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Divided They Govern

By Richard Valelly December 19, 2001

WORK DISCUSSED IN THIS ESSAY

- Alberto Alesina and Geoffrey Carliner, eds.*Politics and Economics in the Eighties* (Univ. of Chicago Press, 1992).
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- Alan Ehrenhalt,*The United States of Ambition: Politicians, Power, and the Pursuit of Office*, (Times Books, 1991)
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Since 1981 American voters have kept the national government divided between the two parties. We have had a Republican White House and a Democratic Congress, except in 1981-87, when Repub licans narrowly controlled the Senate. This pattern, of course, could

change if the Democrats retake the White House in 1992.

Polls suggest that voters increasingly approve of divided government. In 1981, 47 percent of the electorate preferred unified government, while 34 percent preferred divided government (the rest taking an agnostic view). By 1989 these preferences had reversed: Now 45 percent approved of divided government and only 35 percent backed unified government, though very recent polls suggest some second thoughts. Paradoxically, voters evidently dislike what they have wrought. As divided government has persisted, voter frustration has increased. Indeed, divided government can be seen as both a symptom of voter disaffection, and a cause.

Divided government appears to increase public cynicism about politics in two ways. First, when divided partisan government intensifies the separation of powers of the American constitutional system, government becomes stymied. Citizens, like the Founders, may think they are dividing government to keep the rascals from doing damage. Yet the resultant policy inaction sows deeper cynicism about politics and government. Second, divided government creates a climate of scandal-mongering, in which each branch of government expends political resources embarrassing the other (Watergate, Iran-contra, the S&L scandals, Iraqgate) rather than jointly tending to the national business. Over time, this discredits both parties, blurs responsibility, and generates still more voter contempt for government and politics generally.

This analysis is seductive, and at least partly true. However, several recent books suggest it is overstated. Though we think of it as a characteristic of the 1980s, divided government has recurred regularly since the 1940s. In only eighteen out of the past forty-six years has the same party controlled the White House and both houses of Congress. The Nixon presidency, a period of legislative activism, coexisted with Democratic control of the House and the Senate. Divided government was also common during the nineteenth century.

What's New, and What's Not

In a deeper sense, we have lived with divided government since the Founding. Reacting to the Articles of Confederation, the Founders believed that the Constitution favored strong, if restrained, government. But much of American political thought since then from Theodore Roosevelt and Woodrow Wilson to Richard Neustadt and Walter Dean Burnham can be read as a recurring judgment that the Founders constrained government far more than they empowered it. It takes strong politics and a mobilized electorate to overcome the constitutional bias against government activism.

In the sweep of American history, bouts of effective governmental activism have been rare: the Civil War and Reconstruction Congresses, Woodrow Wilson's cooperation with party leaders in the Congress, Franklin D. Roosevelt's two strong working majorities in 1933-34 and 1937-38, LBJ's partnership with the 89th Congress in 1965-66. The ticket-splitting of the

1980s is more the rule than the exception a case of the constitutional chickens coming home to roost. Still, the current era has generated more than a normal amount of squawking about accumulated problems that government seems unable to solve. The federal deficit has deprived government of resources to address national concerns, and the magnitude of the deficit itself stands as a monument to government's failure to act. So the electorate has evidently locked itself into a vicious circle of ticket-splitting, policy inaction, discontent, disaffiliation and more ticket-splitting and more paralysis. Even if Bill Clinton should win the White House in November and enjoy a working majority in Congress, the process of political repair will have only begun.

According to several new studies by political scientists, however, we should not exaggerate the perils of divided government nor, by implication, the virtues of unified government let alone more radical reform proposals imagining a move toward parliamentary government. These new studies add badly needed complexity to the conventional views that blame divided government, willy nilly, for a multitude of sins.

Where most of the new studies fall somewhat short, however, is their failure to explore adequately the connection between divided government and perceived or real paralysis and the resulting damage to public confidence in government itself and to key democratic norms. For one thing, divided government yields less accountable government. If both parties are the in-party, then policy failures are everybody's fault and nobody's. Unified government may not be sufficient to revive strong politics, but it is probably necessary, at least in the current climate.

Divided government can also be a political red herring. For example, Republicans have long insisted that their failure to consummate a domestic program is the fault of Democratic control of Congress control that is itself illegitimate, reflecting gerrymandering and the power of incumbency. The GOP 1992 platform states: "After more than half a century of distortion by power-hungry Democrats, the political system is increasingly rigged." The platform blames the chronic deficit on Democratic control of the Congress, and adds, "The only solution is to end divided government."

