Will America ever become a democracy?

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Abstract.
The US Constitution did not create a democracy. Numerous constitutional structures prevent democracy, and most Americans are content with that. No other nation is democratic, though some tend towards democracy. Democracy is technically possible at a global level if and when people and artilects desire it.

The US is not a democracy.

The United States is not a democracy, has never been a democracy, was not created to be a democracy, and will not become a democracy without substantial changes in the structure of government and the understanding and will of the American people. Until it is fully understood and recognized that America cannot possibly be a model for democracy anywhere since it is not democratic itself, neither America nor the rest of the world will be able to move towards the kind of peaceful self-governance that democratic theory and practice promises.

On the one hand, this is an utterly commonplace and banal statement. The fact that the US is not a democracy and that the founding fathers who wrote the US Constitution had no intention of establishing one has been well known and widely discussed for many years [Ketcham, Beard, Parenti, Dahl].

On the other hand, this is a startling and liberating statement that should enable Americans and all others to strive towards creating a form of government that does not yet exist anywhere as fully as it can and should. Some governments now, such as those of the Scandinavian countries, most clearly including Finland, and Holland, tend towards democracy while most others do not.

The NonDemocratic American Constitution.

In the space available for this essay, it is not possible fully to demonstrate that the struggle to create the US government following its separation from England, between 1776 and 1789, was a conflict between people desiring to create as nearly democratic a government as was possible for the former colonies, given their historical isolation, geographic separation, and the ideologies and especially technologies available to them at the time, on the one hand, and those who wanted to create a stable government that would keep power firmly in the hands of a minority of white male property owners, on the other. But that was the struggle of the time, and those in favor of a restricted-franchise republic were successful in crafting a Constitution and a debate that then entirely defeated those who wanted a moderate democracy for the new nation. While there have been a few amendments to the original constitution that have extended the vote to people who originally were not allowed to vote or run for office (former slaves first and women later), there has not been any amendment adopted that has moved US national governance towards a democracy. There have been some such movements in some of the states and municipalities, and that is noteworthy, but the structure and process of national governance in the US remains firmly nondemocratic.

Dangerous Presidentialism.

And dangerously so: Professor Fred Riggs has shown that the Presidentialist system of US governance, which has been adopted in many newly-independent parts of the world (in South and Central America, Africa, and some parts of Asia during the decolonization period following the Second World War and more recently following the collapse of the Soviet Empire in the 1990s) without exception led to military dictatorship in the former and is steadily tending towards military dictatorship in the latter [Riggs].

Whenever one has a choice between a presidentialist and a parliamentary government, choose parliamentary--though surely we can do better than that now given current and emerging communication technologies and theories and practices of self-governance.

Single-member districts.

Moreover, the Constitutionally mandated single-member district system of the US government (both in elections for the President and Vice President and House of Representatives, and in effect also for the Senate) forces the US to have a two-party system, making the emergence of a multiparty system impossible in the US. As a consequence, even "representation" in the US national government is always of the most aggregate and remote kind, while the resulting "representatives", with very few (and mainly gerrymandered) exceptions, are wealthy white men who can garner the money necessary to buy the votes required for election, and thus are truly representative of only a tiny sliver of American citizens [Amy].

Judicial governance.

In addition, the US Supreme Court, an entirely unelected group of people chosen in part because they tend to be out of touch with and unrepresentative of current sentiments, has gained over time (and extra-constitutionally) the ability to interpret the meaning of the words of the US Constitution, and to declare acts by other branches of government and individual citizens at all levels "unconstitutional" when it so wishes [Schubert, Dator 2001].

I could go on and on pointing out the fundamentally undemocratic structure of US national government, and thus the absurdity, if not the hypocrisy, of any American--such as myself--who pretends to be interested in "exporting" or "nurturing" democracy elsewhere in the world without first achieving it in the US itself.

No democratic will.

But in addition to anti-democratic structural impediments built into the US Constitution, it is also the case that most Americans do not want a democratic government. Most of them are quite willing either to pay no attention to and not to participate in formal politics at all, or they are quite happy to engage in the ritual of voting (which is essentially unrelated to any policy-making), and in no other form of political participation.

