

The Democracy Game

by Andrew Mahon (May 2018)



Hip Hip Hurrah! Artists' Party at Skagen, Peter Severin Krøyer, 1888

The 2009 Wimbledon final, in which Roger Federer defeated Andy Roddick in five sets, was the longest Grand Slam final in history in terms of games played, with a total of 77. Imagine if Roddick's supporters had claimed that, given the final score of 5-7, 7-6, 7-6, 3-6, 16-14, he deserved the victory because he won more games. It's a ludicrous suggestion because, as everyone knows, the game of tennis doesn't work that way and, though it was true that Roddick edged Federer in total games won by 39 to 38, ultimately, neither player was trying to win more games, but three sets. That is the game they play and unless there is agreement about the rules of the game, there can be no game at all.

No less ludicrous than this is the suggestion that Hillary Clinton should be President of the United States because she got more votes than Donald Trump, and yet, more than a year after the election, it is still frequently made. That is simply not the way American federal elections work. Maybe you don't like the way American elections work. For that matter, maybe you don't like the rules of tennis (maybe you think 1, 2, 3 would make more sense than 15, 30, 40). But changing the rules of elections or sports is a separate matter entirely. Neither Clinton nor Trump were trying to win the popular vote; they were campaigning to win the electoral college. Had they been trying to win the popular vote, both candidates would have campaigned very differently, and who can say what the result would have been in that case? In practical terms, it certainly would have meant spending most of their time campaigning in more populated areas, such as New York, Los Angeles and Chicago, instead of travelling across the whole country. And this is precisely what the electoral college exists to prevent. Maybe it's not perfect, maybe it needs to be changed, but without it, or something else in its place, the large cities would be deciding for the whole country, resulting in the various different concerns of the rest of the country being ignored. This is its function, and both candidates agreed to it by entering the race in the first place.

America's system of democracy is as ingenious as it is convoluted, and every aspect of it is directed towards fair representation of the concerns of both the individuals and the many regions that comprise the nation. Each state is represented by two senators serving six-year terms, and by a number of Representatives proportional to the population serving two-year terms. If only the Senate existed, the citizens of the more populous states, such as California,

would be underrepresented in Congress, and conversely, if only the House of Representatives existed, the smaller states such as Alaska and Montana, with only one representative each to California's 53, would be underrepresented in Congress. The resultant makeup of the bicameral legislature ensures that the concerns of individuals are heard as well as the concerns of the states. This, the Legislative Branch of government, is balanced by the Executive Branch (the President and his staff, serving four-year terms) and the Judicial Branch (the Supreme Court; justices serve for life following Presidential nomination and Senate confirmation). And we haven't even touched upon state or local governments. Elections in the U.S. are pretty much nonstop. It must make Americans yearn for one consolidated election to decide everything. Would that it were so simple.

I don't argue that it's perfect, nor even that it's the best form of democracy in the world—in fact I don't think it is but it is not stupid, and far too often people mock it in complete ignorance of its democratic intentions. They need to be reminded of [Chesterton's fence](#). The system reflects the fact that a nation is not merely a group of individuals but a collection of groups, cities, towns, states, districts, etc. This is where its genius is found. I believe that a better form of democracy is the Westminster Parliamentary system, found throughout the British Commonwealth, where we achieve a similar level of democratic representation by only electing our local Member of Parliament. We don't actually elect our Prime Minister at all. To put all this in perspective, the strength of both the Westminster system and the American system is that they don't jump directly from voter to leader, thereby severing ties with any intermediate voices, but rather make an attempt to reflect in between the many different levels and forms of something called community.

Community. It explains why a mining or manufacturing town in the UK or America might support Brexit or Trump. They have grievances that relate to their communities that we city folk struggle to identify with. They've spent years watching their communities disintegrate due to what appear to them vague concepts like globalisation. Thanks, they say, but what about my job? What about my livelihood? What about the community that was built around the factory that just closed? These people deserve the utmost respect, and yet for decades their grievances fell on deaf ears. It is these who are responsible for Brexit and the election of Trump, not occasional armchair philosophes like me, nor the fabled army of racists and bigots spreading across the western world.

