

State of the Parties Conference

Saving Democracy from Elections?¹

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Sisyphus was thought the wisest and most prudent of mortals. At the very end of his long effort, the purpose was achieved. He then watched the stone rush down, whence he would have to push it up again toward the summit. That unspeakable penalty in which the whole being is exerted toward accomplishing nothing. This myth is tragic because its hero was conscious.

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In late August 1968, during an oppressive heatwave, Americans watched Chicago police beat and gas young Americans who had gathered to protest the nomination of Hubert Humphrey. It was a disturbing, gut-wrenching spectacle that became known as the Battle of Michigan Avenue. The event was cast across the black and white television screens of the nation as if some surreal punctuation to a turbulent decade that saw widespread demonstrations and small acts of defiance. A drive for civil rights had shaken the establishment and mass protests had challenged the legitimacy of a war. Cities erupted in flames and the nation mourned the murder of civil rights leaders, a president and his younger brother. The country, it seemed, was coming apart at the seams.

And yet, even during the unbridled, transformative period of the 1960s, vast majorities of Americans had faith in their government. Most believed change would come from *within* the system.

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Today, one would be hard pressed to find anyone who feels good about the conduct of our politics or the effectiveness of our government. Pessimism has turned to despair and frustration has morphed to anger. Only one-in-five Americans believe elections make officials responsive and fewer yet trust government to do the right thing (ANES 2016). Many openly ponder if the grand democratic experiment, charted 240 years ago, has run its course.

How have things gotten so bad and what happens when the very instrument we rely upon to fix things becomes the root of the problem? Can our nation redeem its democratic character?

This paper will offer a novel argument. Since the mid-1800s, the United States has defined its democratic character through elections. We became an election-crazed nation, putting nearly all of our civic marbles in periodic events that choose the personnel of government. But momentous shifts -- some building slowly over the decades and others emerging rapidly -- have distorted how these contests are conducted and the impact they have on public policy. Elections for federal office candidates, in particular, no longer yield a common good and too often produce results incompatible with our structure of government.

Clinging to elections, desperately hoping that “better” candidates and the next big contest will redeem our faith in government, will only harden cynicism. We expect these events to shift public policy, to address our concerns and grievances. The election of Donald Trump is a vivid example of the limits of the current system, but these changes have been going on for more than a decade.

But all is not lost. This paper will conclude with call for the revitalization of associational life, the channeling of political action through local organizations, and for the consideration of the various “pathways of action.” The renewal of America’s democratic spirit can only happen through diverse pathways of change and at the local level.

Breaking Rules, Norms...and the System?

Right from the start, Donald Trump made it clear that his candidacy would be different – very different. His announcement at Trump Tower in New York City drew a great deal of attention, not because he was expected to do particularly well, but rather because Trump seemed to be some sort of novelty act. He was a character, and his entry into the race would add a wild spin; the media was attracted to it like moths to a flame.

A few years earlier, in the wake of Mitt Romney's defeat to Barack Obama, the Republican National Committee produced a post mortem analysis. Among much else, "Growth and Opportunity Project" (RNC 2013) stated that going forward the Republican Party should be known for its tolerance and respect, and that it should "ensure that the tone of the message is always reflective of these core principles...." (8). This was a not-so-subtle nod to changing demographics and the party's interest in cultivating support among minority groups, especially Hispanic Americans. But Trump told his audience and the television cameras, "When Mexico sends its people, they're not sending their best...They're sending people that have lots of problems, and they're bringing those problems with us [sic]. They're bringing drugs. They're bringing crime. They're rapists. And some, I assume, are good people" (*Washington Post* June 15, 2015).

As the race progressed, Trump continued to shatter all manner of rules and norms of modern electoral politics. For instance, a widely-read book, *The Party Decides* (Cohen et. al. 2008), documented the importance of early endorsements in presidential nomination contests. The backing of prominent party leaders and prominent officials during the "invisible primary" was one of the most important determinants of success. Early money was also thought to be critical (which is probably why former Florida Governor Jeb Bush raised an unprecedented by

the summer of 2016 – a whopping \$114 million.) But Trump had few establishment backers and little early money.

Republicans, particularly those who turn out for primaries and caucuses, were supposed to be “values voters.” That is, while a set of economic and foreign policy matters were important, an array of social and cultural concerns was paramount (White 2002; Frank 2005). Each year the Values Voter Summit is widely attended by social conservatives and most up-and-coming GOP candidates. A candidates’ positions on abortion, for example, is critical, but Trump’s position was muddled. A *Washington Post* account, for instance, charted five different positions taken by Trump in just three days (Bumb April 3, 2016). Many considered themselves faithful Christians, yet Trump was the most secular candidate in the group. In an awkward attempt to reach out to these voters, Trump traveled to Liberty University in January 2016, where he tried to “name drop” the Bible: “I hear this is a major theme right here, but Two Corinthians, that’s the whole ballgame” (McMurry January 18, 2016). Above all, Republican primary voters seemed to focus on character. Is the candidate virtuous, a good role-model? Here again Trump did not fit the mold: he has been divorced twice, was known for a flamboyant, playboy lifestyle, and was unabashed about using all manner of profanity. Following a lackluster debate performance, he suggested the moderator might have been tough on him because she was menstruating, and at a rally he mocked the physical disability of a *New York Times* reporter (Kessler August 2, 2016).

