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American Democracy and Governance in a Polarized Era

by Richard Barringer

WE the PEOPLE of the United States, in order to form a more perfect Union, establish Justice, insure domestic Tranquility, provide for the common Defence, promote the General Welfare, and secure the Blessings of Liberty to Ourselves and our Posterity, do ordain and establish this Constitution for the United States of America....
—Preamble, US Constitution, 1787

AND WHERE DO WE STAND TODAY?

Where do we stand today amid America's sharply divided politics and governance? I argue here that in less than two and a half centuries since the nation's founding, it has gone from the espousal of democracy and the general welfare to the pursuit of autocracy and corporatism. In the absence of fundamental reforms, America's founding principles and our national character are at risk.

Robert Dahl, the most widely honored political scientist of the 20th century, observes in his classic treatise, *On Democracy* (2015), that Americans understand democracy largely in Madisonian terms, whereby various constitutional checks are held to be our essential safeguards against tyranny and autocracy.

After exhaustive study of democracies, however, Dahl finds it preferable to think in terms of three types of democracy, namely:

- the Populist, characterized by apparent majority rule, while ignoring the observable fact of

rule by a minority, wherein a minority with strong preferences may overrule a majority with weak preferences;

- the Pluralist, distinguished by peaceful coexistence among different interests and tolerance among separate values and goals (still, Dahl asks, how do we resolve conflicts along abiding fissures, such as race and gender?); and
- the Polyarchal, which stresses social rather than constitutional safeguards, encourages moderation, and emphasizes a high rate of political activism and training in social norms to maximize consensus about their value and usefulness.

Dahl argues that we have fallen too much under the spell of James Madison. To Dahl, the safety of democracy lies not in a complex network of constitutional checks and balances like the separation of powers, staggered terms, presidential veto, and judicial review; rather, it lies in the internalizing of restraints within the conscience, attitudes, and behavior of a nation's citizens, who in the end constitute democracy's ultimate safeguard.

John Adams, our second president, strongly rejected the illusions of the French Enlightenment that so enthralled Thomas Jefferson, the third president; namely,

- that the "People" are possessed of preternatural wisdom that guides their decisions;
- that human beings are basically and profoundly rational creatures; and

- that American society is somehow immune to the ancient European hierarchical class divisions.

Mount Holyoke College historian Joseph Ellis (*American Dialogue*, 2018) explains Adams's belief that all societies inevitably produce social and economic elites that, left unchecked, achieve political domination at the expense of everyone else. Only a strong executive branch is able to provide the balance and stability required for a large, continental republic. Adams advocated that all aristocracies must be controlled to protect democracy and the marketplace regulated to avoid its inherent and abiding excesses.

Ellis argues that from the 1930s through the late 1970s, Adams's insight and wisdom prevailed in the United States, and that a *Grand Bargain* was forged from the New Deal of FDR to the Great Society of LBJ. Free-market regulation was enacted to meet the egalitarian expectations of democracy, and social programs were designed to distribute the nation's increasing wealth and power more equitably.

Since the late 1970s and 1980s, however, this Grand Bargain has been abandoned. The diamond-shaped income distribution of the Grand Bargain has morphed into the old, aristocratic European triangle, with exceedingly few at the top of the income and power distribution, and very many at the bottom. To achieve this, the prevailing New Right required a massive dose of amnesia, as well as a radically revisionist view of history.

Ellis observes that today's debate about the federal role in society is a central feature of the ongoing American dialogue, as it has been from the very beginning, in the bitter argument between Jefferson's Republicans and Alexander Hamilton's Federalists. Today, however, "the rising tide lifts only yachts. The growing disparity of wealth is undeniable, as the values of capitalism trump those of democracy" (Ellis 2018: 104–105).

In *Time Magazine* of September 14, 2020, authors Nick Hanauer and David Rolf explain, based on a new and groundbreaking analysis by the conservative Rand Corporation, that "the elephant in the room today is *extreme* income inequality; and just how big is this elephant? A staggering \$50 trillion, in all!" (Hanauer and Rolf 2020). Had the more equitable income distributions of the three decades following World War II merely held steady, the aggregate income of Americans earning below the 90th percentile would have been \$2.5 trillion higher in 2018 alone, enough to pay every working American in the bottom nine deciles an additional \$1,144 a month, every month, every year!

For three decades from the late 1940s to late 1970s, those at the bottom and middle of the distribution saw their incomes grow at about the same rate as those at the top. This was the era of the Grand Bargain, in which America built the world's largest and most prosperous middle class, an era in which income inequality among income groups steadily shrank.

Economics and policy are all about choice. This upward redistribution of income, wealth, and power was not a foregone conclusion; it was a choice, the direct result of policies we have chosen to implement since 1975. We chose to cut taxes on billionaires and to deregulate the financial industry. We chose to erode the

minimum wage, the overtime threshold, and the bargaining power of labor.

"For four decades," Hanauer and Rolf conclude, "we chose to elect political leaders who chose to put the material interests of the rich and powerful above those of the American people. We could choose to build a more equitable, resilient, and prosperous America by choosing to include every American in it!"

