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GOVERNANCE AND THE AMERICAN PRESIDENCY

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My subject is the American presidency. I will mention some specific presidents, but my main concern is not with individual personalities. It is rather with the nature and attributes of the *office* of the president: its place in American constitutional architecture, its operational functions in the machinery of American governance, and its relation to American political culture—in particular, the standing of the office in the public’s eye and its relation to the organs of the media as they have evolved over the last two and one half centuries.

A near perfect storm of converging forces, some with deep roots in past American experience, some born of more recent history, has converged to wallop the American political system with cyclonic energy in the first years of the present century. They include the changing methods of recruiting and electing candidates for office, especially the presidency; the increasing scale, complexity, impersonality, and volatility of a postindustrial economy and the chronically unmet need for instruments of governance with authority and agility commensurate

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with those attributes; the speed and phenomenal fragmentation of modern communication technologies; the decay of traditional institutions, public as well as private, conspicuously including political parties; and the intersection of the otherwise benign American values of freedom of speech, freedom of choice, physical and social mobility, and homophily that has spawned a culture of distrust that pervades virtually every aspect of modern American life.

Taken together, those developments have enormously stressed the systems and practices of governance that served the public interest reasonably well in the republic's first two centuries. Whether those legacy institutions and behaviors will prove sufficiently resilient to survive the new century's upheavals is a distressingly open question. So too is the fate of the values—another name for shared premises and even shared mythologies—that have sustained the American experiment in democracy since the nation's birth.

Five days a week, I think that everything that has happened in the last year or so is within the normal range of American politics. And two days a week I think, "This must have been how it felt in the final years of the Roman Republic." —Niall Ferguson

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The nation may have been conceived in 1776, but it was truly born only with the adoption of the Constitution in 1788. In particular, the constitutional character of the presidential office—that is, the method of electing the president, and the powers both granted and denied to the executive branch—was defined by the men who drafted the Constitution in Philadelphia in the summer of 1787. Its fundamental attributes remain to this day deeply indebted to their deliberations, for better or worse.

The presidency's place in the actual operations of the American system of governance, however, is another matter, because in the 230 years

since the Constitution was framed, that system has evolved—in many ways dramatically—along with the society and the economy in which it is embedded. So too have the citizenry's conceptions of the president's role and their expectations of the scope and scale of the president's responsibilities.

The tension between the essentially static constitutional character of the presidency and the manifestly dynamic society, economy, and culture in which it is embedded—and especially the technologies, even more especially the communication technologies, that have emerged over the last century—will be the main focus of this chapter.

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Let's begin with some numbers.

There have been forty-five presidencies, but only forty-four presidents, thanks to the peculiar way that Grover Cleveland's two nonconsecutive terms (1885–1889 and 1893–1897) are counted. All forty-five have been men. All but two have been white Protestants. (The exceptions are the Roman Catholic John F. Kennedy and the African American Barack Obama.) Only seventeen, barely a third of all presidents, have been elected to second terms, which might serve to remind that even the pomp of power awaits the inevitable hour, and perhaps to suggest something distinctive about stability and consistency in American governance.

Among US presidents, twenty-six were trained as lawyers, eighteen previously served in the House of Representatives, seventeen previously served as governors, sixteen previously served as senators, fourteen previously served as vice president, and nine had been generals. Just three—and not a particularly happy three, I'm afraid—could be described as having had careers as “businessmen”: Herbert Hoover, Jimmy Carter, and Donald J. Trump.

Two states are tied for having produced the most presidents, at seven each: New York (from Martin Van Buren to Donald Trump) and Ohio (the first was a Virginia transplant, William Henry Harrison, and the

last was Warren G. Harding). That Ohio, a midsize state, has had such a prominent place in president-providing is suggestive of the quirks and caprices that have long characterized political career trajectories in a society that has no deeply entrenched governing class. At one time, the Ohio presidential phenomenon inspired a revision of Shakespeare's dictum that "Some are born great, some achieve greatness, and some have greatness thrust upon them" to read that "Some are born great, some achieve greatness, and some come from Ohio."