Ronald Reagan popularized the so-called Eleventh Commandment for the Republican Party: Thou shall not speak ill of fellow Republicans. At the very least, they should refrain from personal assaults that might cause problems in the general election. Trump quickly cast that rule aside, too. A small selection of insults he directed at fellow Republicans includes the following:

Regarding Carly Fiorina, former Chief Executive of Hewlett-Packard, he said, “Look at that face! Would anyone vote for that? Can you imagine that, the face of our next president?!” He said of former President George W. Bush, “Say what you want, the World Trade Center came down during his time.” On Senator John McCain of Arizona, Trump commented, “He’s not a war hero. He was war hero because he was captured. I like people who weren’t captured,” and regarding physician Ben Carson, “You don’t cure these people. You don’t cure a child molester... Pathological, there’s no cure for that.” Trump also used pejorative nicknames for his opponents, dubbing Texas Senator Ted Cruz: “Lyn’ Ted,” and former Florida Governor Jeb Bush “Low Energy Jeb” (Lee Oct. 20, 2017).

To be fair, insults were soon lobbed in the other direction as well. Texas Governor Rick Perry said Trump was “unfit to be president...a barking carnival act, a cancer on conservatism.” Louisiana Governor Bobby Jindal suggested Trump was “dangerous, a narcissist and an egomaniac,” and Kentucky Senator Rand Paul called him a “delusional narcissist and an orange-faced windbag.” He added for a good measure, “A speck of dirt is way more qualified to be president.” South Carolina Lindsey Graham is quoted as saying of Trump, “You know how you make America great again? Tell Donald Trump to go to hell.” And former Florida Governor Jeb Bush commented, “He’s a bully. Punch him back in the nose” (Gorman May 6, 2016).

Trump campaigned like a bull stung by a swarm of hornets. He raised and spent money in unconventional ways, broke all the rules about overexposure on radio and television, and staggered from one gaffe to another. He spent less money than most of the top-tier candidates, rarely used polling, flip-flopped on one issue after the next, salted his speeches with vulgarities and recurrent grammatical mistakes, and lobbed offences at women, Hispanics, Muslims, Iowans, and many other groups of voters. He even insulted the looks of his opponents’ wives!

Indeed, it is difficult to recount all of the exceptional elements of Donald Trump's drive for the Republican nomination in one volume, let alone a few pages. Flatly stated, in the history of American elections no candidate shattered as many norms and codes of conduct as Donald Trump did. Scholar Frank Mackaman called the GOP nomination "virtually unprecedented" and "you would have to go back to the Bull Moose (Progressive) Party, Teddy Roosevelt's splinter from the Republican Party in the early 20th Century, to get something that resembles [the race]" (as cited in Kurtzleben July 3, 2016).

On the Democratic side, most assumed Hillary Clinton was the heir apparent. She had narrowly lost to Barack Obama in 2008 and then served five years as his Secretary of State. After leaving that post, she had assembled a state-of-the-art campaign operation and raised a ton of money. It was her time and she was ready. Yes, there might be some nipping at the edges from insurgent candidates, but it was Clinton's nomination for the taking – or so it was thought.

To most party leaders, scholars and pundits, Vermont Senator Bernie Sanders' candidacy represented the typical protest from the progressive wing of the party. After all, he was not even a Democrat, but rather a Democratic-Socialist, and he represented the most liberal state in the union. Like Trump, few prominent leaders or officials had endorsed Sanders and his coffers in the early stages were thin. Like an irritating bug at a summer picnic, Sanders would be brushed away as the nomination season unfolded.

But of course that did not happen. In Iowa, the first of the nomination contests, Sanders stunned the establishment by battling Clinton to a draw. He then swamped Clinton in New Hampshire, which was not really a surprise because Vermont is next door, but on the night of the victory he made a plea to the public: "I'm going to hold a fundraiser right here, right now, across America." Sanders urged anyone who would listen to visit his website and make a donation,

“whether it’s 10 bucks, or 20 bucks, or 50 bucks.” Money poured in and by the end of the next day the campaign had collected a staggering \$8 million (Foran March 1, 2016). The size of his crowds became massive and his war chest grew -- nearly all of it coming from small contributions (a sign of popular support). By early March Sanders had gathered over four million contributions, with the average donation size at \$27 (Open Secrets, 2016). He had become a force, a threat to Clinton’s nomination, and would not be brushed away easily.

When it was all said and done, Sanders netted about 44 percent of primary and caucus votes, with 23 wins to Clinton’s 34 victories (the U.S. territories and D.C. have nomination contests). He raised a whopping \$228 million (Open Secrets 2017). Sanders endorsed Clinton at the Democratic National Convention in late July, but it seemed a rather tacit backing, more of a call to defeat Trump than a full-throttled rationale of the former secretary of state.

