

PROCEDURAL PRECURSORS

The Dead End of “More Democracy”

PETER SKERRY

If our democratic system is more “open” than ever before, why are today’s politics so alienating to so many?

The following is Part Two of a two-part exploration of contemporary populism and its various historical antecedents. Click [here](#) for Part One.

Theodore Lowi published *The End of Liberalism*, his critique of what he labeled “interest-group liberalism,” in 1968. By then, the regime he so trenchantly analyzed was already under assault from less scholarly but more passionate actors, first and foremost the civil rights movement and then the anti-war movement. Other movements were soon to follow. Yet also emergent at that time was another, more subtle aspect of politics and policymaking that sheds additional light on the political disaffection of so many Americans. Despite Lowi’s fundamentally valid criticisms, the system today is genuinely more open and accessible than ever before, and Americans are better educated, informed, and equipped than their predecessors to participate in politics and government. So again, why are government and politics so off-putting, alienating, and seemingly closed to such large numbers of citizens?

From Networks to Checkbooks

One clue to addressing this question may be found in a familiar but inadequately examined term: “networks.” To be sure, networks have been featured in recent social science research on information flows and the maintenance of informal social ties. Networks also figure prominently in discussions about the maintenance of civil society. We have all heard of “the old boys’ network,” which has been supplemented, if hardly replaced, by what some refer to as “the old girls’ network.” “Issue networks” figure prominently in Hecló’s study of the impact of experts on the policy process in Washington in the late 1970s. But what exactly do we mean by networks?

In the broadest terms, networks consist of open, *ad hoc*, non-hierarchical relationships in which individuals may opt to participate or not, remain or not, and rejoin or not, depending on their interests, capacities, time constraints, resources, and other factors. Networks typically emerge informally—though hardly randomly—to address the specific needs or objectives of those involved. And they tend to break up or disperse when no longer relevant or effective. This feature importantly distinguishes networks from formal organizations, which are sturdily structured and generally more long-lived. As the term “networking” implies, networks may have open, ill-defined objectives requiring little or no commitment of those involved; or they may be more focused and demanding of participants.

Most observers would agree that today, politics and policymaking in Washington and throughout the country are more reliant on networks than ever. Indeed, this characteristic helps account for the openness and permeability of our civic and

political life, emphasized above. But as I have also suggested, the informal, *ad hoc* nature of networks presents new challenges and dilemmas. Most notably, because it is not always clear who is in charge or responsible, accountability for outcomes midwived by networks can be elusive. Yet even when responsibility is evident, accountability can still be problematic, because networks are prone to disperse or break up.

Another challenge posed by political and policy networks is that while they tend to be open to all comers, they nevertheless depend on participants who are not just “interested” but have knowledge, skills, or expertise to offer. Because of their inherently *ad hoc*, informal nature, the workings of these networks are not typically widely known or necessarily accessible, even to those who might be intensely interested. As often as not, new participants do not discover these networks on their own; rather they are sought out and invited in by individuals who are already involved.

Networks are transforming politics and policymaking in Western Europe as well as the United States—and again, not necessarily for the better. In a nutshell, they are weakening established hierarchies and bureaucracies on both sides of the Atlantic. Even in Sweden, networks have contributed to a blurring of lines of responsibility and authority that some observers fear threatens to diminish “the strong state.” Not surprisingly, well-heeled special interests have few problems negotiating uncharted but wide-open policy networks. The same can be said of well-educated professionals and other segments of the broad upper-middle class. As Richard Reeves of the Brookings Institution argues, such “dream hoarders” constitute the critical but largely overlooked source of inequality in contemporary America. One reason why is how well their education and skills are suited to navigating the far-flung, informal, knowledge-intensive networks that are the lifeblood of politics and policy in Washington, throughout the country, and around the globe.

Highlighting both the impressive energy and creativity as well as the problematic impact of such networks on post-1960s politics is what Robert Putnam calls the “checkbook organization.” This formation allows busy, highly mobile, and typically harried professionals and other affluent individuals to contribute money to favored political causes that make few, if any, demands on their time. To Putnam, who has spent much of his career expressing concern over America’s declining “social capital,” checkbook organizations are a welcome, if partial remedy. But they also present new challenges.

