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The Vulnerable American Politician

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Although most incumbent members of Congress succeed in being re-elected, American politicians are in fact more subject to the vicissitudes of electoral politics than are the politicians of any other major democracy. They face re-election more often. They face the possibility of having to contest primaries. They have to raise most of their own money. They are not given a large measure of protective cover by strong political parties. The consequences for American government and politics are profound. They include such familiar and well-documented phenomena as particularism, 'pork' and the power of special interests; but they also include the high incidence in America of purely symbolic politics, the drastic foreshortening of American politicians' time horizons and the difficulty that the American system often has in taking tough decisions.

Most people take for granted the main features of the country in which they live. In the United States, 'Old Glory' is flown everywhere and is treated with an almost religious respect; there are speed limits on virtually every highway, and they are enforced by men with guns; total strangers at the hotel checkout desk say 'Have a nice day'. In Great Britain, by contrast, the Union Jack is seldom flown, and almost no one regards it as a national icon; there are speed limits, to be sure, but they are seldom enforced; the police do not carry guns; and the man or woman at the checkout desk, while usually being perfectly polite, is unlikely to express an interest in whether or not one has a nice day. It is only knowledge of foreign countries that makes our own country seem mysterious. As Rudyard Kipling said of his native land, 'What should they know of England who only England know?'

There is one feature of politics in the United States with which every American is intimately familiar. It manifests itself on lapel badges, in television commercials, on car bumper stickers and on billboards along state highways across the land. It can also be heard on the radio and, at much higher decibel levels, coming from loudspeakers on the back of pick-up trucks. It is the phenomenon of the never-ending election campaign.

* Department of Government, University of Essex. This article is a summary of part of a forthcoming book, *Running Scared: Why American Politicians Campaign Too Much and Govern Too Little* (New York: The Free Press, 1997). An earlier version of the article was presented to the Annual Meeting of the American Political Science Association, Chicago, 1995. More detailed evidence to support the propositions set out in the article – and also fuller references – are contained in the book. For research assistance in connection with the project, the writer is grateful to Giles Alston. For their helpful and constructive comments on the manuscript in its various guises, the writer is grateful to Giles Alston, Seth H. Dubin, Morris P. Fiorina, Gary C. Jacobson, Jan King, David McKay, David R. Mayhew, Richard E. Neustadt, Bruce K. Nichols and two anonymous referees for this *Journal*.

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Americans do not merely have elections on the first Tuesday after the first Monday of November in every year divisible by four. They have elections on the first Tuesday after the first Monday in November in every year divisible by two. Some states have statewide elections even in odd-numbered years. Indeed, there is no year in the United States – ever – when a major statewide election is not being held somewhere. To this catalogue of general elections must, of course, be added an equally long catalogue of primary elections (forty-three presidential primaries in 1996 alone). Moreover, not only do elections in the United States occur very frequently: the number of posts legally required to be filled by them is enormous. It has been estimated that in the United States at the present time there are no fewer than half a million elective offices filled or waiting to be filled. It is scarcely too strong to say that modern America is *about* the holding of elections.

To a visitor to America's shores, however, America's veritable elections industry, and its election campaigns that never seem to end, present an unfamiliar spectacle. In most other countries, election campaigns have both beginnings and ends; and, amazingly, there are even periods, sometimes prolonged periods, during which there are no election campaigns taking place at all. There are other features of American elections that are also unfamiliar. In few countries are elections and election campaigns so prodigiously expensive as they are in the United States. In none is the role of organized political parties so limited.

The central argument of this article is, quite simply, that the American electoral system, especially as it has developed in recent decades, places America's elective politicians in a highly vulnerable position. Individually and collectively, they are more vulnerable, more of the time, to the vicissitudes of electoral politics than are the politicians of any other democratic country.

They are vulnerable not for any one reason but for a whole combination of reasons – reasons that powerfully reinforce one another. Politics and government in the United States are marked by the fact that elected politicians have, in many cases, very short terms of office *and* face the prospect of being defeated in primary elections *and* have to run for office primarily as individuals rather than as standard-bearers of political parties *and* have continually to raise large sums of money to finance their campaigns. Some of these factors operate in some other countries. There is, however, no other country in which all four factors both operate and operate simultaneously. The cumulative consequences, as we shall see, are both pervasive and profound.

WHY AMERICAN POLITICIANS ARE VULNERABLE

We look first at the question of the lengths of terms of holders of political offices. The Constitution of the United States sets out in one of its very first sentences that 'the House of Representatives shall be composed of members chosen every second year by the people of the several states'. When they decided on a term of office as short as two years for House members, the Founding Fathers were

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setting a precedent that, in the event, has been followed by no other major democratic country. In Great Britain, France, Italy and Canada, the constitutional or legal maximum for the duration of the lower house of the national legislature is five years. In Germany and Japan it is four years. Only in Australia and New Zealand – whose institutions are in some limited respects modelled on those of the United States – is the legal maximum as short as three years. To be sure, the constitutional and legal maxima in other countries are frequently not achieved: parliaments may be, and frequently are, dissolved before, in legal terms, their time is up. Even so, the norm in most parliamentary democracies is for the national parliament to remain in existence for between roughly three and a half and four and a half years.

One implication of this contrast between the US House of Representatives and most other democratic parliaments is immediately obvious and is a theme of much political journalism in the United States. When a US congressman takes his seat in the House in the January of the year following his successful election or re-election, he already knows that he faces a further electoral contest before the end of the following year – that is, in less than twenty-two months' time. For example, David S. Broder, in a routine-seeming piece in the *Washington Post*, wrote: 'Democratic lawmakers returned to Capitol Hill yesterday voicing concern that the problems plaguing the Clinton administration may cripple his legislative program and bring them grief in the 1994 election'.[1] But what was remarkable about Broder's report, at least in the eyes of a foreign observer, was that it was published in early June 1993 – a mere six months into the life of the new Congress. In most other countries, such disturbing thoughts enter legislators' minds only at a much later stage of the electoral cycle.

