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Three Challenges to US Democracy: Accountability, Representativeness, and Intellectual Diversity

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Despite the enduring nature of representative democracy in the United States, and its ongoing fulfillment of virtually all of the basic, formal tenets of democratic theory, there is a pervasive sense of dissatisfaction and disappointment with the current workings of the American political system. Surveys and the literature all point to an impasse in the evolution of democratic governance in the United States, marked by low voter turnout, institutional gridlock, the unfettered power of the media, and the lack of responsiveness by federal, state, and municipal authorities to the perceived problems of most Americans. By one yardstick of the popularity of the existing type of governance, polls indicated that in 1964 only 29% of all Americans believed government was in the hands of a few big interests; after Watergate the figure jumped to 70% and by 1992 it reached 80%. Similarly, by 1992 65% of those interviewed said "quite a few" of the people running the government were "crooked"—an astounding number in the country that virtually invented accountability.

As could have been expected, this *angst* regarding the effectiveness and workings of democratic governance reached its high point during the 1992 presidential campaign. The latter's coincidence with the longest US economic recession since World War II (though perhaps not as deep as the 1981–82 recession) undoubtedly reinforced the doubts and disappointment many citizens and observers of the American system had been experiencing for years before. The emergence of the strongest third-party threat to the traditional system since the turn of the century, Ross Perot's emphasis on the lack of responsiveness of existing mechanisms, and the reappearance of mass race riots in Los Angeles for the first time in a quarter of a century all accentuated the sense of American democracy in disrepair. Citizens were increasingly resorting to alternative forms of representation, from numerous ballot initiatives and referenda to term limit proposals, recalls of governors and judges, and demands for the election of economic regulators. There were 54 ballot initiatives in 1982 and 75 in 1992.

It was almost equally predictable that with the end of the presidential campaign and the election of a new president from a different party, the forebodings and criticisms of the system would recede. Part of the offensive against the functioning of the country's democratic institutions logically and naturally derived from the partisan nature of the electoral brawl: the Democrats had excellent reasons for 'piling on' until the November vote; those reasons quickly vanished after Bill Clinton's inauguration. The Republican Party could not immediately concentrate its energies on criticizing a system it ran for twelve consecutive years and for twenty of the previous twenty-four. And since much of the skepticism and questioning of American democracy must come from the political elite, the fact that it has partly suspended judgment since 1992 has somewhat subdued the virulence and breadth of a critical onslaught that seemed overwhelming in the months building up to the 1992 vote. But the difficulties encountered by the Clinton

administration in passing its economic stimulus program and, more importantly, health care reform will inevitably rekindle the criticism.

Regardless, it is evident that most if not all the interrogations raised in the recent past about the responsiveness of democratic rule in the United States remain as valid as ever. If anything, the relative disappointment that seems to be emerging with regard to the Clinton administration's capacity to deliver on its commitments and to repair the system may begin to strengthen many of the previously held, then prematurely forgotten, impressions. The 1992 election and the inauguration of a young and dynamic president altered the perception of the workings of Washington, however, they do not seem to have actually influenced the substance of the matter. Indeed, it may be that during the past two years, the major shortcomings and contradictions of the American democratic system have become more visible and significant than ever before. The worst that can be said about a sclerotic system is that even when a new generation and group comes into power, it does not make much of a difference because the constraints and deficiencies of the system overpower whatever impetus the newcomers may have ridden or brought with them.

The current difficulties—some have said crisis—confronting democratic governance in the United States possess three central characteristics stemming from one basic origin. Democracy in America has not changed that much; many of its features today are still the same as half a century ago. But the world has changed, the US role in international affairs has shifted, and the United States itself has undergone a deep transformation. What used to work is still present and active, but it works less well in a world and a nation that are no longer what they were.

The first characteristic that deserves review involves the problem of accountability of American democratic institutions and processes. The second has to do with the growing exclusion of significant sectors of American society from democratic rule, generating what has been called—not inaccurately though somewhat sensationally—social apartheid. The third concerns the persisting uniformity of mainstream intellectual debate over substantive policy options in the United States.

The Problem of Accountability

The untranslatable and thus typically Anglo-Saxon notion of accountability is being found wanting in the United States. It is not so much that there is more or less of it but rather that what is expected of it has grown, and its capacity to respond has not. Elected or appointed officials do not do what is expected of them by those who vote for them or by those who appoint them. Candidates run on one platform, then turn around and govern with another, often the diametrical opposite. Corruption, poor management, and inside-the-Beltway complicity are perceived to be

the main features of a political system that, until recently—say until the 1960s—received consistently high marks in public opinion polls questioning constituents' trust in its functioning. The Clinton Administration's first years in office illustrate this eloquently, if perhaps not in as lasting and substantive a manner as many other examples do. Clinton's main achievement so far in office—passing the North American Free Trade Agreement (NAFTA)—can be considered something he was elected not to do. Conversely, two of the main goals he was elected to achieve—a major jobs program and health care reform—were not accomplished promptly or at all. As far as a jobs program was concerned, the Clinton economic team practically gave it up, both as an immediate goal and as a philosophical inspiration. Regarding health care, in the best of cases only a watered down, painless, and much less significant reform than expected may occur, despite the expectations raised by initial plans.

This comes in the wake of the Reagan years when a president elected to cut spending and balance the budget in fact reduced taxes, increased spending, and produced the largest deficits in US history. It also follows on the breaking of the unfulfillable "no new taxes" pledge of "read my lips" fame. The issue is not whether those courses of action were good or bad for the nation, avoidable or inevitable. The question lies in whether such a dramatic contrast between promises and achievements does not generate an inordinate skepticism among electorates, explaining low voter turnouts and growing cynicism. While consonance between campaign promises and administration policy is not the only bellwether of accountability, and while it constitutes a well-known weakness in every democratic system, particularly in the United States, it remains a concern. Without the beginning of some sort of correspondence between program and action, the American citizenry will have trouble regaining the type of trust (justified or not) that for so long characterized US governance.

