DIRECTING DEMOCRACY

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One could almost hear a collective sigh of relief on 8 May 2017 when France's voters elected Emmanuel Macron to be their president. In choosing a political moderate and a pro-European, the French not only repudiated the xenophobic politics of Marine Le Pen; they they also held out hope to the rest of the world that Britain's June 2016 decision to leave the European Union and America's election of Donald J. Trump were aberrational. Perhaps the world may not, after all, descend into isolationism and global disintegration. The disastrous aftermath of the economic nationalism of the 1930s is recent history, well remembered.

Macron's triumph notwithstanding, fear-mongering is a favorite political trick because it works. When voters can be convinced that other countries are grabbing their jobs or are exporting killers, they may vote for policies that prove calamitous in the long run. Think about the temporary popularity bump George W. Bush enjoyed from the "shock and awe" attack on Iraq, a popularity that got him elected for a second term. That's not all. Trade protectionism and anti-immigrant policies damage the economy, and to the extent that global economic integration is a major brake on wars

by spreading around a stake in others' prosperity, economic nationalism is also bad for national security.

Winston Churchill once quipped that democracy is the worst form of government except for all the others. If true, how can democracies best combat the false promises of the likes of Britain's Nigel Farage, Trump, and Le Pen? These politicians are, after all, populists who appeal to ordinary people. Is there something wrong with democracy itself, given how easily ordinary people are fooled, as Plato warned?

Churchill might be right about democracy's ability to muddle through in the long run, but we often reach for the wrong solutions first. The efforts since the 1960s to bring politics closer to the people – through primaries, local caucuses, ballot initiatives, referenda, and plebiscites – are well-meaning measures that have instead set back the public's ability to render governments accountable. The reforms have disabled political parties, the institutions best positioned to craft and compete over policies that make sense over the long haul and for the most people. Voters are vulnerable to shallow claims when political parties lack the ability to hold their member-politicians to a party line and are thereby unable to defend the party's long-term reputation for coherent, consistent policies. Rebuilding a well-functioning democracy requires reversing this trend and restoring party competition.

A great paradox of politics is that hierarchical parties are vital for healthy democracy. If parties cannot bear the costs of informing and mobilizing voters, they are at an immense disadvantage relative to interest groups. But for parties to be effective in this role, they must compete with one another over the policies that – if elected – they will actually implement as governments.

To foster electoral accountability, parties must be large and strong. Weakening party control over decisions, candidates, and leadership selection creates only the illusion of more grassroots democracy. In reality, it empowers intense minorities at the expense of most voters, and it promotes the capture, corruption, and lack of responsiveness that leads people to demand decentralizing control in the first place. Parties with strong internal hierarchies are best able to deliver on policy promises, particularly concerning policies that are important for long-term economic growth and

development. The more valuable a party's public identity and reputation, the more voters can trust that the party is not favoring short-term measures at long-term cost.

Design Flaws and Reforms in American History

America's founding fathers did not at first see the value of political parties. The U.S. Constitution entrenches political fragmentation through an elaborate system of checks and balances, as James Madison urged in *Federalist Papers* no. 10: interests must be made to compete against one another in order to cut them all down to innocuous size. The unfortunate result is that deep within the institutional DNA of American politics is a piecemeal approach to policy decisions.

Although U.S. civics books extol the virtues of limited and pragmatic government, fragmentation is costly. Ad hoc coalitions that reach one-off deals on policy pay a price in impaired democratic accountability: it is hard for unorganized voters to see and control what is going on. Only if everyone were included in one group or another, and only if all of those groups were of roughly equal political weight, would this structure yield meaningful democratic accountability. In fact, the Constitution built to limit the power of any one group instead created a path for populism and political myopia. Moreover, well-organized and well-resourced groups tend to do best in this system. This is a major reason why vulnerable minorities are less well-served by it than is often alleged.

It is unfair to blame the founding fathers for their lack of foresight in designing a well-ordered republic. With little to go on in those very early years of democratic experimentation other than classical Roman texts on how to prevent political demagoguery (at which, it should be said, the Roman Republic ultimately failed), the founders were groping in the dark. They failed to see that political parties, which they thought would ossify destructive factional interests, are vital to a healthy democracy. Only with experience did Madison appreciate, by 1800, this design flaw, and that strong, centralized party leadership – not just the absence of interest-group domination – was needed to govern the nation according to the long-term interests of electoral majorities. He

saw that, rather than acting as umpires in a free-for-all among fragmented interests, political parties are needed to meld interests into larger coalitions that embody broad-gauged and long-term compromises.

The founders stumbled upon the importance of political parties too late to incorporate them into the U.S. constitutional design itself, but they later scrambled to construct parties within the constitutional boundaries they had laid out. Campaigning for president in 1800 against John Adams's Federalist administration, Jefferson saw that he needed a groundswell of political support, and that, furthermore, he would need a legislative majority to devise policies that would win the favor of voters in the next round of elections. There are two essential elements of this strategy: a set of ideas that appeals to a wide swath of voters and the ability to commit to implementing these ideas, if elected, over an extended period of time. Jefferson and Madison created just that in their Republican Democratic Party: they put forward a broad formulation of the national interest for voters to judge, and they constructed a party that would survive them, making it possible for voters to choose policies that might involve some short-run costs but would have greater long-term benefits – most notably, economic growth and development.

