

# Hyperdemocracy

*American politics is more open and inclusive than ever. News about politics and government endlessly cascades from the media, and public opinion is incessantly sounded and courted. Yet Americans seem more and more alienated from the political process. Could it be that we have too much democracy?*

*by Hugh Hecló*

At the heart of American politics is a belief in self-government—the democratic faith that through argument, deliberation, and persuasion people are capable, in the long run, of discovering and promoting their common good. If such a faith sounds naive, consider the alternatives: rule by the most powerful, or rule by “experts,” insiders, or whoever is exalted enough to tell other people what to do. Americans have chosen a very different approach—government by discussion—and it is at the very foundation of America’s political institutions and procedures.

But American politics has been transformed in recent decades. The political system has become sensitive—indeed, hypersensitive—to the public’s opinions and anxieties. The traditional parties and interest groups, as well as the Constitution, have been pushed into the background, as polls, the media, and ideological activists and advocacy groups have moved to the forefront. American democracy is more open and inclusive than ever before, and citizens have unprecedented access to information about the workings of their government and the issues before it. Yet instead of becoming more engaged in democratic politics, the public has grown alienated from it. Americans today typically report feeling like victims of the political system, like harried subjects more than proud citizens.

If the twin hallmarks of America’s new “hyperdemocracy” are democratization and distrust, a question arises: can a republic so constituted long endure?

From the beginning of the republic, American politics has been on a course toward greater democracy. To be sure, there have been zigs and zags along the way, as with the imposition of segregation after the end of slavery. But the inexorable movement has been to expand the meaning of “we, the people” to encompass *all* the people.

Within a generation of the Constitution’s ratification, property qualifications for white male electors began to be dismantled. In the late 19th century, women began to gain the vote at the state level, and in 1920, with the 19th Amendment, they obtained full electoral equality with men. Constitutional mechanisms that the Framers had employed to refine public participation, keeping the demos at a safe distance from the government—devices such as the Electoral College and the indirect election of senators—faded into insignificance or were removed. Then, after the midpoint of the 20th century, came the culmination of formal political inclusiveness, with the national guarantee of voting rights for black Americans and young adults, and the judicial embrace of the principle of “one person, one vote.”

