

Political Parties and Polarization

April 30, 2022

1. Edmund Burke, *Thoughts on the Cause of the Present Discontents*, para. 1.1.141-148 and 1.1.151 (1770)
2. Publius, *The Federalist*, No. 10 (1787)
3. George Washington, Farewell Address, excerpt (1796)
4. Woodrow Wilson, "Wanted – A Party" (1886)
5. Jonathan Rauch & Ray La Raja, "Too Much Democracy is Bad for Democracy," *The Atlantic* (2019)

Recommended

1. George Packer, "How America Fractured Into Four Parts," *The Atlantic* (2021)

Edmund Burke, *Thoughts on the Cause of the Present Discontents*, para. 1.1.141-48 and 1.1.151 (1770)

Edmund Burke was an Irish-born political philosopher as well as a practicing politician who served in British Parliament for over 25 years as a member of the Whig party. In this passage drawn from a 1770 pamphlet, Burke distinguishes between parties and factions. As he understands them, parties are groups of likeminded individuals who are bound together by their commitment to certain principles. According to Burke, parties are essential institutions.

This Cabal has, with great success, propagated a doctrine which serves for a colour to those acts of treachery; and whilst it receives any degree of countenance, it will be utterly senseless to look for a vigorous opposition to the Court Party. The doctrine is this: That all political connexions are in their nature factious, and as such ought to be dissipated and destroyed; and that the rule for forming Administrations is mere personal ability, rated by the judgment of this Cabal upon it, and taken by draughts from every division and denomination of public men. This decree was solemnly promulgated by the head of the Court corps, the Earl of Bute himself, in a speech which he made, in the year 1766, against the then Administration, the only Administration which he has ever been known directly and publicly to oppose.

It is indeed in no way wonderful, that such persons should make such declarations. That connexion and Faction are equivalent terms, is an opinion which has been carefully inculcated at all times by unconstitutional Statesmen. The reason is evident. Whilst men are linked together, they easily and speedily communicate the alarm of an evil design. They are enabled to fathom it with common counsel, and to oppose it with united strength. Whereas, when they lie dispersed, without concert, order, or discipline, communication is uncertain, counsel difficult, and resistance impracticable. Where men are not acquainted with each other's principles, nor experienced in each other's talents, nor at all practised in their mutual habitudes and dispositions by joint efforts in business; no personal confidence, no friendship, no common interest, subsisting among them; it is evidently impossible that they can act a public part with uniformity, perseverance, or efficacy. In a connexion, the most inconsiderable man, by adding to the weight of the whole, has his value, and his use; out of it, the greatest talents are wholly unserviceable to the public. No man, who is not inflamed by vain-glory into enthusiasm, can flatter himself that his single, unsupported, desultory, unsystematic endeavours, are of power to defeat the subtle designs and united Cabals of ambitious citizens. When bad men combine, the good must associate; else they will fall, one by one, an unpitied sacrifice in a contemptible struggle.

It is not enough in a situation of trust in the commonwealth, that a man means well to his country; it is not enough that in his single person he never did an evil act, but always voted according to his conscience, and even harangued against every design which he apprehended to be prejudicial to the interests of his country. This innoxious and ineffectual character, that seems formed upon

a plan of apology and disculpation, falls miserably short of the mark of public duty. That duty demands and requires, that what is right should not only be made known, but made prevalent; that what is evil should not only be detected, but defeated. When the public man omits to put himself in a situation of doing his duty with effect, it is an omission that frustrates the purposes of his trust almost as much as if he had formally betrayed it. It is surely no very rational account of a man's life, that he has always acted right; but has taken special care to act in such a manner that his endeavours could not possibly be productive of any consequence.

I do not wonder that the behaviour of many parties should have made persons of tender and scrupulous virtue somewhat out of humour with all sorts of connexion in politicks. I admit that people frequently acquire in such confederacies a narrow, bigotted, and proscriptive spirit; that they are apt to sink the idea of the general good in this circumscribed and partial interest. But, where duty renders a critical situation a necessary one, it is our business to keep free from the evils attendant upon it; and not to fly from the situation itself. If a fortress is seated in an unwholesome air, an officer of the garrison is obliged to be attentive to his health, but he must not desert his station. Every profession, not excepting the glorious one of a soldier, or the sacred one of a priest, is liable to its own particular vices; which, however, form no argument against those ways of life; nor are the vices themselves inevitable to every individual in those professions. Of such a nature are connexions in politicks; essentially necessary for the full performance of our public duty, accidentally liable to degenerate into faction. Commonwealths are made of families, free commonwealths of parties also; and we may as well affirm, that our natural regards and ties of blood tend inevitably to make men bad citizens, as that the bonds of our party weaken those by which we are held to our country.

Some legislators went so far as to make neutrality in party a crime against the State. I do not know whether this might not have been rather to overstrain the principle. Certain it is, the best patriots in the greatest commonwealths have always commended and promoted such connexions. *Idem sentire de republica*, was with them a principal ground of friendship and attachment; nor do I know any other capable of forming firmer, dearer, more pleasing, more honourable, and more virtuous habitudes. The Romans carried this principle a great way. Even the holding of offices together, the disposition of which arose from chance, not selection, gave rise to a relation which continued for life. It was called *necessitudo sortis*; and it was looked upon with a sacred reverence. Breaches of any of these kinds of civil relation were considered as acts of the most distinguished turpitude. The whole people was distributed into political societies, in which they acted in support of such interests in the State as they severally affected. For it was then thought no crime, to endeavour by every honest means to advance to superiority and power those of your own sentiments and opinions. This wise people was far from imagining that those connexions had no tie, and obliged to no duty; but that men might quit them without shame, upon every call of interest. They believed private honour to be the great foundation of public trust; that friendship was no mean step towards patriotism; that he who,

in the common intercourse of life, shewed he regarded somebody besides himself, when he came to act in a public situation, might probably consult some other interest than his own. Never may we become plus sages que les sages, as the French comedian has happily expressed it—wiser than all the wise and good men who have lived before us. It was their wish, to see public and private virtues, not dissonant and jarring, and mutually destructive, but harmoniously combined, growing out of one another in a noble and orderly gradation, reciprocally supporting and supported. In one of the most fortunate periods of our history this country was governed by a connexion; I mean the great connexion of Whigs in the reign of Queen Anne. They were complimented upon the principle of this connexion by a poet who was in high esteem with them. Addison, who knew their sentiments, could not praise them for what they considered as no proper subject of commendation. As a poet who knew his business, he could not applaud them for a thing which in general estimation was not highly reputable. Addressing himself to Britain,

Thy favourites grow not up by fortune's sport, Or
from the crimes or follies of a Court;
On the firm basis of desert they rise,
From long-try'd faith, and friendship's holy ties.

The Whigs of those days believed that the only proper method of rising into power was through hard essays of practised friendship and experimented fidelity. At that time it was not imagined, that patriotism was a bloody idol, which required sacrifice of children and parents, or dearest connexions in private life, and of all the virtues that rise from those relations. They were not of that ingenious paradoxical morality to imagine that a spirit of moderation was properly shown in patiently bearing the sufferings of your friends; or that disinterestedness was clearly manifested at the expence of other people's fortune. They believed that no men could act with effect, who did not act in concert; that no men could act in concert, who did not act with confidence; that no men could act with confidence, who were not bound together by common opinions, common affections, and common interests.

These wise men, for such I must call Lord Sunderland, Lord Godolphin, Lord Somers, and Lord Marlborough, were too well principled in these maxims upon which the whole fabric of public strength is built, to be blown off their ground by the breath of every childish talker. They were not afraid that they should be called an ambitious Junto; or that their resolution to stand or fall together should, by placemen, be interpreted into a scuffle for places.

Party is a body of men united, for promoting by their joint endeavours the national interest, upon some particular principle in which they are all agreed. For my part, I find it impossible to conceive, that any one believes in his own politicks, or thinks them to be of any weight, who refuses to adopt the means of having them reduced into practice. It is the business of the

speculative philosopher to mark the proper ends of Government. It is the business of the politician, who is the philosopher in action, to find out proper means towards those ends, and to employ them with effect. Therefore every honourable connexion will avow it as their first purpose, to pursue every just method to put the men who hold their opinions into such a condition as may enable them to carry their common plans into execution, with all the power and authority of the State. As this power is attached to certain situations, it is their duty to contend for these situations. Without a proscription of others, they are bound to give to their own party the preference in all things; and p. 150-26 by no means, for private considerations, to accept any offers of power in which the whole body is not included; nor to suffer themselves to be led, or to be controuled, or to be over-balanced, in office or in council, by those who contradict the very fundamental principles on which their party is formed, and even those upon which every fair connexion must stand. Such a generous contention for power, on such manly and honourable maxims, will easily be distinguished from the mean and interested struggle for place and emolument. The very stile of such persons will serve to discriminate them from those numberless impostors, who have deluded the ignorant with professions incompatible with human practice, and have afterwards incensed them by practices below the level of vulgar rectitude.

...

In order to throw an odium on political connexion, these politicians suppose it a necessary incident to it, that you are blindly to follow the opinions of your party, when indirect opposition to your own clear ideas; a degree of servitude that no worthy man could bear the thought of submitting to; and such as, I believe, no connexions (except some Court Factions) ever could be so senselessly tyrannical as to impose. Men thinking freely, will, in particular instances, think differently. But still as the greater part of the measures which arise in the course of public business are related to, or dependent on, some great *leading general principles in Government*, a man must be peculiarly unfortunate in the choice of his political company if he does not agree with them at least nine times in ten.

If he does not concur in these general principles upon which the party is founded, and which necessarily draw on a concurrence in their application, he ought from the beginning to have chosen some other, more conformable to his opinions. When the question is in its nature doubtful, or not very material, the modesty which becomes an individual, and (in spite of our Court moralists) ^{*313} that partiality which becomes a well-chosen friendship, will frequently bring on an acquiescence in the general sentiment.

Thus the disagreement will naturally be rare; it will be only enough to indulge freedom, without violating concord, or disturbing arrangement. And this is all that ever was required for a character of the greatest uniformity and steadiness in connexion. How men can proceed without any connexion at all, is to me utterly incomprehensible. Of what sort of materials must that man be made, how must he be tempered and put together, who can sit whole years in Parliament,

with five hundred and fifty of his fellow-citizens, amidst the storm of such tempestuous passions, in the sharp conflict of so many wits, and tempers, and characters, in the agitation of such mighty questions, in the discussion of such [90] vast and ponderous interests, without seeing any one sort of men, whose character, conduct, or disposition, would lead him to associate himself with them, to aid and be aided, in any one system of public utility?

Publius, *The Federalist*, No. 10

Madison's use of the term "faction" is generally understood to include both formal political parties as well as other formal or informal groups in society. This 1787 essay--the most famous of the Federalist Papers--is about mitigating the problem of factions and reflects Madison's and many of the Founders' view that parties are dangerous.

The Same Subject Continued
The Union as a Safeguard Against Domestic Faction and Insurrection
From the New York Packet. Friday, November 23, 1787.
Madison

To the People of the State of New York:

AMONG the numerous advantages promised by a wellconstructed Union, none deserves to be more accurately developed than its tendency to break and control the violence of faction. The friend of popular governments never finds himself so much alarmed for their character and fate, as when he contemplates their propensity to this dangerous vice. He will not fail, therefore, to set a due value on any plan which, without violating the principles to which he is attached, provides a proper cure for it. The instability, injustice, and confusion introduced into the public councils, have, in truth, been the mortal diseases under which popular governments have everywhere perished; as they continue to be the favorite and fruitful topics from which the adversaries to liberty derive their most specious declamations. The valuable improvements made by the American constitutions on the popular models, both ancient and modern, cannot certainly be too much admired; but it would be an unwarrantable partiality, to contend that they have as effectually obviated the danger on this side, as was wished and expected. Complaints are everywhere heard from our most considerate and virtuous citizens, equally the friends of public and private faith, and of public and personal liberty, that our governments are too unstable, that the public good is disregarded in the conflicts of rival parties, and that measures are too often decided, not according to the rules of justice and the rights of the minor party, but by the superior force of an interested and overbearing majority. However anxiously we may wish that these complaints had no foundation, the evidence, of known facts will not permit us to deny that they are in some degree true. It will be found, indeed, on a candid review of our situation, that some of the distresses under which we labor have been erroneously charged on the operation of our governments; but it will be found, at the same time, that other causes will not alone account for many of our heaviest misfortunes; and, particularly, for that prevailing and increasing distrust of public engagements, and alarm for private rights, which are echoed from one end of the continent to the other. These must be chiefly, if not wholly, effects of the unsteadiness and injustice with which a factious spirit has tainted our public administrations.

By a faction, I understand a number of citizens, whether amounting to a majority or a minority of the whole, who are united and actuated by some common impulse of passion, or of

interest, adversed to the rights of other citizens, or to the permanent and aggregate interests of the community.

There are two methods of curing the mischiefs of faction: the one, by removing its causes; the other, by controlling its effects.

There are again two methods of removing the causes of faction: the one, by destroying the liberty which is essential to its existence; the other, by giving to every citizen the same opinions, the same passions, and the same interests.

It could never be more truly said than of the first remedy, that it was worse than the disease. Liberty is to faction what air is to fire, an aliment without which it instantly expires. But it could not be less folly to abolish liberty, which is essential to political life, because it nourishes faction, than it would be to wish the annihilation of air, which is essential to animal life, because it imparts to fire its destructive agency.

The second expedient is as impracticable as the first would be unwise. As long as the reason of man continues fallible, and he is at liberty to exercise it, different opinions will be formed. As long as the connection subsists between his reason and his self-love, his opinions and his passions will have a reciprocal influence on each other; and the former will be objects to which the latter will attach themselves. The diversity in the faculties of men, from which the rights of property originate, is not less an insuperable obstacle to a uniformity of interests. The protection of these faculties is the first object of government. From the protection of different and unequal faculties of acquiring property, the possession of different degrees and kinds of property immediately results; and from the influence of these on the sentiments and views of the respective proprietors, ensues a division of the society into different interests and parties.

