Political realism: How hacks, machines, big money, and back-room deals can strengthen American democracy

By Jonathan Rauch

INTRODUCTION

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I n December of 2014, progressives and Tea Partiers found common ground—not something that happens every day. Congressional leaders had attached to an omnibus spending bill a rider increasing by a factor of almost ten the amount that individuals could donate to the national parties for conventions and certain other purposes. Progressives denounced the measure as among "the most corrupting campaign finance provisions ever enacted," a gift to special interests and plutocrats.[1] Tea Partiers denounced the measure as "a sneaky power grab by establishment Republicans designed to undermine outside conservative groups," a gift to incumbents and party insiders.[2] For quite different reasons, it seems, these two antagonistic factions managed to agree that the flow of money to party professionals is a menace.

It was a small but telling instance of one of America's oddest but most consequential political phenomena: the continuous and systematic onslaught against political machines and insiders by progressivism, populism, and libertarianism—three very different political reform movements which nonetheless all regard transactional politics as at best a necessary evil and more often as corrupt and illegitimate. This attack, though well intentioned, has badly damaged the country's governability, a predictable result (and one accurately predicted more than fifty years ago). Fortunately, much of the damage can be undone by rediscovering political realism.

The politicos of our grandparents' generation did a pretty good job of governing the country, despite living in a world of bosses and back rooms and unlimited donations, and many of them understood some home truths which today's political reformers have too often overlooked or suppressed. In

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1. Lindsay Wise, "New Federal Budget Bill Lets Political Parties Cash In," *McClatchyDC*, December 16, 2014 (www.mcclatchydc.com/2014/12/16/250243/new-federal-budget-bill-lets-political.html).
2. Tarini Parti and Anna Palmer, "Tea Party Fumes over Campaign Finance Plan," *Politico*, December 11, 2014.

particular, they understood that transactional politics—the everyday give-and-take of dickering and compromise—is the essential work of governing and that government, and thus democracy, won't work if leaders can't make deals and make them stick. They would have looked with bafflement and dismay upon a world where even deals that command majority support within both political parties—something as basic as keeping the government or the Homeland Security Department open—set off intraparty confrontations and governmental crises instead of being worked out among responsible adults. Not being fools or crooks, they understood that much of what politicians do to bring order from chaos, like buying support with post offices and bridges, looks unappealing in isolation and up close, but they saw that the alternatives were worse. In other words, they were realists.

Today, a growing number of scholars and practitioners are bringing new sophistication to our grandparents' realism. Though they use diverse approaches and vocabularies, they can be meaningfully regarded as an emerging school, one characterized by respect for grubby but indispensable transactional politics and by skepticism toward purism, amateurism, and idealistic political reforms. This essay builds on their work. In particular, it argues that

> —government cannot govern unless political machines or something like them exist and work, because machines are uniquely willing and able to negotiate compromises and make them stick.

> —progressive, populist, and libertarian reformers have joined forces to wage a decades-long war against machine politics by weakening political insiders' control of money, nominations, negotiations, and other essential tools of political leadership.

> —reformers' fixations on corruption and participation, although perhaps appropriate a long time ago, have become destabilizing and counterproductive, contributing to the rise of privatized pseudo-machines that make governing more difficult and politics less accountable.

> —although no one wants to or could bring back the likes of Tammany Hall, much can be done to restore a more sensible balance by removing impediments which reforms have placed in the way of transactional politics and machine-building.

> —political realism, while coming in many flavors, is emerging as a coherent school of analysis and offers new directions for a reform conversation which has run aground on outdated and unrealistic assumptions.

And where better to begin than with Tammany Hall?

ORIGINS: J. Q. WILSON'S PROPHETIC CRITIQUE OF AMATEURISM

What I'm calling political realism (and will define more specifically in the next section) has roots as deep as Aristotle, Thucydides, and Machiavelli. In more modern times, it found a colorful exponent in the person of George Washington Plunkitt (1842–1924), a Tammany Hall functionary who held forth on the virtues of patronage employment (at one point he simultaneously held four government jobs, drawing salaries for three of them) and "honest graft," by which he meant insider deals rewarding political loyalists and which he distinguished from purely personal corruption. "The looter goes in for himself alone without considerin' his organization or his city," Plunkitt said. "The politician looks after his own interests, the organization's interests, and the city's interests all at the same time." Reformers

who ignored the distinction and tried to stamp out honest graft, he believed, courted anarchy. "First, this great and glorious country was built up by political parties; second, parties can't hold together if their workers don't get the offices when they win; third, if the parties go to pieces, the government they built up must go to pieces, too; fourth, then there'll be h--- to pay."[3]

Plunkitt, of course, lost the argument about patronage jobs; the civil service was professionalized, and we are all glad of it. In the twentieth century, politicians found ways to do business without recourse to no-show jobs, feather-bedding, kickbacks, and insider dealing. But Plunkitt remains relevant: he reminds us that governments, or at least well-functioning governments, rely not merely on formal legal mechanisms but also on informal political structures and intricate systems of incentives. No informal structures and incentives? No governance.

For all his charm, Plunkitt lacked the sophistication of James Q. Wilson, whose 1962 book, *The Amateur Democrat,* eminently deserves rediscovery today.[4] Wilson, then beginning a great career in political science, looked in detail at power struggles involving Democratic Party political clubs in New York, Chicago, and Los Angeles. The book is a masterpiece of qualitative research, and I won't attempt to do justice to its fine-textured rendering of mid-century American micro-politics. It is also, however, rich with observations and insights which are as pertinent today as when they were first published and which are foundational to my understanding of political realism.

Wilson mapped conflicts between what he called amateurs (today we might call them activists) and political professionals (today's "political class") over control of local political organizations. The two groups despised each other, despite being nominally on the same side (all Democrats). "A keen antipathy inevitably develops between the new and the conventional politicians. The former accuse the latter of being at best 'hacks' and 'organization men' and at worst 'bosses' and 'machine leaders.' The latter retort by describing the former as 'dilettantes,' 'crackpots,' 'outsiders,' and 'hypocritical do-gooders.'"[5]

Like Plunkitt, Wilson sees parties, incentive structures, and political hierarchies as essential not just to electioneering but also to governing. Parties, he says, have at least three functions in democratic government: "they recruit candidates, mobilize voters, and assemble power within the formal government." He emphasizes the importance of the last function: "If legal power is badly fragmented among many independent elective officials and widely decentralized among many levels of government, the need for informal methods of assembling power becomes great." Tension between professionals and amateurs inevitably arises because "all three party functions will in some degree be performed differently by amateur as contrasted to professional politicians."[6]

Professionals are repeat players. They work the system for a living and are accountable for electoral victory and sustainable power arrangements; otherwise, they are out of a job. Thus they think in terms of the realities of power and they "develop a certain detachment towards politics and a certain immunity to its excitement and its outcomes." To appearances, and indeed often enough in reality, professionals are calculating, even cynical: all the more so in that the professional "is preoccupied with the outcome of politics in terms of winning or losing. Politics, to him, consists of concrete questions and specific persons who must be dealt with in a manner that will 'keep everybody

3. William L. Riordan, *Plunkitt of Tammany Hall*, Project Gutenberg digital edition (no page numbers), chapters 7 and 3 (www.gutenberg.org/ebooks/2810).

4. James Q. Wilson, *The Amateur Democrat: Club Politics in Three Cities* (University of Chicago Press, 1962); reprinted with a new preface in 1966.

5. Ibid., p. 2.

6. Ibid., pp. 16–17.

happy' and thus minimize the possibility of defeat at the next election. . . . Although he is not oblivious to the ends implied by political outcomes, he sees . . . the good of society as the by-product of efforts that are aimed, not at producing the good society, but at gaining power and place for one's self and one's party."[7]

Professionals prefer to traffic in interests, not ideas. They feel more at ease with transaction and negotiation than with the politics of issues. "Issues will be avoided except in the most general terms or if the party is confident that a majority supports its position."[8] Professionals are not oblivious to ideology or principle, but they tend to be in politics for extrinsic rewards like power, status, sociability, the fun of the game, and tangible benefits, including pecuniary ones. Being loyal, paying dues, and respecting the system matter. Hierarchy matters. *The system* matters. Writing contemporaneously with Wilson about the struggle between Democratic party regulars and reformers, Daniel Patrick Moynihan described the regulars with characteristic vividness: In their world, politics "is a decent, quiet, family affair, and the highest priority is assigned to those things which keep it so: patronage, small and not-so-small favors, the strict observance of the complex prerogatives of party members on various levels. The Democratic Party is the life of men such as [state party chairman Mike] Prendergast, and . . . they have a sharp dislike for those who disrupt its orderly, hierarchical functions." As for issues, those "are viewed as essentially divisive influences that one would hope to do without." (Moynihan, being Moynihan, can't resist adding puckishly: "In the regular party, conferences on issues are regarded as women's work.")[9]

Amateurs—"activists," as we now often call them—are very different animals. They are less interested in extrinsic rewards than in advancing a public purpose, fighting for justice, experiencing the intrinsic satisfactions of participation. For them, issues are the essence of politics. "The amateur asserts that principles, rather than interest, ought to be both the end and the motive of political action," Wilson writes. Far from taking a detached attitude, the amateur "sees each battle as a 'crisis,' and each victory as a triumph and each loss as a defeat for a cause."[10] The choice of candidates and leaders, for the amateur, should be based on their commitment to principles and policies rather than on personal loyalty or party label or parochial advantage. Parties, rather than being "neutral agents" to mobilize majorities and gain power, should be "the sources of program and the agents of social change."[11]

Amateurs not only love issues, they *need* them as a source of legitimacy and cohesion, and they will manufacture them if none are at hand: "Whereas professional politicians attempt to avoid issues because the loyalty of their workers is commanded by other means, amateurs generate issues because there seems to be no other way to command these loyalties."[12] Because legitimacy comes from fighting for what's right, politicians who compromise for the sake of interest or power have sold their souls and lost their legitimacy. For amateurs, justice means not a transactional outcome but fidelity to an abstract ideal, like the public interest. They are suspicious of compromise, loyalty, insiders, inducements, deals. Being amateurs, they typically have jobs outside of politics or enter the political fray only temporarily, a fact which they will trumpet as a source of disinterest and political chastity. (In New York, Wilson notes, anti-Tammany reformers in the 1950s were heavily drawn from Protestant and Jewish middle-class young professionals.) Not being repeat players, they can afford to play single hands for high stakes, and they cannot easily be held accountable for losing.

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7. Ibid., p. 4. In this section, for consistency with Wilson's tone and to avoid anachronism (the political practitioners that he described were almost all men), I follow his style in using male generic pronouns. No offense to Nancy Pelosi!