John Hibbing and Elizabeth Theiss-Morse did some excellent empirical work for their book titled *Stealth democracy: Americans' beliefs about how government should work*. The authors state their conclusions very clearly in the introduction:

> The last thing people want is to be more involved in political decision making: They do not want to make political decisions themselves; they do not want to provide much input to those who are assigned to make these decisions; and they would rather not know all the details of the decision-making process. Most people have strong feelings on few if any of the issues the government needs to address and would much prefer to spend their time in nonpolitical pursuits. Rather than wanting a more active, participatory democracy, a remarkable number of people want what we call stealth democracy….
>
> Participation in politics is low not because of the difficulty of registration requirements or the dearth of places for citizens to discuss politics, not because of the sometimes unseemly nature of debate in Congress or displeasure with a particular public policy. Participation in politics is low because people do not like politics even in the best of circumstances; in other words, they simply do not like the process of openly arriving at a decision in the face of diverse opinions [Hibbing and Theiss-Morse, 1-3].

The rest of their book documents these conclusions.

There is of course a minority of citizens who are intensely interested in influencing public policy making. Some of them are rich or well-connected enough to be able to be influential while the rest engage in frustrated discussions, emotional oratorical outbursts, and occasional demonstrations in the streets.

What is "democracy"?

So far, I have not explained what I mean by "democracy". It is indeed the case that there are many different, often contradictory, meanings of the term. Almost every government on Earth (and especially during the Communist era) labels its government "democratic." The word can almost be said to just mean "good", "a government I like", or "what most rulers like to call their government".

I mean something very specific: *Democracy is a form and process of governance that allows each person affected by the actions of an entity, a continuous and equal opportunity to influence actions of that entity*.

Given this definition, it should thus be clear why I say that not only is the US government not "democratic" but neither is the government of any other country, though

some countries tend towards it more than others--such as the governments of Scandinavia and Holland.

The implications of "democracy".

It should also be clear that I extend the term democracy to more than just formal government. In order for a polity to be democratic, I believe democracy must extend to all forms and processes that influence people, first and foremost, economic structures, most of which are profoundly authoritarian and undemocratic. The historical failure of all communist and socialist states so far to achieve workplace democracy should not be allowed to prevent us from trying to achieve it if we feel it is worthwhile, as I do.

Similarly--and perhaps actually more importantly--democracy should inform the decision-making processes of the family and of religious groups, both of which are also generally patriarchal and authoritarian. I know I have probably lost my audience with that assertion--if I even had it so far--but it is not possible to have effective formal democratic government unless we have routinely informal democratic governance as well, I believe.

It also clearly follows that the bounds and pretensions of the current nation-state system are too narrow to encompass my definition of democracy. Many years ago, a colleague, Yasumasa Kuroda, and myself wrote and presented to the Japanese Diet a proposal that representatives of all people outside of Japan who are significantly impacted by Japanese economic and political activities should have a place in the Diet and be able to vote on measures impacting them. [Kuroda and Dator].

I believe that notion now needs to be expanded globally on the basis of my definition of democracy, along with the emergence of a global definition of "citizenship" or whatever that concept morphs into.

Do people want democracy?

Let me revisit my comments about citizen interest and participation in governance. The quotation I gave from Hibbing and Theiss-Morse might lead one to conclude that Americans, at least, are not interested in self-governance and are quite willing to leave it up to others to govern for them. But that is not entirely the case. In the same section of their book that I quoted above, Hibbing and Theiss-Morse also wrote:

"People want to be able to make democracy visible and accountable on those rare occasions when they are motivated to be involved. They want to know that the opportunity will be there for them even though they probably have no current intention of getting involved in government or even of paying attention to it" [Hibbing and Theiss-Morse, 2].

That I think is the key. Even citizens who say they have no interest in self-governance *do* want to have an opportunity to participate effectively in it whenever they later decide they want to participate. But this they cannot do. And since they know (or soon discover) that they cannot participate effectively when they want to, they become even more apathetic or cynical about politics.

But they are not apathetic about all forms of participation. Although Robert Putnam documented the decline of certain kinds of civic participation in the US [Putnam], there is also ample evidence that almost all Americans, and all other humans, are involved in some kind of activity outside their home, even if it is increasingly online or virtual. The situation is this: 1) people participate in things they care about; 2) when their participation or nonparticipation matters to them; and 3) when they are enabled to participate easily and effectively. And that is the point. Currently, in the US and generally elsewhere, governance structure are designed to prevent, or to make extremely difficult, participation in policy making (and policy implementation, which is often completely overlooked) in any effective way. If structures existed that made political participation easy, fun, and effective (and nonparticipation costly), more citizens would participate in formal government just as they participate in religious, sports or other activities that they are interested in [Dator, 1983].

Why people work.