It is no wonder that American political parties, operating in a constitutional system designed to limit centralized power, have often been ineffective. The American Progressives of the late nineteenth century were not wrong to take aim at party machines that traded favors for votes, but not knowing how to eliminate corruption without undercutting parties, they went too far. In replacing smoke-filled back rooms with primaries and local caucuses, they inadvertently robbed voters of the very thing they hoped to restore: democratic accountability. As long as party leaders are forced to compete with leaders of an opposing party who are also hoping for an electoral majority, they are in the best position to forge platforms with long-term and wide-spread benefits. Competition within parties undermines this by holding leaders hostage, instead, to intense minorities with narrow interests.

More recently, ballot initiatives and referenda have had similarly corrosive effects. Consider Proposition 13, for which nearly two-thirds of California voters voted on 6 June 1978 in a statewide

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referendum. Proposition 13 dramatically reduced property taxes on homes and farms by mandating a 1 percent tax ceiling on their assessed value. One result of the ballot initiative, visible only some years later, was a public school system in crisis from underfunding. Californians had been deservedly proud of their public schools and favored continued financial support. But when the burden of taxation was presented to them as a stand-alone issue, voters overwhelmingly opted for lower taxes. Some who did this were intense single-issue voters, determined to reduce the size of state government whatever the cost. But many supported Proposition 13 because architects of the up-or-down vote avoided all reference to any downstream consequences, a strategy that is well known to aficionados of ballot initiative politics. As a result, Californians live with poorer schools as an unintended consequence of lower taxes, for they have divested their state representatives of the duty to consider all the consequences, short-term and long-term, of policy decisions. Party leaders need to be freed from the clutches of referenda so that they can stitch together coherent policy platforms and select competent candidates who are capable of carrying them out.

Primaries for presidential candidates replaced smoky rooms, but elections within parties weakens the party's internal policy coherence and the brand name that conveys meaning to voters. Donald Trump's victory in the Republican primaries in 2016 brought this point home to the leaders of that party: primaries can facilitate a takeover of the party by a maverick who can mobilize an intense minority. Had Trump lost to Hillary Clinton, the party would probably have shifted to a more top-down system of candidate selection, by, for example, re-empowering the super-delegates who participate in party conventions. Having won the general election, Trump and his supporters will probably not allow changes to the rules that gave them their victory, so this reform is unlikely to materialize until the consequences of the Trump presidency for the party and the country have played themselves out.

The Democrats face a different challenge. Their super-delegates, introduced in the 1980s following the defeats of George McGovern and Jimmy Carter (who was badly bloodied by Teddy Kennedy's primary challenge), were unpledged. The great major-

ity supported Hillary Clinton from the outset, making Bernie Sanders's challenge an uphill battle that many supporters saw as having unfairly cost him the nomination. Among his conditions for supporting Clinton in the general election was her agreement to bind most super-delegates to the primary and caucus results the next time around. Needing his support, she had little choice, and, in any case, had she won, she would have been running with the advantages of incumbency four years later. As things turned out, if the proposed rule changes stand, the Democrats will be vulnerable in the future to the kind of takeover that the Republicans experienced in 2016. Sanders and his supporters will no doubt consider this a good thing. Many of them cherish the belief that he would have prevailed where Clinton came up short. Perhaps he would. Any single election outcome depends partly on idiosyncratic contingencies, particularly in an election season as volatile as 2016's. But reforming the Democratic Party along the lines he has demanded presses in the wrong direction.

Another obstacle in the way of instituting political competition between strong parties in the United States is the demographically distorted district-based system on which congressional elections take place. State legislatures have relentlessly redistricted to create the maximum number of districts for their own party while wasting as many votes for the opposite party as possible through super-safe districts. The Supreme Court has aided and abetted these developments by endorsing partisan gerrymandering, whereby state parties effectively collude to carve up states. In the majority of districts this means that the primary election is the only contest of any consequence, and competition between the parties falls by the wayside.

Voters also self-select into neighborhoods whose residents are like themselves, and this reinforces demographic sameness within districts and differences across districts. This is precisely the opposite of the ideal situation, in which every electoral district would be diverse in ways that mirror the nation's diversity across the range of issues that voters care about. The median voter in each district would then resemble the national median voter, and the districts' elected representatives would find it comparatively easy to agree on policy priorities. Backbenchers in the legislature

would be happy to delegate authority to their party leaders in order to get legislative work done and protect the party's brand into the future.