Virginia is the next most presidentially prolific state with five (none since John Tyler), and then Massachusetts with four (John F. Kennedy was the last). Six have come from the trans-Mississippi West, starting with California's Herbert Hoover, and five more since WWII, reflecting the phenomenal energy and rising demographic, economic, and political prominence of the Western region since the mid-twentieth century—two Bushes and Lyndon Johnson from Texas, and Richard Nixon and Ronald Reagan from California.

Thanks to the peculiarities of the Electoral College (about which more below), five presidents have been elected without popular majorities—John Quincy Adams in 1824, Rutherford B. Hayes in 1876, Benjamin Harrison in 1888, George W. Bush in 2000, and Donald Trump in 2016.

Eight have died in office, four of them assassinated (Lincoln, Garfield, McKinley, and Kennedy). Two have been impeached (Andrew Johnson and Bill Clinton), and one (Richard Nixon) has resigned.

There have been two father-son dynasties (John and John Quincy Adams and Bushes 41 and 43) and one grandfather-grandson combination (William Henry and Benjamin Harrison).

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But of all those numbers, here's the single numeric datum that is most significant: the president is just one of the 536 federally elected officials in Washington, DC. (For these purposes I am treating the president and vice president as a single, unified political unit.) It's worth repeating that the president is but one of 536 elected officials in Washington, DC. The

others, of course, are the 100 members of the Senate and the 435 members of the House of Representatives.

That legendary chronicler of several twentieth-century presidential elections, Theodore White, once captured the essence of that 1-to-535 ratio when he wrote that “the supreme duty of the President is to protect us from each other’s Congressmen.”¹ White’s characteristically facile quip in fact points to some profound and persistently problematic attributes of the presidency—indeed, problems with the entire American political structure and system.

Those framers in Philadelphia more than two centuries ago were not only revolutionaries who had recently fought and won the War of Independence. They were also intellectual revolutionaries and serious political innovators. When they were drafting the Constitution, among other accomplishments, they essentially *invented* the presidency. No real precedent for the office had existed in the British colonies. Colonial executive power did not lie in the hands of an elected official, but in those of a royally appointed (and usually royally resented) governor. Nor was there any precedent in the Articles of Confederation that formed the original governing charter for the new nation. The Articles, in fact, made no provision for an executive office of any kind.

So those Founding Fathers got quite creative at Independence Hall in that Philadelphia summer. Acknowledging the weaknesses of the Articles of Confederation, they wanted an effective executive. But, remembering the abuses of those much-disliked royal governors, and ferociously opposed to anything that even faintly resembled monarchical power, they also feared the concentration of executive authority. How to strike the balance?

The result was the famous (or infamous) system of “checks and balances” that American students learn about (or once upon a time learned about) in high school civics classes. Power was deliberately dispersed and divided; lines of authority were purposely plotted to intersect at multiple points. The Framers conferred on the president the power to make treaties and to staff and manage the offices of the executive branch—and simultaneously hedged that power by requiring the advice

and consent of the Senate on treaties as well as on high-level executive appointments. (Executive appointments often require congressional confirmation down to the fifth level of authority in many cabinet departments. The United States consequently has a far larger class of political appointees and a far smaller class of professional civil servants than most other advanced democracies, and hence—compared, for example, with France—less technical expertise in government and more politically driven inconsistency of policy as well.) Conversely, the Framers conferred some legislative power on the president in the form of the veto. And they mixed both presidential and congressional prerogative into the judiciary branch by making the president responsible for nominating persons to the federal judiciary, with actual appointment subject to final confirmation by the Senate.

And they concocted the contraption known as the Electoral College.

