

Panel: Future of Democracy

Date/Time: Wednesday, April 23, 2014 / 15:30-16:45

Speakers: Ashley Browne, The Wall Street Journal (Moderator)

Daniel A. Bell, Tsinghua University

Edwin Feulner, The Heritage Foundation

Eric X. Li, Chengwei Capital

Rapporteur: Patrick Thomsen, Seoul National University

Moderator Ashley Browne (The Wall Street Journal) began the discussion by relaying to the panel and audience his experience in contact with the democratization movements in Taiwan and Korea.

Daniel A Bell (Tsinghua University) followed by stating that democracy is fundamentally a good thing. The desire of all our political systems is to try and find leaders both capable and virtuous. Voting unfortunately doesn't guarantee this. Voters, it has academically been found, behave irrationally. Democracy's weakness is found in the conflict that occurs due to its processes between the community of voters and non-voters. He presented two possible mixed models of government selection. 1st. Horizontal mode: two houses, one elected, the other appointed on meritocracy. The problem with this however, is the elected house will accumulate power, and negate the efficacy of meritocracy. 2nd. Vertical Democratic Meritocracy: popular elections at local level, and higher up bureaucracy appointed on merit. (More or less China's system). Issues with this: 1. 'Guarding the gardens' or accountability. 2. Ossification of the political system (criteria of meritocracy needs to evolve with time) 3. Legitimacy: finding other sources of consent. There are many sources of consent not just multiparty elections. Suggested a referendum on the issue of the type of political system in China, once every 50 years.

Edwin Feulner (The Heritage Foundation) began by citing the images on the Plenum's opening video of the 'Arab Spring' and hope that democracy provides to people around the world. He highlighted the desire of individuals to have what others have as a motivating cause for the evolvement of democratic processes and how we view them. He identified 4 areas that are fundamental to improving democracy. 1. Expansion of space for the individual: decentralized control, personal autonomy. 2. Rule of law: equal access, fair and transparent dispensation. 3. Alternative private institutions: Independent religious, knowledge oriented, and charitable organizations, free from government interference. 4. Increased transparency: accountable individuals and government. Feulner believes that the closer a government is to the people, the better the government we receive. And he argues that the 'founding fathers' of American democracy got the functions and separation of government right. He sees it as our responsibility to create a bright future for democracy.

In contrast Eric X Li (Chengwai Capital) identified the many weaknesses of our current conception of democracy. Ideas of universal suffrage, periodic multiparty elections, public referenda, have a dismal future. Historically the 'British Parliamentary' roots of modern democracy make our current system a true accident of history. Democracy as we

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Session Sketch

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know it is an inherent contradiction. For example liberty due to unequal distribution of resources conflicts with equality. The current systems from the US to Europe have become bipartisan and paralyzed by its own inability to agree on anything. Democracy in this context has become rigid. He illustrated this point by quoting the latest study from Princeton University, which used data to show that America is now an oligarchy, where the interest of those in the 90th percentile economically controls 99% of public policies in conflict with the will of the 50th percentile. His final example was of Taiwan where he said there was a correlation between popular election of their president and the stagnation of economic and political growth. Later in the Q&A section he clarified that he did not imply causality between the two, just a correlation.

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