

# Martin Henry | Democracy in distress

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April 29, 2018



"Democracy **2016-2017 LAPOP Report** opens up in its introduction, "  
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Has democracy been oversold, and are its problems terminal?

Democracy viewed as periodically voting with universal adult suffrage for competing political parties to form the government is a relatively new experiment in governance. And it is inherently unstable. Unsuitable for certain kinds of societies and cultures, certainly those low on personal self-discipline, self-governance, strong ethical ideals, and a spirit of compromise and collaboration for a larger public interest. Unable to deliver on its promises against escalating expectations.

"The 2016-2017 AmericasBarometer taps into this simmering frustration" with this form of government that is supposedly "better than any other form of government".

pure democracy but a republic with carefully limited, or guided, democracy. And Plato dissected the dangers of ancient Greek-style democracy in his **Republic**, written 2,380 years ago.

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Model of the risks of a republic by Plato, one of the first to



different.

Democracy, as we have come to see, is mired in exactly a short-term view of government for the electoral cycle and the overwhelming pressure on competing political parties to win elections.

## Pure Democracy

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Madison argued that a 'pure democracy', by which he meant a direct participatory system of government, could find no cure "for the mischiefs of faction". He instead proposed a republic with representatives of the people elected for their wisdom, patriotism and love of justice and from diverse interests and in large enough numbers to be "proper guardians of the public weal".

Clearly, Madison did not envisage the ganging up of citizens as a party to capture elections.

He argues a point that resonates well with me. Small republics should have a disproportionately large number of representatives "in order to guard against the cabals of a few". We should increase the size of our House of Representatives to 90, with one representative for each bloc of 20,000 or 30,000 electors. And we should add a bloc of six 'independent' senators, taking the total to 27.

Madison proposed for the United States a large federal republic with a diversity of interests holding each other in check and balance. He did not conceive the federal government dominating, overriding, suppressing, and 'harmonising' state government. Nor would he have conceived what Walter Molano can see so clearly in hindsight now: factions, special-interest groups can be readily built across large republics using the tools of modern technology. And all that's needed to capture state power is 50 per cent of the votes, plus one.

## The solution

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Madison's "solution to the problem", Walter Molano sums up in his 'Back to the classics' column, was to create a sufficiently large republic with a multitude of factions competing against each other, such that none would gain the upper hand. So what happened? The symptoms are easy to see, but the causes are not so evident, Molano suggests.

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