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To say that the general election was also unconventional would be a grand understatement. An analysis conducted by National Public Radio found no less than 65 ways in which the campaign was unprecedented -- and that was by mid-summer (Kurtzleben July 3 2016). Trump drew large and energetic crowds, but continued to push a novel policy agenda; elements of his platform were plucked from the playbook of die-hard conservatives, but other components were snatched from the populist wing of the Democratic party. In one breadth, for instance, he pledged to rid the nation of both the Affordable Care Act (“Obamacare”) and the North America Free Trade Agreement (NAFTA). Most expected Trump to moderate his hardline positions that seemed to propel him through the nomination process, like his insistence on building a wall along the Mexican border and banning the entrance of Muslims into the

nation, but he never tacked to the middle. His early debate performances were weak, rife with flubs and generalities, but his rallies were massive and supporters exuberant.

In the middle of the general election campaign, on October 7, the *Washington Post* released a video of a conversation between Trump and *Access Hollywood* reporter Billy Bush. Perhaps unaware the microphone was on (it's unclear), Trump said he might start kissing the woman they were about to meet. "I don't even wait. And when you're a star, they let you do it, you can do anything... grab them by the pussy." It was a bombshell, what many, including the author of this paper, deemed the unequivocal end to Trump's candidacy. No candidate could come back from such a disclosure. Trump apologized, claiming it to be mere "locker room talk," and quickly turned attention toward his Democratic opponent and her husband: "Bill Clinton has said far worse to me on the golf course." His poll numbers dropped a bit, but huge crowds continued to show up at his rallies.

It was the most expensive general election race in history. The Clinton campaign and associated groups and political action committees had raised a staggering \$1.4 billion and the Trump campaign and his allied groups had pulled in \$958 million (*Washington Post* January 6, 2017). Spending by outside groups (units not officially affiliated with the candidates) also grew to historic levels. Whereas these groups spent about \$900 million in 2012, in the Clinton/Trump contest this figure mushroomed to \$1.4 billion (Ibid).

True to form, Clinton was perfectly polished and prepared at the debates, but on the campaign trail she seemed to be simply going through the motions. And why not -- there is no way the American electorate would send Donald Trump to the White House. A vast preponderance of the polling confirmed that she was way ahead.

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On election night, signs that Clinton was in trouble came early. Exit polling from several east coast states suggested a tighter-than-expected race, and the actual returns from Florida and Pennsylvania foretold a crisis for the Democrat. There were hopes that she might even snatch North Carolina, but that evaporated quickly, and even Virginia was neck-and-neck. All eyes turned to the Midwest – particularly Ohio, Michigan, and Wisconsin. This *might* be Clinton’s firewall. Ohio would be tough, but Michigan and Wisconsin should be fine (she made very few trips to either, assuming they were in the bag). As the evening wore on and the results trickled in, the outcome crystalized. To the astonishment of pollsters, pundits, politicians and perhaps the candidate himself, Trump swept the entire Midwest. Donald J. Trump would be the 45th president of the United States.

In the end, Trump scored a hefty electoral college victory: 304 to 227, but Clinton won the popular vote by more than 3 million. (Many of the *national* polls were more or less accurate.) It would be the fifth time in American history that the winner of the popular vote would not take up residence in the White House.

The Aftermath

The hours and days after an election are always filled with divergent emotions, ranging from relief to regret, joy to despair. The aftermath of the 2016 race was different. Since the advent of sophisticated polling, colossal surprises had been rare. Races can be tight, sometimes too close to call, but true shockers are few and far between. Even seasoned GOP operatives were astonished by Trump’s easy win (Ward November 9, 2016). His core supporters were euphoric; they had snatched the presidency away from “The Clintons” and “The Establishment” and their outspoken, unconventional hero would renew America. Clinton and her supporters were

thunderstruck, despondent beyond measure. Clinton herself was badly shaken, unable to utter a concession speech until the next day.

So for many Americans the outcome of the 2016 presidential election was certainly *not* disastrous. While his unfavorable ratings might have been record high, Trump's victory was interpreted by many as a vivid, direct response to a growing list of unwelcome changes in the economy and society. Trump, a truly different sort of candidate, would usher in a new policy agenda. The great, slumbering mass of discouraged and dislocated working-class Americans had risen and pounded its chest. For them, election day delivered a long-awaited fundamental change. In states and communities across the country, conservatives were emboldened by the election.

For those on the ideological left, Trump's victory was catastrophic. Not only had they lost the presidency in what many thought was a slam dunk, but the House and Senate were captured by the GOP. Two-thirds of state legislatures would also be controlled by Republicans and a majority of governorships as well. All this had transpired during a time when more Americans considered themselves a Democrat than a Republican. In fact, when it comes to self-identified partisanship, Democrats had been the majority party for decades (ANES Cumulative File 2016).

Still others started to question the viability of the entire election process. Has the election/democracy nexus in the United States been strained, if not broken? All manners of critiques were offered in the weeks and months following the election, from full-length volumes to opinion pieces (see, for instance, Page and Gilens 2017; Cooper March 14, 2017; Eichenwald, 2016; McGeough, 2016; Shea 2017). Did the election punctuate the decline of American democracy?

