Response to "American Democracy in an Age of Inequality"

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The APSA Task Force on Inequality and American Democracy's Report (2004), *American Democracy in an Age of Inequality*, concludes that progress toward realizing our ideals of democracy "may have stalled, and in some arenas reversed" as a result of growing inequality. Political participation, whether through voting, or campaign contributions, or organizational activities, reflects the distribution of economic resources, and as resources come to be more unequal, so is participation increasingly skewed toward the better-off. As a result, the Report goes on to argue, the issues and positions of the affluent are heard by politicians, and louder voices give the affluent greater influence. I agree with this conclusion, so far as it goes. Disparities in voting, money, and organization matter in the political process, and economic inequalities inevitably affect these disparities. None of this is new, of course. While inequalities have increased during the past three decades, they have increased during earlier periods in American history. This is normal politics in the United States, sometimes worse, sometimes better.

However, I think that forcing the problems of the contemporary period in the United States into this very familiar mold may be misleading, for it encourages us to understate the seriousness of the democratic distortions resulting from ongoing changes in American politics. Our problems are not just the result of skewed participation, of the familiar underrepresentation of the least-well-off and the over-representation of the middle- and upper middle-class, in voting, organizational participation, and therefore in the calculations of incumbents. Rather we should pay more attention to the politics of extreme wealth concentration, the culture of greed and arrogance it has encouraged, and the stratagems the wealthy now deploy to control formally democratic institutions. It is this development that underpins the political regime that now controls all branches of the federal government. Although the regime defers, sometimes ambivalently, to the rituals of elections, it operates not like a democracy, responsive to multitudes of voters who participate in normal politics, but like a political machine that uses propaganda, deception, and clientelism to win voters, while the public policies it promotes reward a narrow stratum of machine players.

The machine, like all political machines, works to systematically convert public programs into private political spoils.[1] It includes Republican party operatives, top corporate lobbyists, leading conservative think tanks, business-funded advocacy groups, the organizations of the Christian right, and much of the mass media. So arrogant has the machine become that its new "K Street strategy" threatens to punish lobbyists who also contribute to the opposition party, no matter that doing so is traditional business practice.[2] Corporate machine players open Washington offices, launch Political Action Committees, flood electoral campaigns with contributions, and beef up the trade associations that are now virtually a branch of government. Lobbyists intrude into the inner workings of government, politicians leave office to morph into business executives, while other business executives morph into politicians.

The machine took over the Republican party, pouring money into the electoral campaigns of hard-right candidates, and pushing older-style conservatives to the margins. But the real measure of its political success was its influence on the Democratic party. Franklin Delano Roosevelt had talked of "strong central government as a haven of refuge to the individual."[3] By the 1990s, this tenet of the 20th-century Democrats was jettisoned, and the machine played a key role. The Clinton presidency is a good illustration. The machine had worked to turn welfare into a metaphor for African Americans, sexual license, and liberalism. In 1992, Bill Clinton made his bid for the presidency on the slogan of "ending welfare as we know it." As the 1996 election approached, the machine held Clinton's feet to the fire with their proposal for rolling back welfare called the Personal Responsibility and Work Opportunity Reconciliation Act. He turned for advice to his pollsters and consultants. Dick Morris told him to "fast-forward the Gingrich agenda." "Progressives," argued Clinton pollster Stanley B. Greenberg, "needed to transcend welfare politics."[4] Clinton signed the measure. The Democratic strategy, in a nutshell, was to beat the Republicans by adopting their positions.[5]

The machine is also a powerful presence in the mass media. Democratic deliberation in a large and modern society depends on the media to inform the citizenry about their political world. In the United States, political information and interpretation is hostage to a mass media under increasingly consolidated corporate control, and allied with the machine. Relatively little deeply controversial news is likely to make its way onto the main airwaves or into print. The Downing Street memos that reported Pentagon planning for an invasion of Iraq was

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far advanced by the summer of 2002, and also described White House efforts to doctor the intelligence and facts to justify the invasion, was ignored on the editorial pages of four of the five major U.S. newspapers.[6] While the mainstream media fall under the control of corporate allies of the administration, right-wing groups also expand their own print and cable television outlets,[7] and use these outlets to launch coordinated campaigns to harass and intimidate mainstream journalists as "liberal" or unpatriotic if they deviate from the administration line. The machine has also trained its sights on the public broadcasting networks, "stocking the corporation with G.O.P. loyalists," in the words of the New York Times, and threatening public broadcasting with big budget cuts ("Squelching Public Broadcasting" 2005).

