

# Our environmental health and well-being depends on a thriving democracy

Hanging chads. Paperless ballots. Computerized voting machines. Missing votes. Disenfranchisement. Gerrymandered districts. Multi-million dollar political campaigns. All of these things have become a regular part of our democracy. It is the democracy that we applaud so loudly. Yet, the aforementioned list of characteristics of our democracy should have us all questioning the quality and future of it. Exhortations and platitudes alone don't make a democracy strong or legitimate. And considering how much we hear about how great our democracy is, one would think that its citizens might be a bit more vigilant in making sure it stands up to such high standards.

A healthy environment requires many things; among them is a flourishing democracy. The evidence of significant environmental damage in our country is a sign of problems within our political system. This mounting evidence also stems from the myopic (short-term) vision, excessive greed, ecological ignorance, hubris, and a host of other weaknesses that have become entrenched in our society recently. Many of these contributors also reflect shortcomings of our current democracy. Ultimately, we will not be able to prevent, prepare for, or respond to future environmental challenges and threats without a thriving democracy. This may seem obvious but it isn't something that gets the attention it deserves.

An active, working democracy requires a citizenry that is well-informed, participatory, vested, empowered and diverse; five simple requirements, yet ones that need addressing. Not surprisingly, it is these same characteristics that are necessary to living according to the laws, limits, and allowances provided by the environment that sustains us (by providing food, water, air, soil, and recreation). In this way, satisfying these five requirements will go a long way to making us and our progeny happy, healthy, meaningful and prosperous. Let's see how these five requirements are being met, particularly as it relates to environmental health and environmental quality.

Given the ways of the modern world, a well-informed citizenry needs to have significant exposure to the key ecological principles and the key elements that sustain us (e.g., energy, air, water, and food). Unfortunately, outside of biology and environmental studies classes, few ecological principles are getting attention. Even less attention is paid to the resources mentioned. This is a tragedy. Just as we have made English and math subjects students take on yearly basis, we need to make ecological and environmental awareness a requirement as well. Does this seem a bit extreme? Well, consider the following. How many of you (or your children) have ever been educated in school about any of the following topics: petroleum, wind, solar energy, coal, nuclear energy, agriculture, water resources, air quality, environmental health, carrying capacity, K-selection/r-selection, competitive exclusion, keystone species, biodiversity, symbiosis, succession, etc? If you said "yes" to any of the above, consider yourself one of the lucky ones. Most of us haven't. Those that have probably understand the importance of knowing something substantive about these subjects. Those that haven't (for no fault of their own, mind you) probably don't care. It is a classic case of "what you don't know doesn't matter." Unfortunately, though, it matters a great deal.

If the vast majority of our citizens are not aware of these subjects, our democracy

(and hence our environment) suffers for several reasons. First, people don't often care about things of which they have no connection. Politicians are unlikely to focus attention on things that the public doesn't care much about. Therefore, a public ignorant about environmental issues will result in political representation that doesn't feel the need to tackle difficult, and often perplexing, environmental problems. Second, a public unfamiliar with scientific principles governing the way life and environmental elements interact will not be able to communicate effectively with those that do have decision making power. And, third, a public lacking in ecological understanding will have much more difficulty communicating with the next generation (passing the torch, as it is said). Essentially, uninformed or misinformed people won't be able to contribute much to the subjects that are so key in the maintenance of our livelihood.

Democracy requires participation by its members. Such participation can take many forms, including voting. Recent history suggests that many of our citizens do not take the time to vote. There are many reasons for this, but whatever the reasons, the fact that they don't is a sign that our democracy is failing. Other democracies in the West have much higher election turnouts than we do. This only illustrates a significant weakness of our democracy. The more people that don't vote, the more likely the politicians in power will consider only the opinions of smaller (and elitist) constituencies. Studies show that the more impoverished and undereducated one is, the more likely one will not vote. It is also clear, from work done within the environmental justice movement, that the poor and the pigmented (i.e., African-Americans, Native Americans, etc.) confront a much more hostile and polluted environment. Thus, those that are the most affected by the negative impacts of industry and overconsumption are not speaking with their ballots. This makes our democracy vulnerable to the continued acceptance of disproportionate harm (i.e., environmental racism and classism). In a country where is everyone is afforded equal rights, this is clearly unacceptable.

Yet voting is only one aspect of political involvement. As the human rights gains of the 1960's and women's suffrage (granted in 1920) indicate, voting for the "correct" politician is only a part (perhaps small) of the story. These rights and many others became part of the law only after considerable organization, advocacy, and protest. And while there is collective action currently surrounding the wars we are waging overseas as well as the immigration issue, not nearly as much activism can be observed on environmental fronts. Notwithstanding many exceptions at the local level and the sizeable numbers of citizens who are members of environmental organizations, by and large an insufficient movement (or mobilization) has taken shape. (Why? Well, the lack of education on the issue is probably a major part of it.) If it ever does, and I think there are tons of reasons why it should, it would represent a major improvement to our democracy.