The Democratic Character of the American System

The democratic character of American government has been an ongoing debate since its inception. Democratic impulses played a role in the drive for independence and the framers understood that the Constitution would only be ratified if it reflected populist principles. Some saw this as a pragmatic necessity, while others were true believers of Jefferson's treatise on limited government – the so-called Spirit of '76. There was an explicit rejection of hereditary rule and the Bill of Rights codified essential liberties -- the base ingredients of democratic engagement.

But these men also worried mightily about the “excesses of democracy” and sought to create a governing framework that would check popular impulses. Neither the Constitution nor the Bill of Rights protected individual voting rights. States were left to define voter eligibility; some states used property clauses, others literacy qualifications and still others employed religious tests and poll taxes. All limited the franchise to white men. During the first three decades of our nation's history turnout for *eligible* voters hovered around 25 percent. As a percentage of the population, turnout never got above three percent.

And then things changed. It is difficult to overstate the breadth of changes ushered in with the arrival of Jacksonian Democracy, a period stretching from about 1830 to the turn of the century. As noted by political historian Joel Silby, “The entire texture and structure of the political world shifted markedly. A new political universe [had arrived]” (1991, 9). Voter turnout soared to astonishing levels -- often above 80 percent. Rallies, demonstrations and parades were common. State and municipal contests were particularly raucous affairs. Electoral politics became integral to social life in America, and of course steadfast party loyalty, further fueled by a dogmatic partisan press, became ubiquitous.

It was during this period that elections came to define our democratic character. Religious, property and literacy qualifications for voting melted away and soon all white male citizens were enfranchised. By 1836, all states -- with the exception of South Carolina -- had moved to the direct election of presidential electors. The number of state and municipal elected posts skyrocketed. Citizens were called upon to select governors, judges, auditors, attorney generals, school boards, coroners and officials to all manner of offices and posts. (The incredible number of elected posts in the United States today, roughly 520,000, dwarfs what is found in other democracies.) Alexis de Tocqueville, who traveled throughout the United States during the Jacksonian era saw electoral majorities as “omnipotent.” He would later write about a “tyranny of the majority” (1835).

Historically disenfranchised groups, such as women and African-Americans, set their sights on *voting* as a requisite of equality and liberty. “Suffrage,” noted Susan B. Anthony, “is the pivotal right.” Voting became the protagonist of the American political drama. The simple act of raising a hand, checking a box, pushing a lever, hitting a button, or touching a video screen was thought to carry profound implications for citizens, government and society. Elections implied equality, the right to express preferences and to direct the course of policy. Everyone had a seat at the table of what H.G. Wells dubbed our “democratic feast.”

Is this actually true, especially in light of recent developments? What should we expect from elections in the American setting? Pared down, there are four core functions – what we might call the cornerstones of an election-centered democracy.

1. *Create a Dependence on the People* – By choosing the personnel of government, these events should afford citizens the regular opportunity to influence what government

does and does not do. “Frequent elections,” noted James Madison, “create a dependence on the people.”

2. *Reflect the Common Good* – Open, competitive elections should produce outcomes that reflect a broad consensus. The necessity of candidates and parties to mobilize moderate forces to win office should mitigate the weight of radical, fringe elements. Elected officials, the winners, will promote policies pro public bono (in the public interest) because they want to stay in office. Put a bit differently, elections check the weight of those at the ideological extremes.
3. *Produce Stability and Legitimacy* – Elections channel popular dissent, thereby creating stability and legitimacy. Elections should ease mounting social/economic pressures by creating a safety valve – a viable route for addressing big issues. Done properly, competitive elections grant those exercising power the comfort of a social mandate -- a widely held view that they have the right to charting the course of public policy. We might not like their choices, but they have the right to be in power, at least for the time being.
4. *Make Better Citizens* – Beyond systemic benefits, elections should turn private citizens into public citizens and make them feel better about their role in government. They should build trust and foster a sense of efficacy. Periodic election should afford a crash course on the issues of the day and help link like-minded into civic associations.

A Dependence on the People

Elections should serve as an expression of popular will. “The people are a sovereign whose vocabulary is limited to two words, ‘yes’ and ‘no’” (Schattschneider 1942, 52). We select leaders based on their experience, character and intelligence, but also their policy positions. This

process, where elections are thought to direct the course of public policy, can work in different ways but is centered on that rationality – both the voter’s and the elected official’s.

But do voters pay enough attention to public policy questions to redirect the course of government? Maybe it is not policy issues that drive vote choice, but rather vague, nebulous views of candidate traits and other idiosyncratic factors. There is a long literature on voter information-processing, much of it unflattering (Converse 1964; Niemi and Weisberg 1993; Caplan 2007; Niemi et. al. 2010, part II; Nardulli 2005, chapter 2). It is not at all clear that voters have ever absorbed a broad range of information or shifted through competing evidence. It is likely elites have always been able to manipulate mass opinion, to some degree. Heuristics, especially party identification, are used to sort and filter (Berelson, Lazarsfeld, and McPhee 1954; Popkin 1994; Lupia and McCubbins 1998).