It is necessary to sort out the dynamics of divided government where it came from, how it works, what can be fairly blamed on it, what unified government might portend and what reforms are needed to reclaim politics, irrespective of divided government. One can begin by differentiating the causes of divided government from its consequences.

Causes of Divided Government

Political scientists generally make two kinds of argument about the causes of recent divided government. The first argument emphasizes the behavior of *politicians*, contending that factors such as congressional incumbency, or candidate-recruitment, tends to advantage one party over the other. Some of this literature views the past decade as an aborted

realignment. Voters gradually shifted their presidential allegiance toward Republicans, but for a variety of structural or tactical reasons Democrats were able to cling to their control of Congress. The second view emphasizes the behavior of *voters*, and concludes that the voters' choice of divided government was rational, deliberate, and purposive.

A Rigged System? Drawing on three extensive academic literatures (on the electoral effects of congressional incumbency, reapportionment politics, and realignment), Newt Gingrich and other key Republicans view divided government as the product of Democratic success at riding out, through devious means, the electoral "right turn" that began in 1980. The case has superficial plausibility, since professional politicians do rationally protect their careers and incumbents have indeed gotten re-elected more reliably than in the 1940s and 1950s.

Already advantaged by comfortable vote margins for all congressional incumbents, House Democrats supposedly used their committee positions to build up large war chests. Congressional Democrats also blanketed their districts with newsletters, shoring up the name recognition that helps re-election. Another part of the same "rigged system" were state legislatures most of which are controlled by Democrats. These legislatures supposedly gerrymandered congressional districts to insulate House Democrats from an increasingly suburban electorate that gave Ronald Reagan a landslide in 1984 and George Bush a strong victory in 1988.

But though incumbents do exploit office, the "rigged system" thesis largely fails to explain divided government. Its fallacies are ably explored by Gary Jacobson and Morris Fiorina. If the system were rigged, why have Democrats done better in open House races? Why did they lose the Senate in 1980 and win it back in 1986?

While gerrymandering does occur, it doesn't explain lingering Democratic control of the House. Since 1952 Republican presidential candidates have received a significantly higher fraction of the vote than have Republican House candidates. Reagan got 57 percent of the national vote in 1984, but House Republicans got only 47 percent. For the most part, Republicans fail to capture the legislative branch because they attract fewer voters.

Incumbents appear strong, but their longevity can be exaggerated. Only 10 percent of those in the House in 1990 were there in 1968, even though incumbent vote margins have grown since then. As for campaign finance and incumbency, a big war chest can certainly scare away a strong challenger, leaving a seat effectively uncontested. But during the 1980s Republican challengers were much better endowed than Democratic challengers.

Do Democrats Have Better Candidates? A much more convincing argument holds that Democrats cling to legislative office, at all levels of government, because they field more attractive candidates. As both Alan Ehrenhalt and Gary Jacobson suggest, the Republicans have had a serious problem in candidate recruitment one of the reasons why they have put effort into converting conservative Southern Democrat office holders to the GOP.

Democrats obviously have a more visceral commitment to politics and government than government-bashing Republicans. With the exception of able patricians like William Weld and James Baker, or such serious, supply-side intellectuals as Phil Gramm and Jack Kemp, talented conservatives tend to act on their creed and stay in the private sector. But talented Democrats, because they actually like government, will put up with the stress, long hours, constituent abuse, and the relatively low pay of local and state office, which in turn serves as a recruitment pool for congressional candidates. So Democrats often do have better candidates a reality that grows out of their ideology.

Are the Voters Fools? A very different brand of explanation for divided government centers not on politicians but on voters. In this view, the voters are getting roughly what they want. Republican challengers were unlucky enough to pursue clear partisan realignment just when partisan loyalties, steadily weaker since the 1950s, were becoming too thin to support such ambitions. Most electorally active people have some kind of partisan loyalty, but increasing numbers no longer buy the party's entire program. Thus Republicans are split on cultural, social, and economic fault lines and many Republican presidential voters hedge their bets by backing Democrats for Congress.

Voter ambivalence may be all too genuine. The electorate believes, for instance, that deficits ought to be reduced but also agrees, when asked by pollsters, that budgets for particular worthy purposes, such as the environment and education, ought to go up.

