Democratic discord

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Young people worldwide express distrust in democratic systems

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In a time of hyper-partisanship and political discord, 23-year-old English teacher Emma Huellmantel said young Americans' uncertainty about the future has led to a different experience with democracy compared to that of their parents. She credits this to gradually deteriorating values that support democracy.

As a result, many millennials are losing faith in the system. Huellmantel said young people are worried about what it's going to be like to raise a family in the current social climate.

"We don't really know what that's going to look like for us," Huellmantel said. "But we do know that it's not going to look the same way that it did for our parents."

According to a 2016 Harvard University study, many young citizens of longstanding democracies have also become disillusioned with the system. Of people born in the 1930s, 91 percent said democracy is important. Only 57 percent of people born in the 1980s said the same.

While freshman Olga Stathis, a self-indentified conservative, said that she doesn't believe in the feasibility of traditional Greek democracy, in which every citizen is involved in every part of the making of public policy, she does see the merits of representative government. Despite democracy's appeal, she is ultimately unsatisfied with the real-life result.

"The idea of democracy is essential: that power does come from the people. But then again, the idea of democracy, it's very idealistic to believe everyone will come together, will give up and will do for the better good something for everybody else," Stathis said. "It sounds pretty on paper, democracy, but it doesn't really work."

Stathis believes stronger leaders will better represent their constituents. According to Harvard lecturer Yascha Mounk, this sentiment is becoming more popular among young people.

As the younger generation begins to take on leadership positions in government, their opinions will be heard, and their interpretation of modern democracy could be fueled by hyper-partisanship. And if this trend becomes more prominent in political settings, young adults will shy away from the contextual conception of what a democracy truly is.

Huellmantel said that this could be a result of the substantial change in the way media is being consumed and integrated into the culture of young Americans. She also said that empathy towards others can be lost as a byproduct of constant exposure.

According to a study conducted by the Stanford History Education Group, 80 percent of young people studied couldn't tell the difference between fake and authentic news sources, and usually didn't bother to fact check dubious claims.

27-year-old social studies teacher Sean McCarroll thinks this is the outcome of the way millennials prioritize.

"I don't think that politics are very important to most millennials. I don't think that many of them embrace the idea of political partisanship or the political process, so much as they see and value the outcomes," McCarroll said. "To a large degree, (there's) political debate and discussion. On the millennials' side people are either polar and they're very in it, or they're completely apathetic."

Only 49.4 percent of eligible young people turned out for the 2016 presidential election, according to the Pew Research Center. And yet, they also reported that highly polarized political parties are gaining speed.

McCarroll said that such political discord results in hostility between a government and its people. He said he sees this phenomenon partially due to shifts in power.

"I think right now a lot of people are realizing there are downsides to democracy because there's a group that has been in majority power for the last eight years that is no longer there," McCarroll said. "And I know that can be a tough transition for a lot of folks."

America is not the only country with a changing political climate. Other countries are also moving toward nationalism. In 2016, the United Kingdom held a referendum to decide whether or not to leave the European Union, a political and economic union among most of the major European nations.

The referendum, nicknamed Brexit, was supported by Britain's Conservative Party, specifically party leader Boris Johnson. Members were against the way the EU addressed Britain's financial situation and rising unemployment. They also opposed the EU's open borders policy, believing it contributed to unwanted immigration. Brexit was approved and, as a result, The Conservative Party took control of the parliament.

In France, the presidential election earlier this year featured conservative candidate Marine Le Pen. Though she lost, this was the first time in 15 years that a member of the National Front party was a major contender in a presidential election.

According to Politico, Germany's nationalist party is on the rise again as well. The party, known as Alternative for Deutschland (AfD), has gained traction among voters, especially young white males.

What all of these international movements have in common is an emphasis on anti-immigration and populist policies. They are also often led by figures that can be seen as political "outsiders" and largely supported by young people.

These young adults are often disillusioned with the current government or state of their country and often feel the best way to combat corruption within government is by taking down the establishment.

Stathis said she's concerned that politicians are too influenced by the money they receive from lobbyist groups rather than what citizens want.

"They don't do what's good for the people," she said. "They do what's good for their pocketbook."

Many young adults share Stathis' view on politicians. Negative public perception of career politicians was part of the appeal of outsider candidates, such as the now President Donald Trump and U.S. Sen. Bernie Sanders of Vermont, in the 2016 presidential election. Sanders expresses ideals that diverge from those of the traditional Democratic Party.

Throughout his campaign and during his term, Trump has talked about plans to "drain the swamp" of Washington insiders. But McCarroll said these campaign sound bites are precisely the reason people don't trust politicians.

"One of the reasons why people don't trust it as much is because there are very real issues, but the government process turns those issues into political talking points and bids for reelection and bickering and finger pointing rather than we've actually done something to fix the problem," McCarroll said. "Meanwhile, people suffer."

Since young people are less attached to democracy than earlier generations, some are considering alternatives. Many have even expressed interest in military or authoritarian rule.

McCarroll said that though military rule could be considered more expeditious, under this type of regime, people would realize the importance of a democratic system.

"I think in absence of democracy that people would definitely realize that they value it."

Contributing: Anna Post