

Fall of Democracy in the West

Dr. Ali Naderi

There are two important issues in any sort of elections: first, the principle of participation in the elections and casting ballots in the poll box; second is identification and recognition of the most qualified candidates, which needs a great deal of scrutiny and time.

To be authenticated across the world, democratic societies need to attract and convince their citizens to participate in certain activities such as elections. But there are some intellectuals who have challenged that assumption on the basis that not everyone has the skills and knowledge necessary to make informed political decisions. In the developed and imperialistic societies, the better-off classes are more engaged in policy, while the poorest vote less and lack the resources to lobby for change.

It seems an odd question, but researchers are increasingly asking whether citizen participation is good for democracy. Concerns about apparently diminished participation in the US reflect a Tocquevillian belief that more citizen participation benefits society and the polity. Many political observers lament the decline in voting turnout across the established democracies and view this trend as detrimental to the democratic process.

Low voter turnout in the United States has confounded politicians, activists and academics seeking to reverse a trend that puts the country behind many of the world's developed nations in participation at the polls.

Some years ago, the Pew Research Center ranked the U.S. 31st out of 35 countries including Islamic Republic of Iran for voter turnout based on the voting age populace, among the mostly democratic nations that are a part of the Organization for Economic Cooperation and Development.

The study showed 53 percent of eligible voters in the U.S. cast ballots in 2012, with about 129 million people out of a potential 241 million citizens taking part in the election.

In recent history, participation in the U.S. has peaked during presidential elections, when the last several decades show about 55 to 60 percent of the eligible electorate will vote. But those numbers trail off during non-presidential years and in primary races.

Internationally, Belgium had the highest participatory rate in its most recent election at 87 percent, followed by Turkey at 84 percent and Sweden at 82 percent. The study found that compulsory voting often had an impact on voter turnout, which was the case with three of the top five ranked countries, including Belgium and Turkey.

While mandatory voting is unlikely to happen in the United States, some states are looking to improve those statistics, even though many concede the reasons for low voter turnout are both varied and elusive.

According to interviews with research institutions, advocacy groups and legislators involved in those efforts, restrictive voting laws, as well as lack of hope to find a better society through voting, corrupt politicians and lawmakers in some states discourage the electorate from registering to vote. Additionally, they said gerrymandered districts cut across party lines reducing the number of competitive races and interest, and disgruntled citizens, fed up with the often contentious nature of politics, can choose not participate.

Liberal democracy in the west is facing its greatest crisis in decades, challenged from within by populists and from without by authoritarianism in the United States and even Europe and elsewhere. Reflecting what is becoming a widespread view, Viktor Orbán, Hungary's rightwing prime minister, recently proclaimed: "The era of liberal democracy is over."

What went wrong? Many analysts focus on economic problems. Slow growth, rising inequality, and welfare-state cutbacks have made life more insecure for the working and middle classes and spread economic risk, fear of the future, and social divisions throughout western societies.

Others argue social grievances are to blame. Traditional norms about religion, sexuality, family life and more have been challenged while massive immigration and, especially in the United States, the mobilization of oppressed minority groups has disrupted existing hierarchies, leaving some citizens angry and resentful.

Most discussions stop here, arguing economic or social change has led inevitably to dissatisfaction with democracy and a populist backlash. But economic and social changes only become problems if politicians, parties and governments don't recognize and respond to them.

In fact, dissatisfaction with democracy is rooted in the belief that democracy is not working – that it is unable or unwilling to deal with citizens' demands and concerns. And there is evidence the dissatisfied are right: over time, politicians, parties and governments have become less responsive to a broad cross-section of citizens.

In the United States, gerrymandering has increasingly warped the translation of voter preferences into political outcomes. By some measures, close to 45% of the US population lives in gerrymandered districts where outcomes heavily favor one party, diminishing the need for parties to consider the preferences of voters outside their base.

The role of money in politics has also increased, skewing who politicians pay attention to and who controls the agenda-setting process. Several political scientists have found that the interests of economic elites and the organized groups representing their interests powerfully shape government policy while less well-off Americans and the mass-based interest groups that represent their interests have much less influence.

In addition, private funding of campaigns has grown, influencing who runs for office, who gets elected, and what issues candidates respond to. The Koch network, whose preferences, especially on economic policy, are to the right of even most Republican voters, now raises about as much money as the entire Republican party spent on the 2016 elections.

Perhaps because campaigns increasingly require candidates to fundraise themselves, few lower-income people run for office. This biases economic debate in particular since politicians with working-class backgrounds are dramatically more likely than others to take progressive or pro-worker positions, even when controlling for partisanship, district characteristics and other factors. The American voting system also discourages particular groups from voting, particularly the poor and minorities, shaping what voices are heard at election time and within the political sphere more generally.

Given all this, it's unsurprising that political scientists have found that senior staff members in Congress – the people who help their bosses decide what bills to pursue and support – have “no clue what Americans want”. The more time they spend talking to big business rather than mass membership groups, the more clueless these congressional staffers become.

In Europe, other trends have also diminished democracy's responsiveness, including the decline of mainstream political parties. Historically, social democratic and labour parties

acted as the voice of the disadvantaged and disempowered. But over recent decades their economic policy-making became dominated by “finance-oriented economists” and neo-liberal think tank-based policy wonks who pushed them in a more neoliberal direction, and their overall leadership shifted towards a highly educated elite whose preferences, particularly on issues like the benefits of the EU, immigration and cultural change, diverged greatly from those of their traditional voters.

The rise of an unelected technocracy at the national and European level has also reshaped democracy. Over the past decades, ever-more policymaking areas fell under the purview of the EU without any corresponding increase in European citizens’ control over them.

Technocrats’ preferences often diverge from those of ordinary citizens, and technocrats tend only to ask whether a policy is “effective”, when equally if not more important is whether it is legitimate. Citizens are more likely to tolerate the “inevitable disappointments and frustrations” of policy when they can vote out those whose decisions they disagree with.

Democracy is, by definition, “rule by the people”. This does not require a perfect correspondence between some impossible to define “will of the people” and political outcomes, but it does require that the divergence between the two not be too great. In addition, political equality is the heart of democracy: some citizens cannot be systematically and permanently more powerful or impactful than others. It is hard to recognize much less solve large social and economic problems if politicians, parties and governments are primarily responsive to elites or narrow groups of voters, rather than broad, cross-sections of the population.

We are living in a time when these basic features and requirements of democracy have been eroded, leaving many citizens feeling disregarded and disempowered. As one leader of the “yellow vests” movement in France explained, “What we want above all is respect” – leaders and government should not ignore our needs and concerns. If traditional politicians and parties cannot convince citizens that they are willing and able to do this, dissatisfaction with democracy will increase – as will support for its radical alternatives.