Fiorina, Jacobson, and others suggest that increasingly the voters active in both presidential and congressional elections, who happen to be better informed voters in general, are adopting some basic rules of thumb. There are quibbles among these analysts about the degree of sophistication, but all agree, first, that voters see the parties as offering different policy benefits, and, second, that voters associate their own preferences with a Republican presidency and a Democratic Congress.

Congress cannot face up to expansionist dictators and "evil empires" nor can it broadly steer the economy, but the president can hardly be an ombudsman for a constituent with a Social Security problem. When weakened party loyalties and increasing distrust of government are factored in, the result is enough ticket-splitting to get divided government.

Fiorina is convincing when he notes the historic, system-wide pervasiveness of divided government. Since 1946 divided government has also spread rapidly to state politics, often pitting Republican executives against Democratic legislatures. For Fiorina, this suggests that more and more voters intend divided government and have become sophisticated ticket-splitters. Unified government may well become the exception, not the rule.

While Jacobson and Fiorina offer quite believable arguments in Fiorina's case, enhanced by simple but ingenious modelling the direct evidence for sophisticated voting is still only inferred from survey evidence. The great virtue of the thesis, however, is that it treats voters as purposive: Voters are far more wary of government and politicians than they used to be,

and a near plurality seems to like divided government even now, despite its chaotic results. Fiorina rightly calls for more research into ticket-splitting so that we can know just how much sophisticated voting is going on, and, in the meantime, urges skepticism about the view that divided government is an evil.

In short, political science research does not find much support for the contention that divided government is the result of illegitimate tactics by careerist Democrats. The Democrats include effective career politicians, of course that's one of their strengths as a party. But true electoral realignments sweep aside yesteryear's "in party." We didn't have nor could we have had such a realignment in the dealigned 1980s. The real story is that Democrats went into the 1980s with advantages in legislative electoral arenas that the Republicans lacked, mirrored by disadvantages on "presidential" issues and presidential candidates that Republicans exploited.

If this approach explains the rational causes of divided government, what about the consequences? The ticket-splitters in the electorate, after all, do not make up a majority. What if they unintentionally (and, for some, deliberately) stuck the rest of us with governmental deadlock and political decomposition? Does the cool, rational logic assumed in the new analyses of divided government's electoral origins also explain its consequences?

Consequences of Divided Government

Divided government seems to hobble governmental effectiveness in a variety of ways. However, these concerns are tempered when one takes a longer historical view, as do political scientists David Mayhew, David Rohde, and others. In the literature, three broad problems are attributed to divided government: policy inaction or incoherence, an obsession with political scandal, and an erosion of the political efficacy of the parties.

Policy Inaction, Flawed Legislation. The culpability of divided government is strongest on government's deferral of pressing problems, notably in economic and fiscal policy. Ginsberg and Shefter provocatively connect the national-level divided government of the 1980s to economic decline, fiscal irresponsibility, policy inaction, a failure to plan for economic competitiveness, and a subordination of national economic goals to a national security alliance with Japan. Each party is more devoted to retaining institutional strongholds than to fashioning as coherent national strategy.

Just how convincing are such charges? To test the hypothesis, David Mayhew did much tedious work, compiling a list of "important" legislation for the 1946-1990 period (during which the national government was often divided), 267 statutes in all. Mayhew's list was derived from the conclusions of leading reporters, policy analysts, and historians. He found that the rate of important policy making did not vary systematically across periods of unified or divided government.

Mayhew notes that most important legislation in the postwar period, 186 laws, passed with either two-thirds support or bipartisan majorities. He observes that Congress, contrary to its reputation, is more of a problem-solving institution than we often think simply because most of its members are committed to the ideal of making good public policy, as well as to the goals of getting re-elected and achieving influence within Congress. Also, legislation doesn't come easily. To sustain a bill through all the veto points in the process requires legislative leaders to fashion majorities much larger than 51 percent.

Presidential skill, furthermore, doesn't neatly coincide with unified government; it can be found during divided government, as Reagan, Nixon, and Eisenhower showed. External events that demand problem-solving do not coincide systematically with unified or divided government. Finally, in a serious discussion of a phenomenon often dismissed by political scientists as being too soft for analysis, Mayhew shows that public moods demanding strong government span periods of both divided and unified government. There are constant policy making pressures in Washington, surges of activism, often that last many years. Over the long run, both factors favor a rather high level of activism and policy making, divided government or not.