The latent causes of faction are thus sown in the nature of man; and we see them everywhere brought into different degrees of activity, according to the different circumstances of civil society. A zeal for different opinions concerning religion, concerning government, and many other points, as well of speculation as of practice; an attachment to different leaders ambitiously contending for pre-eminence and power; or to persons of other descriptions whose fortunes have been interesting to the human passions, have, in turn, divided mankind into parties, inflamed them with mutual animosity, and rendered them much more disposed to vex and oppress each other than to co-operate for their common good. So strong is this propensity of mankind to fall into mutual animosities, that where no substantial occasion presents itself, the most frivolous and fanciful distinctions have been sufficient to kindle their unfriendly passions and excite their most violent conflicts. But the most common and durable source of factions has been the various and unequal distribution of property. Those who hold and those who are without property have ever formed distinct interests in society. Those who are creditors, and those who are debtors, fall under a like discrimination. A landed interest, a manufacturing interest, a mercantile interest, a

moneyed interest, with many lesser interests, grow up of necessity in civilized nations, and divide them into different classes, actuated by different sentiments and views. The regulation of these various and interfering interests forms the principal task of modern legislation, and involves the spirit of party and faction in the necessary and ordinary operations of the government.

No man is allowed to be a judge in his own cause, because his interest would certainly bias his judgment, and, not improbably, corrupt his integrity. With equal, nay with greater reason, a body of men are unfit to be both judges and parties at the same time; yet what are many of the most important acts of legislation, but so many judicial determinations, not indeed concerning the rights of single persons, but concerning the rights of large bodies of citizens? And what are the different classes of legislators but advocates and parties to the causes which they determine? Is a law proposed concerning private debts? It is a question to which the creditors are parties on one side and the debtors on the other. Justice ought to hold the balance between them. Yet the parties are, and must be, themselves the judges; and the most numerous party, or, in other words, the most powerful faction must be expected to prevail. Shall domestic manufactures be encouraged, and in what degree, by restrictions on foreign manufactures? are questions which would be differently decided by the landed and the manufacturing classes, and probably by neither with a sole regard to justice and the public good. The apportionment of taxes on the various descriptions of property is an act which seems to require the most exact impartiality; yet there is, perhaps, no legislative act in which greater opportunity and temptation are given to a predominant party to trample on the rules of justice. Every shilling with which they overburden the inferior number, is a shilling saved to their own pockets.

It is in vain to say that enlightened statesmen will be able to adjust these clashing interests, and render them all subservient to the public good. Enlightened statesmen will not always be at the helm. Nor, in many cases, can such an adjustment be made at all without taking into view indirect and remote considerations, which will rarely prevail over the immediate interest which one party may find in disregarding the rights of another or the good of the whole.

The inference to which we are brought is, that the **CAUSES** of faction cannot be removed, and that relief is only to be sought in the means of controlling its **EFFECTS**.

If a faction consists of less than a majority, relief is supplied by the republican principle, which enables the majority to defeat its sinister views by regular vote. It may clog the administration, it may convulse the society; but it will be unable to execute and mask its violence under the forms of the Constitution. When a majority is included in a faction, the form of popular government, on the other hand, enables it to sacrifice to its ruling passion or interest both the public good and the rights of other citizens. To secure the public good and private rights against the danger of such a faction, and at the same time to preserve the spirit and the form of popular government, is then the great object to which our inquiries are directed. Let me add that it is the

great desideratum by which this form of government can be rescued from the opprobrium under which it has so long labored, and be recommended to the esteem and adoption of mankind.

By what means is this object attainable? Evidently by one of two only. Either the existence of the same passion or interest in a majority at the same time must be prevented, or the majority, having such coexistent passion or interest, must be rendered, by their number and local situation, unable to concert and carry into effect schemes of oppression. If the impulse and the opportunity be suffered to coincide, we well know that neither moral nor religious motives can be relied on as an adequate control. They are not found to be such on the injustice and violence of individuals, and lose their efficacy in proportion to the number combined together, that is, in proportion as their efficacy becomes needful.

From this view of the subject it may be concluded that a pure democracy, by which I mean a society consisting of a small number of citizens, who assemble and administer the government in person, can admit of no cure for the mischiefs of faction. A common passion or interest will, in almost every case, be felt by a majority of the whole; a communication and concert result from the form of government itself; and there is nothing to check the inducements to sacrifice the weaker party or an obnoxious individual. Hence it is that such democracies have ever been spectacles of turbulence and contention; have ever been found incompatible with personal security or the rights of property; and have in general been as short in their lives as they have been violent in their deaths. Theoretic politicians, who have patronized this species of government, have erroneously supposed that by reducing mankind to a perfect equality in their political rights, they would, at the same time, be perfectly equalized and assimilated in their possessions, their opinions, and their passions.

A republic, by which I mean a government in which the scheme of representation takes place, opens a different prospect, and promises the cure for which we are seeking. Let us examine the points in which it varies from pure democracy, and we shall comprehend both the nature of the cure and the efficacy which it must derive from the Union.

The two great points of difference between a democracy and a republic are: first, the delegation of the government, in the latter, to a small number of citizens elected by the rest; secondly, the greater number of citizens, and greater sphere of country, over which the latter may be extended.

The effect of the first difference is, on the one hand, to refine and enlarge the public views, by passing them through the medium of a chosen body of citizens, whose wisdom may best discern the true interest of their country, and whose patriotism and love of justice will be least likely to sacrifice it to temporary or partial considerations. Under such a regulation, it may well happen that the public voice, pronounced by the representatives of the people, will be more consonant to the public good than if pronounced by the people themselves, convened for the

purpose. On the other hand, the effect may be inverted. Men of factious tempers, of local prejudices, or of sinister designs, may, by intrigue, by corruption, or by other means, first obtain the suffrages, and then betray the interests, of the people. The question resulting is, whether small or extensive republics are more favorable to the election of proper guardians of the public weal; and it is clearly decided in favor of the latter by two obvious considerations:

In the first place, it is to be remarked that, however small the republic may be, the representatives must be raised to a certain number, in order to guard against the cabals of a few; and that, however large it may be, they must be limited to a certain number, in order to guard against the confusion of a multitude. Hence, the number of representatives in the two cases not being in proportion to that of the two constituents, and being proportionally greater in the small republic, it follows that, if the proportion of fit characters be not less in the large than in the small republic, the former will present a greater option, and consequently a greater probability of a fit choice.

In the next place, as each representative will be chosen by a greater number of citizens in the large than in the small republic, it will be more difficult for unworthy candidates to practice with success the vicious arts by which elections are too often carried; and the suffrages of the people being more free, will be more likely to centre in men who possess the most attractive merit and the most diffusive and established characters.

It must be confessed that in this, as in most other cases, there is a mean, on both sides of which inconveniences will be found to lie. By enlarging too much the number of electors, you render the representatives too little acquainted with all their local circumstances and lesser interests; as by reducing it too much, you render him unduly attached to these, and too little fit to comprehend and pursue great and national objects. The federal Constitution forms a happy combination in this respect; the great and aggregate interests being referred to the national, the local and particular to the State legislatures.

The other point of difference is, the greater number of citizens and extent of territory which may be brought within the compass of republican than of democratic government; and it is this circumstance principally which renders factious combinations less to be dreaded in the former than in the latter. The smaller the society, the fewer probably will be the distinct parties and interests composing it; the fewer the distinct parties and interests, the more frequently will a majority be found of the same party; and the smaller the number of individuals composing a majority, and the smaller the compass within which they are placed, the more easily will they concert and execute their plans of oppression. Extend the sphere, and you take in a greater variety of parties and interests; you make it less probable that a majority of the whole will have a common motive to invade the rights of other citizens; or if such a common motive exists, it will be more difficult for all who feel it to discover their own strength, and to act in unison with each other. Besides other impediments, it may be remarked that, where there is a consciousness of

unjust or dishonorable purposes, communication is always checked by distrust in proportion to the number whose concurrence is necessary.

Hence, it clearly appears, that the same advantage which a republic has over a democracy, in controlling the effects of faction, is enjoyed by a large over a small republic,--is enjoyed by the Union over the States composing it. Does the advantage consist in the substitution of representatives whose enlightened views and virtuous sentiments render them superior to local prejudices and schemes of injustice? It will not be denied that the representation of the Union will be most likely to possess these requisite endowments. Does it consist in the greater security afforded by a greater variety of parties, against the event of any one party being able to outnumber and oppress the rest? In an equal degree does the increased variety of parties comprised within the Union, increase this security. Does it, in fine, consist in the greater obstacles opposed to the concert and accomplishment of the secret wishes of an unjust and interested majority? Here, again, the extent of the Union gives it the most palpable advantage.

The influence of factious leaders may kindle a flame within their particular States, but will be unable to spread a general conflagration through the other States. A religious sect may degenerate into a political faction in a part of the Confederacy; but the variety of sects dispersed over the entire face of it must secure the national councils against any danger from that source. A rage for paper money, for an abolition of debts, for an equal division of property, or for any other improper or wicked project, will be less apt to pervade the whole body of the Union than a particular member of it; in the same proportion as such a malady is more likely to taint a particular county or district, than an entire State.

In the extent and proper structure of the Union, therefore, we behold a republican remedy for the diseases most incident to republican government. And according to the degree of pleasure and pride we feel in being republicans, ought to be our zeal in cherishing the spirit and supporting the character of Federalists.

PUBLIUS.

George Washington's "Farewell Address" (1796)

Washington's 1796 Farewell Address is one of the classic statements on the dangers of political parties. Despite Washington's cautionary words at the end of his second term as president, key members of his own administration had already helped political parties to take root in American democracy.

...In contemplating the causes which may disturb our Union, it occurs as matter of serious concern that any ground should have been furnished for characterizing parties by geographical discriminations, Northern and Southern, Atlantic and Western; whence designing men may endeavor to excite a belief that there is a real difference of local interests and views. One of the expedients of party to acquire influence within particular districts is to misrepresent the opinions and aims of other districts. You cannot shield yourselves too much against the jealousies and heartburnings which spring from these misrepresentations; they tend to render alien to each other those who ought to be bound together by fraternal affection. The inhabitants of our Western country have lately had a useful lesson on this head; they have seen, in the negotiation by the Executive, and in the unanimous ratification by the Senate, of the treaty with Spain, and in the universal satisfaction at that event, throughout the United States, a decisive proof how unfounded were the suspicions propagated among them of a policy in the General Government and in the Atlantic States unfriendly to their interests in regard to the Mississippi; they have been witnesses to the formation of two treaties, that with Great Britain, and that with Spain, which secure to them everything they could desire, in respect to our foreign relations, towards confirming their prosperity. Will it not be their wisdom to rely for the preservation of these advantages on the Union by which they were procured? Will they not henceforth be deaf to those advisers, if such there are, who would sever them from their brethren and connect them with aliens?

To the efficacy and permanency of your Union, a government for the whole is indispensable. No alliance, however strict, between the parts can be an adequate substitute; they must inevitably experience the infractions and interruptions which all alliances in all times have experienced. Sensible of this momentous truth, you have improved upon your first essay, by the adoption of a constitution of government better calculated than your former for an intimate union, and for the efficacious management of your common concerns. This government, the offspring of our own choice, uninfluenced and unawed, adopted upon full investigation and mature deliberation, completely free in its principles, in the distribution of its powers, uniting security with energy, and containing within itself a provision for its own amendment, has a just claim to your

confidence and your support. Respect for its authority, compliance with its laws, acquiescence in its measures, are duties enjoined by the fundamental maxims of true liberty. The basis of our political systems is the right of the people to make and to alter their constitutions of government. But the Constitution which at any time exists, till changed by an explicit and authentic act of the whole people, is sacredly obligatory upon all. The very idea of the power and the right of the people to establish government presupposes the duty of every individual to obey the established government.

All obstructions to the execution of the laws, all combinations and associations, under whatever plausible character, with the real design to direct, control, counteract, or awe the regular deliberation and action of the constituted authorities, are destructive of this fundamental principle, and of fatal tendency. They serve to organize faction, to give it an artificial and extraordinary force; to put, in the place of the delegated will of the nation the will of a party, often a small but artful and enterprising minority of the community; and, according to the alternate triumphs of different parties, to make the public administration the mirror of the ill-concerted and incongruous projects of faction, rather than the organ of consistent and wholesome plans digested by common counsels and modified by mutual interests.

However combinations or associations of the above description may now and then answer popular ends, they are likely, in the course of time and things, to become potent engines, by which cunning, ambitious, and unprincipled men will be enabled to subvert the power of the people and to usurp for themselves the reins of government, destroying afterwards the very engines which have lifted them to unjust dominion.

Towards the preservation of your government, and the permanency of your present happy state, it is requisite, not only that you steadily discountenance irregular oppositions to its acknowledged authority, but also that you resist with care the spirit of innovation upon its principles, however specious the pretexts. One method of assault may be to effect, in the forms of the Constitution, alterations which will impair the energy of the system, and thus to undermine what cannot be directly overthrown. In all the changes to which you may be invited, remember that time and habit are at least as necessary to fix the true character of governments as of other human institutions; that experience is the surest standard by which to test the real tendency of the existing constitution of a country; that facility in changes, upon the credit of mere hypothesis and

opinion, exposes to perpetual change, from the endless variety of hypothesis and opinion; and remember, especially, that for the efficient management of your common interests, in a country so extensive as ours, a government of as much vigor as is consistent with the perfect security of liberty is indispensable. Liberty itself will find in such a government, with powers properly distributed and adjusted, its surest guardian. It is, indeed, little else than a name, where the government is too feeble to withstand the enterprises of faction, to confine each member of the society within the limits prescribed by the laws, and to maintain all in the secure and tranquil enjoyment of the rights of person and property.

I have already intimated to you the danger of parties in the State, with particular reference to the founding of them on geographical discriminations. Let me now take a more comprehensive view, and warn you in the most solemn manner against the baneful effects of the spirit of party generally.

This spirit, unfortunately, is inseparable from our nature, having its root in the strongest passions of the human mind. It exists under different shapes in all governments, more or less stifled, controlled, or repressed; but, in those of the popular form, it is seen in its greatest rankness, and is truly their worst enemy.

The alternate domination of one faction over another, sharpened by the spirit of revenge, natural to party dissension, which in different ages and countries has perpetrated the most horrid enormities, is itself a frightful despotism. But this leads at length to a more formal and permanent despotism. The disorders and miseries which result gradually incline the minds of men to seek security and repose in the absolute power of an individual; and sooner or later the chief of some prevailing faction, more able or more fortunate than his competitors, turns this disposition to the purposes of his own elevation, on the ruins of public liberty.

