



1938

American Politics, 1938

Francis Mairs Huntington-Wilson

Follow this and additional works at: https://digitalcommons.ursinus.edu/fmhw_commerce_documents



Part of the [Diplomatic History Commons](#), [Political History Commons](#), and the [United States History Commons](#)

[Click here to let us know how access to this document benefits you.](#)

Recommended Citation

Huntington-Wilson, Francis Mairs, "American Politics, 1938" (1938). *Documents, 1919-1938*. 94.
https://digitalcommons.ursinus.edu/fmhw_commerce_documents/94

This Essay is brought to you for free and open access by the Travel, Commerce and Politics (1919-1938) at Digital Commons @ Ursinus College. It has been accepted for inclusion in Documents, 1919-1938 by an authorized administrator of Digital Commons @ Ursinus College. For more information, please contact aprock@ursinus.edu.

Part II
Chap. 21

131

AMERICAN POLITICS.

From the philosophy of the French Revolution had come the slogan "Liberty, Equality, Fraternity". The idea of fraternity was as old here as the Mayflower Pact and it is embedded in our democracy and our patriotism. Fascinated by ^athe French phrase, our forebears embodied in the Declaration of Independence the ideas that all men are born free and equal, and that there are natural and inalienable rights. We all know that no man, in any human society, is entirely free; that no two men are likely to be born of exactly equal character, mind, body, or ability; and that rights (always limited by the rights of others) rest, through morals and law, upon social convenience,-- and force. Such phrases as those about equality, literally accepted, may account in part for our pathetic trust in education, as if it were a magic that could alter the individual's biological inheritance of qualities.

The idea that the object of society, and therefore of government, was "the greatest good of the greatest number" was put into those words for us by the English Bentham. We have been prone to forget that the concept was amended by Mill to include aesthetic and moral, as well as material good. And we have borne in mind very little the fact that if a country is to be run for the greatest good of the greatest number, then the character and quality of that "greatest number" is of the utmost importance. Indeed, a little consideration of the matter will bring conviction that the greatest good of all will come through aiming for the good of the majority of worthy citizens; and that government "of the people, for the people, and by the people" requires a fine body of citizens represented by the best men they have,

132

We acquired rather early the habit of taking at their face value slogans, clichés, and "wise cracks". They are a convenient alibi for thinking.

Our passage from being a confederation of states to being also a union of states, on the adoption of the Constitution, had some curious effects upon the machinery of government that we have. Given the mutual jealousies, conflicts of interest, and fiercely suspicious self-assertion of state sovereignties, it was not surprising that senators should be regarded somewhat as ambassadors of their states to the federal government at Washington; and that the Constitution should require both senators and representatives to be "inhabitants" of the States electing them. This extreme consciousness of the individuality and reserved independence of the States, in limiting their representation in Congress to "inhabitants", has had marked effects upon the quality of party government in this country.

For one thing, it excludes from Congress a surplus of able men in some States in favor of mediocre ones from others. More important still, it causes party leadership to stem from the little political rackets ^{of} wards and towns. These local machines, and the ~~the~~ men who compose them, generally know little and care not overmuch about national policies. Their concern is to dominate locally and to enjoy, thereby, whatever of prestige, ~~office~~, and favors their locality has to offer. They run party caucuses. From among themselves and their henchmen they select delegates to party conventions. And, again usually from among themselves, they select candidates to run for nomination and election to office, whether local, State, or national. Some results of such a system are a lack of disinterestedness and ability in government;

an extremeⁿ sensitiveness to pressure groups; and all too frequent graft, inefficiency, waste, and scandal, ^{sometimes in State, and very notably} especially in municipal affairs. The wonder is, in the circumstances, that there are as many good men as there are in our public life.

In contrast to American practice, membership in the "mother of parliaments", the House of Commons, is gained without reference to locality of residence. An English political party is a body of voters in sufficient agreement on fundamentals to give them cohesion. Aside from its principles, the party's assets are the men of ability it can offer, irrespective of their place of residence, to represent constituencies in parliament and to assume responsible government posts. The prime minister is the party leader and he and nearly all of the cabinet are members of the House. In England, a defeat in the House on an important measure (like our court-packing or "reorganization" bills), means a coalition government or a freshly elected one. British voters are not left defenseless, as we are, and expected to go to sleep for fixed periods of two, four, or six years, between elections of representatives, presidents, and senators. In England there is no such thing as a four year sentence to have the same people in ^{executive} power, without possible reprieve, whatever their blunders.

Moreover, the English Prime Minister (corresponding to our President, in his capacity of party leader, if, as at present, he assumes that role), and all the members of the cabinet, have to defend their proposals directly on the floor of the House (of which they are members) against attack by the opposition. This direct debate makes issues clearer to the public than our indirect representation of the Administration by its spokesmen in Congress. Knowledge that any party or coalition that can command a majority in the House

134

may be called upon to take over the government has a sobering effect and restrains demagogic promises of the impossible. These things, and the absence of anything like our "spoils system", help to make the party system of our English cousins very superior, as an instrument of government, to that which has grown up here.