Is this view of the matter dispositive? Not wholly. Consider budget legislation in the 1980s. For many, the failure of government to match revenues with expenditures is the signal failure of divided government Democrats successfully defending outlays and Republicans successfully cutting taxes. However, while divided government in the 1980s made this straddle possible, no such fiscal default occurred during the sixteen years of cumulative divided government under Truman, Eisenhower, Nixon, or Ford. The new element that associated divided government with fiscal excess in the 1980s was the fierce Republican embrace of what George Bush once aptly called "voodoo economics." None of Reagan's Republican predecessors believed that you could cut taxes and increase revenues.

On the spending side, Mathew McCubbins' article in the Cox and Kernell volume (written in the spirit of the volume's persistent focus on parties) focuses on party conflict in a "bi-lateral veto game" and its resolution. He conceptually strips spending politics down to a stylized conflict over two types of programs, domestic spending and defense spending. Democrats preferred increases in one and reductions in the other, and vice versa for Republicans. The outcome is basic game theory: since neither side could get its first preference (more for its side, less for the other side), they both agreed on the second preference (more for both sides). The result, of course, was persistent, upward pressure on the deficit. Historically, Mayhew finds no such clear relationships between divided government and fiscal imbalance. But McCubbins' emphasis on defensive partisan behavior in a fragmented system nicely captures the dynamic of fiscal blockage, at least in the supply-side era.

On the tax side, a key piece of legislation, the Economic Recovery Tax Act (ERTA) of 1981, played a very important role. Startled by the results of the 1980 elections, Democrats sought to shore up business support for the next election. Both parties competed to take credit for a supply-side bill that would spark economic recovery, setting off an infamous "bidding war"

that would have been improbable in a unified government. In a concise article in the volume edited by Alberto Alesina and Geoffrey Carliner, Charles Stewart analyzes ERTA and other tax legislation in the 1980s. He estimates that about 90 percent of lost revenue over the 1980s due to tax cuts is attributable to ERTA. Given Reagan's resoluteness in blocking major tax increases, divided government made it impossible to recover lost revenue. Modest income and corporate tax increases as well as a large increase in Social Security taxes occurred, but tax legislation after 1981 tended toward "revenue neutrality."

Divided government from 1981 to 1992 invited, in other words, complicated patterns of "gaming" between the two parties on spending and taxing that, in turn, created a chronic deficit problem. Its real economic consequences are still being debated periodic fiscal imbalance has been common in U.S. history since the Civil War, as Charles Stewart astutely points out in the Cox and Kernell volume. But in the current era of government-bashing and festering economic and social problems, fiscal imbalance has symbolized government failure.

Increased public cynicism has probably been reinforced by the savings-and-loan scandal, a colossal case of bipartisan failure. In a lucid, sobering treatment of the "thrift debacle" in the Alesina and Carliner volume, Barry Weingast and Thomas Romer show convincingly the bipartisan, political origins of the crisis, emphasizing incentives and informational biases. The public was ill-equipped to assess the issue and was not cohesively organized as the thrift industry was. Since every member of Congress had many thrifts in his or her district or state, Congress tended to accept the available arguments. These favored, first, deregulation and, later, forbearance letting the industry take time to work its way out of its difficulties.

Explicit treatment of divided government plays little role in the Weingast-Romer analysis. But their own account hints that Congress and the administration jointly delayed remedial action because they feared raising taxes or worsening the budget deficit itself partly the product of divided government. In addition, the S&L scandal, like the deficit itself, suggests how divided government permits blame-sharing as well as credit-sharing. Both public deliberation and accountability suffered as a result of a blame-avoidance game. On balance, the contribution of divided government to policy inaction and flawed legislation from 1946 to 1990 across many policy domains is hard to prove, just as Mayhew says. But from 1981 on its contribution to economic mismanagement gets stronger, a point broadly consistent with more pessimistic analyses, such as Ginsberg and Shefter's *Politics By Other Means*.

Divided government has also been blamed for foreign policy incoherence. During the Iran-contra hearings, former National Security Adviser Robert McFarlane cited the Boland Amendment (prohibiting aid to the contras) as destructive foreign policy meddling. First Congress drew the line here, then it drew the line there. Circumventing Congress came easily for who knew what Congress wanted? but the process of circumvention damaged policy. Yet the problem with the general argument of foreign policy incoherence, as Mayhew

points out, is that the country is never unified for long on foreign policy, even under unified government. Divided government may well add healthy checks and balances as both the contras and the Sandinista party know.

