



The Dogma of Democracy Gone Sour

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“The death of democracy is not likely to be an assassination from ambush. It will be a slow extinction from apathy, indifference, and undernourishment.” - Robert Hutchins

Abstract

When it comes to political organisation the western world likes to claim the moral high ground. It touts the benefits of free and fair elections, as if the concept of democracy were a self-evident, eternal truth.

For the US State Department, democracy has taken on near-religious significance. It has become a right, just as much as the right to life, liberty and happiness.

If the US and many other western countries actually practised what they preached, they would at least be giving their sermons from solid turf. But because they continue to undermine the practice of democracy at home, their pulpits are not very high and the ground they stand on is increasingly squishy.

In the nations with the loudest democracy trumpets, big businesses and rich individuals have corrupted the democratic process. They influence elections and laws to their advantage and suppress changes they don't like. At the same time, the poor have become increasingly disenfranchised, either because they are deliberately excluded from the voting process or because they no longer believe it has any value.

This is not just a failure of democracy. It is also a failure of communication. Rather than achieving its goals, and promoting an idea with considerable merit, the West is undermining the cause. Democracy has become little more than an ideological weapon, and it is driving the doubters away.

1. Its Death is not Exaggerated

Democracy is not difficult to understand. It means “rule by the people”. It is difficult to achieve, however. And even when it has been achieved, when there is a fair electoral system and a government that represents the views of the people, it is easy to see the system's flaws. To paraphrase Thomas Jefferson,* democracy can still end up being “mob rule” with 51% of the voters imposing their ideas on everyone else.

When we talk about democracy we usually mean one particular form of representative democracy, called liberal or constitutional democracy. Under this system, most western

* Jefferson actually said: democracy is nothing more than mob rule, where 51 percent of the people may take away the rights of the other 49.

countries hold regular elections to vote for representatives who make decisions on behalf of the electorate. To prevent these representatives from assuming too much power, there is usually a constitution, a legal framework that establishes the principles that the government must follow.

As well as a constitution, a democracy needs an independent judiciary and a fairly elected government. It needs equality of opportunity to stand for election. Anyone should be able to put themselves up as a candidate. Exceptions can exist, for those who might be criminally insane for example, but these should be rare. Being elected should certainly not depend on how rich you are.

A good system also needs universal suffrage. Voting should be open to all adults, without discrimination on the grounds of race, sex, beliefs or social status. This means that even those in prison should have a vote. If not, then those who are wrongful victims of political persecution or of bad laws are denied a voice.

There also needs to be an independent media — a free press — or at least mostly free. Voters should have access to opinions but, more importantly, to facts. It is vital that citizens' views are not influenced by biased reporting, or by media moguls with their own agendas who are able to twist their audience's opinions to suit their own ends.

Democracy also requires freedom of association. Citizens should have the right to form political groups and to have their views heard, even when these views are odious to the majority. Because of the increase in anti-terrorism legislation since 9/11, this requirement has been weakened in many western countries.

Finally, to have a high level of democracy, societies need to have citizens who are educated and informed about their rights and civic responsibilities. There needs to be a working relationship between those in power and those who vote.

It is easy to forget that an electorate has responsibilities too, that the process is two-way. It is not just up to those in power to make sure the system functions, it is also up to every citizen. Citizens, if they care about where their societies are heading, need to take responsibility for being properly informed; they need to speak out when the system does not work; and they need to take part in the political process, even if just through the act of voting.

In many western countries, however, the relationship that exists between the ruled and the rulers has become fraught. Those who have been elected often pursue their own agendas, or look after the interests of lobby groups, before they think of those who elected them into power. Lobbyists, especially those representing big businesses, have become extremely powerful in Europe, including in the UK, Canada, Australia and, especially, in America. They have distorted the political process by influencing elections and laws in ways that the electorate cannot.

At the same time, many western citizens have less direct contact with their political representatives than they once did. Politicians focus instead on a handful of swing voters, meaning that the voice of the majority is frequently ignored. As a consequence, many western citizens

are choosing to vote less than before, and take less interest in politics.

Democracy has always had its problems, of course. Ancient Greece's Aristotle called it one of the three "evil" forms of government. It was not even favoured by America's Founding Fathers who feared democracy as much as they feared monarchy. They worried that a democratically elected government would take away the people's freedom, either by being too weak to protect them from external threats, or by becoming too powerful and taking over every aspect of their lives.

