

Democracy: Weather Report

Where is American democracy headed? A distinguished political scientist, student of the short history of democratic rule, has a pretty good idea . . .

FRANCIS G. WILSON

1. As the practice of "free elections," democracy has only a short history, mainly since 1800 under the influence of the movement toward a broader suffrage and the election of a larger number of public officials. Its success is limited mainly to Western Europe, the United States and the British Dominions. However, the tradition of two-party elections is almost exclusively Anglo-American. A new era for democratic elections has obviously dawned with the rise of vast pressure groups and the so-called "mass media," where, as in television, personality instead of principle surges to the foreground and consciousness of party and party-principle disappears.

2. Democracy has been a common symbol from Herodotus to the present, but as a system of government it has been widespread neither in history nor in geographic areas. Very often it has not been a durable form (how many democracies have disappeared since the end of World War I?). In the ancient world pure democracy, as pictured by Plato, Aristotle, Thucydides, Polybius, Cicero and others was a prelude to tyranny. Thucydides' description of class war, *stasis*, in Corcyra is the classic example of popular derailment.

3. Since democracy is neither the most widespread of political forms, nor the most durable or popular of political techniques or institutions, will America be drawn into the historical sweep, or will we be able with our Western European allies to reform the world of tyranny? Monarchy has been the most popular and the most stable of political forms, and revolution has been the most popular and most widely used device for the transfer of power. Take as witness in recent times throughout most of the world the fascist, Communist, *caudillo* and military movements which have rejected or modified elections,

denounced competing political parties and responsible parliaments based on territorial elections. They have instituted parliaments that are markedly unobtrusive and ineffective, and they have suspended the juridical protection of the individual. The parliament may become a fawning, frightened institution like the Roman Senate under the later Emperors, or like the American Congress during the Hundred Days.

The Stakes of Politics

4. If the state does little, other than keep order, protect property, and perform a regulative and ethical function in the market, then elections of any kind, popular or oligarchical, will work, i.e., the votes will be counted properly. Form in politics then exists by tradition, and democracy, monarchy, or aristocracy can attain the current demands for social justice. The stakes in politics are low; there is little incentive to the class struggle; business success is more important than political power; and political appeal in elections is more humanistic than technical.

5. On the contrary, when the state has become omniscient, omnivorous of independent social forces, when it engages endlessly in warlike activity, in an increasingly complicated regulation of trivial economic behavior, and when it engages in vast propaganda and publishing enterprises—the stakes of politics and the perquisites of office are great indeed. Finally, they tend to become too high to let power be won and lost in the accidents of free elections and secret ballots. Gradually many things short of military tyranny are done to insure the proper outcome of elections, chiefly through controlling the flow of propaganda and the necessary corruption of voting procedures. Here we have the more pleasant face

of the democratic tyranny in a Big Brother society. (Is there not a widespread belief that the 1960 Presidential election was stolen from the Republicans?)

6. So long as society can absorb trained technicians and the intellectuals, the educated and the partially trained, there can be peaceful electoral alternations of power because there are always livable alternatives to the possession of political power and some sort of public employment. The revolutionary class is slow to develop, and the always-emergent aristocratic patterns of life can be separated from the state; in other words, aristocracy can be social and independent, and it can monitor the standards of society. The intellectual (not always an aristocrat by any means) is found in business, in the professions (including the mass media), in the bureaucracy of the big corporations, in university teaching and research that is remote from political commitments, and on the technical staffs of larger pressure groups and voting blocs. Among the great achievements of the United States one must list both the broadening of the middle class (*Marx's petite bourgeoisie*), and the constant absorption of the intellectuals produced by the mysterious processes of higher education.

7. In modern democracy there has been an increasing obviousness in the behavior of self-conscious minorities, pressure groups, bloc voting, and short-term rallies of large numbers of voters for the achievement of selfish aims rather than the common good. Nearly all of these minorities and voting blocs are dominated by an oligarchy of permanent and only formally re-elected leaders. Within the bloc system there is no majority rule in any classic or philosophical meaning of the term because individuals are manipulated and pro-

cured for the leaders. Our democracy is becoming a state run in the interest of bloc-voting masses who can win plebiscites. At the same time the minorities (like Toynbee's internal and external proletariats) deny to other minorities or to less organized citizens the right to act in the same manner. For example, Negroes may vote for Negroes because they are Negroes, but not whites for whites because they are white; labor may act for labor, but business acting for business or professions acting for professions, i.e., doctors and teachers, are considered reactionary, or even monopolistic and fascist.