Some would counter that even though voters might not know too much about the specifics on a range of policy questions, they are more policy grounded than it would seem. One of the strongest arguments along these lines was advanced by the late V. O. Key, a pioneer political scientist during the mid-20th century. In his book, *The Responsible Electorate*, Key argues that, in the end, American voters pay close attention to the goings on of government—and structure their vote choices accordingly. “Voters,” he writes, “or at least a large number of them, are moved by their perceptions and appraisals of policy performance” (26).

But a new volume penned by Achen and Bartels has shaken our understanding of voter motivations. Their book, *Democracy for Realists: Why Elections Do Not Produce Responsive Government* (2016), is aimed at understanding the rationale behind vote choice and party identification. With bushels of data to support their claim, these two authors find that “issue congruence [between voters and parties], in so far as it exists, is mostly a byproduct of other

connections, most of them lacking policy content” (301). They argue voters align themselves with racial, ethnic, occupational religious, recreational and other groups. It is their group identity that determines vote choice, not a particular policy concern or array of policy preferences. People do not seem to like or even understand the policy choices they make, they argue.

They further argue that in most elections the balance between Democrats and Republicans is close, so the outcome often hinges on “pure independents.” This group is also not especially issue-oriented, basing their vote choice on familiarity, charisma, a “fresh face” or a host of other non-policy cues. The outcome into nothing more than “random choices among the available parties—musical chairs” (312).

This may help explain the odd coalition that brought Donald Trump to power in 2016. On the one hand, many of the policies espoused by Trump such as tax cuts for the wealthy, the easing of banking regulations, opposition to raising the minimum wage and scaled-back health insurance guarantees would seem at odds with the concerns of blue collar workers. But on the other hand, the group identity of his supporters was rather well defined. The heart of the Trump winning coalition was working-class and middle-class white men. Jim Tankersley of the *Washington Post* put it this way: “Whites without a college degree — men and women — made up a third of the 2016 electorate. Trump won them by 39 percentage points...far surpassing 2012 Republican nominee Mitt Romney's 25 percent margin. They were the foundation of his victories across the Rust Belt” (November 9, 2016).

On top of all this is the potentially game-changing development that emerged during the 2016 campaign and in the early months of the Trump Administration: alternative facts. This is the aggressive spinning of policies and arguments regardless of contrary verifiable information – as well as the dissemination of fake news as a political tool. The barrier for evidence has

evaporated and emotion-rich information is used to draw more viewers, readers and listeners. If we add the continual drive for fresh “news,” the costs of traditional journalism, and the prospects of meddling by hostile foreign nations, we are left with no consensus or authority. *New York Times* blogger Farhad Manjoo noted, “We are roiled by preconceptions and biases, and we usually do what feels easiest – we gorge on information that confirms our ideas, and we shun what does not” (2016).

Again, citizens (voters) are called upon to judge those in power. If officials have done a good job, they are returned to office; if not, they are sent packing. Elections make the governors accountable to the governed. There *must* be an objective standard for the assessment--which is why the constitutional framers put so much stock in a free press. But with fake news and alternative facts “your side” has *always* done a good job and the “other” party has *always* failed (Shea 2017). There is no way to convince hardcore Republicans that Barack Obama saved the economy and there is little chance of convincing dire-hard Democrats that George Bush kept us safe after 9/11. The key ingredient in the accountability process -- objectivity -- has disappeared and the core rationale for elections has evaporated.

Reflecting the Common Good

Social scientists have long-understood how self-interest in politics could yield a collective good. Anthony Downs in *Economic Theory of Democracy* (1957), for example, argued that rational, vote-seeking candidates (and parties) will find the center of the distribution of voters. The outcome of government would fit the preferences of the median voter and is the most democratic. The selfish interest of the candidate would yield a common good for the system.

Things have changed since Down's era. First, there is geo-political sorting, where citizens cluster in ideologically like-minded communities (Bishop 2009). In 1976, about 25 percent of the counties in the United States produced a landslide presidential outcome – meaning the winner received more than 60 percent of the vote. By 2016, that figure had jumped to an astonishing 71 percent. Even though the *overall* Clinton/Trump contest was close, there was a blowout in nearly three-quarters of the roughly 3,200 counties. Clinton won 199 counties by 60 percent or more, and Trump won a staggering 2,035 by that margin. A whopping 40 percent of counties yielded a winner who received over 70 percent of the vote.

But what does sorting have to do with reflecting the common good? Through balances and shared powers, the framer hoped the system would force moderation and incremental change. It would be a stable, safe system, albeit a slow moving one. Compromise was possible because there was a vibrant center in most states and in *enough* congressional districts. Today, few elected officials value moderation. They don't worry about the next general election, but fret mightily about offending their base and the ever-looming primary contest (where only a handful of voters turn out). To their base, any whiff of compromise becomes sedition. (It should be noted, however, that the type of primary system the incumbent must confront could mitigate this dynamic. See Boatright 2015.)