One example is the enormous discretion and influence wielded by the policy entrepreneurs who are the prime movers in such efforts. Typically motivated not by narrow self-interest but by broader political, ideological, or ethical-moral objectives, such entrepreneurs invest substantial time and energy in securing the seed-funding for facilities, support staff, and policy expertise. So, they are understandably content to keep their “members” informed but not in a position to exercise much voice. Checkbook organizations tend to be staff-dominated and minimize or even avoid face-to-face contact among members, or between members and staff or leaders. Voice is therefore not easily exercised, but exit is. The expected way for a member to express disapproval or discontent is simply to stop writing checks.

Unfortunately, this fosters a counter-dynamic that has contributed to the contentiousness of contemporary American politics. To make their widely

dispersed and highly atomized members feel engaged and persuaded of the effectiveness of their contributions, leaders and staff of checkbook organizations invariably dramatize their efforts through whatever media their members might be paying attention to. As a result, such policy entrepreneurs are hardly averse to controversy. Quite the opposite. As the economist Burton Weisbrod once put it, they seek to maximize not profits but publicity.

Finally, both their affinity for controversy and their atomized, attenuated membership ties help explain why checkbook organizations focus on policy disputes arising from market failures, externalities, and free-rider problems. Indeed, they are particularly well suited to advocating for “public goods” such as clean air and water. No surprise, then, that the template for such organizations emerged from the environmental movement of the late 1960s and early 1970s, followed by similar efforts focused on consumer protection (Ralph Nader’s Public Citizen) and campaign finance reform (Common Cause). Soon others were launched to address the needs or interests of overlooked, underserved, or otherwise marginalized populations—whether Mexican Americans, the disabled, or victims of domestic violence. The organizational model that all such efforts shared—and still share—is reliance not only on energetic, creative policy entrepreneurs, but also third-party funders willing and able to front the substantial resources necessary to bring together and sustain the staff and infrastructure capable of eventually attracting modest financial contributions from highly dispersed and otherwise distracted potential members.

Such endeavors came to be known as “public interest organizations.” The term is apt insofar as they do in fact address problems or issues that if left unattended would negatively impact the interests or well-being of some broader aggregate of interests or a communal interest more generally. Yet “the public interest” is notoriously difficult to define. In the mid-20th century journalist Walter Lippmann offered this: “The public interest may be presumed to be what men would choose if they saw clearly, thought rationally, acted disinterestedly and benevolently.” But postwar American political scientists explicitly and forcefully rejected this view of the matter as conceptual drivel. To behaviorists and pluralists alike, the public interest was simply the outcome of the ongoing and inevitable interplay among competing private interests. Such intellectual timidity undoubtedly prevailed in part because the United States was afforded a *de facto* national purpose during decades of crisis: economic depression; then world war; and finally, Cold War with a nuclear-armed adversary whose communist leaders threatened to “bury” us. In any event, the social and political upheavals of the 1960s soon rendered such academic scruples irrelevant as embattled political elites cast about and embraced the emergent notion of . . . *public interest organizations!*

Yet the pendulum swung rather far, and has stayed there. The accumulated effect

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of the political turmoil of the last half-century has been to render the very notion of self-interest—the basis on which the Framers founded this regime—as dubious and suspect. As Tufts political scientist Jeffrey Berry, the foremost student of public interest organizations, once lamented: “The very basis of public interest advocacy is a

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distrust of the motives and intentions of private interest groups.” Berry has also noted that the organizational survival of public interest groups dictates that they “propagate a popular image of government as a set of institutions beset by ineptitude, corruption, and ineffectiveness.” As he has furthermore pointed out: “A byproduct of their efforts to make governmental institutions more responsive to the ‘people’ has been to undermine the

credibility of those same institutions.” Consequently, “public interest groups have placed themselves above politics.”

Given the issues toward which public interest entrepreneurs are drawn, they have typically relied heavily on expert opinion from natural as well as social scientists. The resulting claims to scientific objectivity have contributed mightily to public interest advocates’ self-perception as transcending politics. Indeed, Berry once noted that they “are as self-righteous as they are skillful.” In this respect, of course, they reflect the deep-seated religious and moral fervor that suffuses American political culture. Indeed, this aspect of public interest politics was reinforced by the religious zeal that sustained the civil rights movement, out of which public interest politics emerged in the late 1960s.