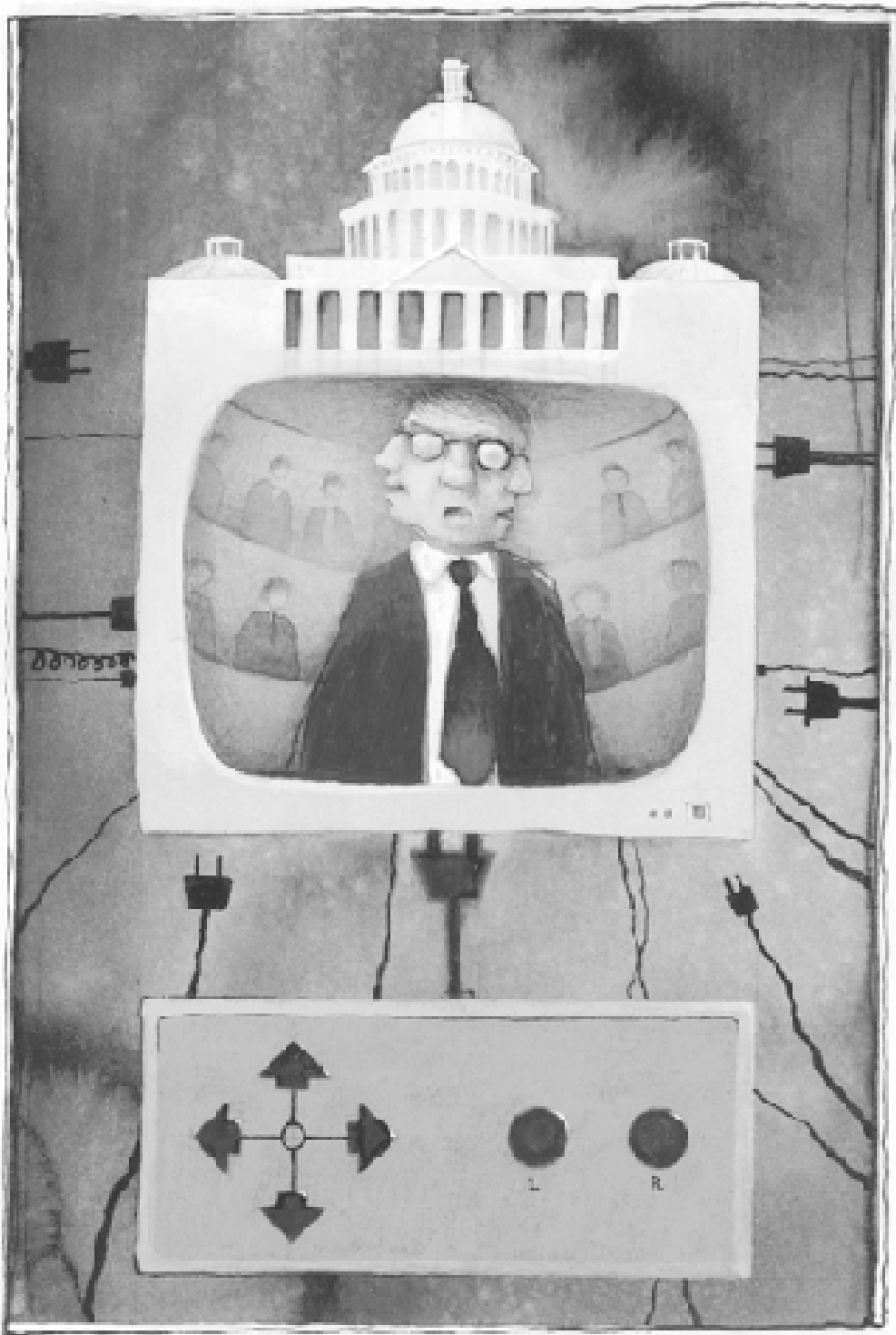


ILLUSTRATION BY MATTHEW TRUEMAN

Thus, over the little more than two centuries of its existence, the United States has gone from a time when less than one in 20 Americans had a voice on such a momentous issue as the ratification of the Constitution to today's mass democracy, in

which virtually any adult who is not deranged or in prison can register and vote (though a declining proportion of eligible Americans take the trouble to do so).

But even that is not the full extent of the massive democratization of American pol-

itics. The judiciary—the least democratic branch of government—has also grown more inclusive in recent decades. New legislation and more activist judges have made the courts far more accessible. Restrictions have been relaxed on who can initiate legal action, lawsuits have been more readily permitted in behalf of entire classes of people, and successful plaintiffs have been allowed to recover their legal expenses from their defeated adversaries. All these actions have opened the doors of the judicial process wider to organized advocacy groups, such as environmentalists and consumer crusaders. Rules of administrative law that once mainly protected business from government have been broadened to let such groups influence the courts' administrative decisions.

Since the tumultuous 1960s, more and more Americans have banded together in movements of all sorts and sizes. In the mid-1950s, the only contemporary “movement” of which the average citizen was likely to be aware was the communist one (whose domestic influence had been much exaggerated by the demagogic senator Joseph R. McCarthy). Two decades later, however, a multitude of movements were vying for the public's attention, including drives for civil rights, women's rights, the environment, consumers, farm workers, welfare rights, and abortion rights, to name a few. Of all the interest groups with headquarters in Washington today, roughly 70 percent have appeared since 1960. With government now touching virtually every aspect of Americans' lives, a huge, complex, and diverse array of organized advocacy groups have sprung up around it. America has had agitational groups before, but never anything like this.

The civil rights movement of the 1940s and '50s was a prototype of many of the other movements that subsequently came into being. These often began as rather loose gatherings of

enthusiasts for particular causes; gradually, the crusaders became more organized and more media savvy—and a semipermanent lobbying presence. As advocacy groups multiplied, they contributed to a growing consciousness of, and preoccupation with, public policy. Semidormant groups such as the Sierra Club and the Audubon Society, noticing the aggressive activities of such upstarts as Friends of the Earth and Greenpeace, awakened from their slumber and became actively involved with national issues. The new “public interest” lobbies, working for the environment or consumers or clean government, not only roused competitors into action but also stirred the affected entrenched interests into opposition. Advances in communications technology, such as faxing and e-mail, facilitated mobilization of the like-minded. Ambitious government initiatives (such as the Clinton health care plan) to deal comprehensively with a problem sometimes set previously harmonious groups (hospitals, doctors, insurers) against one another.