8. Ibid., p. 17.

9. Daniel Patrick Moynihan, "'Bosses' and 'Reformers': A Profile of the New York Democrats," *Commentary*, June 1, 1961.

10. Wilson, *The Amateur Democrat*, p. 4.

11. Ibid., pp. 18–19.

12. Ibid., p. 160.

It goes without saying that most real-life actors exhibit traits of both amateurs and professionals, and any system which excluded either type would be morally bankrupt and politically unsustainable. Wilson saw value in both kinds of politics. And he understood that the old-style city machines were finished, though the type of politics that they embodied survived in etiolated forms: "The ethic of the machine persists, in modified form, in the habits of professional politicians for whom the value of organization and leadership are indisputable [and] personal loyalties and commitments remain indispensable."[13] He also saw, however, that amateurism was succeeding in stigmatizing professionalism as corrupt and professionals as hacks, a development that he looked upon with foreboding. As parties became more ideological, he foresaw, they would also become more oppositional. In a remarkably prescient passage, he says:

> Most generally, the amateur believes that political parties ought to be programmatic, internally democratic, and largely or entirely free of a reliance on material incentives such as patronage. A programmatic party would offer a real policy alternative to the opposition party. A vote for the party would be as much, or more, a deliberate vote for a set of clear and specific proposals, linked by a common point of view or philosophy of government, as it would be a vote for a set of leaders. The programmatic basis of one party would, to some extent, compel an expression of purpose by the opposing party and thus lead toward the realignment of both parties nationally, with liberals in one and conservatives in the other.[14]

Wilson made that prediction years before the great partisan realignment along ideological lines, before modern computerized gerrymandering, and certainly before the Tea Party. Even more eerily prescient was his prediction that issue-based politics would lead increasingly to gridlock:

> The need to employ issues as incentives and to distinguish one's party from the opposition along policy lines will mean that political conflict will be intensified, social cleavages will be exaggerated, party leaders will tend to be men skilled in the rhetorical arts, and the party's ability to produce agreement by trading issue-free resources will be reduced.[15]

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13. Ibid., p. 9.
14. Ibid., p. 355.
15. Ibid., p. 358.

It is hard to imagine a better description of where we find ourselves today.

Wilson, as one of his students pointed out to me recently, did not, in his long career, circle back to the themes of *The Amateur Democrat*. One can imagine why. For all its prescience, the book has a valedictory air, as if observing the closing of an epoch in American politics or the turning of a page. In many ways today's world is transformed. The electorate is more polarized and ideological than in the early 1960s; when a politician says—as Senator Marco Rubio (R-Fla.) did recently—that ideas and policy are what politics is "supposed to be all about," the statement is uncontroversial.[16] Issue-free politics today is unthinkable; in that sense, we are all amateurs now. Interest groups are more numerous and professionalized today than in the early 1960s, which complicates governing and blurs the distinction that Wilson drew between the amateur and the professional. Activists and ideologues are commonly lifers, ensconced in durable organizations and career-long jobs: purists with paychecks. The anti-tax activist Grover Norquist exemplifies the phenomenon: he is simultaneously an outside agitator and a thirty-year Washington fixture. In *that* sense, it might be said that we are all *professionals* now. And the public's expectations for politics have changed. Gone is the trust that government will "do the right thing," replaced by an assumption that transactional politics is a rigged game played by and for special interests. For all those reasons and others besides, the space for transactional politics has shrunk since 1962.

So why dwell on the world as Wilson found it in 1962? Surely not in hopes of turning back the clock, which is impossible even if it were desirable. (No gay American, of which I'm an example, needs a lecture on what was wrong with the politics of the 1950s and 1960s.) Rather, Wilson's appreciation for transactional politics deserves a second look because today's political culture has reacted too dogmatically and puritanically against it. The political aesthetic, as it were, of the amateur and the purist has all but evicted professionalism from respectability; practically every political reformer in the country—and, for that matter, practically every schoolchild—will tell you that machines are rotten, that careerists are slimy, and that what politics needs is more popular participation, more attention to issues, more transparency, more disinterest, more fresh faces. The one-sided conversation has contributed to one-sided policies and outcomes, in turn contributing to the result which Wilson (and Plunkitt) predicted: governing is harder.

REALISM: GOVERNING IS DIFFICULT AND POLITICS IS TRANSACTIONAL

Neither Wilson's work nor that of any other single thinker encompasses more than some of the many strands which, collectively, make up the school of thought—or perhaps cluster of attitudes—that I think of as political realism. With that caveat, let me do my best to explain what I think political realists have in common.

When people talk about realism today in the context of public policy, they usually have foreign policy in mind. I appropriate the term for a domestic context because, although the two spheres are very different, there are important parallels between them.

Like the modern realist in foreign policy, the political realist is not someone who is amoral, or who believes that might is right, or who believes that ideologies and governing philosophies don't matter, or who thinks that favorable ends justify repugnant means. The realist who believes those things today is a straw man, usually a caricature concocted for rhetorical target practice.

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16. Tim Alberta, "The Ryanization of Rubio," *National Journal*, January 31, 2015, p. 14.

In foreign policy, realism is an attitude, not a prescription. It sees the world as a dangerous place in which peace and civic order can never be taken for granted; it insists on respecting, and never wishing away, the ornery hydraulics of power; it believes, as a general matter, in playing the ball where it lies and seeking incremental gains.

Realism in foreign affairs, besides being an attitude, also implies a theory about where peace comes from: not primarily from hegemonic power (as neocons and imperialists believe) or from international cooperation (as liberal internationalists believe), though those things are important. It comes, above all, from *equilibrium*. Equilibrium is not a good in itself, and sometimes it needs to be upset; but, for the realist, knocking things out of kilter sets off all kinds of unpredictable chain reactions, which can be hard to foresee and harder to control.

Above all, the realist believes in the reality of trade-offs. We live in a world of second and often third choices, and in order to govern one must make decisions and engage in practices which look bad up close and are hard to defend in public but which, nonetheless, seem to be the best alternative at the time. Always, the realist asks: "Compared with what?" Principles alone mean little until examined in the harsh light of real-world alternatives.

What, then, is *political* realism? Attitudinally, it shares many traits and premises with foreign policy realism. It sees governing as difficult and political peace and stability as treasures never to be taken for granted. It understands that power's complex hydraulics make interventions unpredictable and risky. (Banning some ugly political practice, for instance, won't necessarily make it go away.) It therefore values incrementalism and, especially, equilibrium—and, therefore, transactional politics. If most of the players in a political system are invested in dickering, the system is doing something right, not something wrong. Back-scratching and logrolling are signs of a healthy political system, not a corrupt one. Transactional politics is not *always* appropriate or effective, but a political system which is not reliably capable of it is a system in a state of critical failure.

Deal-making and power-balancing do not happen by themselves. They require, in foreign policy, structures and forums that are both legally constituted (the United Nations Security Council; the World Trade Organization) and informal (diplomatic and personal channels; alliances and understandings). In politics, likewise, dealing-making and balancing require both constitutional structures like legislatures and informal ones like parties and political networks. Like Wilson and Plunkitt, realists try always to keep sight of the importance and health of informal channels, especially parties. If realists have one view in common, it is that parties play (or should play) a central role in governing but have been too often overlooked or marginalized by the reforms of recent decades.

A realist is likely to take a fairly indulgent view of the shenanigans that politicians get up to, provided that they get results. To govern and keep the peace, politicians need to do things which don't look attractive when examined in isolation and placed under a moral microscope, and the good and great politicians are no exceptions. "No one used the power of patronage more ruthlessly than Abraham Lincoln," Wilson reminds us.[17] Ask her quietly, and a realist may acknowledge that, in any political system, the right amount of corruption is greater than zero, because a zero-tolerance approach criminalizes politics without actually ending corruption.

And always, the realist, while acknowledging the importance and value of ideals and issues in politics, will insist on the ineluctability of trade-offs. You cannot simply assume that improving the optics of the political system, or reforming one troublesome piece of it, will not have costly consequences elsewhere. *Governing is hard*, inherently and always hard, and good intentions and pure practices will not reliably bring it about. You need deals and dealmakers, too.

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17. Wilson, *The Amateur Democrat*, p. 22.

MACHINES: WHERE TRANSACTIONS HAPPEN

Clearly, realist attitudes are capacious. When it comes to specifics, political scholars with generally realist worldviews tend not to be doctrinaire, which makes pinning down their worldview difficult. Some emphasize the importance of parties, others the dynamics of negotiations, still others the impracticality of campaign finance rules. Without denigrating any of those viewpoints, I want to make the case for a realist emphasis on machine politics. Here, to me, is a distinctive, important, and greatly underappreciated realist proposition:

In order for governments to govern, political machines or something like them need to exist, and they need to work.

By "govern" I mean reliably and reasonably reach accommodations on the problems and conflicts which demand resolution from day to day.

By "political machines," I mean informal (as opposed to legally constituted) and mutually accountable hierarchies, networks, and relationships that allow politicians to organize their environment by reaching accommodations, honoring accommodations, rewarding and protecting supporters, punishing and marginalizing defectors, and exerting coordinated influence through multiple formal channels.

By "or something like them" I mean to indicate that the famed big-city party machines of yesteryear are merely one kind of machine and that other, less sharply defined political organizations or networks can do the work of machines: for example, the "regular order" system in Congress, with its hierarchy of committees and seniority rules. Until the 1990s, the U.S. House of Representatives had a pronounced machine-like aspect, with minority Republicans claiming a piece of the appropriations action in exchange for cooperation with majority Democrats (an arrangement gleefully demolished by Newt Gingrich). Even coalitions which are independent of formal political parties and structures, groupings like the Tea Party or the Koch brothers' network, can have some machine-like aspects, as we'll see.

My emphasis on "machines or something like them" is unconventional, to be sure. Most realists focus their analyses on parties. And well they should: parties are important, and machines have usually been partisan (and parties, when strong and effective, have been machine-like). But reciprocally accountable political hierarchies are not necessarily partisan, as we know from the House in its relatively bipartisan days; and parties are not necessarily machine like, as we know from watching the Republican majority's travails in Congress today. Translating the axes of analysis from parties to machines has the advantage of putting function ahead of form: it begins by asking not what an organization or system *is* but what it *does*, which is a useful place to start. It also avoids some common confusions that can arise in a party-centered analysis: for example, between strong party *machines* and strong party *identification* or *ideology*. It's often said that parties are stronger than ever because votes on Capitol Hill are so consistently partisan.

But that can be (and usually is) because the majority party is allowing votes only when its factions agree, whereas machines facilitate decision making when fellow partisans *don't* agree. Ideological solidarity is a brittle glue, and reliance on it for intraparty cohesion is a sign of a weak party machine, not a strong one.

Finally, by "need to exist and need to work," I mean that they need to establish incentive structures which enable political leaders to lead and which encourage political followers to follow—thereby assisting with what Wilson called the assembling of power in government.

And what are machines' characteristics and functions? Among many, I can think of a few which seem especially important.

First, *machines are hierarchical.* From the lowly volunteer to the national chairman or boss, most people, most of the time, will know their place, but most will also feel entitled to a certain degree of discretion and respect; reciprocity and interdependence are expected up and down the line. A result is that, as with a firm, a lot of distributed work can get done.

Please note: being *hierarchical* is not at all the same as being *authoritarian*. Like a large corporation, a well-oiled machine is characterized by multiple power centers, decentralized authority, and internal negotiations over authority and turf. (This was true even of the most renowned machine in its heyday: "At no time," writes Wilson, "has the Tammany leader been completely free of intraparty opposition and usually that opposition has been intense."[18]) Machines are not military-style command-and-control structures, with bosses barking orders to flunkies; they are hierarchies based upon mutual accountability.