Without looking forward to an extremity of this kind (which nevertheless ought not to be entirely out of sight), the common and continual mischiefs of the spirit of party are sufficient to make it the interest and duty of a wise people to discourage and restrain it.

It serves always to distract the public councils and enfeeble the public administration. It agitates the community with ill-founded jealousies and false alarms, kindles the animosity of one part

against another, foments occasionally riot and insurrection. It opens the door to foreign influence and corruption, which finds a facilitated access to the government itself through the channels of party passions. Thus the policy and the will of one country are subjected to the policy and will of another.

There is an opinion that parties in free countries are useful checks upon the administration of the government and serve to keep alive the spirit of liberty. This within certain limits is probably true; and in governments of a monarchical cast, patriotism may look with indulgence, if not with favor, upon the spirit of party. But in those of the popular character, in governments purely elective, it is a spirit not to be encouraged. From their natural tendency, it is certain there will always be enough of that spirit for every salutary purpose. And there being constant danger of excess, the effort ought to be by force of public opinion, to mitigate and assuage it. A fire not to be quenched, it demands a uniform vigilance to prevent its bursting into a flame, lest, instead of warming, it should consume....

Woodrow Wilson, “Wanted—A Party,” September 1, 1886, published in the *Boston Times*, September 27, 1886.

Writing in 1886, Wilson--then a political science professor at Princeton--argued that America's political parties needed to be more ideological.

A man must nowadays either belong to a party through mere force of habit, or else be puzzled to know what party he belongs to. Party platforms furnish no sort of chart by which he can shape his political course. Unless they are carefully labelled, he cannot tell which party speaks through them, for they all say much the same thing. If voters chose their party instead of happening into it, they would probably choose by the aid of two questions, namely, first, “What policy do we favor?” and, second, “Which party advocates that policy?” Perhaps it is fortunate, therefore, that so many drift to the ballot-box and so few choose; for, otherwise, multitudes would lose their votes before answering the second of these questions. They would practically disfranchise themselves if they waited to answer it. The professions of existing parties do not furnish any satisfactory reply to it; still less do their actions. Does anyone favor civil service reform? The present act establishing competitive examinations and a commission was proposed by a democratic senator to a republican senate, was passed by that body and a democratic house, and signed by a republican president.^[1] The senator who proposed it was afterward cast aside by his constituency because of his reform sentiments. His measure is now administered with full sympathy for its purposes, by a democratic president elected because of his record on this question; but it is covertly attacked in a democratic house, and openly sneered at in a republican senate; and the democratic chairman of the house committee on civil service reform fails of a renomination in North Carolina because of his fine reform work on that committee.^[2] Which party, then, advocates civil service reform?

...But why extend the perplexing recital? It is sadly confounding to think about so much confusion. And, be it observed, I am not speaking of these things in ridicule of our national parties, or in disgust with our national politics, nor yet in despair of our national institutions. I am simply gathering facts to serve as food for reflection, and in order to state what my own reflections upon them have been. My chief reflection has been... that such a course of things is tending, so to say, to *individualize* our politics....

First, let me explain what I mean by the individualizing of our politics. I mean simply that the voter who exercises any choice at all, is being obliged to choose *men*, particular individuals, to tie to, instead of parties. Of course, the conscientious voter always chooses between men, between candidates, in voting; but formerly he could choose them as representing parties. Now he must choose them instead of parties. The feeling is: “No party means what it says; some men do seem to mean what they say; we will tie to them when we can.” The last presidential election of course furnishes the most striking illustration of the operation of this feeling. The mugwump^[3] is the man who has cast loose from parties, which don’t mean what they say, and

offers to follow men who do speak with a purpose. Mr. Cleveland^[4] is a democrat. But he was not elected because he was a democrat, but because the civil service of the country needed reforming, and he evidently meant to reform it, if given a chance. A man of that sort in the presidential chair would be worth any number of party platforms; a great number of discriminating voters accordingly followed him in preference to any party—“irrespective of party,” to use the orthodox phrase.

Mr. Cleveland’s case was only a conspicuous one, however; it was not isolated. There is a yearly increasing number of mayors, governors, and congressmen holding their offices because of personal qualities or opinions pleasing to constituencies who do not stop to ask, in choosing them, whether the parties they formally represent possess like qualities or opinions. Various reasons, historical and others, might be offered to explain this interesting but necessarily transitional state of affairs; as, for instance, that the republican party has outlived the purposes for which it was organized, and that the democratic party has ceased to be opposed to it in most matters, except in a Pickwickian^[5] sense. The republican party rendered the country some inestimable services, and the country, in natural gratitude, pensioned it with a quarter of a century of power. Meantime, the democratic party kicked its heels with what philosophy it could command on the cold outside of the offices, comforting itself with dignified repetitions of certain old and important constitutional principles which had all of a sudden apparently lost their old power as charms to conjure with. But the republican pension has run out now. It could not reasonably be claimed for a second generation. The pensioners, too, got intolerable as they grew old. We, accordingly, have a president who is a democrat in favor of civil service reform, and a congress which is nothing in a particular and in favor of nothing unanimously, save large expenditures of money. The old parties, to put it in the vernacular, have “played out,” and we are choosing here a man and there a man who means what he says, while waiting for a party which shall mean what *it* says.

The new parties which are hoped for in the future do not form readily or quickly for the same reason that the old parties have not adapted themselves to changed circumstances. Our system of government has supplied no official place, no place of actual authority, for leaders of parties. A party, consequently, must be merely a fortuitous concourse of atoms; and we must wait on the atoms. Even after it is formed, any party of ours must keep together rather by grace and enthusiasm than by vital organization. There is no ruling station in the government for its leaders. It must follow them rather for what they eloquently profess than for anything that they can actually do. The most leader-like post in politics is the speakership of the house of representatives, which is the most unsuitable place possible for a party captain. If we did not have a natural talent for forming parties, and it were not the fashion in all popular governments to have parties, it is to be seriously doubted whether we would not approximate that “natural society,” of which some philosophers and some anarchists have dreamed, in which everybody

would act for himself and nobody act, except accidentally, or through chance amiability, in concert with his neighbors.

There is, however, another and a better reason why we always have parties, and that is, that we have a splendid habit of all believing in certain great principles of human liberty and self-government, without being tamely all of one mind about the way in which those principles ought to be applied in particular cases. No time was ever bigger than this with unsolved problems as to the best ways in which to make liberty real and government helpful. Labor questions, financial questions, administrative questions must all tax the best thought of the country from this time on, until some clear purpose of reform, of financial reconstruction, or of governmental betterment is conceived by some group of men who mean what they say, who all mean the same thing, and who know how to say it, begin to speak their purpose, so that the nation will wake as at a new voice—a voice which calls with authority to duty and to action. Then a new party will be formed—and another party opposed to it. All that is wanting is a new, genuine and really meant purpose held by a few strong men of principle and boldness. That is a big “all,” and it is still conspicuously wanting.

But the generations that really loved the old and now disintegrated parties is fast passing away. It is largely the new generation that wonders that anyone ever doubted that the war was over—even sometimes wonders what the war was all about—that is compelling a clearing away of the worn-out formulas of the old dispensation and a hastening of something not stated to determine their politics. With the growth of this new generation we shall unquestionably witness the growth of new parties.



Ilya Milstein

POLITICS

TOO MUCH DEMOCRACY IS BAD FOR DEMOCRACY

The major American parties have ceded unprecedented power to primary voters. It's a radical experiment—and it's failing.

By Jonathan Rauch and Ray La Raja

[DECEMBER 2019 ISSUE](#)

SHARE

AMERICANS WHO TUNED IN to the first Democratic presidential debates this summer beheld a spectacle that would have struck earlier generations as ludicrous. A self-help guru and a tech executive, both of them unqualified and implausible as national candidates, shared the platform with governors, senators, and a former vice president. Excluded from the proceedings, meanwhile, were the popular Democratic governor of a reliably Republican state and a congressman who is also a decorated former marine.

If the range of participants seemed odd, it was because the party had decided to let small donors and opinion polls determine who deserved the precious national exposure of the debate stage. Those were peculiar metrics by which to make such an important decision, especially given recent history. Had the Democrats seen something they liked in the 2016 Republican primary? The GOP's nominating process was a 17-candidate circus in which the party stood by helplessly as it was hijacked by an unstable reality-TV star who was not, by any meaningful standard, a Republican. The Democrats in 2016 faced their own insurgency, by a candidate who was not, by any meaningful standard, a Democrat. And yet, after the election, the Democrats changed their rules to *reduce* the power of the party establishment by limiting the role of superdelegates, who had been free to support the candidate of their choosing at the party convention, and whose ranks had been filled by elected officials and party leaders. Then, as the 2020 race began, the party deferred to measures of popular sentiment to determine who should make the cut for the debates, all but ensuring runs by publicity-hungry outsiders.

Americans rarely pause to consider just how bizarre the presidential nominating process has become. No other major democracy routinely uses primaries to choose its political candidates, nor did the Founders of this country intend for primaries to play a role in the republican system they devised. Abraham Lincoln did not win his party's nomination because he ran a good ground game in New Hampshire; rather, Republican elders saw in him a candidate who could unite rival factions within the party and defeat the Democratic nominee in the general election. Today's system amounts to a radical experiment in direct democracy, one without precedent even in America's own political history.

The two major parties made primaries decisive as recently as the early 1970s. Until then, primaries had been more like political beauty contests,

which the parties' grandees could choose to ignore. But after Hubert Humphrey became the Democrats' 1968 nominee without entering a single primary, outrage in the ranks led the party to put primary voters in charge. Republicans soon followed suit.

The new system—consisting of primaries, plus a handful of caucuses—seemed to work: Most nominees were experienced politicians with impressive résumés and strong ties to their party. Starting in 1976, Democratic nominees included two vice presidents, three successful governors, and three prominent senators (albeit one with little national experience). Republican nominees included a vice president, three successful governors, and two prominent senators. All were acceptable to their party establishment and to their party's base.

What often went unnoticed, however, was *why* the nominees were so impressive: Professional gatekeeping had survived informally, in the parallel vetting process known as the invisible primary. Even after the rule changes of the 1970s, candidates still needed to prove their viability to the party's elected officials and insiders, which meant showing that they could win influential endorsements, command media attention, appeal to multiple constituencies, attract top campaign talent, and raise money. To be competitive, they had to run a gantlet of party bigwigs, factional leaders, and money brokers. As recently as 2008, four leading political scientists argued that, as the title of their book put it, the party decides.

Then came 2016. Neither Donald Trump nor Bernie Sanders changed the system all by himself. Rather, both saw and exploited the invisible primary's fragility. The electorate had come to view the establishment's seal of approval with skepticism or outright hostility, allowing outsider candidates to tout their lack of endorsements as a mark of authenticity. Candidates have learned to bypass traditional moneymen by reaping

donations online, tapping deep-pocketed tycoons, or just financing themselves. And the media landscape has evolved to provide oxygen to rogue candidates.

Restoring the old era of smoke-filled rooms is neither possible nor desirable. Primaries bring important information to the nominating process. They test candidates' ability to excite voters and campaign effectively; they provide points of entry for up-and-comers and neglected constituencies; they force candidates to refine their messages and prove their stamina. But as 2016 made clear, primaries are only half of a functional nominating system. The other half is input from political insiders and professionals who can vet candidates, steer them to appropriate races, and, as a last resort, block them if they are unacceptable to the party or unfit to govern.

The Democrats' 2020 race may well avoid a descent into chaos. The desire to unseat Trump may encourage primary voters to coalesce around a candidate with a traditional résumé and broad appeal. The field appears to be narrowing to such candidates. While party elders can hope for a rational outcome, however, nothing in the process *guarantees* one. In 2016, mandarins in the Republican Party assumed, until it was too late, that its primary electorate would eventually reject Donald Trump. Both parties' presidential-nominating contests have reached a point where they cannot promise to choose nominees who are competent to govern or who represent a majority of the party's voters.

Political professionals—insiders such as county and state party chairs, elected officials such as governors and legislative leaders—are uniquely positioned to evaluate whether contenders have the skills, connections, and sense of responsibility to govern capably. Only they can do the brokering and bridge-building to form majorities and shape coalitions, and to ensure that the nominee is acceptable to a broad cross section of

party factions. Only they can reduce the element of sheer randomness that plagues today's primaries, where a stroke of bad luck in a single state can sink a candidacy. The voters need their help.

This may seem like an argument for elitism over democracy, but the current system is democratic only in form, not in substance. Without professional input, the nominating process is vulnerable to manipulation by plutocrats, celebrities, media figures, and activists. As entertainment, America's current primary system works pretty well; as a way to vet candidates for the world's most important and difficult job, it is at best unreliable—and at worst destabilizing, even dangerous.

AT THE MOST fundamental level—the level of electoral math and cognitive bandwidth—primaries are an inherently flawed mechanism for registering voter preferences. Voters' views are often ambivalent and conflicted, their attention finite. When offered several options, individuals tend to lack sufficient information to make a choice that reflects their actual preferences. In fact, many presidential-primary voters mistakenly back candidates who do not reflect their views. One important study of the 2008 presidential primaries found that voters do barely better than chance at picking the candidate whose views most closely match their own. Summarizing abundant research, the political scientist Bruce Cain concludes, "The original sin of citizenship is our cognitive fallibility; namely, limitations in knowledge and motivation." In other words, the nomination process makes unrealistic demands on voters, not because they are lazy or stupid—they're not—but because they are human.

Even if all voters were cognitive virtuosos and informed to the hilt, distilling millions of individual preferences into a single candidate choice is much more difficult than most people assume. As long ago as the 1780s, the French mathematician and philosopher Nicolas de Condorcet

showed that in any field offering multiple candidates, majorities may prefer Smith over Jones and Jones over Brown, yet Brown may nonetheless beat Smith. In the 1950s, the Nobel Prize–winning economist Kenneth Arrow took the argument further, proving mathematically that, no matter what system of voting is used or how rationally voters behave, the electorate can fail to arrive at any consistent majority choice, even when choosing from as few as three candidates.

Theorists have thus long understood that there is no one right way to aggregate group preferences, nor is there any one representative majority. Candidates can emerge from the pack or be eliminated because of a random event or a fluke of election timing. Worse, there is a nontrivial likelihood that the plurality winner will turn out to be positively unwanted by a majority, as was the case in 2016, when Trump secured the Republican nomination without managing to garner 50 percent support within the party. When the number of candidates reaches double digits, elections can enter a world that we think of as Arrow’s nightmare: The process, while observing the formalities of voting, is not particularly representative of anything.