* * *

The delegate to the Constitutional Convention who advocated most strongly for a robust executive was James Wilson. He had immigrated to Pennsylvania from Scotland in the 1760s, bringing with him a deep immersion in the ideas of the so-called Scottish Enlightenment, among whose most prominent figures were David Hume and Adam Smith. Wilson and his colleague James Madison are often bracketed as the two most sophisticated political theorists at the convention. And Wilson and Alexander Hamilton were the foremost proponents of what Hamilton called “an energetic executive.”

Here’s what Hamilton had to say about executive energy in *Federalist* no. 70:

A feeble executive implies a feeble execution of the government. A feeble execution is but another phrase for a bad execution: And a government ill executed, whatever it may be in theory, must be in practice a bad government.²

Most notably, Wilson wanted direct popular election of the president—and for good reason. In his view, the presidency was the sole

locus in the entire political system where responsibility for the nation as a whole resided—as distinguished from the parochial interests of representatives from local congressional districts or senators from individual states.

Wilson later reflected that no part of Constitution-making was more perplexing than the mode of choosing the president. But his conception of the presidency—which I will call “plebiscitarian,” that is, an office to which persons should be elected directly by the entire citizenry, and in which they should be directly beholden to the national at-large electorate—was not to be, at least not for roughly the first century and a half of nationhood. Instead, we got the decidedly odd and distinctly American apparatus of the Electoral College.

The Electoral College is a vestigial votive offering to federalism, an antique artifact crafted in the Philadelphia compromise-factory of constitutional drafting. It remains to this day a mystifying piece of political machinery, no less perplexing to Americans themselves than it is to foreign observers (just try explaining it to an inquisitive foreign visitor). And it is but one of several reminders of how the Founders both longed for and feared meaningful executive power—and of how they regarded the voice of the people with both reverence and dread. But—just to look ahead for a moment—James Wilson’s aspiration for a more plebiscitarian presidency would in the fullness of time get a kind of second wind.

But back to the eighteenth century, and to the Constitution crafted at Independence Hall. Some further numbers can serve to make a cardinal point. Article I of the Constitution addresses the role of the legislative branch. It comprises fifty-one paragraphs. No less significantly, it contains language about “Powers Denied to the Government,” suggesting an elision in the Founders’ minds between “government” and “legislature.”

Article II addresses the executive branch. It contains just thirteen paragraphs, eight of which lay out the mechanisms for electing the president and four of which detail his “powers.” One provides for his impeachment.

The asymmetry of those numbers—fifty-one paragraphs devoted to the legislature and just thirteen to the executive—strongly suggests that

the Framers conceived of the president as largely the creature of the legislature. He was to be a political agent with some autonomy, to be sure, and he was to inhabit something quite different from a parliamentary system, where the head of the majority party in the legislature is also the head of government. But he was intended to be an actor who, though independently elected, would in practice be substantially subordinated to the will of the legislative branch.

That interpretation of the Founders' intent is reinforced when we recollect that down to the 1830s presidential candidates were chosen by congressional caucuses. Following the disappearance and presumed murder in upstate New York of William Morgan, an outspoken opponent of Freemasonry, the newly formed and short-lived Anti-Masonic Party convened what is generally regarded as the first presidential nominating convention in Baltimore in 1832. It proposed a distinguished Virginian and former US attorney general, William Wirt, for the presidency. Other parties soon followed suit. Nominating conventions, composed of delegates drawn not just from the membership of Congress but from the broader electorate, signaled the rise of mass democracy in the Jacksonian era. They heralded a growing demand for more popular access to the political system in general and to the presidential nominating process in particular. The fact that the first party to hold a convention was animated by deep suspicion of the presumably elitist and secretive Freemasons provides an early clue as to the strength of "populist" sentiment in American political culture. It is no coincidence that the president most conspicuously associated with the populist strain in American politics was Andrew Jackson, the victor over both Wirt and Henry Clay, the "National Republican" candidate, in 1832.

