

Richard Pham
Florin High School, Sacramento
2012 Finalist

Justice Louis Brandeis believed that democracy and income inequality cannot coexist. During his time, there was a large disparity between the wealthy and the poor and middle class. Likewise, America now faces the widest amount of income inequality and underrepresentation in history. If Brandeis were with us now, he would not be surprised at our current state of democracy. Our political system is now subject to the whims of the wealthy. Citizens United, Super PACs backed by millionaires and billionaires, campaign contributions made by influential industries, and lobbyists all have a bigger hand in shaping public policy than the hundreds of millions of Americans that these policies affect. It would seem that democracy in America is on the brink of collapse as it struggles to contain the overwhelming influence of wealthy individuals. However, we must look at the big picture. While it is true that the few wealthiest individuals currently hold more influence over our elected officials, they are not entirely at fault. For a democracy to work effectively, the citizens living under this government must be willing to actively participate in this battle for influence. Unfortunately, active participation amongst Americans is scarce. Few Americans voice their opinions against income inequality and even fewer communicate their grievances on social and economic issues to the legislators that represent them. Only until recently, with the Occupy Movement and other widespread protests, has income inequality been brought under the national spotlight with President Obama calling it "the defining issue of our time". In light of this, it becomes clear that democracy is still able to be preserved even in the face of record income inequality and unequal representation. While the wealthy have the money to influence politicians to side with them, we have the voice of an entire country to ensure that the government sees what our country needs and works toward creating public policies that benefit the vast majority of Americans who live in this great nation.

Now, as the 2012 elections approaches, we as Americans have the power to decide what direction our country moves in. Do we continue electing officials who succumb to the influence of wealthy individuals who wish to advance their own agendas while we sit back, twiddle our thumbs and mumble our grievances? Or do we use our voice, our greatest source of power, to send a clear message to our representatives that we are no longer willing to accept a government where our representatives make decisions that solely benefit the wealthy. If they hope to continue being in a position of power, they must use that power to benefit the American people; otherwise, our voices of disapproval will turn into a vote of disapproval. Now is the time to create the democracy that we hope to live in. Regardless of the distribution of wealth, the power of the American people will ultimately lie in the voices and minds of the American people.