The machine uses its media power and the bully pulpit provided by government office-holders to encourage Americans to accept contemporary policies by imbuing them with the aura of inevitability. The message of the machine revives the doctrine of *laissez faire*, the idea that free markets are the way of nature or the way of God, and that the policies of the machine are molded by this spiritualized market law. *Laissez faire* doctrine was always a doctrine of inevitability, of fatalism, at least for those at the bottom end of economic exchanges. In an era when the movement of goods, capital, and labor across borders seems to escape the control of the nation state, *laissez faire* arguments gain heft. And as they do, they weaken the conviction that has made democracy so compelling through the centuries: the idea that if people have influence on the state, they can use that influence to shape the conditions of their own well-being.

Democratic deliberation is also stymied by the contemporary pattern of deception perpetrated by the machine. In democratic principle, voters choose the party and the candidate whose record and promises come closest to matching their own preferences. But the Orwellian uses of rhetoric would seem to rule out such deliberation on the part of citizen voters. Candidate George W. Bush campaigned in 2000 as a "compassionate conservative" but as president offered a budget that slashed monies for school lunches, child care, and after-school programs. Or, on the campaign trail in 2004, President Bush asserted that most of his tax cuts went to low- and middle-income Americans. In fact, 53% will go to people with incomes in the top 10% (Johnston 2005). Half of all taxpayers received a cut of less than $100 in the first year, and by 2005 three-quarters will get less than $100, while the wealthiest 1% will get an average tax reduction of nearly $100,000 a year.[8]

The Medicare Prescription Drug Act passed in 2003 was advertised by the president as the fulfillment of his campaign pledge to provide drug benefits for seniors. The drug benefits are limited and patchy, but the legislation includes very large subsidies to the pharmaceutical companies, as well as legislated protection to the companies against competition from drug imports. To get the measure through Congress, the administration deliberately understated its true costs by more than 300 billion dollars, and even threatened to fire a Medicare actuary if he shared his estimates with Congress.

Or, in campaign 2000, candidate Bush told the voters that in foreign policy, "If we're an arrogant nation, [the people of the world] will resent us. If we're a humble nation but strong, they'll welcome us." This commitment did not restrain the administration's strategy of "preemptive" war in Iraq that threatened to wreck an international system of multilateral alliances. And the buildup to war led to more egregious public deception, including the repeated claims that Iraq had stockpiled "weapons of mass destruction," and that Iraq had supported Al Qaeda, claims that were not substantiated by U.S. intelligence. It is no longer outlandish to wonder whether the fear and excitement of the war against terror and the war against Iraq were at least in part electoral strategies to build support for the regime, distracting the public from the uncertainties and troubles of a weak economy with the nationalist enthusiasms that war always stirs. If this was, indeed, the strategy, it met with considerable success, at least during the elections of 2002 and 2004.

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And then there is the machine's use of public policy to shape political attitudes and political behavior. The Task Force Report notes this sort of "policy feedback" when it says that participation is encouraged by government programs that enhance opportunity and security, and mentions public education, the G. I. Bill, and Social Security. There is clearly some truth in this, although higher rates of voting among the elderly did not protect them from the travesty of the Medicare Prescription Drug Act with its extraordinary provisions to protect the pharmaceutical companies, for example. In any case, presumably the reverse is also true. When government programs are rolled back, as has occurred in nutritional, welfare, and housing programs, for example, and especially when the roll backs are justified by official rhetoric that demeans the programs and their beneficiaries, political participation might well be depressed.

However, the more important uses of policy to shape politics in the current period go far beyond encouraging or discouraging participation. The policies of the machine work to reinforce the politics of the machine in a vicious circle that debilitates democratic possibilities. Some of those policies, the tax cuts for example, contribute importantly to growing inequality. The concentration of income and wealth among the most affluent in turn augments their political resources, and strengthens their self-confidence in their own advantages and the policies that produce those advantages.[9] Meanwhile, the worsening misery of the poor, and especially of the very poor, may stimulate contempt among the larger public more than sympathy, and thus deepen their marginality. Similarly, the seediness and inadequacy that result from stripping the public sector of funds encourage distaste with public services and facilities, especially when the affluent increasingly turn to private services and gated communities.

