

What's So Great about Democracy?

Joyce Francis McMenamon

16 October 2007

Listen to what research shows to be the effects of democracy: better education, longer life expectancy, lower infant mortality, better access to water, better health care, less famines, political stability, freedom of the press, less corruption, improved economy, lower inflation, economic freedom, fewer civil wars, and higher self-reported happiness.

So why aren't all countries democratic? This sounds like a no brainer. Sure enough, if you look at the trend towards democracy you will see that 121 out of 167 countries consider themselves democratic now, up from 40 in 1972. Of course there are varying degrees of democracy. The Economist magazine uses a Democracy Index and you can see from the chart shown below there is a great range in their observed Democracy Index.

One of the countries that is considered to be one of the most democratic in the world is Switzerland and it has been since 1848. It is considered to be the closest to direct democracy. What gives it this status? They have a system to call the parliament to task. Citizens can force a vote on an issue if they can collect 50,000 signatures in 100 days. Then the vote passes by simple majority. Not surprisingly, Switzerland is rated as the least corrupt nation.

Spain is another interesting example. They moved from a monarchy to democracy in 1976 and the country changed dramatically, especially for their culture. Now women are fully educated, they work when they want, and they have children when they want. Everyone is free to lead a contemporary life whereas under the monarchy, dictated rules controlled their most personal lives.

What

Interesting, but exactly what is democracy? Surprisingly, the definition is nebulous. The word comes from the Greek demos, "people", and kratos, "power" or "rule". It is in contrast to a monarchy, rule by one, or oligarchy, rule by a few. In governments it includes freedom of speech and the press, rule of law, equality of individuals. It boils down to two principles: the right of the people to make the decisions and the right of the individuals to be heard.

Do you think that humans have inalienable rights? For example equality before the law, freedom of religion, the right to free speech, the right to gather together, privacy. Is democracy a human right? My view is that we should be able to control our lives and that includes controlling our governments that are controlling us.

Where

So far we have just talked about democratic governments.

Companies have also found that being more democratic helps their bottom line. The principles of democracy are decentralization, fairness, listening, dignity, accountability, transparency,

A classic example is Semco, a manufacturing company in Brazil. When Ricardo Semler took it over in 1980 it was an autocratically run manufacturing company heading for financial ruin. But Ricardo had played a lot of team sports in his time and thought the concept of teamwork may work for business also. He transformed the company into a model democratic workplace and the turned a 900 percent growth. They use three democratic principles: work force democracy, profit sharing, and free access to information. The owner could even be fired by his employees, although he still owns a large share of stocks. Now people like to work at Semco, productivity is huge, and it's profitable.

Think about how democracy could revolutionize a workplace. Did you know that 80% of employees feel disenfranchised from their workplace? In Japan it is about 90%. But if people had greater control over their work, productivity would leap frog.

Let's also talk about democracy in organizations. These same principles help groups make good decisions to carry their agendas forward.

I remember stories of my parents going to ratepayers association meetings in Cadboro Bay where I grew up. The meetings would get quite heated as they were making decisions about lighting down dark streets, parks, bylaws restricting building heights and things that would affect their lives. I remember my parents coming home frustrated by decisions but then after another meeting admitting that the others were right after all. The meetings would get heated but still remain respectful. I remember my Dad telling us that one hard headed woman that he continuously argued with told him "Fred, I don't like any of your ideas but you do raise good children." At least that's the comment that I remember.

Why

Think what it would be like if everyone had the ability to have their voice heard. I think all confrontations are based on misunderstanding. There would be no need for guns and bombs and violence.