The Jacksonian era is rightly regarded as the *fons et origo* of several popularizing strains in American political culture that have persisted and, indeed, amplified over the course of American history—from the preference for leadership molded from common clay and the concomitant suspicion of elites to the privileging of local over central power. Those nominating conventions born in the Jacksonian era also had a long, though ultimately limited, life span. They continued to play a role

in choosing presidential candidates for just over a century after 1832. The last convention that went to a second ballot was the Democratic convention that nominated Adlai Stevenson in 1952. Since then, and especially since 1968, Americans have dwelled in a different political landscape, where the conventions have become largely superfluous or redundant infomercials with no real decision-making consequence.

So the presidential system born in the eighteenth century persisted more or less intact well into the subsequent century. It may well be the case that the average college student of American history today could name more prominent congressional figures than presidents from the nineteenth century. Yes, many could cite Jefferson, Jackson, and Lincoln—but Millard Fillmore, Franklin Pierce, James Buchanan, Chester Arthur, Benjamin Harrison, and many others are not names that reside prominently in core memory. But I'll bet that lots of students would recognize the names of nineteenth-century congressional grandees like Daniel Webster, John C. Calhoun, Henry Clay, Stephen A. Douglas, Charles Sumner, Thaddeus Stevens, or Thomas B. "Czar" Reed.

In any case, for better or worse, Congress remained both in fact and in popular perception the seat and solar plexus of American governance at the federal level well into the nineteenth century.

As John Hamre has observed, our problems and challenges, both domestically and globally, are mainly horizontal, crossing all sort of lines. But our organizations, our governance is vertical.

—Sam Nunn

But toward the end of that century, several observers began to wonder if the legacy constitutional relation between Congress and president was not obsolescing. As America's industrial revolution gathered phenomenal momentum and commerce and communication expanded to continental scale, as people moved in droves from countryside to densely packed cities, as immigrants came ashore in ever-larger waves, the felt need for a Hamiltonian "energetic executive" grew increasingly

acute. Among the earliest proponents of radically rethinking the American governmental system was a young graduate student at Johns Hopkins University. In 1885 he published his doctoral dissertation under the title “Congressional Government.” It remains to this day one of the most trenchant treatises ever written about American political institutions.

That bright young graduate student was Thomas Woodrow Wilson. He was, of course, destined some three decades later to become the twenty-eighth president of the United States.

Wilson intended his title, “Congressional Government,” to be understood as ironic, even oxymoronic. His central argument was that Congress was inherently—structurally—incapable of anything resembling coherent, effective government. As he wrote of the US Congress:

Nobody stands sponsor for the policy of the government. A dozen men originate it; a dozen compromises twist and alter it; a dozen offices whose names are scarcely known out of Washington put it into execution . . . [yielding] the extraordinary fact that the utterances of the Press have greater weight and are accorded greater credit, though the Press speaks entirely without authority, than the utterances of Congress, though Congress possesses all authority. . . . Policy cannot be either prompt or straightforward when it must serve many masters. It must either equivocate, or hesitate, or fail altogether. [The] division of authority and concealment of responsibility are calculated to subject the government to a very distressing paralysis.³

You have to pinch yourself to remember that those words were written not in 2017 but 132 years ago, in 1885.

Wilson’s voice was an early one in a chorus of similar commentary over the next few decades, culminating in works like Herbert Croly’s *The Promise of American Life* (1909), which notably advocated “Hamiltonian means to Jeffersonian ends,” and Walter Lippmann’s *Drift and Mastery* (1914), which is subtitled, tellingly enough, “An Attempt to Diagnose

the Current Unrest.” Like Wilson, Croly, Lippmann, and many others in that so-called Progressive Era had come to believe that Congress was by its very nature too fragmented, too unaccountable, its powers too dispersed and occluded from public view, its constitutional character too deeply rooted in localism and parochial interests, to be capable of coherent governance on a national scale. All that might have been tolerable in the republic’s youth, Croly and Lippmann argued. They noted that the Constitution was drafted when the United States was a nation of farmers, and when but four million people inhabited a territory about one-tenth the size of the twentieth-century United States. But the chronic disarticulation and lamentable dysfunction of Congress now that the United States was a big, mature, complex, urbanized, increasingly networked and interdependent industrial society of nearly one hundred million increasingly diverse people, with the capacity to assert its influence on a global scale, was both an embarrassment and a danger.

