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Lord Acton Memorial Scholarship Reflection

I initially decided to spend my junior year in London intending to study how democracy and democratic participation are changing in the 21st century. Admittedly, I had one thing on my mind: Brexit. It seemed to dominate every headline and discussion about British politics, especially when filtered through the American media. However, upon arriving in London, I soon realized that things on the ground were far more complex—and far more interesting—than I had anticipated.

The highlight of my time in London was my spring-semester internship placement with Operation Black Vote. At OBV, I confronted complex political issues every day, and I gained a new perspective on the British political process. On my first day, OBV's staff told me that they planned to "throw me into the deep end": I attended meetings at Whitehall and Downing Street, wrote blog posts for their website, and helped them recruit for their political mentoring program. I had the chance to work as a primary researcher for OBV's Local Political Representation Audit, which was covered by national media outlets, and led to several local councils and parties moving to recruit a more diverse set of leaders. Watching my work have an impact in real-time was incredibly exciting—how often does a 20-year old American get to influence what local government looks like in Brighton? During my placement, many of my doubts and questions about how we "do" politics crystallized: is change best affected locally or from the top? What

does it mean for a government to be truly representative? What should the nature of political power be as we move forward?

Outside of this work, I found inspiration and learning opportunities seemingly everywhere. After a morning lecture on the history and sociology of immigration to the UK, I would attend my evening French course at the Alliance Française where the students came from nine countries and four continents. After a class discussion on the viability of democracy in Northern Ireland, I could go see a play like *Cyprus Avenue*, which took an entirely different approach to interrogating the success of the peace process. On my trips to Scotland and Wales, between sightseeing and hikes, it was nearly impossible to ignore the issues of citizenship, identity, and sovereignty.

Urgent questions about democracy and politics even popped up in the streets. Even without the Brexit protests, Londoners took to the streets loudly and often in this past year; a few times I found myself wading through masses of striking minicab drivers and antifascists. During my spring break, I wandered into Oxford Circus at the height of Extinction Rebellion's occupation of the intersection—under the massive boat which they had installed in the middle of the road, a volunteer explained their demands, including a democratic “citizens’ assembly” on the climate crisis. It was an unexpected look at how people demand and build power in times of crisis, as well as what a modern “mass movement” can look like.

Overall, I'm happy to say that my year in London was different (and far less Brexit-focused) than I had expected. I have a new perspective on how democracy is changing in the 21st century, one that looks beyond referendum results and more closely at how people relate to their work, their local government, and their community. I'm excited to take the experiences I had in London and integrate them into my senior thesis and work after graduation.

Finally, I would like to thank the Board of AASAP/UK for awarding me with the Lord Acton Memorial Scholarship. The scholarship made many of the aforementioned experiences possible, as well as quieter moments like trips out of central London and museum visits. Leaving the U.K. was bittersweet, but I'm proud to have come home a far more confident, critical student and person than I was at the beginning of the year.