

Opinion: We all should leave the country post-election

By Joe Mathews

Now that the election is over, are you leaving the country? If not, you should reconsider.

Before the election, only a few prominent Californians—from Samuel L. Jackson to Miley Cyrus —pledged to depart the U.S. to express their disgust with the election. And they're still here. But I do know one non-celebrity Californian who is taking his frustrations with American-style democracy to Europe this weekend: yours truly.



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This is not my first such journey. Every couple of years for the past decade, I've helped bring together scholars, journalists, activists, election administrators and politicians who work on participatory democracy, including the initiative and referendum processes for which California is well known. Each gathering is in a different country—South Korea, Uruguay, Tunisia, Switzerland (and even San Francisco). This time our destination is San Sebastián, in Spain's Basque country, which has embraced participatory democracy after years of dictatorship and violence.

I don't particularly enjoy long-distance travel or organizing the events, which requires dealing by Skype at odd hours with

prickly foreign professors or officials.

But I do it because by listening to people from around the world explain their challenges I get a much clearer idea of what's wrong with our version of democracy, and how we might improve it.

I wish every Californian would do the same—travel outside the country to grasp how other places make democratic decisions, so that we might better comprehend ourselves. Goodness knows that such understanding is lacking; surveys show big majorities of Californians know little about the basic functions of their state and local governments.

Unfortunately, too many people here consider the very idea of looking for answers overseas as daft, even preposterous. I'm accustomed to watching California audiences tune out when I give talks describing how other countries do initiatives or elections or budgeting better than we do. Singer-songwriter Sheryl Crow has been mocked for circulating a petition to limit the poison of endless electoral politics and adopt a shorter election cycle, like those of Canada and Great Britain.

The resistance to foreign ideas is especially strong in Sacramento, where political staffers heap ridicule on those who make such suggestions (I speak from personal experience). Heaven help elected officials who dare go overseas to learn more about democracy—they are likely to be pilloried for taking an expensive “junket.”

I find this cynicism dispiriting—and surprising. Californians can be among the most open people in the world when it comes to embracing entertainment or technologies from around the world. But we have the opposite attitude when it comes to democracy and governance. We are convinced that our system is so singularly distinctive that the world has little to say to us.

It's hard to overstate just how wrong we are. Almost nothing in California government is a native invention. We borrowed our two-house legislative system from our British colonial masters, plagiarized our first constitution from Iowans and New Yorkers, took our top-two-runoff election system from the French-speaking world, and established our direct democracy system on the Swiss model.

Our reluctance to look overseas for fixes for our many democratic problems makes little sense in the aftermath of this election. Nearly every democratic institution in this country—the presidency, Congress, law enforcement, state election officials, the media—has lost credibility in 2016. In California, our first open U.S. Senate seat in a generation produced a desultory race, and we turned direct democracy into a bludgeon, littering ballots with 17 complicated and confusing statewide initiatives.

Despite widespread disillusionment with aspects of our democracy, there are few big ideas being advanced for reform. We're not looking far and wide enough for them, and so our insularity embitters us. As Mark Twain famously noted in "The Innocents Abroad", "Travel is fatal to prejudice, bigotry, and narrow-mindedness, and many of our people need it sorely on these accounts."

In San Sebastián, I'm looking forward to learning more from the world: about how Germans support grassroots groups that bring ideas to the ballot, how Tunisians are creating a new system of local government, how the cities of Seoul and Vienna have found smarter ways to engage citizens in local questions.

I wish I could transport a plane full of local and state officials overseas with me, so they could learn firsthand from their counterparts elsewhere, the way American businesspeople and scholars seem more comfortable doing.

"If I cannot add to my own level of understanding, I could ill afford to try to raise that of others," said the Basque

country's own Saint Ignatius Loyola. In these times of great anxiety and little understanding, leaving the country might be the most patriotic thing you could do.

Joe Mathews writes the Connecting California column for Zócalo Public Square.