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To try and get around these problems, America chose a constitutional republic as its model of governance where executive, legislative and judicial powers are separated. The constitution and the judiciary are meant to stop any abuses by those in power. The intention was to make "a government of laws, not men".

Despite these efforts, America's democratic system, the one the world is supposed to look up to as a model, is suffering from exactly the problems the Founding Fathers were trying to avoid. Five stand out in particular:

- The constitution is being undermined.
- Millions have become disenfranchised.
- A tiny number of people determine the outcome.
- Big businesses and lobbyists have corrupted the process.
- There is too little choice.

First, the constitution: thanks mainly to a series of badly thought out laws put in place since 9/11, America's constitution is no longer providing the protection for citizens that it should.

Those wanting to oppose the government, members of the Occupy Movement for example, have been denied the right to assemble and speak out, which is a violation of the 1st Amendment. Muslim groups have also been singled out for surveillance¹ while journalists² have been detained to stop them reporting stories the government does not like. These are also violations of the 1st. Just as bad, the PATRIOT Act allows the government to monitor citizens without recourse to law, which violates the 4th. The state can now legally obtain the source and addressee information of all telephone and online communications and gain access to unopened electronic mail. It can also collect DNA samples, even from those not convicted of any crime.

Even 30 years ago such activities would have been unthinkable. It would have been unimaginable that private letters between individuals could be opened and read by the State or that a democratic western government could demand unrestricted access to medical, finan-

cial, business and educational records or authorise secret searches of homes and offices, without extensive legal process. Yet these are all permitted in America today.³

The second problem is with the democratic process itself. In recent years, many more people have been excluded from voting in America. According to a report published in 2012 by the Pew Center,⁴ as many as 24% of those eligible to vote have not registered to do so because the process has been made too complex. That is at least 51 million people.

In many states, people wanting to vote must now have a government-issued photo ID card or passport. Because few Americans travel abroad and many others are wary of authority, this new rule alone has effectively disenfranchised 12% of the population. A disproportionate number of these people are poor and black.

Convicted criminals are also denied the right to vote in many US states, even after they have served their sentence and are free, in gainful employment, and paying their taxes. In those states where they can re-register, the process is often so difficult that few go through with it. Those in prison are also unable to vote, unlike in many other western countries, including neighbouring Canada. As the prison population of the US is so large compared to other developed nations, this adds up to a great many people. In total, more than 2% of the electorate is excluded because they are, or were, felons. Again, a disproportionate number are poor and black.

2. Good for Swingers, but not for Everyone Else

Even for citizens able to vote, there is a third problem. In most American states, the voice of the average voter is practically worthless.

In presidential elections, as well as in many others, the results in 38 of America's 50 states are entirely predictable. That leaves just 12* that matter, that decide the outcome. The population of these states in 2012 was 86 million people, 28% of the US population. This means that the American President, the holder of what is arguably the biggest job in the world, is actually chosen by little more than one-quarter of the US population (half of whom do not bother to vote).

This also means that presidential hopefuls spend huge amounts of time, money and effort on a small number of voters, in some of the smallest states in the country, largely ignoring the wishes and interests of the majority.

The result is national apathy, with average voter turnout in recent federal elections falling below 40%⁵ in many states, reflecting a lack of interest or faith in the process.

3. The Voters' Power Diminished

The fourth major reason why the US and many other western democratic systems are failing has been the rising influence of businesses and lobby groups. Of greatest concern are

* Nevada, Colorado, New Mexico, Iowa, Wisconsin, Michigan, Ohio, Pennsylvania, Virginia, New Hampshire, North Carolina and Florida

so-called super PACS — which are like traditional Political Action Committees (PACs) on steroids.

Super PACS are pressure groups that are largely free of any restrictions on their political activities. They can raise unlimited cash from anonymous donors and spend it praising or disparaging particular candidates without declaring their interests or explaining who is supporting them.

As most big businesses support the right-leaning Republican Party in America, many voters are being deceived; they are unaware that the opinions they see expressed on television are often from biased sources. The rich and anonymous are able to manipulate the electoral process for their own ends, without the electorate understanding that the information presented to them is being funded by someone with a specific, but usually undeclared, agenda.

