

Democracy or Autocracy: Which will you choose?

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I have been greatly distressed by what is happening in the United States and the rest of the world, in regards to democracy versus autocracy. I do not remember a time in my life (I’m 72 years old) when so many Americans seemed eager to get rid of democracy in favor of autocracy. But it recently occurred to me that perhaps many Americans do not understand the difference. Let me try to lay it out.

Democracy:

- Free and fair elections are the cornerstone of a democracy. Voters are not intimidated or threatened with violence at the polls. The votes of the people are fairly counted, and the leadership of the government can be changed by the vote of the people.
- Fifteenth Amendment to the US Constitution: “The right of citizens of the United States to vote shall not be denied or abridged by the United States or by any State on account of race, color, or previous condition of servitude.” Additional aspects of US elections are outlined in Amendments 12, 14, 17, 19, 20, 22, 23, 24, 25, and 26.

Autocracy:

- Is a system of government wherein one individual, or one political party, has absolute power. (In Russia right now, one individual, President Vladimir Putin, has absolute power. In China, the Communist Party has absolute power, and currently, one individual, President Xi Jinping, has absolute power.) The votes of the people do not matter.
- The autocratic leader wants to remain in power. This can be accomplished in any of the following ways: The leader who wants the people to believe that they have a democracy manipulates the people to vote the way he or she desires. Or the leader creates a sham election (as Russia just did in Ukraine), to pretend as though the election was free and fair. Or the leader has his military or followers intimidate voters at the polls, prevent voters from having access to the polls, or has voters incarcerated or killed.
- Election laws are changed to make it harder for some segments of society to vote.
- Or, an autocratic leader who doesn’t care whether the people believe they live in a democracy will openly oppose, incarcerate, and/or murder any people who protest the leader (as we have seen happening very recently in China and Russia and many other autocratic governments).

Democracy:

- If the election does not go the way the leader of the government wishes, that leader accepts the results of the election, and steps down to allow the newly elected leader to take his or her place.

Autocracy:

- If the election does not go the way the leader of the government wishes, that leader attempts to overthrow the election, in any number of ways: by pretending that the election was rigged and convincing his followers to help him overthrow the election; by repeatedly challenging the results of the election; by using the court system to attempt to throw out the results of the election; by intimidating or threatening the elected officials that oversee the election process (those officials that help ensure it was a free and fair election); by convincing his followers to carry out violent actions to try to prevent the peaceful transition to the new leader.

Democracy:

- Individuals in the society have the right to protest the results of an election, or protest the actions of the government, as long as those individuals do not threaten or carry out violent actions against those they oppose.
- First Amendment to the US Constitution: "Congress shall make no law respecting an establishment of religion, or prohibiting the free exercise thereof; or abridging the freedom of speech, or of the press; or the right of the people peaceably to assemble, and to petition the Government for a redress of grievances."

Autocracy:

- Individuals in the society do not have the right to protest the results of an election or the actions of the government. The autocratic leader or the ruling party will intimidate, incarcerate, or murder those individuals that protest the leader's or the political party's actions.

Democracy:

- The nation has a Constitution that ensures the rights of the people, and a justice system designed to uphold the laws designed to protect the people.
- The laws within a nation or state are created by representatives that were elected by the people in a democratic process.
- Fifth Amendment to the US Constitution: "No person shall be held to answer for a capital, or otherwise infamous crime, unless on a presentment or indictment of a Grand Jury, except in cases arising in the land or naval forces, or in the Militia, when in actual service in time of War or public danger; nor shall any person be subject for the same offence to be twice put in jeopardy of life or limb; nor shall be compelled in any criminal case to be a witness against himself, nor be deprived of life, liberty, or property, without due process of law; nor shall private property be taken for public use, without just compensation."

Autocracy:

- Individuals in autocratic nations do not have any rights.
- Second Amendment to the US Constitution: "A well regulated Militia, being necessary to the security of a free State, the right of the people to keep and bear Arms, shall not be infringed."

- The Russian people have no right to bear arms. The Chinese people have no right to bear arms.
- The laws that an autocratic government creates are enforced either by the autocratic leader, the political party in power, or by martial law (wherein the military commander “has unlimited authority to make and enforce laws”). Individuals who disobey or protest unjust laws are incarcerated or murdered, with no opportunity to defend themselves in a court of law.

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The ancient Greeks and a number of other early civilizations practiced early forms of democratic voting. But autocracies, including authoritarian monarchies, dictators, and military rule, had been the form of government in many nations of the world a long time before modern democracies emerged. So perhaps humanity is not ready for democracy. But remember why the United States established a democratic form of government in 1776 – people left Europe to live in what eventually became the United State of America so that they would no longer be dominated by Kings or dictators. Do we now really want to go back to an autocratic life?