

An Old Man's Concerns About The Future Of Democracy - The Fears And Regrets Of A Longtime Citizen Activist

As the 2024 Presidential Election looms ahead, my concerns about the future of democracy in this country become more intense. After a life time of involvement in politics and public life, my fears about the potentials for the emergence of a more autocratic system of government keep increasing. I also feel some regrets for the failures of reform efforts in the past several decades aimed at preventing this decline of our political process.

The immediate villain is Donald Trump, and the immediate goal is to prevent his reelection as President in November. Although his defeat at the polls may be the current necessity for those of us who are concerned about preserving representative democracy, there are many forces and factors that led us to this moment in our history. As the historian Arnold Toynbee has told us, a country's success or decline is based upon how it responds to various problems or crises over time.

Factors important to acknowledge here are some long term transformations of politics and political parties during the last fifty years. When I was becoming involved in politics and public life in the 1960s, both the Republican and Democratic Parties had moderate, conservative, and liberal constituencies and elected representatives. This meant that both parties often needed to compromise among their own members on controversial issues of the day. In fact, one criticism often made during that era was that the two parties were too similar.

However, this factor provided a positive situation for activists on issues. Reformers and Civil Rights groups of that period could find supporters in both parties to back policy proposals, and it allowed for bipartisan Congressional Coalitions that were often necessary to pass legislation. In fact, most of the major laws passed during the 1960s and 1970s required "yes" votes from members of the Republican and Democratic Parties.

The conservative wing of the GOP grew in numbers and became more vocal in the 1970s. The election of Ronald Reagan as President in 1980 revealed this dramatic swing to the right of the Republican Party and the country as a whole. Major cuts in affordable housing and other federal safety net programs occurred during Reagan's two terms in office, and homelessness and poverty grew in cities across the nation.

Although many Democrats in Congress opposed these huge cuts, their Party also tended to become more moderate to conservative during this period. By the time a Democrat won back the White House in 1992, President Clinton was declaring that the era of big government was over. At the close of his first term in office, he successfully helped end a major, long term safety net program (Aid to Families with Dependent Children).

Another major change in politics that emerged and grew in the seventies, eighties, and nineties was the role of “big money” in election campaigns at the national, state, and local levels. As campaigns became more and more dependent on TV-ads, raising large donations became more and more important. Suddenly, wealthy individuals and groups with interests in influencing public policy and legislation had a major way to gain the support of legislators through large campaign donations. This growing dependence of candidates on large donations created a greater separation of elected officials from average voters as they focused more of their attention on big donors. Representatives also became reluctant to pass legislation that was opposed by “big money” interests.

These trends of a growing conservative movement in both major Parties and an emerging dependence on “big money” to finance campaigns at all levels had an overall negative impact on U.S. politics and government. Certainly the importance of raising large donations for campaigns detracted from the process of grassroots democracy where candidates attempt to directly respond to the needs of their constituents. “Big money” also added to the movement for smaller government and less money for safety net legislation.

A review of my involvement in politics and public life from the 1960s until the present reveals how I witnessed and dealt with these major changes in political life during this time frame. I grew up in a Republican family, and in my early years as a voter in the 1960s I tended to consider myself a liberal Republican. However, when Barry Goldwater won the GOP nomination for President in 1964, I voted for Lyndon Johnson.

When I graduated from college in 1963, I was hired by the City Charter Committee, Cincinnati’s Reform Party, to write press releases for several of its Council candidates. At that time, Charles P. Taft, the younger brother of Senator Robert Taft, was Charter’s leader on Council, and he championed Civil Rights and other policies that assisted low-income residents. Comprised of progressive Democrats and Republicans, Charter that summer and fall was focused on re-electing City Council’s lone African-American member.

A few years later when I was in graduate school at the University of Cincinnati, I became personally involved with a publication that served as the liberal voice for the Republican Party. The Ripon Forum, a monthly journal published in Cambridge, Massachusetts, recruited me to become its Ohio correspondent. My assignment was to file stories about progressive GOP activities and individuals in Ohio as well as an occasional piece of political satire.

When opposition to the Vietnam War began to grow in the late-1960s, I was able to write a few articles for the Ripon Forum about Congressman Charles Whalen and his leadership in the House of Representatives against this conflict. Whalen represented Dayton, Ohio in the House, and he also supported many safety net and urban policies such as General Revenue Sharing. During this era, when each major Party shared a variety of different views on major issues such as Vietnam, I could support Republicans

such as Whalen, while also becoming involved in Senator George McGovern's 1972 campaign for President.