When our political institutions were adopted the problem was to protect a whole people from economic and social exploitation through political powers. The people were given the political power, Their democratic government was geared to protect the individual against political oppression as a means of economic and social oppression. Thus thwarted in one time-honored direction, human greed and lust for power found means through finance, the labor-saving machine, vast corporations, labor organizations, and other pressure groups, to regain the real rule of the country, leaving the official governments, ill-adapted to cope with the new situation, to be buffeted by rival pressures while really interested in office holding, office bestowing, and the zealous representation in each constituency of the interest most conducive to the representative's re-election. Now the pendulum has swung the other way again and it is against our government itself that we need protection. But with public indifference and no coherent public opinion, the best of democratic institutions are feeble defense against the rapacity of politicians.

With conditions what they had grown to be in this country, it is not surprising that the policies of the Government of the United States, to say nothing of those of many States and cities, and a large part of the economic life of the American people, have been for decades more and more shaped by various pressure groups. Indifference of the

135

generality of voters to the duties of citizenship and the responsibilities of democracy have made this possible. The same indifference is an obstacle to authentic public opinion upon many important questions.

In every State in the Union, and in every honest occupation, there are to be found great proportions of fine upstanding Americans, who owe no dual allegiance, who have common sense, honesty, courage, and sufficient intelligence to reject shams and to recognize the truth,-- if they gave thought to the country's problems. They are potentially ^{among} the finest citizens in the world. ^{But} They are minding their own business, little or large, and neglecting that greatest business of all, their government, which, if bad enough, can easily ruin them all, ~~in every way~~. Government they seem to regard as if it were as remote and uncontrollable as the weather. They make fine soldiers and sailors when their country goes to war; but they need more of that peace-time patriotism which means taking the duties of citizenship seriously, seeing the good of each in the good of all, and thinking of America as a land to love and serve, not merely as a field of activity. Awakened, and with good leadership, there are still quite enough such Americans to save America. If this were not so, then why bother about national defense, for example? National defense presupposes that we remain a nation worth defending.

Americans of wealth and leisure share with the great majority of us the attitude, probably quite subconscious, that this country is just an arena, a field for their activities, for the care of which they are not responsible. Hence the appalling political, social and moral

sterility of a favored group that ought to be a responsible and highly useful one. It is a discouraging aspect of the national life that this part of the population, with the best opportunities for education, and with leisure, contribute less ^{in proportion to their numbers,} to political life, moral standards, and decent government than do corresponding groups in any other country.

This failure may be ascribed to a number of causes. Particularly able men seldom retire from private business until their best years have passed. Those who do, and indeed the generality of Americans grown rich in business, are in amazing proportion risen from very modest economic status, after an early life of much discomfort and very hard toil. In those early years luxury and leisure were looked forward to as a goal almost equivalent to Heaven. The goal once attained, they concentrate upon trying to enjoy it. Instinctively they are disinclined to question the perfection of political and economic conditions that have been so wonderfully kind to them. Hence the frequent ultra-conservatism of the self-made man. When they feel any public obligation, they usually express it in money contributions and endowments rather than in any giving of themselves and their undoubted abilities to the service of the public. The curiously detached attitude of Americans toward their country and its government may be due in part to the national habit of changing residence; to the comparative scarcity of families whose homes for even two or three generations have been the same house, or even the same locality; to the comparative rarity, here, of pride in handing down a good name to worthy descendants. ^{PPx}

When a person of means and leisure does go in for a political career, he too often proves to be only a rich play-boy whose motive is not to try to give wise, honest and unslefish service to the country,

† We have a saying that ^{in this country} it is "only three generations
from shirt=sleeves to shirt=sleeves", ^{in this country} "Amazingly enough,
this dictum has been used ~~with approval~~ as a sort
of boast of American opportunity, with an implication of
rapid redistribution of wealth. We should rather con-
sider the demoralizing example of the waster's course
and the irresponsibility it represents. Wealth bestows
power for good or evil. There is such a thing as too
much opportunity, if the standards of competition are
low; and, what with that and with racketeering, too much
of the power of wealth goes into hands that ignore the oblige-

137

but rather to make a career that will flatter his vanity by seeming to set him above his fellows. Sometimes it is an unbalanced fanaticism or an excessive and superficial intellectuality that seeks an outlet and a theatre in the field of politics. Or it may be an inferiority complex that requires the solace of public acclaim and political prominence. It is true that under administrations not indecently political-minded some splendid successful men have been appointed ambassadors or members of cabinets. And, ^{especially} before the direct primary and the direct election of Senators, ^{a good many} more men of that type reached the Senate ^{and the House}

There is, of course, much excuse for the failure of qualified men to enter politics and public service in this country,-- men of character and ability and willingness to dedicate themselves to unselfish service, and with money enough to afford it. The foreign service, the army and the navy can take a few. The civil service has not been made attractive, either in quality or prestige. For the rest, the "practical politicians", ^{our excessively complicated} who control party machinery, pretty well bar the way to those who would give disinterested service in American politics. And these conditions, together with high salaries and generous perquisites for members of congress, draw more mediocre than exceptionally able men to our legislative ^{ive} bodies. Those who might become public-spirited leaders in politics more often hold aloof and engage in far less important and less interesting work. We may prate of "government of laws, not of men". Our real trouble is too many laws and not enough honorable, disinterested and wise men ^{to} engage ⁱⁿ the work of legislation and administration. 88

To work well, democracy must be government
through an aristocracy, in fact, an aristocracy of
character, honor and ability.