Issues & Ideas

A robust democracy

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American Myths, a five-part series aimed at addressing Canadian misapprehensions about our southern neighbour, is a joint project of the National Post, the **Dominion Institute** and the Canadian Defence and Foreign Affairs Institute. In this fourth instalment, Andrew Coyne rebuts those Canadian critics who contend that American democracy is fatally compromised by money, partisanship and shrill sloganeering.

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Among the many things Canadians think they know about their neighbours to the south is that their politics are a disgrace. "American-style" is almost invariably a curse-word in this country, and never more so than when it comes to the theory and practice of democracy. How often have our political parties accused each other of launching "American-style attack ads"? How many times have we been warned that this or that reform will "Americanize" our institutions of government?

To be sure, there remains some uncertainty as to the precise nature of the Americans' inferiority. Is the problem with the United States that it is not democratic enough, or that it is altogether too democratic?

On the one hand, we all know the many ways in which American democracy falls short of the ideal: the overwhelming influence of big money, and the associated opportunities for conflict of interest (Halliburton and all that); the facade of competition between two parties that have very little actual differences, while behind the scenes a few rich families pull all the strings; and all summed up in the fact that fewer and fewer Americans bother to vote.

On the other hand, well, isn't there something about American politics that's just a bit ... common? More than common: unspeakably vulgar. The lack of civility in political discourse, the angry rhetoric, the deep divisions, so unlike our own peaceable kingdom. Doesn't everyone shudder at the prospect of another "circus-like" confirmation hearing for a Supreme Court judge? And what about all those referendums? Imagine: letting average voters decide things. Thank goodness that sort of thing never happens here, where every issue has already been decided.

Finally, as our Ambassador to Washington, Frank McKenna, has lately been undiplomatic enough to point out, the U.S. Congress has become "dysfunctional," hamstrung by partisan wrangling, obsessed with regional issues at the expense of a national vision, unable to look past the next election. The contrast with our own Parliament is stunning.

So: oligarchic kleptocracy, or partisan tractor-pull? No matter. Just so long as it serves as a horrifying example.

Except that almost none of it is true. Well, there's some truth in these stereotypes: There usually is. But whatever the failings of "American-style" politics, they are (a) not nearly as bad as Canadians think; and (b) not necessarily worse than our own. There is as much we could learn from the Americans as teach them, and the starting point is an accurate understanding of how their system really works.

Does money talk in American politics? You bet: the same as in most democracies. The difference is that in the United States, they've tried to do something about it. Canada recently passed legislation to ban most corporate and union donations to political parties (federal parties, at any rate: In most provinces it's still legal). Congratulations: The Americans have had similar legislation on the books since 1907.

To be sure, the parties have found and exploited loopholes over the years: hence the proliferation of political action committees (PACs) and "soft money" donations. But reformers have been just as active. The post-Watergate reforms of the 1970s limited individual donors to US$2,000. The recent McCain-Feingold bill cut that to US$1,000 -- roughly one-quarter of the current Canadian limit. Contrast that with Canada, where until very recently it was permissible for any person, corporation or union to donate any amount they liked, with only the loosest requirements for disclosure.

Conflict of interest? Though much has been made of Dick Cheney's Halliburton connections, the fact is that he owns no shares in the company. He can't: Under American law, members of cabinet must divest themselves of all their shareholdings. Not place them in a "blind" trust, as in Canada, or pass them off to family members: They have to be sold at fair market value, and to buyers with whom they are at "arm's length."

And while no system is immune to abuse, the institutional mechanisms for holding public officials to account in the U.S. are far more powerful than our own. The "special prosecutor," protected by statute from political interference, has no counterpart here. Even a judicial inquiry can be shut down at the government's whim, as we learned in the Somalia affair. Other putative checks and balances are compromised by the prime minister's vast powers of appointment.

This bears some emphasis. It used to be said that a Watergate couldn't happen here: that a prime minister who was found to have done the sort of things that Richard Nixon did would be gone within days, depending as he does on the confidence of the House. After the many scandals of recent years, that can no longer be said with certainty. Compare the congressional committees, with their aggressive questioning and powers of subpoena, that strike such fear into an American administration -- think of the Iran-contra hearings, or the multiple committees looking into the abuses at Abu Ghraib -- to the wretched efforts of the Public Accounts committee to get to the bottom of Adscam before the Prime Minister, invoking yet another of his extraordinary powers, called the last election.

And while we're talking of oligarchies: Suppose that the last three presidents of the United States, of either party, had all been from the same state, and had all once been on the payroll of the same reclusive billionaire; that one owed his considerable fortune to this connection, that another's daughter had married into the family. Would we not take this as confirmation of the dominance of the moneyed class in American life? Yet that is a description (the Kim Campbell blip aside) of our recent history, not theirs.

