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Breaking

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Echo Chambers

Study: US is an oligarchy, not a democracy

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17 April 2014

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This man does not like to be disturbed while he's running the US

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Today's must-read

The US is dominated by a rich and powerful elite.

So concludes a **recent study** by Princeton University Prof Martin Gilens and Northwestern University Prof Benjamin I Page.

This is not news, you say.

Perhaps, but the two professors have conducted exhaustive research to try to present data-driven support for this conclusion. Here's how they explain it:

Multivariate analysis indicates that economic elites and organised groups representing business interests have substantial independent impacts on US government policy, while average citizens and mass-based interest groups have little or no independent influence.

In English: **the wealthy few move policy, while the average American has little power.**

The two professors came to this conclusion after reviewing answers to 1,779 survey questions asked between 1981 and 2002 on public policy issues. They broke the responses down by income level, and then determined how often certain income levels and organised interest groups saw their policy preferences enacted.

"A proposed policy change with low support among economically elite Americans (one-out-of-five in favour) is adopted only about 18% of the time," they write, "while a proposed change with high support (four-out-of-five in favour) is adopted about 45% of the time."

On the other hand:

When a majority of citizens disagrees with economic elites and/or with organised interests, they generally lose. Moreover, because of the strong status quo bias built into the US political system, even when fairly large majorities of Americans favour policy change, they generally do not get it.

They conclude:

Americans do enjoy many features central to democratic governance, such as regular elections, freedom of speech and association and a widespread (if still contested) franchise. But we believe that if policymaking is dominated by powerful business organisations and a small number of affluent Americans, then America's claims to being a democratic society are seriously threatened.

Eric Zuess, **writing** in Counterpunch, isn't surprised by the survey's results.

"American democracy is a sham, no matter how much it's pumped by the oligarchs who run the country (and who control the nation's "news" media)," he writes. "The US, in other words, is basically similar to Russia or most other dubious 'electoral' 'democratic' countries. We weren't formerly, but we clearly are now."

This is the "Duh Report", **says** Death and Taxes magazine's Robyn Pennacchia. Maybe, she writes, Americans should just accept their fate.

"Perhaps we ought to suck it up, admit we have a classist society and do like England where we have a House of Lords and a House of Commons," she writes, "instead of pretending as though we all have some kind of equal opportunity here."

South Korea

Ferry tragedy was a manmade disaster - The death toll from the sinking of the Sewol off the south-eastern tip of South Korea could have been greatly reduced if the passengers had been properly instructed in safety procedures and the crew hadn't been among the first to abandon the ship, write the editors of South Korea's JoongAng Daily.

The South Korean government also shares blame, they write. "It failed to grasp the seriousness of the accident from the start and didn't know how many were rescued or missing."

The government, they continue, should conduct a thorough investigation and prepare a report on how to upgrade the nation's "safety systems and procedures".

Argentina

Cristina Kirchner's sham populism - The government of Cristina Kirchner touts a populism that "redistributes wealth to benefit the poor", writes Luis Alberto Romero in Argentina's Clarin (translated by WorldCrunch).

In reality, he says, "the outcome has been greater wealth concentrations and more social polarisation, helped by subsidy policies".

The Kirchner regime, he argues, has been "built on two foundations: concentration of power and accumulation of wealth".

Algeria

Presidential vote endorses status quo - It seems clear that President Abdelaziz Bouteflika will win a fourth term in this week's election despite looking "more dead than alive", writes University of Houston Prof Robert Zaretsky in the Los Angeles Times.

Mr Bouteflika "is entrenched, propped up by generals and an uneasy status quo", he says.

"The question is," he writes, "how long will the government manage to impose scripted elections on a population ready for the risks and rewards of an unscripted future?"

Ukraine

Nato football v Russian chess - The Ukrainian crisis has taken Nato planners by surprise, writes Prof David Murphy of National University of Ireland, Maynooth, in the Irish Times. This, he says, is because of "fundamental cultural, strategic and political differences" between Russia and the West.

"Nato operates at a huge disadvantage as it needs consensus and co-operation within its member states in order to act," he writes. "President Vladimir Putin and his political and military staffs do not face such limitations and have the freedom to act quickly."

Russia has formulated a plan and is executing it, he concludes. It is up to the members of Nato to work together to stop it.

BBC Monitoring's quotes of the day

*Ukrainian media respond to **high-level meetings** between officials from the US, EU, Ukraine and Russia in Geneva aimed resolving the crisis in Ukraine.*

"There is an illusory hope for the conference in Geneva. Ukraine will be presented there as a pie which will be divided. Everything ... shows the signs of a grand plot, where big geopolitical players resolved their issues at Ukraine's expense. It will be like that this time around too." - Editorial in **Glavkom**.

"Today's meeting will show if the West can counter [Vladimir] Putin's plans to impose his 'world order'." - Editorial in **Den**.

"International talks will hardly improve the situation in Ukraine until people inside the country start talking. So the only thing the Geneva meeting could influence is to facilitate the beginning of talks inside the country between representatives of the east and the central authorities. If the meeting provides this impetus it will be a positive result." - Volodymyr Fesenko in **Komsomolskaya Pravda v Ukraine**.

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