GU POLITICAL FELLOW STEVEN LAW

DISCUSSION GROUP OUTLINE

DEMOCRACY AND ITS DISCONTENTS

How Government of the People Is Losing Legitimacy

Discussion Group Synopsis

According to a recent comparison of public opinion polls throughout the world, the most successful politician in the world right now may be Russian strongman Vladimir Putin, who is riding a wave of rising popularity while his counterparts in most democratic regimes have experienced dramatic erosion of support. In the U.S. alone, people have become deeply skeptical of the legitimacy of elections and the press while placing high trust in authoritarian structures like the military. This Discussion Group will examine the factors that are behind this striking deterioration of confidence in democratic institutions and leaders, and whether this trend can be reversed.

Week 1 – Introduction: Our Brand Is Crisis

The current impression the average American has of government is one of constant chaos and crisis: nations on the brink of war, government finances on the brink of collapse, newly adopted policies about to ruin the lives of millions, political leaders under investigation and bitter conflicts among political factions. How much of this is an emergent reality, and how much is driven by the intensely competitive, internet-powered, 24/7 news business, which has created a market for clutter-busting sensational reporting in lieu of sober analysis and journalistic restraint? How might the nonstop cacophony of crisis impact citizens’ attitudes toward government and democratic systems?

Week 2 – The Tribalization of Truth

Just forty years ago, a triumvirate of national TV networks and less than a dozen influential newspapers and newsmagazines shaped the perceptions and opinions of the vast majority of politically interested Americans. Today, not only has the marketplace of news sources exploded, but consumers have increasingly segmented themselves along ideological and political lines—and found media outlets that cater to and reinforce their point of view. How
does this Balkanization of news affect attitudes toward government? Are there any shared “meta-narratives” left that can help unify us? Looking at real-world examples, how can we build public consensus on controversial issues despite this tribalization of information flow?

**Week 3 – Money Changes Everything—Or Does It?**
Political reformers often point to money as the root of all kinds of evil in democratic systems. Big-spending candidates and special interests seem to drown out the voices of less well-heeled citizens. Money-fueled campaigns provoke cynicism and distrust of elected leaders, while politicians must submit to a time-consuming, demeaning “money chase” to be able to finance their campaigns. Since the Supreme Court decision in *Citizens United*, Super PACs and “dark money” groups appear to eclipse even the candidates in controlling the political debate and determining election outcomes. The group will examine these perceptions of the role of political spending in the American democratic system: does it tilt the playing field against less moneyed constituencies? Does it lead inevitably to corruption? Do candidates and voters matter? What are the benefits and disadvantages of stricter regulation?

**Week 4 – The Decline and Fall of the American Press**
From hollowed-out newsrooms in local newspapers to the phenomenon of Fake News, the American press has fallen on hard times. Public confidence in the objectivity of the media has also fallen to record-low levels—which may be a byproduct of the increasing ideological segmentation of cable and internet news platforms. To what extent is the collapse of trust in the press exacerbated by the aggressively adversarial relationship between the current president and the national press corps? If the institution of the press is delegitimized, how might that affect the way that people respond as citizens in a democracy? What should we take from the fact that public trust in the press is less than half of public trust in the police, and barely a third of public trust in the military? What should the press do to reverse this precipitous decline?

**Week 5 – Free Speech and Civility**
Free speech, once considered the cornerstone of political and personal liberty, has become increasingly suspect as certain views and modes of expression are judged to be beyond the pale in a progressive society. How does freedom of speech strengthen democratic society? Should the ideals of civility and respect for others be given equal weight with the right to express one’s views? The group will discuss recent examples to assess the ramifications of tolerating vs. suppressing views that are widely offensive or hurtful to certain constituencies.

**Week 6 – Are Our Problems Too Big for Politics?**
Has Western society reached a point where its problems simply cannot be solved through democratic institutions? Authoritarian leaders like China’s Xi Jinping and Vladimir Putin are able to tackle difficult issues by eliminating politics—that is, public opinion and input—from the equation. Here in America, Congress’ rock-bottom approval rating reflects widespread frustration with the inefficiency, compromise, conflict-avoidance and inherent messiness of democratic government. Meanwhile, America’s spiraling national debt, spending priorities, immigration problems and social controversies all seem beyond the competence of regular
democratic processes and politicians. How do we confront—or accede to—the American public’s restiveness regarding the weaknesses of democratic governance? Should we be open to more structures like the Base Realignment and Closure Commission, which limit public input and political influence on controversial issues that can impact communities and individual lives?

Week 7 – Resistance and Revolution
Among at least some citizens, the intensifying tribalization of American politics has fueled a rising sense of mistrust, victimization, ideological absolutism and disdain for engagement in democratic processes. Within such a framework, politics becomes a zero-sum game to be won at all costs and political opponents become dangerous enemies. Notwithstanding the historic stability of American democracy and broad acceptance of its norms, there seems to be growing interest in the language and even tactics of anti-democratic movements, from organized “resistance” to democratic government to advocacy of a “French Revolution” in American society to political violence on the left and right. Looking at recent examples, the group will discuss whether these are simply fringe aberrations or more serious trends that require a response. America has a venerable history of civil disobedience in opposition to injustice; what are the appropriate circumstances and means for citizens to disrupt the rule of law when regular democratic processes appear to have failed?

Week 8 – Conclusion: Can American Democracy Be Saved?
This final discussion group will be focused on how American institutions and citizens can remedy the problems and pressures that threaten our democratic system. The group will discuss, among other topics, the emerging discipline of Viewpoint Diversity and renewed calls for civic education in public schools.