

Political Organization and the Future of Democracy

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A Puzzle

The twentieth century ended with a spectacular surge of democracy, the greatest by far since the end of the eighteenth. In simple numbers of people getting their first taste of self-government, the spread of the democratic sentiment across the globe today dwarfs the tiny American and French revolutions. In the United States and Western Europe, the cradle of modern democracy, democratic institutions have never been healthier. Government is more responsive than ever. Politicians are less corrupt, better educated, and more devoted to public service than at any time in the past. The free press flourishes, with greater access and far more resources, and the battle to create political and economic opportunities for women, minorities, and the poor, while far from over, is steadily advancing. Liberal democracy looks better than ever.

Except for one thing. Apart from a handful of historically minded academics, no one else seems to think so. As remarkable as the late twentieth-century spread of democratic institutions throughout the world has been the simultaneous swell of cynicism in the places where democracy is oldest and that have seen its benefits most. Signs of this

phenomenon are all around us. Voter turnout in the United States continues to drop, despite occasional bounces. In Europe, splinter parties with extremist agendas and depressingly thin commitments to democracy are making hair-raising gains. Scandals abound, even as politicians become cleaner under the ceaseless glare of public scrutiny. On both continents, the electorate willingly embraces extravagantly implausible amateur politicians, while polls report persistently rising levels of mistrust in leadership and skepticism about the ability of politics to make life better. Here, then, is a puzzle worth pondering. How can democracy do so well and so poorly at the same time? And why are people losing faith in political institutions even as those institutions are, in fact, becoming healthier?

Taking the Long View

The most beneficial use of history is not, as the familiar canard would have it, that without understanding history we are destined to repeat it. Rather, studying history gives us distance and perspective from which to see things that may otherwise be obscured. The concerns of the day and convictions of the moment too easily fill our perceptions of problems and solutions. In looking at our own cultures at an earlier time, we may discover otherwise imperceptible forces that shape events.

The struggle for democracy in modern times achieved its first triumph in the United States, during the years 1763–1800. The popular misperception that this victory was complete with the Declaration of Independence in 1776 or that it was secured by the adoption of the Constitution in 1789 is just that: a misperception. The American founders had a terribly difficult time devising institutions capable of supporting popular government, and the infant republic came perilously close to collapse during its first decade. These early struggles to build a successful democracy are worth revisiting, if only briefly, to see what light they cast on our problems today.

Although the war for independence from England was effectively won by 1781, the new United States lacked the institutional and political infrastructure to survive as a nation. The 1780s are known for good reason as “the critical period,” for even contemporaries appreciated that a crisis was at hand. The usually sober and restrained George Washington thus wrote despairingly in 1786, “From the high ground we stood upon, from the plain path which invited our footsteps, to be so fallen! so lost! it is really mortifying.”¹ The reform movement to adopt

a new Constitution in 1787 was first and foremost a movement to create a stronger, more “energetic” national government.

Opponents of the new system shrieked that popular government was impossible on a national scale. No matter how dedicated, no matter how faithful its representatives, they urged, the government of a society as large and diverse as the United States would be unable to maintain “the confidence of the people.” Faith in government would erode, and the system would eventually collapse. Instead, they counseled, governing should be left mainly to the states, with a modest national organization arranged along the lines of a league among coequals—a model closely akin to the existing European Union.

At its heart, this Anti-Federal argument rested on a shrewd evaluation of the conditions necessary for democratic politics. Democracy is not just a matter of rational debate about the best policy, nor solely a question of interests or even principles. It is also a matter of what Enlightenment philosophers referred to as “affection” or “attachment.” A democratic system must engage people’s emotions and imaginations as well as their interests. It must make them believe, truly feel, that the government acts for them, that it follows their wishes and can be controlled by them—that it is, in a word, theirs.

Opponents of the Constitution insisted that a national government could never secure this sort of affection and confidence. Why? Because, they explained, popular government requires an intimacy and connection between rulers and ruled that will never exist in a large republic, where government officials and institutions must necessarily be distant and remote from the average citizen. Under the then-existing state systems, voters were “acquainted with” their representatives and had “personal knowledge” of their characters; constituents could “make known their wants, circumstances, and opinions”² because elected officials were friends, neighbors, or patrons who “mixed” with them and whom they regularly encountered while going about their daily business. It was this sort of relationship that made government by representatives acceptable without force or tyranny—a kind of intimacy that would be impossible for officials in a continent-sized republic. Relying on reputation or expecting voters to be satisfied with reports and editorials in newspapers simply would not suffice.

