

Can We Rescue Our Democracy?
Posted On:December 31, 1969

Sometimes transformations take place under the radar. We do not see that a real change has happened until the tipping point suddenly makes it apparent. We are living at such a time now. Our Democracy is at a low ebb-but there is light out there.

Participatory government (democracy or republic) has always been difficult by its very nature. To function at its optimum, there must be a good constitution that sets forth rules, elected officials who believe in a process characterized by debate and compromise, and an electorate that is literate, educated, and cares about participation in governing.

The American republic has had the longest continuity of modern republics. The Greek Republic in Athens only lasted 50 years: Rome's, 500, but at its most functional, only a century; Poland's first republic (1569-1791) was followed by centuries of misery until today; and Venice's renaissance republic lasted for centuries, more or less. Most republics established after World War I did not last out the decade before being taken over by fascist dictatorships. As one philosopher noted, if men were angels they would not need government.

Today, the United States is facing one of its latest crises in its history of self-government. A growing majority of citizens are not happy about how our government functions and we are simultaneously undergoing a crisis of faith in all of the institutions that we once trusted: church, education, law, and government.

During the 19th century, American democracy suffered a number of even worse crises. When the voting rolls were opened to all white males (1840), propertied and educated elites (such as our founding fathers) were replaced by uneducated backcountry men and later hordes of immigrants from Europe who could be controlled by political bosses.

Another issue roiled the country until the Civil War: what to do about slavery. Political parties were mutually antagonistic and nasty, not seen again until today's dysfunctional congress. The Supreme Court of that day was also the worst in America's history.

The war ended slavery, but tradition and bad governance strangled the new Black constituency's voting power in its cradle. It took another century to address this. In addition, money corrupted the political process until the election of Theodore Roosevelt at the turn of the 20th century.

Now, the disenchantment with our governing institutions comes from some bad decisions made by people using inadequate critical thinking:

- o Referendum process: public voting on propositions that have had no discussion or debate by elected representatives, which result in unfunded mandates
- o Primary Presidential Candidate elections: giving undue power to states with small populations and to extremist parties at opposite ends of the spectrum (Tea Party and Far Left).
- o An unwise Supreme Court decision permitting unlimited money from businesses and unions to political campaigns.
- o An Education system that rarely teaches civics (how our government works) and that increasingly stresses the failures of our systems, not their successes (the vogue for criticism).
- o Legislators (and, increasingly judges) that must have deep pockets so that they can run for office.

It will take time to reform our education system which, to its credit, has a much more difficult task than did educators of the past (a flood of immigrant children, parental and government interference, etc.). But there are some changes promoted by an irate public that could tip our democracy back to trust:

- o Get rid of the referendum process and compel legislators to do their job.
- o Hold Primary Elections on the same day everywhere in the country. This would cripple the stranglehold of extremist parties with their terrible choices.
- o Challenge again the Supreme Court's equating businesses with individual citizens and restore campaign funding regulations.
- o Replace two-year terms of office with four, and have term limits. This will take

the wind out of constantly having to raise campaign money.
o Stop having judges run for office; appoint them.

Finally, to save our democracy, we all need to participate intelligently and thoughtfully and once more realize that our two political parties are colleagues, not enemies. Deals are made in the middle.

668 words

Dr. Laina Farhat-Holzman is a historian, lecturer, and author of *Worldchangers: Ten Inventions That Changed Everything*. You may contact her at Lfarhat102@aol.com or www.g1