In fact, divided government has often been associated with initiatives now recognized as statesmanlike, the most famous case being the Marshall Plan, launched during the "do-nothing" (read Republican-controlled) 80th Congress. There is simply no way, using any imaginable set of criteria, to judge foreign policies produced since 1946 under unified control as being consistently superior to those fashioned under divided control.

Scandal-mongering. Ginsberg and Shefter argue that divided government in the 1980s encouraged "politics by other means." If Democrats couldn't win the presidency, they investigated and harassed the president's subordinates, while Republicans anxious to control the House used the ethics machinery to discredit the House leadership. If interest groups couldn't rally voters, they could buy elected officials. In time, the public reasonably drew unflattering inferences about people inside the Beltway: a plague on both their houses.

For some observers of American politics, a continuing round of ethics scandals feeds the kind of paranoia about government that Oliver Stone exploited with "JFK," a plausible point about the political origins of public cynicism. Equally serious, a certain administrative incoherence and timidity can set in. Administrators, wary of scandal, became excessively cautious. Appointments go unfilled, and talented people take a pass on a job offer because of some youthful indiscretion that could invite smears long afterwards.

There are, then, three related claims about scandal-mongering. Divided government increases the rate of political scandal; that in turn increases public cynicism and hobbles government's ability to implement policy. But the rate of scandal-making does not vary systematically across periods of unified and divided government. Mayhew counted for the period 1946-1990 the number of days that the congressional committee investigations of the presidency, or executive response, were featured on the front page of *The New York Times*. There is no systematic relationship between periods of unified or divided government none at all.

Capitol Hill launches investigations for at least two other reasons, factional and constitutional. Indeed, as Mayhew points out, a period of unified government can be associated with investigations that set the stage for tensions in a particular administrative or policy domain that will last for decades. If so, the case for a relationship between divided government and public cynicism and administrative incoherence is weak.

Scandals during both divided and unified government often reflect constitutionally mandated tensions. The Watergate and Iran-contra affairs, both associated with divided government, of course had political dimensions. But they also dealt with quite serious constitutional issues. Moreover, to dismiss recent crises of government as mere "scandals" is to trivialize the stakes. In Watergate and Iran-contra, or in lesser imbroglios, crimes and misdemeanors

against democratic government all demanded scrutiny and response. The rate of congressional investigation in the post-World War II period (and probably the pre-World War II period) is at best only weakly correlated with partisan divided government. Party factions will go after one another as easily as different parties. And concerned congressional leaders will walk away from party loyalty toward the Constitution.

Death of Responsible Party Politics. An article of faith among most political scientists is the unimportance of parties within the Congress. As subcommittees and staff proliferated, abetted by the collapse of deference to leadership or any commitment to apprenticeship, such irrelevance grew. Congress is therefore unruly, hence the recurrent magazine covers picturing Congress as a baby in diapers. Mayhew summed it up best, in an earlier, well-known book, *Congress: The Electoral Connection*: "No theoretical treatment of the United States Congress that posits parties as analytic units will go very far ... we are left with ... 535 men and women rather than two parties..." All of this is supposedly compounded by divided government.

President Bush has set a modern record of thirty-one vetoes in fewer than four years. This has only sharpened the sense that running Congress is not an advantage for the Democrats as a party, and that minority status in the House has transformed Republicans into a kind of Weather Underground in suits. Committee barons freelance, Speaker Foley lacks fire in the belly, and everyone hustles money, subverting the party's historic social commitments. Meanwhile Newt Gingrich plots the fall of the Republic, or at least of the Congress.

There are two claims here: divided government thwarts partisan cohesion, organizationally and programmatically, and it intensifies illegitimate free-lancing, legislatively and in congressional campaign finance or in a poisonous blend of the two. But this picture is also overstated, or just plain wrong. Rohde's finely counterintuitive analysis shows that party government is alive and well in the House of Representatives since the reforms of the late 1960s and early 1970s. His work is part of a renewed interest in congressional parties that can also be found in the Cox and Kernell and Alesina and Carliner volumes.