In the new, politically charged environment, activists abound, but in their crusading zeal, they are very different from average citizens. The activists are seldom satisfied with moderate, nondoctrinaire solutions to public problems—just the sort of solutions that ordinary Americans tend to favor. The arena in which public policy is made today is filled with activists and groups pursuing their own ideological agendas. These far from disinterested groups include many supposedly nonpartisan think tanks and policy institutes, as well as a host of self-proclaimed “defense funds,” “coalitions,” “action groups,” “forums,” and “networks.” To the advocates behind such banners, reaching a settlement on a particular issue is often far less important than “framing the issue,” “setting the agenda,” or “sending messages.” Indeed, since the long-range settlement of an

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issue would, in effect, render it useless as a weapon, that may well be the last thing the advocates want.

Earlier in this century, it was possible to do a good deal of policymaking behind the scenes, with relatively little publicity being given to the people or the processes involved. Richard E. Neustadt's classic *Presidential Power* (1960), for example, portrayed a relatively insulated world of Washington bargaining. Public opinion remained a distant force, a "prestige" factor, changing only slowly and only occasionally of indirect use to the men—and they were almost always men—inside the "Washington community" who were arguing among themselves and determining public policy. Today, that world has vanished. Publicity, exposure, investigation, revelation, and campaigning for policies through the media have become the norm. This is true whether the policy involves health care or gun control or even impeachment of a president.

The insistence on greater exposure and participatory openness in the political environment traces back, once again, to the turbulent events of the 1960s and early '70s—to Vietnam and Watergate. After the resignation of President Richard Nixon, the most sustained and comprehensive effort at ethics reform and public disclosure in American history took place. In Congress, publicly recorded votes, open committee meetings, televised debates, and more democratic procedures became the order of the day. Throughout government, new freedom of information laws, mandating public disclosure and public hearings, were put into place.

Informal forces for openness have been even more influential. Exposés of real or imagined abuses have become a staple of TV journalism, while "interpretive" reporting has become standard in newspaper journalism. Reporters now routinely seek to unmask the "real" meaning of events by portraying them as attempts by one side or another to gain political advantage.

The trend toward "democratic" open-

ness has also been aided by the advances in communications technology. With TV minicams, video recorders, portable audio recorders, cell phones, photocopiers, faxes, and the Internet all in widespread use, it has become virtually impossible for political leaders to limit criticism by monopolizing information.

Obviously, the new openness is both good and bad. It offers access to voices that would not otherwise be heard, and it encourages exposure of political failures and wrongdoing. But it also promotes grandstanding, needless disputation, and endless delay. Perhaps worst of all, it creates in the American public a pervasive sense of contentiousness, mistrust, and even outright viciousness.

This is not to urge a return to policymaking behind closed doors. But it is to put the gains from openness in perspective by recognizing the drawbacks—and to acknowledge the frustrations that now are endemic to American politics. In one policy area after another in recent decades, large coalitions have disintegrated and been supplanted by multitudes of small groups, contentiously doing battle with one another. In the public arena today, there are many voices, but few leaders able to "deliver" large blocs of supporters and, therefore, to bargain quietly among themselves to hammer out agreements. Party leaders can no longer rely on "their" voters, since Americans do not have the same party loyalty they once did. In hyperdemocracy, it seems, openness prevails at every turn.

Information about politics and public affairs now flows continuously into the public forum. *All news, all the time.* As a result, individuals and groups must make ever more frenetic efforts to be heard above the din—and must reduce their thoughts to shouted messages.

Americans today are informed more rapidly about more subjects than ever before. But the complexity of public problems usually gets lost in the dramatic factoids and disconnected commentaries. Instead of knowledge about public affairs, Americans acquire a superficial knowingness.

Sixty years ago, broadcast radio news programs provided virtually no reliable information about many vital national conditions, such as crime, poverty, educational performance, and illegitimacy rates, to mention a few. Today, thanks to technological advances, such information is rapidly gathered and universally disseminated. But data seldom speak loudly for themselves, and often are easily overwhelmed by drama, slogans, and images.