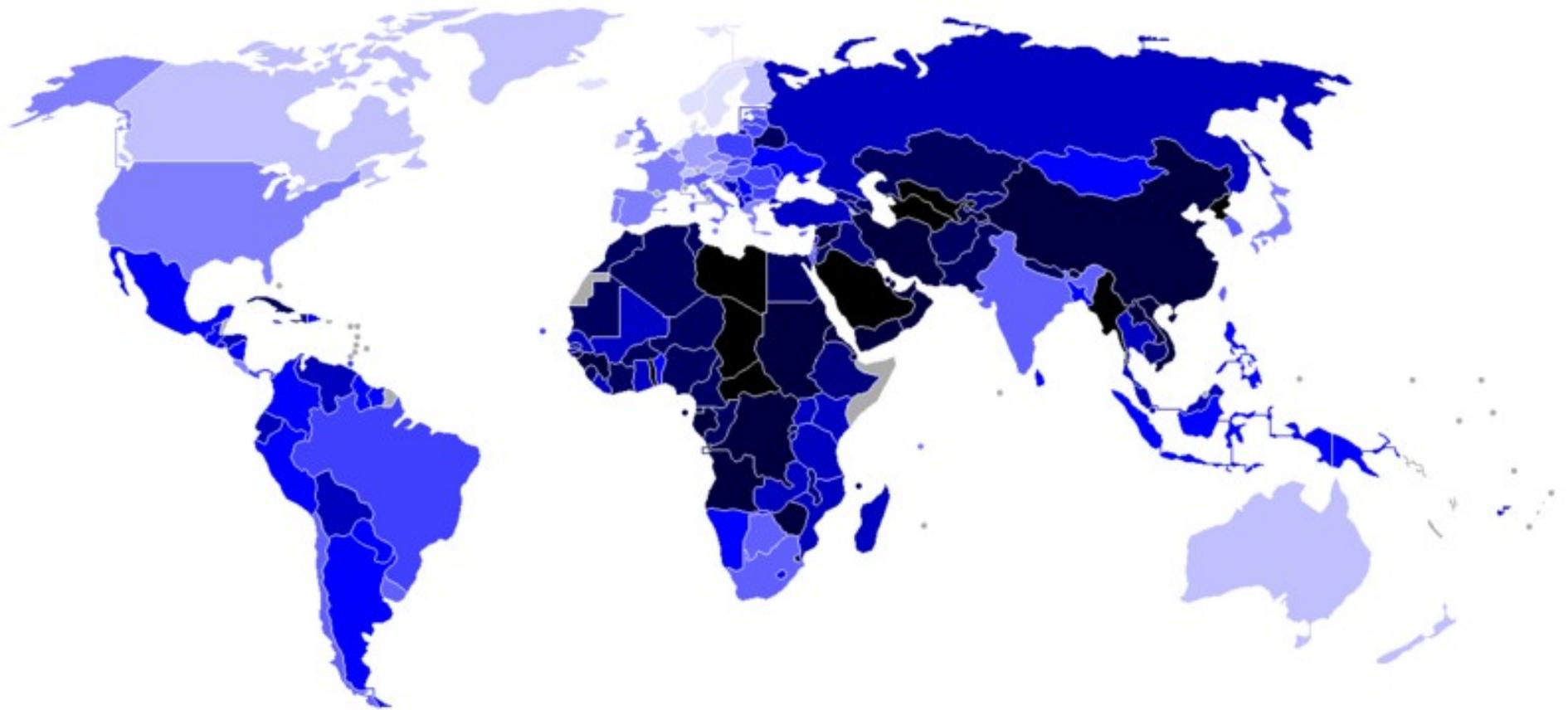
Think about e-democracy and its possibilities. What if decisions that affected you could be directly put to you to decide. This is becoming more real as logistics, particularly security, are worked out.

We need to have the ideal of democracy to work towards. Of course there will be problems, dilemmas, exceptions to the rules. But we need to start with a good clear vision and then struggle towards it.

As we use democratic organization at the grass roots level in our workplace and communities we will be more familiar and comfortable with the process and insist that governments be democratic also.

These are not difficult skills to learn but indeed they are skills. First you have to want to participate in decisions about your life. And foremost you have to learn how to listen to other people's ideas with an open mind. Think how that one idea could resolve the Middle East crisis. But not just the leaders need to understand. The individuals living there need to understand how the others live and what their needs are and then live together peaceably.

So what should we do about it here in a relatively democratic, free country? Don't take it for granted! Democracy needs to be appreciated, used, tested, worked hard, and cherished. As we all become better at using these skills they will become familiar and automatic. It will become natural to listen to other people's ideas, form your own opinion and then accept the wisdom of the majority. And we can all live together in peace! That is what is so great about democracy.



One measure of democracy is the [Democracy Index](#) by [The Economist](#). This map shows the Democracy Index as published in January, 2007. The palest blue countries get a score above 9.5 out of 10 (with [Sweden](#) being the most democratic country at 9.88), while the black countries score below 2 (with [North Korea](#) being the least democratic at 1.03)