Rohde demonstrates a marked increase in party government in the House and Senate. To be sure, notwithstanding structural changes in legislative party cohesion, a Speaker's style can matter enormously. (Speaker Wright was a strong partisan and Foley a relatively weak one.) But, on the whole, far from weakening the Democrats and Republicans as coherent legislative parties, divided government has been associated with a strengthening. Rohde convincingly constructs a party cohesion index that is, the proportion of votes on which a House or Senate Democrat supports the party position. The low for the House was reached in 1970, 27 percent, but by 1987 it had shot up to 64 percent; in the Senate it ranged from 35 percent to 52 percent in the same period. From the 92nd to the 94th Congresses, about 8 percent of the House was involved in the Democratic whip organization, but the percentage increased steadily to 40 percent by the 101st Congress.

During this period the Speakership was strengthened, becoming the apex of a system composed of regular whip planning meetings, policy-planning task forces, a Steering and Policy Committee, the Democratic Caucus, and the Democratic Study Group. The Rules Committee changed from being an obstructionist body to an operation that facilitated the Democratic Party agenda through increasingly sophisticated and for Republicans oppressive use of rules. Greatly aiding these changes was a sharp decrease in sectional tensions within the congressional Democratic Party, the result of the Voting Rights Act's impact on Southern politics.

Speaker Wright used this new system during his brief tenure to enact a party agenda, echoing earlier, now forgotten efforts and successes by Carl Albert and Tip O'Neill, both of whom forced strong, anti-recession measures on reluctant Republican presidents, in 1975 and 1983. Both the Clean Water Act and the Highway Reauthorization were enacted over Reagan's vetoes. Also passed were important savings and loan, welfare, farm credit, catastrophic health insurance, trade, and homeless bills. Indeed, Rohde's evidence suggests that policy-planning and programmatic cohesion grew during the 1980s within the congressional Democratic Party. Forthcoming work by James Shoch of Dartmouth College, on trade policy, and Chris Howard of MIT, on social policy, will strengthen this implication of Rohde's research.

Nor is it clear that divided government promotes corrupt campaign finance. What does seem clear is that divided government in the 1970s helped stimulate the monitoring systems which generate the data that public watchdog groups use to call public attention to finance issues. On balance, public awareness of money's role in politics seems to have been helped by divided government. This isn't to dismiss the issue, which is too often ignored and misunderstood. Greider's controlled outrage in *Who Will Tell the People* wakes one up to it. Yet it is not analytically clear whether, or how much, divided government reinforces the power of organized money and social class in politics.

The overall case that divided government destroys parties is at best mixed. As Rohde suggests, party cohesion and ideological coherence, as well as coordinated policy planning, may actually grow under divided government. At the same time, party cohesion does not assure party accountability; and parties that do not seem accountable are parties that engender voter distrust.

Moreover, a party that shares governance may have difficulty functioning as a clear opposition. Divided government can increase collusion between the parties to avoid blame for policy inaction or failure, which in turn intensifies public cynicism against the whole system.

In sum, divided government cannot have been the sole foundation of the recent crisis of governance. Its critics are putting too much explanatory weight on a pattern of electoral outcomes that has recurred since World War II, and that was common from the end of Reconstruction to the rise of McKinley. In the form it took from 1981 to 1992, divided

government did, however, make it easier for government to become associated with major symbols of political failure, such as the chronic deficit and the S&L debacle. But restoration of public confidence will require more than control of both branches by the same party.

Political Renewal

Given America's constitutional institutions, political culture, and recent history, how shall we go about renewing politics? As James Morone's exceptionally interesting book shows in rich, historical detail, American political culture is deeply anti-political. American history is punctuated by political surges full of democratic yearning that well up from below. In many of them, people seek to abolish the messiness of politics in the name of "the people" and install a government founded in transcendental values of American community. The popular base of the Perot movement was a typical example.

Such democratic surges often ossify into the creation of new interest groups, and new allied federal agencies, such as the National Labor Relations Board in the 1930s, or the new environmental agencies of the 1970s. Yet the proliferation of constituencies and agencies only adds to the system's ungovernability. Thus, the stage is regularly set for broad disillusionment with politics, reinforcing the anti-governmental thrust of American political culture.

In ground-breaking work, the late Jack Walker constructed the first, reliable "census" across time of interest groups. He found that the older view of "stable unrepresentation" in the group system (to use a term coined by William Gamson of Boston College) no longer captures interest group politics. Gaps in group repre- sentation have closed steadily since the 1930s due to constant intervention into the associational system by government and private "patrons," such as foundations, philanthropies, and the media. For example, when the Kennedy administration established state-level commissions on the Status of Women, it laid the basis for the formation of the National Organization of Women, just as liberal foundations helped to finance the voter registration drive of the early 1960s.