Similarly, *centralizing* a machine is not at all the same as *strengthening* it. A corporate CEO who concentrates decision making in the C-suite while hollowing out the divisions might expand her authority at the expense of her effectiveness. In much the same way, House leaders' centralization of power over the past several decades and their weakening of the committee system and regular order seem to have diminished their governing capacity more than it increased their personal authority, weakening them on net.

Second, *machines are disciplinary.* Members can't necessarily be dictated to or fired (especially if they're elected officials or volunteers), but they can be encouraged and discouraged, sometimes strongly. Punishments include ostracism, loss of influence, or withdrawal of prestige or benefits. More important and effective than punishments, however, are rewards: campaign money, a committee position, an endorsement, an earmark (until recently), face time with higher-ups, or a promotion in the hierarchy. Rewards and inducements, more than punishments and exactions, are the currency of the successful machine.

Third, *machines set boundaries.* They distinguish between insiders and outsiders, and they favor insiders. The machine needs to know who is on its side, which requires establishing thresholds and borders, though not necessarily formal ones like membership cards or loyalty oaths. But no machine survives without the ability to identify and incentivize insiders and loyalists who are within a circle of trust.

Fourth, *machines prize professionalism.* Because their goal is not only to obtain power but also to retain power, they need a backbone of regulars who have track records brokering power and who will respond predictably to incentives

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18. Ibid., p. 36.

over time: careerist politicians, pollsters, consultants, fundraisers, and so on. Amateurs and single issue activists have their uses, but without hacks the machine fails, which is why it puts such a premium on people who pay their dues and work their way up the ranks.

Fifth, *machines are middlemen.* To the extent possible, they seek to organize and channel political activism and voter participation—which usually means discouraging direct participation or participation through rival channels. The ethic is, "If you need something, we're the people to talk to." In general, they seek to consolidate political energy, co-opt activists, and manipulate voters. Fragmentation is their enemy.

Sixth, *machines are gatekeepers.* In order to preserve their boundaries and their authority, they seek to control access to prerogatives such as committee seats, floor votes, money, and the ballot. If the machine gets its way, an independent political entrepreneur will have a difficult time influencing the system without paying her dues and going through channels.

Seventh, *machines are durable*, or try to be. Because they need not only to obtain power but also to protect and keep it, they have relatively lengthy time horizons—arguably the longest in American politics. They have to win not just once but again and again, which gives them quite a bit of accountability to their stakeholders, akin to the kind of accountability that the demand for profitability over time forces upon corporations.

Eighth, *machines seek monopolies.* In order to preserve power, they will seek to manipulate rules and rulemaking (redistricting, voting rules, and the like) to shape the political battlefield in their favor—often with the goal of raising barriers to entry for would-be political competitors. They also will try to get their hands on as many formal levers of power as they can, using each to reinforce the others.

Ninth, *machines are transactional.* When they work, they are capable of brokering deals internally between many diverse constituents and interests. The machine does not need internal consensus or even an internal majority to set a direction; as with a corporation, many internal deals and decisions will be delegated to designated officials and subgroups. Machines also broker deals externally, negotiating with their political competitors. Just as important, thanks to their durability and discipline and ability to link multiple transactions, they can pretty reliably deliver on the deals that they make. Constituents who may not like one deal will often live with it, knowing that they're in line for another deal which they do like.

Tenth, *machines are opaque.* Building package deals often requires floating trial balloons, trading across multiple priorities and constituencies, and assuming that nothing is settled until everything is settled. *I'll give you this if a third person gives me that*—which depends on the third person's getting something from yet a fourth person, and so on. In full public view, complicated deal-building is hard to do, indeed usually impossible; therefore machines tend to prefer privacy.

UPSIDES: HOW MACHINES HELP GOVERNMENT WORK

The downsides of machines are so well known that they need no elaboration here. If, indeed, there is a pejorative adjective, it has been applied to machine politics. Too often lost sight of are machines' considerable capabilities and, yes, virtues. It is important to see both sides of the ledger.

So how does the positive side look? Pretty impressive, actually. Machines can accomplish a variety of ends which otherwise are quite difficult to achieve. Most important is that they can compromise—even when many of the people associated with them would rather not compromise. People compromise not because they want to, but because they have to.[19] In America, the Constitution's system of distributed power forces politicians and factions to compromise in order to get much of anything done, but machines—party organizations, congressional hierarchies, even to some extent interest group congeries—are the kitchen where the deals are cooked up. Show me a political system without machine politics, and I'll show you confusion, fragmentation, and a drift toward ungovernable extremism.

For many of the same reasons, machines tend to be a force for moderation. They must engage in transactional politics to survive, and that often requires them to put ideology aside, or at least to dial it back, in the interests of holding power. Recent research finds that states in which a larger share of political money flows through parties have less polarized legislatures, because the parties, desiring to win, press legislators and candidates toward the center.[20] An interesting question is this: which would behave more moderately, a system with many moderates but without political machines, or a system with political machines but few moderates? The answer isn't obvious. I believe, in any case, that modern analysts miss something important when they assume that moderation comes from moderates; often, moderation comes from machines that force politicians toward compromise.

Instinctively, machine culture is skeptical of or hostile to freelancers and insurgents, though it may pay them lip service, and it is most friendly to loyalists and repeat players—the people who have skin in the game and will most reliably respond to incentives, people otherwise known as hacks. Machine hierarchies are pretty adept at marginalizing grandstanders and solo entrepreneurs. In a machine-dominated Senate, there isn't much a figure like Ted Cruz can do except talk. He certainly can't shut down the government.

On the flip side of the coin, a core machine function is to protect loyal insiders who "take one for the team." After President Clinton personally pressured Representative Marjorie Margolies-Mezvinsky (D-Pa.) to cast the tie-breaking vote for his budget in 1993, his inability to protect her from defeat the following year registered as an epic fail. An "insulated" system is to some extent undemocratic and sacrifices some degree of responsiveness ("You can't fight City Hall"); yet it can also provide leaders with the critical margin of support that they need when difficult policy choices have to be made.

Those who criticize machines for standing between politicians and voters tend to forget that, through most of American history, party organizations, both national and local, were marvelously effective at getting people involved in politics, through local party clubs, grassroots events (Tammany held picnics for its supporters), and campaign mobilizations. From 1968 until literally the day he died a few years ago, my late uncle, a retired garment worker, volunteered for the Community Free Democrats, one of many Democratic Party clubs that remain active in Manhattan. He canvassed, leafleted, and unfailingly attended meetings, even when his painful knees would barely carry him. (At his funeral, the local member of Congress, who had come up through the club, was among many Democratic Party dignitaries who showed up. They attended his wife's funeral, too.)

Politicians, like voters, are short-sighted, and machines help with that, too, because they are capable of strategizing and transacting across time. Machines are to politics as banking is to the economy: being long-term, repeat players, they can extend something like political credit. That is, they can sacrifice an interest today for the prospect of a

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19. See Jonathan Rauch, "Rescuing Compromise," *National Affairs* (Fall 2013).
20. The research, by Raymond La Raja and Brian Schaffner, is discussed and cited later in this essay..

greater gain later on. By trading on the present value of future political returns, they can conduct transactions across spans of time—something very hard, frequently impossible, for activists and freelancers to do.

Perhaps the most important thing that machines are good at is empowering leadership by inducing followership. All the vision or foresight or statesmanship in the world on the part of political leaders comes to naught if followers will not follow. Loyalty is tenuous, interest is capricious, and ideology is divisive; though all can help inspire followership, they are no substitute for systematic inducements like money, power, prestige, protection, and the other stocks-in-trade of machine politics.

In the U.S. system, lacking as it does a parliamentary system's structural discipline, inducing followers to follow is all the more important. When asked by the late-night talk show host Jay Leno why he pursued a government shutdown strategy that was sure to fail, House Speaker John Boehner replied, "When I looked up, I saw my colleagues going this way. A leader without followers is simply a man taking a walk."[21] Without followers there can be no leaders, and without leaders there will be chaos. America today has generally capable, honest, hard-working political leaders; Boehner is an example. What the country faces is not a crisis of leadership but a crisis of followership. Richard Pildes of New York University Law School put the case well: "The problem is not that individual leaders are now 'weak,'" but that "broader structural changes, including legal ones, have disarmed party leaders of the tools they previously had used to unify their members around deals that were thought to be in the best interest of the party as a whole."[22]

Of course, machines can be manipulative or abusive. But their control over multiple levers of power can make them uniquely effective at (recalling Wilson's term) assembling power in the formal government. Thad Williamson, of the University of Richmond, provides a case study. Until 2004, the troubled city of Richmond, Virginia, had an institutionally weak mayor who was appointed by, and thus subservient to, the city council. Even as formidable a figure as Tim Kaine (subsequently the state's governor and currently its U.S. senator) was unable to do much with the position. After the city switched to directly elected mayors, an equally formidable figure, former governor Doug Wilder, won the job, but he relied too much on personal influence and provoked a backlash. In 2008, Dwight Jones, elected with less than 40 percent of the vote, set about building what city politicos called a machine: by installing supporters on the city council, school board, and the city housing authority and by exploiting influence over prized sample-ballot spots, he "succeeded where Wilder failed, in consolidating not only his own political position but the reach of the mayor's office into other key public bodies in the city." And the results? Pretty good, Williamson concludes (somewhat to his own surprise, judging from his tone). Jones used his influence to coordinate antipoverty policies across education, workforce development, transportation, economic development, and housing—something the city had failed at in the past. "Hence, a mayor successfully gaining sufficient influence over each of these institutions so as to make coherent policy could plausibly be seen not as a violation of democracy, but as a brilliant exercise of leadership so as to advance the interests of the poor as well as the public interest writ large." Williamson's assessment is worth quoting at length:

> The Jones administration, in my judgment, had and has strong and defensible reasons for wanting
> to build a stronger, mayor-driven regime, given its laudable policy goals and given the fragmentation
> and dysfunction characteristic of local government in Richmond. Further, Jones has gone about
> this work through legitimate channels while generally avoiding overt displays of ego of the kind that

21. Bill Scher, "For Second Time, Boehner Lets Cruz Play Speaker," *Real Clear Politics*, August 4, 2014 (www.realclearpolitics.com/articles/2014/08/04/for_second_time_boehner_lets_cruz_play_speaker_123550.html).

22. Richard Pildes, "Romanticizing Democracy, Political Fragmentation, and the Decline of American Government," *Yale Law Journal,* vol. 124 (2014), p. 833.

alienated Wilder as mayor from residents. And, if one accepts the desirability of a stronger regime, one must also admit that politics is the indispensable tool by which that regime must be built; and that sometimes politics is about rewarding friends and punishing critics and enemies, not about assembling the best qualified and most deliberatively skilled group of representatives.[23]

Even Tammany Hall, the bête noir of progressive reformers a century ago and still the popular symbol of all that is allegedly wrong with machine politics, has received a second look. In *Machine Made*, his 2014 history of Tammany, Terry Golway argues that Tammany's benefits outweighed its harms. He finds that the machine gave marginalized Irish immigrants and other newcomers a voice in politics and pioneered an array of social services—workers' compensation, child-labor prohibitions, public pensions for widows with children—that became models for New Deal reform. "What they did was in essence create an informal social welfare system when of course none existed, so that, eventually, if you were an immigrant and you needed some advice or you needed a job or, frankly, if you just needed some respect, Tammany

Hall was willing to give you that. In return, of course, Tammany expected you to turn out early and often and vote on Election Day."[24] Though kickbacks, vote-buying, and patronage were part of the Tammany story, they were only a part, and Golway finds "astonishing bigotry" in the rhetoric that progressives and other reformers deployed against Tammany.[25] "The accusations of political and moral corruption were often linked to a profound bigotry rooted in a transatlantic, Anglo-Protestant analysis of Irish character defects."[26] To make these points is not to excuse Tammany's shortcomings, but it is to remind ourselves of something important: whatever its flaws, *Tammany governed*.

