

## PROCEDURAL PRECURSORS

## Will the Real Populists Please Stand Up—or Perhaps Sit Down and Chill

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*Populism on the Right has been facilitated by the Left's obsession with participatory democracy.*

**D**onald Trump is riding a wave of conservative populist anger that he did not create but is masterfully manipulating. Historically, populist movements have come chiefly from the left and focused primarily on economic grievances. But as recent events attest, populism also has conservative variants, which may reflect economic grievances but social and cultural anxieties as well.

*Since the emergence of the Tea Party and then the rise of Trump, populism has been broadly de-legitimated on the left and among those still referring to themselves as liberals. Yet as the now almost forgotten Occupy Wall Street movement suggests, populism remains potent on the left, though it now goes by different labels—"liberal populism" is one; even "democratic socialism" gets invoked. But the most frequent is "progressivism," which is surprising in light of turn-of-the-century Progressives' hostility to populism.*

*Out of this morass of casually invoked labels there remains a persistent strain of what I refer to as "procedural populism," which argues for abolition of the Electoral College, ending the filibuster in Congress, and generally eliminating all barriers to voting and taking proactive measures to get individuals registered on the voter rolls. Such proposals can be traced back to notions of "participatory democracy" advanced by the New Left in the 1960s. In this sense, populist impulses have once again become part of a broadly defined Left agenda.*

*Such participatory reforms have since the 1960s been widely implemented and remade our political institutions—for the worse. Indeed, the continuing reforms of our political parties have made the ascendance of a total amateur and outsider like Trump possible. Despite that outcome, procedural populists push for more and more direct democracy.*

*The result will be ever weaker parties dominated by elites that refuse to identify as such; increasingly technologically sophisticated and professionalized campaign machinery that will require ever greater infusions of cash; and even greater removal of politics from the daily concerns of ordinary voters. The prime beneficiary of these developments will be the media, which is already drunk with its power and influence. Meanwhile, the only antidote on offer is a politics of selfless, civic-minded engagement that is based on unrealistic notions of disinterested political actors motivated by grandiose notions of an ill-defined "public interest."*

*The outcome will be more sullen anger and alienation among the mass of ordinary Americans whose only champion appears to be Donald Trump, our Fifth Avenue populist.*

***The following is Part One of a two-part exploration of contemporary populism***

The populist wave roiling politics in America and other western societies should be of concern to all those committed to liberal democracy. Yet some conservatives have accommodated themselves to this angry current and earnestly regard themselves as defending “the people,” however belatedly, against the blatant and entrenched arrogance of globalist elites. Other conservatives are simply unwilling to challenge the apparently unstoppable tsunami that Donald Trump has succeeded in not merely surfing but stoking. Still others are opportunistically trading in the venom and vituperation that now pervade our public life.

Despite such accommodation, it is hard to exaggerate the improbability of this vain, vulgar, irreligious, rapacious, and ill-informed individual emerging as the tribune of millions of decent Americans, who feel economically threatened as well as socially and culturally marginalized and disrespected by their “betters.” Throughout his long and tawdry career Trump has proven to be not merely a sharp dealer and a cheat, but a narcissistic liar and miscreant. And given the intensity and rawness of the emotions he trades on, it is not inconceivable that Trump could eventually be devoured by his own supporters.

But if conservatives are guilty of opportunism, progressives are well-nigh blinded by their rage at Trump and all those who support or even tolerate him. To be sure, concerns and fears about his willingness to traffic in offensive sexual, religious, ethnic, and racial tropes—not to mention his affinity for autocrats—are not without foundation. But progressives’ fury at Trump and his *right-wing* populist supporters has grown so intense, it has become easy to overlook that progressives and their liberal allies have often tolerated and even embraced angry *left-wing* populism.

