



The Crisis of the Middle-Class Constitution: Why Economic Inequality Threatens Our Republic

Ganesh Sitaraman

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In this original, provocative contribution to the debate over economic inequality, Ganesh Sitaraman argues that a strong and sizable middle class is a prerequisite for America's constitutional system.

A New York Times Notable Book of 2017

For most of Western history, Sitaraman argues, constitutional thinkers assumed economic inequality was inevitable and inescapable--and they designed governments to prevent class divisions from spilling over into class warfare. The American Constitution is different. Compared to Europe and the ancient world, America was a society of almost unprecedented economic equality, and the founding generation saw this equality as essential for the preservation of America's republic. Over the next two centuries, generations of Americans fought to sustain the economic preconditions for our constitutional system. But today, with economic and political inequality on the rise, Sitaraman says Americans face a choice: Will we accept rising economic inequality and risk oligarchy or will we rebuild the middle class and reclaim our republic?

The Crisis of the Middle-Class Constitution is a tour de force of history, philosophy, law, and politics. It makes a compelling case that inequality is more than just a moral or economic problem; it threatens the very core of our constitutional system.

The Crisis of the Middle-Class Constitution: Why Economic Inequality Threatens Our Republic Details

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Conor says

I'm very glad that this man is an advisor to Senator Warren.

Employing a panoramic view of history, Sitaraman analyzes how previous successful states/empires defined the rights of various classes, and how the American experiment was very much propounded in a land of economic parity, and that the Founders intended/assumed that it would stay that way. Much of the stability required for checks and balances requires a predominant buffer class that can mediate between the rapaciousness of the upper classes and the jealousies of the lower. This sounds all well and good, but it seems that if the importance of a strong middle class were so foregrounded in the minds of the Founders, they would have enshrined it in the text of the Constitution in some way, or would at least have provided for stronger mechanisms for sustaining it.

Ultimately, I find Sitaraman's evidence for his central premise wanting. Much of it is presumed (e.g., the Founders were erudite students of political history and *must* have appreciated the peril of allowing an upper class or lower class predominate), or inferred (e.g. the lack of a class requirement for the House-of-Lords-manque U.S. Senate indicates our refusal to empower the upper classes). Also, for all of his impressive grasp of American political and legal history, Sitaraman's conclusion about the incompatibility between the Founders' vision and class inequality of political power doesn't exactly hold. After all, this current Gilded Age is not the first our country has suffered through, nor is the Constitution so allergic to massive disparities in wealth that it has been sundered while suffering them.

I would probably give this 3.5 stars, though. Like I said, the author's grasp of legal and political history, particularly of the American type, is impressive. Plus Sitaraman offers intriguing solutions for ensuring that disfavored classes have a say in governance: lottery elections, tribunates, etc. It is to be expected that the gleam of the Founders' vision is dulled in the light of dimmer days, but these are the books we should be reading to understand how we might solve the problems they neither anticipated nor adequately shielded us from.

wally says

finished this one this morning, 10 jun 17, 6:21 in the a.m. 3 stars, i liked it. informative. our government, what can one say? sitaraman ranges from the time of the ancient greeks to our nation's founding to the present day and touches briefly on the election of 2016, describes and defines what type of constitution we have, what it could have been, what it is, makes a distinction between a "class warfare constitution" and what we have a "middle-class constitution" and does not go into much our elected leaders over-stepping the *bounds* of the constitution. perhaps briefly on a few points, but he doesn't make a distinction--in the way i would phrase it--that at times, numerous times, our elected have gone beyond the powers granted them in the constitution--and we have allowed that to happen.

would things be different if the percentages were different? talking the percentage of the rich, the middle class, the poor? why are there so many lobbyists in washington? because time has taught them their money influences how much, when, and to what degree the elected can be persuaded to over-step the powers

granted them in the constitution? would it be different if "x" number of whatever, if "x" percentage controlled "y" percentage of the wealth? what difference would it make? we elect those who serve for life.

meh. fucking politics.

informative...some new insight...for me...about various financial problems that have happened at our nation's founding and since. touches on the kind and number of lobbyists in washington. no blue collar. mostly all white collar. and no conclusions about why they are there. there's stuff about lobbyists...this, that, the other. wish there was more nuts and bolts. "x" happened...."y" legislation was the result. some info about meds. say like medicare, the v.a., some other alphabet unable to...how'd he word it...negotiate price. like is done over there, up there, not here. probably not covered in the 24/7 news cycle where we've heard for six months about "russian collusion"...major distractions. nothing here about the role the media plays. big time player...but no analysis of their role in how things happen.