A citizenry must have a vested interest in the happenings of politics in order for a democracy to work. In other words, citizens have to feel there is something at stake for them. For instance, a person who might get drafted or have a child (or loved one) participate in a military operation will have more at stake than a person who (by virtue of socio-economic status or profession)

doesn't have such connections. So with regard to the current war in Iraq, many people do have a vested interest. This is good for democracy (and may explain why most of us now don't believe it has been worth the sacrifice). However, with regard to environmental damage, since the messages that people get are so few or so confusing, most people don't feel that it harms them in a significant way. In order for our democracy to work to benefit the health of its people and their environments, it is essential for the citizens to come to recognize the risks and dangers that they (and their loved ones) face daily because of deteriorating environments.

In addition to have vested interests, citizens need to feel empowered in order for a democracy to be alive and well. A citizen feels empowered when he/she thinks that he/she can make a difference by contributing to the betterment of something. People may want something to change but if they don't sense that their voice matters or if they feel that there is nothing they can do to "solve the problem," they're likelier to lose faith in the democratic process. And there exist barriers within the political system which disempower people explicitly. For example, in order to run for office, one must become part of a political machine and this requires increasingly large amounts of monetary support. Even for a person to get on the ballot can be extremely cumbersome, especially for third party candidates. Getting media time can be extremely difficult as well, in large part given the domination of the two-party system. However, despite these hurdles, environmental messages are getting attention.

Community groups and local and national environmental organizations have taken the initiative to speak up. For instance, hundreds of local governments in this country are now committed to the stipulations contained in the Kyoto Protocol calling for the reduction of greenhouse gas production, despite our national Administration's unwillingness to support such measures. Environmental justice community groups in San Francisco and Chicago (and elsewhere) are demanding cleaner air. Yet, while the list of similar groups who are committed to making positive change is quite long, the bulk of our citizens do not feel that their voice matters or that their efforts to improve things will be successful. Such cynicism is a sure sign of an ineffective democracy.

Lastly, and paradoxically to some, democracy requires diversity to be alive and well. Currently, many of our environmental problems stem from decisions made by corporate executives or Senate subcommittees with little direct input from citizens. This situation leads us down paths that are much too narrow and inflexible—two examples include our overreliance on industrial agriculture and our addiction to nonrenewable fuels such as coal and petroleum. Many now recognize that we must shift away from these two destructive paths largely because they are unsustainable and unnecessarily dangerous. Yet, there seems to be an incredible amount of inertia in moving away from them and towards healthier and sustainable activities. It is true that the sale of organic, wholesome foods is up and the recent growth in wind energy has been tremendous, but the perverse incentives (via subsidies and laws) only encourage old, impractical agricultural and energy practices to persist. If average citizens had the choice to buy their energy from wind (versus coal or nuclear power), many would make the switch. If people

had the choice to buy organic fruits and vegetables and free-range animal products rather than ones dosed and laced with dangerous (even toxic) chemicals (including hormones, pesticides, and antibiotics), it is likely that most people would choose the former. In a country as rich as ours, it is unconscionable that the bulk of the population feel economically-strapped into buying food which is high in fat and salt, low in nutrients, and highly-processed. Ironically, in a nation that pride itself for the choices that exist, true choices for most of us are actually quite limited. Truly diversifying options (in food and energy as well as other sectors) will enable us to see how viable healthy and safe forms of production are. A democracy that limits choice suffers from special interests and the power of monopolies. A democracy that stresses diversity allows for choice and welcomes innovation in healthy, productive, and even profitable technologies and processes.

The future quality of our environment (and therefore our collective well-being) depends upon a thriving democracy. The democracy that we currently have in the United States has weaknesses that need correcting. The public needs to be much better informed about issues, particularly as it relates to environmental ones. Focusing on the educational opportunities found in our school system is probably a great place to start on this project. Citizens must become more active participants in the democratic system. Shortening work weeks (but not pay; this is being done in Europe), making voting days paid national holidays, and supporting local civic organizations would do wonders to increase public participation in the political process. If people were more aware of the ways in which environmental damage affect them (such as coal-fired power plants and respiratory illness, or environmental toxicants and birth defects and immune suppression), undoubtedly they would be more concerned about the environment's despoilment. Using public air waves to disseminate important information about the connections between environmental health and pollution would be a start in the right direction. Empowering citizenry by passing real campaign finance reform measures and giving all qualifying political parties equal air time (on our "public" airwaves) will encourage optimism and personal efficacy. And lastly, supporting diversity via the enforcement of anti-monopoly laws or the shifting of subsidies for nonrenewable to renewables will enhance options and provide for a much more level playing field (one that accounts for the negative environmental health costs of destructive industrial activities).

If the environment collapses then there will be no need for democracy, but as long as the environment remains viable it is imperative that we strengthen our democracy to ensure prosperity and happiness for future generations.

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