The short-lived Occupy Wall Street movement—“We Are the 99%”—is a recent, if now frequently overlooked, example. Much less recent is the affinity that contemporary progressives and their allies further to the Left have expressed with the agrarian populists who revolted against Eastern banking and industrial interests in the closing decades of the 19<sup>th</sup> century. During the political and intellectual upheavals of the 1960s, youthful historians on the Left began challenging their consensus-oriented elders who dismissed these populists as backward-looking, small-time agricultural entrepreneurs obstructing the development of a dynamic capitalist economy—and as anti-urban, anti-modern bigots and anti-Semites. As Princeton historian Eric Goldman depicted them in the early 1950s: “Populists thought of themselves as engaged in a work of restoration, a restoration of the good old days, when, as they liked to believe, there was open competition and plenty of opportunity for everyone.” Not coincidentally, the postwar New Left’s accommodation to 19<sup>th</sup>-century populism reflected its contemporaneous political sympathies, especially with the civil rights and antiwar movements but also the emergent black power, feminist, and environmental movements. Yet in short order, liberal as well as leftist Democrats were also presenting themselves to disgruntled “middle Americans” as populists.

Today, the sustained visibility and strength of the populist Right, not to mention Trump’s increasingly outrageous pandering to it, has rendered populism of *any* political stripe suspect—and encouraged contemporary progressives to side-step this complicated history. They have also been too preoccupied responding to their adversaries to reflect on the origins of their populist sympathies. Neither do

Progressives—tended to regard populists as reactionaries. Yet this conveniently neglected history has significant bearing on our current situation, particularly when contemporary progressives focus not just on substantive issues but on procedural and structural reforms intended to open up institutions and make them more democratic—that is, more responsive to popular opinion.

An example of such “procedural populism” is the recent successful efforts of progressives in the Democratic Party to weaken the role of “superdelegates,” typically party insiders and elected officials serving as *ex officio* delegates, at the upcoming presidential nominating convention. Another is the numerous calls to reform or simply abolish the Electoral College. Both bear the imprint of notions of “empowerment” and what the New Left called “participatory democracy.” In this same vein are recurrent efforts not merely to eliminate unfair or discriminatory barriers to the ballot box, but to significantly reduce the inconveniences and “costs” associated with voting by means of measures such as early voting, expanded use of absentee ballots, same-day as well as automatic voter registration (when obtaining or renewing a driver’s license, for example), and even pre-registration for 16- and 17-year-olds.

Such contemporary proposals reflect that little noted but significant shift in the Left’s approach to populism which occurred during the tumultuous 1960s. As Michael Kazin, Georgetown historian and editor of *Dissent*, has noted, “the New Left’s distrust of representative institutions separated this kind of populism from its predecessors.” For while late 19<sup>th</sup>-century populists sought primarily to reform institutions they regarded as basically sound, their 20<sup>th</sup>-century successors had much more fundamental goals of opening up those institutions to wider participation and scrutiny. Similarly, progressives today believe that such process-oriented reforms will provide a more secure foundation for American democracy. They also assume, it is not unfair to suggest, that such measures will facilitate the mobilization of disadvantaged constituencies whom they regard as allies and supporters. Yet of course such procedural and institutional reforms also expand opportunities for the mobilization of their adversaries, including many conservative populists!

Donald Trump’s presidency is Exhibit A for this last proposition. In critical respects he has beaten progressives at their own populist game. I refer not to his substantive policies, but to his mastery of the political tools that progressives have fashioned over the last half-century or more. Most notable among these would be what Theodore Lowi has characterized as “the personal presidency”: a fundamentally plebiscitary office, cut loose from any supports or constraints provided by strong, institutionalized political parties, whose occupant is consequently dependent on volatile mass opinion, which he must alternately manipulate and be manipulated by.

From this vantage point, progressives bear more responsibility for the current populist ferment than they acknowledge, or even understand. Again, I am not talking about their substantive policy views on race and gender, trade, or even immigration, although these have been advanced with a stubborn self-righteousness that has provoked the ire of large numbers of their fellow citizens. What I *am* talking about is how in recent decades progressives and their allies have come to advocate and implement critical procedural and institutional reforms that, while arousing little attention and controversy, have inadvertently

