

Governance and Democracy

[Paper No. 4 of the *Nehemiah Papers*]

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The way that a nation is governed is crucial to the well-being of its people and its national identity. Democracy is widely recognized as the fairest and most desired form of governance, although it is not perfect. Monarchy, dictatorship, anarchy, theocracy, *etc.* all have even greater problems for providing long-term desirable governance.

Democracy has two primary types. 1) In a pure democracy, the people themselves govern by majority vote (at open public meetings, for example). 2) In a representative democracy (such as America), the people vote to select a set of individuals who are authorized to govern for a period of time. The elected representatives discuss and then vote; the elected executives gather information and then make executive decisions. Whether from a pure or representative democracy, we can identify three points of potential weakness in democracy.

One potential weakness is in the human nature of people. Ignorant (or biased or bribed or selfish) people could collectively decide in a pure democracy to do some rather stupid things, such as attack a neighboring nation or destroy their own economy by irresponsible government spending. Therefore, one risk in a democracy is poor judgment by a majority of the people who actually vote (even if they are a minority of the total eligible voters), and then everyone suffers the outcomes. The *Federalist Paper No. 10* describes this as control by a “faction.” The saving grace in a pure democracy is that some people might know the dangers of war, over-spending, *etc.* and then convince the majority to make better choices. But they might not accomplish the correction in time to prevent permanent damage.

The second point of weakness is that the people’s representatives who are selected and authorized to govern can exercise poor judgment once elected to office. Sometimes it is innocent ignorance or bias; sometimes it is intentional but legal prejudice; and sometimes it is outright dishonesty. Frequently the element of bias stems from special interest groups that heavily spend their time and money in disproportionate amounts (and sometimes illegally) to influence elected representatives. Without doubt, this can and does happen even in the best of representative democracies, and even more so in democracies weakened by centuries of biased governments, or weakened by mere weeks of political propaganda or lobbying for some special purpose.

The third point of weakness is that once an unfavorable course of action has begun, it is increasingly difficult to accomplish a reversal. When a vote has decided a course of action, there is strong pressure on everyone to support the decision, especially when the stakes are high. For example, when a war is underway, even those who are against the war can be pressured (even drafted) to participate in the war efforts. And those who speak up against the actions can be labeled traitors and possibly punished. Change from established policies is usually difficult. Even in a democracy, the inertia of current practice is hard to change.

Let us never forget that some people who have been properly elected to lead have perpetrated some of the greatest evils. As one example, Adolph Hitler came to power by a democratic election in Germany, and his people followed him into a devastating war. Even in

America, some elected persons have exploited the tremendous powers of their elected positions to perpetrate evil or some shades of gray. One example is President Andrew Jackson's actions for forced Indian removal.

Thus, democracy does not guarantee good governance. However, built into a solid democracy are established voting procedures to change laws and impeachment proceedings which can be used to remove from office officials who exercise serious misconduct or serious abuse of their power. In this Paper No. 4 we discuss some specifics of American democracy and the possible steps to improve it.

Did I just say that democracy in America needs adjustments? Yes, I did. If you agree with me or even suspect that some things need examination and possible change, please continue reading.

The “Currencies” that Impact Democracy in America

Democracy is based on the voted will of the people. And in America, the currencies of “influence,” “money” and “beliefs” can strongly impact the outcomes of democratic votes. “Law enforcement” and “service” have much less impact on votes.

Have you noticed that physical power, including military power, is not on the list of powers or currencies? It did not need to be. Both a hired thug and a ballistic missile are without a conscience; it is mainly money (either directly or indirectly) and/or ideology (“beliefs”) that decide their use.

Influence by and upon Voters:

In democratic governance where “votes” are the quantified currency, the direction of government is influenced **by** voters. The ability to obtain votes in general elections or by elected representatives is extremely important. I have in mind the persuasive powers through speech and reason. These persuasive avenues are most proper where reasonable expressions of truth dominate the communications. I also think of elected chief executives (presidents and governors) who, after election, make multitudes of decisions where they cast the final (virtually only) vote because they have been empowered by the people to take action. The President of the United States has some real power.

The other side is the influence **upon** voters in order to elect persons of some specific persuasion. That is what political campaigns are all about, so certainly speeches and marketing of the candidates are appropriate, up to a reasonable limit. Our country already has some norms or limits: by law, direct bribing or buying of votes is illegal; by tradition, foul language or other immoral campaign conduct is not allowed; and by custom, the spreading of lies about candidates is considered inappropriate except when the perpetrators can get away with it, as seems to be increasingly the case.

In practice, one of the greatest one-sided advantages is to be the incumbent, the person who occupies the position and seeks re-election. This can lead to “serial incumbents” or professional politicians who occupy an elected position for many terms, even many decades. They can accomplish re-election in part because of the favors they have brought to their constituent voters. This strongly promotes actions that are short-term (until the next election) and self-serving (to gain re-election in the limited geographic area of the campaign). Re-election of incumbents does not favor long-term goals for the well-being of the nation. In times of crises such as those presently facing America, the long-term national view is far more important than the short-term local area view.

