The Price of Democracy

Phi Beta Kappa Address

Derek Bok

The past 12 months have surely been a year of democratic ferment. From Egypt, Libya, and Syria to Russia, Burma, and China, we have watched people of exceptional courage—students and shop-keepers, peasants and poets, teachers and tradespeople—rising up and literally risking and losing their lives for conditions we in America take for granted—democracy, freedom, human rights and the rule of law.

In the West, we have also witnessed democratic ferment—on the streets of Athens, Rome, and Madrid and echoed here by the tents that sprang up suddenly on Wall Street and Main Street across the United States. But the ferment in the West has been entirely different from what we have seen in North Africa, Asia, and the Middle East—it has not been a fight to achieve democracy but a protest against the way in which democracy is working. The anger here and in Europe has been directed not against autocratic despots and repressive regimes but against the behavior of democratically elected politicians.

In the United States, the grievances are well-known and shared by millions of citizens besides those protesting in our parks and public squares.

- **Rank-and-file Americans condemn Washington for bailing out the rich and powerful while doing far less to help the poor and dispossessed**
- **They are frustrated by a Congress mired in partisan gridlock while millions remain without a job**
- **They are upset with special interests that seem to get their way so often in the Congress**
- **They are repelled by candidates who denigrate one another with negative ads of doubtful accuracy while offering little of any use in solving the nation's problems**

These views are all familiar. Although the criticisms have grown louder in the last year, they have been a prominent part of our political scene for several decades. The culprits are equally familiar. For each of our complaints we blame the politicians. Opinions about our elected representatives have now reached historic lows. Public approval of Congress has fallen to its furthest level in recorded history. Trust in its members has sunk beneath every occupation save used car salesmen and lobbyists.

I would respectfully suggest, however, that our anger is misdirected. If we content ourselves with vowing to "throw the rascals out," as the angry voters of 2010 should have learned by now, we will only be even more disgruntled two years later.

Let me therefore offer a different explanation for our discontents with politics and politicians.

- **Most Americans agree with the occupiers of Wall Street and Main Street that politicians do too little to help those who live below or close to the poverty line. Yet in the United States, unlike virtually every other well-established democracy, poor people vote at only half the rate of their more prosperous fellow citizens. In a representative democracy, why should we expect politicians to pay much attention to those who do not vote?**
- **We grumble about gridlock and the failure of Congress to agree on ways to solve our problems—yet a clear majority of Americans prior to the election of 2010 said that they preferred politicians who stick to their positions without compromising.**
- **We deplore the polarization in Congress between liberals and conservatives. But a major cause of polarization is that so few people bother to vote in primary elections. When Mitt Romney battled in primaries with Rick Santorum, Newt Gingrich, and Ron Paul, and candidates flooded the airwaves with their ads, fewer than one-third of those qualified to vote in states such as Michigan, Ohio, and Florida actually went to the polls. Those who do trouble to vote are disproportionately citizens at either end of the political spectrum who participate because they feel more passionately about the issues than the moderate middle. It is little wonder, then, that well-organized minorities exert so much influence over politicians and so many of**

the candidates who are nominated and eventually elected seem more extreme than the majority of Americans.

- **Finally, we dislike all the negative campaigning and the primitive level of political discourse. But why is there so much negativity? Because it works! Political advisers who pore over election results and opinion polls soon discover that negative campaigning is the most effective way of driving down your opponent's popular support. And why the misleading, even inaccurate statements? Because so many voters are so poorly informed. After all, as late as 2011, almost one-quarter of Americans still thought that President Obama was a Muslim and another 20 percent didn't feel they knew enough to answer.**

In short, the things we so dislike about politics and government are ultimately rooted in our own lack of interest and involvement in politics. This is not a new phenomenon. Toqueville pointed out in the 1830s that Americans "find it a tiresome inconvenience to exercise political rights which distract them from industry….When required to elect representatives or to discuss political business, they find they have no time."

In recent decades, this casual attitude toward politics has increased. Since 1960, voting, along with every other form of political involvement has steadily declined, and each new generation has participated less than the last. The rate at which Americans go to the polls is now virtually the lowest of any industrialized

nation. Of 172 democracies in the world, America ranks 139th in the percentage of citizens who bother to cast a ballot.

As I compare our situation with events in newly emerging democracies around the world, I wonder what it would take in the United States to elicit something closer to the commitment that leads newly liberated people to walk for miles and stand in line for hours on end simply to cast a ballot for the first time. The question calls to mind a memorable speech in 1904 by the great Harvard professor, William James, about the need to discover a "moral equivalent of war" that could turn the bellicose sentiments engulfing Europe into more constructive pursuits. Re-reading his words, I wonder whether there is a "moral equivalent" of the despotism and oppression in Syria, Burma, and Egypt that could rouse us from our apathy and remind us how precious our democracy is and why we need to work to keep it strong.

William James proposed as a "moral equivalent of war" some form of national peacetime service that would engage the youth of America in such activities as "road-building and tunnel-making" to help them "come back into society with healthier sympathies and soberer ideas." His vision seemed utopian at the time, but has since been realized, albeit only partially, in the Peace Corps, Teach for America, and countless voluntary civic organizations.

Discovering a moral equivalent of despotism and oppression that can awaken us from our political lethargy is an even more daunting challenge. Volunteers consider community service worthwhile whether or not others participate. After all, they can at least do something to help the children they teach in New Orleans schools or the poverty-stricken families they serve in Haiti and Nigeria even if their classmates choose to go immediately to graduate school or Wall Street. But when it comes to voting and working for better government, we can rarely accomplish anything unless many others join us in the effort. As Edward Banfield, another former Harvard professor, once said with brutal realism: "If I go to vote, I have a far greater chance of being run over by a truck than I have of affecting the outcome of the election."