The U.S. primary system compounds the problem by adding its own elements of randomness. For example, the front-loading of primaries in the 2020 race allows a candidate to wrap up the nomination based on a small share of the electorate voting in a handful of states. Moreover, because the ballot registers only each voter’s first choice, it provides no additional information about the intensity of preferences for other candidates. If the electorate splits its vote among several candidates competing in the same political lane—say, two or three pragmatists facing an extreme partisan—the extremist can win even if she is the last choice of the majority. Under the old convention system, by contrast, party leaders would move to a more broadly representative second-choice candidate if the plurality candidate was unacceptable to the larger

coalition. Party leaders did so on several occasions, the most famous being Lincoln's selection over front-runner William Seward, in 1860.

Even in near-optimal conditions, the process's vagaries afford dangerously good odds to fringe candidates. In a large field, enduring the early battles requires mobilizing a loyal faction rather than pulling together a coalition. The goal is not to win a majority but to survive and hope that luck pits you against a clutch of candidates who compete with one another in a different lane. Insurgents, extremists, and demagogues are good at pursuing factions, because they are not tethered to the realities of governing, which demand compromise and coalition-building.

The media might be expected to expose the flaws and limitations of such candidates. In reality, the media can be a powerful accomplice to fringe candidates who play their cards right. Extremism, outrage, and conflict are catnip for journalists. The Trump campaign spent a little over half as much money as Hillary Clinton's campaign did in the 2016 election, but according to the tracking firm mediaQuant, Trump got 50 percent more coverage than Clinton—coverage that was worth \$5.6 billion, vastly more than the \$195 million his campaign spent on paid media.

The current media landscape also encourages the kind of large fields that bedevil our primary system. With cable news eager to book prime-time town halls even for marginal candidates, and the parties willing to create double-bill debates, fringe figures have every incentive to throw their hat in the ring. Even if they can't win, joining the fray will drive social-media followers, book sales, and TV appearances. Paradoxically, the more candidates who enter, the greater the incentive for additional entrants, because each one reduces the number of votes needed to win.

Americans thus have good reason to dislike the current nominating system—and indeed they do dislike it. In a March 2016 Pew Research Center poll, just 35 percent of voters said primaries are a good way of selecting the best-qualified nominees. Not surprisingly, a majority of all candidates’ supporters, except Trump’s, viewed the primaries negatively. Studies also show that large proportions of Americans favor reforming the presidential-nominating process, particularly in states that hold their contests in the later stages. Voters in both large and small states think Iowa and New Hampshire have unfair advantages and influence—which, of course, is true.

THE PRIMARY became a fixture of the American political landscape during the Progressive era. Reformers believed direct elections were more fair, honest, and democratic. By 1917, all but four states had adopted the primary for many statewide nominations.

One dissenter warned of unforeseen consequences. “The idea which commends the direct primary to the masses,” wrote a Princeton University politics professor named Henry Jones Ford, in a 1909 issue of *The North American Review*, “is that it is a means of giving power to the people.” The reality, he argued, would be quite different. Direct primaries would “take advantage and opportunity from one set of politicians and confer them upon another set.” *Some* people, not *the* people, would gain. The party-boss system had its flaws, Ford argued, but it elevated candidates who could govern successfully, whereas primaries favored candidates who had the wherewithal to promote themselves. “When power is conditioned upon ability to finance costly electioneering campaigns, plutocratic rule is established.” Ford’s assessment was withering: Direct primaries would make politics “still more confused, irresponsible, and costly.”

Ford could not have known, in 1909, that the direct primary would devolve into today's mess, but he was astute in challenging the assumption that democratization would remove elites' thumbs from the scales. As he noted, changing the rules may simply hand influence to a different kind of elite—the real-world result of democratization can be to *reduce* representativeness.

In 2012, the political scientists Dennis C. Spies and André Kaiser looked at data for 53 parties in nine Western European countries from 1970 to 1990. They examined parties that empowered different groups—party elites, activists, or rank-and-file voters—in the nomination process. The goal was to see which method picks candidates who are closest to the preferences of the average voter in a party. Their finding: “Parties in which party elites decide the nomination of candidates show slightly higher degrees of representation than parties with more inclusive selectorates.” Other research shows that more inclusive methods tend to dampen the representation of women and may favor extremist candidates who fare poorly in general elections.

Primaries shift power from political insiders to another set of elites: ideologues and interest groups with their own agendas.

New research by the political scientists Byron Shafer and Regina Wagner considers the effects of traditional state-party organizations, with their focus on transactional politics, being displaced by a “volunteer” model. Volunteerism might sound like an unqualified good; the problem is that not everyone is equally likely to volunteer. Turnout in primaries is notoriously paltry, and those who do show up are more partisan, more ideological, and more polarized than general-election voters or the general population. They are also wealthier, better educated, and older.

When party insiders evaluate candidates, they think about appealing to overworked laborers, harried parents, struggling students, less politicized moderates, and others who do *not* show up on primary day—but whose support the party will need to win the general election and then to govern. Reducing the influence of party professionals has, as Shafer and Wagner observe, amplified the voices of ideological activists at the expense of rank-and-file voters. Political theorists sometimes refer to the gap between primary voters and the larger electorate as the problem of “unrepresentative participation.” Whatever you call it, it has a perverse consequence: As Henry Jones Ford predicted, rather than disenfranchising political elites, primaries shift power from one set of elites (insiders who serve the party organizations) to another set (ideologues and interest groups with their own agendas).

No wonder these new elites favor ever more democratization, and less influence for party insiders. By contrast, the public is quite comfortable with insiders taking a role. In a survey, one of us (La Raja) asked voters to allocate 100 points to four different groups based on who they think should have influence in primary nominations. On average, “party voters” were allocated a 42 percent influence share, and “independent voters” were allocated 22 percent of the influence. But 19 percent of the influence was allocated to “party officials,” and another 17 percent to “nonpartisan experts.” In other words, survey respondents wanted to give professionals (party officials and experts) more than a third of the influence in picking the nominee. To judge by the survey results, Americans view a mixed system as a good idea. They want the electorate to do about two-thirds of the deciding and parties and professionals to do about one-third, proportions that strike us as quite reasonable.

The public is right. Reinstating a prominent role for political professionals—what the Brookings Institution’s Elaine Kamarck refers to

as peer review—would make the system more democratic and representative, not less so.

Despite their flaws, smoke-filled rooms did a good job of identifying candidates who could win a general election.

TWO FILTERS are better than one. Electoral and professional perspectives check and improve each other. Each provides the other with vital information that otherwise would be missed. Among the reasons:

Professional vetting emphasizes competence in governing. Candidates now worry more about mobilizing die-hard activists and producing story lines for journalists than demonstrating their aptitude for governing. Voters, for their part, have a distorted sense of the powers of the president, subscribing to what the political scientist Brendan Nyhan calls the Green Lantern theory of the office: the belief that the president's sheer willpower can overcome obstacles to governance. In reality, political influence in our system comes primarily from the soft power of relationships and political debts. Professionals judge the strength of those relationships. What's more, they boost candidates' capacity to govern after the election by encouraging aspirants to meet with party leaders and elected officials throughout the country, forcing candidates to cultivate connections and build political capital.

Despite their flaws, smoke-filled rooms did a good job of identifying qualified people who could unify their party and also exert broad appeal in a general election. Lincoln, Theodore Roosevelt, Woodrow Wilson, Franklin D. Roosevelt, and Harry Truman all emerged in large part from the haze of those rooms.

Of course, the party elders did not always get it right. Warren Harding and Richard Nixon were both promising prospects who turned out to be poor choices. Again, the point is not that either filter is infallible but that both are necessary.

Professional vetting deters renegades. The professional filter also helps exclude candidates who are downright dangerous. The Harvard government professors Steven Levitsky and Daniel Ziblatt, in their recent book, *How Democracies Die*, make this point forcefully. In a democracy, they argue, party organizations' most crucial function is to act as gatekeepers against demagogues and charlatans who, once in power, undermine democratic institutions from within, as Donald Trump has done.

Parties have blocked antidemocratic candidates in the past. In 1924 Henry Ford, the legendary carmaker, contemplated a run for president. He promised to rid the nation of its corrupt and ineffective politics, electrifying voters with his claim to be someone “who could do things and do them quick.” He also spouted anti-Semitic and racist rhetoric. In both respects, he was an antecedent to Trump. In Ford's day, however, the primaries controlled too few delegates to secure the nomination, and the grandees of both parties saw Ford as dangerous. Lacking a pathway around the hostile party establishment, Ford declined to enter the race and contented himself with offering to serve if the nation summoned him. “What Ford was saying, in effect,” write Levitsky and Ziblatt, “was that he would only consider running if the gatekeeping system blocking his path were somehow removed. So, in reality, he never stood a chance.”

Or consider a more recent example, recounted by Jon Ward in his book, *Camelot's End*. In 1976, Democrats in Florida were desperate to prevent Alabama Governor George Wallace from winning the state's presidential primary. A populist who had built his career on racism,

Wallace was toxic to the party's base outside of the South and likely unacceptable to the general electorate. To stop him, party operatives leaned on other Democratic candidates to clear the field for Jimmy Carter, the only other southerner in contention. With the field narrowed, Carter defeated Wallace in Florida and ended Wallace's candidacy (and went on to the White House—which the Democratic operatives had *not* expected). Still more recently, in 1996, Democratic National Committee Chair Don Fowler was able to exclude the conspiracy-mongering Lyndon LaRouche from the Democratic Party's nominating process. LaRouche stood no chance of unseating the incumbent, Bill Clinton, but the refusal to allow him to compete signaled to other would-be disrupters that the party could and would stand in their way.

Professional vetting checks the power of donors and the media. Thanks to court decisions such as *SpeechNow.org v. Federal Election Commission*, political fundraising and spending by independent groups effectively have no limit. Formerly compelled to seek funds from many establishment donors, candidates can now be bankrolled by quirky billionaires with pet agendas. In the 2012 Republican nominating cycle, former House Speaker Newt Gingrich's campaign was kept alive with millions of dollars spent by the casino magnate Sheldon Adelson, even though Gingrich's support was weak among both the primary electorate and the party establishment. Billionaires can also bankroll themselves, buying their way around accountability to any party or constituency.

Among progressive candidates, it has become popular to abstain from raising money from deep-pocketed individuals and corporations, and instead to rely on small donations from grassroots supporters. Like many other observers, we value the participatory enthusiasm of small donors, yet there's a troubling downside. Academic research suggests that small donors are not representative of the electorate. They are as extreme and

polarized as large donors, perhaps more so. They are also skewed demographically compared with the rest of America: They are wealthier, whiter, and older.

Extremist candidates tend to do better at raising small-donor money, because they get the media's attention by staking out bold (if unrealistic) positions and making attention-grabbing statements, many of which violate political norms. It is no coincidence that in the 2016 election, Trump shattered records, bringing in more money from small donors than Barack Obama did in his 2012 campaign and accumulating slightly more than both Clinton and Sanders combined.

Our point is not that small donations are necessarily bad or good. It is that small donations are more constructive in a system that provides professional vetting than in a free-for-all. Then there are the media, who have completely different incentives than political professionals when they evaluate candidates. The media prefer the novel, the colorful, and the combative, qualities that drive compelling narratives, not ones that make for effective governing. Restoring insider influence in the nominating process will not vitiate the role of the media in covering campaigns, nor should it. But it will help ensure that candidates are vetted for competence.

MOST OF TODAY'S political reformers are focused on proposals to tinker with voting protocols (ranked-choice voting, proportional voting, multimember districts), or to increase participation (voting by mail, weekend voting, automatic registration), or to improve fairness (redistricting commissions, small-donor matches, donor transparency). But whatever their merits and demerits, all such process reforms fix the wrong filter. They ignore the more urgent and essential problem.

No mechanical changes in the electoral system can substitute for professional judgment. With so many candidates, so much strategic uncertainty, and so much confusing information, primary voters could not evaluate and organize the field by themselves even if they were inclined to try. Mixed systems ensure that the full spectrum of democratic values gets attention.

If the parties decide to give their professionals more clout, there are all kinds of ways to do it. For example, the role of superdelegates in the Democratic nomination process could be strengthened instead of weakened. Another route, suggested by Elaine Kamarck, is a pre-primary vote of confidence by party leaders. Members of Congress, governors, and party officials could meet with candidates before the first caucus or primary and issue a vote of confidence (or no confidence) on each, or they might rate candidates on measures such as political experience, ability to work with others, ethics, and so on. While not dispositive, insiders' judgments would encourage the news media and the public to focus on characteristics that matter for governing.

A more formal kind of early vetting might require candidates to obtain petition signatures from state and county party chairs and elected officials—not a radical idea, as candidates already need to obtain petition signatures from voters. And parties can and should consider candidates' track record and party service in allocating debate slots. This year, the Democrats opted for a participation test based on candidates' ability to attract small donors and garner poll ratings. Glaringly excluded was any reflection of candidates' experience in office or support among party leaders. Why not consider length of time in office, number and prominence of offices held, major endorsements, and efforts on behalf of other politicians in their party?

These ideas are merely examples. The ways in which party professionals could tighten the reins are many. Indeed, when the invisible primary worked best, it exerted influence through many channels, formal and informal.