Members of the US Senate are, of course, in a different position. Their six-year term of office is a very long one by anyone's standards. But in practice senators' six-year terms are not all that they seem. In the first place, so pervasive is America's electioneering atmosphere that even newly elected members begin almost at once to lay plans for their re-election campaigns. 'The Senate is on a hair-trigger', Senator John Danforth of Missouri complained during his first re-election bid: 'There's an absence of a long view: people are running for reelection the day they arrive'.[2] In the second place, the fact that under the constitution one-third of the Senate retires every two years means that, even if individual senators did not feel themselves to be under continuing electoral pressure (which they do), the Senate as a whole would. *It*, the Senate, may not be up for re-election every two years; but one in three of *them* are. The same June 1993 *Washington Post* report by David Broder continued:

> The Clinton agenda looks shaky in the Senate, especially after interim Sen. Bob Krueger (D-Tex.) was beaten 2 to 1 by Republican challenger Kay Bailey Hutchison in Saturday's [June 5's] special election. The massive defeat sent shock waves

[1] David S. Broder, 'Democrats worrying', *Washington Post*, 9 June, 1993, pp. A1, A16.

[2] Quoted in Alan Ehrenhalt, *The United States of Ambition: Politicians, Power, and the Pursuit of Office*, 2nd edn (New York: Times Books, 1992), p. 236.

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through Democratic ranks and heightened fears among Democrats that they could lose their majority and their chairmanships next year, when 21 Democrats and 13 Republicans face voters.[3]

It is clear from this and other evidence that the Senate's collective electoral sensibilities increasingly resemble those of the House.

There is, of course, one elected American policy maker – the most important of all – who does enjoy a term of office roughly comparable to that of elected officer-holders in other countries: the president himself, with his fixed term of four years. Indeed, in practice the president of the United States is considerably more secure than the heads of government in most other countries because, unlike him (impeachment apart), they can be ousted not merely at national elections but during the long intervals between them. As strong a leader as Great Britain's Margaret Thatcher fell as the result of an intraparty coup in 1990. French prime ministers come and go. Prime ministers in Italy seldom last for more than a year or two.

As in the case of the Senate, however, all is not as it seems. Just as the internal life of the Senate, despite its stability as an institution, is at all times coloured by the electoral preoccupations of at least one-third of its members, so the man in the White House, and all those around him, operate in a political environment coloured by the electoral preoccupations of members of Congress. *Their* electoral concerns are of necessity a central feature of *his* calculations. As David Broder's report indicated, the president's agenda looked 'shaky' in Congress in mid-1993 precisely because Democrats on Capitol Hill were already worried about their seats.

Moreover, all the evidence suggests that in recent decades presidents themselves, despite the apparent security of their fixed and relatively long terms, have come to see their own tasks in increasingly election-oriented ways. Ronald Reagan's White House, especially in the first few years, was organized at least as much for campaigning as for governing; and Bill Clinton in 1993 brought with him into the White House a group of advisers, and also a mind set, that was focused on electoral considerations. Amid the swirl of meetings that surrounded the preparation of Clinton's first economic plan in February 1993, less than four weeks after his inauguration, an economic adviser was heard to complain, 'The campaign people act as if 1996 is tomorrow' – and, bizarrely, the campaign people, as many witnesses have testified, were central to the making of the plan.[4]

Many of America's most important individual decision makers thus have shorter terms of office than their opposite numbers in almost any other democratic country; and both the presidency and Congress as institutions are continuously affected, in the ways just described, by the presence within the system of these short legislative terms. By virtue of that fact alone, both

[3] Broder, 'Democrats worrying'.

[4] Elizabeth Drew, *On the Edge: The Clinton Presidency* (New York: Simon & Schuster, 1994), p. 69, and see the whole of chap. 4; also Bob Woodward, *The Agenda: Inside the Clinton White House* (New York: Simon & Schuster, 1994), *passim*.

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individual officeholders in the United States and the American governmental system as a whole are subjected, continuously, to a level of electoral pressure that is extraordinarily high by international standards.

But there is more to it even than that. Not merely do American congressmen, senators and would-be presidents have to compete in general elections in order to attain office. They have, in addition, to be prepared to compete in primary elections for the purpose of securing their party's nomination. In other words, they have to be prepared to jump not just one electoral hurdle but two (or even three in the states that allow for run-offs in primaries). And the existence of this additional hurdle places American politicians in a completely different position from that of the elective politicians of all other democracies.

Party nominations everywhere except in the United States are in the hands of the political parties themselves, and the political parties in most other democracies function for most practical purposes as private clubs or associations. They are like companies which, so to speak, manufacture 'products' – candidates for office – which the 'consumers' – or voters – can then either 'purchase' or not as they choose. More important for our purposes, the participation of the mass electorate in the selection of party candidates for office is completely unknown outside the United States. The norm in other countries is for nominations to be made by local, regional or national party caucuses. Those involved in the process are usually party delegates or party officeholders of some kind. They are likely to number only a few dozen or a few hundred at most.

The practical consequences are enormous. In most countries outside the United States, the individual legislator or other officeholder, so long as he or she is reasonably conscientious and does not gratuitously offend local or regional party opinion, has no need to spend much time worrying about renomination. Cases of parties in countries like Great Britain, France and Canada refusing to renominate incumbent legislators are by no means unknown; but they are relatively uncommon and tend to occur under unusual sets of circumstances. The victims are sometimes policy or ideological dissidents; but more commonly they suffer from being old, incorrigibly idle or alcoholic. In practice, legislators outside the United States usually find that retaining their party's confidence is not very difficult.

The contrast between the rest of the world and the United States in this respect could hardly be more striking. To the American congressman or senator, or even president, the possibility of not being renominated as the result of a primary election – and therefore of not being re-elected – is ever-present. The possibility of losing a primary may seem remote and indeed may *be* remote; but it can never be entirely dismissed as a possibility, even in the safest districts and states. Elective politicians in the United States are thus doubly vulnerable: to the primary electorate as well as the general. In the 1994 congressional elections, nearly one-third of all House incumbents seeking re-election, 121 out of 386, faced primary opposition. In the Senate the proportion was even higher: 11 out of 26. Even those incumbents who were unopposed could seldom be certain in

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advance that they would not be. The influence of primaries and the possibility of primaries in the United States is pervasive.

To frequent elections and primary elections must be added another factor, which contributes powerfully to making American politicians even more electorally vulnerable than they would be otherwise: the relative absence in the United States of what might be called 'party cover'.

In most democratic countries, the electoral fate of most politicians depends, not primarily on their own endeavours, but on the fate – locally, regionally or nationally – of their party. If their party does well in an election, so will they. If not, not. The British term 'swing', with its air of fatal – and impersonal – inevitability, captures well the manner in which politics in most such countries is conducted. The individual politician's interests and those of his party are bound up together. There are exceptions, of course: in highly marginal districts, where an individual parliamentarian may build up a personal vote and where that personal vote may turn out to be crucial, and also under some electoral systems, such as the Irish and the Japanese.