So today, we are at a point in our political life where fewer and fewer claims get made on the basis of self-interest. Even egregiously self-regarding corporate tax cuts are justified—with a straight face and against abundant evidence to the contrary—as promoting economic growth that will benefit all Americans. And no politician can ever justify any career move except out of a profound sense of duty to the republic. Or if resignation from public office becomes necessary, it is invariably motivated by a deep sense of responsibility to family.

But the real test is how our brightest and most politically engaged youth feel constrained to cloak their personal ambitions in tired, unconvincing rhetoric about “public service.” No mention of opportunities for world travel, stimulating work, or proximity to power ever seems permissible. With the possible exception of those headed for careers in the military, even “leadership” aspirations are rarely voiced and somehow regarded as suspect or illegitimate.

Contemporary culture has apparently reached the point at which self-interest in politics and public life has changed positions with sexual drives and desires. Whereas the latter were once expected to be subdued and sublimated for the good of society, today an individual’s overall health and well-being are deemed as requiring that sexual impulses be gratified, even indulged. Conversely, it is now self-interest that must be overcome, or simply repressed, for the sake of the wider public good. In any event, our guiding ideal and earnest aspiration appear to be—at least according to a [recent book review](#) in the Sunday *New York Times*—“to redirect the nation away from destructive partisanship toward a disinterested pursuit of a common good.” But as Jeffrey Berry might argue, such thinking is precisely how we got to where we are today!

The final topic to be addressed here has already been mentioned, the media—particularly the elite media, including print, electronic, and internet. Yet the importance of the American media transcends their strategic position in the current regime. Indeed, the media’s positive contributions to postwar American politics have understandably afforded them enormous influence and prestige. Today, however, these assets have been squandered, and these outlets have long since succumbed to myopic self-importance and arrogance.

Nevertheless, the road to this unfortunate place was a glorious one. First was the national media’s exposure of the indignities and terror experienced by black Americans in the Jim Crow South. Then came their critical role in exposing the half-truths, outright lies, and horrors of the Vietnam War. Finally, Watergate afforded the media the opportunity to play the decisive role in exposing and finally ending a corrupt, criminal administration. And these are only the highlights of the media’s accomplishments over the last half of the 20th century.

In addition to such triumphs, the media have figured prominently in other aspects—both positive and negative—of postwar American politics. I have already highlighted how dependent checkbook organizations and public interest politics generally are on all variety of media. Another instance concerns the critical role that was effectively thrust upon the media by the post-1968 reforms of the parties’ presidential nominating procedures. As Nelson Polsby observed over 30 years ago, those reforms effectively replaced the old party bosses with the media. Certainly, in the 2016 Republican primary campaign and now in the 2020 Democratic primary contest, the critical role of the television networks in choosing when and which of the many candidates to feature is glaring. All the more so with regard to their prerogatives over the staging and format of the

debates. Again, the media now effectively wield the power once held by party insiders, yet with even less accountability.

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The reduction of party identity to something akin, at best, to brand loyalty is another development that has enhanced the political influence and power of media. After all, advertising and sales are their bread-and-butter.

Less noted developments are perhaps even more significant. Peter Mair has pointed out that political leaders in Western democracies are less and less likely to be recruited and groomed up through the ranks of the parties. Instead, party leaders are increasingly likely to be chosen for their ability to appeal to the media and a wider mass audience. In the United Kingdom, one result has been the disappearance of rough-hewn trade unionists and small businessmen from Parliament. In the United States we have become well accustomed to the blow-dried congressmen who have replaced the much less camera-friendly pols who were accustomed to meetings behind closed doors beyond the reach of microphones and TV cameras—not to mention congresswomen and female Senators invariably turned out in tailored suits and impeccable makeup.

Hence British journalist Peter Osborne’s denunciation of “the merger of the political and media classes” into “a triumphant metropolitan elite” that “has completely lost its links with a wider civil society.” One result is what he refers to

as “a structural dishonesty about a great deal of political reporting.” Britain’s new Prime Minister, former journalist Boris Johnson, is only the most recent and glaring such example. In Washington the same incestuousness is evident among the press corps and the political figures they cover—though decidedly less so under the present administration.

