and selfish policies which politicians employ to avoid accountability. In his book *Unrigged*, David Daley discusses the many ways in which politicians rig the system to their

1 Robert D. Putnam, *The Upswing: How America Came Together a Century Ago and How We Can Do It Again* (Simon & Schuster, 2021).

2 Ibid.

3 Ibid 110.

4 Ibid 12.

5 Morris P. Fiorina, *Unstable Majorities: Polarization, Party Sorting, and Political Stalemate* (Stanford, CA: Hoover Institution Press, Stanford University, 2017), 21.

6 Ibid 33.



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benefit explaining that “the toxic combination of gerrymandering and voter suppression laws passed by newly unaccountable legislatures tied our democracy into a profoundly depressing double-knot of unfairness, and established nearly unbeatable minority rule in otherwise competitive states.”⁷

According to Merriam-Webster, to gerrymander is “to divide or arrange (an area) into political units to give special advantages to one group.”⁸ Gerrymandering allows politicians to guarantee that they or their party will win an election despite the fact that they do not represent the political views of the district they are representing. Gerrymandering can create unresponsive districts where despite changes in statewide partisanship, individual districts do not change parties and legislators are unrepresentative.⁹ Furthermore, gerrymandering often divides communities of interest which threatens the political agency of those communities by diluting their voice.¹⁰ However, despite the negative effects on voters, politicians continue to gerrymander to their benefit.

Gerrymandering exemplifies the gap between average Americans and the political class because while politicians benefit from gerrymandering, Americans across the parties are opposed to it. As discussed above, in the book *Unstable Majorities*, Fiorina exposes the gap between the highly polarized political class and the relatively moderate general public. This separation between the preferences of the political class and the public is also found in views on gerrymandering. As Daley points out in *Unrigged*, “In 2018, polls found that upward of 70 percent of Americans hoped that the high court would help defend American democracy by reining in partisan gerrymandering.”¹¹ So it is clear that a majority of Americans are opposed to gerrymandering regardless of political party. However, significant amounts of legislators must obviously be in support of gerrymandering based on the fact that they have implemented it in their own states. Legislators who continue to gerrymander are not only shirking their responsibility to uphold democracy through the undemocratic act of gerrymandering but also through their continuation of a practice which is vocally opposed by the majority of their constituents.

Redistricting commissions are the clearest solution to fairer redistricting processes and thus a more representative democracy. One key component of commissions is deciding who can serve on them. Commissions which prohibit elected officials and lobbyists from serving allow for more participation by average Americans and prevent the political class from dominating political processes.¹² Furthermore, requirements for public input beyond the commissioners also promotes engagement by allowing all voters to have a say in defining their communities

"Gerrymandering exemplifies the gap between average Americans and the political class because while politicians benefit from it, Americans across the parties are opposed to it."

7 David Daley, *Unrigged: How Americans Are Battling Back to Save Democracy* (New York, NY: Liveright Publishing Corporation, a division of W.W. Norton & Co., 2021), xvi.

8 “Gerrymander,” Merriam-Webster (Merriam-Webster), accessed May 10, 2021, <https://www.merriam-webster.com/dictionary/gerrymander#h2>.

9 Jonathan Cervas, “Districting Terminology,” Representation and Redistricting. Lecture, (2021), 37-39.

10 Ibid 21.

11 Ibid xxi.

12 Michelle Davis et al., *Redistricting Law 2020* (Denver, CO: National Conference of State Legislatures, 2019), 93.

and drawing districts.¹³ A handful of states have already implemented commissions and they have created significantly more representative districts. In *Unrigged*, Daley states that “more than three-quarters of the congressional seats that changed hands in 2018 were drawn by either commissions or courts.”¹⁴ This means that these districts were more responsive, more competitive, and ultimately more democratic. Commissions are perhaps the most obvious solution to more fair districts because they minimize the power of the political class and maximize the power of the public.

Another method to fight gerrymandering is to make districting software and analysis more accessible. By making this software publicly available and easy to use, an even wider variety of people could participate in the redistricting process by proposing new district maps or critiquing the fairness of existing ones. Recently, software like Dave’s Redistricting App and Draw the Lines have allowed anyone with internet access to create their own district maps.¹⁵ Furthermore, many scholars have expanded their discussion on gerrymandering from academic journals to more accessible news media sources. For example, Samuel Wang’s article “How the Courts can Objectively Measure Gerrymandering” explains the basics of the seats votes curve to the readers of *The Atlantic*, thus making the science of redistricting more accessible to the general public.¹⁶ However, public education on gerrymandering is far from adequate and those who are literate in the science of redistricting must continue to make academic discourse comprehensible for the general public.

13 *Ibid* 96.

14 Daley, *Unrigged*, 105.

15 Dave Bradlee et al., “Daves Redistricting App 2020,” Daves Redistricting, accessed May 10, 2021, <https://davesredistricting.org/maps#home>; “Home.” Draw the Lines PA - How to slay a gerrymander. Accessed May 11, 2021. <https://drawthelinespa.org/>.

16 Sam Wang, “Gerrymandering, or Geography?” *The Atlantic* (Atlantic Media Company, March 26, 2019), <https://www.theatlantic.com/ideas/archive/2019/03/how-courts-can-objectively-measure-gerrymandering/585574/>.