Clearly money has a great deal to do with the problems involving confidence and accountability. The issue of campaign financing is central to the possibly growing undemocratic nature of American politics. The rubber check scandal in Congress, the default of savings and loans institutions, and the fact that the only true threat to the traditional two-party system came from a multibillionaire all show that while politics in the United States has never been squeaky clean, the gap between the concerns of many people and the perceived behavior of politicians is perhaps greater than before. To get elected one needs a great deal of money. Once elected, because of incumbents' advantages in raising money and the difficulties for challengers to do so, reelection is a nearly sure thing. This reinforces the perception of unaccountability: it is, in fact, extremely difficult to 'throw the rascals out.' The 1992 high turnover in Congress was due largely to withdrawals, some of which can be attributed to being 'thrown out' (i.e., incumbents not running in the face of impending defeat), but many of which, in fact, signaled frustration and/or weariness with the system (for example, Senators Rudman and Wirth).

The trends have been well studied. The rising cost and requirement of reaching increasingly disperse media markets through high-tech procedures has made campaigns more expensive. This raises the premium on fund raising, which in turn reinforces both the dependency of candidates on donors and candidates' insensitivity to the concerns of those with no money to contribute. Money has become a millstone around the neck of representation. Representatives cannot truly vary with the interests and worries of the electorate because only money can get one elected, not consonance with ideological, political, or generational concerns. The Clinton administration's reluctance and difficulties in moving forward with campaign financing reform show how complex the issue is, and to what extent one of the classical strong suits of US politics (in comparison with other nations)—the relative separation between money and power—has been eviscerated.

This problem leads directly to the so-called gridlock dilemma. Statistically speaking, there is probably no more gridlock than before. Nor is it absolutely clear that, in itself, divided government leads to greater political conflict or to the passage of fewer laws. The question is not why Congress and the executive do not cooperate but rather why Americans do not more often elect political and ideological majorities in both branches of government. Every now and then they do. In 1964 Lyndon Johnson built himself a lopsided Democratic and liberal coalition for his Civil Rights and Great Society programs. In much the same fashion Ronald Reagan constructed a conservative majority of both Republicans and Democrats in 1980–86. But most of the time, it seems a particularly arduous task to achieve. One of the reasons may lie precisely in the tightening link between money and politics, at least in Congress. The great ideological tides of past years can no longer submerge everything in their way; incumbency and fund raising do not allow it. Even if these tides do bring an initial realignment, they quickly are neutralized by the need for freshmen House members, in particular, to position themselves for reelection in a context where the ideological drift and presidential coat tails of the first election will no longer be sufficient to carry the day.

The perception of accountability in the United States is both product and cause of one of the political system's most serious weaknesses today: low levels of voter turnout, increasingly at every level. True, the 1992 vote brought a rise in participation with regard to 1988 and previous years, from 50% to 55%. But this proportion remains woefully low by industrialized nation standards, and may prove to be a fluke; since 1992 turnouts in mayoral and other local elections have returned to their previous levels. The causes and origins of this low turnout are many, as are the debates about the relevance and import of each explanatory factor. Whatever the reasons though, because overall participation is low, a solid block of certain 'high-turnout' votes guarantees victory. But then, those elected are accountable, if at all, only to that solid block, which often coincides with the interest groups responsible for much of the financing of the eternally reelected

congressional majorities. At the same time, those who were accustomed to vote and ceased to do so, or those who have never voted and are not inclined to do so, find a justification for their apathy in the unaccountability and lack of responsiveness of elected officials.

The strong bias in favor of incumbents at the congressional level and the fact that presidents rarely comply with their promises during campaigns encourage the tendency to abstain. This in turn fortifies both the incumbency and absence of consonance between promises and policies. Fewer people vote because of the perceived insensitivity of the system to their concerns, but some sectors of society still vote more than others. Those who vote—white, middle-aged, suburban—see many of their needs and fears addressed. Those who don't vote see their concerns neglected. To ponder the origins and effects of the perceived fall of accountability in the country where it was largely invented is to begin to understand the present travails of American democracy.

Is democratic rule in the United States less accountable and responsive today than at other times? The question is difficult to answer because quantifiable indicators are few. Trust in the political system is undoubtedly at an all-time low according to polls and surveys, but these may be reflecting the expression of discontent and frustration with the current situation more than a balanced, informed assessment of the actual workings of US political institutions. The gap between political discourse and reality is probably wider than before, but American pragmatism has always made this issue a relatively minor one. Corruption and government's inability to address a growing number of the major and minor problems afflicting the lives of citizens is surely greater and more deeply felt than before, but this may result more from an increasingly difficult economic situation and the effects of the insertion of the United States in the world economy than from lower governmental competence or accountability. Are things worse then or just the same? As stated in the premise at the outset of this essay, they probably are the same, but the country and the world are not.

It may be preferable to view the issue differently, from two perspectives. On one hand, the American political system has long been spared any significant reform—a sign of continuity, but also, perhaps, of stagnation and obsolescence. The Voting Rights Act of 1965 and, in general, the civil rights movement represented a relevant transformation of part of the system, insofar as they incorporated a considerable section of the population that had previously been excluded from much of the system's workings. But the fundamental two-party system, with its present balance between the courts, the legislative, and the executive, the first-past-the-post majority mechanism, and the possibility of (regulated) private campaign financing and spending, remains virtually identical to what it was more than half a century ago. Yet American society has changed immensely over the past decades, and the perception of deteriorating accountability of

the political system may well stem from this dissonance: an unmovable political system in a rapidly changing society.

The absence of proportional representation in the United States provides an example of this dissonance. There was a time when the social, ethnic, political, and ideological uniformity of the American *electorate* (not of society at large) could be adequately represented through a two-party, simple-majority system. But no more, as the proliferation of redistricting demands, ethnically homogeneous districts, minority-rights advocates, regional demands, and Ross Perot seem to indicate. It may be time for the United States to adopt a mixed regime, like that of Greece or Germany, which includes a dose of proportional representation that would provide adequate representation for groups, parties, lobbies, and interests that are significant and worthy of representation. Instead of forcing them all into the pressure cooker of the two-party mechanism, this type of change might enhance accountability while at the same time not generating as many of the perverse effects that the makeshift, patchwork solutions like district redrawing or ethnic gerrymandering tend to produce. The essential point, however, lies not in the intrinsic merits or drawbacks of one system or the other but in illustrating the lack of correspondence between the changes in American society and the immobility of the political system. Ultimately, the explanation for the sense of diminished accountability may lie in the relative discordance between the transformed aspirations of a changing society and the responsiveness of a political system built in another time to answer other challenges.

