

Introduce topic: Senate race has gone to new depths. Spratlys Island jet skiing trip by Otso Diretso, penis size comparisons between the president and Jim Paredes, shirt stripping by SAP Bong Go to prove he has no tattoos in his back, and not a member of a drug gang. We're no longer talking about the issues. It has gotten ugly really quickly.

We've forgotten what this election is meant to be about. As in every election we are meant to be discussing the key question: what should the role of government be in our lives?

Why does government exist? What is the role of government? And tied to that question is, what would be the ideal form of government?

One school of thought is government exists to provide law and order to society. Without government, society would simply descend into chaos, a dog-eat-dog world, the wild, wild West. In such a world, the ideal form of government would be an absolute dictatorship, where the state becomes the entity that guarantees everyone's safety. People surrender their freedoms to the state, in exchange for the protection it brings. For much of the medieval period all the way up to the Enlightenment in Europe, you had that. Absolute monarchs ruled by divine right, and they handed power down through their bloodline. People owed their fealty to the sovereign, and in exchange he protected them from bandits, raiders, and invaders.

Another school of thought contends that the role of the government is to guarantee the rights of its citizens. Everyone is born equal with the same inalienable, self-evident right to life, liberty and property. They are all endowed with reason, and the ability to determine what's best for them. In such a world, the government exists to ensure that the things that people own, what they work hard for, is not taken away arbitrarily by anyone without just compensation. The state exists to uphold property rights and enforce contracts. In such a world, the ideal form of government is one run by judges, backed up by police power that allows the courts to uphold their decisions. In England in the 13th century you had the magna carta which limited the rights of kings to govern with absolute authority, curbed by the rights of nobles who owned property. This eventually was the beginning of the rule of law, and the emergence of common law, where the benchmark for interpreting contracts was what a reasonable person who read them would take them to mean.

A third school of thought is that government exists to fulfill something called "the will of the people". And this is done in the "pursuit of happiness". It's not just the moneyed or propertied class whose rights are observed here. People within this society may choose to reorder the way things are done to enhance the sense of personal well-being experienced by a number of its citizens. Under such a set-up a representative democracy would be the ideal form of government to guarantee that people's will, their desires, are met.

Within such a society the "will of the people" would not be a stable thing though. At times, the wealthy and the middle class might opt to reduce the size and scope of government, to tax less and guarantee their material well-being. At other times the middle class may choose to side with the lower classes to tax the wealthy, offer basic services and expand their sense

of social cohesion. At other times, the poor and the rich may decide to tax the middle classes to provide tax cuts for the wealthy and socialised services for the working class.

Even with this inherent instability within representative democracy, if you go around the world, you will find that certain regions, or certain cultures tend to veer towards some consensus around the most appropriate settings.

In the English speaking world of Britain and its former colonies, you will find their societies tending towards limited government, the free market with some basic social safety nets. In the Confucian world of East Asia, there are very limited safety nets, a more paternalistic role for government and willingness to limit individual freedoms to achieve collective undertakings. In Scandinavia and Northern Europe, there tends to be a consensus towards a more egalitarian society that insures against the vagaries of the market through a “corporatist” model where the state, industry and society collaborate to achieve this.

When you go around and try measure the happiness of the people in these various regions, one thing you will find is that people who belong to Scandinavia and Northern Europe tend to be the happiest people on earth. This is true even though they might not be the most wealthy. Providing a good safety net, which includes guaranteed rights to free, good quality education and health services, as well as employment security, and income insurance, allows people the best chance to exercise personal freedom of choice in such societies. Incidentally, in Scandinavia and North Europe is where you find the least corrupt governments as well. People don't feel the need to amass huge wealth to be happy. There is a highly egalitarian society in these countries.

When you ask what form of government they have adopted in this region, you will find that they have all adopted a proportional, parliamentary form of government with a multiparty system. This is the format among representative democracies that ensures that voters' preferences are best reflected in the composition of their highest policy-making bodies.

In English speaking countries, a winner take all, first past the post system generally prevails that leads to a strong two party set-up. I say generally, but there are exceptions. Australia has adopted preferential voting with its lower house and proportional representation in the upper house. In New Zealand, they've adopted a mixed member parliament with first past the post voting for districts and proportional representation in their unicameral chamber.

In East Asia it's been mostly one party states up until very recently with two party systems emerging in South Korea, Taiwan, and Japan. China, Singapore, Cambodia, Vietnam and Laos are still one party states. Latin America tends to be presidential and proportional in its voting. Latin America also tends to swing between democracy and dictatorships with presidents tending to acquire more executive power, unchecked by parliament or the courts. They tend to have rightist and leftist dictators. Corruption tends to be high and rule of law weak. Wealth tends to be concentrated at the top of the social ladder, and people are generally not free to make choices of their own accord due to poor circumstances. They therefore cling to politicians who can offer them a better life through patronage and redistribution.

In our last episode, we looked at the senate race of 2019, and saw how much of it was driven by personality and not principles. We said that a general trend in all senate races since 1987 was the popularity contest that it has become. This is evidenced by the growing number of celebrities or celebrity-related candidates that are present in the senate.

So how do we make our senate race more representative, instead of mimicking an episode of Celebrity Apprentice?

One way is by adopting some form of proportional voting for the senate. There are many forms of PR. One system is the party list, which we are already familiar with, where there is a minimum threshold of votes that a party must get to win a seat. Parties then nominate who from their slate will have first dibs at any seats allocated to them.

So if you want to be more surgical and less disrupted, simply changing the voting rules for the senate through proportional representation would be incremental, but could, as I have said have profound consequences, because it reshapes incentives of potential senatorial candidates. Under our present constitution, you can shift to a PR system in the senate through an enabling law. You wouldn't need to change the constitution. Art. 6 Sec 2 says

The Senate shall be composed of twenty-four Senators who shall be elected at large by the qualified voters of the Philippines, as may be provided by law

It doesn't say how they should be elected, it just says "as may be provided by law".

When you combine these electoral reforms with campaign finance laws that provide state funding to political parties based on the proportion of votes they hold or votes they have gained, free and equal access to airtime on public radio and television, bigger discounts to corporate media, and limit the amount and sources of campaign funding candidates are allowed to receive, you necessarily prevent the kind of elite capture or rigging of the system to favor large donors, corporate lobbyists and make elections more expressive of the people's will.

Greater party loyalty and discipline would be the product, and it becomes less of a popularity contest, and could be more about platforms. Is it guaranteed to happen if we make these changes? No, but we have to do something, or try something new. Doing the same thing over and over again, hoping the result to be different, for some change to occur naturally, or miraculously, is by definition a form of insanity.

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Send me comments and questions through any of these platforms. I'm happy to respond in subsequent episodes. Well, thanks for your listening. I'm Doy Santos. See you next time on another edition of The Cusp!