

Do Our People's Republics Work?

By Kenneth Janda

The American states are divided into East-West blocs according to how they practice democracy. Citizens living in most Eastern Bloc states (east of the Mississippi River) are perplexed over politics



Kenneth Janda is an emeritus professor of political science at Northwestern University.

under way in the People's Republic of California, the leading state in the Western Bloc. Californians are scheduled to vote Oct. 7 whether to recall (remove from office) Gray Davis, whom they duly re-elected governor only this past November.

Bewildered New Yorkers question the democratic character of a "recall" election. They live in the Eastern Bloc where few state constitutions provide for this mechanism of popular participation in government. How come Californians can recall state officials and New Yorkers can't?

The belief that ordinary citizens should participate directly in government was the hallmark of "progressivism," a reform philosophy that marked an era of American politics about 1900-1925. Progressives backed "recall" — a special election initiated by a petition signed by a specified number of voters — to remove corrupt government officials. Recall now exists in some 18 states.

In truth, progressives championed the recall election less fervently than two other mechanisms for popular participation — the initiative and referendum. Through the initiative, voters can propose a law to be decided by the legislature or by the people in a referendum — a direct vote on the measure. About 24 states have one or both, initiative and referendum.

These three mechanisms of direct democracy — referendum, initiative and recall — were largely absent from state constitutions before 1900. This means that they were largely absent from states in the Eastern Bloc, whose constitutions predated the progressive era.

A map of the continental United States shows that all three mechanisms operate in nine states west of the Mississippi but in only one — Michigan — in the Eastern Bloc. Conversely, 14 states in the Eastern Bloc, including New York, use neither referendum, nor initiative nor recall. In the Western Bloc, only Minnesota, Iowa and Texas (all admitted into the Union before 1850) lack all three mechanisms.

Easterners might wonder whether this is another reason to envy the Californian lifestyle. Do Westerners enjoy living, more democracy and better government?

They may enjoy better living and perhaps more democracy, but they don't necessarily enjoy better government.

Democracy is not like money, a good to be maximized. Let's assume that having some money is good, having more money is better and having the most money is best. It's not similarly true that maximizing democracy is "best" in the sense of maximizing the quality of government.

We need not here inquire into how a mobilized public affects the quality of government. Let's just reflect on how well the U.S. Constitution has served our government for over 200 years and then realize that the Constitution was designed to check rule by popular majorities. Indeed, many scholars will argue that an unelected Supreme Court often protected democracy itself by opposing the actions of a popularly elected Congress and president.

At another level, consider your neighbor across the street. How well does he or she follow public affairs?

How much does your neighbor know about how government operates? Would you trust your neighbors — and, by extension, voters in your state — to initiate legislation or routinely make government policy by voting on propositions put before them in general elections?



Martin Kozlowski

In about half the states (most in the Western Bloc) voters routinely make public policy at the polls. In 2002, California voters decided on seven pieces of legislation; voters in

See GOVERNMENT on A29

GOVERNMENT from A27

Arizona and New Mexico decided on 14 each. In fact, a multimillion-dollar industry has grown around campaigns for state referenda. It's debatable, however, whether the laws passed so expensively have improved state governments.

What about recall elections? Isn't it good to throw out the rascals early? For lack of experience, we really don't know. Although those 18 states provide for recall of state officials, only a handful have ever been recalled.

In only one instance (North Dakota, 1921) was a governor recalled. Although recall has been available in California for 92 years, the current attempt to recall Davis, a Democrat, will result in the state's first recall election for any statewide official. It's a populist device that has not proved popular.

Concerning the California recall election's impact

on government, we know these things: (1) By law, the recall petition can make no charge against Davis, but political mismanagement, not corruption, seems to be its basis. (2) The recall election will cost at least \$30 million in a state with a massive deficit. (3) It cost more than \$2 million to collect the 1.3 million signatures on the petition, with Republican Rep. Darrell Issa (who intends to run in the recall) reportedly contributing \$1.6 million.

Clearly, having citizens revote on the performance of their governor after one year is consistent with the majoritarian view of democracy in the Western Bloc. The alternative view in the Eastern Bloc is based more on representative government, which relies on regularly scheduled elections to produce an orderly transfer of power — removing truly corrupt officials by impeachment.

So east-is-east and west-is-west. Are you happy where you are?