The nature of partisanship has dramatically change, too. Whereas in the past our attachment to a party was centered on policy disputes or cues from groups and associations, today's version is grounded in the fear and loathing of the other side. Each sees the other party as crazy and even dangerous. Recent polls by Pew Research Center (2016) finds that the percentage of Republicans who have a very negative view of Democrats when from 21 percent in 1994, to a staggering 58 percent in 2016. The percent of Democrats who have a very

unfavorable view of Democrats when from 17 to 55 percent during that same time period. Why work with the other side when they (or at least their positions) threaten the nation?

Finally, there are sharp generational differences regarding the utility of elections. Young citizens are abandoning the election process in droves, preferring instead to spend their social capital on volunteer community projects (Wattenberg 2012; Shea and Green 2007; CIRCLE Staff 2016). They call this “service politics.” While admirable and surely a form of democratic engagement, a generation turned off to electoral politics will further obscure the common good.

Produce Stability and Legitimacy

It is held that as public policy veers from the concerns of citizens, new leaders are chosen to right the ship. Elections become an expression of majority sentiment, thus a safety valve. They can even be, according to Burnham, the “chief tension-management device,” bringing an “underdeveloped political system” in alignment with “the changing socioeconomic conditions” (1970, 181). Herbert Hoover and the Republicans failed to respond to the crushing weight of the Great Depression, so the electorate brought a new president and a new party to office. Ronald Reagan was sent to office to restore America’s standing in the world. We might say that elections are a tension-management device, bringing an underdeveloped political system in alignment with new socioeconomic conditions.

Nevertheless, there is powerful new evidence to suggest the actual interests of voters has little impact on the acts of elites after elections. Using a stunningly large data set – some 1,779 instances between 1981 and 2002 in which a national survey of the general public asked a favor/oppose question about a proposed policy change – Gilens and Page (2014) cast doubt on the “majoritarian theory.” They write,

Our analysis suggests that majorities of the American public actually have little influence over the policies our government adopts. . . . America's claims to being a democratic society are seriously threatened. When the preferences of economic elites and the stand of organized interest groups are controlled for, the preferences of the average American appear to have only a minuscule, near-zero, statistically non-significant impact on public policy.

In fact, there are a growing number of scholarly works on the strained, if not broken, link between voter preferences and policy outputs (see, for instance, Bartels 2016).

In a thought-provoking article published in the midst of the 2016 election, scholar Roslyn Fuller offered another perspective on the elections/policy nexus in the United States. "Americans," she writes, "made one fatal mistake in attributing the fruits of their labor solely to their own hard work, and another in believing that just because they were doing well economically, occasionally voting actually put them in control of the government" (2016). Much of the success of our "grand experiment" did not spring from Madison's novel scheme or participatory democracy, she argues, but instead the exploitation of groups (slaves, immigrants) and seemingly inexhaustible natural resources. That is to say, elections were an effective placebo so long as each generation had a higher standard of living. But that's gone. The masses are as "superfluous to the economy as they always were to the political system, required to act merely in a superficial capacity as consumers or as voters—roles that have increasingly come to coincide."

Thus an irony: The framers of the Constitution forged a system of checks and shared powers because they assumed social-conflict would define the American condition. Indeed, Madison's "republican remedy" in Federalist No. 10 is aimed at class-based factions (and to a

lesser extent religious groups). Recall that Shays Rebellion, the focusing event that led to the Constitutional Convention, surfaced from economic pressures. But it was the lack of significant class-based conflict that has allowed elections to define our politics. The framers paid scant attention to elections because they assumed a different dynamic – the clash of interest groups – would shape our politics. Economic interests were muted because there were abundant resources and a growing pool of labor (Shea 2017).

Today, no reconfiguration of policies can resurrect the fading American dream. As Nicholas Eberstadt points out in a recent essay, “For whatever reasons, the Great American Escalator, which had lifted successive generations of Americans to ever higher standards of living and levels of social well-being, broke down around then—and broke down very badly” (Feb. 15, 2017). While some elites may hold the economy remains sound, “this is patent nonsense.” It is no wonder that there is growing distrust of nearly every major social or political institution. The American dream is dying.

There is, perhaps, no better evidence of the shrinking utility of elections than the success of Donald Trump. Many understood his behavior and personality were abhorrent (his negatives before the election were record high), but in a desperate move to “make America great again,” and in the privacy of the voting booth, they held their noses and voted him to power. Trump’s outrageousness and ideological ambiguity were perfect features in 2016 because they rekindled faith in elections – at least for some Americans. Elections can *still* make things better, but exceptional times call for exceptional candidates. Unfortunately, as radical as his presidency might be, the forces compelling Trump’s candidacy cannot be tamed.

Making Better Citizens

Finally, one might expect that elections will draw citizens into the political process in sustained, meaningful ways. They help turn private citizens into public citizens, albeit for a brief period. Much of this spring from support for the system -- a belief that elections matter and that their input can make a difference.

According to the ANES data, the percentage of Americans who believe that elections can make officials pay attention to voters' concerns has dropped from about 65 percent in the mid-1960s to around 25 percent in recent years. Legitimacy is critical in any system, but it is foundational in a democracy. A recent poll by the *Washington Post* and the University of Maryland (Wagner and Clement, Oct. 28, 2017) suggests waning faith in the process. While the poll finds low levels of trust toward the federal government, which is certainly no surprise, it also finds that pride in U.S. democracy is eroding. "The share of Americans who are not proud of the way the country's democracy is working has doubled since three years ago — from 18 percent to 36 percent." Doubts about democracy are not limited to strong Trump critics. The poll finds that even 25 percent of his supporters are not proud of the way democracy is working. That's a higher figure than for the general public since at least the 1990s.

