

STEVEN P. DINKIN A Path Forward

DEMOCRACY IS WINNING, BUT THERE'S STILL WORK TO DO

Most Americans are steadfast in certain beliefs, especially when it comes to their personal rights: among them, freedom of speech, freedom to assemble and freedom of religion — all enshrined in the U.S. Constitution.

There are other beliefs that I'd move from the "steadfast" to "wavering" column: a conviction that with hard work, anyone can succeed; an optimism that our country's brightest days are ahead; a commitment to democracy.

As I was working on my column last week about civic education (which has fallen out of favor in school districts and institutions of higher learning across the country), I saw a new study that was released by the Open Society Foundations. It posed the question, "Can Democracy Deliver?" Their report reflects the views of 36,344 respondents across 30 countries that have a combined population of 5.5 billion people.

When asked if it's important to live in a democratically governed country, 80 percent of Americans said yes. If you're a fan of democracy that may sound encouraging,

but it lands the U.S. in 27th place, just above Pakistan, Saudi Arabia and Russia. Ethiopia and Turkey topped the list, at 96 percent. Surprisingly, China — a country under authoritarian rule — placed third, at 95 percent.

Here's another surprise: Just 56 percent of Americans deemed democracy preferable to any other kind of government. The percentage was the same in Ukraine, even as they defend their country against Russian aggression. I would think their passion for democracy would only rise.

Mark Malloch-Brown, president of Open Society Foundations, said the results of the study are "at once hopeful and sobering." In the foreword, he wrote that democracy has a strong pulse; its gravest threat "is not the rival appeal of authoritarianism but rather the question of whether democratic leaders can deliver for their populations."

Malloch-Brown concluded that people want to believe in open societies that have checks on power, independent institutions, minority protections and strong

individual rights. But, he noted, "the evidence of that model improving their lives is all-too-patchy."

Indeed, there is evidence of patchiness everywhere we turn. It's reflected in the generational differences that Open Society Foundations uncovered. Survey respondents ages 18 to 35 years old were least enthusiastic about democracy: 42 percent said they support army rule, while 35 percent were sympathetic to the idea of a strong leader who does away with elections and systems of government. For respondents over the age of 55, the percentages were 20 and 26, respectively.

While the age data are aggregated across the 30 participating countries, I imagine they reflect the views of Americans in the same cohorts. Young people have been witness to a system of democracy that is flawed, with two modern-day presidents (George W. Bush and Donald Trump) winning the election because of the Electoral College system. Both lost the popular vote.

They've also seen the forces

coalescing against democracy, as happened on Jan. 6, 2021. On that day — following a free and fair presidential election — thousands of people swarmed the U.S. Capitol to protest the results. Many of them engaged in violent clashes with officers. Our democracy held, but trust was eroded: One-third of Americans still believe the election was stolen from Donald Trump.

Then there are the quality-of-life issues that young Americans are facing and concerned about: climate change, student debt, the cost of housing, a loss of reproductive freedoms and voting rights — just to name a few. No wonder they are asking, "Is government (and democracy) working for me?"

In the same manner, I wonder whether democracy is the best system of government for all countries. What works and doesn't work is dependent on so many factors, including a country's economic situation and cultural norms. We want more countries, not fewer, in our tent, if we believe that global cooperation and collaboration are worthy goals.

In The New York Times last

week, David Leonhardt noted a shift in President Joe Biden's language. While he previously talked about the world being engaged in a "battle between democracy and autocracy," the administration has come to believe that the framing comes with downsides.

While there are democracies and autocracies both, many countries have not chosen sides. Leonhardt wrote, "If the U.S. suggests that only democracies are welcome in its alliance, that alliance will shrink." And so, there's been a shift, recognizing the need to have "constructive relationships with countries of all different traditions and backgrounds."

But here in America, it's time to double down and recommit to the democratic principles on which our country was founded — and to making democracy work for all.

Dinkin is president of the National Conflict Resolution Center, a San Diego-based group working to create solutions to challenging issues, including intolerance and incivility. To learn about NCRC's programming, visit ncrconline.com

SILENCE • Many participants have history including activism, political engagement

FROM B1
were a weekly endeavor, but after the third anniversary of Floyd's death earlier this year, the group transitioned to walking on the third Saturday of each month.

Before their demonstrations, they read the names and outcomes of people who have been killed by police, and after, they sit in Trolley Barn Park to reflect on that day's walk.

Bettina Heitmann — a 55-year-old North Park resident and one of the group's three founders — started the group with her partner Z and their friend Cynthia Rich. As a trio of practicing Buddhists who are followers of Vietnamese monk and activist Thich Nhat Hanh, they chose to walk in silent reflection as a way to honor his legacy of advocating for peace through silent, nonviolent communication.

"I felt a very powerful message of just carrying the statement and not needing to shout," Heitmann said. "Just by carrying the signs and walking we felt we could actually get more attention and make more of a difference and have it be a more powerful message."

All of the demonstrators during this month's silent



Susan Gionet (left) and Tess Willows hold a Black Lives Matter flag as Mannie Garza walks behind them during their silent protest walk on Sept. 16.

walk have a history of activism and political engagement dating back decades.

Susan Gionet, a 72-year-old Golden Hill resident, campaigned for Robert Kennedy before he was assassinated, and passed out petitions for the United

Farm Workers. Golden Hill resident Doug B., a 72-year-old who declined to provide his last name, first stepped into the world of activism by speaking out against the Vietnam War, then went on to be a union organizer for 25 years.

Tess Willows, a 70-year-old North Park resident, was in Washington, D.C., when Jane Fonda spoke out

against the Vietnam War, marched for the right to abortions and demonstrated in the Myth California protests in the 1980s against the statewide beauty pageant.

At just 16 years old, Mannie Garza, now 80, spent her Saturdays picketing outside the Woolworth department store in Cambridge, Mass., in solidarity with the four Black college students who were denied service at a Woolworth's lunch counter in Greensboro, N.C.

When Rich was in her 20s, she worked for Black political candidates in Boston, then later helped to racially integrate her son's school. Despite having spent most of her life actively engaged in social justice issues, she said it was the 2014 protests in Ferguson, Mo., following the fatal shooting of Michael Brown and the 2020 protests following Floyd's murder that really highlighted how much racism is still an issue for her.

"I think the revelation for me was that so much more

now is coming out that was not there, even for somebody who really was reading all the books and finding out everything I could possibly find out," the 90-year-old said. "I have been educated in these last few years."

When the group first formed, members said they would keep walking until there was no longer a need to continue — with social justice protests happening nationwide every day throughout the summer of 2020, they figured change must be around the corner.

Reflecting back, Heitmann thinks that the group's initial timeline may have been naive.

"We started it certainly at a time when White people were becoming more aware just of how many killings there are, how many murders there are," Heitmann said. "I'm glad that we've been doing it, and I don't see any signs from society that there's an end in sight where this is not necessary. So it's very sad. It's very sobering."

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