As noted earlier in this article, the real evidence of the GOP's shift to the right occurred in 1980 when Ronald Reagan was elected President. As the founder of an urban non-profit (Applied Information Resources) focused on providing information and research on public issues, I was quickly caught up in the task of analyzing the local impacts of the enormous federal cuts in programs designed to assist local governments and individuals and families in need. The eight year Reagan Presidency brought about the first major reversal of federal domestic program funding since the New Deal era. Besides conducting community forums about these cuts, our non-profit received a foundation grant to study how city and county governments and other public agencies and services were affected by this loss of federal dollars.

One of the most depressing outcomes of the GOP's shift to the right and to Reaganomics is the large rise of homelessness in cities across the country. My non-profit was hired by the City of Cincinnati in 1986 to research the growth of homelessness in this area. What we found in our research was the emergence of homelessness among families, especially single parent women and their children. This factor was directly related to the loss of affordable housing due to the huge cuts in federal housing programs. For the next thirty years, much of AIR's research and many of our reports continued to focus on homelessness and affordable housing issues, but these problems only worsened over time.

During this same period, the impact of "big money" on political campaigns also worsened and made representative democracy at all levels less accountable to average voters. Concern about this unhealthy trend prompted my involvement in research and organizing for local reforms such as the 2001 Cincinnati City Charter Amendment that included campaign contribution limits and an option for the public financing of City Council campaigns. Although this Amendment was approved by the voters, the public financing process was repealed one year later by a campaign endorsed and financed by a wealthy Individual who did not want to lose his influence as a major donor. It should be noted that beyond public financing the Supreme Court's decisions equating campaign donations to freedom of speech have made it very difficult for reformers to effectively address the warping effect of "big money" on our political process.

Several further trends should be mentioned that helped bring us to the current political crisis. As the GOP continued its movement to the right it began to nurture a grassroots base that voiced an even sharper divide with moderate and liberal opponents. This division often showed itself in nastier attacks during campaigns for Congress and for President, and during the Obama Presidency it took the form of organizations like the Tea Party. Finally, in 2016, this growing grassroots base nominated Donald Trump, a candidate for President who advocated its more right wing agenda, rather than opting for a traditional conservative Republican like Jeb Bush.

Another trend now creating a less fact-based politics in this country is the growing dominance of social media as the way people get their information about government issues and candidates for office. Too many of us currently get all our information about politics and government from websites that deal in misinformation or lies rather than actual facts. Formerly, conservatives, liberals, and moderates shared the same news from TV, newspapers, and weekly magazines. They still held various opinions about that news, but at least they were dealing with the same information. The decline of fact-based journalism is a problem that any democracy needs to address.

These are the trends and factors that must be considered as issues that have led us to this critical moment in our political life in this country. They have created a crisis that cannot be easily resolved even if we manage to prevent Trump's re-election this November. However, defeating Trump is a necessary and critical first step.

An initial commitment as we look ahead to November is to convince friends and acquaintances of the critical nature of this election. Polls seem to indicate that a high percentage of voters across the country are looking on the Presidential Race as just a normal election that should be decided on kitchen table issues such as inflation and the high cost of groceries. Somehow we have to convince this population that we confront an even higher cost than groceries this fall if we vote for a candidate who wants to transform us from a representative democracy to an autocracy.

How should we do this. One way is launching an information campaign that presents the actual words of Trump and other MAGA-spokesmen about what they would do if given another term. These words include plans for taking revenge against political enemies and making independent Agencies such as the Department of Justice into personal offices run by the President. They are also talking about never accepting defeat at the polls, and promoting more events like January 6th. One strong theme is white male domination linked to violence and racism.

The big "How" is forging diverse and effective state and local coalitions for organizing a variety of approaches for reaching voters prior to the November Election. There are the traditional reform organizations such as Common Cause, the League of Women Voters, and the ACLU, but we greatly need to enlarge and diversify this group in the months ahead. Chapters of organizations that support Women's rights and Civil Rights such as the NAACP come quickly to mind. In fact, any group that is a target of the MAGA-Coalition should be contacted as a potential ally.

These are the thoughts of an old man who conjures up daily fears about our democracy going down the tube. All of us, old, middle-aged, and young, who have these concerns, must come together while we have a chance to prevent this potential public disaster. As I noted, we have a lot of reforming to do even if we prevent a MAGA victory this November. A win for us, however, would give us some momentum for the big tasks ahead.

by William K. Woods

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