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Socialist! Hatemonger! Can democratic problem-solving survive in an age of polarization and hyperbole?

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The proper role of government has been a subject of significant political debate throughout U.S. history, but especially in the last two years since the emergence of the libertarian Tea Party organization. Nonetheless, most agree that government has certain core responsibilities, such as defending citizens' life and property, maintaining territorial sovereignty, and dealing with emergent public policy crises, such as environmental disasters or epidemics. One of the most important roles of government, and indeed one of the motivations for the original creation of complex governance structures, is the mitigation and management of social conflict short of violence: complex problem solving.

Different forms of government perform this conflict-mitigation function, as well as the other core functions of governance, in different ways. Autocracies, for example, mitigate social conflict by minimizing social interaction, while totalitarian states mitigate social conflict by attempting to exert absolute control over every aspect of social interaction. Democracies, in contrast, function by harnessing social interaction. Where autocracies maintain order at the expense of liberty and free interaction, democracies are designed with an underlying leap of faith, that people can interact in politically-significant ways without killing one another, inciting riots, or otherwise destabilizing society. The democratic strategy is necessarily more complicated, as it involves striking a delicate balance between liberty and regulation: people must be free to interact and communicate, but this interaction must be structured and regulated; order must be maintained and safety preserved, while at the same time the state requires structural mechanisms (e.g., elections, sub-national governance systems, public question and answer sessions,

deliberative forums) to translate interaction and communication in the populace into actionable information about public policy problems and preferences. Democracy manages society on the knife's edge, balancing between chaos and order, where a slip in either direction will bring down anarchy on the one hand and autocratic backsliding on the other.

Democracies, in short, are both complicated and complex, but they offer a great deal of potential. Research by scholars in the fields of public administration, economics, and complexity theory have demonstrated that organizations that harness social complexity tend to make more informed decisions and are more adaptable in the face of change. The last century, at least on the surface, seems to extend these findings to the performance of democracies. Leaving aside for a moment the rise of semi-democratic (anocratic) regimes in the last thirty years, the twentieth century saw democratic regimes survive two world wars and the Cold War, while maintaining extraordinary economic prowess and continuing to perform their core functions domestically.

The changes through which our world's young democracies persevered is astounding, in retrospect. When my great-grandfather was born, autocracies were the norm and democracy an ill-perceived experiment in social engineering, air travel was a dream (he emigrated from Canada on horseback), and veterans of the U.S. Civil War populated small-town parades. By the time of his death, I had traveled to Japan in twelve hours' time and watched recorded footage of the moon landing on the Internet, and democracy had become the government of a majority of the world's countries and achieved a monopoly on legitimacy

in governance. In contrast, how many autocratic regimes from the 19th century survived the last century's tumult?

While it is impossible to foretell how much similar change we will experience in this century, so far we are developing quickly indeed – faster in many cases than societal norms have been able to catch up. Internet and cellular phone usage are ubiquitous, with the former now readily accessed via the latter. The media is struggling to transition into the new digital world, and the mainstream television news broadcast has been replaced by news entertainment. Instant messaging and email have replaced the written letter, and students increasingly seem more comfortable communicating online than in person. I recently invited several students to dinner, only to find them checking Facebook notifications during the awkward pauses endemic to polite conversation. Perhaps not surprisingly, our attention span has reduced in this new digital age, and where politicians once gave speeches for hours on end, including lengthy, well-reasoned arguments, in the modern era the thirty-second sound-bite, loaded with hyperbole and rhetoric, rules the political domain. At the same time, we find that Americans are becoming less informed and more polarized.

Unfortunately for government, technology is only one aspect in which the world is becoming more complex. We face enormous problems in the next century, with looming crises due to energy consumption and fossil fuel dependence, climate change, deforestation, water pollution, and desertification, among others. We are increasingly dependent upon highly complex technology for our economic and military strength, and massive, grid-debilitating solar flares are expected in the next decade. The number of independent states in the world has more than quadrupled in the last seventy years. Governments face the same core responsibilities as ever, but they do so in an environment characterized by extreme and increasing levels of complexity, interconnectivity, and inter-

dependence.

Few would argue that the last one hundred years have seen more change, more quickly, than any other period in human history. While democracies are better situated to adapt to changing environmental conditions, they can only do so if their structures and institutions remain flexible. Can our democracy survive the modern age? More specifically, can democratic institutions continue to help us solve our increasingly complex problems in this age of hyperbole, polarization, and the decreased attention span?

While on the surface these problems may seem minor compared to the crises looming on the horizon, the first two are particularly worrisome for governance. Factionalism, the systemic polarization of society into haves and have-nots, for- and anti-system groups, decried by James Madison in *Federalist 51*, has been identified and confirmed as a leading cause of democratic breakdown and civil war by the U.S. Political Instability Task Force. Most of the young democracies in the world will die before age 15, in no small part because of the identity politics associated with factionalism. Polarization is dangerous to democracies, but the replacement of reasoning by rhetoric and truth by hyperbole endangers them even further, because it reduces potentially-constructive disagreement into destructive anti-system goals and language. Like the fairies of Peter Pan, when the people lose faith in the system, the system begins to die. The U.S. reached this state of factionalism in the 1850s and 1860s, leading to the ruinous Civil War. We came close again in the 1960s, when identity politics and polarization led to significant violence between state and citizenry. Belgium has recently suffered from this transition from policy to identity-based politics, having had no effective government for the last few years due to the failure of its increasingly polarized political parties to reach agreement. The survival of our system through both the Civil War and the twentieth

century speak to the resilience of our institutions. Continued survival, however, will depend on continued flexibility in the face of change, flexibility that is undermined by polarization and hyperbole, alignment of policy preferences with identity. When liberals become communists and conservatives become fascists, the flexibility of the political system is eroded.

Professor Richman's position paper inspires another question: what happens to democratic problem-solving when participants no longer agree on the nature of truth, or when leaders use lies to advance parochial political agendas? Recently, bold-faced lies have become common in our political discourse: Senator Kyl's "not intended to be a factual statement" memo is a high-profile example. Democratic deliberation is founded on the basis of truth – when hyperbole and lies replace evidence and truth as the basis of our discussion, we make worse policy rather than better policy; instead of harnessing social complexity, we threaten to unleash the mob.

In order to continue to mitigate social conflict and solve our increasingly complex problems, we must seek to make our political system, including both structures and participation dynamics, more flexible and adaptable, and resist the structural inertia that bureaucracies develop over time. The question facing us is how to develop such flexibility. How does the use of referenda affect the problem-solving capacity of government? If the growing federal government is a sign of such inertia, could greater devolution of power to local and regional governments improve flexibility? Other states, such as Canada or the United Kingdom, are more decentralized than the U.S., and seem to do fine. Could a deliberative democratic structure serve our needs better? In that case, who decides which topics and pieces of evidence can be brought to the deliberation table?

Democracy is no more effective or flexible than

the institutions that comprise it, and it can last no longer than does the faith of its citizens. While democracies are more flexible than autocracies due to their strategy of harnessing social complexity; inertia, polarization, and hyperbole threaten to erode our political institutions and our faith in the democratic experiment. Can democratic problem-solving survive the modern era?