

Stop Calling the United States a Democracy

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One way to have a tyranny is the traditional way, that is, by brute force. You tow the line, you do what you're told, you keep your mouth shut; otherwise, you're either dead or in a labor camp. Another way, a more sophisticated way, is to pretend everyone is free while rigging and manipulating everything to achieve a desired outcome, and then call it democracy.

If you look at the news media in the United States even briefly, you're very likely to hear a constant refrain of phrases like "undermines our democracy," "save our democracy," "preserve our democracy," "uphold our democracy," "strengthen our democracy," "pillars of our democracy," and "our democratic institutions." However, all these presuppose we actually have a democracy. That such language is used so frequently is in itself suspicious because if we really had one, they shouldn't have to keep insisting we do.

A Fake Republic

The fact is that the United States is not even a democracy on paper; it's a republic. In the mainstream, a republic is touted as a form of democracy, but actually it's a form of autocracy. Granted, it's a more liberal autocracy than what has generally been seen throughout history because in theory those who are ruled over get some kind of say in who their rulers are. However, what they don't get is a say in making policy decisions, and that component is in fact the essence of democracy, as under that system, the people ultimately decide.

Even worse, at present, the United States is an extremely weak and dysfunctional republic. We can only participate more or less once every two years, when we get to choose between effectively two candidates for each elected office, both already pre-selected by the elites. The way they select candidates is with money, since it costs so much to get on the ballot and to run a political campaign that only the rich can decide who may do it effectively in most cases. Meanwhile, those same people own the media companies and the tech companies and so have the immense influence to manipulate how people vote, the same way they try to manipulate the population into thinking it lives in a democracy.

Any voices that dissent too much from that narrative just get ignored, and if they happen to be too loud to ignore, they get denounced as spreading misinformation, spouting conspiracy theories, or acting as mouthpieces for scary foreign powers. If that doesn't work either, they just get hijacked and used to serve the mainstream. We see an example of the last tactic playing out right now in all the hysteria around race and gender, a convenient sideshow to distract from the real cause of societal wrongs, the fact that almost all the wealth and power in the country is concentrated among a tiny clique.

Another item to note is that the U.S. government keeps a lot of secrets. To consider some examples, what are the true intentions behind its foreign policy? Where exactly is all the military funding going? What exactly are the CIA, NSA, FBI, and other intelligence services up to around the world? What kind of propaganda campaigns and experiments, programs along the lines of COINTELPRO and MKUltra, are they running domestically and to what end? Such programs, by the way, are not ones that would be instituted by a government of, by, and for the people, quite the opposite, let alone one that has even the

slightest respect for them. In the same vein, what other illegal activities, like warrantless wiretapping and extraordinary rendition, is the government continuing to engage in? What are the details of the relationships between the government, private sector, and foreign entities? Does the government actually have information concerning extraterrestrial life, the truth of the Kennedy assassination, or other potential conspiracies?

In light of all this, one could try to make the old argument that all the secrecy is necessary for supposed national security, but all that would mean is that the sovereignty of the people has been sacrificed for someone's idea of security. Ultimately, there could be things going on that mean the reality we're presented with is a lot different from the truth. It's impossible for voters to make informed, rational choices if critical information is withheld, and it's impossible for them to hold officials accountable if they can't know the extent of those officials' activities. Even those holding high public office might not know themselves the full extent of what's going on, but rather unelected persons may be making critical decisions in secret. Under such circumstances, it's not possible to have a democracy.

The Farce of Elections

On the subject of our elected officials, the two-party system is actually a one-party system, since both parties represent the interests of the same group, while no one represents the majority. There is no middle-class party, no labor party, only a capitalist party. That party does have two factions, called Republicans and Democrats, but the main difference between them is that Republicans are more honest about how they don't care about the majority, while Democrats make more of a pretense of caring. The sum of their actions, however, shows that they don't. For the most part, the politicians of the capitalist party display little loyalty to the people or to the country, but rather the party and donors come first, what will keep each politician in power under this corrupt system comes first, and that's why we see less and less compromise, less and less effective governance, and more and more destruction among the people.

Congress, with its approval rating in the teens, is not a legitimate governing body. It doesn't have anywhere close to majority support, so in any kind of democracy, our current representatives and senators would be out of power. Turning the current system on its head, imagine this as a platform for a congressional candidate: "If I get elected, whenever a bill comes up for a vote, I will vote however you, my constituents, want me to vote." That would be real democracy. But no one in Congress does anything close to that, which is why almost everyone hates Congress and why the number of independents keeps growing.