uuummmm...what else? curious info about how much time a newly-elected, or those entrenched for life...how much time is spent on "fund raising". be curious to ask my elected, if ever given opportunity...like that will happen?...ask them, hey bud, how much time in your "work week" is devoted to the nation's business and how much time is spent on raising money? some tidbit here about another that is told one must raise \$18,000 a day. yeah, you bet. get to work now. go have a power lunch. ask for green between bites of salad. eat healthy.

nothing here about two-parties. we're pretty much evenly divided, straight down the line, as the song has it. but still...various election cycles...things turn around. the pendulum swings both ways. but nothing about that...two parties. that is the option. the lesser of two evils. touches briefly on the idea of a third party...some populist...possibly the v.p. of william jennnngs bryant? briefly on ross perot...92 was it? and what i think was the motivating factor behind "bipartisan campaign finance reform". harps a time or ten on "citizens united". one of the justices said that had "bcfr" been in place in 92, ross perot would have been subject to five years in the federal pen...as i recall...because he used his own money or some such...to finance a run. trump? what's it all about, alfie? elected for life. an elected official can be "the most qualified candidate" to date (hillary, he says)...and have all that baggage, certainly one reason--her personality--that sent foster to suicide...and because the media spins and spins...she wins the "popular vote".

touches briefly on the idea of making the vote mandatory. like in australian? though one can "protest vote"? turn in an empty ballot? so easy answers, alfie. we elect them for life.

nothing here about "term limits"one justice called "bcfr" an incumbent protection plan. what options does the electorate have? the constitution says free speech. the ussc upheld "bcfr" and struck down "citizens united". was money, the moneyed-elite involved in that decision? 5-4 decisions, both. one coming out within days of finding sadam hiding in a hole...and the story changes, the world moves on.

be curious to read an analysis of *why* we've only a small percentage of people who actually go to the polls. and don't give me a bunch of crap about tuesday...afternoon...i'm just beginning to see! now i'm on my way!...why? because they'll do what the hell they want anyway, damn the constitution and the bounds written therein that are ignored...and why not? they're in for life. they know they can pretty much do whatever the hell they please. a new story will come up, move along, nothing to see here.

and there is some here about how that happens---has happened---in our history. things were beginning to happen...say like before the world war numbered two. an idea was brewing...but things happened. hitler and company. the idea passed.

what else? i dunno....good read...three stars. i liked it.

Marks54 says

Ganesh Sitaraman's book is a study of how economic inequality influences the functioning of a republican form of government. The "inequality" content is well known and draws from the major researchers on the topic such as Thomas Piketty. What is new and interesting here is how Sitaraman draws out the implications of inequality for political society.

The premise of the argument is that political power follows economic power, so that as society becomes more unequal, government will increasingly come to resemble a plutocracy-an oligopoly of the powerful in which government is by the rich for the rich with little influence options open for others. The punchline of this is that those left out of government will not take their exclusion lightly and that civil war and chaos will ensue, ultimately leading to some form of autocracy.

Political thinkers have realized this problem for a long time and one of Sitaraman's early discussions is how this happened in ancient Rome at the time of the Republic and how the growth of inequality led to civil war and Empire.

To avoid such chaos, constitutions are developed that recognize the gross class distinctions in society and attempt to ensure that both haves and have-nots have a say in government. Indeed, the book argues that class warfare constitutions are common throughout history. The American constitution was different, in that it was built around the presence of a large middle class that would balance the interests of rich and poor. Over time, however, economic development puts tensions on the middle class and promotes greater extremes in inequality. Sitaraman shows how this has happened over American history. Economic trends have resembled waves that bring increased or reduced inequality. In addition, government has trouble adapted to changed technological and economic conditions and thus often addresses inequality only at a lag - if it is addressed at all.

The book is clear and well argued. A strength is that it identifies the thinkers who were influential at the time of the US founding (even if they are less well known today), such as James Harrington. The argument linking how economic inequality affects politics which then in turn affects economics, is clear, well drawn, and backed up with lots of interesting statistics.

This book fits in well to the inequality debates in terms of answering the "so what" questions about why inequality is a problem. I am less informed about the legal context of all this, but the discussion of the Supreme Court and critical court decisions is good.

Sitaraman's book contributes to the inequality debate. There might be a temptation to link its arguments to current political debates, but that is less compelling. The 2016 elections fit into this story but the story does not depend on them. The concluding recommendations are reasonable but do not seem likely to be enacted any time soon.

Overall this is a fine book.

Matthew says

After taking a break from this for some classwork, I managed to finish it up. It's a well sourced, well written, and well argued book about the past, present, and potential future of our republic based in the economic system we experience. I'm a bit of a policy wonk, and so while a lot of what was in here was not news to me it provided a good compilation of the information. I was also very pleased with the section on ideas for the future of our democracy.