During the run-up to the 1992 election, for instance, the official data on the economy were mixed, with inflation and interest rates low and the unemployment rate rising, albeit, by historical standards, only moderately. This mixed assessment of the economy's condition was no match for the more dramatic news stories telling of individual Americans who had lost their jobs. Throughout the 1992 economic recovery, media coverage of the economy was overwhelmingly negative, as was the public perception of economic trends and George Bush's related performance as president.

While modern media deluge the public with information, they give the impression of national problems as always unresolved, and their frequent exposés suggest that official venality is largely to blame. Even with the best of intentions, the exposé approach to policy issues can be quite misleading. It plays to short attention spans, short-term reactions, and the inevitable human demand for simplified dramatics. Media attention typically lurches from one "hot" topic to another, stressing in each case only one side of the issue, be it positive or negative, evoking enthusiasm or fear. Even though Cable Network News offers news around the clock, CNN stories average only about three minutes each, while the typical stories on the three major broadcast networks' nightly newscasts are even shorter.

In the past, policymakers usually had time to deliberate before the public weighed in with its opinions. That did not guarantee wise decisions, but it at least encouraged thoughtful ones.

Today, however, technology has reduced the time for deliberation. Call-in talk shows register public responses even as major events unfold, and the Internet gives anyone with a computer and a modem minute-by-minute access to pending legislative committee agendas and congressmen's voting positions, as well as e-mail facilities and bulletin boards. Computer-enhanced call-in campaigns to policymakers are common, as are fax campaigns by interest groups seeking to give the purported "popular" reaction to decisions or events. On hot issues, decision-making now often has an "on-line" quality.

Competing for attention, modern media often associate immediacy with importance, and intensity with seriousness. A dull congressional vote, agency announcement, or international agreement may represent important change in the world, but it holds little attraction for the media next to a plane crash or a public clash of personalities. As the current media vernacular puts it, "If it doesn't bleed, it doesn't lead." Consequently, information about public policy choices tends to be conveyed in the form of human interest "story lines" involving dramatic conflict, visual imagery, and compelling hopes and fears. This may help to expose corruption and draw attention to significant social problems, but it also tends to create phony conflicts and distorted perceptions. Even media-sponsored policy debates often merely provide, in place of a one-sided presentation of an issue, two one-sided presentations, albeit from opposite sides. In the electronic talk show of democracy, those citizens in the middle who see merits and demerits on both sides of an issue tend to be systematically excluded.

We, of course, are complicit with the media in all this. Each of us has a limited attention span, a desire to respond quickly if that makes our voice more likely to be heard, and an inclination to favor dramatic entertainment over substantive information. But today's communication technology enlarges these

natural individual proclivities and projects them onto public thinking in society as a whole. In the end, what is typically transmitted by our communication media is not so much information as such but rather feelings—whether of sorrow, shock, joy, or fear. The social order is experienced vicariously through the mass media as a gnawing daily presence, an unending succession of arguments never settled, about social problems never resolved.

Alongside innovations in communication technology, there have also been remarkable developments in “political technologies”—sophisticated techniques for studying, manufacturing, organizing, and manipulating public opinion to produce political support for candidates and causes. The techniques are by no means foolproof; often, deployed in competition, they cancel each other out. Nevertheless, they have a cumulative impact on the whole political process, giving it a far more contrived quality than it had until as recently as the 1950s. Indeed, scientific polling—which has been a prominent part of public life since the 1960s—proved to be the midwife of hyperdemocracy.

While polling techniques have advanced considerably in recent decades, the major news organizations rarely use them to examine policy issues in any significant depth. Most of their surveys are done instead with the idea of generating “news” stories about the popularity or unpopularity of particular viewpoints and personalities. The questions asked are usually too simple to elicit anything more than “off-the-top-of-the-head” opinions.

Meanwhile, politicians and advocacy groups engage in ceaseless private polling, using their surveys to plan political strategy, design media campaigns, or target fundraising. With the aid of polls and focus groups, public figures often are able to take inoffensive, usually vacuous, stands on controversial topics.

