

The Failure Of Democracy

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January 3, 1943

The present world crisis has again brought up the question of the efficiency of democracy. In any discussion of the condition of the government of this country, the increasing number of weaknesses can not possibly be ignored. These defects are found in local, state, and national government.

Cities with crowded tenement districts offer rich prizes for "boss rule". By doing favors and generally looking after the voters all year around, the machine can count on them to vote as they are instructed. Although some of these bosses wind up in Alcatraz for not filing an income tax, there are still a few in operation.

In state government, there are weaknesses in all three branches. In the executive branch, the unfortunate governor is held responsible for the condition of the state when he can do relatively nothing to better it. His power is strictly limited. He can only advise the many boards, commissions, and agencies but do nothing to enforce this opinion. About half the states have revised this system in the last twenty-five years, but there is still room for improvement. In the legislatures, the salaries are so low that good talent is not attracted. It is not worth while for a man to leave his business for three months every year or so and journey to the state capital to earn three dollars a day. Hence, many of those elected to this office are not really suitable material. The judicial branch is renowned for its delay. Some time ago two young men spent one hundred and seven days in an Ann Arbor jail, awaiting trial for simple larceny, and were finally convicted and sentenced to the maximum penalty of ninety days. Thereupon the

judge credited them with seventeen days apiece on the next sentence they might receive.¹ Such happenings are not typical, but they occur frequently enough to create a serious problem.

In spite of all precautions in voting, ballot boxes are still stuffed and primaries raided. Lobbyists hold forth noisily in the state capitals; some pay good money to insure the "killing" of a bill detrimental to the interests of their employers. A mild type of the spoils system is in effect in many states in spite of "competent" civil service commissions. In the District of Columbia, nearly three quarters of a million people have no vote. In this respect, they are on a par with criminals, aliens, children, and insane people.

The national government is guilty of too much centralization; it has power over railroads, big business, radio, air traffic, ships, and public utilities-- to mention only a few. In the last quarter of a century, the tendency has been to create an agency to oversee almost every new business that springs up. The more government we have, the less freedom remains. Certain weaknesses might call for government aid, but not domination. Of course, in time of war, tighter control by the federal government is quite a necessity. The majority of the people will argue: "We don't want a dictator; we want freedom." However, they do not take an active part in their government by going to the polls on election day. In the 1940 presidential election, only sixty-two per cent of the eligible voters

¹ Macdonald, Austin F. American State Government And Administration. New York City, 1940. p. 237.

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cast their ballots.² If one-fourth of those non-voters had had enough energy to indicate their choice at the voting-place, the election might have gone the other way. If these uninterested individuals would take the trouble to study conditions in this country and indicate their opinions on a ballot, it would go a long way towards correcting some of the governmental difficulties confronting the United States today.

² Ogg, Frederic A. and Ray, P. Orman. Introduction To American Government. 7th ed. New York City, 1942. p. 177.

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