

Too Much Democracy?
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Populism around the world is in the process of destroying liberal democracy, replacing it with dictatorships. This is a shock to those of us who believed that the American style of democracy was both wanted and on a roll after the collapse of the USSR. Populism (power to the people) is a revolt against government, the often unwieldy process of participatory governance. That Democracy does not instantly solve all problems has become apparent, and many are looking for a strongman to address societal grievances that are not being solved.

Those who wanted a president who would drain the swamp (get rid of vested interests) and bypass Congress, the Courts, and silence the alarmed press (Democracy's watchdog), have elected such a person, with the increasingly obvious help of Russia's "President for Life," Vladimir Putin. Trump has not drained the swamp; he has not "made things happen;" but he has made divisiveness and rancor ubiquitous and frightened enough of us to wake up to the danger we are in. In trashing our government and its institutions, we risk losing the very things that have made us the envy of the world.

Many people are tired of competing political parties (often with radically opposing policies) that are so gridlocked that projects badly needed by the country cannot be financed or begun. Those nostalgic for the good old days remember a time that getting things done was easier. Americans got the interstate highway system, not because they voted for it, but because President Eisenhower just did it (citing national security).

Earlier, during the dark days of the 1930s depression, President Roosevelt was able to get electrification for the Tennessee Valley, a dirt-poor region that private enterprise would never have funded. The Tennessee Valley Authority turned this backwater into a rich region, and its abundant power enabled us to produce the atomic bomb that ended World War II in our favor.

Today, the wonderful infrastructure created after World War II is crumbling, and the squabbling and divided parties in Washington cannot agree to fix it. We have the money, we have the labor ready for this work, but do not have the bipartisan governance we enjoyed in the past. People who do not know much history have chosen to bypass liberal democracy in the hope that a strongman will trash the system and make things happen. How did we get in such a fix?

The death of John McCain has reminded us of what leadership should be. A leader should have character, decency, putting duty and honor ahead of self-promotion. American democracy depends on good character, informed voters, and representatives who govern with mutual respect rather than "winning at any cost." McCain's death has reminded us of bipartisanship, working across the aisle, and caring more about honorable service than the next election. Character and honor are beginning to come back.

To save our democracy, we need to review some past decisions that have damaged good governance. Our Founding Fathers knew that representative government was safer than popular democracy. The California Initiative process has been an example of the latter: people voting on issues they do not understand, bypassing their representatives who hold hearings on issues so that they can understand them. Many states have adopted this flawed practice, burdening voters with ballot issues obviously unsuitable for the uninformed to vote.

We must abandon the nonsense that "government is the problem." Without government, we would have anarchy or dictatorship. We must elect representatives who want good government, not winner-take-all demagogues.

We must delegate our most urgent issues to qualified commissions, who will work out appropriate legislation and then offer it for voting up or down by representatives. We did this when we could not decide which obsolete military bases should be closed. The commission proposed and Congress voted, no amendments permitted. It worked.

The same could work for a national health system and science-based climate change. Commissions can provide qualified experts, which most representatives are not. Shorter election campaigns paid for by voters, not dark money, would be a start in making government the solution, not the problem.

682 words

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