But the presidency—there, thought Wilson and Croly and Lippmann and Theodore Roosevelt and many others of their generation—the presidency was the fulcrum that, if managed with creativity, muscle, and art, could be made to serve the larger interests of this big, continentally scaled, ambitious, energetic society.

So when he assumed the presidency in 1913, Wilson represented both a newly emerging popular conception of the president’s role and a new style of presidential leadership. Theodore Roosevelt had prefigured these changes, but Wilson significantly consolidated and advanced them. As he said, “The President is at liberty, in law and in conscience, to be as big a man as he possibly can.”⁴

That statement was more aspirational than descriptive in Wilson’s day, but it nonetheless set the compass headings for almost all future presidents. Between them, Theodore Roosevelt and Woodrow Wilson introduced two significant innovations to the presidency.

The first is evident in the fact that with Roosevelt we have the first publicized slogan—the Square Deal—that described a comprehensive, coherent policy program for which the president was to stand as champion. No such thing existed before the twentieth century. But Americans

have long since become accustomed to—indeed, have come to expect—presidentially sponsored policy packages, along with their headline slogans—from Theodore Roosevelt’s Square Deal, to Woodrow Wilson’s New Freedom, FDR’s New Deal, Harry Truman’s Fair Deal, JFK’s New Frontier, Lyndon Johnson’s Great Society, and Donald Trump’s Make America Great Again.

That succession of presidential programs bespeaks the felt need in modern American society for the type of coordinated, articulated, national policies for which the lone national political officer can be held accountable. But of course, while the president proposes, Congress disposes, and it has many, many avenues of disposal. Here is where constitutional realities and the abundant liabilities of what Francis Fukuyama calls the American “vetocracy” continue to come frustratingly into play. As the young Woodrow Wilson observed, Congress to this day remains the place where presidential policy initiatives go to die—or, perhaps even more regrettably, to be disemboweled or dismembered beyond all recognition.

The second innovation whose outlines, at least, we can see in the Progressive Era of Roosevelt and Wilson recalls that plebiscitarian dream of James Wilson back in 1787. The Electoral College, and the full panoply of congressional methods and mystifications, of course, continued to abide. But both Roosevelt and Wilson began to develop a political technique that would grow exponentially in incidence and effect as the twentieth century went forward: using *publicity* as a tool of governance. And here is where the history of the presidency and the history of communications technologies fatefully intersect.

The problem for the modern decision-maker is, he has to decide, to pick one of these courses of action, given a wicked problem, fully aware he might be totally wrong. —T. X. Hammes

By publicity, I mean reaching over and beyond Congress to appeal directly to the public at large in order to advance the presidential agenda.

The emergence of inexpensive mass-circulation newspapers around the turn of the century—papers like William Randolph Hearst’s *New York Journal* and Joseph Pulitzer’s *New York World*—first made this possible. Wilson conspicuously used a kind of saturation publicity to mobilize public opinion and compel passage of tariff, banking, trade, and anti-trust legislation in his first term. He tragically broke his health in a failed attempt to do the same with respect to ratification of the Treaty of Versailles in 1919.