As I hope is obvious, I am not arguing that political machines and machine-like behavior are always good. I am arguing that machines and machine-like behavior are necessary—and that governing without them in America is high in friction and low in efficiency and sometimes will not be possible at all. There is, however, a very different view.

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23. Thad Williamson, "The Tangled Relationship of Democracy, Leadership, and Justice in Urban America: A View from Richmond," in *Good Democratic Leadership: On Prudence and Judgment in Modern Democracies,* edited by John Kane and Haig Patapan (Oxford University Press, 2014), pp. 32–50. Quotations are from pages 45 and 47–48.

24. "The Case for Tammany Hall Being on the Right Side of History," National Public Radio interview with Terry Golway, March 5, 2014.

25. Ibid.

26. Terry Golway, *Machine Made: Tammany Hall and the Creation of Modern American Politics* (W.W. Norton, 2014), p. xviii.

REFORMERS: THE THREE-FRONT WAR ON TRANSACTIONAL POLITICS

In 2014, staffers and political appointees of Chris Christie, the Republican governor of New Jersey, shut down two of three access lanes leading to the George Washington Bridge from the town of Fort Lee, snarling traffic for miles. The Democratic mayor of Fort Lee, who had refused to endorse Christie's gubernatorial bid, complained that the closures were punitive, a charge which gained plausibility when e-mails and texts emerged in which Christie's func-tionaries said things like, "Time for some traffic problems in Fort Lee" and "They [in Fort Lee] are the children of Buono voters." Buono had been Christie's opponent. Before long, the whole thing blew up into Christie's first major scandal.

What Christie's people got up to was laughably boneheaded and comically incompetent, a Keystone Cops version of machine politics. Effective machines work primarily through rewards, not punishments—and punishments, when used, are supposed to be meted out to political adversaries, not random commuters. Effective machines are not top-down, command-and-control autocracies; they are hierarchies of reciprocal accountability, in which incentives and loyalties are banked and traded up and down the line. Still, to a realist, what the Christie officials were *trying*, incompetently, to do (organize their political environment by rewarding friends and punishing foes) was not shocking.

That distinction was lost on the public and commentators, and therein lies realism's peculiar modern problem. Machine politics is necessary, it's often productive, but it looks bad under the microscope of modern media, even when practiced adroitly, and it looks even worse when practiced maladroitly. And so its fortunes, of late—for the last half-century or more—have not been good.

The excesses of Tammany and its ilk needed reining in. Professionalizing the civil service, formalizing welfare programs, prosecuting bribery and extortion, opening more political deliberations to public view—those and other reforms of a century ago were justified and mostly wholesome. But what began as a necessary rebalancing acquired its own momentum and ideology and created an imbalance of its own, pushing relentlessly to extirpate corruption and defining corruption ever more broadly.

Some observers will argue that machine politics was discredited by its own failures. Certainly that is true of the more extreme and abusive varieties of machine politics. But I think that the country achieved a reasonable balance between transactional and ideological politics in a period beginning somewhere around the early 1960s, with the toppling of the monarchy of Representative Howard W. Smith (D-Va.) at the House Rules Committee, and ending at some point in the 1990s, with the rise of Newt Gingrich's peculiar mix of throwing bombs and centralizing power. When I began covering Washington as a journalist in the 1980s, I found a system which seemed to me at the time, not just in hindsight, to be unruly but surprisingly functional. On big, hard issues like Social Security and immigration and taxation and spending, it more often than not achieved reasonable results; on everyday matters like appropriations and farm bills and government oversight, it ticked along fairly reliably. Even when a brush fire broke out, as when the Gramm-Rudman-Hollings bill burst out of nowhere and blindsided leadership in 1985, political leaders were able to move quickly to manage it. The system, though not a machine, was machine-like enough to work.

Other observers will argue that machine politics was rejected by the public. But if public approval is the gauge, the collapse of machine politics has been a disaster: people rightly perceive that politics is more contentious, more ideological, and less productive than in the past, and they are justifiably disgusted. Approval of government was higher, not lower, in the days when transactional politics was healthier, partly because government was seen as more competent.

Others point out that in today's more polarized environment, where the two parties have sorted themselves into generally opposed ideological camps, there is less room for compromise; the sides are simply farther apart. In the Senate, where blues and reds used to commingle in the center, the rightmost Democrat is to the left of the leftmost Republican. That point is undeniably correct, but it is not the entire story. At any given level of polarization, more compromise will happen if leaders have more space to negotiate deals, more incentives with which to win cooperation, and more sway over obstructionists and spoilers. Indeed, the farther apart the two sides' starting points, the more important discipline and incentives and reciprocal accountability become and the more broken the system will be without them.

Still other observers will argue that machine politics died of obsolescence, a casualty of declining public trust in institutions, fragmented media, rambunctious interest groups, and a host of other social changes that made hierarchies and gatekeepers untenable. There is truth in that argument, too, but again it's not the whole story. Machine politics is adaptable and persistent; indeed, as we have seen in Richmond and New Jersey, it is a natural force in politics, cropping up like grass wherever it finds a crack. Today's environment is challenging, certainly, but political hierarchies could have adapted far better if not for the determined antagonism of all three of the major modern political reform ideologies. *Progressivism*, *populism*, and *libertarianism* have many differences, but they have collaborated relentlessly and effectively to reduce the space for transactional politics.

All three of these counter-realist traditions, by now, are venerable. All three of them tap into important political truths and stand for admirable moral principles. All three have made valuable contributions to the country's moral and political improvement. And all three have fostered particular reforms which were reasonable and appropriate at the time. The evaluation which follows may seem lopsidedly critical, but it is intended to correct excess and imbalance, not to repudiate the reform ideologies root and branch. It is aimed not at any particular reform measure but at a cumulative and collective imbalance which arose as idealistic reforms piled up, compounding each other's effects.

The *progressive* tradition scorns transactional politics for deviating from meritocracy. Where the realist tends to believe that governing is inherently difficult, that politics is inherently transactional, and that success is best judged in terms of reaching social accommodation rather than achieving some abstract purpose, the progressive tradition tends to see government as perfectible and politics as a path toward a higher public good. Where realism tends to see the public interest in terms of negotiated settlements ("This is the best we could get this time around"), the progressive tradition tends to see it as an abstract benchmark, against which real-world politics continually falls short—so that transactional politics, even if sometimes unavoidable, is a lamentable deviation from meritocratic decisionmaking. Where the realist sees interests as the very stuff of politics, the progressive sees them distracting or detracting from issues, the ideological currency which Moynihan and Wilson warned is so often nonnegotiable. Where realism sees money as an intrinsic and morally neutral part of politics, the progressive sees it as a contaminant. And where realism seeks to balance many competing political values (competence, stability, broad buy-in, integrity, and other variables all figure in the equation), the progressive tradition views integrity as paramount.

And today it defines corruption very broadly indeed. In a famous colloquy on the Senate floor in 1999, Senator John McCain declared that "we are all corrupted" by political contributions, but, under challenge by Senator Mitch McConnell ("Someone must be corrupt for there to be corruption"), he refused to name a single corrupt individual. The *system* is corrupt, he said: a good statement of the ideology which has made modern progressivism an inherently unstable and uncontainable doctrine. One academic propounds that "an act is corrupt when private interests trump public ones in the exercise of public power, and a person is corrupt when they use public power for their own

ends, disregarding others," a definition which seems to erase altogether any boundary between self-interested transactional politics and corruption.[27] As progressives, ever disgusted with politics, search for new dragons to slay, one struggles to understand what sort of real-world political system is *not* corrupt. Here, then, is a classic case of overshoot: what began as a useful correction of Tammany-style excess has become a neurotic obsession.

The *populist* reform tradition scorns transactional politics for deviating from democracy.[28] The populist critique is closely aligned with the progressive one—today they have merged into what might be called "propulism"—but its emphasis is slightly different. While agreeing with progressivism that the leading problem in politics is corruption, the populist school equates legitimacy with direct participation by ordinary individuals and corruption with intermediation or influence on the part of organizations or interests, especially large or wealthy ones. For the populist reformer, the solution to almost any political problem involves more democracy, more participation, and more power for the little guy. Populism turns the progressive activist's instinctive suspicion of political insiders and careerists into an explicit ideology: by their very nature, political professionals are interlopers who speak for special interests and for the political class; amateurs are the true custodians of the public interest. In a speech at the New America Foundation, touting federal legislation that would heavily subsidize small-dollar political donations, Representative John Sarbanes (D-Md.), exemplified both the ethos and the rhetoric of modern populism when he explained why progressive-style limits on political donations are not enough:

> All of those things . . . are about refereeing the conduct of big money players. It doesn't really do anything to empower the everyday citizen, to bring them into the solution. And I believe that even as we pursue all those other remedies to try to contain and limit some of the big money actors out there, if we're going to address the cynicism that the average person feels that's driving them out of the political town square and frankly up into the hills, out of desperation, we have to design a solution that brings them in—that in a sense brings them out of the bleachers and into the ring, because they feel they have power, they have voice, they have consequence to the way the system

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27. Zephyr Teachout, *Corruption in America: From Benjamin Franklin's Snuff Box to Citizens United* (Harvard, 2014), p. 9.

28. By "populist *reform* tradition" I mean to distinguish the modern political reform movement from populism in the broader sense of any politics that appeals to anti-elite sentiment.

operates. . . . Let's give some power, some opportunity, some voice and access to those millions, tens of millions, hundreds of millions, of Americans out there who feel like they don't have any.

While agreeing with progressives that political decisions should be based on merit rather than interest, populists add the important fillip that the best judges of merit are the people, preferably without intermediation. For the populist, as for the progressive, private money in politics is corrupting—unless it comes from small donors, in which case it counts as participation (even if the government has to purchase said participation with a tax credit and a six-fold match). For the populist, as for the progressive, private dealings and transactional politics are likewise corrupting, not just because they deviate from meritocratic decisions but also because political professionals and insiders conduct the negotiations, often out of public view. For the populist, transparency is virtuous in and of itself, because it stymies self-dealing by elites. As three transparency advocates write: "Simply put, information is power, and keeping information secret only serves to keep power in the hands of a few."[29]

Together, by fusing their ideologies, the progressive and populist reform movements have performed an impressive public relations feat: they have combined the intellectual prestige of meritocracy with the moral claims of democracy. Because participation improves decisionmaking, democracy and meritocracy are one and the same—and insider politics is the enemy of both. Against so potent a combination, no wonder realism has been on the defensive.