This is why Anti-Federalists were so troubled by the Constitution. If you remove the props on which faith in popular government has rested, they asked, what will support it when things get rough, as they assuredly will? How will government retain the confidence of the people if you weaken the foundations on which that confidence has been based? When

lawmakers adopted measures that were controversial or that called for unequal sacrifices—something inevitable in a diverse, eclectic society—the government would be unable to manage the political strains that would emerge. The nation would, eventually, either erupt in civil war or dissolve under the collective weight of the people’s apathy.

The Constitution’s supporters thought they had an answer to this quandary. Giving people better government was one way to earn their support and affection. “I believe it may be laid down as a general rule,” Alexander Hamilton wrote in *Federalist* 27, that the people’s “confidence in and obedience to a government, will commonly be proportioned to the goodness or badness of its administration.” More fundamentally, the Federalists offered an ingenious structural solution in the form of federalism. No sensible Federalist denied either that substantial differences existed among the states or that the legislature in a unitary national system would be hard-pressed to take all of them into account. Instead, they denied that such a thing was necessary—pointing to the Constitution’s federal division of labor, which confined the national government to objects of a general nature that would not need to be adjusted to suit the particular circumstances of every community. By thus limiting the responsibilities of national representatives, federalism itself became an integral component of the Federalist theory of republicanism and democracy.

This decentralizing strategy was, as it turned out, exceedingly useful (a point to which I will return below). But it was also incomplete—and for reasons the Anti-Federalists anticipated. Even with federalism, they said, the national government must do things that will touch people where it counts, that will affect their lives and their pocketbooks and stir their emotions. That the objects of federal law are general does not make them insignificant in the lives of ordinary citizens, and Congress’s actions must often rouse passionate conflict in the community. The problem of governing a pluralistic society is not merely the technocratic one of tailoring laws appropriately to suit dissimilar local circumstances. It also includes finding a way to engage the polity: enabling citizens to embrace and take possession of a distant government that must often make decisions with which they disagree or whose content they do not fully grasp. Federalism is no help when national policy is at stake. Nor can political stress be relieved by “good government” when it is precisely whether the government is good that is at issue.

The clairvoyance of these Anti-Federalists was apparent from the start. The United States experienced one of the greatest economic booms of its history during the first decade under the Constitution, yet

the 1790s were still a time of “vicious party warfare” and “almost hysterical fear.” Although Federalists delivered precisely the kind of good government they had promised, domestic political debate achieved a level of violence and alienation exceeded only by the Civil War. By the decade’s end, talk of disunion and secession was rife, the commander of the U.S. Army (who happened to be Alexander Hamilton) was musing about whether to invade Virginia, while the governors there and in Pennsylvania were anxiously preparing to mobilize their militias in anticipation of a possible civil war.

The new nation weathered the crisis, due in large part to the emergence of the world’s first political parties. With each new controversy, even as the emerging Federalist and Republican parties exacerbated popular discontent, they helped simultaneously to channel that discontent back into the system. When disgruntled citizens began murmuring about secession and civil war, party leaders were able to encourage them instead to turn to the polls by offering supporters a national organization capable of formulating positions, managing election campaigns, and arranging the government to ensure that their party’s program was implemented. It was the replacement of traditional forms of face-to-face politics with the new rituals of party politics that made constitutional democracy on a large scale functional. Parties gave public debate on a continental scale the structure and coherence needed to create tolerable consensus on an agenda, while offering citizens opportunities to participate at the local level, which facilitated their acceptance of the system and its laws.

The crucial insight of the Anti-Federalists in 1787 was thus the same insight as former Speaker of the House Tip O’Neill’s familiar line about how in a democracy “all politics is local.” Because popular government depends on the affection and good will of the citizenry, for democracy to work it must be experienced as something vital and immediate. But this means more than meekly submitting to policies dictated from above or dutifully trudging down to the local high school to cast a vote every few years. A democratic system must engage its citizens where they live—not abstractly or passively, not through watching television or reading newspapers or sending checks, but in forms and on planes that are personal and feel efficacious.