Despite these exceptions, America's elective politicians remain, by a wide margin, the outliers. They are, almost literally, out on their own. The factor of party still matters in American electoral politics, as the 1994 congressional elections demonstrated; but it matters less than anywhere else in the democratic world. As a result, American legislators seeking re-election are forced to raise their own profiles, to make their own records and to fight their own re-election campaigns. If the term 'swing' captures well the relative impersonality of British electoral politics, the term 'entrepreneur' – with its connotations of aggressive individualism – captures perfectly the style that actual and would-be elective politicians in the United States are forced to adopt. It is no accident that the term has caught on only in America.

This nonpartisan individualism among candidates is matched – and partly caused by – nonpartisan individualism among voters. In other countries, few voters deviate in the ballot box from their current party preference. In America, millions do (or in fact have no party preference). The incidence of split-ticket voting in the United States – unknown, and indeed physically impossible, in most other countries – has soared since the 1960s, as has the proportion of voters who claim that they identify with one party but nevertheless vote for another. In the 1950s, the proportion of party identifiers in House and Senate elections who defected from their party at elections seldom rose above 10 per cent; since the mid-1970s it has seldom fallen below 20 per cent. Congressmen and senators know this. They know that their future depends on who *they* are and what *they* do. In America, the party does not provide them with a place to hide. This absence of party cover is, needless to say, partly a cause and partly a consequence of the relatively low levels of party cohesion in the US Congress compared with legislatures abroad.

Frequent general elections, the existence of primary elections and the absence of strong, cohesive national parties are not, however, the only factors that render

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American elective politicians peculiarly vulnerable. In addition, candidates for public office in the United States are mostly required to find the means of funding their own election campaigns – and American election campaigns are among the most expensive in the world.

In most democratic countries, either or both of two factors limit the role that money plays in elections. First, in many countries, such as Germany, France and Italy, the national government directly subsidizes the national party organizations and also, in many instances, helps defray the election costs of individual candidates. Secondly, in those countries, but also in many others, including Great Britain, Canada and New Zealand, strict legal limits are placed on the total amount of money that can be spent on campaigns (at least by individual parliamentary candidates), and the government also provides free air time for candidates and parties. In many countries, including Great Britain, it is actually illegal for candidates and parties to advertise on radio and television, apart from their allocations of free time. Whether by means of subsidy or limits on spending, individual candidates are thus largely relieved of the need to engage in extensive fund-raising on their own account. Japan is one of the very few important exceptions.

The consequence in the United States is further to increase American politicians' electoral vulnerability. Not only must American politicians spend a great deal of time, energy and other scarce resources in fund raising; but they must also be constantly aware of their heavy dependence on those who contribute to their campaigns. Campaign contributions may not 'buy' votes in any crude sense; a good deal of evidence suggests that they do not. But the need for them is bound to colour deeply a congressman's or senator's image of his entire political environment. Uncertainty about campaign finance is added to all the other uncertainties in his or her world. Certainly the sums involved are enormous. To take an example almost at random, in 1990 the *average* of contributions made to all House candidates – including non-incumbent challengers and total no-hopers – was $308,269; for Senate candidates the equivalent figure was no less that $2,661,559.[5]

The central point, however, is not that American elective politicians *are* vulnerable, for the reasons just described; it is that they *know* they are. They are well aware of just how precarious their political existence is. Comments that testify to their nervousness abound, not least in the writings of Richard F. Fenno Jr. For example:

> I remember when Charlie came up to me on the House floor in 1970. I had just gotten 72 percent in the election. He said, 'It looks like you've got that district sewed up.' I said, 'It's the worst thing that could have happened to me. Everyone will think I'm safe and get complacent as hell. Then some son of a bitch will come along and defeat me.'[6]

[5] Norman J. Ornstein, Thomas E. Mann and Michael J. Malbin, *Vital Statistics on Congress, 1993–94* (Washington, DC: CQ Press, 1994), pp. 75, 79.

[6] Richard F. Fenno Jr, *Home Style: House Members in Their Districts* (Boston, Mass.: Little, Brown), p. 13.

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If he [a potential primary opponent] ever runs against me, he'll give me fits. I'll need $100,000 and three months of campaigning. The first free ride he has is in 1980, and he may try then.[7]

I don't know where his support is. And that's what bothers me. Every time he makes a statement, I think the campaign is lost.[8]

Campaigning for members of the US Congress is a never-ending activity. Even those who claim they positively enjoy it nevertheless usually admit to feeling more than occasional twinges of apprehension about the outcome.

There is, of course, an obvious objection to the general line of argument that is being developed here. If American politicians are so vulnerable, why are more of them not defeated? Even in 1994, more than 90 per cent of incumbents in both houses who sought re-election were safely returned.

But to say that because incumbent members of Congress are so seldom defeated they are not really vulnerable is to miss two crucial points.

The first is that, precisely because they are vulnerable, they go to prodigious lengths to protect themselves. Like workers in nuclear power stations, they take the most extreme safety precautions. The fact that the precautions are largely successful in both cases does not make them any the less essential. The methods they use are well known, and there is no need to go into detail here.[9] But the second point is the more important. Congressmen and senators go to extreme lengths to secure their re-election because, although they may 'objectively' be safe (in the eyes of journalists and political scientists), they do not know they are safe – and, even if they think they are, the risks to them of being wrong are enormous. John Maynard Keynes long ago distinguished between the probability of a specific event occurring and the personal stake that an individual or organization may have in whether or not it does in fact occur. To revert to the earlier example: the probability of anything going wrong with a well-maintained nuclear power station may approach zero, but planners nevertheless tend not to build them near the centres of large cities. A member of Congress may believe he is safe; but, if he wants to be re-elected, he would be a fool to act on that belief. The folklore of Congress is replete with cases of 'those who did not return'.

American politicians thus run scared – and are right to do so. And, whether they know it or not, they run more scared than the politicians of any other democratic country – and they are right to do that too. Why should this be so? What are the intellectual and historical sources of high-vulnerability, high-exposure politics in the United States compared with elsewhere?

[7] Fenno, *Home Style*, p. 14.
[8] Fenno, *Home Style*, p. 16.
[9] See, for example, David R. Mayhew, *Congress: The Electoral Connection* (New Haven, Conn.: Yale University Press, 1974), *passim*.