It was but a short step from polling to find out what the public thinks to political technologies to tell the public what it wants to hear. Since the 1950s, when

politicians and “advertising men” first discovered each other, specialized political consultant services have arisen to cover every imaginable point of contact between leaders and led. These services, in all their jargon-ridden splendor, now include survey research, strategic planning, direct marketing, image management, media materials production, “media buying,” event management, targeted “grassroots” mobilization, and opposition research. (Full-service “oppo firms” are currently the fastest-growing segment of the consultant industry.) And then there are the extensive fundraising services needed to pay for all the others. The 15 most expensive Senate campaigns in 1994 spent 70 percent of their funds on the services of consultants.

With electoral politics coming to resemble a political arms race, consultants have succeeded in turning what once was seasonal work into permanent employment, using their arts of continued talk not only to win elections but to push policies on issues such as tax reform and health care. As First Lady Hillary Rodham Clinton observed, “You have to run a campaign for policy just like you do for elections.” The failure of her drive for health care reform did not alter that. Today, hundreds of permanent policy campaigns are going on continually in this country. This is the context in which policymaking now takes place.

For the making of public policy, hyperdemocracy presents three general problems. *Policy debate occurs without deliberation. Public mobilization occurs without a public. And the public tends to distrust everything that is said.* These are hardly minor defects in our government-by-discussion.

The political environment of hyperdemocracy systematically discourages policy arguments that are substantive and responsive to competing ones. This is because good policy argumentation is bad political management. The central insight of professional political management was expressed in 1967 in a strategy memo by Raymond K. Price, a Nixon adviser who was seeking to develop a “new Nixon”:

It's not what's *there* that counts, it's what's projected—and carrying it one step further, it's not what *he* projects but rather what the voter receives. It's not the man we have to change, but rather the *received impression*. Reason requires a high degree of discipline, of concentration. . . . Impression can envelop [the voter], invite him in, without making any intellectual demand. [Italics in original]

In the media battle over public impressions, those who seek to educate the voters by providing information, or to answer opponents' criticisms, usually lose out to those who "frame" issues and images, shift focus and counterattack, avoid admissions of ignorance or uncertainty, and exaggerate conflict over policy for dramatic impact. These strategies exploit the modern media's appeal to our short attention spans, quick responses, and appetite for drama.

Winning policy debates in the world of consultant politics and hyperdemocracy is defined as coming out on top in a series of disconnected, adversarial contests, in which results are measured by vote percentages and by how well each side "moves the [poll] numbers." Doing whatever it takes to win on these terms has become normal practice, not because consultants and their clients are bad people, but because all participants recognize that that is the principal standard by which they will be judged and rewarded. However, from the point of view of the average citizen, the likely result is a general atmosphere of contentiousness, without contending arguments about policy problems moving, in a rational way, any closer to resolution.

**T**he politics of advocacy groups shows a similar pattern. Policy disputes are likely to begin not with good-faith bargaining in a search for agreement but with confrontation. Adversaries, since they are not backing the advocates' cause, are presumed to be enemies. And since the leaders of advocacy groups need dramatic, easily under-

stood threats to the cause in order to raise funds and mobilize supporters, they are very careful to avoid any "sell-out," to the point where policy activists often refuse to agree with their adversaries even when they really do agree. For this reason, much of what passes for policy debate involving advocacy groups actually has little or nothing to do with making policy, in the sense of finding a settled course of public action with which people can live. The "debate" instead becomes a forum for ideological crusades—confronting power with power, fundraisers with fundraisers, media campaigns with media campaigns. Policy debates on welfare reform, affirmative action, foreign trade, abortion, crime, business regulation, and environmental crises are rich in examples of this phenomenon of debate without deliberation. Honest skepticism and moderated thinking get pushed to the sidelines.

The overall result is to give the public a distorted picture of the underlying realities. The policy experts are perceived to be in much greater disagreement, and to be far more contentious, than they usually are when the cameras and microphones are turned off. Sudden, dramatic actions are made to seem more important—and the long-term consequences of chronic problems less important—than, more often than not, they really are. And what has been aptly called a culture of complaint emerges stronger than ever from policy debates in which seemingly dramatic conflicts never really settle anything or lead anywhere.

