Grumbling in the Ranks

Time to Put Democracy on Hold for a Bit?

By G. Tracy Mehan III

With the election of President Trump in 2016, and recent setbacks for political parties supporting aggressive action on climate change in Australia and Canada, there is disension among some environmentalists and academics about the efficacy of democracies in achieving the goal of mitigating emissions of greenhouse gases and the resulting changes to our planet.

“Even the best democracies agree that when a major war approaches, democracy must be put on hold for the time being,” says Gaia theorist James Lovelock. “I have a feeling that climate change may be an issue as severe as a war. It may be necessary to put democracy on hold for a while.”

That old curmudgeon Garrett Hardin (of “The Tragedy of the Commons” fame), believed the world had to relinquish “the freedom to breed, and that very soon.” That was back in 1968. And David Shearman and Joseph Wayne Smith, in The Climate Challenge and the Failure of Democracy (Praeger 2007) stated their firm belief that “authoritarianism is the natural state of humanity, and it may be better to choose our elites rather than have them imposed.” Battling climate change is warfare, and “humanity will have to trade its liberty to live as it wishes in favor of a system where survival is paramount.”

This is reminiscent of William James’s famous lecture “The Moral Equivalent of War,” given at Stanford in 1906, in which he declared that war “is the only force that can discipline a whole community.” A pacifist, he still believed in martial virtues that “must be the enduring cement; intrepidity, contempt of softness, surrender of private interest, obedience to command, must still remain the rock upon which states are built.”

So it is no surprise that Representative Alexandria Ocasio-Cortez (D-NY) stated in support of her Green New Deal that “none of these things are new ideas”, and that World War II provides “a blueprint of doing this before” (quotes from “Everyone a Conscript,” by Jonah Goldberg, National Review).

Compare those who would issue a call to arms to, on the other hand, James Madison: “No nation could preserve its freedom in the midst of continual warfare.”

These and other criticisms of democracy are outlined in Daniel J. Fiorino’s short, concise, well-sourced Can Democracy Handle Climate Change? published last year. Many of the complaints revolve around governance challenges presented by many environmental and sustainability issues. As to the environment, though, challenges include long time frames and possible intergenerational conflicts, a spatial scale crossing political boundaries, economics and demography, and complexity. Climate change he deems “the largest collective action problem in history.”

“One cannot touch, feel, or smell climate change, and our understanding of it comes mostly from complex scientific models that reflect a great deal of uncertainty about the rate and magnitude of the change and its effects,” writes Fiorino. “As a result, it has been more difficult to establish a political consensus on climate than on more conventional and politically salient environmental problems.”

In these pages I have previously reviewed, quite positively, Fiorino’s The New Environmental Regulation (September/October 2008) and, in the interest of full disclosure, I have since become a friend and colleague, now serving on the advisory board of his Center for Environmental Policy at American University. Fiorino formed the center after retiring from EPA, where he ran several cutting-edge voluntary, collaborative programs pioneering newer models of environmental protection. He is a prolific author of serious academic works.

Fiorino is a social or political scientist and brings to his subject both the strengths and weaknesses of those disciplines, at least as it relates to evaluating democracy and its relationship to climate change. In sum, he comes to the right verdict for reasons that are only partially correct. His is a more instrumental view of democracy, although he does, briefly, mention the “normative” reasons for valuing our basis of government in most contemporary human societies. Nowhere in his book is there any reference to James Madison, The Federalist Papers, Montesquieu, the Magna Carta, or the liberty interest.
Can other forms of government better respond to the climate crisis?

Can Democracies Handle Climate Change? makes only brief mention of concepts such as the rule of law, private property rights, or other constitutional constraints on government. But it does point to second-order benefits of these democratic principles. Democracies do a better job of facilitating the free flow of information and encouraging transparency, holding leaders accountable, seeking and disseminating scientific information, and fostering policy and technological innovation. In fact, “democracies account better for longer-term issues,” he concludes, which obviously bodes well for an intergenerational issue like climate change.

Fiorino never uses the word “federalism” or “subsidiarity,” but he describes widespread and energetic action on the climate front by “sub-national governments,” which is jargon for state and local governments. With the election of President Trump, environmentalists are rediscovering the joys of states rights, or so it seems.

Democracies’ ability to generate economic growth and accelerate a nation’s environmental performance up the Environmental Kuznets Curve is relegated to a footnote and deserved more discussion at least as to whether or not this is unique to democracies. The EKG posits that the relationship between economic growth and environmental quality is an inverted U-shape, according to which environmental conditions deteriorate during early stages of economic growth but begin to improve after a certain threshold of wealth or per capita income is reached, as indeed happened in Europe, North America, and Japan. This is, in part, a function of democracy and public demand.

Interestingly, the book makes no mention of the lessons learned after the fall of the Soviet empire and the horrendous environmental disaster left in the aftermath — Exhibit 1 against authoritarians’ supposed concern for the environment. Who regulates the government when the government owns or controls everything? It is no accident that John Paul II, who grew up under the Nazis and Communists in Poland, was the first of the modern popes to elevate the environment as a moral concern.

Dan Fiorino brings it all home when he asserts, “The normative case in favor of democracy is a powerful one . . . it is hard to dismiss the benefits of a system which protects individual rights against arbitrary or discriminatory action by government; which ensures an open flow of information and opinions through freedoms of speech, press, and assembly; and in which people have a say in decisions that affect them, even if only when it comes to choosing their leaders.

There is absolutely no evidence that authoritarian regimes do anything significant for the environment, or climate change specifically. Moreover, “populist” authoritarians, as found in Venezuela, are viewed by political scientists as having the worst outcomes of any type of political regime. Neither can the barriers to better climate mitigation be overcome by “autocratic rule by scientific elites,” writes Fiorino. Indeed, “the democracy critics are pretending that politics does not exist or can be wished away.”

How can I not end this review without quoting Winston Churchill’s famous line that “democracy is the worst form of government, except for all the others.”

G. Tracy Mehan III is executive director for government affairs at the American Water Works Association, and an adjunct professor at Antonin Scalia Law School, George Mason University. He may be contacted at tmehan@awwa.org.