

EMERGING TRENDS IN DEMOCRATIC PARTICIPATION

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Though "democracy" is one of the most popular words in the vocabulary of virtually all political systems everywhere in the world, from my perspective, there is no democratic polity anywhere on the face of the earth today. The US is no more a "democratic government" than were the old "people's democracies" of the heyday of Communism (but of course, those systems weren't "Communist" in my understanding either).

Nonetheless, some existing governments tend slightly, and some even significantly, towards democracy more than do others. For example, the polities of Scandinavia and Holland are significantly more democratic than is that of the United States, which is very far from being democratic. Indeed, the polities of most European countries, and of Japan, are significantly more democratic (though still far from adequately democratic) than is the government of the US. But of course, the Founding Fathers who wrote and ratified the US Constitution designed the government so that it would NOT be democratic, and they were quite successful in doing so.

At the same time, some of the states and cities of the US have somewhat more democratic structures than does the US per se, but the political powers of the US federal government are so much more important and pervasive than are those of the states or municipalities that the overall consequence of governance in the US is that it is non-democratic.

The assigned theme of this talk is participation, which is the biggest single indicator of democracy, in my opinion. The more effectively each individual citizen can participate directly in all aspects of governance of interest to that citizen, the closer the polity comes to being "democratic." (Please note that there thus is, in my understanding, more to good governance than just "democracy." For example there are matters concerning what it is that "government" is supposed to do and the "structures" through which it is to do it; civil and other human rights; the relation of political to economic and other social, cultural, technological, and environmental institutions, and many other things. There is of course both a participatory and a democratic element in each of these as well!)

There are many problems about "participation" itself. One can be denied the opportunity to participate when she wants to, or forced to participate when she doesn't. And certain kinds of participation are more automatic, or at least more vital, than others: It is easy not to participate in the US political system, but hard not to participate in the US economic system.

Participation usually involves some form of activity. But sometimes, "just watching" can be a viable mode of participation, perhaps more important than

"being there" and "being active" (when, for example, "the whole world is watching").

Most forms of political participation in the US (registering to vote; listening to or reading about political debates; discussing political issues with family, friends, neighbors, fellow workers; canvassing; holding signs and waving at people from the side of the road; legal financial contributions; joining interest groups; writing or phoning one's representative, etc., are each and collectively wholly symbolic which are in no clear way related to public policy. Most (individually or collectively) citizens have no way to influence policy directly or effectively.

The title assigned this talk speaks of "Trends in political participation". These trends everywhere (even in new governments of Eastern Europe) are downward. People are becoming fed up with the sham of current political structures and are refusing to participate, even though they often voice their refusal in terms of dislike of politicians or policies, rather than in terms of the inadequacies of the available modes of participation, so blinded are they by the myth of democracy.

Though bullshit walks, money talks. Money is far more important than votes. It is clearly and everywhere far more effective to buy a politician than to vote for one.

Much is heard these days about the role of television in political discourse, participation, and policy making. It is clear that television has rendered problematic all we think we can learn about politics and participation from anything said or done in the past, including the four historical figures featured in this Institute--Pericles, Rousseau, Jefferson, and Goldman--though I am certain your Humanities Scholar and my good friend and colleague, John Wilson, and others here, will attempt to convince you to the contrary. Indeed, of the four, I will go with Pericles on the one hand and Goldman on the other and suggest that, at least as far as participation is concerned, you should just forget the other two antique gentlemen ever existed. But, when you get right down to it, you are better off forgetting all four and focussing on the real and novel problems of the present and future about which these folks are silent, irrelevant, and/or misleading. On the other hand, there is a National Endowment, and a Hawaii Committee, for the Humanities, which funds, if meagerly, meetings like this, and there is none whatsoever for the future. Why? Perhaps because the various powers that be would much rather keep you befuddled by thinking about the glories of the past rather than addressing the problems of the present and anticipating the challenges of the future.

As I said: money talks and bullshit walks. And as long as our academic and intellectual community focuses on the past, and on the printed word, as sources for the present and the future while we live in a world where all people's minds are shaped by sound bites, digital bytes, and visual bits, then while there doubtlessly is much wisdom and inspiration to be found in the thinkers of the past, we would be better advised to balance in the present the weight of the past with more light from the future.

So given the past and trends, what might the future of democratic participation be?

That socio-political arrangement which most Americans, and even most Europeans, designate as "democratic" does not have a very bright future, in my opinion. "Liberal Democracy" of the Rousseau-Jefferson type is not long for this world. While many people were crowing about the triumph of "democracy" after the collapse of so-called communism in the late 1980s, the probable demise of liberal democracy and its handmaiden, capitalism, is everywhere apparent.

This is most clearly obvious for the case of American presidential "democracy" which is a particularly exotic, fragile, dangerous, and perverse form of pre-democratic governance. So the optimistic view might be that some forms of European parliamentary governance might continue to exist in some of the smaller countries of Europe, especially those which continue to have monarchies (again, Scandinavia and Holland--not England, certainly--and perhaps--though probably not--Germany and France; and in one or two of the newly emerging countries--I am thinking primarily of Catalonia though there may be some others). But old liberal democracy will likely come to an end in the rest of Europe, old and new, and in Japan and India, and fail to become established in the rest of Asia, Africa, and South America.