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HOW THEY CAME TO BE VULNERABLE

A very short answer to these two questions would be: 'Because the American people like it that way.' The American people are now, and have been for a very long time, the Western world's 'hyper-democrats'. They are keener on democracy than almost anyone else and are far more determined that democratic norms and democratic practices should pervade every aspect of national life.

It is important to note that there are present in democratic countries two differing conceptions of what democratic politics is and of how a democratic political system should operate. Moreover, although these two conceptions have never been codified, and although they certainly cannot be found written down in constitutions or other formal statements of different countries' political principles, one or other of them nevertheless underpins the political practice of every democratic country (even if, inevitably, the abstract conception and the day-to-day practice are never perfectly matched).

One conception of democracy might be labelled the 'division-of-labour' conception. On this view, there are in any democracy two classes of person: the governors and the governed. The function of the governors is to govern, to take decisions in terms of what they believe to be in the country's best interests and then to act on those decisions. Politicians in countries that operate on the basis of this conception can frequently be heard using phrases like 'the need for strong leadership' and 'the need to take tough decisions'. In countries like these, politicians experience no moral queasiness about defying public opinion. They may even take a certain pride in doing so (at least if they think they can get away with it).

The function of the governed in such a democratic system is a very important function, but it is also a strictly limited one. It is not to determine public policy. It is rather to go to the polls from time to time to choose those who *will* determine public policy: namely, the governors. On this conception, in the well-known words of Joseph A. Schumpeter, 'the democratic method is that institutional arrangement for arriving at political decisions in which individuals [i.e. politicians] acquire the power to decide by means of a competitive struggle for the people's vote'. [10] In other words, the deciding of actual issues by the electorate is made strictly secondary to the election of those individuals who are to do the deciding. The analogy is with choosing a doctor. The patient chooses who is to give the treatment. He or she does not normally decide what the treatment itself is to be.

The other conception of democracy might be called the 'agency' conception, and it is of a completely different character. According to this conception, those who govern a country should function as no more than the agents of the mass of the people of that country. The governors' job is not to act independently and to take whatever decisions they believe to be in the national interest. Rather, their

[10] Joseph A. Schumpeter, *Capitalism, Socialism, and Democracy*, 2nd edn (New York: Harper, 1947), p. 269.

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job is to reflect faithfully, in all their actions, the views of the majority of the people, whatever those views happen to be. On this conception, governors are not really governors at all: they are representatives in the very narrow sense of being in office solely to represent the views of those who sent them there. It almost goes without saying that, in the view of the agency democrat, representative government as we know it in most of the Western world can only be a second-best. The ideal system would be one in which there were no politicians or middlemen of any kind but in which the people governed themselves directly; it would take the form of more or less continuous town meetings or referendums, perhaps conducted by means of interactive television. Meanwhile, given that direct democracy of this kind is impracticable, the citizens of an agency democracy are apt to complain that their system is 'not sufficiently democratic', that their politicians are 'out of touch' and that 'the people's wishes' are constantly being frustrated. The culture of an agency democracy is liable to be an anti-politician culture.

It is probably fair to say that the majority of the world's major democracies – Great Britain, France, Germany, Japan – operate largely on a division-of-labour basis. It also goes without saying that there is no known case of a pure agency democracy (let alone a pure direct democracy). Politicians in all countries have a good deal of autonomy; and there are always some institutions that, for one reason or another, have been allowed to escape from democratic control.

Nevertheless, the United States appears to be almost unique in the world in being a country that has never accepted the notion of a clear-cut division of labour between governors and governed but instead has retained a remarkably pure version of agency democracy as its fundamental ideal. By the time of Andrew Jackson, if not before, the notions that democracy was desirable and that agency and direct democracy were much the best forms of democracy was deeply implanted in the American mind. De Tocqueville was acutely conscious of the prevalence of this version of the democratic ideal in America, and to this day, for example, textbooks on American government, unlike the textbooks on any other country's government, often judge the American system by the extent to which it lives up to this version of the ideal. Division-of-labour democracy, as a theoretical possibility, seldom received a serious hearing in the United States after the time of Jackson.

Against this background, it is not difficult to explain most of the features of the modern American system – short terms, direct primaries and the weakness of political parties – that have led directly to the politics of vulnerability and high electoral exposure.

The Founding Fathers, as is well known, were not keen on agency democracy or democracy of any kind; but, when they met in Philadelphia in 1787, they had no real option but to create a popularly elected assembly – the House of Representatives – and to provide that its members should be elected for very short terms. The Philadelphia delegates were under especial pressure because by 1787 most of the former British colonies had adopted new state constitutions,

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and a large proportion of these provided that elections to the lower house of the state legislature should take place, not every three or four years, but *every* year. State representatives were indeed to be agents. Some at the Philadelphia convention actually favoured annual elections to the US House, one of them insisting that elections every year were 'the only defence of the people against tyranny'.[11] Others, including James Madison, favoured three-year terms. In the end, the delegates simply split the difference.

If the adoption of two-year terms for the House represented an early American response to the agency-democracy ideal, primary elections represented one of the most important later ones. The Progressives at the turn of the century sought to reform the abuses of 'bossism'; but they also sought to tear down the new barrier – powerful party political machines – that had been erected between the people and their elected representatives. The oratory of the Progressive age was suffused with direct-democratic rhetoric. William Jennings Bryan contended that the people were competent 'to sit in judgment on every question which has arisen or will arise, no matter how long our government will endure'.[12] Woodrow Wilson asserted that the Democratic party intended 'to set up a government in the world where the average man, the plain man, the common man, the ignorant man, the unaccomplished man, the poor man had a voice equal to the voice of anybody else in the settlement of the common affairs'.[13] Primaries spread rapidly from 1903 onwards, when they became mandatory in Wisconsin, and by 1917 all but four states had made the direct primary compulsory for some or all statewide offices.

What is striking about this development is that it was peculiar to America. It had no analogue in Europe, not even in those European countries, such as Great Britain, France, the Netherlands and Sweden, that were well on their way to becoming democracies by the time of the First World War. In Europe, progressive parties and groups did not seek to dismantle the existing machinery; they sought, on the contrary, to capture it, with a view to exploiting it for their own ends. European liberal and labour movements created, where necessary, their own political parties, and they pressed, increasingly successfully, for the extension of the franchise. But nowhere did they espouse – or even think of espousing – such direct-democratic devices as the initiative, recall or direct primary. They merely wanted to be on the right side of the division of governmental labour.