Federalism helps to do this by relocating the situs of political decision making closer to home, putting it at a level where most people feel a greater sense of familiarity and control than is likely to be true of national politics. But national politics cannot be avoided, and a solution is needed to bring politics home from this level as well. For most of

the nineteenth and twentieth centuries, in both the United States and Europe, it was political parties that filled the gap, connecting people to government by traversing and mediating the space between politicians and their constituents.

Back to the Future

Even in this sketchy form, the story related above highlights some important lessons about the nature of democracy. First, democracy has an emotional and affective side as well as a rational one. Second, we must tend to democracy's affective side through political stratagems capable of nourishing a vibrant political life for ordinary citizens. More particularly, the story points to two very different sorts of institutional devices that are worth reexamining in this regard. And, as we shall see, it provides a possible partial explanation for rising public cynicism about government while suggesting some ways to think about how to turn that cynicism around.

Federalism

Federalism was out of favor among progressives for most of the twentieth century, particularly in the United States, where it was blamed for perpetuating racism and for a variety of other evils. This tendency peaked around 1964, when William Riker concluded a comparative study of federalist systems around the globe by observing that federalism was good only for shielding powerful groups from surrendering their privileged status. Put in other words, Riker mused sardonically, "if...one approves of Southern white racists, then one should approve of American federalism... If one disapproves of racism, one should disapprove of federalism."³

Not so, conservatives, who continued to champion federalism and who have spent the last quarter of a century busily investigating and finding ways to return authority to the states (albeit with a countervailing centralizing trend in the George W. Bush administration)—accompanied by an equally incessant chorus of praise for the genius of federalism. Items listed in the inventory of claimed benefits for federalism include everything from enhancing freedom to fostering participatory democracy, facilitating regulatory diversity, protecting individual liberty, promoting responsible fiscal policy, and providing a laboratory for testing novel legislative programs.

To be sure, some of the items included in this litany reflect nothing more than thoughtless repetition of theoretical justifications that experience has disproved or called into question. The view that federalism enhances freedom, for example, was first voiced in the late eighteenth century, at which time it rested on a “civic humanist” understanding of liberty that was group rather than individually oriented. The argument may have made sense in this context, but if anything seems clear today, it is that central governments generally (though not invariably) do a better job than local governments when it comes to protecting individual liberties and the rights of subordinated minorities. Similarly, an abundance of studies have refuted the notion—first articulated by Justice Louis Brandeis—that state and local governments provide valuable laboratories of democracy.⁴

Such qualifications aside, two centuries of experience have vindicated the conviction of the American founders that federalism can contribute to the political health of a democracy. Because state and local electorates are smaller, elected representatives are more immediately accountable to individuals and their concerns. Government is closer to the people, and democratic ideals can be more fully realized. The paradigmatic model of democracy remains the legendary Greek polis or New England town meeting, a setting in which the whole electorate deliberates and decides, and elected representatives have essentially managerial responsibilities. Of course, direct democracy of this sort is not only impossible, but ultimately undesirable. There is much truth in James Madison’s famous quip in *Federalist* 55 that “had every Athenian citizen been a Socrates, every Athenian assembly would still have been a mob.” Nevertheless, the aspect of direct democracy that retains a hold on our imaginations is the way in which it engages ordinary citizens in political decision making. There is overwhelming evidence to support the proposition that our most local governing structures—school boards, county commissions, city government, and so forth—are also our liveliest and most vital. Government close to home enables people to participate in ways that feel more vivid and fulfilling than is ever possible for decisions made at the national or multinational level.

Progressives have been far too quick to run away from local politics, far too quick to assume that these forums are controlled by ordinary citizens who are hopelessly reactionary and need to be gotten around—something more easily accomplished at the national level or in court. But if this seems to be so, might that not be because conservatives have *not* run away and have *not* shared these attitudes, but have instead been willing to put their energy and political capital into winning at the local

level? Successful progressive grassroots movements are a staple of U.S. history—from the Revolution itself to abolition, women’s suffrage, civil rights, and the movement for equal rights for women. Progressives need to rediscover the advantages and desirability of state and local politics and must begin the slow, hard process of winning people’s hearts and minds at these levels by taking them (and the ordinary citizens who participate in and control them) seriously.

