

The Necessity of Education for Democracy

By Kevin Chang

Winston Churchill, one of the most famous British Prime Ministers, said, “The best argument against Democracy is a five minute conversation with the average voter.” In many democratic countries, including the United States, the voting populace fares poorly on measures of knowledge and intelligence. In a 2002 survey of 18-24 year olds conducted by National Geographic, half of respondents could not find Mississippi while a third could not find Louisiana on a map of the U.S. Considering this, why do we let crucial decisions regarding the fate of our country go to the average person, who typically lacks expertise in many important fields, in our system of government?

The answer to this dilemma comes from another Churchill quote: “Indeed it has been said that democracy is the worst form of Government except for all those other forms that have been tried from time to time.” According to Churchill, democracy has severe flaws but the alternatives are far worse. There are too many occasions in history where a dictator, claiming to act in the best interests of the people, infringes on basic human rights and leads their country into economic ruin. After all, the Berlin Wall was not made to contain West Germany but to keep the citizens of an authoritarian Communist regime from escaping towards freedom. It is very significant that most developed nations today employ a representative liberal democracy as their model for governance.

However, the situation of modern-day democracy is not perfect. Countries in the European Union are suffering from sluggish economic recovery and increasing political radicalism. China has shown the world that democracy and civil liberties are not needed for tremendous economic growth. Here in the U.S., the proliferation of “alternative facts” and “fake news” during the last election cycle calls into question the bedrock of our democracy – a well-informed populace. The media cannot be solely relied upon to present the facts or impartial narratives.

If democracy is to survive in the U.S., we must improve our education system. Fostering a sense of critical thinking - evaluating and analyzing information in order to create an informed judgment – is more important than ever as America fully enters the 21st century. With the advent of the internet, everyone has access to vast troves of knowledge. Instead of beating countless dates and factoids into our youth, true learning will come from critically utilizing information.

The obtainment of education is not explicitly mentioned in the Constitution but it is just as necessary to American Democracy as free elections or civil liberties. Who can call someone, ignorant in knowledge of all affairs political, economic, and social, a free citizen? Franklin Delano Roosevelt, a contemporary of Churchill and one of our greatest presidents said, “Democracy cannot succeed unless those who express their choice are prepared to choose wisely. The real safeguard of democracy, therefore, is education.” We have all heard countless pundits try and convince us of their worldviews. It is high time that we, the American citizens, form our own beliefs.