

The Health Of Our Democracy- Questions To Ponder Before And After This Election (by Bill Woods for StreetVibes)

Most of us are planning to vote in the next few weeks. We will either vote early at the Board of Elections, cast our absentee ballots through the mail, or go to our polling places on November 3rd. This process of preparing to vote causes me to think about our political and governmental systems themselves and to pose a series of questions about their health and relevance.

Any high school civics class teaches the basics of how our democratic system is supposed to work. "We the People" are meant to be the bosses of our public officials who we elect to pass laws that respond to our collective needs and that reflect our common values. If our local, state, or national representatives fail to do a good job of legislating and administering what we want government to accomplish, "We the People" replace them at the next election. Thus, in a representative democracy, our right to vote is essential.

Further knowledge of government and history, or just our exposure to the day to day workings of public life teach us that things are a lot more complicated. There is the ideal of how democracy is meant to work and the reality of how our systems actually function. A good course in American history also shows us that from the time the words "We the People" were written, each generation has struggled to make this phrase more of a reality than it was when only white male property owners could vote.

Most of us can accept the discrepancies that exist between an abstract description of democracy and the reality of the system that we know. For instance, we realize that "we the people" represent diverse religions, cultures, economic classes, and viewpoints. Such diversity led to the creation of political parties that imperfectly reflect the views and beliefs of different people and groups. We also know that economic and social problems over time can impact politics and government.

However, government scholars tend to agree that when the differences between an existing system, especially a democracy, and its written principles and duties become too extreme, the system is in trouble. The question we must now ask is: Has the national government and political process in the U.S. reached this stage? Is our representative democracy currently in ill health?

Many, including former President Barack Obama, say that democracy is on the line in this current election. They declare that President Trump, with his autocratic inclinations and disrespect for law and the Constitution, pose a real threat. Further, his use of scape goats and enflamed rhetoric so polarizes us that coming together as one people becomes more and more difficult.

The evidence of Trump's ant-democratic actions does seem clear, and his untrue rants about rigged elections and fraudulent mail-in ballots further sew doubts in the minds of many Americans about the integrity of our election system. In other words, an initial step for protecting democracy in this country is resoundingly voting Trump out of office on November 3rd. The next question, however, is what more needs to be done to restore U.S. democracy to health.

Trump's election in 2016 showed that a lot of Americans could support an outsider who offered scapegoats and simple answers, because they were already disillusioned with a system that seemed to ignore them. That is why political reformers and activists realize that defeating Trump is not enough. The next steps are addressing the factors that have evolved in recent decades that weaken representative democracy.

When launching any long-term reform agenda, certain questions must be answered in order to get people on the same page. Here follows some of those questions. To begin with, what in your mind are the key obstacles that weaken democratic institutions?

More specifically, is the influence of "big money" in the form of large campaign donations to candidates warping representative government? Are politicians of both parties so preoccupied and influenced by "big money interests," that they pay too little attention to the views and needs of average voters? Has this lack of attention made many people believe that elections don't matter because their representatives really work for the economic establishment?

In terms of voting itself, are there too many obstacles and actual voter repression regulations that make it difficult for you or your neighbor's to vote? Are you concerned about national and state strategies this fall to make it difficult to vote by mail or to question this form of voting? Are reforms needed to make it easier to vote such as having Election Day declared a national holiday?

Do you think reliable sources of public information about politics and government are essential to a healthy democracy? Do we have these reliable and accepted news resources today? Are you concerned that not enough Americans receive and believe reliable and accurate accounts about politics, elections, and government in general? How is Social Media a negative and positive information resource for informing its users about politics and government today? What are some steps needed to lessen the polarization of information today?

Finally, are trends in U.S. society such as the growth of economic inequities and the huge disparities in wealth a threat to our democratic institutions and values? These are some questions for round two of reforming democracy. You can ponder them after you cast your important vote from now until November 3rd.