The problem is exemplified in a recent *Wall Street Journal* op-ed by *New York Times* publisher, Arthur Sulzberger. Sulzberger was responding to a June 15, 2019 Twitter posting by President Trump that accused the *Times* of “a virtual act of treason” on account of a story the Gray Lady had run about U.S. cyber incursions into Russia’s electrical grid. The details of this particular episode are irrelevant to the point at hand—which is *not* to fault Sulzberger’s warning that Trump’s accusation “crosses a dangerous line in the president’s campaign against a free and independent press.” Rather the point is to highlight Sulzberger’s summary assertion that “Over 167 years, through 33 presidential administrations, the *Times* has sought to serve America and its citizens by *seeking the truth* and helping people understand the world” (my emphasis).

Now, “helping people understand the world” certainly strikes me as a worthy goal for a daily newspaper. But “seeking the truth” is, at best, sophomoric twaddle, and at worst, evidence of the profound arrogance and self-importance of today’s elite media. Whatever happened to “All the News That’s Fit to Print,” described by the BBC as “the most famous seven words in American journalism”? These words still appear every day in a box on the upper left corner of the *Times*’s front page, where they could be found since 1897. And they still articulate what a daily newspaper functioning under commercial, political, and time pressures can reasonably set as its objective. As for “seeking the truth,” the *Times* should leave that to others better suited to the task.

Making Sense of Trump

Given the political and cultural terrain I’ve been mapping, one does not have to approve of Trump’s behavior, rhetoric, or policies to acknowledge the rationality of his *modus operandi*. From his perspective it makes perfect sense to criticize and confront the decisions of various unelected government officials, whether Federal judges or the Federal Reserve chair. So, too, when he refuses to fill vacant high-level positions in various agencies, bureaus, and departments. After all, these are what Mudde and Kaltwasser refer to as the “unelected bodies and technocratic institutions” that elites on both sides of the Atlantic have increasingly relied on “to depoliticize contested political issues.”

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In light of such developments, it is striking that higher education has not been more prominently targeted by Trump. To be sure, his Department of Education has sought to bolster for-profit education, weaken accreditation procedures, limit or cut student loans, and reduce research funding. Yet Trump’s rage and rhetoric have generally avoided denouncing colleges and universities, even though these are the spawning grounds of the elites who inhabit these same “unelected bodies

On the other hand, much of the vitriol that Trump directs toward immigrants, African-Americans, Muslims, and minorities generally is also aimed, albeit obliquely, at their champions in the academy, particularly in the humanities, law, and social sciences. After all, these are the faculties most dominated by liberal and progressive values, whose graduates shape policies and occupy key positions in the regime’s social welfare, educational, philanthropic, and cultural institutions. More to the point, universities are the bastions of the enlightened upper-middle class that is “the class enemy of the lower-middle class,” as sociologist Herbert Gans once put it to me. Indeed, much of the vitriol expressed toward minorities by Trump and his supporters derives from their hostility toward such segments of the upper-middle class, which habitually, almost reflexively champion the disadvantaged and oppressed. This is hardly admirable or desirable, but is nevertheless not irrational.

Still, the target Trump has pursued the most avidly is clearly the elite news media. And given its preeminent role in today’s regime, this tack is similarly not irrational. Nor is Trump’s “fake news” mantra without some foundation. Even before the FCC under Reagan did away with the Fairness Doctrine (by which broadcast media were mandated to present controversial issues in a fair and balanced manner), Roger Ailes saw the opportunity—indeed, what he regarded as the necessity—to create an alternative to the mainstream media. Clearly, as a market calculation, Ailes’s judgment has been vindicated.

But the more revealing angle is how, even as Trump has conducted his jihad against the media, he has had to distance and disentangle himself from it. After all, the prominence and visibility that made possible his running for president were the result of a successful reality television program. It is surely not an exaggeration to say that Trump is a creature of the media, and in turn a master at deploying it. Moreover, the media have come to rely on him to do so. As CBS CEO Lesley Moonves smugly commented about the ongoing presidential campaign to an audience of media investors and executives in February 2016: “I’ve never seen anything like this, and this is going to be a very good year for us. Sorry. It’s a terrible thing to say. But, bring it on, Donald. Keep going.”