In the relatively rare cases where independents and third-party candidates manage to get on the ballot, they almost always lose because the elites' propaganda drills into everyone that such a candidate could never win, even though all the voters have to do to change that is vote independent or third party. Such candidates are breaking a fundamental rule—the elections are only supposed to be for show, and only capitalist-party candidates are supposed to run—which is why any others are so thoroughly ignored and derided. The most common accusation is that they are "spoilers," which is very telling because there's no such thing as a spoiler in a democracy; people just have the right to vote however they want. Those who call such candidates spoilers are in fact saying the voters shouldn't have a choice, that they should have to vote for the pre-selected candidates. That's the opposite of democracy. That's one step away from casting a pre-filled ballot for the Dear Leader under the watch of the secret police.

Voter turnout in the United States is often less than 50%, and it's not hard to see why there is such apathy: people know their vote doesn't count. A number of studies, such as one by Martin Gilens and

Benjamin Page from 2014¹, bear out the fact that the majority has a negligible influence on policy while wealthy elites have by far the largest effect. This fact is also born out anecdotally in the lived experience of many people. They can see that the propaganda beaming across the airwaves has little correlation to daily life on the ground. They can see the stagnant and declining wages, that the factories are abandoned and the main-street shops are boarded up, that the unions are gone or have sold out, that the banks are fleecing the public more than ever, that the food is a chemistry experiment, that the air and water are poisoned, that to get sick is to go bankrupt, and that the constant, pointless wars always end in disaster.

When the majority not only doesn't rule but also has effectively no influence, there's no way a country can be called a democracy; the idea of being a democracy is dead right there. So why expect people to waste time going to the polls in their gerrymandered districts to choose between two terrible candidates, feeding a ballot into some proprietary voting machine, the trustworthiness of which can't even be verified by the public, when their votes are then diluted down to nothing by millions of other votes, even assuming they're all counted properly, when in the end the elites just find a way to do what they want anyway?

Searching for Democracy

Though the typical strategy is to say whatever it takes to get into office and then betray everyone afterwards, when a politician actually does try to enact part of the platform on which he got elected, the courts often wind up ordering the suspension or curtailment of that policy. In other words, the courts overturn democracy. The so-called justice system, in fact, is a total tyranny, and judges basically have dictatorial powers. Like kings, their whims determine someone's fate, as in many cases, they can sentence someone to years in prison as easily as to probation. They're also likely the only government officials treated with the kind of deference typically reserved for actual kings, another undemocratic aspect of the justice system.

Jury duty, meanwhile, is simply a mild version of conscription, which is itself just a form of slavery, one dressed up in notions of duty, honor, and patriotism to cloak that fact. Arguably, it's the worst form of slavery, since slaves, as a rule, are not blatantly commanded to risk serious injury and death on a regular basis, since that would also risk the slaveowner's investment. One of the most important institutions in the United States, the military itself is certainly not democratic but, quite the contrary, based on a rigid hierarchy, strict obedience, and conformity.

Such qualities are often supported by American culture at large. The society itself is not a democracy either, as a person's standing in it is almost completely tied to wealth, not any concept of equal representation or mutual consensus. Ironically, despite those concepts supposedly being part of the core values of the country, calling for such ideals to be implemented for real is a quick way to get branded as a radical or a fanatic and thus be excluded from consideration. The celebrity culture, meanwhile, amounts effectively to an aristocracy, just one tied to fame and money rather than heredity. Despite the United States being founded through a fervent rejection of it, many Americans fawn over the British aristocracy, and some have even joined it, committing, if not in a legal sense then a moral one, treason against the republic. While the culture pays tremendous lip service to democracy, actions speak louder than words.

1 Gilens, Martin and Benjamin I. Page. "Testing Theories of American Politics: Elites, Interest Groups, and Average Citizens" Cambridge University Press. 2014. <https://www.cambridge.org/core/services/aop-cambridge-core/content/view/62327F513959D0A304D4893B382B992B/S1537592714001595a.pdf>

While almost all of us do get part of one day every couple of years where we can pretend to be participating in a democracy by casting a ballot that doesn't mean anything, we then get to spend most of the rest of our waking hours under a dictatorship, also known as going to work. Despite all the assertions that capitalism and democracy each require the other, the capitalist workplace is the opposite of a democracy. The boss tells you what to do, and that's it. If you don't like it, you're fired, and your livelihood is taken away. Then you can go find a new dictatorship to work under, if any will have you, or go rot in poverty.

What it comes down to is that our rights primarily exist on paper, and they're coming to mean less in practice all the time. One way this is happening is through the powers-that-be arranging things so that rights are exclusive. For instance, a person accused of a crime needs to have a lot of money to hire a lawyer to actually enforce the rights supposedly guaranteed under such circumstances; the judges and prosecutors don't simply grant them to defendants. Another method is to go around people's rights. For example, instead of authorities having to get a warrant to access someone's personal information, they can just use the back doors provided by the tech companies. A third way is to suppress rights by proxy. No one may be able to forcibly stop people from expressing a contrary point of view, but a campaign to shame and slander them can be undertaken, even on a global scale thanks to social media, and their employers can fire them, even though workers' opinions have nothing to do with their job performance. A fourth way to suppress our rights is to twist and pervert them. So the free exercise of religion actually means Christianity can be imposed in the public schools, the right to keep and bear arms actually means limitless gun sales, the right to a speedy trial actually means waiting in jail for months or years, and freedom of speech actually means corporations are allowed to buy elections.