Rediscovering our Democratic Roots

American history has shown that significant change can occur when average citizens mobilize, lobby elites, take matters to the courts, or seek changes in political culture. Writing of the civil rights movement during the 1960s, the late Howard Reiter noted, "From organizing voter-registration campaigns under threats of violence in the South to massive rallies in the North, the civil rights movement resorted to almost every form of political participation besides voting in order to overthrow the old system in the South" (1993, 4). A more contemporary example might be the drive for LGBT rights. Incredible changes have been ushered in over the

last decade, and very few of them by elected officials. By putting our eggs in only the elections basket, so to speak, the will of the people may actually be stifled.

Democracy, in its purest form, is a process that brings citizens together to resolve issues and disputes. This implies face-to-face deliberation—airing your views and listening to the concerns of others. Through discussion and extended deliberation citizens become better informed not only about their own view on a particular matter, but also more sensitive to the opinions of others in the community. As noted by the philosopher John Stuart Mill, “He is called upon, when so engaged, to weigh interest not his own; to be guided in causes of conflicting claims, by another rule than his private partialities.”

Yet participation in contemporary American elections is usually an isolated, individualized act. We discuss candidates and platforms prior to the election with friends and family, but when it comes our behavior (casting our vote), it is a private matter, done in the concealment of the polling booth. By turning elections into an individual act, private interests are more likely to displace the public spirit. In other words, is it possible that the current model discourages thinking about the collective? The long-term stability of a system is predicated on citizens looking beyond their own short-term interest to the general welfare. The privation of politics makes that less likely.

If elections no longer fuel the democratic process in the United States, are there other viable pathways of participation? Fuller suggests the prospects are grim: “Under the present constitutional system, there simply isn’t much that those masses can threaten [public officials] with. They are as superfluous to the economy as they always were to the political system, required to act merely in a superficial capacity as consumers or as voters—roles that have increasingly come to coincide” (2016).

But is the patient terminally ill? For instance, could social media-based involvement spur meaningful engagement, as many have conjectured? Maybe. Social media engagement has mockingly been dubbed slacktivism and arm-chair activism. Several years ago Gladwell offered a swat at any relationship between social networking sites and broad democratic engagement. Contrary to the hopes of the “evangelists of social media,” he argues new modes of communication have not drawn young citizens into the political fray. “Social networks are ineffective at increasing participation—by lessening the level of motivation that participation requires” (2010). It allows access to information but it does not forge connections to other political actors or to the larger political system. Social media makes it easier to express yourself, but harder for that expression to have impact. It also makes it easier to fence out contrary opinions.

Empirical findings connecting acts of support on line and subsequent cost-intensive behaviors has been muddled – at best. Boulianne recently conducted a meta-analysis on the relationship between social network engagement and broader political involvement. Her findings suggest a small positive relationship but notes studies relying on panel data are less likely to report positive and statistically significant coefficients, compared to cross-sectional surveys. “Popular discourse has focused on the use of social media by the Obama campaigns... [and] while these campaigns may have revolutionized aspects of election campaigning online...there is little evidence that the social media aspects of the campaigns were successful in changing people's levels of participation” (2015).

That is to say, there is little hard evidence to suggest social media activism increases real-world engagement. But this is a new tool, and there are some indications, mostly anecdotal, that social media helped mobilize many of the protests following Donald Trump’s inaugural. The

authors of *Political Turbulence* (Margetts et. al. 2016) suggest social media allows for “tiny acts” of political participation (liking, tweeting, viewing, following, signing petitions). Rather than identifying with issues, forming a collective identity and then acting, social media pushes citizens to consider issue and identify with others later, if at all. Tiny acts can “scale up” to larger demonstrations for policy change. The best we might say is that the jury is still out on the potential of social media.

Another possible avenue for democratic revitalization is broad social, economic and intellectual social movements. Throughout our history, there have been periods where the interests of a large segments of the public forced a policy agenda on the system. A common feature of these events is that they have typically arisen from those excluded from the mainstream political process (read election-centered). For example, given the ironclad control that party machines had on elections and subsequent policies, the success of progressive reforms between 1880 and 1920 offers evidence that tectonic shifts are possible despite the dominance of the election-centered model.

Which brings us to local interest mobilization – the very mechanism used to help secure the right to vote. One of the defining characteristics of contemporary politics is the breadth of political engagement. While levels of turnout have remained more or less constant, other indicators of engagement have shown remarkable growth. For example, according to the American National Election Study, the percentage of Americans who attended a political meeting has more than doubled since the late 1990s (ANES Cumulative File 2016). A 2014 Pew Research study found that 40 percent of liberals and conservatives remain mobilized during non-election periods (Pew 2014). Americans of all stripes stand ready to engage.