The public in America's hyperdemocracy is at once better known and more remote than ever before. Polling and other technologies now make it possible for politicians, consultants, and the media to "know" the public without having any true political relationship with it. Images are relentlessly bombarded at the faceless consumers of the mass media. In daily news "sound bites," "horse race" stories, and political ads, the public is courted but not engaged—asked to make a kind of passive consumer purchase but not any larger, more active political commitment.

Meanwhile, mobilization of selected segments of the electorate takes place. Instead of trying to create coalitions and mobilize the general public, consultants and politicians break the public down into various narrow demographic subgroups and target their resources on those already inclined in their favor. Computer-generated lists of potential supporters, profiled by demographic, consumer, and political characteristics, can be compiled, personalized mailings sent out, and a database of the like-minded developed for future use. In hyperdemocracy, this sort of political mobilization appears to be the most effective way to harvest funds, drive up poll numbers, and get supporters to vote—to do everything, in short, except mobilize *the public*, which includes too many ordinary folk who are not true believers and so, as one leading consultant put it, “are not profitable to work.” The result of all this, as Harvard University political scientist Morris Fiorina has observed, “is unnecessary conflict and animosity, delay and gridlock, and a public life that seems to be run by wackos.”

No wonder the public at large now looks upon politics and government with deepening distrust. To be sure, democracy and distrust have gone hand in hand from the start of the republic. The colonists who transformed themselves into American citizens created an unprecedented form of popular government and looked to it to secure their rights and actively legislate for the public good. Yet, at the same time, they were deeply suspicious of government’s power to subvert their liberties.

Today, however, this venerable ambivalence toward government has become dangerously unbalanced. Although Americans remain strongly attached to the symbols of their constitutional regime, and, apparently, to their basic form of government and the values on which it was founded, they seem in recent decades to have let skepticism toward authority devolve into cynicism toward all politics and government. To doubt and question public authority is a time-honored

American tradition. Always to expect the worst of it is not.

Cynical views of government have undoubtedly been encouraged by national leaders’ poor performance in office. Watergate and Vietnam, for example, were used for years as shorthand explanations for failures of leadership. But distrust is at least as great among younger generations who know of these events only through history books. Changing party control of the White House in 1992 and then Congress in 1994 appears to have done nothing to dispel public distrust and cynicism. And President Bill Clinton’s admitted misbehavior and prolonged prevarications about it have hardly improved the situation. If anything, the public has come to be more or less uniformly distrustful of whatever is being done in government by whoever is doing it.

At all levels of government, the political culture of hyperdemocracy encourages citizens to behave like spoiled children, demanding that government “meet my needs,” and alternating between sullen withdrawal and boisterous whining. And like angry children who nonetheless never doubt that their mother will always be there to ultimately set things right, Americans—at the same time that they exhibit an almost pathological cynicism about the political processes by which they govern themselves—generally express immense, not to say blind, faith in their nation’s future and in its standing as a democratic model for the world. In short, they naively trust in the ultimate unimportance of their distrust—that when things get bad enough, the system somehow will automatically right itself, presumably through the efforts of other people, who do not share their cynicism. But the truth is that the ills of hyperdemocracy are not self-limiting or self-correcting. Things *can* keep going from bad to worse. And as concerns the quality of the public discussion that is so basic to democracy, things have been getting worse for some time now.

What is to be done? It seems to me that there are two possible courses. One is the apparently logical but actually impractical solution of curbing the “exces-



sive” democratization that has taken place. We might try to restore some of the forms of indirect democracy, and thus erect firewalls between the governing institutions and mass opinion. For example, as keeper of its own rules, Congress could reduce the number of recorded votes, turn off the TV cameras, and return to routinely excluding the public from committee meetings. Whatever the merits of doing all this might be, however, it would be completely at odds with the whole spirit of the times. Such measures would be attacked as “elitist” and “antidemocratic”—and even if taken, they would soon be reversed. In short, it almost certainly isn’t going to happen. One may as well propose returning to the indirect election of senators or replacing presidential primary elections with conclaves of the Electoral College.

