DIRECT DEMOCRACY

More and more I hear Hoosiers who believe that the answer to problems with the democratic process in this country is to let the people directly make some policy decisions. They are interested in proposals to create electronic town meetings where voters could use advanced technology to register their views on a given issue directly. They like the idea of holding nationwide referenda on issues like tax increases or reform of Social Security.

About half of the states in the U.S. use the referendum, which is a vote by all of the people on a particular proposal. Though state laws vary, this process typically requires garnering the signatures of a certain number of registered voters in support of placing a proposition on the ballot. Indiana law does not provide a way for citizens to put issues directly on the ballot, though citizens do vote on amendments to the Indiana Constitution once they are approved by the General Assembly. The U.S. Constitution does not provide for use of the referendum at the national level.

Proponents of direct democracy note that the information gap between ordinary people and their elected representatives is far narrower now than centuries ago. Thanks to television, radio, instant polling, the Internet, and fax machines, news travels widely and instantaneously. Voters are informed, and they want a part of the action.

POSSIBLE DRAWBACKS

The hope behind direct democracy is that American civic life will be re-energized as voters become more involved. But direct democracy does present problems. First, it sometimes omits time to absorb information and exchange views. While the legislative process doesn't often work quickly, it is designed to allow extensive deliberation.

Second, while direct democracy seeks to make an end run around powerful special interests, this is not easily accomplished. Interest groups simply shift their lobbying focus from politicians to the people. In California, where ballot initiatives are perhaps most prolific, millions of dollars are spent on sophisticated, sometimes misleading, advertising campaigns.

Third, direct democracy could sometimes slight the rights and views of racial, religious, or other types of minorities. Our Founding Fathers warned of the ''tyranny of the majority,'' and expanding direct democracy would probably put more responsibility on the courts to ensure that fundamental constitutional guarantees were preserved.

Fourth, direct democracy places more responsibility on voters. They must move beyond educating themselves about candidates for office to learning about specific issues in some depth.

THE DEMOCRATIC PROCESS

The democratic process does not invariably get us to the right policy, but when citizens talk and deliberate with one another in a spirit of mutual respect, it yields impressive results. Not every issue can be resolved through the democratic process, but even with the tough issues it does permit us to live with disagreement and to move on. When everyone's claim is considered on its merits rather than on the basis of power, status, or wealth, the decisions made will likely lead to better public policy.

The lifeblood of democracy is citizen participation. As people participate in the institutions of civic life—whether schools, churches or community organizations—they are drawn out of their own private interests, they reject cynicism, and begin to think about what is good for their community and country. It is important not to think of direct democracy as a substitute for existing means of participation in the political process, and we should work to increase voter turnout. Direct democracy has its risks, but so does the view that government is inaccessible, unresponsive and unworkable.

I treasure America's unique system of representative democracy, but I also think we need to keep searching for ways to strengthen our democracy by finding better ways to give all Americans a sense that they have a stake in the process. My guess is that with the rapid advances in telecommunications technology and the dissatisfaction many persons now feel with the political process, we will see a demand for more direct democracy and broader citizen participation. It may be that a good dose of direct democracy, carefully administered and selectively used, is just what we need to reinvigorate our democracy.

INTRODUCTION OF HOUSE RESOLUTION EXPRESSING SENSE OF CONGRESS REGARDING GREENHOUSE GASES

HON. DON YOUNG

OF ALASKA

IN THE HOUSE OF REPRESENTATIVES

Wednesday, September 10, 1997

Mr. YOUNG of Alaska. Mr. Speaker, I rise today to introduce a resolution along with Speaker GINGRICH, Mrs. CHENOWETH, chairman of the House Resources Subcommittee on Forests and Forest Health, Mr. TAYLOR of North Carolina, Mr. HERGER, and Mr. PETERSON of Pennsylvania, Mr. POMBO, Mr. MCINNIS, Mr. SESSIONS Mrs. SMITH of Washington, Mr. RIGGS, Mr. CUNNINGHAM, Mrs. CUBIN Mr. NETHERCUTT, Mr. DOOLITTLE Mr. LEWIS of California, Mr. SKEEN, Mr. SCHAFFER of Colorado, Mr. HANSEN, and Mr. RADANOVICH expressing the sense of Congress that the United States should manage its public domain national forests to maximize the reduction of carbon dioxide in the atmosphere.

