

Toby Arment, WY – 2019

Washington Week was packed with entirely positive speakers, making it impossible to analyze the best. Rather, I would like to look at how my views changed during the week, specifically those about governance and democracy. At the start of our first complete day in Washington D.C., we toured Mount Vernon. After walking the estate and visiting the museum, the subject of slavery stuck in my mind. George Washington owned a lot of enslaved persons. Despite being heralded as the greatest American man, I couldn't approve of him engaging in a system of owning others. While he did release all his enslaved persons upon his death, he still financially gained immensely from their free labor. More than this, Washington allowed slavery as we formed our nation, with the three-fifths compromise eternally staining our Constitution. Next, the Executive Director of the Society of the Cincinnati, an organization tasked with promoting knowledge about the history of the American Revolution, spoke to us. My concern about slavery was one thing the speaker addressed, making a great deal of sense about the issue. He argued that we all participate in this economic system that works for us. Part of this system is the exploitation of others for abhorrent pay to make our goods cheaper. As a society, we acknowledge that our economy would not work without cheap labor. George Washington had to take part in his economic system to make any change at all, but still worked against it. Now it is our turn to fight against this injustice we place upon others for the benefit of ourselves.

The miracle of America's Republic was another subject of the speech. Before us, every person was either a ruler or a servant: there were no citizens. Our independence was not something that seemed possible; the great empires that dominated the world had successfully been able to squash seemingly every rebellion that came to them. However, despite the odds, great leadership helped the colonies become independent, creating a world where there are just citizens: no rulers or servants. Those citizens can become lawmakers with the consent of others, and lose that power just as easily. Temporary rule is the remarkable thing about our democracy.

Apart from leadership, my expanding perspective of democracy was furthered by the conversations I had with the other delegates. Two topics were discussed often: the Electoral College and compulsory voting. As for the former, I feel I had a great deal of perspective. I live in the state where an individual vote has the most weight in the Presidential election, and I've never found that to be fair. A principle of our democracy is one man deserves one vote. The fact that I have greater sway over who leads us all than someone in California (sorry Cindy and Lauren), solely because of where I live, doesn't make much sense to me. The Supreme Court ruled in *Reynolds v. Sims* that state legislative districts must be roughly equal in proportion. Legislators must each represent the same amount of people. In essence, a citizen shouldn't have a greater vote because of where they live. Yet, the United States ignores this principle. This case is an important precedent when we look to why the Electoral College isn't just.

As for the latter, fundamental to being a democracy is hearing the voices of everyone. While I'm not certain I support compulsory voting, I walked away from Washington Week knowing that we need to work vigilantly to increase voter turnout. (One such way is to make everyone believe that their voice counts, perhaps by abolishing the Electoral College.) When I mention mandating voting, many often argue that it will lead to more uniformed people casting ballots. And, well, that's kind of the point. We do not live in a meritocratic system where the most informed get to run our nation. Everyone is affected by the law, so everyone deserves a say. Equally, we deserve to hear what our fellow citizens think. Some say that it's an American's right to sit out in protest. I disagree. Not voting is not a protest of our democracy, but a surrender of it.