Other policies also reinforce the political attitudes that the machine propounds. The ownership society initiatives—the shift from guaranteed pensions to stock accounts, the rollback of subsidized housing in favor of shaky schemes for home ownership, the proposals for "medical savings accounts"—turn people away from a belief in collective security and instead encourage illusions about the prospect of somehow striking it rich in the market. Meanwhile, the growing hardship and insecurity that result from the regime's policies lead more and more people to turn to religion, and especially to right-leaning evangelical and often fundamentalist churches that offer not only eternal salvation, but the concrete assistance that government programs no longer provide, including childcare, after-school programs, support groups of various kinds, and even cash hand-outs. The Bush administration encourages this trend with its faith-based initiatives which channel government funds to help churches provide the services that government once provided, creating a new system of clientelism, especially in the African-American and Hispanic communities which have until now been bastions of the Democratic party.

Similarly, the machine's appeals to "family values" may resonate just because family life is hollowed out when parents are stressed by overwork. "Over the last 30 years, workers in middle-income, married-couple families with children have added an average of 20 more weeks at work, the equivalent of five more months [a year]."[10] Long hours at work by both parents mean that no one has the time to do the caring tasks, the meal preparation, the homework help, the holidays, the play

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dates, and the dentist trips that are the stuff of family life. No wonder that anxieties about the family are widespread.

All this said, some caveats. First, this is not the first time in American history that a business-backed machine has taken over national politics. The 19th century is often depicted as an era of democratic exuberance. Parades and picnics and high voter turnout notwithstanding, political participation for much of the century was stamped and molded by intense religious and ethnic allegiances, and this political culture was in turn cultivated by political parties steeped in patronage at the national, state, and local levels. Voters were organized by armies of foot soldiers, to be sure, but the foot soldiers were on a payroll. The significance of these arrangements was that voter participation was organized in terms of ethno-cultural identities and personal favors, thus largely walling off voters from influence on the big and potentially divisive policies of the day, including currency, tariff, and the internal infrastructure developments that were decisively shaping the American political-economic order.

Meanwhile, this was also the era when corporate and especially railroad power grew and came to dominate national, state, and local governments. Corporations secured favorable action on tariffs, huge land giveaways, and subsidies, commandeered government agencies to do railroad work, and then used the further wealth thus accrued to tighten their grip not only on state governments, but on national government. Control of state legislatures guaranteed control of the Senate, and control of the Senate yielded control of the U.S. Supreme Court. Boies Penrose, a late-nineteenth-century Republican senator from Pennsylvania, captured the dynamic in a speech to a business audience: "I believe in a division of labor. You send us to Congress; we pass the laws under which you make money . . . and you further contribute to our campaign funds to pass more laws to enable you to make more money" (*State of Working America 2002/2003*, 16).[11] James B. Weaver, the People's Party of America presidential nominee in 1892, summed it up: plutocracy "has usurped the Government . . . filled the Senate . . . , controls the popular branch of the legislature, and it has not hesitated to tamper with our Court of last resort" (Phillips 2002, 201). The party's platform was more eloquent:

> [W]e meet in the midst of a nation brought to the verge of moral, political, and material ruin. Corruption dominates the ballot-box, the legislatures, the Congress, and touches even the ermine of the bench. The people are demoralized; most of the States have been compelled to isolate the voters at the polling places to prevent universal intimidation or bribery. The newspapers are largely subsidized or muzzled, public opinion silenced, business prostrated, our homes covered with mortgages, labor impoverished, and the land concentrating in the hands of capitalists. The urban workmen are denied the right of organization for self protection. . . . Imported pauperized labor beats down their wages. . . . The fruits of the toil of millions are boldly stolen to build up colossal fortunes for a few. (Zinn and Arnove 2004, 229)

Money corruption, in other words, is not new.

Still, it is small consolation to remember that American democracy has been corrupted before, especially since the stakes are so much larger now for Americans and for the entire world. Here at home we have already lost a great deal. The social programs and business regulations forged during the New Deal and the Great Society have been rolled back, along with union rights. Environmental regulations are being steadily eroded, and the U.S. responds casually to threats of a pandemic with consequences that affect not just the U.S., but the entire planet. And then there is the turn by the regime to unilateral military aggression abroad, and the dangers it poses to other peoples as well as to Americans. And finally, the ever more precarious state of the American economy as public and private indebtedness grows. So, this is indeed a troubled moment in American political life.