The adoption of direct primaries – first for local and state offices, then for congressional nominations and finally for the presidency itself – has, of course, been a central factor in the weakening of American party organizations, especially since 1968. Party organizations have traditionally existed to nominate

[11] Jonathan Elliott, ed., *Debates on the Adoption of the Federal Constitution* (Washington, DC: Printed for the Editor, 1845), p. 184.

[12] Quoted in Richard Hofstadter, *The Age of Reform: From Bryan to F.D.R.* (New York: Vintage Books, 1955), p. 262.

[13] Quoted in Hofstadter, *Age of Reform*, p. 262.

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candidates for public office and subsequently to secure their election. Largely deprived by primaries of their first function, American parties have proved less and less capable of performing their second, that of organizing for elections. Both nominations and elections have become increasingly candidate-centred. As a result, state and local parties all over America – far more than in other countries – have tended to atrophy. The Progressives set out to undermine the power of the party machine. They have largely succeeded, though the process has probably taken a little longer than they expected. A crucial effect, as we remarked earlier, has been to deprive elective officeholders of 'party cover'. They are on their own. They, personally, are vulnerable – and they are even more vulnerable now than they were thirty years ago.

WHY THEIR VULNERABILITY MATTERS

What are the consequences of American politicians' vulnerability? In what ways does it matter?

The simplest, most central consequence of American politicians' electoral vulnerability – obvious, but needing to be stated – is that most officeholders in the United States are extraordinarily sensitive to the opinions and demands of the men and women upon whom their political futures depend: the voters in their state or district or in the nation at large. Not only are they extraordinarily sensitive: they are continuously sensitive. The pressures of electoral politics in America are incessant. Only if an elected official has decided not to run for office again – or else has both a highly exalted opinion of his status as a representative and an unusually thick skin – are the pressures significantly relieved.

Finding themselves inhabiting this turbulent and torrid environment, most American officials respond as might be expected: in an almost Darwinian way. They adapt their behaviour – their roll-call votes, their introduction of bills, their committee assignments, their phone calls, their direct-mail shots, their speeches, their press releases, their sound bites, who they see, how they spend their time, their trips abroad, their trips back home and even their family and private lives – to their environment: that is, to their primary, almost elemental, need for electoral survival.

The consequences of this selective adaptation ramify throughout the American political system. They can be detected not only in the lives of individual officeholders but in America's political institutions as a whole and, not least, in the shape and content of American public policy. It is worth saying something about each of no fewer than ten consequences. Needless to say, the ten phenomena discussed below have not in most cases been brought about *only* by American politicians' extreme electoral vulnerability; other factors are almost invariably involved. The contention here is merely that politicians' vulnerability in the United States in each case makes a significant contribution. The world of American politics is other than it would be but for this high degree of vulnerability.

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(1) Money Costs

The politics of high electoral exposure is very expensive. It costs much more than low-exposure politics would. The costs – as members of Congress, in particular, seek to defend their positions – take the form of enormous buildings (the Rayburn House Office Building took ten years to build and is larger than the Capitol itself), of the largest legislative staffs in the world (with probably roughly half the time of congressmen's and senators' personal staffs given over to nursing the district or state rather than to legislation and policy making); and of the facilities that members of Congress create for themselves in order to facilitate communication with their home state or district (including the franking privilege, newsletters, constituency mail, travel home, the telephone, the rental of state and district offices, the operations of the House and Senate radio and television studios, and so on).

In 1993 Congress appropriated a total of $1,203,260,250 to administer the House of Representatives and the Senate (excluding support agencies like the Library of Congress and the Congressional Budget Office).[14] It is anyone's guess what proportion of that large sum was devoted, overtly or covertly, to trying to increase the members' chances of re-election; but the total must have been very large.

(2) Time Costs

Not only is much of the time of congressional staffs devoted to securing their politician-employers' re-election: much of congressmen's and senators' own time is too. Madison in 1787 was worried that, if elections were too frequent, members of Congress would neglect their duties in the capital and 'would travel backwards and forwards [to their home state] at least as often as the elections should be repeated'. [15] He was right – and he reckoned without the jet airplane.

There used to be a minority of congressmen and senators, mainly from the East Coast, who were notorious among their colleagues for shirking their legislative duties by leaving Washington for their home district or state every weekend. They were known as the 'Tuesday-to-Thursday club'. As Morris P. Fiorina has pointed out, that term is now seldom used, because almost the entire Congress has joined the club.[16] In the early 1960s members of both houses were allowed a mere three government-paid trips home per year. By the late 1970s members of the House were allowed thirty-three trips and members of the Senate more than forty. One researcher discovered that, whereas in 1970 members of the House spent roughly fifteen weeks of each year in their

[14] Calculated from Ornstein, Mann and Malbin, *Vital Statistics on Congress*, p. 140.

[15] Elliott, *Debates on the Adoption of the Federal Constitution*, p. 225.

[16] Morris P. Fiorina, *Congress: Keystone of the Washington Establishment*, 2nd edn (New Haven, Conn.: Yale University Press, 1989), pp. 91–2. The club was temporarily disbanded in 1995 when the Republican majority in the House of Representatives, in particular, threw itself into the cause of enacting the Republicans' Contract with America. There is every reason to think, however, that the club's disbandment was, indeed, only temporary.

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congressional districts, by 1976 that figure had risen to twenty-two weeks.[17] The total time consumed is enormous (not least because the United States itself is an enormous country, with immense distances to travel); but then the electoral incentives are powerful.

Even when in Washington, incumbent members of Congress – not to mention incumbent presidents like Bill Clinton – skew their political activities and the time they spend on them towards self-advertisement, credit claiming and often meretricious position taking. To take an example almost at random, a study of committee hearings which compared the 1970s with the 1950s found that, whereas in the 1950s members frequently interacted with one another and joined forces in questioning witnesses, by the 1970s the great majority preferred to operate as lone wolves, jealously guarding their right to examine witnesses uninterrupted. What, the author of the study asks, is the explanation?

> The answer, it seems, is that hearings have increasingly come to fulfill another function [other, that is, than exploring policy issues], self-display. Congressmen come to hearings to publicize themselves, to take stands, to win points with particular constituents, to make a record, to boost their image as hardworking, concerned legislators.