In varying degrees, all influences upon voters and their elected representatives are subject to the influence of money, which is the currency of economics and capitalism, not of governance and democracy.

Money:

American-style democracy is massively impacted by money, beginning with the episodic election process, and continuing through daily lobbying efforts. This is influence upon voters, not influence by voters.

In large measure, the veritable underlying power in American governance is the influence of money. “Money makes the World go ’round.” “Money talks.” Money is literally the currency of recognition and reward. A pat on the back is nice recognition, but a payment of real money is generally considered to be a deeper appreciation that can have longer lasting impacts, especially for those who are greedy or short on money. When transfers of assets are linked to governance, the results can be very unfair, whether to minorities or even to unknowing majorities in the population. Campaign money, hidden money, prospects to gain more money, lobby money, forgiveness of real and intangible debts, *etc.* are all very real factors in American elections and American politics. Not all votes and decisions are impacted by money, but far too many are.

Beliefs (“God”):

Votes and subsequent decisions by elected representatives in America can be substantially influenced by religious beliefs, including (in my definition of religion) the beliefs of the ultra-sectarians and even atheists. Strong beliefs are powerful forces, especially within the person and when expounded by leaders of groups of believers. This is neither illegal nor necessarily bad. Faith impacts politics in America. But even faiths, beliefs, and religious expression are subject to the influence of money. The examples are unending where the representatives of God in each of the faiths (including sectarianism) operate under the influence of money. Church leaders can count souls saved, attendance in church, and participants at rallies, but at the end of the day, the money the church collects from its supporters provides payment for salaries of employees (incl. leaders), attractive new buildings, utilities, insurance, and so forth.

In fairness, let’s acknowledge the flow in the other direction. The perceived power of God can stimulate some persons to donate their money and time to various causes, including their preferred candidates for election. And some elected officials certainly exert their powers to favor laws or appointments of federal judges that are more in line with the thinking of the religious activists. Money talks for many in the name of God.

Discussion:

Money is closely associated with capitalism. In America, capitalism and democracy are closely linked. But, when the chips are down in America, capitalism trumps democracy, and economics is more important than governance. The people who prefer this arrangement probably have a lot of money and know how to use their money to influence the election of governance that favors their wealth or personal preferences.

I do not like that arrangement. My attitude has nothing to do with being capitalist or socialist, and nothing to do with my religious beliefs. Simply stated, governance in a democracy should not be subject to pressures for favorable treatment of wealthy people, their businesses, or

their preferences. And as hard as it might be for some wealthy people to accept, in the end all true Americans would prefer revisions of capitalism to provide more strength for democratic freedom in America instead of the weakening of American democracy (and ultimately our whole society) in order to sustain and perpetuate the less desirable aspects of capitalism. I believe that.

Consider this textbook-style, economics-based definition of capitalism: *Capitalism is primarily based on private ownership of goods and services in a market economy in which the best business practices prevail over those that are not as good.* Now look at that same definition in relation to governance: Capitalism is primarily based on private ownership (*but “government” is not private property*) of goods and services (*but “votes” are not goods or services*) in a market economy (*but a “nation” is not simply a marketplace*) in which the best business practices (*but “democracy” is not a for-profit business*) prevail over those that are not as good (*but “fairness” is not to be prevailed over*).

I do not see how capitalism (or any economic system) has much direct relevance to democracy, and certainly no exclusive relevance to democracy. Unfortunately for America, the capitalist economic system here has shameful influence on our democratic elections through the power of money! And that money comes from the left as well as the right, from the Republicans as well as the Democrats, from the rich as well as the middle-class, but not so much from the poor.

So, how could we change things so that democracy (our system of governance) is not tainted by the most undesirable aspects of our capitalist economic system?

1. Term limits. The “serial incumbents” thrive on special-interest donations to keep them elected so they might vote in predictable ways. I write a whole section in favor of term limits in a later Paper.

2. Better controls and more balance on campaign allowances for each of up to five (?) candidates in each election, including the primary elections which decide who gets on the final ballot.

3. Development of alternatives to money as a power in politics. I am thinking of service as an alternative currency, which is discussed in other Papers. Someone who spends significant money and time to accomplish good service (in activities unrelated to politics or religion) will find more receptive listeners when speaking about politics, laws and votes.

4. Establish new laws to place the democratic processes above the reach of persons who would influence elections and decisions with money.

In short, democracy in America is too important to be left to the present system of capitalistic manipulation of voting processes. America needs to have more influence **by** voters, and less influence **upon** voters by the other powers. Power to the fair-minded voter, says

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