

Change Mindsets, not the System

By
Daniel E. White February 12, 2024

“Maybe the Framers were right,” my friend said. “Maybe the right to vote should be reserved for the knowledgeable ones who weigh the merits of an argument and choose on the basis of that analysis.” Or something like that. He lamented that, to his way of thinking, so many voters make choices on sharply drawn personalities or sound bites or code words.

He is right about what the Framers believed. They created four entities: two legislative; one executive; one judicial. They entrusted the “masses” with responsibility for electing only one of the four—the House of Representatives—and gave its members the shortest term; two years.

The “masses” in their day—excluding women, slaves, indigenous people and, if some had had their way, men who did not own land—could vote for state legislators but the legislators would pick U.S. Senators. The “masses” could vote for electors pledged to a presidential candidate, but it would be the electors, who in many cases were not legally bound to any candidate, who would choose the President. The “masses” also had no direct say over who became a federal judge.

The system was, at best, only indirectly democratic.

The problem with reconstructing a system in which only the elites vote is obvious: who sets the standards for inclusion in the elite? A further issue: if non-elites have grievances over how they are being treated by the system, what are they to do?

Winston Churchill once observed that “democracy is the worst form of government except for all others that have been tried.”

What has periodically plagued U.S. politics is the ease with which groups dehumanize other groups with whom they disagree and are willing to forego the give and take necessary in a democracy, preferring that their point of view prevails in perpetuity. Those who believe their position to be “revealed truth” and not a man-made opinion exacerbate the matter.

My friend realizes that the U.S. will not go back to its 1789 position. So, what to do? We have to learn to live with more participation than the Framers intended. Is that impossible?

Last November, at a conference, Jamie Dimon, CEO of JP Morgan, urged Americans to put aside some of their ideological differences and look for the nuance in others’ political beliefs.

“We should stop talking about ultra-MAGA,” he insisted. “I think you’re insulting a large group of people, and making this assumption, scapegoating—which the press is pretty good at, too—that these people believe in Trump’s family values and are supporting the personal person. I don’t think that’s true.” (Emphasis added)

The scapegoating works both ways. We hear much from the political right about “socialists” whose “flaw” is supporting the idea that government has a role in addressing the needs of its poorest citizens. The use of the term socialist is intended to incite.

Dimon called on the audience to consider why people take opposing views. For Democrats, he suggested reading the work of conservative columnist [George Will](#), while he said Republicans ought to look up the work of Pulitzer-winning columnist [Thomas Friedman](#).

“We should get out of this [idea that] it’s one way or the other,” he said. “I’m not mad at people who are antiabortion. If you believe in God and that conception starts at the moment of birth, you are not a bad person. I think people need to stop denigrating each other all the time because people take a point of view that is slightly different than yours. We’re a democracy—people should vote and solve some of these issues, and they won’t always be what you want.”

Dimon seems to believe that people can change.

People of a Certain Age, do you remember that a politician who referred to “pointy-headed liberals who can’t park a bike straight,” won 13.5% of the popular vote and the electoral votes of five states as an Independent in the 1968 presidential election? That this same person was a candidate in 1972 for the Democratic Party nomination for President?

Did you know that when he ran for governor in 1958, he had the backing of the NAACP, that his thrashing in that election turned him into a voluble segregationist enabling him to win the next time? That, after being shot five times, one of his first visitors in the hospital was Shirley Chisholm, who said to him that she wouldn’t wish his fate on anyone, causing him to cry?

That this experience stimulated a change in his segregationist views, that, in a final term as governor, he greatly increased the number of African-Americans in state government positions and helped increase voter registration after winning 90% of the black vote? That Civil Rights icon John Lewis forgave him his previous vitriol in the *New York Times*? (Diane Bernard, “How a Failed Assassination Attempt Pushed George Wallace to Reconsider His Segregationist Views,” *Smithsonian*, May 12, 2022)

Bernard notes those who question Wallace’s sincerity. Fair enough. But a large part of the Bible, devoted to promoting Christian belief, was written by a man who had once persecuted believers.

Saul of Tarsus became Paul, the Apostle. His mindset changed. It can happen.

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