### *Parsing Populism*

Considerable confusion, even obfuscation, envelops the term “populism.” Drawing on the work of Cas Mudde and Cristobal Rovira Kaltwasser, I do not consider populism a full-blown, coherent ideology, but rather “a set of ideas that, in the real world, appears in combination with quite different, and sometimes contradictory, ideologies.” How could it be otherwise? Populism reflects disaffection and alienation expressed by “ordinary people” when they arrive at the realization, however incorrectly or inchoately, that the elites in charge of “the big picture” have not only screwed up but also screwed *them!*

Populism has variants on the Left as well as on the Right, but in either mode it is fundamentally illiberal. Fixing it more precisely in the contemporary context, Mudde and Kaltwasser conclude: “In a world that is dominated by democracy and liberalism, populism has essentially become an illiberal democratic response to undemocratic liberalism.” Populists assume an undifferentiated, monistic popular or general will that elites are ignoring or subverting. Counterpoising the pure people against a corrupt elite, populists inevitably introduce a moralistic element into politics. Yet as Princeton political scientist Jan-Werner Mueller argues forcefully, one can disagree strenuously with populist complaints, as he does, without dismissing them, as elites frequently do, with “psychologizing diagnoses” or references to “authoritarian personalities.” Thus, while populism of any variety is worrisome and potentially dangerous, it should not be regarded as inherently irrational.

More central to my concerns in this essay is the degree to which contemporary populism is not merely anti-elitist but also anti-institutional. Historically, populism in its 19<sup>th</sup>-century guise was generally *not* anti-institutional. Indeed, the People’s Party was itself an institution, albeit short-lived, that grew out of a network of agricultural cooperatives that were the model for a system of “federal sub-treasuries” proposed by the Populists to provide credit to cash-starved farmers. That scheme never materialized, and, like the People’s Party, soon disappeared from view. Aspects of it reappeared, albeit under starkly different auspices, when the Federal Reserve System was created in 1913.

Yet during the 1960s, as the New Left was reinterpreting populism in a more favorable light, the mantra became “participatory democracy.” This led to our own American version of an ongoing cultural revolution that has, as noted by political scientist Hugh Heclo over 20 years ago, “institutionalized the distrust of institutions and their normative authority, whether in the public or private sector.” In this essay I focus on how this anti-institutional populism has been directed not only against various agencies and institutions, but also against political parties in particular. And while instances of such anti-institutional sentiment are evident on the populist Right (against the Federal Reserve, for example, or perhaps universities), that sentiment is much more prevalent on the Left, especially with regard to political parties. Indeed, contemporary populism

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There is, however, one significant source

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of anti-institutional sentiment on the populist Right. It involves the not inaccurate perception that elites have relied on certain institutions, in particular the courts and the media, to defend and advance the interests of various protected minorities in America, including blacks, women, gays, immigrants, and Muslims. As William Galston argues cogently in *Anti-Pluralism: The Populist Threat to Liberal Democracy*, “populist movements . . . are

not necessarily antidemocratic. But populism is always anti-pluralist.” Similarly, Mudde and Kaltwasser emphasize: “Populism holds that nothing should constrain ‘the will of the (pure) people’ and fundamentally rejects the notions of pluralism, and therefore, minority rights as well as the ‘institutional guarantees’ that should protect them.”

Yet however cogent, this contention that populism is simply anti-pluralist misses a key dimension of the present situation. It is possible, from a populist perspective, to see elite championing of pluralism and minority rights in a different light. Quite aside from whether they regard minorities as legitimate components of “the people,” populists have reason to find fault with elites for advancing the interests of minorities while ignoring the fact that those interests invariably include the narrow, self-regarding interests of minority *individuals*. In other words, populists might well object that the interests of some individuals are being elevated in the name of a pluralistic conception of the public interest, while those of others—“the people”—are being dismissed. Given this perceived hypocrisy, it should not be surprising that the focus of much populist anger on the Right is on the courts and the media.

While my emphasis here is on the cultural dimensions of populist outrage on the Right, I do not deny that economic factors have also been at work. Indeed, the emergence of the Tea Party beginning in 2009 is generally regarded as driven primarily by economic grievances and concerns. Nevertheless, economic populism is much more in evidence on the Left. Again, Occupy Wall Street is the prime example. In any event, populist ferment and energy on the Right are more in ascendance—and of much greater concern to elites—than on the Left.

