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May 9, 2017: What Can Democracy Do?

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Title: What Can Democracy Do?

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5/9/2017—In the season of grading exams, I can only occasionally post entries. But I have been pondering news about democracy recently.

On Sunday, the New York Times published a story about the growing influence of strict Islam in Indonesia, especially in rural areas and small towns. This influence has come about peacefully and mostly through democratic means. But it has meant the imposition of Sharia on people who undoubtedly do not want it—caning for extramarital sex, morality police, bans on alcohol, dress restrictions for women etc.

Then there was a story, also I think in the New York Times, about all the harmful legislation being passed in Republican dominated legislature undoing environmental protections. This is a real race to the bottom in which federal protections are weakened and then States are pressured by industry to agree to cuts in health and safety in return for jobs and investments—if you don't go along, legislators are told, we can go to another State.

At the same time, there have been reviews of Condoleezza Rice's book, *Democracy: Stories from the Long Road to Freedom*, which argues for a democracy oriented American foreign policy, and which reminds us all of the invasion of Iraq in the name of democracy. Give me a break.

There has been a real turning away from democracy on both the left and the right in America. On the right, there is a longer pedigree. Conservative thinkers like Ayn Rand never had any use for democracy. Current thinkers like Randy Barnett are more interested in individual liberty than in democracy—protection of individual liberty is the goal of government, not democratic expression of the will of the people. (Of course this individual liberty inevitably ends up meaning the right of wealthy people to destroy the climate in order to make money, but somehow no theorist is ever responsible for the use of liberty).

All this is fed, at least psychologically by the bad faith knowledge that Hillary Clinton was actually elected by a majority of the people (yes, Californians get to vote in American elections)—how can you support democracy when you don't practice it?

On the left, there is the big money myth—that big money dominates politics and that this is the reason that the policies of the left never win over a lot of the country. So the left expressly turns to nonelected alternatives—courts mostly, but also the cult of expertise, to get what it wants. No longer is the left obligated to convince people, build political parties in Red States, win over the hearts and minds of the American heartland.

All this is disaster. There is no long term American politics without democracy. And no one should want to rule without winning a majority of the American people—a solid majority. Neither Republicans nor Democrats care about that. No one any longer yearns for majority confirmation. No one wants to go to the people. Romney and Clinton alike were willing to write off 40% of the people—or more. Trump is worse—a phony populist willing to lie about his majority support.

But haven't you noticed how legitimacy is draining away from American public life?