That shift in the political uses of communication technologies has been precisely quantified. Research confirms that in the twentieth century, presidents spoke directly to the public—in one medium or another—six times more frequently than in the nineteenth century. Conversely, presidents in the twentieth century spoke exclusively to Congress one-fourth less frequently than in the preceding century.⁵

The later emergence of mass electronic, instantaneous communication—that is, the radio—powerfully accelerated that trend. Franklin D. Roosevelt, of course, with his renowned Fireside Chats, fundamentally redefined the president’s relationship to the public. He deliberately relied on the radio to end-run the newspaper magnates like Hearst, whom he considered his political adversaries, and to mobilize public opinion to bend Congress to his will.

Roosevelt’s use of the radio to speak directly to his fellow citizens in real time represents one step in a continuing process of political “disintermediation” (or the removal of intermediaries who once delivered, interpreted, or commented on communications between leaders and citizens) that in our own time has fantastically accelerated. Citizens today increasingly receive their political news directly from the politician’s mouth, Twitter finger, or Facebook page, without filtration by editors or reporters. In Roosevelt’s case, radio displaced the earlier mass-communication technology of high-circulation newspapers that had served Wilson so well. In time, John F. Kennedy advanced this process still further when he began televising news conferences, rendering the evening broadcast or the next morning’s print account of presidential pronouncements utterly redundant. (Though, ironically, the presidential

preemption of “news” exponentially expanded the volume of “commentary” to fill traditional news holes.)

The internet and social media of our own time take this process of disintermediation to an extreme conclusion. They not only provide presidents (and presidential candidates) with direct access to citizens, but also enable citizens to communicate directly and swiftly with leaders—and, even more consequentially, with one another, free from editorial curating or fact-checking or even the protocols of civil speech.

Contrary to past predictions that the proliferation of mass media would nurture a “global village,” in fact the multiplicity of media is dividing us into ever more isolated tribal units—and is resurrecting primal habits of trusting no one outside the tightly straitened circles of the familiar. Distrusting government—indeed, distrusting all institutions and persons beyond one’s own immediate orbit—is an old American habit. As Edmund Burke said of the rebellious Americans in 1775, “The religion most prevalent in our northern colonies is a refinement on the principle of resistance; it is the dissidence of dissent, and the Protestantism of the Protestant religion.”⁶ But even Burke would be astonished at how deeply dissidence and distrust have taken root in twenty-first-century America. Americans today not only distrust governmental as well as a broad array of other institutions—but they increasingly distrust one another. Recent polling data confirm that distrust is pervasive in our society and, alarmingly, that young people are the least likely to place trust in others.

Consider the following data (table 8.1 and figures 8.1–8.2), especially unsettling in light of Alexis de Tocqueville’s warning nearly two centuries ago that “despotism . . . is never more secure of continuance than when it can keep men asunder; and all its influence is commonly exerted for that purpose. . . . A despot easily forgives his subjects for not loving him, provided they do not love each other.”⁷

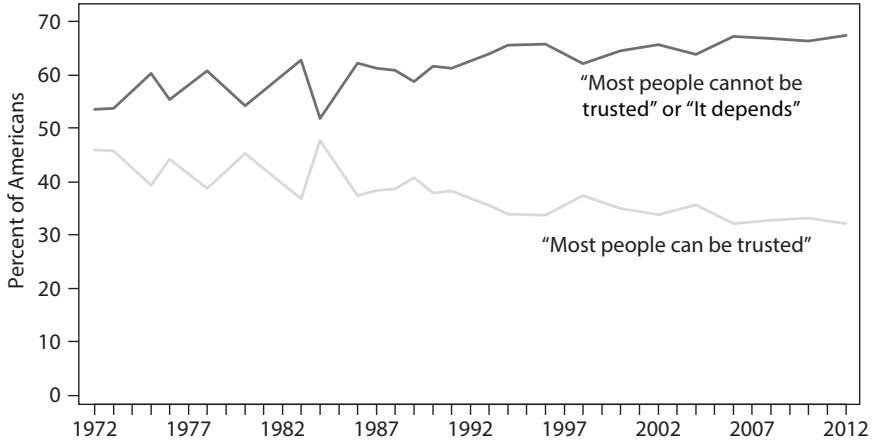
TABLE 8.1 Confidence in US Institutions, 2015, vs. Historical Average Since 1973 (1993 in some cases)

Percent of American public expressing “a great deal” or “quite a lot” of confidence in each institution.