Global warming has been an issue of great debate and discussion in Congress. Whether you believe human induced global climate change is occurring or not, this resolution deserves the support of everyone.

Science has proven to us that carbon dioxide, the leading greenhouse gas can be taken out of the atmosphere by allowing a young vibrant forest to absorb carbon through photosynthesis. It is stored as wood.

Carbon dioxide can also be kept out of the atmosphere by harvesting the forest before it begins to decompose or burn, thus storing the carbon in wood products that are environmentally friendly, as well as providing an economic benefit to society.

In December of this year, the U.N. Framework Convention on Climate Change, which may commit to the United States to mandatory greenhouse gas reductions, is expected to be signed in Kyoto, Japan. The ramifications of this treaty could be enormous for people, the economy, and our way of life.

The key issue is whether the Clinton-GORE administration will commit the United States to mandatory reductions of carbon dioxide. Mandatory reductions mean it will cost you $8 more each time you fill your gas tank. Mandatory reductions mean your home heating bill will increase by 50 percent. Mandatory reductions will cost taxpayers millions of dollars and will cost many Americans their jobs.

There are alternatives to mandatory reductions of carbon emissions. One alternative is to manage our public forests better in order to extract from the atmosphere and store more carbon dioxide than we currently do. This means using the controls on greenhouse gasses that mother nature gives to us rather than control that Government mandates us to follow.

With this resolution, we send a message to the Clinton-GORE administration. Use mother nature's way of cleaning the atmosphere. Manage our forests to improve the environment. Don't simply impose still more Government controls on our lives.

We must send a message to the Clinton-GORE administration that the Federal Government itself should take the lead in taking steps to reduce the levels of carbon dioxide in the atmosphere. By managing our public domain national forests to minimize additions of carbon dioxide to the atmosphere we will improve our air quality, the health of our Nation's forests and set an example for other nations' as the world prepares for the negotiations in Kyoto, Japan.

CELEBRATING THE 50TH ANNIVERSARY OF INDIA'S INDEPENDENCE

HON. RON KLINK

OF PENNSYLVANIA

IN THE HOUSE OF REPRESENTATIVES

Wednesday, September 10, 1997

Mr. KLINK. Mr. Speaker, I rise to celebrate the 50th anniversary of India's independence. On August 15, 1997, India, the world's largest democracy celebrated 50 years of freedom from British rule. Today, Indian emigrants share their culture, diversity, religions, and languages with people throughout the United States. Last week on the floor of this House of Representatives, some Members attempted to perform a great disservice to the proud and distinguished Indian people who have worked so hard to instill democracy in their country.

Mr. Speaker, the road to democracy in India has not been an easy one to navigate. India's first 50 years of independence have been filled with numerous challenges to the nation's sovereignty. Lest I remind those in this Chamber of the tumultuous first century which the Founders of this great Nation endured. But to penalize this country by limiting developmental assistance funding would be an act of ignorance that not even this body could endorse.

India exhibits all of the internal problems that any country of 1 billion people would face. Yes, there is violent crime, yes, there are acts of terrorism, and yes, there is racial violence. But we also have these same problems in our country. Financial punishment of India would be tantamount to the imposition of the death sentence to the millions of children who rely on our assistance to survive.

United States-India relations are strong. India has been able to maintain the democratic principles they were founded on in the face of great diversity. India is a country we should applaud, not condemn. Recently, the Commerce Department designated India as one of the United States' most important trading partners and India's largest investor. I am pleased the House unaminously rejected this most recent attack on India and urge my colleagues to continue to support democracy in this great country.