Many people, without thinking much about it, seem to desire a more simplistic democratic system, which directly jumps from voter to national leader, even though this neglects the needs and concerns of communities. Real communities are diverse and local and organically occurring, not arbitrarily or artificially imposed from above. A community shapes the way individuals think, and each community has different priorities. It is by finding a balance in recognising them, as well as the wishes of individuals, that a democratic system is able to function effectively. It is regrettable that so many voters don't give their local MP a second thought, but rather vote for the party, or more likely the leader of a party that they like best. I suspect American influence has a lot to do with this mistaken approach to our national elections. Once again, people might be quick to disparage a system they don't understand, but I argue that it's worth understanding first. The whole point of government arises from the needs of a community. Local representation is democracy at its most primitive. The modern tendency is to view democratic government as primarily national, or even supranational (the EU, for example). But it's an error to focus on this at the

expense of the local. And to illustrate this, I submit the example of the Kurds.

The Kurds are an ethnic group populating parts of Iraq, Iran, Syria and Turkey, comprising between 9% and 25% of the populations of each country. They are the world's largest nationality lacking its own state. They were the target of genocide at the hand of Saddam Hussein and in recent years have been fighting for their survival against ISIS, Al Nusra and other Islamist groups. In Syria, we often hear about Assad's government forces, ISIS and "the rebels." Closer inspection reveals the rebels to be mostly different terrorist groups with similar ideologies. I suppose it's a good thing that they don't get along, but to my knowledge none of them is good news, and it seems that the Kurds have had to fight all of them. Unfortunately the State of Kurdistan cannot exist because Turkey, that friend to the West, democratic ally, Nato member, would-be EU member, will not allow it. And the West's support of the Kurds has been limited by a fear of upsetting Turkish President Recep Tayyip Erdogan. Turkey's democracy is gradually vanishing under Erdogan. Over the past few years he has jailed hundreds of journalists in an effort to take control of the media and last year's referendum saw him ease into a new role with increased autocratic powers. All the attempts to compare Trump's electoral victory to Hitler's rise to power are nonsense because the American system doesn't allow for it to happen. It is a good system, in part because of the checks and balances that prevent such things. Turkey under Erdogan, on the other hand, might show us a much more appropriate analogy to 1930s Germany.

But back to the Kurds. They maintain a strong ethnic identity, which manifests in community. Where they have made gains in Syria against ISIS, they demonstrate how democracy begins,

with egalitarian, local representation of the needs and concerns of communities. When America invaded Iraq, President Bush thought he could replace a cruel dictatorship with a national democracy, but this betrayed a complete misunderstanding of the region. He tried to shove democracy down the throats of a people who hadn't recognised the need for it themselves. That will never work. Democracy, being a system of representing the interests of individuals and communities, must arise from individuals and communities. The Kurds exemplify this impeccably. What the West should have done in the past and should do in future is attempt not to impose a new system of national government from above, but to encourage locally representative democracy from below by identifying communities that already exist. Where that fails, democracy is not an option.

In large cities, the communities are disappearing. This is not to say there aren't any healthy communities; indeed there are, particularly immigrant communities. But I am referring to a general trend away from community, and I think anyone who has lived in a large city knows what I mean. The conclusion of all this is that the first attempts at establishing local representation amid chaotic violence signify the birth pangs of a functioning democracy. The neglect of the local and community orientation in favour of an almost total focus on national or supranational government signifies the death throes of a democracy. I may be wrong, but it appears to me that European democracy is heading towards the latter. Think about it. If a nation that eschews local representation, either because it fails to recognise the needs of its communities or because it has lost sight of the very concept of community, begets unsound and out of touch national governments, a transnational union of such governments cannot survive. It's cut off from its foundations. There's a reason that both the United States and the United Kingdom have

survived as unions for as long as they have, and, as recent events in both countries demonstrate, the communities that these political systems are built to favour will react when their governments ignore them, which the governments of both countries have been doing pretty much since the fall of the Berlin Wall. Fortunately, even if some of us have forgotten the concept of community, the system, in America and Britain at least, will remember for us. But even then, our democracy will only function properly in the long run if we reorientate ourselves to local representation, and this requires a return to the concept of community. Though I live in one of the biggest and most vibrant cities in the world, I find that I am not part of a community. Would that I were.

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