8. While the election of the President becomes the result of a coalition of minorities and blocs in the more populous states, and the appeals of the campaign become vague and abusive, congressmen are elected on a different system of majority. Often the congressman does not come from a district in which the bloc voters are clearly dominant. Congress represents a majority that rests on the social structure of communities in the congressional districts; as Professor Willmoore Kendall has shown in his article, "Two Majorities." Here there is more fluidity, more individual decision, and clearly less pressure from the permanent leaders of the blocs. In any traditional sense of democracy as the "free election," it is up to Congress to preserve democracy; that is, to resist the domination of the blocs, or the coalition of minorities and their alliances with the executive and the bureaucracy.

9. The vast number of intellectuals we are producing in America is a consequence of the expansion of higher education. One of the outlets for them is to become employees in the civil service of the blocs and minorities that are concerned with winning elections. Intellectuals in such situations have only one political interest: to win power and to retain it. Though in the past our intellectuals have been generally uncommitted politically, there is a pronounced tendency today for them to be associated with ideological movements, e.g., with Liberal causes, and thereby to promote the irreconcilability of ideological parties.

10. The Classical World does not offer us an extended description of

the democratic transition to tyranny. But in general a leader appears; he increases his power; the welfare of the people depends on his safety; he is given guards to prevent injury to him; and he is, let us say, endowed with charisma. Prophecy is cheap, but let us try: in the middle of President Kennedy's second term there will be a movement to repeal the Amendment, the 22nd, that limits the President's time in office. Kennedy may well have acquired charisma; the people will be lost without him; he will be elected for a third term, and then for life, in fact. . . . He will be, as G. K. Chesterton described, a medieval monarch, the last remaining in the world. All this will happen provided the blocs can maintain some unity among themselves; the compromise must not fail when an election victory is needed.

Control of Congress

11. But if the movement to repeal the 22nd Amendment should fail, the blocs will move toward a more positive control of Congress. If they succeed, the Congress will become submissive to the executive, and the executive will direct the bureaucracy with increasing encroachment on a civil service system which has been preserving the tenure of some who are against "progress."

12. President Kennedy, however, may not be able to hold the five million Catholics who shifted from Eisenhower to him in 1960. Kennedy is essentially anti-clerical, very much as Latin chiefs of state have often been. He has opposed federal aid to parochial schools, which many Catholics would say is necessary for the equal treatment of Catholic children; he has opposed an ambassador to the Vatican; he has been discourteous to the Bishops in Puerto Rico; and he has intimated that any cleric who seeks to tell him anything about natural law or the Catholic conscience will be quickly and firmly shown the door. If he does not hold the Catholic swing, a notable crevasse in the union of bloc and minorities that elected him will appear. If the Republicans nominate a Catholic in 1964 could Kennedy lose his charisma? Is it possible to divide the blocs and minorities between the Democrats and the Republicans?

Necessary Efforts

13. American democracy can be strengthened by the following:

a. An heroic effort to preserve free elections and to retard the encroachment of corruption on the purity and the freedom of ballot must be made. Such an effort is particularly important in areas where there are large blocs of voters who have not "earned" the right to vote by their competence, their education, their maturity, their interest and information in politics, or by their willingness to be independent of the "persuasion" which blankets them.

b. A vigorous legislative effort must be mounted to retard or check the power of bloc voting. Must a member of a labor union vote always as his union officers tell him? Even though they were told that Kennedy had signed on the dotted line? If the Presidency is to be the permanent prize of directed bloc voting, then the only solution may be a reform that would bring the executive under the control of Congress; that is, an American version of parliamentary government.

c. In the end there must be a less lopsided "formation" of the intellectuals. Somehow the left-wing Liberal scientists and social scientists must be balanced by conservative intellectuals. Such a change means a reshaping of the universities where the intellectuals are "formed," and it means as well a greater fluidity in the civil service, that is, a greater responsibility to Congress.

d. The majorities reflected in the election of congressmen outside of the big-city machines and their controlled voting must be preserved. The congressman must be more assertive of the validity of the majority he represents, for he represents society, the social, against the manipulative and the political.

e. Congress must be willing to restrict the senseless growth of national government function. It must control, as far as possible, the waste and extravagance of government and hold in check the growth of the number on the public payroll. One of its functions must be to remind the voters that we live in a federal system of government; one does not need to blush in a defense of the functions of state government.