PROCEDURAL PRECURSORS

The Dead End of ċMore DemocracyČ

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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 ďinterest-group liberalism,Đ 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 Lowičs 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,

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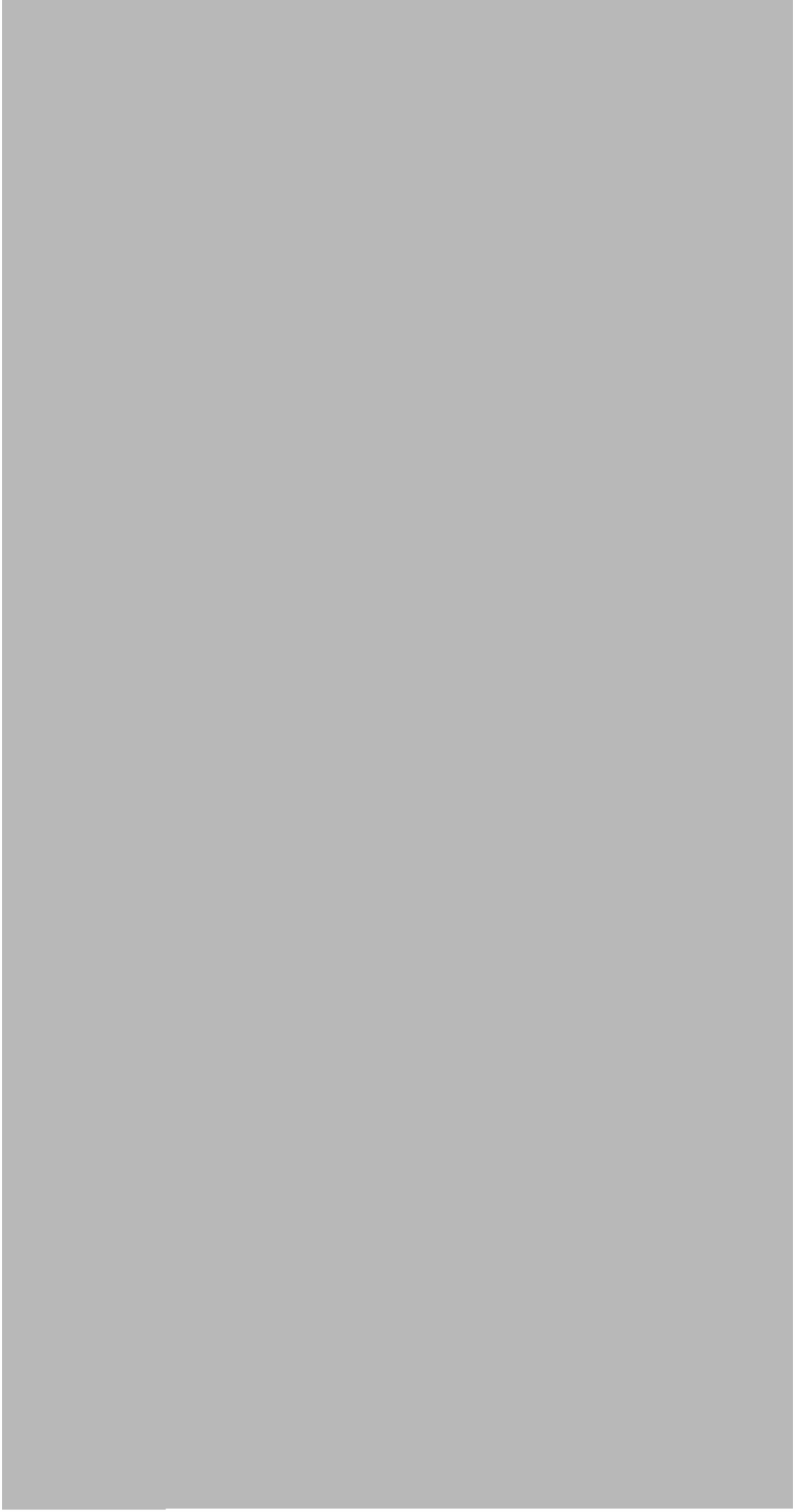

cultural institutions. More to the point, universities are the bastions of the enlightened upper-middle class that is ďthe class enemy of the lower-middle class,Đ as sociologist Herbert Gans once put it to me. Indeed, much of the vitriol expressed toward minorities by Trump and his supporters derives 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 todayčs regime, this tack is similarly not irrational. Nor is Trumpčs ďfake newsĐ 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 ċ indeed, what he regarded as the necessity ċ to create an alternative to the mainstream media. Clearly, as a market calculation, Ailesčs 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: ďIčve never seen anything like this, and this is going to be a very good year for us. Sorry. Itčs a terrible thing to say. But, bring it on, Donald. Keep going.Đ

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 Trumpčs 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 OčReilly did just that ċ flagrantly and repeatedly ċ 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 ċ that is, as long as they have not criticized him politically. For while certain segments of the American public ċ conservative Catholics and evangelical Protestants, for example ċ 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 Trumpčs 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 ċ like staging a big fund-raiser. Nor does Trump much criticize them ċ 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 Trumpčs appeal lies in the fact that he made his money the old-fashioned way ċ in real estate! Millions of Americans find it easier to understand the sources of Trumpčs 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.

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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 ďmake itĐ in capitalist America. The fact that ďpeople get screwedĐ doesnčt necessarily delegitimize the system: After all, ďthatčs just the way it is.Đ 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 ċ 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 therečs more.

As I have already suggested, Americans drawn to Trump are likely to be tolerant ċ even a bit respectful ċ of a little cheating. After all, one does what one has to do to succeed! But Warrenčs Achillesč 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, Americačs elites have denigrated self-interest as suspect and unworthy, Donald Trump has made a virtue out of

increasingly activist government. Yet, as the basis of a ďnew politicsĐ 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 ďpublic interest organizationĐ and expressed his preference for ďcitizens lobby.Đ And why political scientist Andrew McFarland, who has chronicled Gardnerčs concerns, does him one better and suggests the term ďcivic balance organization.Đ

Ralph Nader harbored similar doubts about the emergent reform movements of

abolish an anachronistic and elitist institution like the Electoral College? Or the filibuster? Why shouldnčt we make it easier for citizens to vote? And while