But it is not without possibility. Business domination of American politics has been interrupted before, as evidenced by the periods of democratic reform in our history. Popular upheavals, from the farmers' movements of the late 19th century, to the labor movement of the 1930s, to the civil rights and poverty movements of the 1960s, played an important role in those periods. But the rise of those movements, and their ultimate impact on politics and policy, was worked out in the context of electoral politics. Movements raise the issues that are otherwise suppressed, and create the disorders and disruptions that make government action imperative. Just how government responds at such moments of crisis, however, depends importantly on how masses of voters align themselves on the issues raised by the movements. At these moments, the emphasis on broad electoral participation espoused by the APSA Task Force is indeed pertinent. This is also the reason to take heart from the evidence that the machine is losing its grip on public opinion. Even while people respond to exhortations like "personal responsibility" and "family values" they also continue to believe in government responsibility, for health care and economic prosperity, for example. The patriotic fervor generated by war tends to fade over time as the costs of war to the population become evident, and sometimes also as the deceits and incompetence with which war was pursued are exposed. By mid-2005, only 37% of the public approved of the administration's handling of the war in Iraq, and a mere 25% agreed with his proposals on Social Security (Toner and Connelly 2005).

In conclusion, the publication of *American Democracy in an Age of Inequality* implies that the APSA recognizes political scientists' responsibility to contribute to public understanding of the relations between inequality and politics in the United States. That is a good thing. On balance, however, this is a timid document. But then, we can hope it is only a first step.

Notes

1. On the GOP business political machine, see Nicholas Confessore, "Welcome to the Machine: How the GOP Disciplined K Street and Made Bush Supreme," *Washington Monthly Online*, July/August 2003.

2. See Elizabeth Drew's description of what she describes as "the unprecedented corruption—the intensified buying and selling of influence over legislation and federal policy—that has become endemic in Washington." Elizabeth Drew, "Selling Washington," *New York Review*," June 23, 2005: 24–27.

3. The quotation is from a speech to the Commonwealth Club in 1932. See Aaron Singer, ed., *Campaign Speeches of American Presidential Candidates* (New York: Unger, 1976), cited in Ronald Schurin, "A Party Form of Government" (Ph.D. dissertation, Graduate School of the City University of New York, 1996). Schurin argues that this definition of the role of government was a strong and consistent theme in Roosevelt's public addresses.

4. This is from Stanley B. Greenberg's reminiscence, "How We Found—and Lost—a Majority," *American Prospect*, June 2005. Greenberg's 1991 article, "From Crisis to Working Majority," was considered a key guide for the Clinton 1992 campaign.

5. See Jonathan Schell's review of two Dick Morris books, *The New Prince: Machiavelli Updated for the Twenty-first Century*, and *Behind the Oval Office: Getting Reelected against All Odds*. Schell's review is "Master of All He Surveys," *The Nation*, June 21, 1999.

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6. See Tom Engelhart, ed., "Tomgram: Mark Danner on Smoking Signposts to Nowhere," June 14, 2005, www.tomdispatch.com/index.mhtml?pid=3602. Frank Rich reports that in the 19 press briefings by the White House after the "Downing Street memo" was revealed, only two of the 940 questions by the press corps were about the memo. See "Don't Follow the Money," *New York Times*, June 12, 2005. There are numerous similar examples of the suppression of news unfavorable to the reigning administration by the mainstream media. Todd Gitlin gives the example of the failure of the media to report the number of detainees who died in American custody during the "war on terror." See "MIA: News of Prison Toll," *The Nation*, July 4, 2005.

7. For one journalist's list of right-wing media outlets, see Lewis Lapham, "Tentacles of Rage: The Republican Propaganda Mill: A Brief History," *Harpers*, September 2004.

8. These numbers are from a study by Citizens for Tax Justice, reported in David E. Rosenbaum, "Bush May Have Exaggerated, but Did He Lie?" *New York Times*, Week in Review Section, June 22, 2003: 1. For an excellent analysis of the distortions of voter perceptions with regard to the new tax legislation, see Jacob S. Hacker and Paul Pierson, "Abandoning the Middle: The Bush Tax Cuts and the Limits of Democratic Control," *Perspectives on Politics* 3, no. 1 (2005): 33–53.

9. For a discussion and data on the correlation between income concentration and conservatism, see Alex Hicks, "Back to the Future? A Review Essay on Income Concentration and Conservatism," *Socio-Economic Review* 1 (2003): 271–288.

10. The United States was the OECD leader in average annual hours at work. See Ken Estey, "Review of *Labor's Time: Shorter Hours, the UAW, and the Struggle for American Unionism* by Jonathan Cutler," *WorkingUSA: The Journal of Labor and Society* 8, no.3 (2005): 370–374.

11. Quoted by Mark Green, "Stamping Out Corruption," *New York Times*, October 28, 1986, A35 and cited in Bertell Ollman and Jonathan Birnbaum, eds., *The United States Constitution* (New York: New York University Press, 1990), 7–8.

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