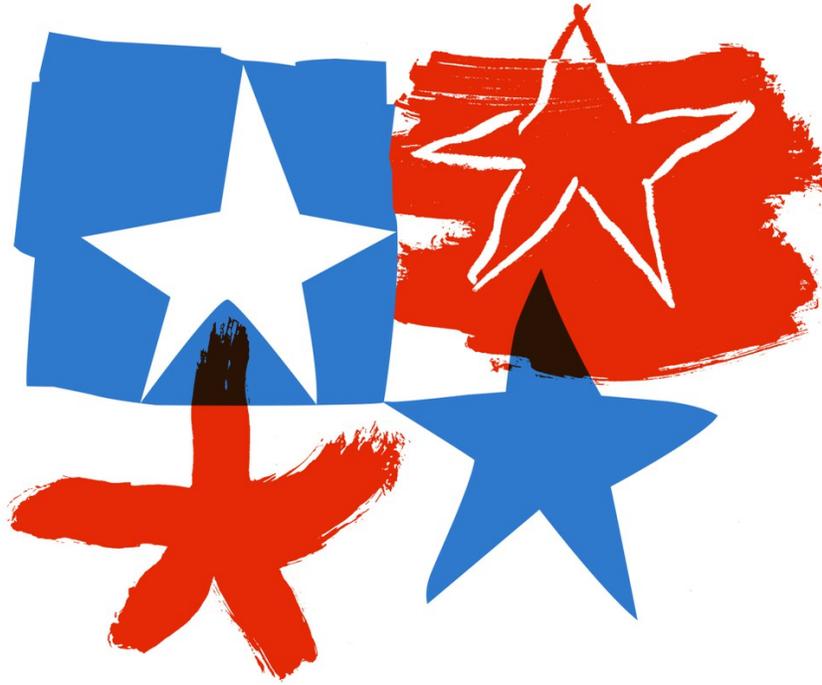
BECAUSE PROFESSIONAL VETTING was the norm in American politics for all but the past decade or so of our political history, no one can say it is a radical, alien, or untried scheme. The challenge, then, is not altering the procedures; it's altering the politics. As peer review has lost public support and legitimacy, the parties have grown reluctant to provide it. They fear the kind of excoriation that Bernie Sanders's supporters unleashed against superdelegates. They worry about being blamed for unpopular and unsuccessful choices. Far easier to pass the buck to the voters.

The most important reform is thus conceptual, not mechanical: changing the mind-set that reflexively regards popular elections as the only legitimate way to choose nominees. Paradoxically, democratic fundamentalism—the insistence that the remedy for whatever ails democracy must always be more democracy—is dangerously undemocratic. Likewise, political consumerism—the idea that more choices are always better—is a recipe for confusion and chaos.

A healthier approach prizes institutional actors. They understand the party not simply as a vehicle for one candidate's ambitions, but as a national political association with a past, present, and future. Their empowerment does not banish populism—as if that were possible—but balances it, by restoring the Madisonian pillars of pluralism, checks on power, and deliberative institutions.

In December 2015, former Florida Governor Jeb Bush, then a leading candidate for the Republican presidential nomination, famously said of

Trump, “He’s a chaos candidate, and he’d be a chaos president.”
Without professional input, America’s nominating system will be a chaos process, giving birth to chaos candidates and chaos presidents for years to come.



Lucy Jones

IDEAS

HOW AMERICA FRACTURED INTO FOUR PARTS

People in the United States no longer agree on the nation's purpose, values, history, or meaning. Is reconciliation possible?

By George Packer

[JULY/AUGUST 2021 ISSUE](#)

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NATIONS, LIKE INDIVIDUALS, tell stories in order to understand what they are, where they come from, and what they want to be. National narratives, like personal ones, are prone to sentimentality, grievance, pride, shame, self-blindness. There is never just one—they compete and constantly change. The most durable narratives are not the ones that stand up best to fact-checking. They're the ones that address our deepest

needs and desires. Americans know by now that democracy depends on a baseline of shared reality—when facts become fungible, we're lost. But just as no one can live a happy and productive life in nonstop self-criticism, nations require more than facts—they need stories that convey a moral identity. The long gaze in the mirror has to end in self-respect or it will swallow us up.

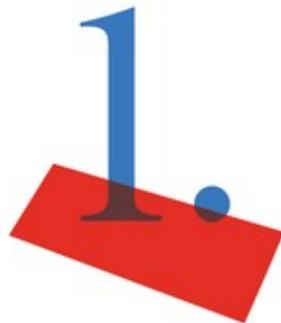
Tracing the evolution of these narratives can tell you something about a nation's possibilities for change. Through much of the 20th century, the two political parties had clear identities and told distinct stories. The Republicans spoke for those who wanted to get ahead, and the Democrats spoke for those who wanted a fair shake. Republicans emphasized individual enterprise, and Democrats emphasized social solidarity, eventually including Black people and abandoning the party's commitment to Jim Crow. But, unlike today, the two parties were arguing over the same recognizable country. This arrangement held until the late '60s—still within living memory.

The two parties reflected a society that was less free than today, less tolerant, and far less diverse, with fewer choices, but with more economic equality, more shared prosperity, and more political cooperation. Liberal Republicans and conservative Democrats played important roles in their respective parties. Americans then were more uniform than we are in what they ate (tuna noodle casserole) and what they watched (*Bullitt*). Even their bodies looked more alike. They were more restrained than we are, more repressed—though restraint and repression were coming undone by 1968.

Since then, the two parties have just about traded places. By the turn of the millennium, the Democrats were becoming the home of affluent professionals, while the Republicans were starting to sound like populist

insurgents. We have to understand this exchange in order to grasp how we got to where we are.

The 1970s ended postwar, bipartisan, middle-class America, and with it the two relatively stable narratives of getting ahead and the fair shake. In their place, four rival narratives have emerged, four accounts of America's moral identity. They have roots in history, but they are shaped by new ways of thinking and living. They reflect schisms on both sides of the divide that has made us two countries, extending and deepening the lines of fracture. Over the past four decades, the four narratives have taken turns exercising influence. They overlap, morph into one another, attract and repel one another. None can be understood apart from the others, because all four emerge from the same whole.



Call the first narrative “Free America.” In the past half century it’s been the most politically powerful of the four. Free America draws on libertarian ideas, which it installs in the high-powered engine of consumer capitalism. The freedom it champions is very different from Alexis de Tocqueville’s art of self-government. It’s personal freedom, without other people—the negative liberty of “Don’t tread on me.”

The conservative movement began to dominate the Republican Party in the 1970s, and then much of the country after 1980 with the presidency of Ronald Reagan. As the historian George H. Nash observed, it uneasily wove together several strands of thought. One was traditionalist, a

reaction against the utopian plans and moral chaos of modern secular civilization. The traditionalists were sin-fearing Protestants, orthodox Catholics, southern agrarians, would-be aristocrats, alienated individualists—dissidents in postwar America. They were appalled by the complacent vulgarity of the semi-educated masses. Their hero was Edmund Burke, the avatar of conservative restraint, and their enemy was John Dewey, the philosopher of American democracy. The traditionalists' elitism put them at odds with the main currents of American life—the one passage of American history that most appealed to them was the quasi-feudal Old South—but their writings inspired the next generation of conservatives, including William F. Buckley Jr., who introduced the first issue of *National Review*, in 1955, with the famous command to “Stand athwart history, yelling Stop.”

Adjacent to the traditionalists were the anti-Communists. Many of them were former Marxists, such as Whittaker Chambers and James Burnham, who carried their apocalyptic baggage with them when they moved from left to right. Politics for them was nothing less than the titanic struggle between good and evil, God and man. The main target of their energy was the ameliorative creed of Eleanor Roosevelt and Arthur Schlesinger Jr., good old liberalism, which they believed to be a paler communism—“the ideology of Western suicide,” Burnham called it. The anti-Communists, like the traditionalists, were skeptics of democracy—its softness would doom it to destruction when World War III broke out. If these hectoring pessimists were the sum of modern conservatism, the movement would have died of joylessness by 1960.

The libertarians were different. They slipped more easily into the American stream. In their insistence on freedom they could claim to be descendants of Locke, Jefferson, and the classical liberal tradition. Some of them interpreted the Constitution as a libertarian document for individual and states' rights under a limited federal government, not as a

framework for the strengthened nation that the authors of *The Federalist Papers* thought they were creating. Oddly, the most influential libertarians were Europeans, especially the Austrian economist Friedrich Hayek, whose polemic against collectivism, *The Road to Serfdom*, was a publishing sensation in America in 1944, during the most dramatic mobilization of economic resources by state power in history.

What distinguished libertarians from conventional, pro-business Republicans was their pure and uncompromising idea. What was it? Hayek: “Planning leads to dictatorship.” The purpose of government is to secure individual rights, and little else. One sip of social welfare and free government dies. A 1937 Supreme Court decision upholding parts of the New Deal was the beginning of America’s decline and fall. Libertarians were in rebellion against the mid-century mixed-economy consensus. In spirit they were more radical than conservative. No compromise with Social Security administrators and central bankers! Death to Keynesian fiscal policy!

Despite or because of the purity of their idea, libertarians made common cause with segregationists, and racism informed their political movement from the beginning. Their first hero, Senator Barry Goldwater, ran for president in 1964 as an insurgent against his own party’s establishment while opposing the civil-rights bill on states’-rights grounds.

The first two strands of the conservative movement—elitist traditionalism and anti-communism—remained part of its DNA for half a century. Eventually the American people made their preference for taking pleasures where they wanted clear and the first faded, while the end of the Cold War rendered the second obsolete. But libertarianism stretches all the way to the present. James Burnham is mostly forgotten, but I’ve met Ayn Rand fanatics everywhere—among Silicon Valley venture capitalists, at the office of the Tampa Bay Tea Party, on a road-

paving crew. Former House Speaker Paul Ryan (who read *Atlas Shrugged* in high school) brought Rand's pitiless philosophy of egoism to policy making on Capitol Hill. Libertarianism speaks to the American myth of the self-made man and the lonely pioneer on the plains. (Glorification of men is a recurring feature.) Like Marxism, it is a complete explanatory system. It appeals to supersmart engineers and others who never really grow up.

How did Free America become the dogma of the Republican Party and set the terms of American politics for years? Like any great political change, this one depended on ideas, an authentic connection with people's lives, and timing. Just as there would have been no Roosevelt revolution without the Great Depression, there would have been no Reagan revolution without the 1970s. After years of high inflation with high unemployment, gas shortages, chaos in liberal cities, and epic government corruption and incompetence, by 1980 a large audience of Americans was ready to listen when Milton and Rose Friedman, in a book and 10-part public-television series called *Free to Choose*, blamed the country's decline on business regulations and other government interventions in the market.

But it took the alchemy of that year's Republican nominee to transform the cold formula of tax cuts and deregulation into the warm vision of America as "the shining city on a hill"—land of the Pilgrims, beacon to a desperate world. In Reagan's rhetoric, leveraged buyouts somehow rhymed with the spirit of New England town meetings. Reagan made Free America sound like the promised land, a place where all were welcome to pursue happiness. The descendants of Jefferson's yeoman farmers, with their desire for independence, became sturdy car-company executives and investment bankers yearning to breathe free of big government.

In 1980, the first year I cast a vote, I feared and hated Reagan. Listening to his words 40 years later, I can hear their eloquence and understand their appeal, as long as I tune out many other things. Chief among them is Reagan's half-spoken message to white Americans: Government helps only *those people*. Legal segregation was barely dead when Free America, using the libertarian language of individualism and property rights, pushed the country into its long decline in public investment. The advantages for business were easy to see. As for ordinary people, the Republican Party reckoned that some white Americans would rather go without than share the full benefits of prosperity with their newly equal Black compatriots.

The majority of Americans who elected Reagan president weren't told that Free America would break unions and starve social programs, or that it would change antitrust policy to bring a new age of monopoly, making Walmart, Citigroup, Google, and Amazon the J.P. Morgan and Standard Oil of a second Gilded Age. They had never heard of Charles and David Koch—heirs to a family oil business, libertarian billionaires who would pour money into the lobbies and propaganda machines and political campaigns of Free America on behalf of corporate power and fossil fuels. Freedom sealed a deal between elected officials and business executives: campaign contributions in exchange for tax cuts and corporate welfare. The numerous scandals of the 1980s exposed the crony capitalism that lay at the heart of Free America.

The shining city on a hill was supposed to replace remote big government with a community of energetic and compassionate citizens, all engaged in a project of national renewal. But nothing held the city together. It was hollow at the center, a collection of individuals all wanting more. It saw Americans as entrepreneurs, employees, investors, taxpayers, and consumers—everything but citizens.

In the Declaration of Independence, freedom comes right after equality. For Reagan and the narrative of Free America, it meant freedom *from* government and bureaucrats. It meant the freedom to run a business without regulation, to pay workers whatever wage the market would bear, to break a union, to pass all your wealth on to your children, to buy out an ailing company with debt and strip it for assets, to own seven houses—or to go homeless. But a freedom that gets rid of all obstructions is impoverished, and it degrades people.

Real freedom is closer to the opposite of breaking loose. It means growing up, and acquiring the ability to participate fully in political and economic life. The obstructions that block this ability are the ones that need to be removed. Some are external: institutions and social conditions. Others are embedded in your character and get in the way of governing yourself, thinking for yourself, and even knowing what is true. These obstructions crush the individuality that freedom lovers cherish, making them conformist, submissive, a group of people all shouting the same thing—easy marks for a demagogue.

Rather than finding new policies to rebuild declining communities, Republicans mobilized anger and despair while offering up scapegoats.

Reagan cared more about the functions of self-government than his most ideological supporters. He knew how to persuade and when to compromise. But once he was gone, and the Soviet Union not long after him, Free America lost the narrative thread. Without Reagan's smile and the Cold War's clarity, its vision grew darker and more extreme. Its spirit became flesh in the person of Newt Gingrich, the most influential politician of the past half century. There was nothing conservative about Gingrich. He came to Congress not to work within the institution or

even to change it, but to tear it down in order to seize power. With the Gingrich revolution, the term *government shutdown* entered the lexicon and politics became a forever war. (Gingrich himself liked to quote Mao's definition of politics as "war without blood.") His tactics turned the goal of limited and efficient government into the destruction of government. Without a positive vision, his party used power to hold on to power and fatten corporate allies. Corruption—financial, political, intellectual, moral—set in like dry rot in a decaying log.

The aggressive new populism of talk radio and cable news did not have the "conservative orderly heart" that Norman Mailer had once found in the mainstream Republicans of the 1960s. It mocked self-government—both the political and the personal kind. It was rife with destructive impulses. It fed on rage and celebrity culture. The quality of Free America's leaders steadily deteriorated—falling from Reagan to Gingrich to Ted Cruz, from William F. Buckley to Ann Coulter to Sean Hannity—with no bottom.

While the sunny narrative of Free America shone on, its policies eroded the way of life of many of its adherents. The disappearance of secure employment and small businesses destroyed communities. The civic associations that Tocqueville identified as the antidote to individualism died with the jobs. When towns lost their Main Street drugstores and restaurants to Walgreens and Wendy's in the mall out on the highway, they also lost their Rotary Club and newspaper—the local institutions of self-government. This hollowing-out exposed them to an epidemic of aloneness, physical and psychological. Isolation bred distrust in the old sources of authority—school, church, union, bank, media.