The second possible course, and the more realistic one, I believe, is to try to cure the ills of hyperdemocracy with more genuine democracy. Historically, democracy has been continually redefined—and it hasn’t always been easy. It took acts of political creativity in the 19th century to produce the legislative structures, budget processes, political parties, and interest groups that Americans soon took for granted. It will require at least as much political creativity today to counteract hyperdemocracy’s pathogenic side effects while preserving its benefits.

**W**e must create new arrangements that will make it safer for those who would lead us to tell the truth as they see it, and make it easier for us—who would be citizens—to hear and act on competing truth claims in a well-informed way.

First, we need to make some changes in

the media. Mere admonitions to media folk to do better will not suffice. We need to make some *institutional* changes. In particular, we need to turn the Public Broadcasting Service, which is now almost three decades old, into a public service telecommunications system geared to the needs of *citizens*, not just consumers of information and images. I have in mind a system at the national, state, and local levels that would integrate public television and radio with live-coverage public affairs channels, local public-access cable channels, interactive discussion forums, high-quality public affairs databases, and other on-line services relevant to public deliberation. The mission would be to offer timely, reliable information relevant to us as citizens, and nonpartisan forums for sustained public discussion of this mountain of information. Political candidates should be given free airtime,

to spare them the degrading, distracting, and potentially corrupting need to go around begging for funds in order to be able to address the public via the media. Whatever one’s philosophical view of public financing of elections, the real question, ultimately, is not whether, but how, the telecommunications revolution

that is under way today is going to affect America’s politics. If this is left solely to the mercies of commercial incentives, hyperdemocracy in the future promises to be even more grotesque than it is today.

**N**ext on my agenda for reform is an item that is already being implemented in some places. It’s called “civic journalism” or “public journalism,” and it seeks to go beyond traditional reporting to get both journalists and their audiences more engaged as citizens. Instead of being content with just reporting incidents of crime as they occur, for



instance, newspapers and television stations that engage in civic journalism typically work together to examine the neighborhood crime problem in depth and to develop a public “conversation” about it. In civic journalism, it is recognized that journalists and news organizations have civic responsibilities too, and should not just be serving up disillusioning news stories for readers or viewers to passively consume.

Closely related to civic journalism is the need to improve the way we usually gauge public opinion. Instead of conducting superficial polls gathering snap reactions to simplistic questions—or, even worse, taking the often extreme ravings of isolated crank callers to radio or TV phone-in shows as representative of public opinion—the news media and allied institutions need to make serious efforts to probe public thinking. In so-called deliberative polling, for example, survey researchers explore what representative samples of citizens think about particular issues when given unbiased information and adequate time to discuss and absorb it. Another approach to plumbing public opinion—already taken by some community groups—is to hold “national issue forums,” at which citizens try to work their way through the hard choices often involved in deciding on public policy. Since efforts to make deeper soundings of what the public really thinks are not likely to be prompted by commercial motives, support from foundations and other nonprofit organizations would be needed. To tame hyperdemocracy, we must drastically reduce the influence of public opinion at its shallowest, and the way to do that is to pay a lot more attention to public opinion at its most thoughtful.

Finally, I urge the importance of civic education. If we are to eliminate the ills of hyperdemocracy, people must want to behave like citizens. This is not “natural” behavior; it must be taught and learned. For schools, of course, it is far easier to go along with the larger culture and teach youths to have self-esteem and insist upon their rights. Civic education, by contrast, links rights to responsibilities, and teaches youths to listen as well as to speak, and to work together with others to solve mutual public problems.

To bring our raucous hyperdemocracy under control, we need not retreat from its openness, inclusiveness, or dependence on modern media technology. But we must work at organizing the talk of democracy in ways that make it better—more honest, more deliberative. Today, interest groups and political activists at the extremes are heard the most because they shout the loudest. They do not want a more genuinely democratic process of making public policy. They want to own the policy answers. To overcome their influence, we must find ways of engaging the informed and active consent of a much broader public—a citizen public that is truer to the vision of self-government than a consumer public can ever be. In the end, I believe, we must heed the advice given by “a parting friend” of the nation just over two centuries ago. Laying down his public duties for the final time, George Washington urged those who came after him to remember that “in proportion as the structure of a government gives force to public opinion, it is essential that public opinion be enlightened.” This was never more essential than it is today.