
IN MY VIEW: Is America a democracy or republic?

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We have two major parties in America, the Democrats and the Republicans. It is not surprising that these two parties disagree on what form of government we have. Are we a democracy or a republic or some combination of both? I found a story on this topic from Jefferson Public Radio that has some interesting insights.

“Since the election of 2020, supporters of former President Donald Trump have become notably more willing to assert their belief that voting in America is suspect. That Trump won an election he lost. That millions of ballots were uncounted or miscounted. That voting by mail was fraught with abuse.”

"Despite the lack of evidence, election denial-ism has become not only a thing, but a movement. When critics call this an attack on democracy, some election deniers respond by saying the U.S. is not a democracy, it is a republic."

Democratic Republic

“The Athenian democracy in Greece around 500BCE denoted the right of the people (demos) to personify power (kratos) and meant it to include an entire polity – or at least its males. Something like 5,000 citizens were enfranchised to participate.”

In a pure democracy all the people vote on all the decisions. This would be unworkable with the current U.S. population of more than 335 million people. As a result, we have adopted a republican model of government where the people elect representatives who are empowered to make decisions on behalf of the people.

“The American experiment has harmonized democratic and republican models, each of which drew its legitimacy from the people and depended on rule by the people. The essential difference was the role of representatives to substitute for the gathering of all the people at one point in time and space.”

The Constitution

To ensure that the majority does not trample the rights of the minority, our country has also adopted a constitution, which defines the protected rights of all the people. This has led to the description of our form of government as a constitutional republic or a constitutional democracy.

In addition to a constitution our system has built-in checks and balances to ensure that no one part of our government has too much power. The legislature is charged with passing and amending the laws. The

executive branch is responsible for implementing and enforcing the laws. The judiciary independently interprets and evaluates the laws.

California Initiatives

In California we have a very democratic process whereby the people can collect signatures to place a topic on the ballot for all voters to decide in a direct vote. If our elected officials fail to address a specific problem or we don't like their decision, we can bring this issue directly to the people to decide.

While this is a very useful process to ensure that our issues are represented, it is also subject to abuse. Anyone with enough money can hire signature gatherers to get a proposition qualified for the ballot. A weakness to this approach is that voters must inform themselves about complex issues to make good choices.

Some ballot measures are written in a way that is intentionally or unintentionally misleading. Occasionally there are two competing ballot measures that will result in the opposite outcome. It looks like there may be as many as 15 ballot measures in the November election. This many can be overwhelming for most voters.

2024 Ballot Measures

I recently attended a meeting of the Executive Board of the California Democratic Party where we adopted positions on the ballot measures that will be on the November ballot. The Democratic Party uses its own type of republican structure.

There are more than 10 million Democrats in California, so the Democratic Party has a process to elect representatives to vote on behalf of all California Democrats in these proceedings. Representation is proportionate to the number of Democrats in each county. Del Norte has 4394 Democrats out of 10 million.

Each county elects a local Central Committee, which then elects delegates to the State Central Committee. We have six delegates and one Executive Board member. Statewide there are 4000 delegates and 400 Executive Board members who are empowered to represent the interests of 10 million California Democrats.

Positions Adopted

The process for considering positions on proposed ballot measure is very thorough and inclusive. First there is a committee meeting and public hearing to receive input from the members in attendance. The hallways teem with advocates carrying signs, wearing t-shirts, and distributing flyers promoting their position pro or con.

After the Committee formulates recommendations, the slate is voted on by the full Executive Committee. Occasionally a recommendation is pulled for further debate and a separate vote. This year a ballot measure proposing to "add one semester personal finance course to high school graduation requirements" was pulled for debate.

It seemed like a good idea, until I heard the concerns from others. They claimed the proponents didn't consult with educators on the impacts. One person cautioned, "it is a slippery slope to have initiative driven

curricula.” Another argued that resources are limited, and this is an unfunded mandate with no extra funding provided.

Passed By One Vote

By the time this came for a vote at the Sunday General Session, the 322 registered Executive Board members had dwindled down to 135 that were present to vote whether to support this proposition. Once an item is pulled from consent, the rules require 60 percent vote for approval.

I voted to support this proposition despite an appreciation for the concerns expressed by the opponents. This barely passed with 81 yes votes, exactly 60 percent. If I had voted the other way, this vote would have failed. This is just another reminder that every vote matters.

However, the votes that really matter are the votes that will be cast in November. In future columns I will provide more information on the propositions that qualify to be on the ballot and the Democratic Party recommendations to support or oppose. With 15 ballot measures we have some homework to do.

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