

**Two sides of the same coin:**

An analytical report examining differing aspects of the  
United States Constitution as explained by  
Joseph M. Bessette and Michael Parenti, respectively

**PART I:**

In his essay entitled *"Deliberative Democracy: The Majority Principle in Republican Government,"* Joseph M. Bessette asserts that the framers of the Constitution proposed a contradictorily dichotomous governmental system and that, while idealistic, it is a political impossibility. Bessette proposes that either the framers were being politically evasive in their diction, or that the limitations placed on the majority "did not violate the basic principle itself." (102) Throughout his exegesis, he attempts to persuade his audience that there is on way to enforce limitations without violating the essence of democratic liberties.

Bessette supports his claim that the United States government might not be as democratic as the Constitution supposedly suggested by providing factual evidence regarding the framer's intent and, often times, using their words. Firstly, he says that "decisions are made by elected officials" and not by the individual citizens of the nation. (106) This statement is factual because no matter how much representation the citizens of the United States may have in their federal government, they still do not directly vote on many issues, but rather place trust in their political representatives. Bessette goes on to say that representation "opens the possibility that governmental decisions" could be made on the basis of the representative's own viewpoint instead of being based on "the considered judgments of the people." (106 – 107) Secondly, he factually states that "in a pure democracy, the people actually meet together and make binding political decisions..." which is different from the type of representative or, as he calls it, "deliberative democracy" of the United States. (104) His definition of democracy directly refers back to James Madison's definition of direct democracy presented in the *Federalist 10*.

While Bessette does offer many factual statements to defend and support his position, he frequently offers opinions and forcefully words them as fact. While some of the opinions are common, commonality does NOT constitute fact! Firstly, he says that a "sound public policy demands more than the pursuit of private ambition." (112) This is an example of an opinion that is

commonly held, but is not fact since it cannot be proven. The opinionated nature of the statement can be confirmed by the choice of the word "sound." Soundness is not a quantitative term and requires definition if it is to be closed to interpretation. Therefore, while it may be an argument of the so-called *devil's advocate*, one could potentially argue against his point. Secondly, he states that "bicameralism was not a device to thwart majority rule," but that idea is based on the opinion he presented early in the paragraph regarding the "Senate[s]...pursu[it]" of the goals of the "reasonable...public." (109) So, in order to believe his statement about bicameralism, one must agree with his previous statements, which are also opinions.

Bessette claims that if "every national legislator served only a two-year term" the government would neglect long-term issues. (109) This supposed causal relationship isn't entirely accurate, but rather, based on speculation. He has no way of knowing whether or not legislators would disregard long-term issues because of their shorter terms; certain legislators may find it easier to project long-term plans if they wouldn't be holding office during the enactment of their proposal. Therefore, Bessette's claimed cause-effect relationship is potentially flawed based on speculation.

## **PART II:**

In his essay "*The Constitution as an Elitist Document*," Michael Parenti argues that the framers of the Constitution weren't trying to promote democracy; rather, they were attempting to protect their financial assets and high political status in a centralized United States government. He tries to illustrate how the framer's intentions were different than their vocalizations and surface value of their dissertations, like the *Federalist Papers*.

Unlike Bessette, Parenti references some empirical data as statements of fact. For instance, he says that "by 1700, three-fourths of the [land] in New York belonged to fewer than a

dozen persons.” (40) This type of fact is very helpful in legitimizing his claims of land owning relating to elitism and power in the United States, and that those few people wanted, for obvious reasons, to protect their ownership. He also says that the framers were “financially successful” people and that “many [were] linked by kinship and marriage...” (41) Both of these factual statements help further his ideas of a pseudo-coup by a small elitist faction.

Like Bessette, however, Parenti often made his assumptions or opinions into seemingly factual statements to improve his argument. He claims, on page 41, that the framers of the Constitution were “impelled by a desire to do something about the increasingly insurgent spirit evidenced among poorer people.” This opinion is based on the logical fallacy known as “begging the question” in that the statement assumes that the reader preemptively believes Parenti’s argument of the framers’ elitist faction. Later, Parenti goes through different political interpretations of “political diversity.” (47) Refuting those other opinions, he says that “Madison welcomed diversity because it would produce not compromise but division.” (47) By offering a myriad of other ideas about Madison’s view of political diversity and then offering his own view, Parenti invalidly makes his opinion seem like a fact.

Shortly thereafter he makes a claim to causation which can’t really be determined. He says that “too great a multiplicity of interests [can make] compromise impossible,” and that can result in a “kind of factionalism and instability.” (47) There are essentially two supposed causal clauses in this argument. The first is the most important in that too many interests make compromise impossible—in essence, the impossibility of compromise stems directly as a result of multiple interests. This is both inherently and potentially flawed in that differing stances on an issue doesn’t necessarily result in lack of compromise about the issue. By definition compromise is giving up certain aspects of one’s view in hopes of maintaining an outcome that is pleasing to all

involved. Therefore, political multiplicity *could* lead to a lack of compromise, but could just as easily be a catalyst of compromise.

### **PART III:**

Personally I feel that Parenti's article is more convincing, primarily because of its use of empirical data. Before reading the articles, I had adopted the mentality that the government was run by the views of a select group of political elitists rather than the common citizen. Therefore, it wasn't necessarily all that difficult to persuade me to believe that the framers of the Constitution had ulterior motives of protecting their land-ownership. Bessette's argument was well-constructed, but did little more than illustrating the seemingly paradoxical dichotomy of the framers' intentions to create a democracy supporting the majority while, at the same time, limiting the power of the majority.