

Saving Democracy: What can we do?©

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Overview

Democracies are created to protect human rights. The purpose of this dialogue is to: identify the human rights essential to our democracy, which ones are at risk, and what we can do to protect them? The focus of discussion is our role as citizens; what is required of us to make our democracy work? Are we up to the task?

The United States is a democratic republic that derives its power from the consent of its citizens. Citizens exercise their power by electing leaders to represent and act on their interests, or to replace leaders who do not. But citizens have only one vote which gives them power only when their one vote becomes part of a majority that shares a common purpose.

This is the democracy problem—creating common cause and purpose out of individual, often competing interests. How can we replace competition with cooperation? Alarming, this has become a test of our democracy. Two Harvard researchers and authors of *How Democracies Die* believe our democracy is at risk because of the extreme partisanship and polarization of the American people. From their extensive studies of democracies that have failed in the 20th century they identified a list of actions taken by democratically elected leaders that led to autocratic rule. They include:

- demonizing opponents,
- disenfranchising voters,
- undermining the justice system,
- bypassing legislative assemblies by using executive orders,
- and replacing uncooperative judicial and law enforcement officials with those loyal to them.

When the people are divided, they have no power to defend against these destructive acts. When the people are polarized they have no power to protect the constitution. When the people are locked in partisan conflicts they are part of the problem—not the solution.

This is a problem of human behavior—our behavior—and we need to change. But, what and how? Some of the following findings from two books that report on the scholarship of social scientists who study human behavior provide some answers.

Jonathan Haidt, a moral psychologist and author of *The Righteous Mind: Why Good People Are Divided by Politics and Religion* has also concluded that Americans have become “polarized and embattled to the point of dysfunction.” He concludes from his research that we form emotional bonds within “our” groups that give us a sense

of identity and a blind belief in the superiority of our group's moral matrix. This is supported by his findings that:

- Our minds are "... divided into two parts, a rider—our intellect— and an elephant—our feelings and emotions. The rider evolved to serve the elephant.
- Our righteous minds are moralistic, critical, judgmental and groupish.
- We are primarily intuitive and emotional – not rational.
- We no longer have the power as voters to hold those we elect accountable because we:
 - are trapped in the moral ideology of our groups,
 - are in constant conflict with those with other ideologies
 - are unable to agree on what is essential for the well-being of the community, and
 - cannot determine if or when our elected representatives are working in our interests, or if it is time to "vote them out."

Christopher Achen and Larry Bartels, authors of *Democracy for Realists: Why Elections Do Not Produce Responsive Government*, reach conclusions consistent with Haidt's. They offer compelling evidence from their study of voter behaviors that:

- Most of the time voting behavior merely reaffirms voters' partisan and group identities.
- Most citizens support a political party not because they have carefully calculated that its policy positions are closest to their own, but rather because "their kind" of person belongs to that party.
- Political parties are in the business to mold identities into partisan loyalties which reflect the way people understand their own lives, and determine how they vote.
- Identities are not primarily about adherence to a group ideology or creed. They are emotional attachments that transcend thinking.

Research Conclusions:

1. Our democracy is at risk because the values on which it rests have been weakened due to extreme partisanship and polarization.
2. As individuals we behave emotionally & intuitively, not thoughtfully. (The elephant rules.) We are *groupish*.
3. Our voting behavior is determined by our partisan and group identities—not by rational choice making.

Questions to discuss.

1. What are the human rights our democracy was created to protect?
2. How does our democracy protect our rights?
3. Which of our rights are at risk today?
4. Where is our power to protect our democratically defined rights?
5. How can we change voting behaviors—ours and others?

After witnessing the death and destruction of World War I, the poet William Butler Yeats described our human affliction.

The Second Coming
by
William Butler Yeats

Turning and turning in the widening gyre
The falcon cannot hear the falconer;
Things fall apart; the centre cannot hold;
Mere anarchy is loosed upon the world,
The blood-dimmed tide is loosed, and everywhere
The ceremony of innocence is drowned;
The best lack all conviction, while the worst
Are full of passionate intensity.

Sources & Citations

1. Steven Levitsky & Daniel Ziblatt, *How Democracies Die* (New York: Crown, 2018).
2. Jonathan Haidt, *The Righteous Mind: Why Good People Are Divided by Politics and Religion* (New York: Pantheon Books, 2012).
3. Christopher Achen & Larry Bartels, *Democracy for Realists: Why Elections Do Not Produce Responsive Government* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2016).
4. W. B. Yeats, *The Second Coming*, ed. Michael Schmidt (London: Quercus, 2008), 22.