We might consider the Tea Party movement. It hard to dispute the influence that the Tea Party had during Barak Obama’s administration – particularly the first term. Who could have anticipated rancor over raising the debt ceiling? And what about the steady drumbeat for the repeal of Obamacare – a program many on the left saw as tame? How many Americans had ever heard of sequestration prior to the Tea Party? Who could have imagined that John Boehner’s troubles would come from the right?

The movement was certainly not as organic as initially thought. Mayer’s work, *Dark Money* (2016), and Nesbit’s volume, *Poison Tea* (2016), among others, detail ties between the Koch brothers’ and what seemed to be a grassroots movement. Genuine anger and fear mobilized many of the Tea Party followers, but the Kochs and some 450 wealthy donors spent a decade and hundreds of millions building a national network of umbrella organizations. Mobilized by Americans for Prosperity and Freedom Works (both Koch-financed), Tea Party activists drove much of the policy agenda even though they did not control the White House. To the chagrin of those on the left, it was a vivid example of how non-electoral mobilization can dominate our politics. The left captured the White House, but could not follow through.

Perhaps we could say, then, that much of the smart money in politics during the last two decades has been on group mobilization after the polls were closed. If anything, the 2016 election underscored how “big money” in elections has become a red herring – or at least less important than we might think. Did the Kochs *not* help fund Trump’s campaign because they knew it would be a waste of money?

There is evidence that the political left has gotten the memo. Beginning with huge demonstrations the day after Donald Trump’s inaugural and continuing at numerous venues, particularly the town hall meetings of federal legislators, progressive groups have sprung to life.

As with the Tea Party, it's likely that this mobilization comes from both professional groups and the anxieties of average folks.

Americans of all stripes seem to be discovering that political power extends far beyond the vote, to the ability to disrupt, withhold, boycott, delay, strike and block. These tactics threaten a system that functions on order, routine and anticipated outcomes. In April of 2017, Massachusetts Senator Elizabeth echoed the call for a new form of activism:

This is not about what happens every four years, or what happens four years from now.

We have to be in this fight right this minute. This is what has changed in democracy in America. It's not the case that we can simply put this off and every four years we'll all kind of get interested in one big race — or maybe every two years for congressional races or Senate race.... We have to be engaged, and we have to be engaged right now. I mean, between now and the end of the day (NRP Interview, April 6, 2017).

But interest mobilization is not a new tool. How might this approach be refined for the 21st Century? There is no “silver bullet” reform, but the renewal of *local associational life* offer much hope. From food and employment, to housing, recreation and culture, Americans are discovering the power and potential of “local.” In some ways, the argument will parallel Levin’s conclusion in *The Fractured Republic* (2016) regarding the revival of the middle layers of society—families and communities, schools and churches, charities and associations, local governments and markets. Junger’s latest work (2016), strikes a similar note: “We have a strong instinct to belong to small groups defined by clear purpose and understanding--tribes.” He suggests local connections will be the key to our psychological well-being, and the same can be said about our politics.

What is more, there is a growing understanding that deep cultural differences will continue to make inclusive, national policy solutions difficult. As Levin notes, “We are now a highly diverse and multifarious society defined by its profusion more than its solidity” (2016, 186). For decades, conservatives clamored for local control, but today many on both sides of the ideological divide understand that reaching a collective good is less likely for issues linked to rights and equality, especially given the ideological homogenization of communities. For conservatives and liberals, “new federalism” is an increasingly accepted response to the strains of the federal policy morass.

* * * *

Elections have consequences. It matters that Donald Trump is in the White House and that the GOP controls both chambers of Congress. We will all continue to pay close attention to this dimension of politics if for no other reason than that they are narrative-driving spectacles, guaranteed to rack up viewers, ratings, and hits. But elections matter less than we think and less than at other points in our history. They have become the show horse, when what we need is a work horse. It is a mistake to imagine that elections will, by themselves, compel the governors to heed the wishes of governors; they are foundational, but clearly not transformative events.

Even the supporters of the victorious candidate will get frustrated by the slow pace of meaningful change and it’s fair to say that the scope of policy adjustments after “big” elections can be narrow. There is more than an ounce of validity to George Wallace’s adage that there’s not a “dime’s worth of difference between the two parties.” It is also certainly true that Congress seems mired in gridlock and we have less confidence that elections are fair -- and that the “best” candidate wins. The role of big money can be upsetting, to be sure. And yet, those who sit in positions of power are better able to bend government outputs to their interests than those who

do not. Barack Obama might not have been able to usher in all or even most of his “change” agenda, just as Donald Trump will probably not transform the economy. But they took up residence in the White House and their opponents did not.

One of the grand canards of our politics is that voting defines activism. We will sometimes hear that if you don’t vote, you should keep quiet. Non-voters lose the “privilege” to air concerns. Whether this silly notion grew naturally like a weed in the garden or was planted as yet another hegemonic tool can be debated another day. But we do know that political activism in a democracy can move along many different pathways. Many of the most portentous changes in our government and society occurred despite repeated expressions of the majority’s will. The solution our troubles, as it is in any vibrant democracy, is not one mode of activism or another -- but *all of the above*.

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