

After Democracy

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“What comes after democracy?” That’s a question I first asked myself a few years ago, not because I thought there was something better than the American form of government, but simply as a thought experiment. You see, I believe you can’t accept an idea as true unless you sincerely try to defend the opposite idea. And then, after you have honestly tried to understand the other side as if you believed it, can you really evaluate it and know what you think.

The “after democracy” idea came to me in the context of evolution. There is an intuitive assumption that “us”, as we are right now, is the end of the evolutionary line. That for 100 million years species were evolving until we got to be “us.” And the process has now stopped.

Of course, if you believe in “prior evolution,” it makes logical sense to believe in “future evolution.” That “us” in 100,000 years, will look at current day “us” the same way we look at humans in 100,000BC; simple, barbaric, wrongheaded, and with a few different body traits. The only way that couldn’t be true is if we are the final last step; that we are simply done evolving as a species. But logically, of course, that can’t be true.

It was this idea that lead me to apply a continuum framework to the American form of government. I had always assumed that society was slowly working its way towards what we have today, that we have (mostly) gotten it perfect, and that no better form of government was possible. In short, I was making the “evolution has stopped” argument for American government.

The story goes something like this. You start off as a person alone in the woods. No government is needed. But two-person jobs exist, like moving stones. So, you join up with another person in the woods and share efforts, and life is better. And you add people until the group gets big enough that disagreements emerge. To solve these disputes and to provide direction to the mass, a leader emerges. Maybe even a good leader. But that leader holds onto their authority under claims of hereditary or being a god-king. Regardless, the effect is they keep it under threat of violence. Of course, there are more little people than Kings, so the people eventually overthrow the government, and a new leader is installed...who turns into the new god-king. Wash, rinse, repeat for 1,000 years of despotism.

Until one day, someone gets the crazy idea that maybe we become a society of equals, and we should all have an equal say. And you get democracy, or, in the case of the US, republicanism. This is the story of governmental evolution that

played in my head. The end. The perfect, final, form of government has been attained. America.

But what if it hasn't? What if forms of governance, like evolution, continue? What if there is something after democracy?

It seems to me there are some problems with republican forms of government. First, personal truth is determined by emotion as much as fact. Something is true not because it is true, but because it feels true. Propaganda works by pushing a simplistic, emotional, repetitive, uncompromising, statements. The polite word for it is advertising. Coke isn't selling coke. Coke is selling a lifestyle and an emotion, and they are willing to bet millions of dollars a year in ads that their advertising works.

The second problem is the desire of people to be a part of a group. You can call it tribalism, factions, or in/out groups. The theory is the same. The desire to find a tribe for protection and identify is rightfully strong. And sometimes that instinctual support of the tribe clouds the ability to be open-minded to new ideas, or to think rationally in forming opinions. Being a member of the group isn't just a choice, it's an identity. An identify you defend by agreeing with the group, even if you don't exactly agree with everything the group thinks.

And the third problem is each person tends to think they are immune to the effects of problem #1 or problem #2. So, while you are susceptible to repeated emotional messages, and you have a desire to be a part of a group, you also think you are the exception to the rules....and so does everyone else. And we are all wrong.

The founding fathers knew this all too well and (in a flash of genius) created a form of government that gave the people the power, but kept their emotions and factions at bay from doing too much harm. Federalist #10 outlines this idea. If you haven't read it, you should. The idea is that if a few people have power they may be swayed by irrational emotion or factions and make a sudden bad decision. But if everyone shares power there will be so many emotions (and factions), pulling in so many directions, it will be almost impossible to get anything done.

Imagine it this way. If two ants are pulling on a piece of food, they might get lucky, generally point the same direction, and move the food. But if 1,000 ants are pulling on the piece of food, just by the law of averages, the ants will be pulling in so many directions, the food is unlikely to move at all.

The genius of the American form of government is, by including everyone pulling in 1,000 different directions, it's almost impossible to get anything done. The safety net of the US government is it's almost impossible to get anything done, by design.

Now with those things out of the way in my thought experiment, what conclusions did I draw? First, that money equals advertising, which equals emotion, which equals “truth.” The more media time you can hold, the more emotion you can invoke, and the more “truth” you can make people feel. This means bias cable news programming creates “truth.” This also means companies, and the wealthy, can spend money on ads to create “truth.” Which means companies, and the wealthy, and cable news channels, get a disproportionate share of whatever they want under government rules. It also means the actual truth gets drowned out for lack of funding.

This also means our government responds really well to sudden problems that evoke mass emotion, but very poorly to slow, but serious problems that the mind normalizes and adjusts to. Global warming is the perfect example of what our government is bad at dealing with. It’s technical. It’s slow. Those opposed to it have a huge budget to fight it, and it’s hard to point a finger to a single understandable “enemy” you can make an action figure out of dressed in black.

The US form of government is great at responding to Pearl Harbor style events where the enemy is clear, emotional, and understandable, but bad at fighting slowly rising carbon levels.

Can this be done better? What comes after democracy? In 100,000 years will the US form of government still be considered the end of the government evolutionary chain, or is there a better way to do it? I’m certainly not suggesting that China, or anyone else, has the answer. Given the choice between living in the US and living anywhere else in the world, I’d pick the US.

But the thought problem is, I think, useful. Assuming we aren’t the end of the government evolutionary chain, what might be next? What might we be missing? What might we need?

Is this it? Or are we done?

(I’m by no means saying I have the answer to any of this. But these are the things I think about [huge nerd, I know] and writing about them helps me work through my thought process. I’m certainly open to feedback, am open to having my mind changed, and am open to having my errors in reasoning pointed out. Errors in grammar, msg to me privately...)