A second imbroglio that democratic governance has encountered in the United States involves the end of the long cycle of American economic expansion and the impressive socio-economic equalizing effect that expansion had on US society. One need not subscribe fully to the tenets of the end-of-the-American-middle-class school to appreciate that the kind of economic growth enjoyed in the forties, fifties, and sixties belongs to the past and that the standard of living for many Americans has reached a plateau or has declined. The types of tradeoffs and postponement of choices that such growth made possible have become more difficult without it.

No doubt the American political system, while perhaps not nearly as accountable and responsive as its admirers and certainly its mythology have made it out to be, functioned adequately in these respects because of the enormous leeway afforded by the economic context. Debates over redistribution of wealth, taxes, public services, employment, race relations, and inequality throughout society all were held in an environment that in many cases allowed Americans to have their hamburger and eat it too. Many of the virtues that often were attributed to the accountability of the political system in fact should have been credited more correctly to the extraordinary economic expansion of those years and to the effects it had on reducing inequalities in American society. That same growth was a consequence and a contributing factor to US participation in the world economy, which was both highly favorable and commanding.

When these elements started becoming less operative—they did not change overnight or radically but they did undergo significant mutations over a relatively brief period of time—the difficulties of problem solving and overcoming the divisions of American society became more apparent. So too did the drawbacks of the political system. Many of the weaknesses and obstacles that today impede an adequate treatment of a number of these problems can be blamed on the political system, not on the slowdown in economic growth, nor on the ensuing inequalities, nor on the new US role in the world economy. The blame must fall on the political system, not because it can solve these problems, but because it should permit a rational and substantive debate about the tradeoffs and choices involved. However, to a large degree it is not doing so.

This is illustrated in the job market. For decades the United States enjoyed a tight job market with low unemployment compared to the rest of the industrialized world and wages that permitted impressive levels of consumption for blue-collar workers and numerous sectors of the middle class. Few hard choices were apparent: between protectionism and free trade; between lowering the cost of labor and losing jobs to other countries; between subsidizing and/or protecting certain industries or concentrating on sectors that required no support; between seeing communities and segments of society flounder because of job loss and an eroding tax base or spending money to help them survive, without any guarantee that time or money would improve matters.

These debates, which many other nations began to face previously, were largely absent from the United States until the late 1980s. But once they became salient, the political system seemed woefully unprepared to address them. The contradictions between Congress (particularly House members, closely identified with their districts) and the executive (mindful of broader issues) were one source of problems. Another was the US emphasis on being a consumer society: what was good for the consumer was good for America because what was good for the consumer was good for everyone else. When this basic tenet lost its validity, the framework for discussing real choices and difficult tradeoffs—between regions, sectors of society, generations, interests, etc.—simply was not available.

But the economic modifications entailed social and political consequences. The changing nature of American society, and consequently of its democracy, stemming from the end of the period of rapid economic growth, also had its bearing on the workings of democratic governance in the United States. Schematically, it seems safe to say that representative democracy in the United States historically was a direct reflection of the uniformity and extension of the American middle class, in a sort of Athenian system: those who were outside that middle class, either socially, ethnically, or ideologically, did not really participate in the democracy until years after it became consolidated; but those inside—a majority of the population—enjoyed immense benefits unknown to the rest of the world. In Europe, up to a point, democratic rule was established to

solve deep political, social, and ideological conflicts; in America it was the reflection of a gradually widening consensual society that excluded important cleavages until they lost their import. A necessary, and perhaps sufficient, condition for effective democratic rule in the United States was that the middle class remain its bedrock, ensuring that the types of conflicts that democracy was called upon to reconcile never went beyond the limits established by its middle-class social base.

But the great American middle class began to shrink in recent years as many authors have shown.[1] Even before the Reagan years the middle deciles in the income scale began to receive a smaller share of national income, and the top 1%, 5%, and 10% saw their slice of the pie grow. Polls and other surveys show a similar evolution. Moreover, this trend was taking hold as another worrisome process was beginning to bite. As other writers have argued,[2] the traditionally equalizing institutions of the United States began to fade. The most draconian change came in 1973 when the military draft was abolished. During the last two decades the public school system has undergone a transformation of its own, as affluent families have moved their children to private schools or have established the equivalent of their own public education by moving to suburban middle-class enclaves, thereby excluding the poorer neighborhoods and ethnic groups. The United States became a more unequal society as policies and long-term economic trends polarized income scales and the distribution of wealth. As a consequence, American society and the American electorate began to look less like the American dream and more like some European nations and what the United States perhaps always was, but refused to acknowledge: a society deeply divided along class, color, gender, and regional lines.

The Problem of Representativeness

The ballot box stopped functioning effectively as a melting pot. Thus, in addition to the problem of accountability, a problem of representativeness in American democratic dealings arose. As long as the middle class was the overwhelming majority and the rest really did not matter, the fact that few women, African-Americans, Latinos, or even poor whites were not elected was not terribly important. The system segregated itself. As the electorate began to include groups outside the traditional middle class, it generated elected officials representing those groups. The number of elected black, Latino, and women officials has grown significantly. But the polarization and growing inequalities in American society and the increasing pluralism of the ideological spectrum occurred more quickly than did access to public office by representatives of

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1 Kevin Phillips, *The Politics of Rich and Poor* (New York: Random House, 1990); Kevin Phillips, *Boiling Point: Democrats, Republicans, and the Decline of Middle-Class Prosperity* (New York: Random House, 1993); Robert B. Reich, *The Works of Nations* (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 1991); and Robert Kutner, *The End of Laissez-Faire* (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 1991).

2 Mickey Kaus, *The End of Equality* (New York: Basic Books, 1992).

previously excluded groups. And the aspirations of those previously excluded and discriminated against rose even more rapidly. When aspirations were not met, some sectors of the electorate became disenchanted with the system, perceiving it to be unresponsive. Symptoms of social and electoral apartheid began to emerge.

