



US Electoral Politics and the Illusion of Control

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We have all been told a lie. The lie that says democracy can be maintained only through voting, through purely representative, parliamentary means. When the founding fathers set up the Constitution and Bill of Rights, they were wary of any truly popular, working and middle class control of the United States. Our government was to be run as a republic, designed by elites, for the elites. Our three branches of government were not simply invented for checks and balances: another reason was to stymie any massively popular mandates that would go against the interests of the oligarchy.

Today, the checks and balances used ostensibly to prevent tyranny are being used against us: even though a high majority (65%) is against government surveillance which violates privacy, and 78% want *Citizens United* overturned, we are stuck with a broken system and statesmen bought off by corporations. Even though 80% of eligible citizens didn't vote in the 2014 elections, this year our out-of-touch pundits and mass media puppets prattle on unceasingly about our democracy, still misguidedly believing these candidates represent the will of the people.

Just sixteen years ago, our very own electoral system, in the form of a gilded cage, shut down the popular will of the people, as Al Gore won about 500,000 more votes than George W. Bush, yet still lost. Although the decision was made over 200 years ago, we have decided that the antiquated Electoral College system should still be used today.



More broadly, our never-ending election cycle serves as a palliative for ordinary Americans, but does nothing to cure the underlying disease and rot within our political system. Progressive liberals can take pleasure in Sanders' statements supporting a raise in the minimum wage, debt relief for students, fighting income inequality, etc. Yet Sanders has no broad coalition in Congress to advance his agenda and to fight his "revolution". Isolationist, non-interventionist conservatives can take pride in Trump's support of Russia's fight against ISIS in Syria, and his token rhetoric

towards re-working unfair free trade agreements and bringing back jobs. Yet Trump's pandering towards racists and xenophobes will only accelerate the descent towards fascism that the US has been slipping into for decades.

The second lie we've been told, or assumed implicitly, is that we are in control of our national destiny. Through the vote, we can supposedly make a clean slate every four years, to make up for the misdeeds of our past political leaders. The truth is much murkier. Our national security state and intelligence services have been built up to Leviathan levels, and presidential candidates are instantly discredited and marginalized for suggesting even small decreases in military spending. Corporate lobbyists and the conglomerate multinationals control the political landscape, determining the limits of discourse and shutting down anyone who exceeds the boundaries. Absurdly, third party candidates, some of the only ones with fresh ideas to invigorate our democracy, are demonized. Mainstream media coverage reinforces these imaginary limits of discussion, and Independents, Greens, Socialists, and Libertarians are relegated to the sidelines.

As the neoliberal order reinforces and deepens material poverty and intellectual ignorance, public discourse narrows without totalitarian overt manipulation. This makes issues seem as if they are progressing naturally, when public debate and consent is in actuality homogenized and conformist. This is analogous to the concept known to scientists as "shifting baselines": here it applies to a public that accepts deeper cuts to social services, increases in privatizations, and increased militarization and policing of the public sphere, because the momentum seems inexorable and immutable. The establishment uses rhetorical threats and excuses to further corporate agendas and destroy civil society, all in the name of maintaining "economic growth" and upholding "law and order".

The truth is that only by staring into the abyss can we collectively begin to dig ourselves out of our self-dug graves. The US has been in an unofficial recession since 2008. Millions of Americans live paycheck to paycheck, with minimal society safety nets, leading to insecurity, uncertainty and cynicism towards the future, and crippling anxiety. Politicians routinely show they do not care about the working class and the poor when they speak to the "middle class", whatever that means anymore. Our leaders are handpicked by Wall Street billionaires, and/or defense and fossil fuel industrialists. Abroad, covert war is ongoing in a dozen or more countries in Asia and North Africa.

With so many minds confined to the hypnotic and myopic gaze focused on high technology, mass media, and our official "leaders", 21st century man falls further into enslavement every day. As Fromm would say, we *Escape from Freedom* into self-indulgence and apathy, leaving hard decisions to technocrats and oligarchs. Control over our food, medicine, intellectual property, and basic social and environmental rights are consolidated into a handful of multinational corporations who inundate us with false needs through advertising and propaganda. Computer algorithms tell us what to buy, and social media manipulates our emotions, fulfilling the preaching of techno-dystopian prophets who warn of non-human intelligence guiding humanity towards dark futures.

Revolutionary fervor lurks under the surface, yet whether a popular progressive movement can blossom remains to be seen. Conversely, a missed revolution could easily result in an authoritarian and fascist takeover by the reactionary far-right. One thing we know for certain is that continuing under this two-party charade will only lead us to our doom.

Average citizens have never had any control of the republic since its founding. A complete

constitutional overhaul is needed, and forms of direct, consensus, and deliberative democracy must be woven into a hybrid system. Elections should be funded by the public, with no corporate money allowed, shorter election cycles, and no discrimination towards third parties, unlike the current Commission on Presidential Debates. State governments should gain power, and federal programs reigned in and redefined towards streamlined regulation and oversight. Tax subsidies should be stripped from the fossil fuel industries entirely and redirected towards the best scientists and engineers in the field of renewable energy.

What is desperately needed is a shift in worldview to promote government that sees its job as not simply to tax and legislate, but to also support healthy life-world systems. Also, promoting humble and dedicated leaders who are stewards of community and the Earth, who do not insist on blatant exploitation of distant nations and pillaging resources, would go a long way. This cannot be done within the confines of the Democratic and Republican parties, who thrive on domination, coercion, control, and manipulation of public interests.

To break the cycle, we must collectively embrace our frailties and limitations. The deadly, patriarchal energy technologies such as the petrochemical industries and nuclear energy must be shut down. We must learn from the man-made tragedies of Bhopal, Katrina, Chernobyl, and Fukushima, and dismantle dangerous plants and factories, and begin to move humanity away from areas susceptible to natural disasters and coastal flooding. The US, Russia, and the nuclear nations must formally apologize for the atmospheric nuclear testing in the fifties and sixties which will kill millions from cancer, and ban nuclear weapons for good.

Learning to relinquish control and learning to keep one's ego in check are two of the ultimate tests our leaders must accept. As the *Tao Te Ching* says:

Therefore the sages:
Manage the work of detached actions
Conduct the teaching of no words
They work with myriad things but do not control
They create but do not possess
They act but do not presume
They succeed but do not dwell on success
It is because they do not dwell on success
That it never goes away (1)

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Notes:

1. *Tao Te Ching: Annotated and Explained*. Derek Lin. SkyLight Paths. 2006. <http://www.taoism.net/ttc/complete.htm>

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