Members therefore resist each other's efforts to intervene in committee questioning: they represent attempts to steal the limelight.[18] A study in the mid 1980s of how members of both houses spent their time found that large numbers spent considerably more time than they wished on fund raising and constituency-related activities and considerably less on (notably) 'studying pending legislation and talking about it with other members and staff'.[19]

(3) Staff as an Encumbrance

The increase in the size of congressional staffs has, of course, many sources, including Congress's enhanced role in the policy-making process following Vietnam and Watergate, the substantial decentralization that has occurred within both houses and the increased demands that citizens make on members in their 'ombudsman' role; but there can be little doubt that some part of the increase is owing to congressional incumbents' sensitivity to their ever-increasing electoral exposure.

To the extent that this is so, congressmen's and senators' electoral vulnerability has contributed to congressional staffs, having initially been acquired partly to help solve the problem of overload, themselves becoming part of the problem. Large staffs quickly become yet another of the legislator's many constituencies, having to be managed, taking up his or her time, always tempted

[17] Roger H. Davidson and Walter J. Oleszek, *Congress and Its Members*, 4th edn (Washington, DC: CQ Press, 1994), p. 145.

[18] James L. Payne, 'The Rise of Lone Wolf Questioning in House Committee Hearings', *Polity*, 14 (Summer 1982), p. 632.

[19] Quoted in Davidson and Oleszek, *Congress and Its Members*, pp. 132–3.

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to go into business for themselves. Several scholars have expressed concern about congressional staffs' cumulative impact on Congress as a deliberative body. In Fiorina's words:

> Members rush from committee meeting to committee meeting and flit back and forth between Washington and their districts. Meanwhile, the staff deliberate, and understanding is not the goal – credit is. All too often members talk to their staffs, who talk to other members' staffs, who talk to their members, who talk back to their staff, and so on and so forth up and down the chain. Members themselves complain that they have insufficient chance to get to know one another and express appreciation for opportunities to get together sans staff.[20]

A freshman senator complained in the 1980s that members of the Senate scarcely knew one another. 'If I have any free time,' he said, 'I spend it with my staff.'[21]

(4) Congressional Organization

David R. Mayhew drew attention two decades ago to the almost symbiotic relationship between the organization of Congress and the electoral needs of its constituent members. 'To put it another way,' he noted, in a frequently quoted passage, 'if a group of planners sat down and tried to design a pair of American national assemblies with the goal of serving members' electoral needs year in and year out, they would be hard pressed to improve on what exists.'[22] Since he wrote, however, further improvements have been made, partly in response to the fact that since the early 1970s members' electoral needs have become even more exigent.

Increasingly since the 1970s the procedures of Congress have been biased towards the norms of individualism and decentralization (with some increases in the leaders' powers, if only to avoid total anarchy). The more decentralized the Congress, the more benefits individual members can deliver to their constituents and campaign donors, the more attention they can draw to themselves and the more credit they can claim, as individuals, for what they do and say (mainly say). Hence, in part, the proliferation of subcommittees in both houses (with fewer and fewer fish swimming in smaller and smaller ponds). Hence the perennial weakness of the congressional parties by international standards. Hence, too, a congressional budgetary process that facilitates spending. 'That's the beauty of the budget process,' said one House member. 'You can vote for all your favorite problems, and then vote against [the] deficit.'[23] It is the favourite programmes that tend to come first.

[20] Fiorina, *Congress*, p. 120. See also Michael J. Malbin, *Unelected Representatives: Congressional Staff and the Future of Representative Government* (New York: Basic Books, 1980), esp. chap. 10.

[21] Quoted in Ehrenhalt, *United States of Ambition*, p. 233.

[22] Mayhew, *Congress: The Electoral Connection*, pp. 81–2.

[23] Quoted in Gary C. Jacobson, *The Politics of Congressional Elections*, 3rd edn (New York: Harper Collins, 1992), p. 210.

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(5) Recruitment and Retirement

Do American politicians actually thrive in the electoral hothouse in which they are forced to live? Many of them clearly do not. For many members of Congress and others, winning elections (and piling up sufficiently large margins to deter challengers) is not an end in itself; it is merely a necessary – but absolutely necessary – condition of their being able to do what they really want to do, which is to influence policy and participate in the government of their country.

If many of them do not enjoy the hothouse, two effects might be expected to follow: many otherwise able and well-equipped men and women might be deterred from ever seeking elective office (since the penalties to be paid are so visible), and some incumbent officeholders might well quit in disgust (or at least out of a sense that they were not fulfilling themselves). In other words, it is possible that America's never-ending election campaign may be affecting, adversely, the size and quality of the political profession in America.

Political scientists unfortunately know little about America's (or any other country's) pool of 'potential politicians', the group of men and women who are interested in politics and who, if the circumstance were right, might be attracted into running for office, especially national office. But what seems clear is that, controlling for sense of civic duty and personal ambition, a key factor is sheer enjoyment: the pleasure people expect to derive from running for office, the pleasure they expect to derive from actually holding office. No anticipated pleasure, no race.

Hard evidence on the point is lacking, but many writers on American politics give the impression that they think the pool of available candidates for national office may be shrinking in the United States and that the cause may be not merely negative campaigning, Congress's diminished reputation and the intrusiveness of the modern media but the fact that national-level politicians cannot any longer 'settle in' to governing. Instead, they have to contemplate fighting the next election campaign before they have finished the last one. Alan Ehrenhalt writes in *The United States of Ambition:*

> There are thousands of politicians around the country who decide every year that a career in Congress is not for them. But they do not make that decision after two years or four years in office. They make it in advance, knowing what is involved. Congressional burnout still exists. But it isn't a midcareer problem anymore. It happens at the starting gate.[24]

The possibility that large numbers of able men and women may be quitting at the starting gate, or even before, is lent support by the large numbers of voluntary retirements among those already elected to Congress. Retirements soared in the 1970s, fell back considerably in the 1980s and have soared again in the 1990s. Many decisions to leave can, of course, be explained by factors that have little or nothing to do with job satisfaction – factors ranging from improved

[24] Ehrenhalt, *United States of Ambition*, p. 230.

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congressional pensions to the 1992 House banking scandal. Even so, lack of job satisfaction in recent years does appear to have been an additional factor prompting considerable numbers of incumbent members to stand down. It may seldom have been the only factor; but it has frequently played a part.