In their *American Amnesia*, economists Jacob Hacker and Paul Pierson (2016: 7–9) argue that all nations that achieved widespread affluence in the 20th century did so upon the catapult of the mixed economy. "It takes government—a good deal of it—to make advanced societies flourish for all." The mixed economy, they assert, "may well be the greatest invention in all of human history, a spectacularly positive-sum bargain. And now we're trashing it!"

In a mixed economy, markets play the dominant role in producing and allocating goods and services, and innovating to meet consumer demand. Government plays a vital and dominant role at the same time, when markets fall short or fail. Hacker and Pierson cite several great challenges facing the nation today, in which we once led and now trail other advanced nations, including

- public health and health care (United States ranks 17th)
- education (20th, where once we were the undisputed leader)
- income equality (most unequal among all advanced nations)
- research and development (9th)
- environment and climate change (33rd)
- infrastructure investment (15th)

Hacker and Pierson offer no magic bullet to restore the nation's pre-eminence, but they do point to several critical needs:

- to reform the political system to make it more majoritarian;
- to rebuild the capacity of government, to make it work better;
- to empower the people by guaranteeing the right to vote, reducing the role of money in elections, and rebuilding labor unions; and
- to amplify the voices of the more moderate and progressive private corporations.

In *How Democracies Die* (2018), political scientists Steven Levitsky and Daniel Ziblatt explain that, where it once was common, blatant military dictatorship has disappeared from much of today's world. They find that democratic backsliding often begins at the ballot box.

Today, unlike the more distant past, there is no single moment when democracy gives way to authoritarian and dictatorial leaders; its erosion may be almost imperceptible. Abdication of their responsibility by current political leadership generally marks a nation's first step toward authoritarianism. Political parties and party leaders are democracy's gatekeepers and defenders!

When fear and miscalculation lead established parties to bring extremists into the mainstream, democracy is imperiled. Institutions alone are not enough to reign in autocrats. Without robust norms of behavior, constitutional checks are not enough to safeguard democracy.

Like Dahl, Levitsky and Ziblatt argue that democracies work best when constitutional mechanisms are reinforced by unwritten but accepted norms of behavior. In the United States, two such basic norms are mutual toleration and restraint in using institutional prerogatives (like the Senate filibuster, now used to excess). These norms are democracies guardrails, and they are weakening, especially from partisan polarization, and

morphing into a fixed battle over social issues of race, gender, and culture.

Levitsky and Ziblatt find four behavioral signs of incipient authoritarianism: when a politician rejects the democratic rules of the game; denies the legitimacy of opponents; incites or encourages violence; and curtails the legitimate civil liberties of opponents.

SO, WHERE DO WE GO FROM HERE?

In 2019, the American Academy of Arts & Science created a Commission on the Practice of Democratic Citizenship. The commission (including such notables as Judy Woodruff of PBS, David Brooks of the *New York Times*, and Norman Ornstein of the American Enterprise Institute) conducted 47 public listening sessions across America.

At one such session in Bangor, Maine, the commission heard from a local woman who responded to the question, “What is our responsibility, living in a democracy?” “I think that’s a great question,” she replied, “and I don’t know that I’ve ever been asked it before. I just wonder to what extent we all understand what a democracy is really all about.”

In June 2020, the commission released its unanimous report, *Our Common Purpose*, with some 30 recommendations “to better the Common Good.” It identifies several imperatives at the heart of our nation’s civic dilemma: to achieve equality of voice and representation, ensure the responsiveness of our political institutions, build a civic infrastructure for shared purpose, and inspire commitment to democracy (AAAS 2020).

The commission sets forth several recommendations to address each imperative, including

- ranked choice voting in all federal and state elections,

- a constitutional amendment to regulate spending in elections,
- all federal elections to be held on the Veterans Day holiday,
- universal automatic voter registration,
- required voting in federal elections,
- new technologies for wider participation in official meetings,
- universal expectation of at least one year of public service, and
- civics education available for all ages, in all communities.

We live in a time of political crisis when nothing less than American democracy, itself, hangs in the balance. In 1863 amidst civil war, Abraham Lincoln spoke of preserving “government of the people, by the people, for the people.” In 1981, Ronald Reagan declared, “In the present crisis, government is not the solution to our problem; government *is* the problem.”

There is a straight line from Barry Goldwater to Milton Friedman to Ronald Reagan to Lee Atwater to Karl Rove to Newt Gingrich to Mitch McConnell to Donald Trump to January 6, 2021; a straight line from concern for the General Welfare and the common good to individual acquisitiveness and corporate aggrandizement; a straight line in terms of their positions on labor, the environment, public health, rule by majority, control of the courts, racial justice, women’s rights, and voting rights.

No dearth exists today of thoughtful reforms if only we will act with good effect. Most needed is that after decades of war and climate denial, persistent racism and sexism, oppressive income inequality, and chronic neglect of the nation’s public health, R&D, and infrastructure, the national government must do all it might to demonstrate anew its ability make a difference in the lives of

America’s working and middle class families.

“Civilizations die from suicide, not by murder,” observes the great British historian Arnold J. Toynbee. May we heed his warning!

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