Seven months after sharing that cynical insight, Moonves was forced to resign his post at CBS in response to sexual assault and harassment charges. This raises another aspect of Trump’s media profile and persona that could be a liability, but thus far has not been. His personal morality and behavior have always reflected what most of the media celebrate and exploit. Then, too, the success of Fox News has revealed to anyone willing to pay attention that there is a market for politically incorrect fare that does not practice or even preach traditional values and morality, as long as those values are not openly disrespected or mocked. When Bill O’Reilly did just that—flagrantly and repeatedly—his dismissal confirmed that at some point a price *might* have to be paid.

These examples highlight the thin line between news and entertainment media. Yet if Trump has freely and vehemently attacked the former, the latter have simply not been in his crosshairs—that is, as long as they have not criticized him politically. For while certain segments of the American public—conservative Catholics and evangelical Protestants, for example—are categorically offended by the cultural fare on offer from the entertainment industry, others either revel in it or are ambivalent, simultaneously attracted and repelled.

Also not on Trump’s radar screen, either for praise or criticism, are the super-rich.

To be sure, he has long enjoyed the company of the very, very wealthy, regardless of how and where they acquired their money. Yet he seldom lavishes praise on such individuals, unless perhaps they render him some personal service—like staging a big fund-raiser. Nor does Trump much criticize them—even, for example, CEOs of large corporations that have for decades now been making a mockery of the law and hiring undocumented immigrants.

Such maneuvering by Trump sheds light on a major wellspring of his appeal. No personality cult is ever likely to develop around him. No one is going to liken his entrepreneurial genius to that of Steve Jobs, or praise his enlightened philanthropic activities. Rather Trump’s appeal lies in the fact that he made his money the old-fashioned way—in real estate! Millions of Americans find it easier

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to understand the sources of Trump’s wealth than to decipher what Wall Street geeks do when glued to their computer screens, or how the fancy footwork of hedge fund managers earn them billions. Neither do they associate him with the enlightened smugness of youthful Silicon Valley *nouveaux riches*, or the moral obtuseness of pharmaceutical executives slithering around and through government regulations in order to peddle deadly opioids to millions of their countrymen.

Real estate, by contrast, is a realm that ordinary Americans can at least fathom, a market with which most have some familiarity, from which they have typically profited, but which they also understand to be rife with posturing, sharp-dealing, and even cheating.

Indeed, this captures the folkloric understanding of what many believe is necessary to “make it” in capitalist America. The fact that “people get screwed” doesn’t necessarily delegitimize the system: After all, “that’s just the way it is.” The result is a relatively stable equilibrium that comes under challenge only when the losers become too pitiable, numerous, or visible. In the interim, individuals like Trump are for many Americans the object of begrudging admiration—nothing more, nothing less.

In this regard, the most useful and revealing foil for Trump is Senator Elizabeth Warren, who manages to reek not only of enlightened, meritocratic privilege but also of crass opportunism and dishonesty. I refer of course to her history of misrepresenting herself as a Native American deserving of affirmative action consideration. But there’s more.

As I have already suggested, Americans drawn to Trump are likely to be tolerant—even a bit respectful—of a little cheating. After all, one does what one has to do to succeed! But Warren’s Achilles’ heel is her self-righteous condemnation of the system that allowed her to rise up from humble origins and prosper. Particularly problematic is her lucrative legal work for corporations whose practices or

products she has sharply criticized. Whereas Trump comes across like a cross between a taxi driver and a union business agent doing what it takes to survive in his native New York, Elizabeth Warren presents to many as a whining, hypocritical ingrate.

In a political culture where, as I have noted, America’s elites have denigrated self-interest as suspect and unworthy, Donald Trump has made a virtue out of the crass, crude pursuit of his own narrow self-interest. Yet he has also managed to speak out on behalf of the self-interest of the nation, which cosmopolitan critics have also denigrated and rejected. Indeed, however wrong-headed or offensive Trump’s initiatives on immigration and trade, they do push back against a persistently assertive and ill-considered cosmopolitanism.

Again, the avatar of this cosmopolitanism was the public interest movement that emerged from the turmoil of the 1960s to challenge the facile pluralism that dominated American politics in the postwar era. *The Public Interest* may have been an inspired title for a publication launched in 1965 to create a forum where academic specialists could engage with Cold War intellectuals reared for ideological combat, and debate the specifics of policies undertaken by an increasingly activist government. Yet, as the basis of a “new politics” that presumed to pick up where the civil rights movement left off, and to right the many wrongs of late capitalism in America, the public interest movement was ultimately counter-productive. This is why John Gardner, founder of Common Cause, the flagship of the public interest movement, articulated his own reservations about terms like “public interest organization” and expressed his preference for “citizens lobby.” And why political scientist Andrew McFarland, who has chronicled Gardner’s concerns, does him one better and suggests the term “civic balance organization.”