One recently retired congressman told an enquiring political scientist in the 1970s:

> Every time you turn around there is another election coming up. It makes things more intense and nerve-wracking. You are always running, and I suspect this is why members of the House seem to burn out more quickly than senators. I suppose I would still be there if I didn't have to run for re-election every two years.[25]

Another, who quit in 1994 after twenty-five years in the House, likewise put the blame on the demands of incessant campaigning and the never-ending need to raise funds: 'What you have to do to get the job is something I'm just not willing to do anymore. Campaigns get more mechanistic. Money has virtually divorced campaigning from people. Money has allowed us to professionalize campaigns, when they should be an amateur sport.' The same man then added, for emphasis: 'It's not the job, it's the campaign. I'm so elated at not having to campaign.'[26]

But to most American citizens the effects of high-exposure politics that really matter are not their effects on the organization of Congress or political recruitment and retirement but their effects on public policy. It would be surprising, to say the least of it, if vulnerable politicians did not produce policies that bore the hallmarks of their vulnerability. A number of possible policy effects of vulnerability can be singled out. Some are more familiar than others.

(6) Particularism and Pork

One of the most familiar effects of American officeholders' vulnerability is particularism: the disposition of the American political system to generate policies deliberately designed to target specific benefits on specific groups and individuals in the population – a disposition that extends to 'framing laws to give a particularistic cast to matters that do not obviously require it' (or, come to that, that obviously require precisely the opposite).[27] 'Pork' is a familiar American phenomenon, and one of Congress's unwritten but best-observed rules is that every member gets a slice of it.

The instances of general laws being given 'a particularistic cast' are innumerable. R. Douglas Arnold lists some of them:

> The idea behind model cities (1966) was to create a demonstration program pouring massive federal funds into a handful of trouble cities. Congress transformed it completely by providing for 150 cities, making small cities eligible, and limiting any state's share to 15 percent of the total funds. Bureaucrats then selected the cities

[25] Quoted in John R. Hibbing, *Choosing to Leave: Voluntary Retirement from the U.S. House of Representatives* (Washington, DC: University Press of America, 1982), p. 57.

[26] *New York Times*, 1 October 1994, p. A1.

[27] Mayhew, *Congress: The Electoral Connection*, p. 128.

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strategically for maximum political effect, spreading the benefits among as many of the program's congressional supporters as possible, even selecting a handful of villages with populations under 3,000. Similarly, a water and sewer program (1965) conceived to help rapidly growing areas was transformed so that all areas were eligible. The Appalachian regional development program (and most other development programs) have been broadened to include less distressed areas.[28]

And so on. In every case, the purpose of the original programme is blunted; the waste is enormous.

(7) Interest Group Influence

Another familiar effect of American politicians' vulnerability is the power it accords to lobbyists and special interest groups, especially those that can muster large numbers of votes or have large amounts of money to spend on campaigns. Members of the US Congress 'walk the electoral world alone'; they can be picked off one by one; they know it; they adjust their behaviour accordingly.[29]

The cases of the American Association of Retired Persons, the National Rifle Association, the National Education Association, the banking industry and the various veterans' lobbies are well known. The power of organizations like these derives partly from their routine contributions to campaign funds and the quality of their lobbying activities in Washington, but it derives far more from congressmen's and senators' calculations of how the positions they take and the votes they cast in the present may affect their chances of re-election in the future – and the future is usually not so very distant. Might a challenger use that speech against me? Might I be targeted for defeat by one of the powerful lobby groups? Most politicians are intensely risk-averse when it comes to elections. 'A few instances where such [lobby] groups have helped to defeat seemingly entrenched incumbents are sufficient to keep most members from taking them on'.[30]

(8) Symbolic Politics

One of the somewhat less familiar consequences of US politicians' high degree of electoral exposure is that, being subject to such intense and continuous pressure, American politicians are even more likely than other people's politicians to engage in symbolic politics: the politics of words masquerading as deeds, of actions that purport to be instrumental but in fact amount to no more than windy rhetoric. A problem exists; the American people demand that it be

[28] R. Douglas Arnold, 'The Local Roots of Domestic Policy', in Thomas E. Mann and Norman J. Ornstein, eds., *The New Congress* (Washington, DC: American Enterprise Institute, 1981), p. 272.
[29] Fiorina, *Congress*, p. 131.
[30] Jacobson, *Politics of Congressional Elections*, p. 214.

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solved; politicians cannot solve it; in some cases they know they cannot solve it; they nevertheless engage in an elaborate pretence of trying to solve it, often at great expense to the American taxpayer and almost invariably at a very high cost in terms of both the truth and elected politicians' own reputations for integrity and effectiveness. The politicians lie, not because in most cases they are liars or approve of lying, but because the potential electoral costs to them of not lying are too great.

Cases of symbolic politics abound in the United States, and they are almost certainly greater (though no one has ever done a comparative study) than in any other democratic country. Prohibition in the 1920s was an almost pure example. Some would argue that Star Wars in the 1980s was too. The various 'wars' that are waged from time to time on drugs and crime are, likewise, expensive and mainly useless. They are not really designed to reduce drug-taking or criminal activity; they seldom do either. They are really designed to impress, by deceiving, the voters.

(9) Foreshortened Time Horizons

Another less familiar, though not very subtle, effect of American politicians' electoral vulnerability is the systematic foreshortening of their time horizons – and therefore of the time horizons of the American governmental system as a whole. Again, the foreshortening is in no way American politicians' fault. It is an inevitable consequence of a system in which elections are so frequent and make such continuous and heavy demands on those who fight them. Who can afford to think of the next decade, let alone the next millennium, when the next, crucial electoral contest is probably only a year or two away? Samuel Johnson famously said that 'when a man knows he is going to be hanged in a fortnight, it concentrates his mind wonderfully'. American politicians' minds are always concentrated – and, alas, their thoughts are seldom of all eternity (or even, so far as one can tell, of their place in history).

Many US officeholders are well aware that short-termism is an occupational disease from which they all to varying degrees suffer. One senator, already quoted, complained of the 'absence of a long view'. Another remarked:

> The Founding Fathers gave senators six-year terms so they could be statesmen for at least four years and not respond to every whim and caprice. Now a senator in his first year knows any vote could beat him five years later. So senators behave like House members. They are running constantly.[31]

A former member of the House, Timothy J. Penny, recounts how he tried to persuade a fellow member to vote against a proposal to exempt the Veterans Health Administration from the provisions of a bill designed to cut federal spending. The following dialogue ensued:

[31] Quoted in Ehrenhalt, *United States of Ambition*, p. 236.

