Is democracy up to the task?

The gridlock in Washington, D.C., between the Republicans and Democrats and the president and Congress, has soured many Americans on politics. The inability of our politicians to come together to address serious, long-term problems such as our ballooning debt and the future solvency of Social Security raises questions about whether our democratic political system—which the Founding Fathers consciously constructed with an element of conflict built in—is up to dealing with these challenges. Winston Churchill famously characterized democracy as "the worst form of government except all the others." We certainly seem bent on proving him right on the antecedent clause; it is up to us to show he was also right in the subsequent.

Michael Desch
Professor and Chair, Department of Political Science

The founders envisioned and implemented a system of government that would utilize gridlock as a means to protect individual rights; thereby, they transferred political power from the state to the people. Consequently, democracy in the United States is dependent upon us, the American populace. It is unquestionable that courage is needed to solve America's problems. If not from the Almighty, as Russian exile Alexander Solzhenitsyn discussed in his 1978 Harvard University commencement address, then where can such fortitude originate?

Scott Englert
Political Science Major

Democracy, at least American democracy, is up to the task if and only if Americans themselves are up for it. Any government is only as strong as its governors, and in the case of democracy, that somewhat paradoxically means the governed, its citizens. If Americans can muster the political will to work together—to compromise—only then will the full potential of democracy be unleashed to solve the many problems of the future.

Colin Slaggert
Political Science Major

Although the field of American politics looks bleak, it is essential to remember that our political system is based on the principle that discussion and dogma both contribute to a dynamic framework, one that allows for a plurality of opinions and guards against majority tyranny. In the end, the success of the democratic idea is contingent upon active and knowledgeable participation from a demanding populace. Our political system is up to the challenge. Are we?

Annalee Rice
Political Science Major

The outcome of a democracy is a function of its participants. One of the biggest challenges of creating and sustaining a successful democracy is the challenge of bringing the people into the conversation. If democracy is surrounded by corruption, discrimination, or other participation barriers, it is certain to fail. One of our constant goals must be implementing democracy so that participation is encouraged, equal, and free. Although this goal may never be realized fully, it is in the process of completing it that we will make democracy up to the task.

Demitri Tarabini
Political Science Major

Americans are acutely aware of the conflict that exists in our political system right now, as the media and others tell us that this discord is new, unique to our time, and dangerous. However, sharp polarization has always existed in our system on many issues, including proposed laws, presidential campaigns, and court decisions. While what we disagree over is often changing, disagreement itself is an integral part of democracy. Engaging in a hearty, and, at times, hostile, back-and-forth on the issues ensures that the process of lawmaking is public and considered by many. The friction may be ugly, but it shows us that our system is working.

Chris McMillion
Political Science Ph.D. Student

FURTHER READING

Politics by Aristotle

"Activists and Conflict Extension in American Party Politics" by Geoffrey Layman et al. in *American Political Science Review*

Constitutional Government by Woodrow Wilson

Federalist Papers (specifically Federalist #51) by James Madison

The Crisis of Democracy: Report on the Governability of Democracies to the Trilateral Commission by Michel Crozier, Samuel P. Huntington, and Joji Watanuki

Treatise on Law by Thomas Aquinas

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