

WHERE ARE WE HEADED AS A NATION? (Part two)

Is the first order of business in this country the need for citizens to attempt to restore democracy back to health? At the conclusion of Part I of "Where Are We Headed As A Nation - A Need For Reflection," I promised to review critical problems that are currently receiving either inadequate or completely counter productive responses, and to also suggest some possible reforms. Two U.S. Supreme Court decisions this month prompted me to place reviving our democratic process at the top of my list of reforms.

First off, the Court upheld the policy of the State of Ohio to purge people from the registered voter rolls if they had not voted in two consecutive elections. This policy put in place by Secretary of State John Husted was justified as a way to prevent voter fraud by efficiently removing registrants from the rolls who for a variety of reasons no longer appeared to be Ohio voters. Critics and reform groups such as Common Cause and the League of Women Voters denounced the policy as a partisan step to make it more difficult for many citizens to exercise their right to vote. Research shows that thousands of Ohioans were purged from the rolls and a disproportionate number of them were African Americans and residents of low-income urban neighborhoods. By a five to four decision, the Court upheld Husted's process as a legitimate way to administer voter registration.

Next, the Court punted on the issue of gerrymandering. After the 2010 Census, extremely gerrymandered representative districts were created in a number of states such as Wisconsin, North Carolina and Ohio. By utilizing computer experts to crunch population data, the political parties that controlled redistricting mapping in those state could virtually insure a lopsided majority of safe seats for their candidates. Challenged in the Courts as

procedures that established unfair voting in those states, the Wisconsin case was taken up by the Supreme Court last year. This June, however, the Court ruled that the plaintiffs in the case had not sufficiently proved their contention of harmful damage to Wisconsin voters. They sent the case back to the state, essentially not commenting on the potential Constitutionality of the issue.

These cases reenforced my concern about the health of democracy in this country and the number of obstacles that exist blocking many meaningful reforms. Voting rights and the goal of fair elections emerge as the latest aspects of political democracy to be placed in jeopardy by the Supreme Court. Efforts to curb the destructive impact of "big money" on elections have already been stymied by the Court's rulings in Buckley versus Valeo and Citizens United.

The ticking clock for reformers in overcoming this series of inappropriate responses to major political and government issues seems to be the limited time available before reviving democracy is no longer a possibility. Most of the activities and decisions eroding democracy bolster the powers of the economic establishment to control government policy. Such control has led to the kind of elitism and income inequality that has disillusioned so many Americans about our current system. One result has been a sharp decline in the number of people who take the time to vote.

In fact, Trump's election was in part a reaction by a large number of people that the current system was not working for them. They threw their support to this very loud and angry man who promised to make America great again with simple answers and by attacks on various scape goats. His authoritarian tendencies and his

contempt for the complexity and fragility of public affairs make the decline of democracy even more of a scary reality.

The challenge is to work toward rebuilding a political and governmental system that citizens can believe is striving to represent "we the people." What makes this challenge particularly daunting is the current set of circumstances. To repeat, "big money" continues to grow as a warping factor in elections at all levels. Legislation aimed at discouraging and actually suppressing voting keeps popping up in many states, and the threat of further extreme gerrymandering still looms as a possibility in 2021. Meanwhile, a vocal minority seems to relish Trump's inclination for authoritarian rule.

All this leads to the question of what reforms exist for activists to support in order to make things better? Are there still some significant ways to renew democracy such as the Ohio Constitutional Amendment on Congressional redistricting that voters passed in May? Part III of this series will discuss some of the reform arrows that are still available for activists to put in their quivers.