Government, which did so little for ordinary Americans, was still the enemy, along with "governing elites." But for the sinking working class, freedom lost whatever economic meaning it had once had. It was a

matter of personal dignity, *identity*. Members of this class began to see trespassers everywhere and embraced the slogan of a defiant and armed loneliness: *Get the fuck off my property. Take this mask and shove it.* It was the threatening image of a coiled rattlesnake: “Don’t tread on me.” It achieved its ultimate expression on January 6, in all those yellow Gadsden flags waving around the Capitol—a mob of freedom-loving Americans taking back their constitutional rights by shitting on the floors of Congress and hunting down elected representatives to kidnap and kill. That was their freedom in its pure and reduced form.

A character in Jonathan Franzen’s 2010 novel, *Freedom*, puts it this way: “If you don’t have money, you cling to your freedoms all the more angrily. Even if smoking kills you, even if you can’t afford to feed your kids, even if your kids are getting shot down by maniacs with assault rifles. You may be poor, but the one thing nobody can take away from you is the freedom to fuck up your life.” The character is almost paraphrasing Barack Obama’s notorious statement at a San Francisco fundraiser about the way working-class white Americans “cling to guns or religion or antipathy to people who aren’t like them, or anti-immigrant sentiment or anti-trade sentiment, as a way to explain their frustrations.” The thought wasn’t mistaken, but the condescension was self-incriminating. It showed why Democrats couldn’t fathom that people might “vote against their interests.” Guns and religion *were* the authentic interests of millions of Americans. Trade and immigration *had* left some of them worse off. And if the Democratic Party wasn’t on their side—if government failed to improve their lives—why not vote for the party that at least took them seriously?

Free America always had an insurgent mindset, breaking institutions down, not building them up. Irresponsibility was coded into its leadership. Rather than finding new policies to rebuild declining communities, Republicans mobilized anger and despair while offering up

scapegoats. The party thought it could control these dark energies on its quest for more power, but instead they would consume it.



The new knowledge economy created a new class of Americans: men and women with college degrees, skilled with symbols and numbers—salaried professionals in information technology, computer engineering, scientific research, design, management consulting, the upper civil service, financial analysis, law, journalism, the arts, higher education. They go to college with one another, intermarry, gravitate to desirable neighborhoods in large metropolitan areas, and do all they can to pass on their advantages to their children. They are not 1 percenters—those are mainly executives and investors—but they dominate the top 10 percent of American incomes, with outsize economic and cultural influence.

They're at ease in the world that modernity created. They were early adopters of things that make the surface of contemporary life agreeable: HBO, Lipitor, MileagePlus Platinum, the MacBook Pro, grass-fed organic beef, cold-brewed coffee, Amazon Prime. They welcome novelty and relish diversity. They believe that the transnational flow of human beings, information, goods, and capital ultimately benefits most people around the world. You have a hard time telling what part of the country they come from, because their local identities are submerged in the homogenizing culture of top universities and elite professions. They believe in credentials and expertise—not just as tools for success, but as qualifications for class entry. They're not nationalistic—quite the opposite—but they have a national narrative. Call it “Smart America.”

The cosmopolitan outlook of Smart America overlaps in some areas with the libertarian views of Free America. Each embraces capitalism and the principle of meritocracy: the belief that your talent and effort should determine your reward. But to the meritocrats of Smart America, some government interventions are necessary for everyone to have an equal chance to move up. The long history of racial injustice demands remedies such as affirmative action, diversity hiring, and maybe even reparations. The poor need a social safety net and a living wage; poor children deserve higher spending on education and health care. Workers dislocated by trade agreements, automation, and other blows of the global economy should be retrained for new kinds of jobs.

Still, there's a limit to how much government the meritocrats will accept. Social liberalism comes easier to them than redistribution, especially as they accumulate wealth and look to their 401(k)s for long-term security. As for unions, they hardly exist in Smart America. They're instruments of class solidarity, not individual advancement, and the individual is the unit of worth in Smart America as in Free America.

The word *meritocracy* has been around since the late 1950s, when a British sociologist named Michael Young published *The Rise of the Meritocracy*. He meant this new word as a warning: Modern societies would learn how to measure intelligence in children so exactly that they would be stratified in schools and jobs according to their natural ability. In Young's satirical fantasy, this new form of inequality would be so rigid and oppressive that it would end in violent rebellion.

But the word lost its original dystopian meaning. In the decades after World War II, the G.I. Bill, the expansion of standardized tests, the civil-rights movement, and the opening of top universities to students of color, women, and children of the middle and working classes all

combined to offer a path upward that probably came as close to truly equal opportunity as America has ever seen.

After the 1970s, meritocracy began to look more and more like Young's dark satire. A system intended to give each new generation an equal chance to rise created a new hereditary class structure. Educated professionals pass on their money, connections, ambitions, and work ethic to their children, while less educated families fall further behind, with less and less chance of seeing their children move up. By kindergarten, the children of professionals are already a full two years ahead of their lower-class counterparts, and the achievement gap is almost unbridgeable. After seven decades of meritocracy, a lower-class child is nearly as unlikely to be admitted to one of the top three Ivy League universities as they would have been in 1954.

This hierarchy slowly hardened over the decades without drawing much notice. It's based on education and merit, and education and merit are good things, so who would question it? The deeper injustice is disguised by plenty of exceptions, children who rose from modest backgrounds to the heights of society. Bill Clinton (who talked about "people who work hard and play by the rules"), Hillary Clinton (who liked the phrase *God-given talents*), and Barack Obama ("We need every single one of you to develop your talents and your skills and your intellect") were all products of the meritocracy. *Of course* individuals should be rewarded according to their ability. What's the alternative? Either collectivization or aristocracy. Either everyone gets the same grades and salaries regardless of achievement, which is unjust and horribly mediocre, or else everyone has to live out the life into which they're born, which is unjust and horribly regressive. Meritocracy seems like the one system that answers what Tocqueville called the American "passion for equality." If the opportunities are truly equal, the results will be fair.

But it's this idea of fairness that accounts for meritocracy's cruelty. If you don't make the cut, you have no one and nothing to blame but yourself. Those who make it can feel morally pleased with themselves—their talents, discipline, good choices—and even a grim kind of satisfaction when they come across someone who hasn't made it. Not “There but for the grace of God go I,” not even “Life is unfair,” but “You should have been more like me.”

The winners in Smart America have lost the capacity and the need for a national identity, which is why they can't grasp its importance for others.

Politically, Smart America came to be associated with the Democratic Party. This was not inevitable. If the party had refused to accept the closing of factories in the 1970s and '80s as a natural disaster, if it had become the voice of the millions of workers displaced by deindustrialization and struggling in the growing service economy, it might have remained the multiethnic working-class party that it had been since the 1930s. It's true that the white South abandoned the Democratic Party after the civil-rights revolution, but race alone doesn't explain the epochal half-century shift of working-class white voters. West Virginia, almost all white, was a predominantly Democratic state until 2000. If you look at county-by-county national electoral maps, 2000 was the year when rural areas turned decisively red. Something more than just the Democrats' principled embrace of the civil-rights movement and other struggles for equality caused the shift.

In the early 1970s, the party became the home of educated professionals, nonwhite voters, and the shrinking unionized working class. The more the party identified with the winners of the new economy, the easier it became for the Republican Party to pull away white workers by

appealing to cultural values. Bill and Hillary Clinton spoke about equipping workers to rise into the professional class through education and training. Their assumption was that all Americans could do what they did and be like them.

The narrative of Free America shaped the parameters of acceptable thinking for Smart America. Free trade, deregulation, economic concentration, and balanced budgets became the policy of the Democratic Party. It was cosmopolitan, embracing multiculturalism at home and welcoming a globalized world. Its donor class on Wall Street and in Silicon Valley bankrolled Democratic campaigns and was rewarded with influence in Washington. None of this appealed to the party's old base.

The turn of the millennium was the high-water mark of Smart America. President Clinton's speeches became euphoric—"We are fortunate to be alive at this moment in history," he said in his final State of the Union message. The new economy had replaced "outmoded ideologies" with dazzling technologies. The business cycle of booms and busts had practically been abolished, along with class conflict. In April 2000, Clinton hosted a celebration called the White House Conference on the New Economy. Earnest purpose mingled with self-congratulation; virtue and success high-fived—the distinctive atmosphere of Smart America. At one point Clinton informed the participants that Congress was about to pass a bill to establish permanent trade relations with China, which would make both countries more prosperous and China more free. "I believe the computer and the internet give us a chance to move more people out of poverty more quickly than at any time in all of human history," he exulted.

You can almost date the election of Donald Trump to that moment.

The winners in Smart America have withdrawn from national life. They spend inordinate amounts of time working (even in bed), researching their children's schools and planning their activities, shopping for the right kind of food, learning to make sushi or play the mandolin, staying in shape, and following the news. None of this brings them in contact with fellow citizens outside their way of life. School, once the most universal and influential of our democratic institutions, now walls them off. The working class is terra incognita.

The pursuit of success is not new. The Smart American is a descendant of the self-made man of the early 19th century, who raised work ethic to the highest personal virtue, and of the urban Progressive of the early 20th, who revered expertise. But there's a difference: The path now is narrower, it leads to institutions with higher walls, and the gate is harder to open.

Under the watchful eye of their parents, the children of Smart America devote exhausting amounts of energy to extracurricular activities and carefully constructed personal essays that can navigate between boasting and humility. The goal of all this effort is a higher education that offers questionable learning, dubious fulfillment, likely indebtedness, but certain status. Graduation from an exclusive school marks the entry into a successful life. A rite endowed with so much importance and involving so little of real value resembles the brittle decadence of an aristocracy that's reached the stage when people begin to lose faith that it reflects the natural order of things. In our case, a system intended to expand equality has become an enforcer of inequality. Americans are now meritocrats by birth. We know this, but because it violates our fundamental beliefs, we go to a lot of trouble not to know it.

A common refrain, in places like southeastern Ohio and southern Virginia and central Pennsylvania, is that the middle class no longer

exists. I once heard a woman in her 60s, a retired municipal employee in Tampa, Florida, who had made and then lost money in real estate, describe herself as a member of “the formerly middle class.” She meant that she no longer lived with any security. Her term could apply to a nonunion electrician making \$52,000 a year and to a home health aide making \$12 an hour. The first still belongs financially to the middle class, while the second is working-class—in fact, working-poor. What they share is a high-school degree and a precarious prospect. Neither of them can look with confidence on their future, less still on their children’s. The dream of leaving their children better educated and better off has lost its conviction, and therefore its inspiration. They can’t possibly attain the shiny, well-ordered lives they see in the houses of the elite professionals for whom they work. The espresso maker on the quartz countertop, the expensive art hanging on the living-room walls, the shelves of books lining the children’s bedrooms are glimpses of a foreign culture. What professionals actually do to earn the large incomes that pay for their nice things is a mystery. All those hours spent sitting at a computer screen—do they contribute something to society, to the family of an electrician or a home health aide (whose contributions are obvious)?

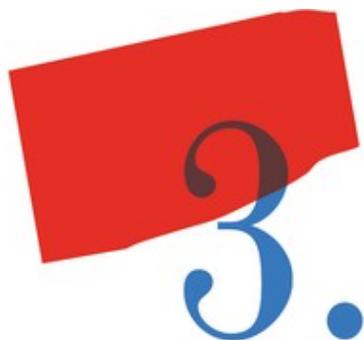
So these two classes, rising professionals and sinking workers, which a couple of generations ago were close in income and not so far apart in mores, no longer believe they belong to the same country. But they can’t escape each other, and their coexistence breeds condescension, resentment, and shame.

As a national narrative, Smart America has a tenuous sense of the nation. Smart America doesn’t hate America, which has been so good to the meritocrats. Smart Americans believe in institutions, and they support American leadership of military alliances and international organizations.

But Smart Americans are uneasy with patriotism. It's an unpleasant relic of a more primitive time, like cigarette smoke or dog racing. It stirs emotions that can have ugly consequences. The winners in Smart America—connected by airplane, internet, and investments to the rest of the globe—have lost the capacity and the need for a national identity, which is why they can't grasp its importance for others. Their passionate loyalty, the one that gives them a particular identity, goes to their family. The rest is diversity and efficiency, heirloom tomatoes and self-driving cars. They don't see the point of patriotism.

Patriotism can be turned to good or ill purposes, but in most people it never dies. It's a persistent attachment, like loyalty to your family, a source of meaning and togetherness, strongest when it's hardly conscious. National loyalty is an attachment to what makes your country *yours*, distinct from the rest, even when you can't stand it, even when it breaks your heart. This feeling can't be wished out of existence. And because people still live their lives in an actual place, and the nation is the largest place with which they can identify—world citizenship is too abstract to be meaningful—patriotic feeling has to be tapped if you want to achieve anything big. If your goal is to slow climate change, or reverse inequality, or stop racism, or rebuild democracy, you will need the national solidarity that comes from patriotism.

That's one problem with the narrative of Smart America. The other problem is that abandoning patriotism to other narratives guarantees that the worst of them will claim it.



In the fall of 2008, Sarah Palin, then the Republican nominee for vice president, spoke at a fundraiser in Greensboro, North Carolina. Candidates reserve the truth for their donors, using the direct language they avoid with the press and the public (Obama: “cling to guns or religion”; Romney: the “47 percent”; Clinton: “basket of deplorables”), and Palin felt free to speak openly. “We believe that the best of America is in these small towns that we get to visit,” she said, “and in these wonderful little pockets of what I call the real America, being here with all of you hardworking, very patriotic, very pro-America areas of this great nation. Those who are running our factories and teaching our kids and growing our food and are fighting our wars for us.”

What made Palin alien to people in Smart America prompted thousands to stand in line for hours at her rallies in “Real America”: her vernacular (“You betcha,” “Drill, baby, drill”); her charismatic Christianity; the four colleges she attended en route to a degree; her five children’s names (Track, Bristol, Willow, Piper, Trig); her baby with Down syndrome; her pregnant, unwed teenage daughter; her husband’s commercial fishing business; her hunting poses. She was working-class to her boots. Plenty of politicians come from the working class; Palin never left it.