Oh, and that abysmal American turnout: scraping 50% in recent presidential elections? Dig out our own numbers, and put them on the same basis -- as a percentage of the voting age population, rather than (as here) as a percentage of those registered to vote. It's much the same. Declining voter turnout is an affliction common to most modern democracies. And while some might see little to distinguish the Republicans from the Democrats, for sheer monotonous sameness there is nothing to compare to the almost unbroken century-long reign of the Liberal Party of Canada.

In fact, there are real differences between Republicans and Democrats: over Iraq, over social security, over taxes and health care and any number of other issues. They appear alike only through the same distorting lens that sees a vast gulf that separates Americans' attitudes from Canadians': that is, from the perspective of the Canadian left. Canadians are neither so liberal, nor Americans so conservative, as their respective caricatures would suggest. It's just that in the United States the actual divisions that exist within any society are allowed to play out, whereas here they are suppressed. Opinion on gay marriage, for example, often cited as a point of distinction between the two countries, divides very nearly on the same lines in both, especially if the two outliers -- Quebec and the South -- are left out.

Is that the real problem, then? That there's too much democracy in America -- that personal attacks and unvarnished opinions flourish, while civilized debate languishes? There's no doubt that American political campaigns have a certain, um, robustness, and certainly American talk radio

regularly tests the limits of free speech. But let's not overstate things. Harsh as "American-style" campaigns may be, no American candidate for president has ever campaigned, as the Liberals did in 1988, on the theme that "my opponent is in league with foreign interests to sell out the country." Nor is there anything to compare to the sort of free-for-all our televised debates have become, with every candidate shouting over the other. For heaven's sake, Al Gore lost points for sighing too loudly.

In the most basic and literal sense, however, it is true that America is a more democratic society than ours -- for good or ill. A much wider array of offices are open to election, including sherriffs and judges in some states, with more institutions of government to elect them to, given the separation of executive and legislative branches and the prevalence of bicameral legislatures. (Fun fact: there are more elected officials than bank tellers in the U.S.) Politics is a more pervasive part of life in some ways: You are expected to register as a Democrat or Republican, for example, and vote in organized party primaries, rather than the kind of fevered buying and selling of memberships that decides nomination races in this country. The whole of the House of Representatives, and a third of the Senate, are elected every two years; presidential election campaigns, it seems, now overlap, the next beginning before the last has finished. And yes, there are all those referendums: hundreds of them, every election cycle.

But what's wrong with that? Referendums are hardly unknown in this country, and there is persuasive evidence that they make for better government, resolving divisive issues in ways that are accepted on all sides as fair and providing an important check on the pretensions of legislators. The American legislative process, likewise, may be cumbersome and time-consuming, but much more of it is done out in the open, and there are more opportunities for public input. It may take, for example, nine months or more to pass a budget through both houses of Congress. But are we so sure of the superiority of doing things the Canadian way: with a lockup, a speech, and a few days of perfunctory debate? Congressmen may have more power to buck the party line, even to trade their votes. But do we really prefer the rows of trained seals that Parliament has become?

Much of the popular revulsion so easily aroused against any proposal to "Americanize" our system is based, not just on sweeping generalizations about the American system (Supreme Court confirmation hearings, for example, are rarely the sort of "circus" we are warned against) or ignorance of our own (the behind-the-scenes machinations that accompany Supreme Court appointments in this country mean our system is just as "politicized," in its own way), but on an instinctive attachment to the status quo.

Just because something is the case now does not mean it must always be -- or that it always was. Perhaps the biggest myth about American democracy is that it is indeed "American-style": that their commitment to it is unique, reflecting some innate difference between us and them. But it was not ever thus. The historian Christopher Moore, in 1867: How the Fathers Made a Deal, argues that Confederation-era Canada was one of the most democratic societies on earth. Upper Canada, certainly, had much the same grassroots, town-hall ethos as the New England states, and for much the same reason: an economy based on small, roughly equal landholdings.

This tradition died slowly. Until almost the Second World War, for example, it was the convention that appointees to Cabinet had to resign their seats and run in a by-election, their role having changed from that of watchdog on the executive (even as members of the governing party) to members of it. What a long way we have come.

American Myths;ac@andrewcoyne.com; Tonight: Watch the American Myths TV series exclusively on Canadian Learning Television, 10:30 p.m. EST.; Tomorrow: Robert Fulford deconstructs the Canadian cult of anti-Americanism

Black & White Photo: Brad Loper, Dallas Morning News / George Bush waves to the crowd at the 2004 Republican National Convention in New York on Sept. 2, 2004.