

Democracy Has Strings Attached.
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Democracy means \342\200\234Rule by the people.\342\200\235 First devised by the ancient Athenians, native freeborn men of property could cast votes for issues of importance to their city. Discussions before the vote were carried out in the public marketplace, where all voters could assemble. Over time, however, the system become corrupted and some unfortunate decisions were made (such as going to war against fellow Greeks) that made the democracy collapse.

The Romans modified the Greek system into a Republic. In a Republic, citizens (again, male and free-born) voted for senators to represent them in a deliberative body that made decisions for the country. A complex state requires such a system rather than expecting the voters to make every decision in public.

At times of national emergency (invasions, etc.), the system was temporarily replaced by a military dictator. The dictator was expected to stand down after the emergency ended. This system too became corrupted through vote buying, lavish public spending, and a prolonged emergency in which the military dictator, Julius Caesar, did not step down. Rome\342\200\231s next government was an Emperor with a rubber-stamp Senate, a pret end republic.

During the Renaissance, two other countries tried a republic: Venice and Poland. Neither survived corruption or more powerful neighbors.

The United States is now the longest-living continuous Republic, and its influence has been spread throughout the world with more (or less) success. One essential element of a successful Republic is rule of law. We all know that. But less understood is the other essential element: a common culture. Failure to recognize the importance of this commonality is damaging our own republic today, and is obviously making democratic success in emerging societies (such as in the Arab world) impossible.

The failure of the Arab Spring was predictable because there was no commonality of values between the educated secularists and the majority of country, pious and ignorant, for whom democracy is not an acceptable kind of governance. The notion of \342\200\234freedom\342\200\235 does not include responsibility.

The United States has gone through periods of largely common values and other periods when our democracy tottered. From the 1820s through the end of the Civil War, one issue prevented a national common culture: slavery. The slave-holding sector remained agricultural and aristocratic in power, whereas the rest of the country was increasingly industrializing or being settled by small landholders. We did have a commonality in language (English) and religion (largely Protestant) that made it possible for the country\342\200\231s democracy to resume and flourish after the end of t he Civil War.

By the 1920s and until the 1960s, this country seemed to have a common culture. Most of us saw the same movies, read mainstream newspapers and magazines (Life, New York Times), and with the advent of television, watched the same shows and got our news from three mainstream news channels (CBS, NBC, ABC). We could talk to each other. Our disagreements were politically resolved by vigorous election campaigns, after which the winners and losers worked together---not perfectly, but generally cooperatively.

The changes came with the 1960s in the youth revolt, the divisive Vietnam War, and an increasing polarization of both the far left and the far right. Today, redistricting has created regions that are only Republican or only Democratic, leaving representatives unchallenged in elections. Cable News and the Internet have created a Tower of Babel in sectarian information, leaving little space for commonality. Very destructive Primary Elections give too much power to extremists.

The worst version of the extremist politics is described by Charles Pierce in Esquire: \342\200\234We have elected an ungovernable collection of snake-handlers, Bible-bangers, ignorami, bagmen and outright frauds, a collection so ungovernable that it insists the nation be ungovernable, too. We have elected people to govern us who do not believe in government.\342\200\235

I would also throw in those on the far left who fight any constraints on language, public behavior, and insistence that all cultures are equal. They too contribute to the Tower of Babel. But I believe that for us, this is just a bad cycle. There appears to be a public will to fix it.

684 words

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