Majority-minority districts were also created in part with minority representation in mind. But not only does demographic distortion undermine partisan competition; it also fails in the end to serve the interests of the minority voters the districts are intended to benefit. In practice, majority-minority districts have limited the voting power of African Americans to the fewest possible districts, principally in urban areas where their votes are concentrated. There are better ways to achieve diversity in legislatures, such as the reservation of 7 out of New Zealand's 120 parliamentary seats for Māoris or the comparable provision in India dating back to the Poona Pact of 1934, which reserves 84 out of the Parliament's 543 seats for Untouchables and other scheduled castes. Similar measures could enhance gender diversity without diluting democracy's competitive lifeblood. Making every district accountable to the preferences of voters in the political middle would go a long way toward both moderating the stances of American legislative parties and strengthening their leaders at the expense of the shrinking number of outliers.

Populism in Europe

In parliamentary democracies, backbenchers select leaders who look out for the party's long-run interests over time, and who, in turn, try to pick candidates who have the best chance to win elections so that the party can implement its agenda. Parliamentary parties thus have built-in authority structures because of the collective desire to avoid a no-confidence vote.

But European parliamentary democracies, too, have succumbed to piecemeal politics gone wrong, of which Brexit is a prime example. The growing popularity in 2015 of Nigel Farage's chauvinistic United Kingdom Independence Party (UKIP) was making some members of Prime Minister David Cameron's Tory Party nervous about sticking to their party's official pro-Europe policy as parliamentary elections approached. Thanks to Britain's plurality elec-

toral rules, UKIP remained a minuscule parliamentary presence. But, particularly in some tight electoral districts, Tories joined the chest-thumping about protecting British jobs and began humming the right wing's anti-immigration tune.

David Cameron did not have to hold a national referendum on Brexit. A parliamentary majority — and, in fact, majorities in both major parliamentary parties — favored Britain's continued membership in the European Union. By the numbers, there was little doubt that Britain's economy was better off with Britain in the E.U., given the country's enormous exports of financial services and the lower labor costs from liberal E.U. immigration rules. But Cameron decided to put Britain's E.U. membership to a popular vote in the summer of 2016, in response to widespread pressures to be "more democratic"; and no doubt also because he was confident that the Brexit gambit would fail. After all, in poll after poll majorities of British citizens had acknowledged the overwhelming benefits to the British economy from E.U. membership, and they had elected representatives who had made those judgments on their behalf in Parliament. Grabbing the immigration piece of the issue, the intense Brexiteers turned out in higher numbers than those who favored remaining in the E.U., robbing the British electorate of a parliamentary discussion and vote that would have elevated the broader and longer-term interests of the British people.

The Proportional Representation democracies of continental Europe have also suffered from the misguided impulse to increase grassroots control in the name of democratic accountability. Low vote thresholds protect small parties, open-list systems let voters select individual representatives on party lists, and primaries all produce intraparty competition that rewards small groups with intense preferences. These reforms undermine healthy competition over national programs, promoting logrolling deals and special interest politics. Better to increase thresholds, forcing small parties to combine, retain closed lists to strengthen party leaderships, and use counting rules that tilt in favor of the largest parties. Whatever the system, reforms should move away from smaller, weaker parties toward larger, stronger ones.

In France, which is unusual in Europe in having a presidential system (and therefore weaker parties), the moderate candidate

Macron won the presidency in 2017, but it was a close thing. Responding to populist pressures, the large parties chose their candidates by way of party primaries, which produced off-center candidates more vulnerable to populists like Le Pen. Macron won the general election only because he refused to run in a primary, and the long-standing party structures of the Republican and Social Democratic parties were left in shambles. Returning to more centralized forms of party structure and discipline, while perhaps appearing undemocratic, will help restore more meaningful electoral accountability.

Strengthening Political Parties

Misguided attempts of recent decades to make politics more popularly responsive illustrate the importance of strong political parties in identifying, competing over, and defending the broad interests of the voting public. How can democracies reform themselves? The central task is to restore centralized control of the much-maligned but core institution of modern representative democracy: the political party.

To strengthen parties for the sake of more meaningful voter choice, parties need to back away from local selection mechanisms such as primaries and caucuses, and reject referenda, direct election of leaders, and other illusory instruments of popular control. In Proportional Representation systems, the best reforms will be those that abolish open lists and make the system operate more like a two-party one by increasing thresholds and weighting the vote share of larger parties more heavily. The motivating imperative should be to diminish competition *within* parties while expanding the size of parties and enhancing competition *between* them.

Nurturing strong, competitive parties is hard. Partly because decentralizing reforms have been so widely misconstrued as beneficial, and partly because those who profit from them are often entrenched, efforts to reverse the tide are bound to meet strong resistance. The Italian prime minister Matteo Renzi learned this the hard way in December 2016 when he was forced to resign after

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losing a referendum on reforms that would have reversed many of the decentralizing changes that had been accumulating in the Italian system for some time. The British Labour Party is also in the midst of a harsh re-education process. In June of 2017, Labour lost its third consecutive general election, twelve years after the party had last won the keys to Downing Street. Ordinarily this would have been enough to oust the leader and change the selection rules, but Theresa May's lackluster Tory campaign helped Jeremy Corbyn outperform expectations, staving off the moment of reckoning. Reformers should be ready, and armed with the right ideas, when the time comes.