As for what hints of democracy do exist, local elections can still count for something. Because these entail fewer people, each vote is more impactful, while at the same time local authorities probably have more impact on each citizen day-to-day than the state or federal governments. The elite interests actually running the country are not always going to bother trying to subvert the politics of a small town, though it can still happen when such is in their interests. It nonetheless would be a stretch, however, to call the average local government democratic. Having one's influence limited to casting an occasional ballot and getting a few minutes to speak at the school board or planning commission meeting, so the members can then go ahead and do what they most likely decided from the beginning anyway, isn't exactly democratic decision-making. It's more a sideshow that makes it look like everyone participated and had a say, giving the proceedings a veneer of legitimacy, but really a small clique made the actual decisions.

Some states also do have occasional referenda, but those are generally just to get a rubber stamp on what the elites intend to do anyway, and if they don't get it, then they can just adjust their propaganda and keep trying until they do, or try a different approach altogether. This is also apparent from the convoluted and disingenuous wording common on ballot measures and in the difficulty of the process for most people to even get a proposal on the ballot, for the voters even to have a chance to decide. If we're serious about direct participation, why don't we have a nationwide referendum on, for instance, universal healthcare, paid maternal leave, student loan debt, and corporate bailouts? Why not just settle these contentious issues once and for all the democratic way? The reason we don't is the outcome wouldn't be what the elites want.

Living in a Plutocratic Oligarchy

No matter where you look, there is little to no democracy to be found. It's hard to see much trace of it in the sordid history of slavery, Jim Crow, the genocide of the Indians, imperial conquest in Latin America

and the Pacific, and neo-imperial globalization. Certainly, democracy is not faring very well in the colonies, such as Puerto Rico, Guam, and American Samoa, whose residents have no actual representation in Congress or a vote for the President. In fact, almost none of us really vote for the president but rather elect delegates who will vote on behalf of each state. Even the Constitution itself, which is supposedly the basis of our democracy, not only never even set one up but also has profoundly undemocratic roots. It was formulated in secret by a small group of delegates and then ratified by state legislatures that themselves were elected only by a small minority—primarily the white, male, land-owning population—and not even that group got to vote on the constitution itself. The constitution still did represent a big step forward in the progress of human society, considering what came before, but a lot has been learned since then, and there are still many steps to take if we're ever going to achieve ideals like democracy.

As already discussed more broadly, the political system largely isn't democratic, the institutions of the state aren't democratic, the economic system isn't democratic, and the culture to a significant degree isn't democratic. So where is all this democracy we constantly, incessantly, are told about? In the imagination. The real form of government of the United States could perhaps be called a "plutocratic oligarchy," with some ceremonial republican trappings. That is, the country is ruled by a clique of oligarchs, commonly called "the one percent," who put on some theater about the country being a republic, while the basis of their power is money, hence, plutocracy.

Similar observations could probably be made for many or even all supposedly democratic countries, but the focus here has been on the United States because it's the one that's most familiar to me and probably the most influential in the world and most likely to be held up as an example of democracy. It is not, on the other hand, out of any disdain for the United States, quite the opposite, because it's not patriotism to watch your country imploding and yet continue to shout how wonderful everything is. That would actually be closer to treason because if such self-deception continues on a broad scale, the country will inevitably be destroyed. Nevertheless, a major part of the propaganda that keeps things on the current course is to use accusations of a lack of patriotism to shut people up so the oligarchs can continue to plunder the country until there's nothing left of it.

At the same time, the U.S. could be a lot more repressive than it is, and even as a fake republic, it often allows more freedom than other countries do. One sign is that pretty much none of even its most reactionary fanatics reach the level of insanity of their counterparts in much of the rest of the world and across much of history. By and large, people aren't killed or put in prison just for saying or writing things, to give one example, and not many would even think to call for such draconian measures. Likewise, there is very little outlawing of information, as books and other materials generally aren't suppressed by force of the law or threat of imprisonment, though that may be changing.

Things could thus be a lot worse, but that shouldn't be used as an excuse to ignore the negative, and it doesn't change the fact that there's still plenty that could be improved. In fact, to strive for maximum freedom, for the expansion of rights, and for a truer democracy are goals that are quintessentially American. If the United States ever really starts to live by its own values, the effects would probably make even its greatest accomplishments to date look small by comparison. Maybe to stop pretending we already have democracy would be the first step toward actually achieving it.