

## **Should We Look to Democracy for Some Answers to Our Political Crises?**

Our current and deepening political crisis has made us all aware of the deep problems undermining our politics, our governments, and even our most basic ability to find common ground and work together. We are all looking for a way out of this nightmare and we are discovering that most of our current political leaders do not seem to be helping.

It might help us to realize that the problems we face -- our deep divisions, widespread alienation from our politics and governments, corruption, and control by elites-- are exactly the problems that democracy was designed to address. Democracy addresses these issues by creating a culture, norms and institutions that treat everyone as equals, by giving everyone a voice and role, and by helping people find the common ground needed to work together. Democracy has, historically, not only made progress on addressing the issues that prevent us from working together, it has also succeeded in unleashing the energy of countless individuals and produced periods of great creativity and accomplishment.

So, maybe it is time for us to look again at the 3000 years of our democratic tradition to find some way out of our current crisis. The story of democracy is a history of advances and retreats with slow but steady progress towards the goal of finding a way to organize a society that can both prevent a minority from seizing power and dominating and also create a way of life that respects and empowers everyone. It is a tradition that has, over the centuries, continued to evolve. It is still learning from multiple cultures, religions, and diverse practices. Today it has become a world treasure created and maintained by sacrifices and contributions from all sides: from our civil rights movements to Tiananmen Square to the Arab Spring and to the countless other small and large struggles for voice and dignity. Democracy is still a hotly contested way of life always under threat from various forms of authoritarianism and elitism. While it may still be only an unrealized ideal in most nations, it continues to capture the hopes of the people of the world. As Americans living in a nation that has made significant contributions to the democratic story, we are lucky to have the ability to look to our own traditions for insights into democracy.

It might also help us to know that we might have been able to anticipate or current crisis since some time ago we pretty much abandoned our place as leaders in the universal democratic story. About the start of the 20<sup>th</sup> Century, we all, led by our intellectual class, seemed to decide that science and scientific managers could do a better job at directing our nation than its citizens working together. There was a big debate about this then but democracy pretty much lost and we basically went from government “of the people, by the people, for the people” to just government “for the people”.

It is surely not a coincidence that this happened at the time when a large number of immigrants had flooded our cities. The nativist reaction to this immigration and the still dominant racism that kept black and white citizens divided, made it impossible to mount a challenge to the rise of our scientific managers and the abandonment of many of our core democratic traditions and hopes. This change did not go unchallenged then or even now, but the proponents of democracy lost and have continued to lose this struggle to this day.

This shift away from democracy took place not only in our politics. To justify this elitism, we began to adopt a more individualistic culture that downplayed community and emphasized special individuals—our celebrities, stars, geniuses, entrepreneurs, and “successful” people-- as the source of progress. Today, we have pretty much taken that view today about as far as it can go, including in our education system now designed to train and justify our meritocracy. It is no wonder that the “average” person might feel somewhat out of place in the life we have created, a place quite far from the spirit of Jefferson’s “all men are created equal”.

But, just to be clear, democracies do not have a problem with experts, with talent, or with people of exceptional character. We have always needed these individuals and they have thrived in democracies. But in a meritocracy like ours, talent is defined too narrow, the ability of experts is overestimated, and the knowledge and experience of non-expert citizens are underestimated. As a result, it seems only natural for experts to make decisions for us. In a democracy, things are different: the contributions of everyone are valued and respected. Experts still play a major role, but they use their expertise to inform and partner with citizens, not to make decisions for them.

So maybe we do have to rethink this turn from democracy and see if it might not be an underlying cause of our current political crisis. Here are four arguments to support this rethinking of our democracy, or our current lack of democracy.

First, only a more democratic society can realistically address the divisions and alienation that are contributing to our deepening political crisis. Only respect, a meaningful role and voice, and real power to shape our communities can overcome the alienation that is undermining our nation. It is not just about jobs and money, it is, above all, about respect and power. And only more democracy can address this deep need for a voice and role.

Second, we are making a basic mistake when we accept the common wisdom and assume that today’s world is too large and complex for democracy to work. How would we know if democracy might work in today’s complex world if we gave up any effort to adapt democracy to fit the modern world? The world changes so democracy, the infrastructure and customs, institutions and laws that make democracy work, also need to be adapted to fit a changing world. Jefferson was right when he said that democracy would need to be periodically renewed. Instead of following Jefferson’s advice and adapting democracy to fit the changing world, we abandoned it. And, of course, it is not an accident that those leading the abandonment of democracy were exactly the elites who would benefit most from this change either in wealth or power or both. We fell for the most ancient trick in the long history of democracy and gave over our democracy to those who claimed a special access to the truth, our “experts” and our “geniuses”. If we put a fraction of the energy and resources and creativity of our nation into rebuilding our democracy, we could find ways to make it work in today’s world. Democracy always looked impossible whenever it was tried, but it was always a question of priorities and not impossibilities. The fact is that a host of innovative new methods to enhance democracy have already emerged in the shadows. So, we need to recognize that

the doctrine that democracy is out of date is really just another in the ageless attempt of elites to hold power.

Third, it is deeply ironic that we are coming close to completely losing our democracy today when we actually have the best chance ever of creating the democracy that our founding fathers could only dream of. Thanks to the tremendous contributions of our civil rights, women's and LGBT movements, we have made great progress in overcoming the prejudices and practices that have kept us divided and unable to fully realize our democratic ideals. The issues highlighted by Black Lives Matter and #MeToo movements show that we have a long way to go to creating a fully democratic culture, but the progress we have made should not be forgotten or underestimated. This progress has created an opportunity for us to create for the first time in our nation's history a deeper democracy and deeper democratic way of life. We Americans might even have the chance to make another significant contribution to the 3000-year-old story of democracy. Hopefully we can see our current crisis as a last-ditch effort of authoritarians and purveyors of all forms of discrimination to stop what they see as a real advance of democracy that is now possible and maybe even likely.

And, the fourth and, for now, final argument for looking to democracy to address our current crisis, think about this: If democracy really does capture our hopes and best fit the needs of us humans, then we should be seeing a real challenge emerging to the widespread turn towards elitism in Western culture. Well, just look, it is there in plain sight. The first and unmistakable appearance of a real challenge to the status quo might have been in the worldwide, diverse and often contradictory, but consistently democratic movements of the sixties. And since then, there have been countless movements and efforts for inclusion, equality, respect and democracy. We have seen experiments, many if not most in other nations, with a more participatory form of governance and a more democratic way of life. We have seen, to mention just a few, the use of broad collaborations to handle difficult problems; the many city-wide experiments of to tackle tough problems with deliberative conversations; the citizen panels convened to find common ground; the revival of neighborhoods and their growing role in cities; the use of the Internet and social media to create bottom up movements and engage more people; the worldwide experiments starting in Brazil with participatory budgeting; and, the widespread "Go local" efforts to develop local control and local power. In response to the decline of our democracies, people have been and are looking for and building democratic communities and practices that treat each other with respect and empower people and give them a voice and role. Not all of this has worked and the often volunteer democratic practices don't always succeed or stay on track, but something is stirring and it is a sign that our current institutions and norms are once more being challenged by a new wave of democracy that is speaking again to the historic hope for a better way of life. We are set for a new and important step in the story of democracy. This is the struggle taking place now, not in Silicon Valley enterprises, party organizations, or in high profile foundations, but in everyday places like our neighborhoods, towns and cities. It is our best chance to rebuild our democracy and regain our place in the story of democracy. Look around. Join in.