In all, this book got me pretty fired up about socioeconomic inequality in this country, especially knowing that some of the changes since it was written have done nothing but worked to push us further down the path laid out within.

Becky says

Spent most of this wanting to sob but settled on deep sighs. I would love to have copies sent to every Trump supporter who is not a billionaire.

Mehrsa says

This book is a nice sweep of democratic history that contemplates what it means for the democracy to have such stark inequality. Sitaraman's thesis, and it is a provocative one that I agree with, is that drastic wealth inequality threatens the foundations of our constitutional democracy because our founding documents were based on a more equal distribution of wealth. I think we talk about class struggle too little in the US as if not talking about it will make the tension go away. As we've seen, and as Sitaraman points out, if not addressed through the democratic system, it will be addressed by demagogues.

Michael Baranowski says

If you're expecting a typical liberal lament about the passing of the good old days of the 1950s - early 1970s with the strong unions, high top tax rates, and heavy regulation ... well, you won't be entirely disappointed. But this book is a lot more than that. Sitaraman's look at constitutional theory is fascinating and should be of interest to both liberals and conservatives. I've been a political scientist for 20 years, and it's rare that a book written for a general audience has so much in it that surprises me and informs my views. I'm very glad I read it.

Myles says

There are no surprises here: wealth influences politics. In the US, most elected officials to national office spend more time raising money for their next election than they spend in the committee rooms of government. It's safe to say the donors will have a say in just about everything. As will the corporate lobbyists, the Goldman Sachs financiers appointed to Cabinet positions, and (although Sitaraman does not

mention it) professors at elite institutions.

In this miasma of corruption, Professor Sitaraman conjures up an innocent time when American public servants devised a constitution intended to foster a polity based on a fair distribution of wealth and income in the economy. He cites proof that the framers of the Constituion were influenced by traditions of political thought grounded in economic fairness, that they avoided models of class warfare and instead found a balance of competing influences in the polity.

The assumption here is that a reasonably strong middle class will govern fairly and effectively.

That's a pretty big assumption. What if you think it's the middle -- or the middling -- classes which got America into the fix it's in now? Stalemate on Capital Hill. A White House occupied by a lunatic. A judiciary controlled by people who want to purify the law according to the original intentions of the framers of the Constitution, whatever those were.

I honestly don't believe that the Constitution was grounded in an economic model of fairness at all. It came about in an era of political crisis and was intended to improve upon the political articles of Confederation which themselves were direly incomplete.

Moreover, it was drawn up in a country of seven million inhabitants, not 350 million inhabitants.

And today Americans stick to their amendments like flies to flypaper. As if they came from the mouth of God.

American political history is grounded, whether you like it or not, in an unfair system of slavery, the genocide of aboriginal peoples, and the rape of countryside. Did I mention systematic disenfranchisement of women and the working poor?

I personally don't agree that the American Constitution is place to look for agreement on fairness in the political decision making. The Constitution is a very living document to help protect the government against the very real problems abuses in political power. Americans are faced with just such a challenge now.

Democracy is sustained by participation. The US Constitution is but one expression of that participation. Neither Rome nor Athens are such great examples of participation, certainly not in light of contemporary communications, mobility, or social thought. Things are much, much different today.

I find the American obsession with their Constitution, much like their obsession with the Presidency missing the point. And It annoys me to no end to listen to political commentators complain about "elites" who supposedly make all the decisions but don't work for a living. Everybody works in that goddamned country, except maybe my Auntie Sadie.

These people are simply going to have to compromise because they are never, ever going to agree with each other on some fundamentals.

This is not political science. (How scientific is "political science" anyway?)

This is common sense.

Shenard Robinson says

Worth a re-read to better understand how each of us contributes to the overall decline of public virtue and what responsibility means to a Republic.

Richard Thompson says

When I find myself completely agreeing with a book that has a clear political point of view, I wonder if I am just letting myself be drawn into the trap created by the internet and cable news channels where people see their own often wrong views reflected back on themselves and happily bask in the clarity of their own narrow and poorly conceived vision. So as I read this book I alternated back and forth between smiling in agreement and nagging self doubt, worrying that I had let Mr. Sitaraman fool me by feeding me back a close reflection of my own views. But try as I might, I still got through to the end feeling that this book pretty much nailed it.