	Historical Average		2015
<i>Military</i>	68%	↗	72%
<i>Small Business</i>	63%	↗	67%
<i>Police</i>	57%	↘	52%
<i>Church / Organized Religion</i>	55%	↘	42%
<i>Medical System</i>	38%	↘	37%
<i>Presidency</i>	43%	↘	33%
<i>US Supreme Court</i>	44%	↘	32%
<i>Public Schools</i>	40%	↘	31%
<i>Banks</i>	40%	↘	28%
<i>Newspapers</i>	32%	↘	24%
<i>Organized Labor</i>	26%	↘	24%
<i>Criminal Justice System</i>	24%	↘	23%
<i>TV News</i>	30%	↘	21%
<i>Big Business</i>	24%	↘	21%
<i>Congress</i>	24%	↘	8%

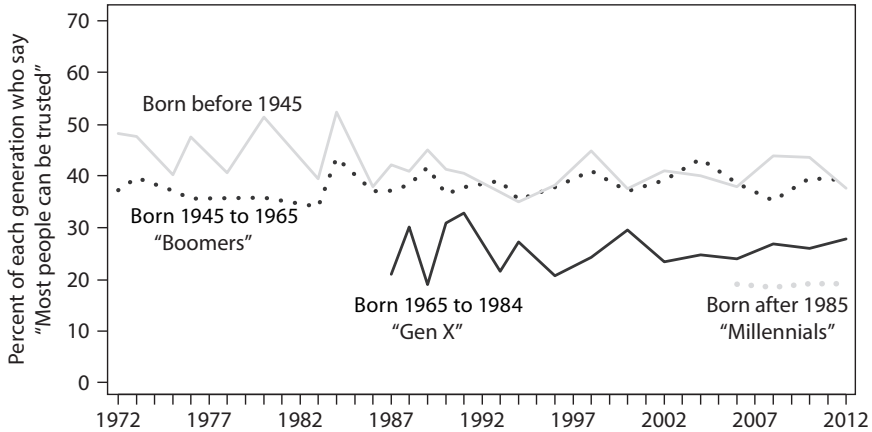
Source: Jeffrey M. Jones, “Confidence in U.S. Institutions Still Below Historical Norms,” Gallup, June 15, 2015, <http://news.gallup.com/poll/183593/confidence-institutions-below-historical-norms.aspx>.

FIGURE 8.1 The Decline of Trust in the United States



Source: Josh Morgan, *Medium*, 2014, from General Social Survey data, accessed December 7, 2017, <https://medium.com/@monarchjogs/the-decline-of-trust-in-the-united-states-fb8ab719b82a>.

FIGURE 8.2 The Decline of Trust among the American Public by Generation, 1972–2012



Source: Josh Morgan, *Medium*, 2014, from General Social Survey data, accessed December 7, 2017, <https://medium.com/@monarchjogs/the-decline-of-trust-in-the-united-states-fb8ab719b82a>.

When combined with the hyper-fragmentation of media outlets that the internet has facilitated, social media has unleashed all the perils of what psychologists call “confirmation bias,” or the quite natural but also troublesome human tendency to give more credence to those views that reconfirm one’s already existing views and to discount deeply all contrary voices. The proliferating narrow-casting, even micro-casting, that characterizes today’s supersaturated media environment lends a kind of perverse proof to the old maxim that more is not necessarily better.

There is one further development that might be subject to the “more is not necessarily better” critique. I’m referring to another innovation that dates from the early twentieth century—the proliferation of primary elections. Oregon held the first delegate-binding presidential primary election in 1910. California and a handful of other states soon followed suit. They did so in the name of “direct democracy”—taking politics out of the hands of the “bosses” and “machines” and putting power squarely into the hands of the people.