The third member of the troika does not get along with the other two, except in one crucial respect: *libertarians* never saw a political machine that they liked. They, too, scorn transactional politics, although not because it deviates from meritocracy or democracy but because it deviates from market outcomes. The libertarian critique of government goes back centuries to venerable sources, but its distinctive contemporary incarnation dates, perhaps, to the 1970s and Reaganism's critique of special interest government. In 1975, a young congressional aide named David Stockman published a seminal article called "The Social Pork Barrel," in which he argued that formula-driven social welfare and entitlement programs were no less wasteful and corrupt than the Appropriations Committee logrolling and Tammany-style favoritism which they were supposed to clean up. In fact, mechanistic entitlements were even worse than discretionary handouts, because instead of concentrating public largesse on people who were needy by at least someone's definition, they spread it everywhere, replacing retail waste and graft with a much more costly wholesale variety. Government, Stockman argued, had become a game of providing the "greatest goodies for the greatest number," paying off strong clients rather than strong claims and insidiously co-opting even conservative opposition.[30]

Today, Stockman's libertarian and libertarian-ish descendants despise political machines less because they are machines than because they are political. If market decisions are, with rare exceptions, more just (because less arbitrary) and more efficient (because less economically distorting) than political decisions, then transactional politics is inherently unjust and wasteful—and thus corrupt. Jay Cost, the author of the book *A Republic No More: Big Government and the Rise of Political Corruption*, sounds very much like a progressive when he defines corruption not as, say, individual dishonesty or graft but as occurring "when government agents sacrifice the interests of everybody for the sake of a few" or whenever "the government puts private interests before public interests."[31] And

29. Gary D. Bass, Danielle Brian, and Norman Eisen, "Why Critics of Transparency Are Wrong," Brookings, November 24, 2014, p. 20 (www.brookings.edu/research/papers/2014/11/24-why-critics-transparency-wrong-bass-brian-eisen).

30. David Stockman, "The Social Pork Barrel," *Public Interest* (Spring 1975). Stockman's essay, still impressive, anticipates much of what Paul Ryan, Grover Norquist, and the Tea Party have to say today. Stockman went on to win election to Congress and head Reagan's Office of Management and Budget.

31. Jay Cost, *A Republic No More: Big Government and the Rise of American Political Corruption* (Encounter Books, 2015), p. 1.

what is the public interest? Acknowledging that it is hard to define, Cost asserts (in a speech) that "you know it when you see it."[32] Reading on in the book, one learns that defense procurement, Medicare, agriculture subsidies, tax breaks, pork-barrel spending, earmarks, Fannie Mae and Freddie Mac, and the congressional committee system ("which helps members of Congress secure deals with one another") are examples of corrupt programs and institutions because they are subject to political influence and thus are wasteful, profligate, and suboptimal. Even the smallest amount of such "corruption" is "incompatible with a republican form of government" because "it is similar to gangrene or dry rot: if left unchecked, it inevitably spreads." Here, again, one is hard pressed to understand what kind of real-world political system would *not* be corrupt and therefore cancerous.[33]

The author asks, in italics, "*What in the world do we do about this mess?*" Fewer than five of his 320 pages address that question. He hopes that "the disinterested" of left and right (the disinterested, we learn, are "the people who take seriously the duties of republican citizenship, even though they derive no private gains from it"—more echoes of progressivism) might "come together . . . around a sensible reform agenda." Still, he acknowledges that "reform is often like trying to stop water from rolling downhill" and that "corruption will eventually manifest itself in other ways."[34] The reformer's job is never done! Indeed, it is always just getting started. Here, we discover, is a doctrine just as unstable and uncontainable as purist progressivism.

And so the libertarian and progressive critiques end up being twins separated at birth. Both are obsessed with corruption, see it everywhere, and are incapable of distinguishing it from policy disagreement; both view transactional politics as illegitimate; both therefore embark on an inherently destabilizing and unending mission to stop politics from doing what politics naturally does. Only over the preferred prescription—more government or less, more regulation or more privatization—are they at daggers drawn.

In my own earlier work, I have expressed sympathy with the libertarian critique by, for example, referring to subsidy-seekers as a "parasite economy." What I also said then, but now believe that I underemphasized, is that the symbiosis between politicians and private interests, though indeed often costly and self-serving, also brings an important benefit to the body politic, in the form of America's enviable political stability. People who are haggling over subsidies are not making war or revolution. Interest group "parasites" may be less like a tapeworm than like the intestinal biome, extracting nourishment but preventing political indigestion. This is not to deny that many programs need reform and that many interest group claims are dubious or worse, but a political system which loses competence at making the kinds of insider deals that libertarians, populists, and progressives deplore is a political system which cannot govern. Stockman was right to understand many government programs as paying off powerful private factions. The question that he failed to grapple with is the question that realists ask first: What's the alternative?

CHAOS: TRADITIONAL MACHINES FALL, SHADOW MACHINES RISE

As you might expect, when all three of the country's major political reform movements concentrate their fire on transactional politics continuously for decades, a lot of governing capacity will be lost. There is hardly an aspect of machine politics which reformers have not at least partially dismantled or disabled. To reemphasize: many of the specific reforms and ideas of the past decades were reasonable and appropriate in the context of their time and

32. Jay Cost, speech at the Cato Institute, February 12, 2015 (www.cato.org/multimedia/events/republic-no-more-big-government-rise-american-political-corruption).

33. Cost, *A Republic No More*, pp. 215, 1, and 84, among others.

34. Ibid., pp. 318, 319, and 316.

place; my goal here is to consider their cumulative effect, which has been to replace relatively accountable machine politics with fragmented and unaccountable private actors.

The crown jewel in the populist political reform movement is the political primary system. Once upon a time, the party's nomination to appear on a general election ballot was largely, though not entirely, in the gift of party elders and professionals, who may have fought with each other but could normally make their eventual choices stick. When I was growing up in Phoenix, Arizona, in the 1960s and 1970s, there was no formal political machine, but a clique of local politicians and business leaders (sometimes calling themselves the "Phoenix 40") pretty much decided how things would go. They might approach a well-known car dealer, suggest that he run for a House seat, and ease his way there, keeping his political life uneventful if he played by the rules. Today, selection by amateurs—usually by voters in primaries but occasionally by partisan caucus-goers—is de rigueur.

Without attempting to recapitulate the huge literature debating this change, I'll note that the switch to direct voter nomination probably has been the modern political world's most conspicuous example of unintended and perverse consequences. A crucial premise of populist reform, namely that most people want to participate more in politics, turns out to be wrong. And so, instead of opening decisionmaking to a broader, more diverse, and more representative spectrum than party hacks represented, primaries have skewed decisionmaking toward the notably narrow, ideologically extreme, and decidedly nonrepresentative sliver of voters who turn out in primary elections. "The universe of those who actually cast primary ballots is small and hyper-partisan, and rewards candidates who hew to ideological orthodoxy," write Jill Lawrence and Walter Shapiro in their recent evaluation of the 2014 cycle of House primaries.[35]

Primary contests also turn out to be unequaled pressure points for special interests. Especially in the Republican Party, insurgents like the Tea Party and interest groups like the Koch brothers' network have discovered that they can strike fear into the heart of Republican members of Congress by "primarying" them or even threatening them with a primary. Between 2004 and 2014, the percentage of Republican House members facing primary challenges doubled, to almost 50 percent.[36] And that may be just the beginning. "A network of conservative advocacy groups backed by Charles and David Koch aims to spend a staggering $889 million in advance of the next White House election, part of an expansive strategy to build on its 2014 victories that may involve jumping into the Republican [presidential] primaries," the *Washington Post* reports.[37] Faced with this unprecedented bid to systematically privatize candidate selection, and seeking to reestablish some kind of order and authority, party leaders have launched their own counter-effort to raise money, organize networks, and mobilize special interests. "Don't be afraid of a primary," Senate Majority Leader Mitch McConnell (R-Ky.), the Republicans' shrewdest tactician, reassured his troops. "We will win all the primaries. We did it in '14. We will do it in '16."[38] That may be, but primary challenges do not have to succeed to intimidate incumbents; they don't even have to happen. The mere threat of a primary will influence political behavior.

If the loss of control over the nominating process was devastating for political professionals and machines, the reduced control over money has been almost as debilitating. To rank-and-file politicians, knowing that being a good

35. Jill Lawrence and Walter Shapiro, "Phoning It In and Failing to Show: The Story of the 2014 House Primaries," Brookings, September 2014 (www.brookings.edu/~/media/research/files/reports/2014/09/30-candidates-voters-primaries-lawrence-shapiro/primaries_lawrence_shapiro.pdf).

36. Elaine Kamarck and Alexander R. Podkul, "The 2014 Congressional Primaries: Who Ran and Why," Brookings, September 30, 2014 (www.brookings.edu/research/reports/2014/09/30-congressional-primaries-kamarck-podkul).

37. Matea Gold, "Koch-Backed Network Aims to Spend Nearly $1 Billion in Run-Up to 2016," *Washington Post*, January 26, 2015.

38. Paul Kane, "New Senate Majority Leader's Main Goal for GOP: Don't Be Scary," *Washington Post*, January 5, 2015.

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"The rarity with which House and Senate leaders can secure privacy complicates negotiations in Congress."

"Making Deals in Congress," in *Negotiating Agreement in Politics* (2013)

team player will open money taps and that defecting will close them is an important and time-honored inducement to play well with others; to the individuals and groups which form politicians' bases and networks, giving money is an important and time-honored way to reward reciprocity and earn insider status. The first wave of progressivism, a century ago, took aim at dishonest graft, like bribery and extortion, and also at some forms of "honest graft," such as featherbedding and patronage, but it left ordinary political donations mostly alone. Disappointed by the results, a second wave, beginning in the 1970s, spread the net much more widely, establishing a web of legalistic rules and regulations which have made it much harder for candidates and parties to raise money, on the general theory that fundraising and dependence on big-dollar donors are inherently corrupting. The result was not to reduce the amount of money in politics or to reduce the influence of special interests but to drive money to unrestricted channels, such as party committees. When progressive legislation restricted those channels too, the result was to push money into so-called "independent" spending by super PACS, nonprofit organizations, billionaires, and other actors who are less accountable, less pragmatic, and less transparent than Tammany ever was. According to the Brennan Center for Justice at New York University Law School, "outside spending [in Senate races] has exploded in the last three federal elections and is highly focused on competitive races. In 80 percent of competitive 2014 races, outside spenders outspent the candidates—sometimes by more than double." In 2014, so-called dark money, whose donors are not disclosed, accounted for almost half the outside spending.[39]

To be sure, many social and political changes, not just progressive laws and regulations, have contributed to the growth of the gray market for political money. Some of what is happening would have happened anyway. But to acknowledge as much does not get the progressive paradigm off the hook: its raison d'être for four decades or more has been to sequester political professionals from political money, opening the way for amateurs to take over the job. Raymond J. La Raja, a political scientist at the University of Massachusetts, points out that money raised by party committees almost tripled in real dollars from 1988 to 2004. After the Bipartisan Campaign Reform Act of 2002 (the so-called McCain-Feingold Act) banned unrestricted donations to parties, party fundraising went into a mild decline—and spending by outside groups rushed in to fill the gap, going from trivial in the 1990s to $1 billion or so by 2012. "The campaign finance system has strengthened the hand of partisan activists by limiting the flow of financial resources to the formal party organization and its technocratic staff," he writes. "The campaign finance

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39. Ian Vandewalker and Eric Petry, "Election Spending 2014: Outside Spending in Senate Races since Citizens United," Brennan Center for Justice, January 13, 2015 (www.brennancenter.org/publication/election-spending-2014-outside-spending-senate-races-citizens-united).

rules constrain coherent, party-based organizing to such an extent that partisans have sidestepped the rules to create organizations such as super PACs."[40]

To organize coalitions and deals, political machines need to talk to and organize their networks and supporters. But that imperative runs afoul of the weirdest and most perverse of modern progressive obsessions: the attempt to restrict "coordination" of campaign efforts between political parties and either their own candidates or their outside supporters. In the progressive worldview, limiting the money which private interests can give directly to candidates and parties does little good if the interests can pretend to spend independently while quietly letting candidates and parties direct the spending. For progressives, in other words, coordination is a way of circumventing the quarantine on political contributions. For a machine, of course, coordination is something else: the whole point of politics. If a machine can't organize, assist, and direct its politicians and supporters, it might as well not exist.

