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The Future of Democracy

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I wish I could simply be very optimistic when discussing the future of democracy. Unfortunately, I think that it is essential that we do not naively think that the future of democracy is automatically bright. The sustenance of a democratic system is similar to the sustenance of an initially successful family firm. The first generation works very hard to build it up. The second generation has usually witnessed some of the struggles of the first generation and usually is able to continue the effort started by the first generation. But, when the firm is turned over to the third, fourth, or fifth generation, problems can occur. Children are born already rich and without a deep

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understanding of the struggle that it took to build the enterprise in the first place. What took many years to build can be dissipated within a short time. Now, that does not mean that all family enterprises will fail. And it certainly does not mean that all democratic institutions will eventually fail. It does mean that I share Vincent Ostrom's concern, articulated in his most recent book (Ostrom 1997), that democratic systems are vulnerable if the basic constitutive ideas of democracy are not strongly held and practised over time.

Let me be bold and indicate that no democratic society can sustain itself as a democracy over multiple generations unless citizens in general understand that:

- It is always a struggle to keep a democratic system functioning as a democracy – requiring at times the willingness to engage in civil disobedience.
- There is a necessity for complex institutions that balance one another – courts that balance executives, national governments that balance regional divisions and local units – and vice versa. In other words, it is important to have multiple, organized voices – citizens who are active in political parties and other kinds of associations. It is important that there are officials who have some independence and autonomy as well as those who are elected for limited terms. And having strong local government is as important as having strong national government.
- Voting is not the only activity of a good citizen, and participation in civic groups, NGOs, and neighborhood associations is an important way of participating in democratic life.
- It is important to be active in and knowledgeable about sustaining a diversity of public and private organizations that consider alternative ways of life and public policies.

I share a deep conviction that democratic systems of government are the highest form of human governance yet developed. Yet I worry that the need for continuous civic engagement, intellectual struggle, and vigilance is not well understood in some of our mature democracies and is not transmitted to citizens and officials in new democracies. I base this on several related experiences.

One of these is the 'democracy projects' that have been sponsored by the US Department of State and USAID in many developing countries. I have been fortunate to participate in some USAID projects that have made a positive difference. On the other hand, some donor-assisted projects have set democratic development back rather than enhancing the future of democracy. About five years ago, for example, USAID decided to make the creation of democratic systems a major focus of attention. They set up study groups in Washington and sent out officers around the world to 'facilitate' democracy in developing countries.

I was asked what readings I would suggest as background to this important work. Besides recommending some of the best books written by contemporary political scientists, I asked whether *The Federalist Papers* (Hamilton et al. 1788) or de Tocqueville's *Democracy in America* (1945) or *The Old Regime and the French Revolution* (1955) was on their discussion list. (I do not think that other countries should adopt the American system of government as a blueprint, but these are pretty basic works for an American to have read who is going to discuss democracy intensively with others interested in understanding the foundations of democratic thought.) I was told that this was a ridiculous suggestion. No one read these books any more. They were not relevant for a contemporary democracy project. What they wanted to know was how to set up the mechanics of running a good election. Period – end of study. (And, even though several of these officials had taken political science courses, they told me that they had never been assigned to read de Tocqueville or *The Federalist Papers*.)

Soon thereafter, a colleague of mine was asked to join the USAID office in Kathmandu, where he was assigned to a democracy education project. He was married to a Nepali woman and had lived and worked in Nepal for many years. He was deeply concerned about how to help farmers set up more diversified operations. He knew that there were many public fishponds in the *terai* of Nepal that had been allowed to deteriorate after the national government had declared them to be public property. He also knew that it would be possible for local communities to redevelop some of these ponds in order to gain a good source of local food as well as an important source of local revenue that could then be invested in local schools, roads, health facilities, and literacy campaigns. Further, trying to find ways of reducing the financial dependence of local communities on the national budget was a way to increase local democratic strength, he thought. He was ridiculed and told that such activities had nothing to do with democracy and that he should stop trying to find ways of helping farmers help themselves. My colleague finally left USAID with great regret, for he was witnessing efforts by individuals who knew nothing about Nepal to stress only the mechanics of running an election and nothing related to helping Nepali citizens gain greater capabilities and independence. Thus, one of my worries is that my own country has been spreading a trivialized notion of democracy which I do not consider a sustainable foundation for future democracies.

This past year I taught a junior-level course for political science majors. On the first day of the course, I asked the students how many of them had read any of the above-mentioned books. I asked them what kinds of voluntary associations they belonged to and a variety of other questions about their political activities. I also asked them how they would approach solving a variety of public policy questions. Unfortunately, few of them were participating in any voluntary groups and almost all of them identified national

political offices as the first place they would approach in an effort to cope more effectively with a local school problem and with a local environmental problem. None of them had much idea at all about American state and local government and how one could approach solving these problems without writing to their national representatives.

By the end of my course they did have another view as we took on together a research project studying the NGOs in the region which were active in regard to environmental questions. And we did find a large number of such groups that were active and doing some very good and interesting work. So I was reassured that we did have many citizens in Indiana who were organized to deal with a variety of environmental questions and that my students now had a much richer view of democratic life.

Another of my worries is that political scientists no longer consider it an important part of our responsibilities to teach civic education. As a recent president of the APSA, I established a Civic Education Task Force as a way of stimulating considerable thought about these problems. Some of my fellow political scientists criticized the effort and challenged the legitimacy of teaching civic education in high school or college. Fortunately, it is officially one of the goals of the APSA, so I was on firm ground and the Task Force has been successful in stimulating a lot of interest. The experience, however, left me concerned that the professionalization of political science has led to a lack of concern about the sustenance of the very system that allows us to have a vigorous and independent higher education system in the US.

I hope I have not sounded too pessimistic here – but I would rather sound a warning note that if we are not vigilant about these problems, we can lose democratic systems very easily. We have to avoid slipping into a naive sense that democracy – once established – will continue on its own momentum.

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