

SUSTAINABLE DEMOCRACY

Alice Ramsey 9-17-09 revised

ONE DEFINITION

What is Sustainable Democracy? Tom Palmer (who is with the Atlas Economic Research Foundation, the Atlas Global Initiative for Free Trade, Peace, and Prosperity and also with the Cato Institute) postulates that a Sustainable Democracy is a Limited Democracy. He defines a Limited Democracy as one in which a “majority of the population (usually limited in some way by age or citizenship) makes decisions about all those issues on which they wish to make decisions.” But there are “substantive freedoms enjoyed by free and equal citizens, notably freedom of speech and assembly, but sometimes also including freedom of religion, exit [emigration], procedural rights to due process of law, and so on.” (from a speech “Democracy and Limited Government: The unbreakable partnership” given in New Delhi, June 13, 2009)

Palmer says that sustainable democracies “are those that are limited and that incorporate institutions that protect rights—both individual rights and rights of local autonomy, form being overridden by collective choice. That is, sustainable democracy is liberal democracy.”

Liberal democracies have several elements especially the existence of a loyal opposition (one that perhaps opposes the program of those in power, but is loyal to their right to be in power) and elections that are free and supervised by independent authorities. An example of an Illiberal democracy might be one in which the opposition is punished—thus unable to oppose without danger, and elections which are likely to be corrupted. It has been defined as “one man, one vote, one time”.

LEAGUE PRINCIPLES

Many of our League Principles are in line with the above definition of a Sustainable Democracy. We support representative government and individual liberties established in our Constitution. Of particular interest in our thinking on sustainability of our government are our principles that call for a “responsible government that should be responsive to the will of the people; that government should maintain an equitable and flexible system of taxation; promote the conservation and development of natural resources in the public interest; share in the solution of economic and social problems when affect the general welfare; “ (from “Principles of the League of Women Voters of the United States).

We should be concerned about whether our government is indeed responsive to the will of the people or to special interests which speak only for themselves. Is our taxation system equitable? Is our government sufficiently concerned and acting to conserve and develop natural resources in the public interest or for a special interest? Is our government acting in the best interests of the people in the solutions (or non-solutions) to economic and social problems (health care, jobs, education,)? Are these solutions leading to a Sustainable Democracy that protects the rights of the people or are the rights of the people being ignored in the interests of special interests?

IS SUSTAINABILITY IN DANGER?

In The Bridge at the Edge of the World; Capitalism, the Environment, and Crossing from Crisis to Sustainability by James Gustave Speth contained a very interesting passage.

“America’s gaping social and economic inequality poses a grave threat to democracy. Political scientist Robert Dahl believes it is ‘highly plausible’ that ‘powerful international and domestic forces [could] push us toward an irreversible level of political inequality that so greatly impairs our present democratic institutions as to rend the ideals of democracy and political equality virtually irrelevant.’ The authors...document the emergence of a vicious cycle: income disparities shift political access and influence to wealthy constituencies and businesses, which further imperils the potential of the democratic process to act to correct the growing disparities.”

Dahl also postulates that the outcome could be different depending on American generations to come. This is from his book On Political Equality published in 2006.

The current US legislature seems like a graphic illustration of Robert Dahl’s less hopeful outcome seen during the battles fought over carbon cap and trade and health care which seem to put the “wealthy constituencies and businesses” into a disparate access and influence position from the average citizen.

Does this mean that Democracy is in danger of not being sustainable? Aristotle noted that a powerful and large “middle class would increase the likelihood that the laws and structures of government would favor the equal distribution of society’s riches; a goal enshrined in the U.S. Declaration of Independence. The solidarity and common experience of this demographic would also service the social bonds of cohesion, security and trust needed for a free and healthy society.” (from an article by Joel Dyer “Thoughts on Wealth and Democracy” on the Sustainable Democracy website www.sustainabledemocracy.org).

Mr. Dyer goes on to say that Jean-Jacques Rousseau pointed out that “economic conditions could impact the viability of democracy.” And that John Adams wrote about European experiences where “economic power became concentrated in a few hands, then political power flowed to those possessors and away from the citizens, ultimately resulting in an oligarchy or tyranny.”

Mr. Dyer suggests that when certain interests can use wealth to purchase power by funding campaigns for government officials the rest of us shouldn’t be surprised if government produces a result in those interests favor and that the less effective citizens may suffer the outcomes. Again the debate on climate change and health care are examples of who sways the argument.

In an article by Richard Lamm and Dottie Lamm called “Is our Democracy Up to the Task?” (Sustainable Democracy website www.sustainabledemocracy.org) the authors ask “Is our political system structured to be able to solve the problems the nation faces? Can we do politically, what we must do economically, ecologically and socially to leave our children a workable and decent society?”

The authors note that “our most famous Greek philosophers felt that democracy was not a sustainable form of government.” The concern of the article is that the huge debt being incurred by the government is unsustainable and will leave succeeding generations with insurmountable bills.

They point out that Medicare, Medicaid, and Social Security are very popular politically but are not sustainable without “major, political career-destroying amendments.” Also they are concerned with the ability to provide a sustainable ecosystem. The assumption of unlimited resources and endless growth is at odds with demands created for more than the earth’s capacity.

In the end, the authors wonder if the “problems might be beyond the ability of democracy to solve.” Will that mean that democracy is unsustainable because it may be unable to solve important political problems resulting in a society of haves and have-nots?

Today regulation puts limits below or above which entities may not go but this usually means that only the minimum is being done to meet such requirements. Instead what is needed is to go way beyond the limits in doing what is needed. The article suggests that government should be the carrot and not the stick using incentives and legislation to encourage businesses and individuals to go beyond the minimum.

A paper for the Center for Sustainability at Aquinas College titled “Government and Sustainability” calls for citizens to “support sustainable government initiatives and legislation and...choose to put our dollars toward companies that are currently going above and beyond the regulatory framework.” The point of the article is that regulation is a failure of design and sustainability looks for innovative and effective design.

“Regulating bodies can no longer continue considering reduction and minimization of air emissions, soil and water contamination to be a viable strategy. ‘Reduction does not halt depletion and destruction—it only slows them down, allowing them to take place in smaller increments over a longer period of time.’” While this article was oriented toward the environment, the same could be said for education, health care, equal rights, the economy and more.

QUESTION

So, the question is a complicated one. Is our democracy unsustainable? Are the majority of its citizens making decisions or a minority of well connected citizens (or special interests) having more than their share of influence on legislators. Are our legislators responsive to the people? Are they concerned with protecting our society and environment so that our children and grandchildren and so on will be able to enjoy what we have? Or should they have what we have? Is it even possible for them to have what we have?