

Some Democracies Are Not Wonderful.
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I recently heard an idealist complaining that President Obama was not enthusiastically supporting the "democracy movement" in the Arab world. He could not understand why we were intervening (tepidly) in Libya, but not in Yemen or Syria. To this idealist, democracy is something we profess to promote so why aren't we?

The trouble with this view is that there are two kinds of democracy: liberal and illiberal. Liberal democracy has imbedded in it a number of essential features:

- \225 Private property rights;
- \225 Protection of minorities both political minorities and status minorities (religion and women);
- \225 Independent courts with the teeth to enforce their judgments;
- \225 An independent press, whose job it is to keep an eye on abuse of power;
- \225 Literacy of more than 50%, including women;
- \225 A middle class larger than the richest or poorest classes;
- \225 Separation of government and religion;
- \225 Recognition of the equality of men and women under the law;
- \225 Voting in free and fair elections, with the losers stepping down with grace.

Notice that voting is the last element in a liberal democracy. The United States expanded the franchise over a 200-year period. The last to be enfranchised were women, in the 1920s.

An illiberal democracy is like pushbutton democracy; everyone votes, ready or not, and majority rules, just or not. For example, recent polls in Egypt showed that a vast majority would vote for death for blasphemy or "insults" to Islam. This is not acceptable as a democracy that the United States should back.

How can we promote democracy among the unenlightened when even we Americans do not understand the difference between pushbutton and liberal democracy? The illiberal democracy now in force in my own state of California is a case in point:

\225 The Initiative Process. Voters vote up or down all sorts of new laws that have neither legislative hearings nor provision for funding. California is no longer the leader in creative and good governance. This system has crashed our economy.

\225 Gerrymandered Districts. California is not alone in having manipulated the borders of Congressional districts so that they remain either majority Democrat or majority Republican. It is difficult to have real party changes in major elections, or to vote out really bad representatives. But change is coming.

\225 Primary Elections. The primary election process lets the most extreme fringes of each party select candidates. A candidate must either lie (to please the political fringes to become the party's candidate), or if he or she genuinely reflects the party fringes, is unelectable in the general election. How does this represent the majority of voters, who are in the middle?

How can we fix this and model a better democracy for the world? We cannot immediately dump the Initiative Process, but we can mandate that each proposition include the costs for implementation. This would eliminate the majority of frivolous propositions.

The primary process should be changed back to what it once was: selection of candidates by diligent and devoted national (or state) party leaders. People who are willing to put in time to serve on the state or national committees have my support in selecting a good candidate. This was once called "the smoke filled room." It is no longer smoke filled, and it now has women there at all levels of political experience.

Finally, for all the emerging democracies out there as well as for our problematic ones (like California), constitutions must be written and/or revised so that liberal democracy can flourish. California may soon have a constitutional conference. The Middle East countries must do the same and yes, that includes Israel one of the

better democracies in the world, yet with real problems of small minorities (the religious parties) with undemocratic power over the majority.

President Obama, in his speech about support for democracy across the Middle East, made clear that it is only liberal democracies that we will support, and that countries that want to join the modern world must carry out serious reforms of their societies. They must quit persecuting women and religious minorities and stop jailing peaceful demonstrators. That would be a start.

678 words

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