I liked the idea that most attempts at republican government before the US Constitution were based on "class warfare" theory where the governmental structure was made to reflect and enshrine the class structure of society, giving each class some measure of a voice in governing, though of course as George Orwell taught us, some pigs are more equal than others. And then we have the American middle class constitution that grew out of a frontier society where there was no aristocracy and few people were vastly richer than others. Of course there are some aspects of our governmental structure that favor the rich or that otherwise promote inequality, but remarkably few. However, a structure that gives everyone an equal opportunity at participation, regardless of class, can only work as long as no single class is able to dominate. Sitaraman describes the efforts that have been made over the course of US history to maintain the underpinnings of this structure, which have come in waves of greater and lesser power, but that over time seem to have been largely successful, at least until recently.

In recent years there has been been a decimation of the middle class with a few people rising out of it to riches and far more pushed down into borderline poverty. Sitaraman discusses how the phenomenon of increased wealth disparity is a self-reinforcing phenomenon -- as the rich get richer, they capture government more and more with the result that they get richer yet again, and simultaneously the people in the middle slowly evaporate and lose their say in governing. I agree that we need to take steps to reverse this trend, not because wealth is bad per se but because the concentration of wealth undermines the structure of our institutions which require a broad social equality in order to function as they were intended. As Sitaraman correctly points out, these problems are ones that affect all of us; it's not even good for the rich themselves to become too dominant, so that this is an issue that leaders of all political persuasions should be able to get behind.

As of now, we don't seem to have a meaningful coalition or even a single charismatic leader in the federal government who champions this cause. I hope that we can find one before it is too late.

Jake says

The premise of this book is that relative economic equality is necessary for republican government. It begins with the history of the idea going back to Greek and Roman republics and writings from Machiavelli (not

The Prince) and other who influenced the American founders. Then we have American history where in the early years this was the most equal nation in the world (excluding blacks and natives, as noted in the book) due to having enough land for anyone to make it on their own. James Madison and others saw a future problem when the land ran out which he thought would be 1930. The problem is twofold as the powerful never seem to have enough and the resentful poor are a threat of riot and revolution. As many feared, we no longer have farmers in Congress and it's difficult to even meet your representatives without offering them lots of money. This effects the laws. The second part of the book which was suggestions for making things more equal and representative was not as compelling. So we have a problem but what to do? John Adams asked whether there was "such a rage for Profit and Commerce that we no longer have public virtue enough to support a Republic." Hopefully not.

Varrick Nunez says

This is a more challenging read, as the author lays out his assessment of the history of constitutional government and makes a case for our Constitution as a "middle-class" vice a "class-warfare" constitution, with many direct quotes from the founders that they intended to not have concentrations of wealth and create a neo-royal class of entitled elites. Mr. Sitaraman reviews the history of constitutions from ancient Greece on, and presents suggestions for a way forward.

It will be a tough fight to draw the nation back from the brink of oligarchy; I'm not hopeful, my country seems to swing back and forth from having a strong middle class, to what we have now. Will we swing back to growing or supporting the middle class, or will the oligarchs be able to entrench themselves for a long while? History predicts the latter, followed by revolution, or an intervening cataclysm, to break the oligarch's hold.

Another review, by "Myles," suggested that focusing on the Constitution, or any other one thing (e.g. the President, or, I would infer, the Congress or the Judiciary) is missing the point, that the lack of participation in American democracy is more worrisome. I agree.

We live in interesting times, to adapt the ancient Chinese curse.

Michael says

Highly recommended!!! There have been heaps of books written on inequality in the last 10 years but to my knowledge none that have focused on economic equality as the underlying foundation of our constitution. I'm already due for a rereading though because I can no longer remember his rebuttal to cynics who believe the constitution was written to simply protect the wealthy.

Hopefully this book falls into some conservative hands and let's them put their respect for the constitution and the founders to the test. They might be surprised to hear the framers in their own words address their concern for our country should we ever let wealth concentrate upward at the expense of our middle class, not to mention every other part of our political system. Ganesh covers all of it.

Corrine Burmeister says

An amazingly well thought-out and articulated view of the main source of what ails America today - the decline of the middle class and lack of economic mobility. This book really got me thinking and now I feel informed about several areas I will look for future candidates I vote for to support: anti-trust laws, campaign finance reform, progressive tax and inheritance reforms, among other things. Every American should read this book, or at least be familiar with the concepts Sitaraman espouses.

Carl says

Factual & well-written but the theme by now is more than familiar. Money has a gravitational effect on politics. The wealthy have more influence than the poor and as inequality increases, the effect grows & becomes more pernicious. The U.S. at the beginning was a nation of yeoman farmers with negligible extremes of wealth & poverty. Its constitution was conceived, written & adopted in that context & it has functioned as long as those conditions prevailed. When inequality became prevalent - the gilded age, the roaring twenties & the present - our government ceased to work for our population in total and conditions are likely to continue to deteriorate as long as corporations & the wealthy are able to use their financial resources to dominate governance.