Ralph Nader harbored similar doubts about the emergent reform movements of the late 1960s, and consequently called his sprawling organization Public Citizen. Yet regardless of the name, most such efforts fail to transcend the biases and limitations of the highly educated, well-informed individuals who are typically drawn to them and tend to look upon “politics” with disdain and suspicion, while at the same time regarding their own efforts and activities as motivated by obligation and duty.

Throughout our history, the role of “citizen” has held little meaning for vast numbers of ordinary Americans, whose life histories and customary circumstances lead them to think in much less abstract categories. Perhaps the obligations and duties that attach to citizenship come to mind when saluting the flag at some public ceremony, or when watching a movie about World War II. Yet for most Americans, the demands of political or even civic activities (as opposed, perhaps, to voting) tend to compete unsuccessfully with those of earning a living, maintaining a household, and keeping one’s family together.

In the past, the inevitable gaps between interest-based political activity and disinterested civic-minded pursuits were bridged by organizations like unions, political machines, even churches. These fostered roles and defined interests in concrete contexts that made sense to millions of men and women—whether as workers, Democrats, Republicans, Italians, Poles, Jews, Catholics, and so forth. Today, though difficult to discern through the fog of cultural warfare, identity politics provides another alternative to the abstractions of citizen politics—one that, however controversial or problematic, is eagerly and opportunistically

More Will Be Less

In the ongoing, ever intensifying debate over the nation’s direction, *substantive* populism will continue to be a critical focus of attention and controversy. After all, “a politics of issues” is what enlightened opinion in America has long called for. But now that we have it, what are we going to do with it? Issues such as persistent, perhaps increasing income equality are obviously of utmost concern. So, too, are health care and, of course, the immigration and refugee crises. Then there is the panoply of frightfully divisive cultural issues and controversies to which there are no easy answers, or even responses.

In this environment, *procedural* populism will likely be regarded, not entirely incorrectly, as less than compelling and narrowly technical—the kind of stuff political wonks and obsessive activists get caught up in. That will certainly be the reaction of most Americans. Meanwhile, well-heeled, highly motivated business and commercial interests will doubtless have more immediately relevant, substantive items that they will be able to place and keep on the nation’s agenda.

Yet procedural populism will hardly diminish in importance. Sooner or later, one or more of these reforms will capture the public’s attention, and might very well take off. After all, we live in a democracy, don’t we? Why shouldn’t we abolish an anachronistic and elitist institution like the Electoral College? Or the filibuster? Why shouldn’t we make it easier for citizens to vote? And while we’re at, why shouldn’t non-citizens who have lived here, paid taxes, and raised their children to be Americans have a say in how their community is governed?

One answer to such questions is: “No, we don’t live in a ‘democracy,’ we live in a *representative* democracy, whose institutions were designed to limit abuses of power but also to foster enlightened leadership and statesmanship.” Yet in the current environment, this response is, unfortunately, not very persuasive.

More compelling, in my view, would be to argue that the democracy on offer is chimerical. Under the conditions elucidated here, “more democracy,” i.e., more procedural reforms and gestures toward “increased participation,” will do nothing to clarify and prioritize the substantive matters confronting us. In the past, this vital function was performed, however imperfectly, by organizations and institutions such as interest groups and political parties. Today “interest group” is a term of opprobrium, and our political parties have been reduced to bureaucratic behemoths incapable and unwilling to help citizens order and aggregate their interests into coherent sets of choices that can be evaluated against those of other organized political actors.

In sum, there are today no viable organizations or institutions by which the needs, interests, tastes, and desires of different segments of the political community may be weighed in the balance, one against the other. Absent any such, the populist call for “more democracy” will inevitably result in more noise, confusion, posturing, denunciation, and recrimination—all of which will be facilitated by, and work to the advantage of, the media, whose *raison d’être* now looms dangerously as profiting from the chaos.

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Peter Skerry is professor of political science at Boston College.