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FELLOW MEMBER: How did this bill ever get to the floor? This is irresponsible.
PENNY: Can you vote no?
FELLOW MEMBER: I can't do that. This is an election year. Veterans already have enough reason to be upset with me.[32]

Politicians and governments everywhere, of course, watch their backs in election years. The point of Penny's story is that in the United States every other year is an election year – and every year in between is a pre-election year.

(10) Difficulty in Taking Tough Decisions

The final less familiar consequence of American politicians' vulnerability is that it makes it even harder for politicians in the United States than for elected politicians in other democratic countries to take tough decisions: to court unpopularity, to ask for sacrifices, to impose losses, to fly in the face of the conventional wisdom – in short, to take decisions in what they believe to be their constituents' interests and the national interest rather than in what their constituents themselves believe to be in their interests. Penny remarks ruefully that 'voters routinely punish lawmakers who try to do unpopular things, who challenge them to face unpleasant truths about the budget, crime, Social Security, or tax policy'. He concludes, perhaps a little harshly, that 'a Culture of Hypocrisy thrives in Washington'.[33]

The difficulty that American politicians – even more than other people's politicians – have in taking tough decisions is especially important in an historical period like the present one, when loss-imposing rather than largess-distributing has become a major challenge facing democratic politics everywhere. Governments throughout the period of the long post-war boom could enjoy playing Santa Claus. Now they look increasingly like Scrooge. And it is worth noting that, by some malign fate, the inauguration of the new era of loss-imposition throughout the democratic world has coincided in the United States with the recent era in which American elective politicians, having always been so vulnerable, suddenly became even more so. The weakening of parties from the late 1960s onwards, and the explosion of campaign costs and therefore politicians' increased dependence on well-funded interest groups, could not have come at a worse moment from this point of view. The story of energy politics in the 1970s and the story of budget-deficit politics in the 1980s and 1990s are largely stories of the American system's difficulties in coping with, and responding to, the requirements of a more demanding age.[34]

[32] Timothy J. Penny and Major Garrett, *Common Cents* (Boston, Mass.: Little, Brown, 1995), p. 106.
[33] Penny and Garrett, *Common Cents*, p. 72.
[34] The best treatment so far of the politics of loss imposition is Paul Pierson, *Dismantling the Welfare State? Reagan, Thatcher, and the Politics of Retrenchment* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 1994).

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A PROBLEM OF RESPONSIVENESS?

The central questions raised by this article have probably long since become obvious. The American system has always been based on the ideal of direct or agency democracy. In the 1990s it is frequently condemned, by American citizens, for not being sufficiently responsive to the people's opinions and wishes. But is it not in fact perhaps *too* responsive? Is there not perhaps a case for readdressing the case in favour of something more like division-of-labour democracy?

Whatever the answers to these questions (and the writer's biases should be evident), it is notable that doubts about the degree to which the American system is over-responsive to voters' concerns, rather than not sufficiently responsive to them, are already creeping into the writings of some leading commentators on American politics and government. The commentators in question are seldom vehement, and they seldom spell out their arguments in detail; but they are clearly worried – and their worries run along the lines being suggested here.

Gary C. Jacobson, for example, refers to the phenomenon of 'responsiveness without responsibility' in the US Congress, and a political scientist and former congressman, David E. Price, writes that he is concerned, not about 'governance in disregard of the popular will', but, on the contrary, about 'a *failure* of governance, based on an exaggerated sensitivity to the anticipated campaign use of difficult policy decisions'.[35] (The use of the word 'exaggerated' in this context is somewhat ironic in view of the fact that Price lost his seat in 1994.)

Alan Ehrenhalt similarly makes the same concern one of his themes in *The United States of Ambition*. He describes the American system as being one in which 'the elected representatives are, if anything, hyper-responsive'. Members of Congress, he says, have become 'magnificent responders':

> The flights that bring them home on weekends guarantee them a full array of constituent problems, complaints, and suggestions. Those same flights bring constituents to the Capitol, precluding any real insulation from constituent pressure, even within the halls of Congress. It is sometimes written that members of Congress, blessed as they are with a variety of free privileges and perquisites denied to the rest of us, have lost touch with ordinary experiences. In fact, the opposite is true. Congressmen may not have to pay the full cost of an airplane flight or a restaurant meal, but when it comes to hearing constituent complaints, they are tuned in fifty-two weeks a year.[36]

As Ehrenhalt suggests, perhaps what is needed is not less 'insulation' but more.

A CONCLUDING WORD

This article, written by a Canadian resident in Great Britain, could give rise to a serious misapprehension – or, rather, to three serious misapprehensions.

[35] Jacobson, *Politics of Congressional Elections*, pp. 232–8; David E. Price, *The Congressional Experience: A View from the Hill* (Boulder, Col.: Westview Press, 1992), pp. 166–7.

[36] Ehrenhalt, *United States of Ambition*, p. 235.

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The first is that America's current political difficulties can all, without exception, be traced to the politics of high exposure and extreme vulnerability. This is, of course, not the case; and no such simple, unicausal explanation is being put forward here. The only suggestion being made here, on the basis (be it said) of largely familiar research, is that high exposure and extreme vulnerability are factors that need to be taken into consideration by anyone seeking to understand why the US system currently works (and sometimes fails to work) in the way that it does. The factors of high exposure and extreme vulnerability are not in fact ones that have tended to be taken into account till now.

The second misapprehension concerns the (largely implicit) comparisons that have been made here between the United States and other countries, usually to America's disadvantage. It should go without saying that the politicians of other countries – however much they may believe in division-of-labour democracy – are also subject to electoral pressures and are just as likely as their American opposite numbers to succumb to them. The only claim being made here is, that for the reasons given, they are subject to such pressures less often and in a less unremitting way. Nor is it being claimed here (either implicitly or explicitly) that other democracies do not also have their own serious problems, problems which in many cases the United States may not share. For what it is worth, the present writer thinks the British political system is in at least as bad shape as the American – but for different reasons. In any case, if Americans are concerned about their own polity, it is up to them to address *its* faults rather than cheering themselves up by contemplating the faults of others. (It does not do the British any good to dwell, as they often do, on, say, corruption in Italy.)

Finally, it should be understood that this article about the United States, written by a foreigner, is not offered in any spirit of moral or intellectual superiority. On the contrary, Canada, his native land, teeters permanently on the brink of national disintegration, while Great Britain is in a state of seemingly irreversible secular decline. Americans over the years have had quite enough of Brits and others telling them how to run their affairs. The present writer has no wish to prolong their agony – or their irritation.

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