She went after Barack Obama with particular venom. Her animus was fueled by his suspect origins, radical associates, and redistributionist views, but the worst offense was his galling mix of class and race. Obama was a Black professional who had gone to the best schools, who knew so

much more than Palin, and who was too cerebral to get in the mud pit with her.

Palin crumbled during the campaign. Her miserable performance under basic questioning disqualified her in the eyes of Americans with open minds on the subject. Her Republican handlers tried to hide her and later disowned her. In 2008, the country was still too rational for a candidate like Palin. After losing, she quit being governor of Alaska, which no longer interested her, and started a new career as a reality-TV personality, Tea Party star, and autographed-merchandise saleswoman. Palin kept looking for a second act that never arrived. She suffered the pathetic fate of being a celebrity ahead of her time. Because with her candidacy something new came into our national life that was also traditional. She was a western populist who embodied white identity politics—John the Baptist to the coming of Trump.

Real America is a very old place. The idea that the authentic heart of democracy beats hardest in common people who work with their hands goes back to the 18th century. It was embryonic in the founding creed of equality. “State a moral case to a ploughman and a professor,” Thomas Jefferson wrote in 1787. “The former will decide it as well, and often better than the latter, because he has not been led astray by artificial rules.” Moral equality was the basis for political equality. As the new republic became a more egalitarian society in the first decades of the 19th century, the democratic creed turned openly populist. Andrew Jackson came to power and governed as champion of “the humble members of society—the farmers, mechanics, and laborers,” the Real Americans of that age. The Democratic Party dominated elections by pinning the charge of aristocratic elitism on the Federalists, and then the Whigs, who learned that they had to campaign on log cabins and hard cider to compete.

The triumph of popular democracy brought an anti-intellectual bias to American politics that never entirely disappeared. Self-government didn't require any special learning, just the native wisdom of the people. "Even in its earliest days," Richard Hofstadter wrote, "the egalitarian impulse in America was linked with a distrust for what in its germinal form may be called political specialization and in its later forms expertise." Hostility to aristocracy widened into a general suspicion of educated sophisticates. The more learned citizens were actually less fit to lead; the best politicians came from the ordinary people and stayed true to them. Making money didn't violate the spirit of equality, but an air of superior knowledge did, especially when it cloaked special privileges.

The overwhelmingly white crowds that lined up to hear Palin speak were nothing new. Real America has always been a country of white people. Jackson himself was a slaver and an Indian-killer, and his "farmers, mechanics, and laborers" were the all-white forebears of William Jennings Bryan's "producing masses," Huey Long's "little man," George Wallace's "rednecks," Patrick Buchanan's "pitchfork brigade," and Palin's "hardworking patriots." The political positions of these groups changed, but their Real American identity—their belief in themselves as the bedrock of self-government—stayed firm. From time to time the common people's politics has been interracial—the Populist Party at its founding in the early 1890s, the industrial-labor movement of the 1930s—but that never lasted. The unity soon disintegrated under the pressure of white supremacy. Real America has always needed to feel that both a shiftless underclass and a parasitic elite depend on its labor. In this way, it renders the Black working class invisible.

From its beginnings, Real America has also been religious, and in a particular way: evangelical and fundamentalist, hostile to modern ideas and intellectual authority. The truth will enter every simple heart, and it doesn't come in shades of gray. "If we have to give up either religion or

education, we should give up education,” said Bryan, in whom populist democracy and fundamentalist Christianity were joined until they broke him apart at the Scopes “monkey trial” in 1925.

Finally, Real America has a strong nationalist character. Its attitude toward the rest of the world is isolationist, hostile to humanitarianism and international engagement, but ready to respond aggressively to any incursion against national interests. The purity and strength of Americanism are always threatened by contamination from outside and betrayal from within. The narrative of Real America is white Christian nationalism.

Real America isn't a shining city on a hill with its gates open to freedom-loving people everywhere. Nor is it a cosmopolitan club to which the right talents and credentials will get you admitted no matter who you are or where you're from. It's a provincial village where everyone knows everyone's business, no one has much more money than anyone else, and only a few misfits ever move away. The villagers can fix their own boilers, and they go out of their way to help a neighbor in a jam. A new face on the street will draw immediate attention and suspicion.

By the time Palin talked about “the real America,” it was in precipitous decline. The region where she spoke, the North Carolina Piedmont, had lost its three economic mainstays—tobacco, textiles, and furniture making—in a single decade. Local people blamed NAFTA, multinational corporations, and big government. Idle tobacco farmers who had owned and worked their own fields drank vodka out of plastic cups at the Moose Lodge where Fox News aired nonstop; they were missing teeth from using crystal meth. Palin's glowing remarks were a generation out of date.

This collapse happened in the shadow of historic failures. In the first decade of the new century, the bipartisan ruling class discredited itself—first overseas, then at home. The invasion of Iraq squandered the national unity and international sympathy that had followed the attacks of September 11. The decision itself was a strategic folly enabled by lies and self-deception; the botched execution compounded the disaster for years afterward. The price was never paid by the war’s leaders. As an Army officer in Iraq wrote in 2007, “A private who loses a rifle suffers far greater consequences than a general who loses a war.” The cost for Americans fell on the bodies and minds of young men and women from small towns and inner cities. Meeting anyone in uniform in Iraq who came from a family of educated professionals was uncommon, and vanishingly rare in the enlisted ranks. After troops began to leave Iraq, the pattern continued in Afghanistan. The inequality of sacrifice in the global War on Terror was almost too normal to bear comment. But this grand elite failure seeded cynicism in the downscale young.

The financial crisis of 2008, and the Great Recession that followed, had a similar effect on the home front. The guilty parties were elites—bankers, traders, regulators, and policy makers. Alan Greenspan, the Federal Reserve chairman and an Ayn Rand fan, admitted that the crisis undermined his faith in the narrative of Free America. But those who suffered were lower down the class structure: middle-class Americans whose wealth was sunk in a house that lost half its value and a retirement fund that melted away, working-class Americans thrown into poverty by a pink slip. The banks received bailouts, and the bankers kept their jobs.

The conclusion was obvious: The system was rigged for insiders. The economic recovery took years; the recovery of trust never came.

Ever since the age of Reagan, the Republican Party has been a coalition of business interests and less affluent white people, many of them

evangelical Christians. The persistence of the coalition required an immense amount of self-deception on both sides. As late as 2012, the Republican National Convention was still a celebration of Free America and unfettered capitalism. Mitt Romney told donors at the infamous fundraiser that the country was divided into makers and takers, and those 47 percent of Americans who took would never vote for him. In fact, the takers included plenty of Republicans, but the disorganization of life in the decaying countryside was barely noticed by politicians and journalists. Christians who didn't attend church; workers without a regular schedule, let alone a union; renters who didn't trust their neighbors; adults who got their information from chain emails and fringe websites; voters who believed both parties to be corrupt—what was the news story? Real America, the bedrock of popular democracy, had no way to participate in self-government. It turned out to be disposable. Its rage and despair needed a target and a voice.

When Trump ran for president, the party of Free America collapsed into its own hollowness. The mass of Republicans were not free-traders who wanted corporate taxes zeroed out. They wanted government to do things that benefited *them*—not the undeserving classes below and above them. Party elites were too remote from Trump's supporters and lulled by their own stale rhetoric to grasp what was happening. Media elites were just as stupefied. They were entertained and appalled by Trump, whom they dismissed as a racist, a sexist, a xenophobe, an authoritarian, and a vulgar, orange-haired celebrity. He was all of these. But he had a reptilian genius for intuiting the emotions of Real America—a foreign country to elites on the right and left. They were helpless to understand Trump and therefore to stop him.

Trump's populism brought *Jersey Shore* to national politics. The goal of his speeches was not to whip up mass

hysteria but to get rid of shame. He leveled everyone down together.

Trump violated conservative orthodoxy on numerous issues, including taxes and entitlements. “I want to save the middle class,” he said. “The hedge-fund guys didn’t build this country. These are guys that shift paper around and they get lucky.” But Trump’s main heresies were on trade, immigration, and war. He was the first American politician to succeed by running against globalization—a bipartisan policy that had served the interests of “globalists” for years while sacrificing Real Americans. He was also the first to succeed by talking about how shitty everything in America had become. “These are the forgotten men and women of our country, and they *are* forgotten,” he said at the 2016 Republican National Convention. “But they’re not going to be forgotten long.” The nationalist mantle was lying around, and Trump grabbed it. “*I am your voice.*”

Early in the campaign, I spent time with a group of white and Black steelworkers in a town near Canton, Ohio. They had been locked out by the company over a contract dispute and were picketing outside the mill. They faced months without a paycheck, possibly the loss of their jobs, and they talked about the end of the middle class. The only candidates who interested them were Trump and Bernie Sanders.

A steelworker named Jack Baum told me that he supported Trump. He liked Trump’s “patriotic” positions on trade and immigration, but he also found Trump’s insults refreshing, even exhilarating. The ugliness was a kind of revenge, Baum said: “It’s a mirror of the way *they* see *us*.” He didn’t specify who *they* and *us* were, but maybe he didn’t have to. Maybe he believed—he was too polite to say it—that people like me looked down on people like him. If educated professionals considered

steelworkers like Baum to be ignorant, crass, and bigoted, then Trump was going to shove it in our smug faces. The lower his language and behavior sank, and the more the media vilified him, the more he was celebrated by his people. He was their leader, who could do no wrong.

Trump's language was effective because it was attuned to American pop culture. It required no expert knowledge and had no code of hidden meanings. It gave rise almost spontaneously to memorable phrases: "Make America great again." "Drain the swamp." "Build the wall." "Lock her up." "Send her back." It's the way people talk when the inhibitors are off, and it's available to anyone willing to join the mob. Trump didn't try to shape his people ideologically with new words and concepts. He used the low language of talk radio, reality TV, social media, and sports bars, and to his listeners this language seemed far more honest and grounded in common sense than the mincing obscurities of "politically correct" experts. His populism brought *Jersey Shore* to national politics. The goal of his speeches was not to whip up mass hysteria but to get rid of shame. He leveled everyone down together.

Throughout his adult life, Trump has been hostile to Black people, contemptuous of women, vicious about immigrants from poor countries, and cruel toward the weak. He's an equal-opportunity bigot. In his campaigns and in the White House, he aligned himself publicly with hard-core racists in a way that set him apart from every other president in memory, and the racists loved him for it. After the 2016 election, a great deal of journalism and social science was devoted to finding out whether Trump's voters were mainly motivated by economic anxiety or racial resentment. There was evidence for both answers.

Progressives, shocked by the readiness of half the country to support this hateful man, seized on racism as the single cause and set out to disprove every alternative. But this answer was far too satisfying. Racism is such an

irreducible evil that it gave progressives commanding moral heights and relieved them of the burden to understand the grievances of their compatriots down in the lowlands, let alone do something about them. It put Trump voters beyond the pale. But racism alone couldn't explain why white men were much more likely to vote for Trump than white women, or why the same was true of Black and Latino men and women. Or why the most reliable predictor for who was a Trump voter wasn't race but the combination of race and education. Among white people, 38 percent of college graduates voted for Trump, compared with 64 percent without college degrees. This margin—the great gap between Smart America and Real America—was the decisive one. It made 2016 different from previous elections, and the trend only intensified in 2020.

The issues Trump had campaigned on waxed and waned during his presidency. What remained was the dark energy he unleashed, binding him like a tribal leader to his people. Nothing was left of the optimistic pieties of Free America. Trump's people still talked about freedom, but they meant blood and soil. Their nationalism was like the ethno-nationalisms on the rise in Europe and around the world. Trump abused every American institution—the FBI, the CIA, the armed forces, the courts, the press, the Constitution itself—and his people cheered. Nothing excited them like owning the libs. Nothing convinced them like Trump's 30,000 lies.

More than anything, Trump was a demagogue—a thoroughly American type, familiar to us from novels like *All the King's Men* and movies like *Citizen Kane*. “Trump is a creature native to our own style of government and therefore much more difficult to protect ourselves against,” the Yale political theorist Bryan Garsten wrote. “He is a demagogue, a popular leader who feeds on the hatred of elites that grows naturally in democratic soil.” A demagogue can become a tyrant, but the people put him there—the people who want to be fed fantasies and lies,

the people who set themselves apart from and above their compatriots. So the question isn't who Trump was, but who we are.



In 2014, American character changed.

A large and influential generation came of age in the shadow of accumulating failures by the ruling class—especially by business and foreign-policy elites. This new generation had little faith in ideas that previous ones were raised on: All men are created equal. Work hard and you can be anything. Knowledge is power. Democracy and capitalism are the best systems—the only systems. America is a nation of immigrants. America is the leader of the free world.

My generation told our children's generation a story of slow but steady progress. America had slavery (as well as genocide, internment, and other crimes) to answer for, original sin if there ever was such a thing—but it *had* answered, and with the civil-rights movement, the biggest barriers to equality were removed. If anyone doubted that the country was becoming a more perfect union, the election of a Black president who loved to use that phrase proved it. “Rosa sat so Martin could walk so Barack could run so we could all fly”—that was the story in a sentence, and it was so convincing to a lot of people in my generation, myself included, that we were slow to notice how little it meant to a lot of people under 35. Or we heard but didn't understand and dismissed them. We told them they had no idea what the crime rate was like in

1994. Smart Americans pointed to affirmative action and children's health insurance. Free Americans touted enterprise zones and school vouchers.

Of course the kids didn't buy it. In their eyes "progress" looked like a thin upper layer of Black celebrities and professionals, who carried the weight of society's expectations along with its prejudices, and below them, lousy schools, overflowing prisons, dying neighborhoods. The parents didn't really buy it either, but we had learned to ignore injustice on this scale as adults ignore so much just to get through. If anyone could smell out the bad faith of parents, it was their children, stressed-out laborers in the multigenerational family business of success, bearing the psychological burdens of the meritocracy. Many of them entered the workforce, loaded with debt, just as the Great Recession closed off opportunities and the reality of planetary destruction bore down on them. No wonder their digital lives seemed more real to them than the world of their parents. No wonder they had less sex than previous generations. No wonder the bland promises of middle-aged liberals left them furious.

Then came one video after another of police killing or hurting unarmed Black people. Then came the election of an openly racist president. These were conditions for a generational revolt.