"The restrictions on party coordination force parties to spend 'independently' of candidates," writes La Raja. "This arrangement is not only a parody of what parties are about in most democracies, but encourages inefficient use of resources (hence ever more money is needed), legal gamesmanship, and diminished political accountability."[41] Predictably, trying to disconnect politicians and parties from each other and their supporters has created a gray market in coordination; driven resources, professional talent, and influence to unaccountable outside groups; hindered candidates' and parties' ability to control and transmit their message; and underwritten the growth of a burgeoning independent political infrastructure which is difficult (at best) for leaders to organize and influence. Even in principle, efforts to define and ban unacceptable "consultation" and "cooperation" criminalize politics arbitrarily. For example, conservative groups in Wisconsin have been investigated and raided by state prosecutors for spending money on issue ads in consultation with Governor Scott Walker, a form of political collaboration which a federal judge ruled is perfectly legal. Overturning that ruling, a federal appeals court threw up its hands: "The Supreme Court has yet to determine what 'coordination' means." The kinds of questions which the appeals court said await resolution are hopelessly metaphysical: for example, "What if the [coordinated] speech implies, rather than expresses, a prefer-ence for a particular candidate's election?"[42] It's hard to assemble power in government if consulting or cooperating with the people you are assembling is a criminal act—or if you can't tell whether it's a criminal act.

If anti-coordination rules are an example of a bad idea which can't work, transparency requirements are an example of a good idea which can work but which entails trade-offs whose existence advocates are reluctant to acknowledge. If there is one thing that progressives, populists, and libertarians all agree on, it is that sunlight is the best disinfectant. Lying, cheating, and stealing are certainly more difficult when the world is watching. But so are dickering, floating trial balloons, being candid, and working out complex deals. Public attention, note Sarah Binder and Frances Lee, induces politicians to posture and adhere to partisan talking points; closed-door negotiations, by contrast, give them more freedom to explore policy options and multidimensional, integrative solutions.[43] Above all, privacy lets negotiators work out complex packages in toto before individual pieces are shot down. No wonder that "candidate Obama vowed to televise negotiations over health reform," said *The Economist*, but "President Obama did no such thing"; instead, he went behind closed doors with congressional leaders and industry groups to hammer out secret

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40. Raymond J. La Raja, "Why Super PACs: How the American Party System Outgrew the Campaign Finance System," *The Forum*, vol. 10, no. 4 (February 2013), pp. 93, 98.

41. Ibid., p. 103.

42. From the Seventh Circuit Court's opinion in *O'Keefe* v. *Chisholm*, September 24, 2014, p. 9.

43. Sarah Binder and Frances Lee, "Making Deals in Congress," in *Negotiating Agreement in Politics,* edited by Jane Mansbridge and Cathie Jo Martin (American Political Science Association, 2013), p. 63 and following.

agreements.[44] In 2013, budget negotiations between the House and Senate budget committee chairs succeeded partly because, as a Democratic aide told Jill Lawrence, "their leaders empowered them to figure it out themselves, very, very privately."[45]

There isn't much hard evidence that transparency reliably improves real-world decisionmaking or makes the public happier, and some evidence points to ill effects. One recent study finds that, in developing countries, transparency makes the public more fatalistic about corruption rather than stimulating outrage and action; the same dynamic of cynicism and numbness may apply in the United States, especially when transparency is coupled with paralysis. The public sees more of the sausage-making while getting less sausage.[46] Ray La Raja finds that disclosure rules seem to induce small political donors to halve their giving.[47]

The point is not that sunshine rules and disclosure laws are always bad or even to deny that up to a point they are a public good in and of themselves; it is only that they can be counterproductive and that reformers' dogmatic and often moralistic commitment to them needs a reality check.[48] As Pildes writes:

> After the 1976 Government in the Sunshine Act required that congressional committee meetings be public, surveys of senators soon concluded that these open meeting requirements were the largest single cause of a decline in the ability to negotiate and to make politically difficult trade-offs. Today, we have the unfortunate Federal Advisory Committee Act, which extends these open meeting requirements even to bodies that only provide advice to the federal government and ties these advisory groups in knots for little meaningful public benefit. If negotiations among leaders are a key to effective governance, particularly in polarized times, then we need a less moralistic, more realistic sense of the conditions under which negotiations effectively take place.[49]

Sometimes, in other words, the only thing wrong with smoke-filled rooms is the smoke. Yet, note Binder and Lee, "private negotiations in Congress are increasingly difficult to secure."[50]

One important attribute of smoke-filled rooms was that usually you had a pretty good idea who was entitled to be in them—and the selection, to the dismay of "propulists," was not always based on merit. To the contrary, political leaders delegated deal-making to functionaries who had earned a place at the table by dint of seniority, loyalty, or cunning, as well as expertise. Keeping freelancers and interlopers out of the room and maintaining control over the

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44. "Good, Bad and Ugly," *The Economist*, January 17, 2015, p. 79.

45. Jill Lawrence, "Profiles in Negotiation: The Murray-Ryan Budget Deal," Brookings, February 2015 (www.brookings.edu/research/papers/2015/02/profiles-negotiation-murray-ryan-lawrence).

46. Monika Bauhr and Marcia Grimes, "Indignation or Resignation: The Implications of Transparency for Societal Accountability," *Governance,* vol. 27, no. 2 (April 2014), pp. 291–320.

47. Raymond J. La Raja, "Political Participation and Civic Courage: The Negative Effect of Transparency on Making Small Campaign Contributions," *Political Behavior*, vol. 36, no. 4 (December 2014).

48. For example, although Bass, Brian, and Eisen say that they "are not transparency absolutists," their rhetoric radiates uncompromising moralism (as well as disdain for transactional politics): "More transparency is needed, not less," because "smoke-filled back rooms have repeatedly been shown to cause cancer in the body politic"; "The potential for bad corruption—whether through earmarks, campaign contributions, patronage, or other forms of 'grease'—is precisely why sunlight is needed and, indeed, should be expanded"; "The opposite of transparency is secrecy, and secrecy often leads to corruption." And so forth. Bass, Brian, and Eisen, "Why Critics of Transparency Are Wrong," pp. 2, 9, and 12.

49. Pildes, "Romanticizing Democracy," p. 846.

50. Binder and Lee, "Making Deals in Congress," p. 64. The common rejoinder that members of Congress can still find places for private discussions (for example, "No rules prevent private conversations between members of Congress," per Bass, Brian, and Eisen, "Why Critics of Transparency Are Wrong") misses the point, which is the difficulty of conducting organized negotiations out of public view. Until the 1970s, committees routinely met and did business behind closed doors, and they often reported only vote tallies rather than how individuals voted. The resulting dynamic was quite different from a hallway conversation.

agenda inside the room are instrumental to making bargaining manageable and delivering on deals; giving loyalists and time-servers a place at the table rewards them and marginalizes outsiders.

In Congress, for many years, the seniority and committee systems served those incentivizing and boundary-setting functions well—arguably too well, because a senior committee chair could become an entrenched baron. For example, during his more than fifty years in Congress, Representative Jamie Whitten (D-Miss.) wielded his power on the Appropriations Committee to become known as the "permanent secretary of agriculture." When rank-and-file members from below and congressional leaders from above demanded and received more control over who got top committee slots, they were responding to a real problem. Over time, however, the downside of weakening committee hierarchies and the "regular order" process on Capitol Hill has come into clearer focus. The committees and subcommittees are the compromise factories of Congress. The chairs (and ranking members) are the factories' managers; mid-ranking and junior committee members are their sales force and their eyes and ears. The House speaker and Senate majority leader, capable though they and their staffs may be, don't have the capacity to do a fraction of the work that committees can do, nor can they replace the committees' networks and expertise and finely tuned political antennae. Ad hoc arrangements like Senate "gangs" may have their occasional uses, but they are no substitute for "the negotiating advantages afforded by long-standing repeated interactions," as Binder and Lee put it.[51] When today's legislators call for a return to regular order—the routines of consensus-building led by delegated professionals—they are expressing an important insight about how the mechanism of transactional politics needs to work.

And then there are earmarks and pork. For years they were the hard currency of Capitol Hill's political economy. Sometimes abused, they could also be a powerful inducement to win a wavering vote or break an impasse. Lyndon Johnson famously won critical support for the 1964 civil rights bill by "proposing, and personally securing, a NASA research facility at Purdue University," in the district of House Republican leader Charles Halleck of Indiana.[52] Pork remains alive, but earmarks were banned in 2010 under pressure from Tea Partiers, who saw them as emblematic of Washington corruption. Ironically, by the time that they were barred, earmarks had been successfully reformed; they were in fact the least expensive and most transparent kind of pork, because they were narrowly targeted and routinely disclosed.[53] Their abolition stripped leaders on the Hill of one of the few tools still remaining to them for influencing behavior. Avoiding a government shutdown in 2013 would have "absolutely" been easier if House Speaker Boehner had been able to dispense earmarks, Trent Lott (R-Miss.), a former Republican Senate majority leader and House minority whip, told CNN: "Trying to be a leader where you have no sticks and very few carrots is dang near impossible. Members don't get anything from you and leaders don't give anything. They don't feel like you can reward them or punish them."[54]

Little wonder, as reforms bear down on machines led by professional politicians, that shadowy rivals have sprung up, mimicking some of the functions of machines but unaccountable to voters through elections or often to citizens through disclosure. Under the campaign finance rules, reports *Politico,*

> state-party-run phone banks for federal candidates had to be staffed only by volunteers. They could make calls only for presidential elections—not congressional races. Mail, campaign literature, and

51. Binder and Lee, "Making Deals in Congress," p. 66.
52. Michael O'Donnell, "'What the Hell's the Presidency For?'" *The Atlantic*, April 2014, p. 93.
53. Jonathan Rauch, "Earmarks Are a Model, Not a Menace," *National Journal*, March 14, 2009.
54. Dan Merica, "Longing for Pork: Could Earmarks Help Congress Get Things Done?," CNN, October 17, 2013 (www.cnn.com/2013/10/17/politics/earmarks-help-congress/).

get-out-the-vote operations around federal races were regulated by similarly strict rules, conditions and requirements regulating volunteer time, coordination with the national party and what kind of funds could be spent.[55]

Funding has fallen for state party organizations. Where is it going? To unconstrained private machines. The Koch network's $899 million commitment for 2016 "is challenging the primacy of the official parties," which together spent just over $700 million in 2012, according to the *Washington Post*.[56] In the 2014 North Carolina Senate race, the Koch-funded Americans for Prosperity was "by far the most significant player" in get-out-the-vote activity on the Republican side, bringing "far more clout" than either the Senate candidate or the party.[57]