Today, in many cases, those who vote, run for office, get elected, legislate, and rule are less and less a reflection of society as a whole, although they are an increasingly faithful image of the electorate. This could be named the Richard Riordan syndrome. How did the most cosmopolitan, tension-ridden, socially and racially diverse city in the United States elect in 1993 a Republican, white, over-50 male millionaire as its mayor? It didn't. The people of Los Angeles did not elect Riordan, the voters did. The people and the voters are no longer the same. According to *Los Angeles Times* exit polls, 85% of voters who cast ballots for Riordan were white. His opponent, Michael Woo, captured 86% of the black vote (blacks accounted for 12% of the turnout). Riordan did better than expected among Latinos, but only 10% of the voters were Latino.[3] Granted, before Tom Bradley, Los Angeles had never had a black (Asian, Latino, or female) mayor. Nonetheless, the contrast between the social configuration of the city and its elected officials is much more striking today than years ago. This electoral bias, or breakdown in the system, has began to churn out economic and social effects, basically through its influence on the country's fiscal situation.

The sad dynamic that this process unleashes is well-known. Since the poorer white and nonwhite, young, and strictly urban citizens increasingly do not vote or participate in politics, and because they are able to shoulder only an exceedingly light tax burden, there is a high degree of overlap between those who vote and those who pay taxes. Yet the voting sectors are those who least use or consume the goods and services funded by taxes: public education, public health, public transportation, job training, etc. Voters are older, more affluent, and tend to be white. They either have no children, send them to private schools, or have finished putting them through school. They do not use public transportation or public health, have little use for welfare or other forms of public assistance, for playgrounds, child-care centers, or public sports facilities. So they are not ecstatic over shouldering a high tax burden to pay for services they do not consume. Inevitably, these individuals want to pay less taxes for things of little direct use to them, while those who do use the public goods pay minimal taxes and do not vote in sufficient numbers to force the others to pay taxes. This further excludes the nonvoting and low-turn-out groups from the system.

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3 According to the 1990 Census of Population and Housing, 53% of the population of Los Angeles was white; 14% black; 10% Asian and Pacific Islanders; and 23% other races. Thirty-nine percent of the total population was of Hispanic origin.

In other democratic systems, where the redistributive aspects of taxation, representation, and inclusion are generally taken for granted, this would not be a problem. When citizens accept the notion that societies are made up of different classes and regions, and respect the principle of some income transfers from the richer to the poorer sectors, paying taxes for services one does not directly consume is not so conflictive. There are other perfectly decent reasons for carrying a heavy tax burden: ensuring a more equal and livable society, fewer social tensions, a cleaner environment, etc. But if citizens believe society is uniform and homogeneous to begin with (i.e., class cleavages, gender, racial, and regional disparities are not acknowledged and, in any case, the role of the state in diminishing them is not contemplated), the principle of redistribution cannot be validated, and paying taxes to finance goods or services one does not consume seems absurd.

The greater rigidity observed in continental Europe than in the United States with regard to cutting back on a higher tax burden shows this dynamic. From Sweden to Spain, the ideological drift in Europe is similar to that in the United States. But the actual implementation of policies derived from that drift is far less marked than across the Atlantic. The high tax burden carried by Europeans and the far superior and more extensive services they receive in exchange have barely budged in recent years. It is not evident that the American political system, in its current form, can manage the transition from a 'user-fee' conception of taxation to a redistributive one. This is a second major challenge facing democracy in America today.

The Problem of Intellectual Diversity

A third challenge facing democratic governance in the United States concerns the narrowness of the debate on economic and social options—a particularly paradoxical state of affairs given the end of the Cold War, the *raison d'être* for past dogmatism. The debate remained understandably narrow during the Cold War, as any deviation from the norm, any dissonance from the general chorus, was viewed as harboring sympathy for the enemy and his ideas or for ideas equidistant from both camps. European-style left-right intellectual and ideological debate has never been a fixture of American political life. But surprisingly, now that the Cold War has ended the debate still has not extended significantly beyond its previous bounds. Mainstream America (in academia, the press, business, and politics) still seems to believe that its economic and social organization is the only one in existence, that others either do things the same way, or incorrectly. The great American cultural debates on gender, abortion, religion, and race fill this void partly, but they tend to lack policy consequences. In a sense, American debates focus either on narrow policy options, leaving aside their intellectual context, or on vast cultural themes without policy implications. The free trade debate and, since NAFTA, the health care discussion are in this

sense both a novelty and a confirmation of this conundrum faced by American democracy. The only options deemed viable are so close to the status quo that they are virtually indistinguishable from it.

The free trade debate took for granted a series of tenets that are at least arguable elsewhere in the 'capitalist world': whether protectionism is good or bad, whether the market alone should decide what is produced ('microchips or potato chips'), whether government intervention in markets is intrinsically evil or, on occasion, fortunate, and whether this intervention is the norm or exceptional. From a political standpoint the debate was exemplary. From an intellectual view, with a few exceptions, it was a dismal exercise in homogeneity on issues that should provoke great disagreement and that do so elsewhere. The entire discussion of whether the American model of a market economy is the only one, the best one, or the one best suited to the United States as it is today remained marginal during the NAFTA autumn. Any recognition of the possible relevance of the structures, functioning, or ideological underpinnings of other market economies, either to the debate itself or to the future of the United States, was overwhelmed by simplistic arguments of faith regarding free trade, the magic of the market, and the supreme interest of the consumer.

The relative freshness and innovation that seemed to be springing up in American political discourse and debate during the 1992 presidential campaign, as illustrated by contributions from Robert Reich, Laura Tyson, Paul Krugman, and others, disappeared once the NAFTA debate got underway. The fact that other nations did many of the things that NAFTA critics suggested for the United States was either decried as proof of the failure of those options or as a diversion from the main discussion. Granted, the political imperative of having the agreement approved explains why intelligent people said foolish things, but it also demonstrates that when push comes to shove, the American political system seems incapable of promoting the broad, substantive debate that must take place in order for a society to make clear decisions and significant choices.

The health care issue has taken on a similar coloration. As long as serious individuals in the United States continue to argue that the single-payer, national health insurance model is not applicable to the United States, it will be clear that there is something fundamentally skewed in the country's institutional framework. Perhaps in the long run Americans will prefer their private insurance system. Or they may react to changes in the structure of the job market and to the aging of their society by choosing a Canadian-style system. But the debate, which should have started with an assessment of the available options including the choices made by other societies similar to the United States, got off on the wrong track.