Put differently, Occupy Wall Street typifies *substantive* populist grievances. My concern here is to refocus attention on the neglected topic of *procedural* populism, which remains strong on the Left. Indeed, it pervades the ill-defined but critical territory shared by populism and progressivism. But again, this procedural populism has gone largely unexamined and unacknowledged. It will be a prime concern in what follows.

## *The Cult of Participation*

**T**he best guide to the American Left’s complicated relationship with populism is historian Christopher Lasch. Arguably the most insightful and influential member of the generation of leftist scholars who began their careers in the late 1950s and early 1960s, Lasch was an avid student of Marxist and neo-Marxist social theory and criticism. He was also a critic, albeit a sympathetic one, of late 19<sup>th</sup>-century populists for their naive understanding of economic interests under

then-emergent corporate capitalism.” Unlike Marxists, populists simply assumed interests to be self-evident. They lacked (and still lack) any notion of how ideology may distort reality and obscure from view an actor’s “objective” interests. Whereas Marxists rely on “theory” to understand and explain the crises of a capitalist system understood to be inherently and irredeemably flawed, populists express anger and outrage that things have gone awry and seek to restore the status quo ante.

After the New Left’s mantra of participatory democracy culminated in chaos at the 1968 Democratic Convention in Chicago, things degenerated still further into a terror campaign waged by the Weathermen. Lasch condemned the violence and argued that the New Left’s “cult of participation” was resulting “in an unworkable definition of democracy as the direct involvement of all the people in every political decision, no matter how minute.” Far preferable, in Lasch’s view, was the work of community organizer Saul Alinsky. Lasch was drawn to the organizer’s criticism of the politics of “cultural identity” then emerging among blacks and Native Americans. He also endorsed Alinsky’s ridicule of the New Left for refusing to take “the poor as they are”—for “romanticizing” and “patronizing” them. Citing Alinsky as the notable exception, Lasch concluded: “It is only the left which, both in its politics and in its culture, clings to the illusion that competence is equally distributed among people of good intentions.”

Echoes of participatory democracy were first heard in the halls of Congress in the mid-1960s, when the old-guard Democrats who had dominated the institution since the New Deal found themselves under growing pressure from ascendant liberals to blunt the authority of committee barons, and to open up congressional proceedings to the scrutiny of the increasingly assertive media. After the fiasco at the 1968 convention and Vice President Hubert Humphrey’s subsequent loss to Richard Nixon, liberal Democrats turned their attention to how their party chose its presidential candidates. Deprived of the opportunity to reform America, they reformed themselves—and in so doing, they contributed mightily to the fundamental reshaping of American politics in a more plebiscitary, populist mold.

By and large, the architects of these reforms were Democrats outraged that antiwar candidates who had been tested in various primaries in 1968 were denied the nomination in favor of LBJ’s surrogate, Humphrey, who had not run in a single primary. Yet it is critical to put this episode in context. For as recently pointed out by the Brookings Institution’s Elaine Kamarck, up to and including the 1968 cycle, “the primaries were more like tryouts for professional sports teams, with the scouts being the powerful party leaders who made the ultimate decision on which candidate prevailed as the party’s representative.” For many years the overwhelming majority of delegates to the national convention had been chosen at state conventions controlled by party regulars and insiders. Consequently, when the Democrats convened in Chicago late in August 1968, most of the delegates had been hand-picked by state party leaders—in many cases well before the beginning of that eventful, tumultuous calendar year. Some had been elected in primaries in which their commitment to a specific presidential candidate was either ambiguous or non-existent. Only a small minority had been chosen in primaries in which their candidate pledge was explicit and transparent.

So in the aftermath of the debacle in Chicago, the Democratic National Committee established the Commission on Party Structure and Delegate

Selection, known more colloquially as the McGovern-Fraser Commission after its successive chairmen, South Dakota Senator George McGovern and Minnesota Congressman Donald Fraser. According to *The Congressional Quarterly*, one of “the radical changes wrought by the McGovern-Fraser Commission” was the insistence that “rank-and-file Democrats . . . have a full and meaningful opportunity to participate in the delegate selection process.”

