We are witnessing an interesting time in U.S. democracy. Does it offer guidance on how to maintain democracy in Canada?

The United States is a democracy, which is generally taken to mean that all citizens get to vote their representatives, who look out for the citizens’ interests by legislating in Congress. The federal government is mirrored in state governments. How does that all seem to be working out these days?

I think that it’s not doing too well. Voter suppression and disenfranchisement. A president who was supported by a minority of voters. The power of lobbyists. The power of money which is considered to be “free speech.” The appointment of judges based on political persuasion. The appointment of people to lead government agencies whose goals are antithetical to those of the agencies they lead. A government that does not serve the interests of many of its citizens (perhaps even acting against their interests) and which makes no attempt to balance competing demands.

One explanation for the election of Donald Trump is that many of those who support him are marginalized and dispossessed not only of property but also of social standing by changes in society (a shifting demographic makeup, the transformation from a resource-based manufacturing economy to a service-based gig economy) that are misattributed to some evanescent abstracted bogey such as immigration, drugs, race, or crime. Trump’s authoritarian message, that he can and will put things right by returning to the glory days of yore by destroying the posited evil, gives hope to the marginalized. Whether this can or will happen, and whether or not Trump is a snake-oil selling huckster, are largely irrelevant concerns because people voted for a person who gives them hope and optimism. Trump rallies are revivalist meetings. I favour this explanation because it also explains Brexit and the ascension to power of other autocrats, such as in Hungary, the Philippines, or Brazil.

It’s easy to think that these sorts of things couldn’t happen in Canada. But if this explanation is correct, then a major factor in the rise of authoritarianism is a widespread feeling of marginalization and dispossession that coalesces in support of a messianic figure who promises to put everything right and restore things to the way they were. It follows that the best way to prevent authoritarianism is to attenuate the factors that give rise to it. In Vancouver, for example, we see homelessness, joblessness, lack of hope, people who can expect never to buy a house, open gang warfare, poverty, and rising rents. Are we doing enough to avoid Trumpland North, eh?

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