Like the NAFTA discussion, the health care debate was derailed by political imperatives. Since the president perceived that the only way to pass health care reform was to present it as a

continuation and improvement of existing trends (rather than as a major change in conceptions corresponding to changing realities in the United States), the choices facing the country were narrowed to a slight transformation of the status quo. Rather than educate the public and lead it in the direction of what had to be changed, the administration tried to make the entire process as painless as possible, in terms of cost, choice, and behavioral changes. It may turn out that, faced with the option of sticking with what they know or shifting to an extraordinarily complicated system that does not significantly depart from the present situation, Americans will prefer the former route and leave President Clinton dangling with his health care plan in shambles.

Some of the reasons explaining this inability to sustain meaningful debates over substantively different options include the absence of referendary procedures, the lack of a clear majority in Congress, and the need even for freshmen congressional members to immediately devote their time and attention to reelection. Were there not a clamor for reform in the United States on issues such as health care, campaign financing, jobs, welfare, and crime, the difficulties of holding real discussions on these issues would not be so great. But the public wants change and the debates that go with it. The political system, however, seems incapable of encouraging or allowing them. This would seem today to be a third shortcoming of American democracy, which cannot be overcome or ignored through procedural artifacts or skillful political manipulation. Placing procedure over substance has been a traditional American method of addressing the difficulty of dealing with substance. It is probable that this worked when the substance was not terribly important, mainly for reasons outlined in the first two sections of this essay. Today, change is necessary and substance has become essential. Procedure alone will no longer suffice.

Accountability, representativeness, intellectual diversity: these are some of the major challenges facing democratic rule in the United States today and in the years ahead. They exist in the context of ongoing economic, social, and international problems facing the United States and other industrialized nations and of the complexities involving US relations with the nonindustrialized countries to the South. These challenges will have three direct bearings on American life in the years to come. In fact, we are already seeing some of their effects.

First, the way in which the United States is able to overcome the aforementioned problems will directly influence its capacity to negotiate abroad. Increasingly, international negotiations will be nonideological, and though not necessarily limited to economic, social, and environmental issues, in most cases they will be devoid of the flag-waving, fist-raising connotations of years gone by. The end of the Cold War means that most of the time the stakes in international negotiations will not entail issues of national salvation or danger. They will involve nuances, interests, and tradeoffs between unpleasant but minor impacts and complex options whose effects can only be discerned with a magnifying glass (i.e., close-up) or with a telescope (i.e., in the distant future).

Just in the past couple of years it has become apparent that most international issues and negotiations involving the United States have been of that nature: NAFTA, GATT, Haiti, Somalia, Bosnia, and less demonstrably, the Russian question.

Without more effective procedures for accountability in a new context (for example, avoiding the Haiti confusion, where Clinton's policy promised to be radically different from Bush's but ended up being the same) or of representation and a broader intellectual debate, it will be increasingly difficult for Washington to involve itself constructively in these types of issues and negotiations. The constant threat of having to withdraw from any form of international intervention because of unforeseen and uncontrollable domestic pressures; the difficulty of delivering on deals brokered by diplomats who then find they have no support at home; the constraints placed on policy by the virtual impossibility of holding a serious debate on policy options that are *not* a matter of life or death: these all contribute to the ongoing, painful adjustment of the United States to its role in the post–Cold War world. One might even say that just as the United States is beginning to truly feel the brunt of the economic adjustment to a new international era, it has barely begun to face the principal features of the main geopolitical adjustment it must also undergo. Its political system, which worked so well under different circumstances, does not seem up to the task.

The second adaptation American democracy must make concerns the effects on US society of the country's changed role in the world. The shift in the nation's insertion in the world economy need not be as negative or dramatic as the decline school made it out to be a few years back. But in view of current Japanese and European difficulties, neither should it be as irrelevant as the new heralds of 'America is back' allege. The transformation is much more long-range in nature; it began years ago and will continue for some time to come. The United States no longer dominates the world economy, and its share in manufacturing, services, exports, and finance will continue to shrink, albeit more slowly than in the past. If American society benefited from its prior commanding position, then it will surely feel the loss. Among the consequences of these changes, as we mentioned, is a polarization of US society: the skills, education, and capital needed to generate high incomes at the end of the century are different and less well spread out than those necessary and available at mid-century. Not only must the United States then be affected by the smaller role it plays in the world economy, but the effects of the changes in the world economy on American society are also having their bearing.

The issue is eminently political. There is very little the United States can do to stymie or revert the transformations currently underway; they are part of deep trends that no one nation or economy can alter. What can be modified is the way American society responds to the changes, softening, reorienting, and absorbing their impact. That is what the political system, and democratic governance in particular, is for. The previously described impediments to an updated

performance of democracy in the United States are seemingly making it more difficult for the country to come to terms with the impact of world trends on American society. If those impediments are not overcome, political accommodation to economic and social changes will be all the more painful.

A third intersection between the obstacles confronting representative democracy in the United States and the country's future involves the question of so-called intermestic issues. Increasingly, many of the chief issues the United States will be forced to address in the future will be simultaneously domestic and foreign. Jobs, immigration, drugs, and the environment are matters that are both internal and external in nature, origins, and implications. The traditional format for dealing with domestic matters, or the classical procedures constructed for handling foreign affairs, are proving deficient for this type of issues and will prove more so in the future. Immigration cannot be dealt with as a foreign policy question because it directly affects the daily lives of millions of Americans. But it is unmanageable as a purely internal affair, to the extent that any American decision on immigration has an enormous impact on countries such as Mexico, Haiti, Cuba, and others, and in view of the fact that the origins of the problem (if it is one) can only be found and addressed in the migration-generating nations. The same is true of most other intermestic issues.

It will be increasingly difficult for the United States to confront these matters with its present political institutions. The debates they entail, the effects they generate, the tradeoffs they imply, and the constituencies and coalitions that must be built to craft coalitions to devise and implement policy all require profound changes in American politics and institutions. American pragmatism and flexibility have succeeded in the past. When the country had to adapt to new circumstances in order to move forward, it has generally done so, however long it may have taken. Political change is probably more cumbersome for the United States than change in other realms; the proof lies in the immutability of American political structures. But change there will have to be. Without it, democracy in America will not thrive as it enters its third century.