A further concern is the growing influence of America's richest individuals. Campaign contributions of wealthy people have long been vital to running US elections, especially at the federal level. But for many years they have also been a source of worry. The concern is that these donations allow rich people to buy influence and gain some advantage, often for their businesses or investments, or because they have a private political objective.

A 2012 survey by The Brennan Center⁶ showed that most Americans believed that as well as leading to greater corruption, the current electoral financing system made it less likely that poorer people would vote at all. "One in four respondents — and even larger numbers of low-income people reported that they are less likely to vote because big donors have so much more sway than average Americans", the report said.

Part of the problem, of course, is that America's politicians have been forced to sell their souls, because the cost of running campaigns is so high. Without such huge payments, or a different model, most candidates cannot hope to stand for office. While anyone can theoretically put themselves forward for election, in practice the race is now only open to those who can raise the funds through these corrupting channels, or to the super-rich.

4. Is a Two-party State Twice as Good as a One-party State?

The fifth reason America's political system is so undemocratic (this also applies in the UK, Ireland, Australia and many other countries) is the astonishing lack of choice offered to voters at the polls.

To outsiders, it sometimes appears as if America only has two political parties, the Democrats and the Republicans. In fact, there are at least 40 parties to choose from. Among the next largest are the Constitution Party, The Green Party and the Libertarian Party. But there are many more. Most are small and fragmented, some of them having split from the main parties. A large number have extreme views. But some also reflect the views of millions of people, such as the Green Party.

What most of these parties lack is the funding needed to run an enduring campaign at a national or even at a local level. Although more than ten other parties endorsed candidates for

the 2012 presidential election, few polled even a fraction of 1% of the vote, partly because they found it almost impossible to be heard.

The fact that these parties exist allows politicians from the two dominant parties to claim that their system is democratic, because anyone can stand for office and because the views of all strands of the political spectrum are represented. But the practical barriers that prevent these other parties from holding office make such statements meaningless.

5. The Dogma of Democracy

A wider issue, mostly for those living in less democratic countries, is that the western concept of democracy has become an ideology, a weapon used to bash them. For several decades, the western world has exported an idea, trying to impose it on everyone else. Cosily wrapped in the principles of freedom, equality and justice, “democracy” has become dogma, a doctrine that is proclaimed as true without those who are imposing it needing to provide any proof — because the proof is no longer available. Coupled with the dogma of “the market”, it has encouraged the citizens of other nations to turn their countries into debt-driven consumerist societies, no longer fuelled by a desire for genuine progress but by a heady hunger to go shopping.

As Francis Fukuyama argued in *The End of History and The Last Man*, the great passions that prompted armed struggles and tremendous acts of heroism in the 20th century and before, have been gradually superseded by the call of the market. Material improvement has given way to material gain. The push for democracy and the free market has made nations trade their principles for Pringles.

Western⁷ interference, in the name of democracy, played a large part in the “Arab Spring” of 2011, especially in Egypt, where western NGOs spent millions of dollars trying to direct the revolution and manipulate the political process.⁸ Many of those working for these NGOs were eventually expelled by the Egyptian government. Despite this, western meddling in the country’s political processes remains rife.

The United Arab Emirates has also expelled⁹ “pro-democracy” NGOs from Europe and the US, which the government found to be tinkering with the country’s internal affairs. After the revolution in Libya,¹⁰ the government there attempted to stop US and European groups funding local NGOs as well, fearing that they would manipulate the local democratic processes.

Other countries known to have expelled westerners who were interfering in the democratic process include Russia, Pakistan, North Korea, Syria, Sudan and Bolivia. Many of the same NGOs that were in North Africa in 2011 also played a part in the changes that took place in Myanmar¹¹ in 2012, when the country began to open up to western influence. There are also reports that western-backed groups have intervened in the political freedoms of both Thailand¹² and Malaysia.¹³

Rather than achieving worthy goals, the West’s export of a warped dogma has been undermining its place in the world. Under the name of democracy, the West has tried to

incite resistance to the lawful authority of many governments, to overthrow regimes. It has done this to widen western influence, to gain access to raw materials, and to provide business opportunities for western firms, which then strengthen these objectives by attempting to convert them to the free market.

Democracy has lost touch with its meaning and purpose. It is failing to do what it is meant to, in America, Britain and many other places. It has become a tool for western nations to force their ideas onto others. Tied to the religion of economic growth, carried on the wings of the free market, it is being sold as the answer to everyone's problems, when it is not.

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