As a result, almost none of the delegates to the 1972 Democratic National Convention were selected by party insiders, leaders, or elected officials. Indeed, these traditional power brokers had been relegated to the margins of or excluded completely from the process. As Byron Shafer, the leading student of party reform, concludes: “By 1972, a solid majority of delegates to the Democratic National Convention was selected in presidential primaries, while an even more crushing majority was selected through arrangements that explicitly linked delegate selection to candidate support.” Moreover, scores of women, minorities, and others not previously in evidence were highly visible delegates on the floor of the 1972 convention.

Subsequent national conventions (Republican and Democratic alike, both parties having been transformed by revised state election laws) increasingly reflected the direct will of primary voters. Convention outcomes have become highly predictable, with delegates effectively reduced to passive emissaries who, in Senator Daniel Patrick Moynihan’s pithy formulation, “merely serve as scenery for the television cameras.” This has led some to ask whether the time and expense of staging the conventions is worth it. The more salient point, however, is made by Kamarck: “The new nominating system is solely in the hands of voters. . . . But until 2016, it had never produced a nominee who was a total outsider with no government experience, demagogue-like qualities, and a disdain for the Constitution and the separation of powers. *This is the danger of the new system and the legacy of 1968.*” (emphasis added) More precisely, this is the legacy of participatory democracy, whose contemporary manifestation is the procedural populism so virulent among today’s Democrats.

Yet note how former Vice President Joe Biden characterizes the bizarre, vaudevillian format of the recent Democratic presidential debates televised at the end of July: “Look, it’s not anybody’s fault the way it’s worked. There’s 20 candidates and that’s a good thing.” Surely his view here is mistaken—or, more likely, disingenuous. The various news networks are primarily responsible for the staging of these events, and have been widely criticized for fostering a circus-like environment. As for the plethora of candidates, that is *not* “a good thing.” Moreover, it is the direct result of reforms implemented by liberal Democrats and now brought to light by analysts like Kamarck and Shafer.

Back in 1972, the problem surfaced quickly when the new participatory reforms led to an outcome different from the previous convention, but equally unsatisfactory: the candidacy and then resounding defeat of the Democratic presidential nominee, George McGovern. The connection could not have been more direct: McGovern had overseen the party’s reforms, best understood their intricacies, and was therefore ideally situated to take advantage of them. And while one seldom hears mention of it these days, at the time of his nomination McGovern was favorably dubbed a “prairie populist.” When he died in 2012, *The New Yorker*, *The Nation*, and like-minded publications resurrected that epithet to describe him.

Today, in the wake of the Tea Party and the rise of Trump, the Left's response to populism is decidedly more complicated and convoluted. On the one hand, one cannot avoid the populist economic messaging of presidential candidates Bernie Sanders and Elizabeth Warren. Even so, these days on the left "populist" is not always invoked as a compliment. Indeed, in such quarters populism has taken on decidedly negative connotations. *The New York Times* was presumably attempting to cope with this dilemma when it recently referred to Sanders and Warren as "populist liberals." In any event, as I have been suggesting, when it comes to procedural and structural issues, populism is alive and well on the American Left.

Another challenge is that substantively populism has two different dimensions: economic and cultural. And it is with the latter that left-liberals in the recent past and progressives today have had the most trouble. In the late 1960s and early 1970s, politicians such as George Wallace and Spiro Agnew were aggressively campaigning as cultural populists in response to the civil rights, anti-war, and campus youth movements. In the case of McGovern, even his fellow Democrat and Senate colleague (and for a brief time his vice-presidential running mate) Thomas Eagleton called him the candidate of "acid, amnesty, and abortion." McGovern's only alternative was his *economic* populist agenda.

