

America's Delicate Democracy

WASHINGTON – Democracy, anyone? But, yes, of course. We all want democracy. In principle we all agree as to the advantages of living in a democratic country, where there are constitutional guarantees which uphold and protect freedom of expression and enterprise, free elections, rule of law, transparent and fully accountable government, respect for minority rights, and a lot more.

Preserving and passing on key values

In reality, though, it seems that many societies –including an old democracy like the United States– are no longer able to preserve, nurture and pass on to the next generation the essential shared values that make it possible to have a well-functioning democratic republic.

Let's get this straight. A vibrant democracy needs a lot more than political pluralism and free elections held at regular intervals, as prescribed by the constitution.

Yes, these are essential preconditions. But, although absolutely necessary, they are not sufficient to guarantee an effective democracy. You can have (reasonably) free elections, and still give life to a polarized or just confused political system which produces dysfunction, or even chaos.

Basic preconditions

Here are some implicit, yet basic, preconditions without which democracy becomes a flawed mess. Any vibrant democracy is premised on a reasonably well-educated population in which most citizens/voters agree at least in broad terms as to what rule of law means. This is all about justice, fairness, protection of minority rights, unfettered openness, real access to education, to all economic activities and to the unimpeded pursuit of public office.

The citizens also agree about the goals of public policy. And this includes agreement as to where the boundaries between the private and the public spheres should be. This means that the people share a genuine understanding about the proper role of the state in providing for the truly needy and in creating appropriate and fair systems that would enhance, in fact guarantee unfettered access to economic and other opportunity to all, without at the same time creating politically inspired and justified entitlements and/or set asides for any group or social class.

Paralysis

Well, here in the United States we still have all our republican institutions protected by our Constitution. But we also have political and policy paralysis. And this prolonged paralysis tells us that, unfortunately, as a society we no longer agree on critical fundamental values.

And this did not start with the November 2016 elections. During the eight years of the Obama presidency the Republicans did their best to block or delay anything that the White House wanted to undertake. The widespread perception among conservatives and also many independent voters was that Obama was in fact not the President of the United States trying to promote policies that would benefit most Americans but an ideological leftist who wanted to remake America into a quasi-socialist state. Hence the reflexive opposition to practically anything President Obama proposed. The outcome was paralysis. Almost nothing done when the Republicans gained the majority in the House of Representatives after the 2010 mid-term elections.

Today, after the significant Republican victory of 2016, we have a populist President Trump who at least until now seems to act on changeable instincts rather than on the basis of a well laid-out, properly articulated and widely embraced strategy. The impression is that, beyond broad goals delivered

through appealing slogans, this Chief Executive is uncertain as to which are the policy tools that would take America to higher ground.

Ideological warfare

The legislative branch, in turn, is torn by deep ideological warfare, and most of all by the astounding inability of both Democrats and Republicans to elaborate and articulate in a compelling fashion their own strategic visions for America. The outcome of this is more policy paralysis. If this were only a temporary aberration, a glitch, America could survive and move on. But, as noted above, this paralysis did not start in 2016, it has been going on for a number of years, irrespective of who is in power.

Now that the (rather fragmented) Republican Party is in charge, we have the flip side of the Obama years scenario. Now we have the Democrats as almost statutory obstructionists. They will not get behind this President on anything at all, as a matter of principle. Battling them we have a disunited, in fact disjointed, Republican Party ostensibly in the majority. The Republican Party is clearly incapable, not only of attracting members of the opposition in order to form bipartisan coalitions on key policies, but also of maintaining even a modicum of unity and cohesion among its Senators and Congressmen.

This is serious. Indeed so serious that, if we cannot repair the ideological rifts and the deep divisions that make it now impossible to create viable (bipartisan) coalitions which can identify and successfully tackle policy priorities that will benefit America and its people, the very future of this old republic is in question.

Checks and balances

The fact is that, a long time ago, the Founding Fathers devised a complicated and delicate –I underscore “delicate”–

system of government that was primarily aimed at preserving Liberty.

America was not and is not about creating a strong government that “*would get things done*”. It is mostly about creating institutions aimed at protecting free people against the threat of tyranny. And for this reason the Founders came up with a complex alchemy of “*checks and balances*” : equally strong centers of power that will keep an eye on one another, this way preventing any one of them from becoming too strong, and therefore a threat to liberty.

Easy to block anything

But here is the thing. While this system of equal forces balancing one another is an effective instrument when it comes to preventing any dangerous power grab, it is also ideally suited for launching successful obstructionist efforts at multiple levels.

Simply put, preventing almost anything from getting done is relatively simple within the U.S. constitutional framework. A small group of legislators, in some instances even a single law-maker, can delay or prevent major pieces of legislation and/or critical presidential appointments from moving forward.

“Getting things done” requires a relatively high degree of political agreement within the parties and often between the parties and among various factions and interest groups within the broader American society.

Lacking such an agreement, the system becomes easily dysfunctional. And this is the way it has been for a number of years, regardless as to who is in charge in the White House or in Congress.

Delicate system

That said, Let me be clear. There is nothing wrong, as a

matter of principle, with the U.S. Constitution. What is deeply wrong is that nobody really cares very much about the fact that this American system of government is actually premised on a fairly broad consensus about the mission and the scope of government, sincerely and openly shared by both major parties and other interest groups. In other words, this American constitutional system, while old and tested, is in fact very delicate. It needs consensus.

Recreating the consensus

Indeed, the system is so delicate that it cannot properly function without a fairly high level of “upstream” consensus about shared values and consequently about what should be the appropriate functions of the federal government. These shared values should be the ideological and cultural glue that should unite most if not all citizens and their elected representatives.

Given all this, it is obvious that given this constitutional setup it is next to impossible to have a reasonably well-functioning U.S. government when vocal extreme factions vociferously advocating mutually exclusive visions are in control of the political agenda. They have created a charged environment in which “compromise” is synonym with “betrayal”. The outcome is policy paralysis. (Remember what I noted above about how easy it is to engage in obstructionist efforts while ostensibly operating within the rules of the U.S. Constitution).

Anybody out there?

It should be fairly clear by now that we have a major problem. Accepting a perennially dysfunctional federal government is not an appealing prospect.

So, here is the question. Who is actively engaged in any meaningful, non partisan effort aimed at recreating the fundamental consensus about values and basic principles that

made America possible in the first place? Anybody out there?