The shadow machines possess resources and skills that Wilson's yuppie amateurs could not have even dreamed of: Americans for Prosperity (AFP) "now has 600 paid staffers in 35 states," reports *The Economist*. "In North Carolina it has its own ground game: its staff operate phone banks and canvass voters at home, inputting survey data on tablets and uploading them to a central database."[58] But they are distinctly amateur (or activist) in the important Wilsonian sense that their interest is in issues and purity, not in the messy and compromising work of governing. "The aim, says Donald Bryson of AFP, is to build a movement rather than to win elections. 'You may win or lose but at least you have been intellectually consistent—your principles haven't been defeated.'"[59] As they grow, the shadow machines weaken traditional ones, which find themselves ever less able to maintain order in their environment and in their own ranks. *Politico* quotes Thomas Mills, a North Carolina–based political consultant and observer who has worked on local, state, and presidential races: "There's nobody refereeing the fights. We're not seeing party bosses or strong chairs that can try to work out deals behind closed doors to keep it from breaking out into the public."[60] The shadow machines also weaken candidates' accountability, to voters as well as to leaders. "Candidates raise as much as they can, but they can be smothered with expenditures from interest groups and super PACs, which are not subject to the same fundraising limitations as candidates or parties," write former House members Tom Davis and Martin Frost and the journalist Richard E. Cohen.[61]

Little wonder, in turn, that more and more often, on any number of pressing issues—the budget, immigration, and even keeping the government open—congressional leaders have found themselves helpless to exert enough discipline to negotiate and deliver on deals, even when getting a deal was in the interest of the party and when a majority of the caucus wanted one. Little wonder that lone-wolf politicians and outside groups and private machines have acquired veto power of a sort which would have shocked politicians of earlier generations.

Paralysis born of inability to forge consensus on a tough issue is frustrating and disappointing, but it accurately reflects political reality. Paralysis born of politicians' incapacity to organize a deal even when they want and need one is true systemic dysfunction, a distortion of political reality. To paraphrase Moynihan from another context: a polity that demolishes its political machines and demonizes its political professionals asks for and gets chaos.

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55. Byron Tau, "Last Call for State Parties?," *Politico*, February 16, 2014.

56. Gold, "Koch-Backed Network Aims to Spend Nearly $1 Billion in Run Up to 2016."

57. Ashley Parker and Jonathan Weisman, "For Midterms, Betting on Feet and Good Apps," *New York Times*, October 25, 2014.

58. "How to Spend It," *The Economist*, October 25, 2014

59. Ibid.

60. Tau, "Last Call for State Parties?"

61. Tom Davis, Martin Frost, and Richard E. Cohen, *The Partisan Divide: Congress in Crisis* (Premiere, 2014), p. 164.

REBALANCING: LETTING POLITICIANS DO WHAT COMES NATURALLY

A frequent criticism of realism is that it is not realistic, because the world has changed and the age of political machines is over. In one respect, that objection is true but trivial: no realist imagines that it is either possible or desirable to reincarnate the ward heelers, block captains, and party clubhouses of old. The realist claim is that we can learn from the past, not relive it; that generations of political knowledge and practice are still relevant today; and that today we can profitably seek modern processes that provide the functional equivalent of what our grandparents did that was valuable. In another respect, however, the objection that realism is unrealistic is nontrivial but the opposite of true. Organizing their political environment, transacting exchanges with each other and their supporters, favoring friends over foes, building and joining informal hierarchies, controlling access to power and perquisites—those behaviors are instinctive for political professionals. They can be encouraged simply by being allowed.

Indeed, they will happen even if they are *not* allowed, albeit in roundabout and insidious ways. Transactional politics and informal structures that organize influence are not optional; they are necessary to run a government, a political party, a congressional caucus, a House committee. Because they must, political professionals have responded to the challenge of shadow machines—partly by building private machines of their own, because outsiders can do so much that insiders cannot. It's rather as if a weak sovereign government, under attack from hostile private militias, turned to friendly private militias to mount a defense. Confronted with the Tea Party insurgency, establishment Republicans, led by Senate Republican leader McConnell, organized pro-business allies and proxies to counterattack. David von Drehle's account in *Time* is worth quoting at length:

> It was time for the Old Guard to strike back. A little-watched special election in 2013 for a House seat in Alabama saw the U.S. Chamber of Commerce turn its big guns against a Tea Party candidate. When the Establishment's choice won a narrow victory, McConnell and his House counterpart were heartened. Boehner's unruly backbenchers finally quit throwing spitballs and shut up, the Speaker told confidants, while McConnell advised the U.S. Chamber's board that the Alabama special served as a warning to insurgents that 2014 would be different.

> It proved to be the template for a rough primary in Mississippi earlier this year, where the GOP establishment beat back a Tea Party challenge to veteran Senator Thad Cochran. Behind the scenes, meanwhile, McConnell served notice that Tea Party enablers would pay a price for their rabble-rousing. He made an example of a GOP advertising firm, Jamestown Associates, and coaxed his

colleagues into a boycott of the company. He planted stories of bloated salaries paid to the leaders of pro–Tea Party groups, which was enough to dampen some of their enthusiasm. "Mitch basically took all the wedge-driven zealots in the party who screwed up the Senate for two cycles and either slowed them down or worse," said Rick Hohlt, a longtime GOP consultant. "He was focused and disciplined, and it was phenomenal to watch."[62]

The result, as Karl Rove, a prominent Republican strategist, wrote, was that in 2014 "every Republican senator and virtually every congressman challenged as insufficiently conservative won their primaries."[63] Meanwhile, Speaker Boehner made his own attempts at reestablishing authority by stripping Rules Committee assignments from two House conservatives who voted against him and blocking a bill favored by a third. (A group of twenty-three House conservatives responded with an indignant broadside, calling Boehner's retaliation "unacceptable and disappointing" and insisting that "this must end immediately," a response which must have been gratifying to the Speaker.)[64]

So the professionals are struggling to reassemble and reorganize. Much weakened, they may or may not succeed. The realist mission is not to root for them or any other particular faction in politics but, in the contest between professionalism and amateurism, to move law, rules, and public opinion closer to neutrality, thereby giving the professionals more space to do what they need to do. The good news for realism is that today there is no shortage of strong minds at work on the question of how to strike a less lopsided balance. Realists are cropping up in the academy and elsewhere, examining various aspects of the problem, and making creative suggestions.

A logical place to begin is by reducing the artificial fundraising advantages that current law gives to political amateurs and outsiders. Today's tight restrictions on donations to candidates and parties have not reduced the amount of money in politics, nor have they demonstrably reduced corruption, improved policy outcomes, facilitated governance, or pleased the public; what they have done is to channel money into "proto-parties disguised as independent groups run by party-affiliated political operatives," resulting in "a nightmare of fractionalized spending," as Stanford University political scientist Bruce Cain puts it.[65] Because many or most donors would give directly to parties and candidates rather than shadow machines if they could, a logical remedy is to raise dramatically the contribution limits to candidates and parties, bringing more money back inside the system.

But *where* inside the system? There is a case for moving beyond neutrality by deliberately advantaging the parties in the fundraising game. In new research, political scientists Ray La Raja and Brian Schaffner, of the University of Massachusetts Amherst, compare states which have candidate-centered funding systems with those using party-centered systems. In states where parties do more of the fundraising and spending, the legislatures are less polarized and the parties' own behavior is more moderate. "Party organizations do, in fact, behave differently than other partisan groups by mediating ideological sources of money and funneling it to moderate candidates," they write.[66] That is not necessarily because parties are made up of moderates, but because they want to win. Moreover, party mediation "helps to insulate candidates from ideologically-driven donors who might pull candidates in their direction, either by threatening to withhold funding or by financing other candidates who agree with them." Insiders,

62. David von Drehle, "GOP Wave: How Mitch McConnell Won the Day," *Time*, November 17, 2014.

63. Karl Rove, "My Fearless Political Predictions for 2015," *Wall Street Journal*, January 8, 2015 (www.wsj.com/articles/karl-rove-my-fearless-political-predictions-for-2015-1420675013).

64. Rob Bluey, "23 Conservative Leaders Warn Boehner Not to Punish GOP Dissenters," *Daily Signal*, January 7, 2015.

65. Bruce Cain, *Democracy More or Less: The Quandary of American Political Reform* (Cambridge University Press, 2015), pp. 167, 202.

66. Raymond J. La Raja and Brian Schaffner, "Want to Reduce Polarization? Give Parties More Money," *Washington Post,* July 21, 2014 (www.washingtonpost.com/blogs/monkey-cage/wp/2014/07/21/want-to-reduce-polarization-give-parties-more-money/).

they find, direct electoral resources in ways that appeal to the median voter. "Moderation," they find, "is a byproduct of their pursuit of power."[67]

A good way to create space for transactional politics, then, might be simply to lift all restrictions, except disclosure requirements, on donations to political parties, an approach which La Raja and Schaffner call building canals, not dams. With more resources of their own and relatively less flowing outside, parties would be in a stronger position to "assemble power in the formal government": in other words, to behave like machines. One could make a similar case for allowing top leaders in Congress (and perhaps committee chairs and ranking members) to raise much larger or even unlimited donations for their leadership PACs, helping leaders support and protect loyalists. Channeling contributions through parties and bosses would be reinforced by eliminating today's counterproductive restrictions on coordinating parties' campaign efforts with those of candidates and outside groups. Directing political traffic and organizing political coalitions are what machines exist to do.

They also act as gatekeepers to power, a function which today's system of primary elections has weakened—at high cost to leadership in government. Imagine how dramatically the dynamics on Capitol Hill might change if state Republican parties gave Speaker Boehner the power to strike House candidates from the primary ballot: overnight, the party would move dramatically toward parliamentary-style discipline. Although giving Boehner a nuclear option is likely to remain a thought experiment, realists have proposed more plausible ways to balance today's dispropor-tionate influence of amateurs. As in the presidential nominating process, the primary vote in congressional contests could be supplemented with a designated role for officeholders and party grandees. Such "super-delegates" would be year-round professionals and elected officials, not amateur caucus-goers. Despite their influence, extremists might still get the nod in extreme districts, but allowing professionals to do more gatekeeping could give candidates and officeholders second thoughts about going rogue after the election. Another approach is to make getting on the primary ballot harder, filtering out candidates who have little party or institutional support. Yet another approach lets the party clearly indicate its preferred candidate on the primary ballot, telling voters unambiguously which candidate has earned official endorsement. "The point here," writes Nathaniel Persily, of Stanford Law School, "is to give the party organizations a thumb on the primary election scale so that potential nominees must factor in how much their apostasy means to them. In some circumstances, perhaps it will mean a lot. Candidates could still 'run against' the party. But when they do, it will be clear to voters that they are doing so."[68]

In Congress, realism prescribes seeking ways to strengthen the hand of congressional leaders and hierarchies. Here is a simple enough idea, far from revolutionary but probably incrementally helpful: bring back earmarks—well regulated, as they were before they were abolished. Jason Grumet, the president of the Bipartisan Policy Center, suggests that "bills passed out of committee by large enough majorities should be placed *automatically* on a calendar that propels them to floor consideration without delay," a step which "would strengthen the committee chairs and increase the engagement of committee members who have grown weary of a process that has little chance of shaping outcomes."[69] A growing chorus on Capitol Hill calls for restoration of regular order and committee work. Taking steps to protect and expand private spaces for negotiations also would not go amiss.