Making a case similar to McGovern's was the 1972 book by Jack Newfield and Jeff Greenfield, *The Populist Manifesto: The Making of a New Majority*. The following year Fred Harris—former chair of the Democratic National Committee, recent presidential aspirant, and newly retired U.S. Senator from Oklahoma—published *The New Populism*, another attempt to articulate an economic agenda that would counter increasingly successful Republican appeals to Middle America. During the Reagan years, journalists Robert Kuttner and Jim Hightower as well as campaign consultant Stanley Greenberg were among those arguing for a blue-collar populism focused on bread-and-butter issues that would steer between Middle America's animus against both corporate elites and the "undeserving poor." In a forlorn attempt at humor reminding fellow Democrats how they should position themselves in the 1980s culture war, Hightower (who was also Texas Commissioner of Agriculture) wrote that they needed to be "down at the Seven-Eleven picking up a Budweiser and a Slim Jim . . . (not with the) yuppies enjoying a midday repast of cold melon mélange and asparagus and goat cheese and a delightfully fruity and frisky California white wine."

But Hightower was whistling past the ballot box. As Michael Kazin has observed in *The Populist Persuasion*:

The Democrats' turn to populism . . . remained a strategy hatched by candidates and their consultants . . . It did respond to mass emotions but was not connected in any organic way to the 'workingmen and -women' whose sentiments candidates ritually invoked. This was a populism that saw no need for organized movements from below to support and extend its achievements. Like the copywriters for Hewlett-Packard and Banana Republic, Democratic campaigners were trying to pitch populism to a certain segment of the national market. But, in politics as in any sales effort, the consumers could always select a competing product or simply decline to buy any goods at all.

Today, it remains to be seen whether economic populism—however labeled and packaged—will work any better for Democrats.



If the economic populism cultivated by Democratic elites has had limited impact on substantive policy outcomes, their procedural populism has had a much greater—and, as I have indicated, largely negative—impact. The party reforms of the late 1960s and early 1970s may have led to wider participation in the presidential nomination process, but at the price of distorting how ordinary Americans conceive of politics. For instance, as already noted, those reforms have reduced those attending national conventions to “mere delegates” expected to parrot the views of those who sent them and not exercise any independent judgment.

A similarly problematic dynamic was highlighted by the noted African-American political scientist Charles V. Hamilton in 1974, when he expressed concern that activist lawyers’ reliance on the courts to advance the interests of African Americans was turning ordinary black citizens into “plaintiffs rather than precinct captains.” Not coincidentally, these litigation efforts were undertaken just as party reforms were becoming sufficiently complex and controversial that litigation was increasingly needed in that domain as well. Likewise, campaign finance reforms that followed the Watergate scandal served to augment the role of lawyers at national party headquarters, whose functioning grew more and more bureaucratic.

Of course, the prominence of lawyers in American politics was hardly a recent development. But it was during the New Deal that the Roosevelt Administration sought simultaneously to recast the federal judiciary and to develop an administrative state that would rely on technical experts such as economists, but especially lawyers. Over the decades, that project has culminated in a Congress that enacts increasingly vague, complex statutes whose details and implications are then fleshed out administratively by executive and regulatory agencies only nominally answerable to elected officials. Broadly speaking, what happened to delegates at party conventions has also befallen members of Congress: They, too, have become increasingly passive actors before political forces not readily held to account.

Similar processes have reshaped and actually undermined the prerogatives of political parties across the West. Parties have come to be understood less as private, voluntary associations and more as appendages directly implicated in the functioning of the state, fiscally as well as administratively. These trends are especially visible in Western Europe, where election campaigns, party functionaries, and their affiliated think tanks and foundations are significantly, if not fully, subvented by the state.

Here in the United States, such developments have been more limited, but nevertheless evident. Campaign finance reform has resulted in closer regulation of the parties by state and Federal governments. At the national

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level, qualifying presidential candidates are eligible for public subsidies in primaries as well as the general election. From 1976 until 2012, the presidential nominating conventions of the parties were either partially (minor parties) or fully (major parties) funded by the Federal government. And finally, various public financing options are currently available for designated electoral offices in 14 states. The details here are obviously of critical importance. But the broader point has been forcefully advanced by political scientist Peter Mair in *Ruling the Void*: “From having been largely ‘private’ and voluntary associations that had developed in the society and drew their legitimacy from that source, parties have therefore increasingly become subject to a regulatory framework whose effect is to accord them quasi-official status as part of the state.”

