

## AP US Government and Politics - Summer Reading

*Democracy Despite Itself* by Danny Oppenheimer and Mike Edwards

My intent in the assignment is not to discuss the corruptions in a democratic system. My intent is to explore the the system of government which allows the “citizens of democracies are healthier, happier, and freer than citizens of other countries. “ (MIT Press) I want you to know the importance of being informed and the importance of using your knowledge to use the power you have to participate in a democracy. I want you to be aware of campaign strategies so that you will be a more informed voter. I want you to know how to make our democracy better.

Voters often make irrational decisions based on inaccurate and irrelevant information. Politicians are often inept, corrupt, or out of touch with the will of the people. Elections can be determined by the design of the ballot and the gerrymandered borders of a district. And yet, despite voters who choose candidates according to the boxer--brief dichotomy and politicians who struggle to put together a coherent sentence, democracy works exceptionally well: citizens of democracies are healthier, happier, and freer than citizens of other countries. In *Democracy Despite Itself*, Danny Oppenheimer, a psychologist, and Mike Edwards, a political scientist, explore this paradox: How can democracy lead to such successful outcomes when the defining characteristic of democracy -- elections -- is so flawed?

Oppenheimer and Edwards argue that democracy works because regular elections, no matter how flawed, produce a variety of unintuitive, positive consequences. The brilliance of democracy, write Oppenheimer and Edwards, does not lie in the people's ability to pick superior leaders. It lies in the many ways that it subtly encourages the flawed people and their flawed leaders to work toward building a better society. - MIT Press

### Part I - Democracy is Crazy

1. How does the author define democracy?
2. Why do citizens need to be able to identify the flaws in democracy?

### Chapter 1 Don't Know Much About...Well, Anything, Really

*The best argument against democracy is a five-minute conversation with the average voter.*  
Winston Churchill

1. Why do people believe in untruths about candidates?
2. “One problem is that we simply assume that our favored candidate agrees with us. “ Explain this quote.

3. What is the *False Consensus Effect*?
4. The author tells a story of drawing a bicycle, and how we know what one looks like and we know there are parts, but we find it difficult to draw because we really haven't investigated or we have so little experience. Explain how he uses this story to illustrate voters and candidates.
5. How do political ads sometimes mislead the voters? Give an example.
6. Explain 4 ways in which voters are misled.
7. What is a confirmation bias?
8. Explain what the author says about why the media has a bias.

#### Chapter 2 "We the People" are Irrational

*A government can be no better than the public opinion that sustains it.*

Franklin Delano Roosevelt

1. Explain the author's findings concerning how appearance affects the outcome of the election.
2. What is "priming" and how does it change views towards a particular issue?
3. How does language and terminology affect opinions?

#### Chapter 3 Electoral Madness

*A citizen will cross the ocean to fight for democracy, but won't cross the street to vote in an election.* - Bill Vaughan

1. What is gerrymandering?
2. What problem do state legislatures experience when drawing district lines within the state?
3. What is the author's explanation of why Al Gore lost the election in 2000, even though he received more popular votes than George Bush?
4. What does the author mean by "an incumbency advantage"?
5. How does weather affect voter turnout?
6. How does ballot order affect the outcome of an election?
7. What is "strategic voting"? How are "focal point" taken into account in strategic voting?
8. The author claims there are not meaningless votes. Explain what he means.

9. What does the author mean when he says, “essentially, all presidents are from New Hampshire and Iowa”?
10. How can “pluralistic ignorance” cause the most popular candidate to lose the election?
11. Explain what a closed primary is and what an open primary is and the problems with each.

#### Chapter 4 Too Many Voices

*Polling is merely an instrument for gauging public opinion. When a president or any other leader pays attention to poll results, he is, in effect, paying attention to the views of the people. Any other interpretation is nonsense.* - George Horace Gallup

1. How is democracy like *The Price is Right*?
2. How do voter’s opinions make it difficult for a candidate to make decisions?
3. What makes the results of a poll accurate or inaccurate?
4. Explain what a “push poll” is.
5. How do answer choices in polls sometimes lead to misleading results?

#### Part II - Restoring Some Sanity

*It has been said that democracy is the worst form of government except all the others that have been tried.* - Winston Churchill

1. The author gives several alternatives to a democracy, but claims that none of the alternatives work as well as a democracy in ensuring citizens the most rights and civil liberties. What is his reasoning?
2. Give at least three examples of how democratic citizens have more liberty.
3. The author acknowledges that it is not difficult to find examples when liberties in democracies around the world have been limited. He focusses on how Freedom of the Press and Freedom of Religion are protected in a democratic system, two of the most basic freedoms. How do these freedoms vary, even among democratic systems?
4. How does democracy foster peace between nations?
5. Why do democracies do a better job at taking care of their people?

## Chapter 5 Procedure, Process, Prophecy

*Though force can protect in emergency, only justice, fairness, consideration and cooperation can finally lead man to the dawn of eternal peace.* - Dwight D. Eisenhower

1. Studies show that people will be more likely to follow a law voluntarily if they believe the law is fair and just. Explain why this is true.
2. How does a democratic system contribute to fairness?
3. By making people feel involved in the decisions that affect their lives, you make them less likely to rebel against society." Explain this quote.
4. Explain how a democracy relies on the concept of self-fulfilling prophecies to maintain control.

## Chapter 6

*All democracies are based the proposition that power is very dangerous and that it is extremely important not to let any one person or small group have too much power for too long a time.* - Aldous Huxley

1. "Elections act like a release valve. Without them, pressure will build and societies are more likely to explode." Explain this quote.
2. Why do wars boost a leader's popularity rating?
3. Explain a time in American history when a political leader tried to shift the blame in order to boost his popularity rating. (There is no example about the US in this book.)
4. Why is the strategy of "ruling with an iron fist" devastating to the economy of that nation?
5. Do you think peaceful protests or violent protests are more effective? What are the pros and cons of each? Give an explanation of your answer.
6. Explain this quote. "Democracies are not ruled by monarchs, but their leaders must still maintain legitimacy in order to govern."
7. What is the reason that democracies transfer power smoothly between different rulers?
8. Explain the meaning of the diagram on page 167.
9. "Democracies... are uniquely capable of responding to turmoil and crisis... without widespread chaos or violence." Explain why this is a true statement.

## Chapter 7 Overcoming our Weaknesses

*So, two cheers fro Democracy: one because it admits variety and two because it permits criticism.* - E.M. Forster

1. The author argues that voters, for the most part, are uninformed. Why does he say that voters still, for them, make the best decision?
2. According to the author, what additional factors contribute to which candidate voters support?
3. How does the *wisdom of crowds* cancel ignorance?
4. What is a *veto player* and why are they necessary in a democracy?

#### Chapter 8 Throwing the Bums Out

*The only way I can lose this election is if I'm caught in bed with either a dead girl or a live boy.* - Edwin Edwards

1. Explain the author's stance on the importance of issues in an election. Read his argument. Do you agree or disagree with him? Explain your answer.
2. What is the incumbency advantage?
3. Explain what the author means when he says that no one is safe.

#### Conclusion The Means Justify the Ends

*How wonderful that we have met with a paradox. Now we have some hope of making progress.* - Neils Bohr

1. "The brilliance of democracy...[is that] it subtly encourages the flawed people and their flawed leaders to continually work toward building a better democracy." Explain this quote.
2. Write a short paragraph about why the author believes democracy works.
3. Write a short paragraph about what citizens can do to make out democracy better.