Call this narrative "Just America." It's another rebellion from below. As Real America breaks down the ossified libertarianism of Free America, Just America assails the complacent meritocracy of Smart America. It does the hard, essential thing that the other three narratives avoid, that white Americans have avoided throughout history. It forces us to see the straight line that runs from slavery and segregation to the second-class life so many Black Americans live today—the betrayal of equality that

has always been the country's great moral shame, the heart of its social problems.

But Just America has a dissonant sound, for in its narrative, justice and America never rhyme. A more accurate name would be Unjust America, in a spirit of attack rather than aspiration. For Just Americans, the country is less a project of self-government to be improved than a site of continuous wrong to be battled. In some versions of the narrative, the country has no positive value at all—it can never be made better.

In the same way that libertarian ideas had been lying around for Americans to pick up in the stagflated 1970s, young people coming of age in the disillusioned 2000s were handed powerful ideas about social justice to explain their world. The ideas came from different intellectual traditions: the Frankfurt School in 1920s Germany, French postmodernist thinkers of the 1960s and '70s, radical feminism, Black studies. They converged and recombined in American university classrooms, where two generations of students were taught to think as critical theorists.

Critical theory upends the universal values of the Enlightenment: objectivity, rationality, science, equality, freedom of the individual. These liberal values are an ideology by which one dominant group subjugates another. All relations are power relations, everything is political, and claims of reason and truth are social constructs that maintain those in power. Unlike orthodox Marxism, critical theory is concerned with language and identity more than with material conditions. In place of objective reality, critical theorists place subjectivity at the center of analysis to show how supposedly universal terms exclude oppressed groups and help the powerful rule over them. Critical theorists argue that the Enlightenment, including the American founding, carried the seeds of modern racism and imperialism.

The term *identity politics* was born in 1977, when a group of Black lesbian feminists called the Combahee River Collective released a statement defining their work as self-liberation from the racism and sexism of “white male rule”: “The major systems of oppression are interlocking. The synthesis of these oppressions creates the conditions of our lives ... This focusing upon our own oppression is embodied in the concept of identity politics. We believe that the most profound and potentially most radical politics come directly out of our own identity.” The statement helped set in motion a way of thinking that places the struggle for justice within the self. This thinking appeals not to reason or universal values but to the authority of identity, the “lived experience” of the oppressed. The self is not a rational being that can persuade and be persuaded by other selves, because reason is another form of power.

The historical demand of the oppressed is inclusion as equal citizens in all the institutions of American life. With identity politics, the demand became different—not just to enlarge the institutions, but to change them profoundly. When Martin Luther King Jr., at the March on Washington, called on America to “rise up and live out the true meaning of its creed: ‘We hold these truths to be self-evident, that all men are created equal,’” he was demanding equal rights within the framework of the Enlightenment. (In later years, his view of the American creed grew more complicated.) But in identity politics, *equality* refers to groups, not individuals, and demands action to redress disparate outcomes among groups—in other words, *equity*, which often amounts to new forms of discrimination. In practice, identity politics inverts the old hierarchy of power into a new one: bottom rail on top. The fixed lens of power makes true equality, based on common humanity, impossible.

And what is oppression? Not unjust laws—the most important ones were overturned by the civil-rights movement and its successors—or even unjust living conditions. The focus on subjectivity moves oppression

from the world to the self and its pain—psychological trauma, harm from speech and texts, the sense of alienation that members of minority groups feel in their constant exposure to a dominant culture. A whole system of oppression can exist within a single word.

By the turn of the millennium, these ideas were nearly ubiquitous in humanities and social-science departments. Embracing them had become an important credential for admittance into sectors of the professorate. The ideas gave scholars an irresistible power, intellectual and moral, to criticize institutions in which they were comfortably embedded. In turn, these scholars formed the worldview of young Americans educated by elite universities to thrive in the meritocracy, students trained from early childhood to do what it takes to succeed professionally and socially. “It is a curious thing, but the ideas of one generation become the instincts of the next,” D. H. Lawrence wrote. The ideas of critical theorists became the instincts of Millennials. It wasn’t necessary to have read Foucault or studied under Judith Butler to become adept with terms like *centered*, *marginalized*, *privilege*, and *harm*; to believe that words can be a form of violence; to close down a general argument with a personal truth (“You wouldn’t understand,” or just “I’m offended”); to keep your mouth shut when identity disqualified you from speaking. Millions of young Americans were steeped in the assumptions of critical theory and identity politics without knowing the concepts. Everyone sensed their power. Not everyone resisted the temptation to abuse it.

Just America emerged as a national narrative in 2014. That summer, in Ferguson, Missouri, the police killing of a Black 18-year-old, whose body was left to lie in the street for hours, came in the context of numerous incidents, more and more of them caught on video, of Black people assaulted and killed by white police officers who faced no obvious threat. And those videos, widely distributed on social media and viewed millions of times, symbolized the wider injustices that still confronted Black

Americans in prisons and neighborhoods and schools and workplaces—in the sixth year of the first Black presidency. The optimistic story of incremental progress and expanding opportunity in a multiracial society collapsed, seemingly overnight. The incident in Ferguson ignited a protest movement in cities and campuses around the country.

What is the narrative of Just America? It sees American society not as mixed and fluid, but as a fixed hierarchy, like a caste system. An outpouring of prizewinning books, essays, journalism, films, poetry, pop music, and scholarly work looks to the history of slavery and segregation in order to understand the present—as if to say, with Faulkner, “The past is never dead. It’s not even past.” The most famous of this work, *The New York Times Magazine’s* 1619 Project, declared its ambition to retell the entire story of America as the story of slavery and its consequences, tracing contemporary phenomena to their historical antecedents in racism, sometimes in disregard of contradictory facts. Any talk of progress is false consciousness—even “hurtful.” Whatever the actions of this or that individual, whatever new laws and practices come along, the hierarchical position of “whiteness” over “Blackness” is eternal.

Here is the revolutionary power of the narrative: What had been considered, broadly speaking, American history (or literature, philosophy, classics, even math) is explicitly defined as white, and therefore supremacist. What was innocent by default suddenly finds itself on trial, every idea is cross-examined, and nothing else can get done until the case is heard.

Just America isn’t concerned only with race. The most radical version of the narrative lashes together the oppression of all groups in an encompassing hell of white supremacy, patriarchy, homophobia, transphobia, plutocracy, environmental destruction, and drones—America as a unitary malignant force beyond any other evil on Earth.

The end of Ta-Nehisi Coates's *Between the World and Me*, published in 2015 and hugely influential in establishing the narrative of Just America, interprets global warming as the planet's cosmic revenge on white people for their greed and cruelty.

There are too many things that Just America can't talk about for the narrative to get at the hardest problems. It can't talk about the complex causes of poverty. Structural racism—ongoing disadvantages that Black people suffer as a result of policies and institutions over the centuries—is real. But so is individual agency, and in the Just America narrative, it doesn't exist. The narrative can't talk about the main source of violence in Black neighborhoods, which is young Black men, not police. The push to “defund the police” during the protests over George Floyd's murder was resisted by many local Black citizens, who wanted better, not less, policing. Just America can't deal with the stubborn divide between Black and white students in academic assessments. The mild phrase *achievement gap* has been banished, not only because it implies that Black parents and children have some responsibility, but also because, according to anti-racist ideology, any disparity is by definition racist. Get rid of assessments, and you'll end the racism along with the gap.

I'm exaggerating the suddenness of this new narrative, but not by much. Things changed astonishingly quickly after 2014, when Just America escaped campuses and pervaded the wider culture. First, the “softer” professions gave way. Book publishers released a torrent of titles on race and identity, which year after year won the most prestigious prizes. Newspapers and magazines known for aspiring to reportorial objectivity shifted toward an activist model of journalism, adopting new values and assumptions along with a brand-new language: *systemic racism*, *white supremacy*, *white privilege*, *anti-Blackness*, *marginalized communities*, *decolonization*, *toxic masculinity*. Similar changes came to

arts organizations, philanthropies, scientific institutions, technology monopolies, and finally corporate America and the Democratic Party. The incontestable principle of inclusion drove the changes, which smuggled in more threatening features that have come to characterize identity politics and social justice: monolithic group thought, hostility to open debate, and a taste for moral coercion.

Just America has dramatically changed the way Americans think, talk, and act, but not the conditions in which they live. It reflects the fracturing distrust that defines our culture: *Something is deeply wrong; our society is unjust; our institutions are corrupt*. If the narrative helps to create a more humane criminal-justice system and bring Black Americans into the conditions of full equality, it will live up to its promise. But the grand systemic analysis usually ends in small symbolic politics. In some ways, Just America resembles Real America and has entered the same dubious conflict from the other side. The disillusionment with liberal capitalism that gave rise to identity politics has also produced a new authoritarianism among many young white men. Just and Real America share a skepticism, from opposing points of view, about the universal ideas of the founding documents and the promise of America as a multi-everything democracy.

But another way to understand Just America is in terms of class. Why does so much of its work take place in human-resources departments, reading lists, and awards ceremonies? In the summer of 2020, the protesters in the American streets were disproportionately Millennials with advanced degrees making more than \$100,000 a year. Just America is a narrative of the young and well educated, which is why it continually misreads or ignores the Black and Latino working classes. The fate of this generation of young professionals has been cursed by economic stagnation and technological upheaval. The jobs their parents took for granted have become much harder to get, which makes the meritocratic

rat race even more crushing. Law, medicine, academia, media—the most desirable professions—have all contracted. The result is a large population of overeducated, underemployed young people living in metropolitan areas.

The historian Peter Turchin coined the phrase *elite overproduction* to describe this phenomenon. He found that a constant source of instability and violence in previous eras of history, such as the late Roman empire and the French Wars of Religion, was the frustration of social elites for whom there were not enough jobs. Turchin expects this country to undergo a similar breakdown in the coming decade. Just America attracts surplus elites and channels most of their anger at the narrative to which they're closest—Smart America. The social-justice movement is a repudiation of meritocracy, a rebellion against the system handed down from parents to children. Students at elite universities no longer believe they deserve their coveted slots. Activists in New York want to abolish the tests that determine entry into the city's most competitive high schools (where Asian American children now predominate). In some niche areas, such as literary magazines and graduate schools of education, the idea of merit as separate from identity no longer exists.

But most Just Americans still belong to the meritocracy and have no desire to give up its advantages. They can't escape its status anxieties—they've only transferred them to the new narrative. They want to be the first to adopt its expert terminology. In the summer of 2020, people suddenly began saying "BIPOC" as if they'd been doing it all their lives. (*Black, Indigenous, and people of color* was a way to uncouple groups that had been aggregated under *people of color* and give them their rightful place in the moral order, with people from Bogotá and Karachi and Seoul bringing up the rear.) The whole atmosphere of Just America at its most constricted—the fear of failing to say the right thing, the urge to level withering fire on minor faults—is a variation on the fierce

competitive spirit of Smart America. Only the terms of accreditation have changed. And because achievement is a fragile basis for moral identity, when meritocrats are accused of racism, they have no solid faith in their own worth to stand on.

The rules in Just America are different, and they have been quickly learned by older liberals following a long series of defenestrations at *The New York Times*, *Poetry* magazine, Georgetown University, the Guggenheim Museum, and other leading institutions. The parameters of acceptable expression are a lot narrower than they used to be. A written thought can be a form of violence. The loudest public voices in a controversy will prevail. Offending them can cost your career. Justice is power. These new rules are not based on liberal values; they are post-liberal.

Just America's origins in theory, its intolerant dogma, and its coercive tactics remind me of 1930s left-wing ideology. Liberalism as white supremacy recalls the Communist Party's attack on social democracy as "social fascism." Just American aesthetics are the new socialist realism.

The dead end of Just America is a tragedy. This country has had great movements for justice in the past and badly needs one now. But in order to work, it has to throw its arms out wide. It has to tell a story in which most of us can see ourselves, and start on a path that most of us want to follow.

ALL FOUR OF the narratives I've described emerged from America's failure to sustain and enlarge the middle-class democracy of the postwar years. They all respond to real problems. Each offers a value that the others need and lacks ones that the others have. Free America celebrates the energy of the unencumbered individual. Smart America respects intelligence and welcomes change. Real America commits itself to a place

and has a sense of limits. Just America demands a confrontation with what the others want to avoid. They rise from a single society, and even in one as polarized as ours they continually shape, absorb, and morph into one another. But their tendency is also to divide us, pitting tribe against tribe. These divisions impoverish each narrative into a cramped and ever more extreme version of itself.

All four narratives are also driven by a competition for status that generates fierce anxiety and resentment. They all anoint winners and losers. In Free America, the winners are the makers, and the losers are the takers who want to drag the rest down in perpetual dependency on a smothering government. In Smart America, the winners are the credentialed meritocrats, and the losers are the poorly educated who want to resist inevitable progress. In Real America, the winners are the hardworking folk of the white Christian heartland, and the losers are treacherous elites and contaminating others who want to destroy the country. In Just America, the winners are the marginalized groups, and the losers are the dominant groups that want to go on dominating.

I don't much want to live in the republic of any of them.

It's common these days to hear people talk about sick America, dying America, the end of America. The same kinds of things were said in 1861, in 1893, in 1933, and in 1968. The sickness, the death, is always a moral condition. Maybe this comes from our Puritan heritage. If we are dying, it can't be from natural causes. It must be a prolonged act of suicide, which is a form of murder.

I don't think we are dying. We have no choice but to live together—we're quarantined as fellow citizens. Knowing who we are lets us see what kinds of change are possible. Countries are not social-science experiments. They have organic qualities, some positive, some

destructive, that can't be wished away. Our passion for equality, the individualism it produces, the hustle for money, the love of novelty, the attachment to democracy, the distrust of authority and intellect—these won't disappear. A way forward that tries to evade or crush them on the road to some free, smart, real, or just utopia will never arrive and instead will run into a strong reaction. But a way forward that tries to make us Equal Americans, all with the same rights and opportunities—the only basis for shared citizenship and self-government—is a road that connects our past and our future.

Meanwhile, we remain trapped in two countries. Each one is split by two narratives—Smart and Just on one side, Free and Real on the other. Neither separation nor conquest is a tenable future. The tensions within each country will persist even as the cold civil war between them rages on.

This essay is adapted from George Packer's new book, Last Best Hope: America in Crisis and Renewal. It appears in the July/August 2021 print edition with the headline "The Four Americas."