Confucian forms show great promise in East Asia (Singapore is more likely the wave of the future than an aberration), and Islamic forms demonstrate great vigor for the future everywhere.

It is likely that these governments will, at least initially, call themselves "democratic" though I suspect that even the term will die out, or becoming negatively evaluated, everywhere as it declines in the (and with the) West.

There is plenty of room for "participation" in Confucian, Islamic, and other revitalized "ethnic" forms of governance, just as there was in the people's democracies of Eastern Europe and the Soviet Union.

Those of you who have known me for a while know that I still believe that it is possible to use television, and other, newer, forms of electronic communications, to invent a form of democratic governance that would make old Pericles, and all of us, proud.

Like everyone else, I don't know whether to thank or curse Perot for his brief venture into American politics. In my case, Perot did for direct electronic democracy what no one else has been able to do: to start a serious discussion of the possibility electronic democracy. But, like everything else Perot did, or tried to do, the discussion went nowhere, and where it did go was mainly trivial or maliciously wrong.

Still, I am absolutely convinced that something much more closely approaching true democratic, participative governance is possible using the concepts of electronic democracy which Christa Slaton, Ted Becker, Majid Tehranian here in Hawaii, and others elsewhere, have already very well explored. I have encountered no objection to electronic direct democracy which has not already been satisfactorily answered by their research and publications. All current discussion about ETM simply reveals the utter ignorance, unconscious fear, or purposeful distortion of the extensive research which has already been done on various forms and possibilities of electronic direct democracy.

I see that this Institute is ending with a mock political convention which will consider a number of basically manini political issues. Why not junk that agenda and turn you attention to designing, and trying to implement, electronic direct democracy in Hawaii? If any place in the world can do it, it certainly is here, and now. I beg you to give this challenge serious consideration before you reject it and continue to rearrange the deck chairs on the Titanic.

And if you don't like ETM, then consider other more appropriate forms of participatory democratic governance. All other social institutions are in the throes of such reconsideration--businesses, labor unions, social movements, even churches and the military. Yet almost no one is focussing on the design of new forms of civil governance. Why is this the case? Why don't you begin doing so here? And why not then take the experience back to the classrooms and begin some real political education in Hawaii's schools? If anyone is up to that challenge, I know that Grace Ing, Jean Kawachika and Madeline Cahoon are the founding mothers we have all been waiting for. Let's start the democratic revolution in Hawaii here and now!

I would be particularly thrilled if the Hawaiian sovereignty activists among us would try to invent new forms of participatory governance instead of merely copying or adapting old ones (whether those of the US, as seems generally to be the case ironically enough, or those of the ancient Hawaiians). Far be it from me to tell any Hawaiian what to do about anything, but I can't help but wonder what traditional forms of Hawaiian governance would look like now if the world had continued to evolve as it has over the past two hundred plus years but if the West had not invaded Hawaii and thwarted and distorted the development of Hawaiian forms of governance.

Also, it is clear that the biggest immediate challenge from the future is the invention of forms of global governance. We have many people focussing on local, community-scale governance, and some suggestions for new (though obsolete) nations, but the real need is for democratic, participatory global governance to balance, and regulate, all the other global economic, technological, social, cultural, and environmental forces and institutions of the present and the future.

One step towards this might be to find ways in which non-citizens could participate in the governance of the major economic nations of the present. Several years ago, Prof. Yasumasa Kuroda and I suggested that this be a part of a new democratic form of governance for Japan. We also suggested that some, or ideally all, the representatives in the Japanese Diet be chosen at random, by lot. We feel that this is the only way to achieve true representative government. It also should have a salutary influence on public education as well. If we know that anyone, literally, can be elected President, then everyone had better be adequately prepared for the job.

The most recent World Conference of the World Futures Studies Federation, held last October in Barcelona, Catalonia, was on the theme, Advancing Participation and Democracy. I wrote a paper for the working group on Communication and Participation, which I titled, "I want my ITV". The paper was a summary of my understanding of the way changes in communication technologies have changed the possibility and substance of governance, including democratic governance, over time. It concluded with an initial

exploration, very preliminary, of the impact of virtual reality and other emerging forms of communication on democracy and democratic participation. It also summarized some of the discussion about the emerging political and other Rights of Robots and other forms of artificial intelligence and post- homosapiential life.

I would be particularly interested in knowing the views of Pericles, Rousseau, Jefferson, and Goldman on the rights of robots, though I am certain that, if the four were alive today, Jefferson would be leading the discussion about, and experimentation with, cyborgs and androids.

But what about the future itself? If there is anything truly tragic, in the Greek sense of that term, about democratic government today it is that it is so focussed on the present and the past, and so irresponsible towards the future. It is absolutely essential that we find some way for future generations to participate in all the present decisions which will impact them so massively. There are already some interesting, if inadequate, attempts to do that which you should consider as you embark on your invention of a new, democratic, responsible, future-oriented polity for Hawaii.

And if you think it helps you to see the future more clearly if you stand on the shoulders of the humanities scholars of the past, then please consider my words here as no more than a place to stand and sink your lever so that you may leap up on their backs and begin to change the world.