Is there any way to overcome this feeling of impotence—this sense that nothing one does individually can change the quality of our democracy? In the past, when voting rates in America were higher, the task of political mobilization and civic awareness was largely undertaken by unions and churches and civic groups. Today, all these organizations are in weakened condition. Union membership, as a percentage of the workforce, is back to what it was in the 1920s, before the coming of the Great Depression and the New Deal. Church attendance is in decline. Most civic organizations, as our colleague Robert Putnam has reminded us, have lost membership.

The other traditional source for developing an active, informed citizenry is education. But schools too have become less involved. Fifty years ago, it was common practice for students in our public schools to take as many as three courses in civics. Today, most students take only one. Not surprisingly, their interest in public affairs has declined. Fewer than one-quarter of young Americans claim to read a newspaper regularly, and only one in ten gets news regularly from the internet. Sadly, when it comes to interest in politics, young Americans are truly exceptional. In a recent survey of 14 leading democracies, political interest among the youth rose over the past few decades in 13 of the participating nations. Only in the United States did interest decline.

One might have thought that government officials would be concerned about these trends and urge our schools to renew their efforts at civic education. Not so. Regardless of which party is in power, our leaders today define the mission of public schools as preparing students for better jobs and keeping America competitive in the world economy. According to President Clinton, "we measure every school by one high standard: are our children learning what they need to know to compete and win in the global economy." Or as George W. Bush declared in explaining the importance of his "No Child Left Behind" legislation, "We need to make sure that our country is more competitive and that our children can take advantage of the best jobs our country has to offer by strengthening math and science education." State governors speak much the same language.

These statements offer a striking contrast with what Congress said in enacting the Northwest Ordinance of 1787 that set aside tracts of land for public schools: "Schools should be forever encouraged because…knowledge is necessary to good government and the happiness of mankind."

Now that our teachers are being pressed to prepare their pupils for global competition, the only subjects in which all students must be tested annually are skills deemed essential to the economy. Not surprisingly, two-thirds of our public schools report that they have increased the class hours spent teaching these skills and reduced the time allotted to civic education. And as one would expect, the knowledge of high school seniors about how our government works has been declining.

I am sorry to say that colleges have hardly done better. This is not just my personal opinion. To quote Carol Schneider, President of the American Association of Colleges and Universities, "After five years of active discussions on dozens of campuses, I have been persuaded that there is not just a neglect of but a resistance to college level study of democratic principles."

To be sure, college students who wish to prepare themselves to be engaged, enlightened citizens can find plenty of courses and extracurricular activities appropriate for the purpose. They can major in political science, participate in student government, and join Republican and Democratic clubs. But these are only

options. Students need not choose them. And most do not. Although one can hardly understand many important policy issues without knowing something about economics, fewer than half of American undergraduates take a single course in the subject. Barely a quarter take a course in American government and politics. Smaller fractions still have studied international relations or political philosophy. Small wonder. Fewer than one-third of college freshmen think that keeping up to date with political affairs is important and fewer still discuss politics even occasionally.

In short, education for citizenship in our colleges is now treated much like choral singing or intramural basketball—available for those who are interested but easily avoided by those who aren't. There is, of course, one difference. Students need not become choral singers or basketball players in later life, and nothing turns on whether they do so or not. But citizenship is not an option. Almost all college students are citizens and much does turn on whether they choose to prepare themselves for the responsibility. Apparently, few colleges encourage them to do so. In a recent national poll, only one-third of college seniors felt that their college "promoted an awareness of social, political and economic issues or encouraged them to be actively engaged citizens." In three of the most popular college majors—in business, education, and engineering—Sunshine Hillygus, another Harvard professor, found that the more courses concentrators took, the less they voted or participated in community affairs after they graduated.

In dwelling on the importance of education, I recognize that high school civics and college courses are not going to change students magically into engaged, enlightened citizens. But there is good evidence to show that properly taught courses can have lasting effects on voting and interest in politics and public affairs. Education is surely not a complete solution for political apathy, but it can help. And in a democracy, every increase in political awareness and participation can make a difference.

Before we can take even this first step toward a more robust democracy, however, we need a change in our attitude toward democracy and our understanding of what it requires of us to keep it strong. A former college president, Robert Maynard Hutchins, made the point most forcefully:

> **The death of democracy is not likely to be an assassination from ambush. It will be a slow extinction from apathy, indifference, and undernourishment.**

That statement, of course, is extreme. Our democracy is not about to die, however badly it may be functioning at present. If there is one thing that unites Americans it is their strong belief in the basic structure of our government. Yet if our democracy is not merely to survive but to work well, we will have to stop taking it for granted and blaming politicians and lobbyists for everything that goes wrong.

In this sense, democracy is like a garden. It needs constant attention to retain its beauty... On second thought, however, that analogy is not quite apt, for one can hire gardeners to tend the flowers, but only we can keep our democracy strong. In that respect, democracy is more like a college education; as all of you know well, what you get out of it depends on how much effort you put in, and you can't hire anyone to take exams for you. Yet once again, the analogy fails, for you can get a lot out of college whatever your classmates do, but democracy will be successful only if most people join in working to make it so.

And so, I end where I began—still looking for a moral equivalent of despotism and oppression that will rouse us from our apathy to take better care of our democracy. Alas, I have no wholly satisfactory answer to give you. But of one thing, I do feel certain. Education is the place where we must begin.