

Why Thin Democracy is failing...

From the Ukraine to Iraq, people are willing to risk their lives for the right to vote in fair elections. Indeed, the right to choose one's governors is now widely embraced, or at least paid increasing lip service. Yet, a troubling 2005 survey of Latin Americans found confidence in democracy dwindling: Fewer than half of those polled believed democracy "preferable to any other kind of government." In the United States the share of Americans who feel their "government is run by a few big interests looking out only for themselves" more than doubled from the mid-1960s to reach 76 percent by the mid-1990s.

How can we make sense of the apparent contradiction?

Disillusionment with democratic government, I believe, flows inevitably from a weak concept of democracy: Once democracy is reduced to elections plus a market economy driven by a single rule -- highest return to existing wealth -- it leads to such extreme concentration of wealth that it overwhelms elected governments and destroys open markets. Little wonder that disillusionment follows as we see that this Thin Democracy cannot address our planet's interlinked crises.

Today's problems, by their very nature, don't yield to top-down strategies. From violence against women to pollution, from the decimation of species to climate change, today's problems are complex, deep, and diffuse. They are decentralized yet interconnected. Their solutions therefore require invention and widespread changes in behavior—both of which depend on the experience, ingenuity, and "buy-in" of citizens closest to the problems. Yet Thin Democracy's concentrated power excludes precisely such broad-based engagement.

Thin Democracy denies deep human needs and stifles the expression of needed human capacities. Thin Democracy can't create healthy societies because it reduces us all to a shabby caricature of our complexity -- one of narrowly self-seeking materialists. Thin Democracy denies human need for community, for basic fairness, and for efficacy in contributing to something grander than our own survival. Forcing us to bury these deep needs, Thin Democracy contributes to feelings of alienation and powerlessness.

Thin Democracy can't compete with morally certain extremisms. Finally, because of its demeaning materialist premise and dismissal of citizens' voices, Thin Democracy can never inspire the passion and loyalty necessary to compete with extremist ideologies—both religious and secular—that claim high moral ground and offer transcendent visions. In face of such soul-serving calls for allegiance, Thin Democracy is frighteningly weak and vulnerable.

If we accept Thin Democracy as the end-of-history culmination of human experience, we are doomed. Fortunately, though, a conceptualization of democracy is already emerging that may be strong, complex and vital enough to meet today's challenges. It may be just the uniting civic vision we need - rich enough to embrace our diverse religious values and compelling enough to stand up to divisive sectarian calls.