Comments by Robert Dahl

I agree with the general thrust of Professor Castañeda's argument. Among citizens of the United States there has been a marked increase since the 1960s—triggered off by the Vietnam War and Watergate—in cynicism, skepticism, and distrust toward elected politicians, Congress, the presidency, political parties, and the ability of people in political life to solve problems of concern to many or even most citizens. The evidence of widespread disaffection and decline of trust in and respect for politics and politicians is too convincing to be denied.[1]

That this is a marked and genuine change in American political life is undeniable. However, it is much more difficult to say whether some of the other aspects of current politics in the United States remarked on by Professor Castañeda are *changes* or have been present all along.

To illustrate the problem, I want first to suggest several qualifications that I would make in Professor Castañeda's interpretation, second, to offer an alternative but not incompatible interpretation, and third, to raise a troublesome question for both of us.

I. A Few Qualifications

1. *The consequences of divided government.* American constitutional separation of powers has numerous consequences, some in my view undesirable. One is the possibility of divided government, the frequency of which has increased. In fact, since World War II, divided government has been the norm, not the exception. From 1947 to 1990 the president and both houses of Congress have been of the same party only about one-third of the time. But it is unclear whether divided government leads to deadlock, paralysis, or inertia above and beyond what may already be a result of separation of powers.

David Mayhew has shown that the number of major laws enacted was no lower on average in periods of divided government than in periods of unified government. Nor have major congressional investigations been fewer in periods of divided government.[2]

Paul Peterson and Jay Greene, after systematically examining "the degree of conflict displayed in the questioning of witnesses testifying before congressional committees and

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1 See, for example, the survey data in Burns W. Roper, "Democracy in America: How Are We Doing?" *The Public Perspective, A Roper Center Review of Public Opinion and Polling* (March/April 1994), pp. 3–5.

2 David Mayhew, *Divided We Govern: Party Control, Lawmaking, and Investigations, 1946–1990* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1991).

subcommittees" from 1947 to 1990 found "little evidence that divided government by itself adds to political controversy."[3]

Whether American-style separation of powers, with the president and each house of Congress elected by and responsive to different constituencies, makes effective and responsible government more difficult than in countries with more unified parliamentary systems is another question. I think it does, but comparative analysis is extremely difficult and rather inconclusive.

2. *Promises and performance.* Whether elected officials do not attempt to carry out the policies on which they campaign, as Professor Castañeda suggests, seems to me doubtful. In fact, elected officials are subject to two contradictory judgments: that they don't pay attention to public opinion, and that they pay too much attention to it. The second strikes me as closer to the truth than the first. My impression is that elected officials do in fact attempt to carry out most of their salient campaign pledges but are often prevented from doing so by (a) the inability to form a legislative coalition in favor of the policy and (b) unforeseen changes in circumstances.

3. *Puzzles about turnout in elections.* Whether the 'waning' of accountability contributes to low levels of voter turnout is problematical. There are, in fact, two different phenomena in need of explanation. Both are persisting puzzles to American political scientists, and the subject of considerable controversy. One puzzle is why Americans throughout this century have been turning out in national elections at a much lower level than citizens in the older democracies with the exception of Switzerland. There is nothing new about this comparatively low level of electoral participation. The problem, then, is to explain why participation remained low *long before the recent period of distrust in politics and politicians.* The other puzzle is why turnout began *declining* in the 1960s. Although this decline was slightly reversed in 1992, the question remains.

(i) Common sense and conventional wisdom explain the *historically low level of turnout* by attributing it to the supposed 'fact' that Americans are less interested in politics or more alienated than citizens in other democracies. But this supposed 'fact' has been strongly contested by several writers, including Raymond Wolfinger, who points out that common sense and conventional wisdom are in this case quite wrong. A considerable body of survey data shows pretty convincingly that even though Americans were turning out for elections at lower levels, they were *not* less interested in politics or otherwise more alienated from politics than people in other democratic countries. Indeed, cross-national surveys revealed that Americans ranked higher than people in most, or in some cases all, other democratic countries in

their interest in politics;

the frequency with which they discussed politics;

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3 "Why Presidential Congressional Conflict is Dwindling," paper prepared for the annual meeting of the American Political Science Association (Chicago, September 1992).

working for a party or a candidate during an election;

the strength of their partisan attachments;

their sense of political efficacy;

their pride in American political institutions;

their satisfaction with their government.[4]

To be sure, even before the recent growth of distrust a larger percentage of people in the United States than in some European countries said that they did not trust the national government to do what is right most or all of the time. Yet one of the highest rates of turnout in all democratic countries was in Italy, where the percentage who distrusted their government was even higher than in the United States.

Thus we cannot account for the lower turnout among Americans in national elections by attributing it to psychological characteristics and attitudes such as lower interest or greater alienation from political life. We face "The Puzzle," as Verba, Nie, and Kim called it in 1978.[5] If, because of higher average education, interest, and other factors that influence motivations to vote, American citizens *should* vote *more not less* than people in other democracies, why don't they?

I believe that three structural features may account for much of the difference. (a) Registering to vote in national elections has been left to the states; in general, it is more difficult to register to vote in the United States than in any other democratic country. One writer concludes that "if the United States adopted automatic registration, or something similar, turnout might be increased by 14%."[6] Because the 'voter-motor' bill passed by Congress last year should reduce many of the obstacles to registration, we shall soon see how much of a difference registration requirements have made in the past.

(b) A second factor may be the absence in the United States of a socialist or working class party that mobilizes the less informed or less educated citizens.[7] Voting in the United States is highly correlated with education, which in tum is highly correlated with socioeconomic class.[8] The extra effort required to mobilize potential voters with less education and socioeconomic status has

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4 Many of the cross-national surveys were taken before the recent declines and therefore do not reflect the recent changes. More recent polls would, of course, show significant declines in the last three items. It is rather amazing, however, that even in 1992 85% of Americans polled agreed that "whatever its faults, the US still has the best government in the world." Polls reported in *The Public Perspective* (May/June 1992), pp. 8–9.

5 Sidney Verba, Norman H. Nie, and Jae-on Kim, *Participation and Political Equality: A Seven-Nation Comparison* (Cambridge, Eng.; New York: Cambridge University Press, 1978).

6 G. Bingham Powell, Jr., "American Turnout in Comparative Perspective," *American Political Science Review* 80 (March 1986), pp. 17–43.

7 This hypothesis was suggested by Sidney Verba and Norman Nie in *Participation in America: Political Democracy and Social Equality* (New York: Harper and Row, 1972).