Indeed, since the 1960s, the political system has been characterized by burgeoning interest groups and declining electoral participation. Voter turnout and partisan affiliation have both decreased. As Ginsberg and Shefter observe, electoral politicians no longer have to engage in mobilizing the electorate. Today's politicians are all too comfortable with the "low voter turnout" environment in which they compete. It is a predictable milieu, and changing it is against their career interests. Thus, as the interest group system has become more pervasive and inclusive, the broader citizenry, paradoxically, has become more frustrated.

Perhaps, contrary to William Greider's title, The People don't need to be told they have already grasped the intractability of representative government and have channeled their political impulses into avenues outside those mediated by party and election. Paradoxically, the number of political activists has increased just when millions have become electorally inactive. Reintegrating group activism with representative government and effective parties

will be very tricky, for interest groups often seem to operate at the expense of parties, treating them as flags of convenience. (See Karen Paget, "Citizen Organizing: Many Movements, No Majority," *TAP* No. 2, Summer 1990, and John Judis, "The Pressure Elite," *TAP* No. 9, Spring 1992.)

Moreover, as William Greider suggests, because of the fragmentation and particularism of interest group politics, the gain to inclusion is no match for the power of money. Also, the crisis of the labor movement the most embracing and aggregating group of ordinary voters has reopened gaps in representation. Hence the paradox of the contemporary system of representation: More Americans are highly active in politics, via interest groups. Yet in an age of partisan disaffiliation and group fragmentation, Americans are more disconnected than ever before. What gets lost, finally, is appreciation of democratic politics and government as aggregative and collectively valuable activities.

This, unfortunately, is the larger context for political renewal. For some analysts, such as those who formed the Committee on Constitutional Structure, the fate of the Carter Administration and the legislative and fiscal stalemate of the Reagan-Bush era suggest institutional and procedural reforms to create genuine unified government. In this view strong parties, a strong presidency, unified government, and responsible government all go together. Hence key figures associated with the committees, such as Lloyd Cutler and the Brookings scholar James Sundquist, call for constitutional reforms that would make our system more like parliamentary government. These include such ideas as "team tickets" (that is, voting for presidential, House, and Senate slates together), and changing congressional terms to give presidents time to see a program through. But these reforms, though appealing, are improbable, and they beg the question of how to redeem democratic citizenship under our present constitution.

One obvious inference is the need for stronger parties, to enlist citizens in the business of politics and to bridge the constitutional separation. Without strong parties, even "unified" government can itself become a kind of divided government, as the Democratic Party has often been throughout its history. Without a strengthened Democratic Party, a Clinton administration could go the way of the Carter administration, succumbing to the still potent factionalism in the three party groupings the Democratic Leadership Council, Jesse Jackson and his various constituencies, and the AFL-CIO/Kennedy alignment. A Clinton administration, like Reagan and unlike Carter would have to take advantage of the party-building opportunities of White House incumbency.

Deepening voter alienation also reflects the widespread perception that the political deck is stacked that only insiders have influence, that money talks louder than votes, and that both parties are corrupted. Greider's muckraking uncovers damning details about how money talks and constricts national debate about what's feasible. Here again, ordinary people are denied political influence for reasons deeper than the fact of divided partisan government. Fundamental campaign finance reform is only the beginning of a cure.

Political efficacy, citizen participation, strong parties, and government competence are mutually reinforcing. In the heyday of the New Deal coalition, notwithstanding its exclusions, each factor operated in tandem with the other to make for a strong polity, and invited further inclusion. Since the late 1960s, that cycle of reinforcement has ended. Divided government has compounded this political reversal.

But unified government under the Democrats, at least would have to work mightily to repair the damage. Political renewal can perhaps be built on the upsurge of citizen activism, but it will have to take care that such activism does not come at the expense of parties, or of voter confidence in the polity as a whole. Certain measures, like the "motor voter bill" recently vetoed by President Bush, or fundamental campaign finance reforms, point in the right direction. But they only whet one's appetite for a whole new genre of strategies to reclaim politics.

When all is said and done, it is hard to imagine political renewal occurring in the absence of a strong president who has a working majority in Congress and a healthy partisanship. In that sense, those who associate democratic decay with divided government are partly right after all.