In American political culture, it’s hard to argue that more democracy is not better than less democracy. But the actual workings of the primary system might prompt us to rethink that apparently benign proposition.

The fact is that, as late as 1968, only a dozen states held presidential primary elections. A decade or so later, virtually every state had a primary—or its near equivalent, a caucus.

Here is another instance of disintermediation, with far-reaching consequences. While the electronics revolution has severely reduced the influence of the established press and other media, in more or less the same time frame primary elections have enormously reduced the role of political parties in performing their usual tasks of identifying, vetting, recruiting, grooming, and supporting candidates. Now, any political entrepreneur with a fat checkbook or a few fat-cat supporters can seek to “rent” a party as the vehicle of his or her candidacy—a consideration that helps explain why the Republican field in the 2016 election cycle had seventeen contenders, many of whom had sufficient funding to hang on well beyond their sell-by date.

When people talk about this being the beginning of the “post-Western” era, you may be saying in effect the “post-moderate era”—an era beyond when we can count on political parties to bring us to a moderate position.

—Jim Hoagland

This arrangement amounts almost exactly to an inversion of the historical relation between would-be candidates and parties. Some might even argue that “rent” is too weak a word—that in today’s environment it has become possible to “hijack” a party.

So here is where history has deposited us: Americans have come to have increasingly extravagant expectations not only that the president will protect them from each other’s congressmen but will also be the paladin of coherent nationally scaled policies, domestic and foreign, responsive to the realities and the responsibilities of an advanced post-industrial society of 322 million people. In the absence of tempering, mediating institutions like a responsible press and functioning political parties, presidential aspirants can nourish those expectations as they will, but without meaningful appraisal, expert analysis, or restraint.

This is plebiscitarianism run amok, plebiscitarianism without the benefits, because the American political system as a whole proves stubbornly unable to satisfy those expectations. And like presidential candidates, congressional representatives are increasingly free agents, only weakly shepherded by party “leadership.” Yet Congress retains all its prerogatives to obstruct and to veto. It continues to operate as a ramshackle confederation of local interests rather than a truly national legislature. The resulting stalemate feeds public frustration, disillusionment, distrust, and resentment and breeds the political attitude we call populism. It is not a pretty picture.

A recent book by Terry Moe and William Howell, *Relic: How Our Constitution Undermines Effective Government—and Why We Need a More Powerful Presidency*, resurrects much of Woodrow Wilson’s lament about congressional inefficiency in 1885.⁸ Moe and Howell go further than Wilson, however, and propose a quite specific remedy:

granting the president across-the-board “fast track” authority with respect to all legislation, such as he now enjoys with respect to trade negotiations. If their recommendation is adopted, presidential initiatives would have to be voted up or down, without amendments or riders. In their view, this arrangement would better align the hopes invested in the presidency and the realities of presidential leadership by meaningfully attaching presidential accountability to presidential promises—as James Wilson wanted—and would introduce more transparency to the legislative process—as Woodrow Wilson wanted—while still allowing Congress to retain its essential powers even while mitigating its capacity to obstruct.

Whether this is a realistic, or a sufficient, or even an appropriate solution to the political paralysis that besets the United States today, I can’t say. But any diagnosis of the current unrest, to borrow Walter Lippmann’s phrase, must take account of the mighty weight of constitutional architecture, technological change, institutional evolution, and historical practice that has brought the American political system to its present sorry pass. If some means are not found to establish reliable credibility in our organs of information and communication, revivify the capacity of political parties to channel and responsibly focus citizens’ interests, restore confidence in our principal institutions and our trust in one another, and, finally—as was the goal in the Progressive Era—to align the authority of the executive and other branches of government with the realities of contemporary life, the great American political experiment, so hopefully launched more than two centuries ago, may well be doomed.