It does not follow that all decisions should be made at the state or local level. There are powerful and essential justifications favoring national legislation: the demand for a country to speak with one voice on important matters, the need to prevent spillover effects among the different states or regions of a nation, the desires to achieve economies of scale and to protect individual rights, and so forth. What is wanted, then, is a genuine commitment responsibly to allocate political authority among different levels of government, together with appropriate devices to ensure that national lawmakers leave suitable decisions to lower levels.

As to political commitment, there seems everywhere to be a renewed willingness on the part of public officials and party leaders to explore decentralizing strategies. Nevertheless, the reflex among progressives to address every new problem at the national level or through litigation remains strong and must be watched and resisted where it is inappropriate. The process of sensibly rethinking how big to make big government is still just beginning. It has been and should be an important part of the progressive agenda.

The problem of discovering means to achieve an optimal allocation of authority is more difficult, but also more exciting. The first impulse among scholars is invariably to think in constitutional terms, which means looking ultimately to courts for answers. But while this surely is a possible strategy, articulating legally enforceable limits on national authority has proved to be exceedingly difficult in practice. The German courts have been somewhat successful in this venture, whereas U.S. courts have experienced nothing but controversy and trouble. In any event, legal solutions have actually been less common and less prominent than political ones. In the United States, the Supreme Court has historically played an insignificant part in defining the boundaries of national power (with unfortunate results when it has intruded, though this has not stopped the present Court from trying). Instead, the allocation of power between the federal government and the states, and between state and local governments, has been fought and decided through ordinary politics.

Moreover, legal strategies have generally been less successful than political ones. International dialogue is important in this respect, for

among the different nations that use federalism we have already seen and tested a wide variety of possible approaches. These include various ways of giving state or provincial governments a voice in national politics, sharing legislative and administrative authority at different levels, innovative efforts to foster “home rule,” and the formation of novel cross-governmental funding and other inventive structures to shape policy. We have only just begun to explore the full potential of what has come to be known as “cooperative federalism”: arrangements for sharing power among officials at different levels rather than allocating exclusive responsibility in any particular area to one or another authority. Early efforts at cooperation, such as the Great Society programs of President Lyndon Johnson, failed badly. But there is room to build on the lessons of these failures, as well as on subsequent successful efforts in the United States and elsewhere. The space for creative thinking and innovative leadership remains enormous.

Beyond Parties

Having said all that, there are nevertheless limits to what can be accomplished through decentralization and the dispersal of power. As noted above, many political choices can only be made at the national level: choices about war and peace, foreign relations, trade and commerce—in other words, all the most important and controversial choices in society. Pressure for national legislation will continue to intensify, moreover, as the process of globalization accelerates, demanding national and multinational solutions for an ever-expanding range of economic and social problems. Indeed, the creeping alienation so characteristic of contemporary democracy is surely at least partly attributable to this trend. It is hardly surprising that people would become more removed from politics as politics becomes more removed from them.

During the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, it was political parties that kept politics from becoming too remote. This was mostly a matter of technology. Learning what people wanted, whom they favored, or what issues mattered to them could be done only through face-to-face encounters—a method of intelligence gathering that demanded a presence in the community that only political parties could manage. Campaigning was labor-intensive activity, requiring nothing so much as bodies to hand out pamphlets; to canvass door to door; to stage rallies and torchlight parades; and to make stump speeches in parks, on corners, or near polling places. With armies of volunteers obtained through their extensive patronage networks, it was the parties

that supplied these services, nurturing a style of politics that engaged citizens on a personal level.

Nor were party activities confined to elections and electioneering only. Absent government welfare systems, political parties managed private welfare networks: In exchange for loyal support, ward bosses or precinct captains would help constituents to find jobs in the neighborhood or arrange for them to receive food and shelter during a bad stretch. The parties also provided entertainment at a time when cheap forms of amusement were scarce. The famous debates between Abraham Lincoln and Stephen Douglas attracted immense crowds not only because the issue of slavery was so pressing, but also because their contest was the best entertainment around. Parties sponsored dances and social events and organized a wide variety of other neighborhood activities, thus becoming important institutions in people's daily lives. And because the parties' agendas were never far from the surface, these full-service organizations made active engagement with politics an important aspect of everyday life.