One of the biggest obstacles to citizen active participation in politics is the fact they have to work. It has always been a big mystery to me why participation in the workforce is considered to be mandatory (or at least laudatory) while participation in governance is considered to be voluntary and difficult. Since human mental as well as manual labor is really not necessary for the creation, distribution, repair or recycling of most goods and services now available in so-called "advanced countries" (people are

made to work mainly to prevent them from having the time and energy to participate in governance, and as a way of giving them access to the credit--or debt--that enables them to acquire goods and services produced without their significant labor), why not invent and design systems that free people from meaningless "labor" and that enable them once again to become actively-participating democratic citizens in the old Athenian mode? I am certain that is possible if people were to decide it was desirable.

A hybrid model of democracy.

Nonetheless it is certainly the case that very few people want to participate in every decision in the world that needs to be made. They are quite happy to leave most of the decisions up to others of their choosing. Here is where Jiri Räsänen's brilliant "Aanivalta" project of the late 1980s still rings true to me. Among other things, "Aanivalta" proposed a system that allows citizens to participate directly in any public policy making they wish, and to choose (on a daily basis, if necessary) a representative to act on the many issues they prefer not to become directly concerned about.

Direct democracy is possible now.

It fortunately is not necessary for me to demonstrate that global, as well as local, direct electronic democracy is possible now, and certainly in the future, if we wish to have it. Extensive experiments have been conducted all over the world showing that it is possible. It is also possible to design systems that prevent the "abuses" of direct democracy that so many people raise in objection, such as instant emotional responses that result in "wrong" decisions; the fact that information and discussion is needed before any person can or should participate; that designing and making transparent software used for public decision-making must itself be available for public scrutiny; and many, many more. I heartily recommend anyone interested in the possibility of direct electronic democracy to read Ted Becker and Christa Daryl Slaton's *The future of teledemocracy*, and participate in the discussions on the TAN+N website <https://fp.auburn.edu/tann/> [Becker and Slaton].

Conclusion: So, when will America become a democracy?

No time soon. There is scant evidence that many people in the US are concerned about achieving democracy. Indeed, much evidence is to the contrary, so frightened have Americans become of their own shadow: "The land of the free and the home of the brave" indeed! "Give me liberty or give me death!" Quite to the contrary, never before have people given up their vaunted freedoms as quickly and willingly as most Americans did after the events of September 11, 2001. It will be very difficult to recover or advance beyond those lost freedoms again, should Americans ever become brave enough to want to do so.

But not impossible. While conventional political science in the US utterly ignores issues of new governance invention, design, and experimentation, ordinary people in the US and everywhere else (by their participation on the internet, in electronic games, and in various face-to-face activities in their local communities and worldwide) are in fact learning how to create postmodern forms of governance that can be translated to the public sphere when the time is ripe.

And, one day, the time will finally be ripe, first somewhere, and then everywhere. As the world becomes truly democratic, so will America.

But what about the robots?

It would be uncharacteristic of me to conclude without commenting on the rights of robots and artilects in future democracies. I have a long history of being concerned about this matter [Dator 1989, 1990, 2004, McNally and Inayatullah], and I am gratified that every day more and more people are turning their attention to the issue [Goonatilake, Gray, Hughes, Kurzweil 2005, Sudia]. Of course most people consider it an absurd concern--just as most people used to consider it utterly ridiculous to contemplate giving political rights to poor people, or black people, or--most ridiculous of all--to women who, while pleasant creatures, were considered to be just too flighty to be trusted with the vote. All great political theorists once agreed that weighty reason is clearly man's work while women specialize in the unimportant emotional things of life.

But now, more and more machines are thinking for us all [Brooks, Kurzweil 1999, Moravec, Perkowitz], while many of them are also learning to emote and empathize with us as well [Breazeal]. So true democracy may emerge not when

machines learn to do all the work for us (as male slaves, all women, and most children did for the few male citizens during Athenian democracy), but when they also do all the essential thinking for us. This could result in a much more exciting version of "hybrid democracy" that includes not only what Ian Pearson calls *homo ludditus* (old unaugmented humanity) [Pearson] and its elected representatives in the *Aanivalta* mode, but also *homo ludditus* and its various intelligent agents as well as transhumans, posthumans, cyborgs, clones, chimeras, and a wide variety of artilects and forms of intelligent artificial life, along with Martians, Venusians, Europans and the like (when speciation begins again on human, artilectual, and posthuman settlements on the planets, moons and platforms in the solar system and beyond [Finney and Jones])--including any ETs who feel they have the right to participate in matters affecting them.

The more I contemplate such futures of diversity and intelligence, the brighter seems the futures of democracy, and not only "in America."

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