



*„These disagreements, about the role of government in our lives, about our national priorities and our national security, they’ve been taking place for over 200 years. They’re the very essence of our democracy. But what frustrates the American people is a Washington where every day is Election Day.“*

*Barack Obama, State of the Union Address, January 27, 2010*

In his recent address to both parties of the Congress, President Obama brings up a painful subject: How to practice democracy within a context of entrenched interest groups, citizens longing for harmony and tax reduction, and deep political differences, “masqueraded philosophical” on issues like health benefit packages. A continued dialogue only, on all the divers issues in disagreement might be a way to follow in democratic systems. Is this idealistic idea naïve? How much of education, basic knowledge and understanding is needed to match the request for a political dialogue. How much of mental independence, courage and civil disobedience is needed to interfere with the political administration; how much of time has to be granted by employers, families and friends to allow the individual to act as a responsible citizen? And finally will those framework conditions really politically enable the individual citizen?

Those questions will be tackled in the upcoming Engelberg conference on “Challenging Democracy.” There will be three, but not necessarily separated topics on.

## **1<sup>st</sup> Science and Democracy**

Recent scientific innovations in genomics, nuclear technology, and, more recently, nanotechnologies are challenging democratic institutions in heterogeneous ways. The need to prevent negative environmental, health, and social impacts raises questions about how emerging risk technologies should be handled and regulated in democratic societies, and about if and how lay citizens are able to make decisions about complex scientific issues. At the same time, the role of scientific expertise in policy-making has become more important, however, what is considered legitimate expert knowledge is often debated. Societal controversies have, for example, arisen over antagonistic expert studies in agricultural biotechnology during the past three decades.



## **2<sup>nd</sup> Freedom of Choice**

The functioning of democratic institutions rests on the citizen's ability to make sensible decisions. However, individual incentives to acquire and process information are low given the negligible probability that one's vote is pivotal. Besides the problem of rational ignorance, a large psychological literature shows that humans have limited cognitive abilities and are prone to a large variety of biases in judgments and decision making. At the same time, modern democracies face increasingly complex socio-economic issues.

## **3<sup>rd</sup> The Future of Democracy in a globalized World**

In contrast to the optimism of the early 1990s, when some observers heralded an "end of history" that would definitely seal the victory of liberal democracy across the world, a realistic assessment of the state of democracy nowadays must admit that democratic regimes are faced with numerous challenges: Globalization, internationalization and Europeanization have undermined the problem-solving capacities of established democracies. Governments no longer have the degree of control that they once had, and their decisions are increasingly affected by decisions taken elsewhere. At the same time, international institutions to which political authority is increasingly transferred lack democratic legitimacy. Furthermore, attempts to democratize unstable countries and regions have proven to be more difficult than expected.

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