In the United States, successive waves of well-meaning reform progressively maimed this system over the course of the twentieth century's first six decades. In the United States and elsewhere, a still more crushing blow was delivered by new technology: the invention and spectacular growth of television, computer-based polling and survey techniques, and direct mail and other sophisticated means of reaching voters with minimal labor. Even as greater numbers of political decisions were being made at higher levels of government, politicians and government officials were becoming more distant as they abandoned the traditional forms of party politics. Leaders in the twenty-first century reach out to constituents primarily through the national media, apparently content to establish "personal" contact through forms of address that are, in fact, one-sided and anything but personal.

Politics today has thus become a remote, passive activity for most of us. We read newspapers or watch TV; we discuss the issues with friends; we vote and maybe give some money to a party or other organization. But apart from that, we leave the management of our political affairs to others working in a businesslike manner in or closely with government agencies. Is it really any wonder that ordinary citizens have become progressively more alienated and mistrustful?

Obviously, it is too late to think about resurrecting old-style political parties, even in Europe, where these forms have retained more of their traditional flavor and salience. Nor is it clear that we should want to do so. Mass party politics in the United States was, indeed, a sinkhole of

corruption, and the fascist and communist parties of midcentury Europe made the potential dangers of demagoguery and excessive party control abundantly clear. In focusing on dangers and downsides, however, we may have paid too little attention to the important constitutive role the parties played in maintaining a healthy democracy. We allowed these critical institutions to atrophy without giving adequate thought to alternative means or institutions to fill the resulting gap. We became content to address the public from a distance without seeing how this might affect the long-term vitality of democratic politics.

Here, then, is an even more important item demanding the attention of responsible leaders concerned for the future of democracy. The process of globalization has just begun to hit full stride. No matter how much energy we invest trying to preserve spheres of local autonomy, the pressures for greater centralization will be irresistible, for the simple reason that increasing numbers of issues really can be addressed only at a national or international level. As this happens, it is incumbent on political leaders to devise new means and new forms of political organization to draw the public in, to give ordinary citizens a sense not merely that the policies being adopted are good, but that these policies are also theirs.

Conservatives have responded to these changes brilliantly by establishing new and alternative institutions that knit politics and the conservative political agenda into the lives of ordinary citizens—institutions capable not only of reaching existing supporters, but also of drawing in and persuading potential new supporters. They have created a network of think tanks and intellectual societies to train future leaders and assure proper networking. They have established media outlets, including newspapers, magazines, talk radio, and even a TV network, to develop and disseminate their intellectual agenda in a manner accessible to the average person. Most important, they have used churches and religious organizations to engage and involve large numbers of citizens and make conservative politics part of the local culture and social fabric of everyday life.

These efforts have been coordinated and well considered. And effective. Progressives, in the meantime, have done nothing similar. Older organizations that once served this purpose, like unions, have atrophied, while liberal media have either been cowed into striving for a “balance” that makes their message disappear or converted into elite outlets that do not even attempt to speak to most Americans. If there is a critical agenda for progressives as we look ahead, then first and foremost, it must be to address this fatal shortcoming: Progressives must devise

new and effective institutions capable of doing what parties used to do. The stakes are greater than just advancing a substantive progressive agenda. The health of our democracy more broadly speaking demands a richer, more effective array of institutions capable of actively engaging Americans in politics and restoring their sense that what they want and believe is worthy and actually matters.

Notes

1. Letter from George Washington to John Jay, May 18, 1786, in 28 *The Writings of George Washington* 431–32 (John C. Fitzpatrick, ed., Washington, D.C.: GPO, 1938).
2. The Federal Farmer, An Additional Number of Letters to the Republican (letter VII), December 31, 1787, in 17 *The Documentary History of the Ratification of the Constitution* 265, 281–82 (John P. Kaminski and Gaspare J. Saladino, eds., Madison: Wisconsin Historical Society Press, 1984).
3. William H. Riker, *Federalism: Origin, Operation, Significance* 145 (Boston: Little, Brown, 1964).
4. *New State Ice Co. v. Liebmann*, 285 US 262, 311 (1932) (Brandeis, J., dissenting).