8 Raymond E. Wolfinger and Steven J. Rosenstone, *Who Votes?* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1980).

been much more neglected in the United States than elsewhere, particularly since the decline and disappearance of the old-fashioned, urban Democratic machines.

(c) A winner-take-all voting system may also reduce turnout as compared with the effects of the proportional representation (PR) systems in most European democracies.[9]

It seems possible that taken together these three structural differences may account for a substantial part of the historically lower levels of voting in the United States than in most other democratic countries.

(ii) The phenomenon of *declining turnout* from the 1960s to 1992, when it went up slightly, is also not easy to explain. A decade ago attempts to account for the decline were a subject of heated controversy in the pages of the *American Political Science Review,* and the results of that debate were, it seemed, rather inconclusive. A number of quite persuasive explanations were offered, and all were shot down because either the evidence or the methodology was unsatisfactory:

Explanation: Voting depends on the strength of the sense of *citizen duty* among voters, and the sense of citizen duty has declined. Explanation rejected: there was no evidence of a decline in the sense of citizen duty during the previous decades.[10]

Explanation: Voting depends on the sense of *personal efficacy,* which has declined. Explanation rejected: there was no evidence that personal efficacy had actually declined.[11]

Explanation: Voting depends on *interest* in politics, and interest in politics has declined. Explanation rejected: there was no evidence that interest in politics had declined.[12]

Explanation: The decline in voting is explained by the marked decline since the mid-60s in *trust in government.* Explanation rejected: trust in government is so weakly related to political participation that its decline cannot account for the decline in voting.[13]

Explanation: The strength of *party identification* is highly related to voting, party identification has declined, and the decline is sufficient to account for 25 to 30% of the decline in turnout

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9 Blais and Carty, "Does PR foster turnout?" *European Journal of Political Research* (1990). It follows that PR would also increase turnout in Britain, Canada, New Zealand, and Australia, where the other two factors are, presumably, sufficient to account for the higher levels than in the United States. In 1993 New Zealand voters adopted by referendum a mixed German style system—half the seats to be allotted by PR and half, as before, in single member districts with plurality voting. Levels of voting in New Zealand were already so high, however, that the effects of PR on turnout will be slight.

10 Warren E. Miller, Arthur H. Miller, and Edward J. Schneider, *American National Election Studies Data Sourcebook, 1952–1978* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1980), p. 288.

11 Ibid.

12 Ibid., p. 307; and Carol A. Cassel and Robert C. Luskin, "Simple Explanations of Turnout Decline," *American Political Science Review* 82 (December 1988), pp. 1321–30.

13 Paul R. Abramson and John H. Aldrich, "The Decline of Electoral Participation in America," *American Political Science Review* 76 (1982), pp. 502–21, at p. 504.

in presidential elections (and even more in congressional elections). Explanation rejected: The methodology employed was badly flawed and the explanation is unsatisfactory.[14]

Explanation: Voting is highly associated with beliefs in *government responsiveness.* Thus people who disagree with the statement "I don't think public officials care much what people like me think" are more likely to vote. Belief in government responsiveness has definitely declined, and that decline would account for about one-third of the decline in turnout. Explanation rejected: The methodology is so flawed that the explanation remains unproved.[15]

Explanation: Voting is related to a *concern* with which party will win the election; concern has declined; and this decline accounts for the decline in turnout. Explanation rejected: The relation between concern and turnout is moderate, the decline in concern is moderate, and thus it may account for only one-fifth to one-quarter of the decline in turnout. In short, most of the decline is unexplained by this hypothesis.[16]

Explanation: Mobility is inversely related to voting, and mobility has increased. Explanation rejected: The relation between the increase in mobility and the decline in turnout is extremely weak, accounting for only 0.5% to 10% of the decline in non-Southern turnout.[17]

The rather aseptic conclusion to these controversies arrived at by one pair in the debate is that "most of the decline in turnout is still unexplained, and we shall have to do some hard thinking, then cast a wider net, to explain substantially more."[18]

II. Another Interpretation

I would be inclined to offer another interpretation that would explain at least some of the phenomena to which Professor Castañeda refers. My interpretation is not inconsistent with his. It is, rather, an alternative way of trying to understand the changes in the American political system that seem to have occurred in the last twenty years or so.[19]

First, government policies are made in response to a greater number and variety of conflicting and substantially independent interest groups. However, political institutions for encouraging these conflicting interest groups to negotiate with one another and with political

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[14] Ibid., pp. 507, 510. And see their "Reply to Hill and Cassel," *American Political Science Review* 78 (1984), pp. 792–94. The critique of their argument is by Cassel and Luskin (1988), *supra.*

[15] Abramson and Aldrich (1982), Table 3 and p. 512. The critique is by Cassel and Luskin (1988), p. 512.

[16] Ferejohn and Fiorina (1979). The critique is by Abramson and Aldrich (1982).

[17] David P. Hill and Carol A. Cassel, *American Political Science Review* 77 (1983), pp. 1011–12, at p. 1011. The critique is by Abramson and Aldrich (1984), p. 793.

[18] Cassel and Luskin (1988), p. 1327.

[19] This section is adapted from my *The New American Political (Dis)Order: An Essay* (Berkeley: Institute of Governmental Studies Press, University of California, Berkeley, 1994).

actors who are more representative of the general public, in search of mutually beneficial policies, are in some important respects weaker than before. One feature of the new order, then, is more *fragmentation* and less *integration.* Second, although public opinion more often directly influences the policies, strategies, tactics, and speech of political leaders, institutions for insuring that the opinions serving as the views of 'the public' are either representative or well considered have not yet been created. The *plebiscitary* aspect of American political life has grown, one might say, without a corresponding improvement in its *representative* and *deliberative* aspects.

Although the new order is continuous with the old, its two features, taken together, produce something substantially different from the order to which we Americans had grown accustomed.