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67. From the forthcoming book *Campaign Finance and Political Polarization: When Purists Prevail* (University of Michigan Press), chapter 1. Thanks to the authors for providing a copy of the manuscript.

68. Nathaniel Persily, "Are Parties the Cause or Solution to Polarization?" conference paper, October 2013. Quoted by permission of the author.

69. Jason Grumet, *City of Rivals: Restoring the Glorious Mess of American Democracy* (Lyons Press, 2014), p. 132.

RETHINKING: TOWARD A NEW— OR IS IT OLD?—PARADIGM

Perhaps more important than making any particular change in law or policy or rules is to change the country's argumentative defaults. For too many years, "propulist" and libertarian anti-realists have enjoyed an oligopoly on the public conversation. Too many assumptions have gone unchallenged and hardened into dogma.

It's often assumed that polarization is today's foremost problem for governance. Maybe not. As important and perhaps more so may be what Pildes calls fragmentation. "By fragmentation," he writes, "I mean the external diffusion of political power away from the political parties as a whole and the internal diffusion of power away from the party leadership to individual party members and officeholders."[70] The ideological gap between the two parties may indeed make negotiating more difficult and deals harder to strike (and may also present clearer choices to voters—not a bad thing), but the target for policy—the thing that we could actually do something about—is "re-empowering party elites and leaders and giving them the tools to more effectively enforce party discipline in the service of effective governance in a highly polarized political era that is likely to remain so for years."[71] The question is not only how far apart the parties are but also whether their leaders have the capacity to meet in the middle when compromise is in their interest.

It's generally assumed that moderation comes from moderates, so the way to reduce polarization is to increase participation. Maybe not, on both counts. Moderation may come more from machines than from moderates, and direct participation naturally favors extremists and independent operators. If so, efforts that seek to foster moderation by encouraging voter independence and weakening party control—for instance, by establishing nonpartisan primaries, as California has done in hopes of increasing the influence of moderate voters—may backfire.[72] To get moderation in governance, the better bet may be to empower leadership and parties that have incentives to compromise. Persily draws the distinction well:

> The anti-party approach [to reducing polarization] hopes to promote the election of moderates by fostering electoral competition or liberating candidates from the constraints of party loyalty and

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70. Pildes, "Romanticizing Democracy," p. 809.

71. Richard Pildes, "Fragmentation, Not Polarization: Reduce Participation and Empower Leadership," conference paper, October 2013. Quoted by permission of the author.

72. I've supported the California experiment, and I still do—at the state level. Reforms like nonpartisan primaries and redistricting commissions deserve to be tried. But so do reforms like strengthening parties, which have received less attention.

discipline. The pro-party approach aims to empower the median party member and the party leadership against the extremes. . . . Party organizations need to be richer and more powerful to counteract the polarizing tendencies of outside groups, and party leaders need to have a greater array of tools to whip recalcitrant members into line.[73]

It's generally assumed that making districts more competitive in general elections would reduce obstructionism and extremism. Maybe not. From the point of view of governing, making general elections more competitive may be less important than making *primary* elections *less* competitive but more subject to leadership influence. Leaders who can protect their followers from retention contests—or who, conversely, can green-light a challenge to an obstreperous incumbent—will have a lot more leverage in seeking help on tough votes.

It's generally assumed that the system will be healthier if more individuals give small sums of money, thereby increasing participation and reducing the relative weight of special interests. Maybe not. Small donors tend to be polarized and polarizing. Pildes notes that individual contributions to campaigns "today are by far the largest source of direct money to campaigns (about 61 percent for Congress)" but that "as our campaign finance system has become more democratized, our politics has become more polarized."[74] Moreover, small donors' independence and capriciousness makes them hard to organize and influence, and today we need to worry at least as much about politicians' influence over donors as about donors' influence over politicians. Subsidizing small-dollar donations to candidates, a common reform proposal, would increase politicians' independence from parties and professionals, potentially making politics even more disorganized and government more dysfunctional. It would also reduce barriers to entry for fringe and extremist candidates, while reducing the costs of maverick behavior in office. Though a candidate funded by small donors may be less accountable to a high roller like Sheldon Adelson or Tom Steyer, she is also less accountable to a leader like John Boehner, which right now is the more pressing problem.

A similar analysis holds for public financing more generally. The question which needs to be asked more often is not whether financing is public or private or whether donations are large or small, but whether flows of money are accountable to political and party *insiders* or *outsiders*. Super PACS and mega-donors like Adelson and Steyer are facts of life, and the sensible thing to do now is make the best of their big bucks by attaching them to machines or parties which offer some hope of mediating and directing their influence. Using the public burse to pay for all or part of campaigns might (or might not) reduce the influence of special interests and wealthy donors at the margins, but public subsidies to candidates also help politicians set up shop as independent entrepreneurs, reducing the power of parties and leaders to act as gatekeepers and traffic cops.

Deciding what the public has a right to know about the transactions that go on within government is difficult; there is no perfect sweet spot. At present, however, neither public discourse nor reform consensus is inclined to acknowledge that there is a cost to exposing the inner workings of politics to 24-7 public scrutiny. Recently, when it emerged that Hillary Clinton had used a private account for her e-mails when she was secretary of state, Democrats and Republicans debated whether she had broken the rules, but no one suggested that the secretary of state's e-mails are none of the public's business or that shielding them might be helpful when there are sensitive tasks to perform. Clinton herself felt obliged to announce, "I want the public to see my e-mail." Transparency advocates say that they do not expect or want politicians and public officials to work in a fishbowl, but at what point will they draw a line

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73. Nathaniel Persily, "Stronger Parties as a Solution to Polarization," in *Solutions to Political Polarization in America,* edited by Nathaniel Persily (Cambridge University Press, 2015), pp. 123, 126.
74. Pildes, "Romanticizing Democracy," p. 826.

JASON GRUMET
Bipartisan Policy Center

"A closer look reveals that many of the reforms we've instituted to make government work more effectively—all of them pursued with the best of intentions—have, in practice, had the opposite effect. Through a series of bad assumptions and unintended consequences, we have weakened our government's capacity to solve problems."

City of Rivals: Restoring the Glorious Mess of American Democracy (2014)

against the encroachment of scrutiny? They may be right to object to the overuse of classification by government officials, but what, really, is to be expected when everything that is not classified is wide open? As Jason Grumet has said, the opposite of transparency in politics is not corruption, it is privacy. Even granting that there is no perfect balance to be struck, acknowledging the need for balance and the value of privacy would mark a welcome change.

It is time, too, to acknowledge that what Pildes calls the romanticization of democracy—the unquestioning pursuit of ever more participation—needs reexamining. The general assumption that politics will be more satisfying and government will work better if more people participate more directly is poorly supported and probably wrong. What is true of donors is also true more generally: where direct engagement with politics is concerned, the polarized and financially interested have an inherent advantage. Jay Cost's fantasy of a coalition of the disinterested is just that, a flight from reality, and as futile as flights from reality usually are. Pildes argues for acknowledging a "tragic trade-off" between unmediated popular participation and government's effective functioning. There may be no perfect balance between the two, but just accepting that more democracy is not always the answer would mark a sea change in American political discourse.

And then there is that Tasmanian Devil of entrenched assumptions, the tail-chasing, tree-munching, all-consuming, ever expanding, and by now entirely counterproductive war on corruption. Perhaps the hardest of all default assumptions to reset is the idea that most of America's political and governmental ills are the result of some version of corruption and that the remedy involves some version of amateurism. Changing this default is a tall order in a country where politicians and the public are addicted to diatribes against politics, where inexperience in politics is regularly touted as proof of virtue, and where two generations of reformers are deeply invested in the war on corruption.

Still, mounting a frontal challenge to the premises that the war on corruption is based on now seems at least possible. Realists are beginning to step forward confidently into a debate which until recently stigmatized them as cynics or ignored them altogether. Their advocacy of political home truths is already suggesting new directions in a reform conversation which has reached a dead end.

RENEWAL: THE IDEALIST'S CASE FOR REALISM

In Utah, only a few weeks before these words were written, leaders of the gay community, of the Mormon Church, and of the Republican dominated state legislature went behind closed doors for several weeks to negotiate in secret. Working late hours to the point of exhaustion, they tried one combination of ideas after another. When they thought they were getting close, some unhappy group or politician would raise a new problem and set them scrambling anew. After they finally hammered out an agreement with each other on a bill, an entirely separate piece of legislation threatened to derail it, forcing yet more huddles and scrambles. A participant who was new to political negotiation told me that the whole business, up close, had seemed disconcertingly messy, uncertain, and hard.

But what emerged from behind those closed doors? Gay rights groups stood shoulder to shoulder with senior leaders of the Mormon Church to propose the extension of antidiscrimination protections, for the first time, to gay, lesbian, and transgender Utahans, coupled with religious conscience exemptions for the faithful. Rather than merely splitting the difference, the negotiators sweetened the deal with an innovative provision protecting employees from being fired for their non-harassing, non-work-related speech about morals or politics. The negotiators had taken care to keep lines of communication open to groups, such as non-Mormon religious organizations and national civil rights organizations, whose objections might have sideswiped the agreement. The politicians in the room had run interference with colleagues and constituents outside the room to reduce the odds of having the deal picked apart. The landmark gay rights legislation passed by overwhelming margins in both chambers of the legislature.[75]

Not everyone went away happy. Purists among libertarians, gay rights activists, and social conservatives all found reasons to grumble. But the negotiation and its outcome showed up the purists for what they were: outliers. And it built a consensus strong enough to withstand their vetoes, allowing implicit majority opinion to be heard. The successful compromise carved new channels of communication and trust across adversarial lines, partially depolarizing what had been an intractable controversy in which one side's religion was the other's civil rights violation. It spoke for and to the median voter in a way that today's primary campaigns and advertising blitzes rarely do.

The Utah deal worked partly because of good timing and good luck. Both sides (in this case, the church and gay rights advocates) wanted a deal, and they had spent several years having backstage conversations to build trust. Such opportunities for civic compromise don't come every day, and lately they come less often. But that only makes it more important that openings for compromise be seized rather than squandered when they arise. Without private negotiations, interest group dickering, and political leaders who can deliver votes—in other words, without secrecy, logrolling, and hacks—the moment in Utah would have been lost.

I've heard it said that America today is too divided for transactional politics to thrive as it once did; there just isn't as much common ground. Perhaps, but the causality runs both ways. I believe that America today is as divided as it is partly *because* transactional politics has been stifled. Coarse and crass as it often is, transactional politics is social mediation. It is how we connect across our disagreements and figure out a way forward. Strengthening the mechanisms of compromise—the incentives to barter, the leverage of leaders, the spaces for frank conversation—will not bring all of the people together all of the time, but it will allow more of the people to come together more of the time. Fortunately, it's never too late to put more politics back into politics.

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75. For more, see "Gays, Mormons, and the Constitution," Brookings panel discussion, March 16, 2015 (www.brookings.edu/events/2015/03/16-gays-mormons-religion).

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