The bureaucratization and professionalization of parties also connects to the growing dominance of experts in politics and public life. The problematic role of experts in government and policymaking, and the perception of that role by ordinary citizens, have not gone unobserved, though their overall impact has doubtless been underestimated. During the Carter Administration, Hugh Heclo argued that the government’s increasing reliance on experts was fostering not “merely an information gap between policy experts and the bulk of the population,” but also “‘an everything causes cancer’ syndrome among ordinary citizens,” the result being that “the non-specialist becomes inclined to concede everything and believe nothing that he hears.”

Since Heclo wrote that in 1978, the role and visibility of experts—especially from the social but also the natural sciences—has grown. And their assertiveness, indeed bravado, has grown commensurately. For instance, in the heyday of the post-Cold War economic boom presided over by the Clinton Administration, Princeton economist Alan Blinder served on the Council of Economic Advisors and then as Vice Chair of the Board of Governors of the Federal Reserve. Back at Princeton in 1997, he published an article in *Foreign Affairs* titled “Is Government Too Political?,” in which he argued, directly but diplomatically, that “we want to take more policy decisions out of the realm of politics and put them in the realm of technocracy,” more in the hands of “nonelected professionals.”

About 15 years later, one of Blinder’s junior colleagues in the profession that understands itself as the queen of the social sciences, MIT economist Jonathan Gruber, personified a major problem with Blinder’s perspective. A key architect of Obama’s health care reform, the Affordable Care Act (ACA), Gruber was caught on video at a policy forum trumpeting that the ACA’s controversial “mandate” was in fact a tax and that “the lack of transparency” around this and other aspects of the legislation were premised on “the stupidity of the American voter.” Even making allowance for the pedagogical value of an attention-getting line, it is hard not to see the contrast between this remark by Gruber and Blinder’s carefully framed proposal as a measure of the burgeoning arrogance of America’s mandarins. Even more telling than Gruber’s tone and substance was the license with which he expressed these views in numerous public fora. Such showboating before presumably like-minded audiences spotlights the cloistered universe of our policy elites. Consequently, no one should be surprised that politicians like Barack Obama and Hillary Clinton, who surround themselves with such talent, feel at liberty to express either condescension toward fellow citizens who “cling to guns or religion,” or outright contempt toward those they consider “a basket of deplorables.”

Broader and deeper bureaucratization, professionalization, and dependence on experts trained in the natural and social sciences are now routinely cited as critical factors in citizen disaffection with *government*. But equally important, these developments have also impacted *politics*—political parties in particular, and civil society institutions in general. Indeed, there have been significant sociological effects on how citizens and voters relate to politics.

As mentioned above, Peter Mair argues that parties have attained “quasi-official status as part of the state.” His further insight is that as party organizations in Western democracies have moved “from a position in which they were primarily defined as social actors . . . to one where they might now be reasonably defined as state actors,” they “are now less well rooted within the wider society” and are “now more strongly oriented towards government and the state.”

The transformative impact of pollsters, marketers, media advisors, and campaign consultants on contemporary electoral politics is now legend. Most recently, digital media have been transforming the terrain all over again, creating new opportunities for tech-savvy specialists. One obvious outcome is further diminution of the role of parties, as individual candidates have come to run their own show. Yet candidates are hardly free agents. On the contrary, they have become critically dependent on these coterie of consultants, and that dependence does not abate once the candidates get elected.

Less noted has been the impact of these campaign experts and technicians on how politicians relate to voters and citizens—and how voters and citizens in turn respond, or don’t. Marshall Ganz is a former union and community organizer who now teaches at Harvard’s Kennedy School. He points out how electoral campaigns have shifted from “gathering” together as many supporters and voters as possible to “hunting” the much narrower segments of the electorate that can be most reliably and economically activated by means of targeted mailings and media messages.