The political scientist Hugh Heclo emphasizes the difference between the political world Americans live in today and that of thirty years ago. Back then the American political world was "a regime of establishments." There was a congressional establishment, a foreign policy establishment, a labor establishment, a Black establishment, a Social Security establishment, a Democratic party establishment, and so on. The regime that has replaced the old world of establishments is "much more open, fragmented, self-critical, nondeferential, and fluid in its attachments." The new regime is everywhere. Its main features "have been increasingly true of Congress internally, of presidential relations with Congress, of interest groups and their coalitions, of parties, political campaigns, and of voters reactions to this passing parade."[20]

Meanwhile, the capacity of our political parties to integrate diverse interests has dramatically declined. Parties can help to compose differences in demands at two levels: in nominations and elections (an unusually lengthy process in the United States) and at the policy-making level, particularly within the legislature and between legislature and executive. Authorities on political parties have long observed that the stronger the party organizations are in elections and legislatures, the weaker is the influence of interest groups, and conversely. (Causation probably runs both ways.) In nominating candidates and enacting legislation American parties have always tended to be somewhat less centralized and cohesive than European parties. But during the last several decades, at the *electoral* level they have become more fragmented than ever before. As Alan Ehrenhalt has observed, local, state, and national party organizations have dissolved into loosely attached collections of individual political entrepreneurs who have their own organizations, agendas, and finances. The result is precisely what many political activists and entrepreneurs of the last two decades intended: a weakening in the power of party leaders and an increase in their own power.

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20 Hugo Heclo, "The Emerging Regime" in *Remaking American Politics*, ed. Richard A. Harris and Sidney M. Milkis (Boulder: Westview Press, 1989), pp. 289–320, at pp. 309–10.

One cause for the dissolution of parties and for an increase in fragmentation and political entrepreneurship is the need for elected officials to raise money to cover the staggering rise in the costs of campaigns. This makes them less dependent on their party organizations and more dependent on making themselves attractive to individuals and Political Action Committees (PACs) with highly particularistic interests.

The second main feature of the new order—an increased influence in direct communication between citizens and leaders without the corresponding development of institutions for ensuring representativeness and deliberation—shows up in several ways. As a number of observers have pointed out, organizations, institutions, and groups that once served as intermediaries between political leaders and citizens have grown markedly weaker. As the influence of intermediary strata has lessened, relations between political leaders and voters have become more direct than they once were.

Plebiscitary politics acquired novel importance during the presidential campaign of 1992. Taken together, the role of Larry King and other talk-show hosts, the influence on candidates of immediate responses to these shows by their listeners, the rapid shifts in campaign tactics designed to adapt to perceived changes in public opinion, the use of focus groups to reshape the content and emphasis of messages from the candidates, and the inventive use of 'national town meetings' by Bill Clinton and Ross Perot—all epitomized plebiscitary politics in action. That a stronger plebiscitary element is likely to be a permanent part of the American political order is indicated by President Clinton's immediate response to the unexpected public outcry to his first two candidates for the post of Attorney General, his unwillingness to take on the task of explaining significant differences between the two, and his continued use as president of the 'town hall' format he adopted during his campaign.

Let me mention what I think are several causes of this new order. The increase in the number and variety of interest groups results both from the enhanced effectiveness of direct mail solicitation and from broad changes in attitudes and concerns that have enabled existing organizations to expand and newer ones to form around issues of women, the environment, education, the elderly, etc. Another cause is the ever increasing complexity of public policies. Among other things this encourages the growth of experts and staffs, in Congress and elsewhere.

The consequences include the sheer incomprehensibility to most people of what goes on in political life, the extraordinary difficulty of producing coherent national policies, and great difficulties, as Professor Castañeda rightly emphasizes, in the accountability of elected and nonelected officials to voters and elections. Incomprehensibility, incoherent policies, and an increased sense of unaccountability, in tum, drive the search for simple—indeed simplistic—and

ultimately ineffective solutions, of which, in my view, term limits and the balanced budget amendment are prime examples.

III. A Question

I conclude with this troublesome question: Are we witnessing a general decline in Western democracies of (1) confidence in the capacity of the government to solve major problems, and (2) willingness to raise taxes, or even maintain them at present levels, in order to fund social programs and redistributive policies?

Consider health insurance. In many other democratic countries their present health insurance programs were completed during a lengthy period when increasing taxes for such purposes was politically feasible. To take the extreme case, in Sweden the public sector's share of GNP rose from 44% in 1970 to 62% in 1980 and 70% in 1992. Meanwhile, however, the economy has turned down and unemployment has risen, as it has in much of Europe. And the rapid rise in taxes as a percent of GDP has produced a counter movement. For example, the long uninterrupted dominance of social democratic govemments in the Scandinavian countries has given way to 'bourgeois' coalitions. New governments have sought to cut back on social expenditures, including spending on health. Could the expansive health programs of these countries be enacted today?

However that may be, in the United States the era in which raising taxes was a feasible option seems to have passed. One could argue that when Truman proposed a national health plan in 1948, an increase in taxes to cover its costs might have been politically feasible. His health plan was not defeated because of widespread public resistance to increased taxes. It was defeated because of the numerous points of veto in the American political system and the influence these offered to the medical association and the insurance companies. Their opposition regularly resulted in the early death of proposals for health reform.[21]

In 1992 Clinton succeeded in placing health care reform on the active political agenda, always a first crucial step in bringing about major changes. But the Clinton administration evidently ruled out the single payer plan because it would require raising taxes to cover the large outlays required for universal coverage.[22] Raising taxes, except in disguised form, has become politically

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21 I have profited from an unpublished paper by Sven Steinmo and Jon Watts, "It's the Institutions, Stupid! Why the United States Can't Pass Comprehensive Health Care Reform" (1994).

22 Robert J. Brand, "Should We Support Clinton's Plan?" *Dissent* (Spring, 1994), pp. 196–200. "First, the president made a simple, tactical decision that he was unwilling to risk Democratic control of the Congress and the White House in 1996 by proposing a health care reform system that would require hundreds of billions of dollars in new taxes," p. 198.

impossible. I cannot predict how long this limit on new policies may remain but it is hard for me to see when and how the attitudes of citizens and elected politicians about taxes will change.

It may be, then, that in the United States major health reform along the lines of other democratic countries was first denied to Americans because structural features of our political system gave undue influence to several strategically placed and well-financed organized interests, representing small minorities of the American people. And it may now be denied, not simply because of the continuing influence of these minorities—though that is not a trivial factor—but also because political leaders now have perfectly realistic fears that a majority of voters will punish them if they overtly raise taxes.

Perhaps, then, for these reasons the window of opportunity for comprehensive health reform has never been open as wide in this country as it once was in other countries.