In *By Invitation Only* political scientist Steven Schier offers a similar perspective by differentiating between voter “mobilization” and “activation.” The former relies on strong partisan appeals to stimulate maximum voter turnout. It characterized the era of classic party mobilization in late 19<sup>th</sup>-century America. By contrast, “activation” is what contemporary candidates and interest groups do to induce specifically targeted segments of the public to participate in elections, demonstrations, or lobbying. As Schier suggests, activation of specific segments of the populace is predicated on indifference to the rest, who are effectively demobilized: “Mobilization has given way to activation, a system by which minority interests manipulate the complex electoral and governmental system in the misleading garb of participatory democracy.”

As Mair rightly observes, the sociological implications of these cumulative developments are profound. His point of comparison is “ ‘the golden age’ . . . [when] the mass parties in western Europe strove to establish more or less closed political communities, sustained by reasonably homogeneous electoral constituencies, strong and often hierarchical organizational structures and a coherent sense of partisan identity.” As he elaborates, “Voters, at least in the majority of cases, were believed to ‘belong’ to their parties, and rather than reflecting the outcome of a reasoned choice between the competing alternatives, the act of voting was seen instead as an expression of identity and commitment.” Summing up, Mair quotes two colleagues: “‘Choosing’ a party is nearly as

Here in the United States, party affiliation and identity were never that all-enveloping. American parties have typically never had formal, paid memberships, though they did have strong roots in ethnic and religious institutions and communities. In any event, Western European parties are now suffering from drastically declining numbers of paid memberships. Back in America, church attendance and religious affiliation have come to resemble consumer choices among competing brands. Meanwhile, both domains, political and religious, are ruled by bureaucratic hierarchies staffed by functionaries who are increasingly perceived to be out of touch with “consumers,” but who apparently have no alternative but to soldier on and endeavor as best they can to attract adherents.

#### *Interest-Group Liberalism*

**T**he overall consequences of these varied developments in American politics and government are not straight-forwardly assessed. Without a doubt, our processes and institutions are more accessible, open, and transparent than they ever have been. There are certainly fewer “smoke-filled rooms”—unless we’re talking about a different kind of smoke. Our politics are more democratic and more participatory, and dramatically less controlled by party regulars and insiders. There are more avenues open to inquiry and investigation.

Moreover, by any reasonable historical standard, there are far fewer barriers to the ballot box for most citizens. This is true in spite of the many issues raised about limited access to registration and voting for specific disadvantaged, marginalized populations. Without challenging the validity of such claims, one must recognize that they are advanced in light of the greatly improved standards that have come to apply to the vast majority of citizens. Similarly, today there are certainly more opportunities and options to vote other than going to the polls on election day—unless of course we count the “good old days,” when even the dead got to vote.

At the same time, however, Schier emphasizes that while the educational levels of Americans have been increasing over recent decades, voter turnout rates have been declining. One explanation might be that while politics and government are more open, procedurally and substantively, to scrutiny than ever before, they are also more embedded in labyrinthine bureaucracies administering typically vague or contradictory statutes and regulations. Things are seldom as transparent as advertised or promised.

A half-century ago, as these developments were just beginning to be analyzed, political scientist Theodore Lowi identified the problem in *The End of Liberalism*. Contrary to what James Madison depicted in *The Federalist*, the factional interests generated in the dynamic commercial republic envisioned by the Framers never quite worked out as planned. Instead of continually emerging, competing, dissipating, and perhaps re-emerging, factions got organized, and interest groups eventually became more or less permanent parts of the policymaking machinery. To be sure, it took a long time for this to play out, but by the last third of the 20<sup>th</sup> century, the new regime that Lowi termed “interest-group liberalism” was in place.

Under this new dispensation, Lowi emphasized, “policy-making power” got

parceled out to the most motivated parties, while “the mass of people who are not specifically organized around values salient to the goals” of various initiatives got “cut out.” And responsibility for government’s many endeavors was assumed by experts, whom he defined as “trained and skilled in the mysteries and technologies” of particular programs. For the usually blunt Lowi, this was a polite way of saying that this emergent regime was fundamentally corrupt.

***Click [here](#) for Part Two.***

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