
Cultural Politics and Media Fevers: Are They Causing Good People to Shun Public Office?

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Do good people shun public office because of feverish media attention? In order to understand what's going on in American public life, we have to have a historical perspective.

A chapter in Lord Bryce's *The*

American Commonwealth, published in 1888, is titled "Why Great Men Are Not President"—despite the fact that Bryce later became a friend of Theodore Roosevelt, who was in time elected president. Bryce reminds us

that we're talking about a longtime characteristic of American public life, not just a current problem.

Let me begin with three propositions about American political history. The first is that politics more often splits Americans on cultural than on economic lines, despite the historical narratives of the Progressive and New Deal historians, who tend to emphasize economic division. Cultural splits of the sort that we see today are the norm in American history.

The second proposition is that cultural variety—I'm going to avoid the word diversity because it's been used as an emblem of a whole set of arguments that I don't agree with and that are also misleading—is not something that just started yesterday. Cultural variety has been a condition of American life from the very beginning.

The third proposition is that the politics of cultural variety has the capacity to split the nation deeply and grievously, though most of the time, to paraphrase the historian Robert Wiebe, we Americans manage to live together because we can live separately.

Today's postindustrial America in many ways more closely resembles the preindustrial America that Alexis de Tocqueville described in *Democracy in America*—the Jacksonian era of the 1830s—than the industrial America in which most of us grew up. That industrial America was big-unit America: big government, big business, and big labor made most of the decisions in American society. The men who headed those organizations—and of course they were almost all men—met togeth-

er, made decisions, and told everybody else what to do.

It was a conformist America, an America literally in uniform: during World War II, more than 12 million men were members of the armed services. It was a country of "organization men," as the term was, who for the most part worked harmoniously and productively together as small units in large organizations.

This America came into existence in part as a result of industrialization—the big factories, the big grain mills, and so on—but also as the creation of World War II. War brings us together, puts us in uniform, causes us to create large institutions to make big decisions for everybody. Industrial, big-unit America was very much not the typical America but the result of specific events: World War II, and then the cold war.

In this America, it was good to be normal, healthy, ordinary. You didn't want to be eccentric; that was for the English. Politics in this America, to a considerable and unusual extent in American history, was a struggle over economic issues.

We had relatively few cultural divisions, and those we had we tended to paper over. Blacks were mostly ignored, and, by the end of the 1950s, the number of immigrants as a percentage of the population was the lowest since Tocqueville's time. For the most part, we abolished immigration in the 1920s, and the number of immigrants and immigrants' children was low by our historic standards.

Churchgoing was high and was

dominated by the mainline Protestant denominations and by a disciplined, cohesive Catholic Church. There was a sense that we were moving to a standardized Christianity that just about everybody believed in.

This was the America that most of us instinctively take to be the norm, the baseline: America as it usually is. But if you compare it with the America of earlier times, it isn't. This America brought together in cultural uniformity, or apparent cultural uniformity—we tended to ignore things like the existence of blacks in the South and the way they lived—was actually an unusual one.

Reverting to the Norm

In the forty years since the 1950s, we have silently, without really realizing it, reverted to our norm. As early as 1964, there was a clear signal that baby boomers did not like this conformist lifestyle.

The Berkeley student riots of 1964 weren't over the Vietnam War—there had been no large shipment of American troops to Vietnam. They were about not wanting to be part of a large organization. One of the student slogans was "Do not bend, fold, staple, or mutilate." Clark Kerr, president of the University of California, had just written a book called *The Multiversity* in which he proclaimed how terrific this huge organization, the University of California, was. The students were saying, We don't want to be part of this huge organization, we want to be individuals, we want to be ourselves.

Black Americans emerged into

open view in the 1960s in the civil rights revolution, which proclaimed as its goal integration and desegregation, but soon they started saying that they didn't want to integrate into the larger society. There were calls for black power, and riots in the street.

Immigration started again after the 1965 immigration act opened up immigration from Latin America and East Asia. It wasn't noticed much at the time. When I wrote the first *Almanac of American Politics* in 1971-72, our concerns echoed those of the immigration period up to the 1920s—ethnic civil wars between the Swedes and the Norwegians, say.

We were just starting the period of immigration that has now changed the composition of our society by bringing us new people with new attitudes, though in many ways they resemble earlier immigrants. Political society responded to new immigrants by saying, Well, they're just like blacks, their problem is going to be racial discrimination, and the solution is government action, perhaps racial quotas and preferences, at least antidiscrimination laws, and perhaps a lot of government spending.

In fact, their experience was much more like that of the earlier immigrant groups. In many ways, the blacks of the 1990s are like the Irish of the 1890s; the Hispanics of the 1990s like the Italians of the 1890s; and the Asians of the 1990s like the Jews of the 1890s. A lot of common experiences, a lot of similar, though not identical, behaviors. The civil rights model is not particularly applicable to most of the new

immigrant groups.

What else has changed? Religion. Tocqueville taught us that religion is one of the most important forces that shape American society, and he recognized that there were a whole bunch of religions in America and that there sometimes was conflict or rivalry between them. In the 1950s we had the idea that we were coming together in one religion, an idea that ignored the Catholic-Protestant division: in the 1960 presidential election, one candidate got 78 percent of the Catholic vote and the other candidate got 63 percent of the white Protestant vote. Evidence, obviously, of some clear division.

As the 1960s and 1970s came on, Catholicism became a more various, less disciplined religion; mainline Protestant denominations lost members; and membership in the Southern Baptist churches and in newer offshoots—the Assemblies of God, the evangelical churches—grew. We had a different religious mix in the country.

The Articulate Elite

At the same time, the articulate elite, which tends to dominate the media, became more secular and adopted an adversarial posture toward the larger society. When James Q. Wilson reviewed my book *Our Country* in *The New Republic*, he said that one of the things I hadn't sufficiently explained was why the elite—the Ivy League-educated people in the media and in the State Department who put together the policies of World War II and the cold war—moved against America in the

1960s. Their children and grandchildren were leading revolutionary movements at the great universities during the Vietnam War period. A revolution run from Yale is a strange thing.

You might say that in the late 1960s and early 1970s, the Nixon period, the country turned right and the elite turned left. The media, of course, tend to be an articulate part of the elite. A lot of the tension of the past twenty-five years has been between ordinary people and elite media that do not entirely share their values and in some cases are adversarial to them. The media want to lecture, to teach, to instruct ordinary people, and they get a little miffed when people don't take instruction properly.

During the same period, we started to get a certain amount of chaos and turmoil in our society. I worked for the mayor of Detroit during the riot of 1967, which went on for six days. The Los Angeles riot in 1992, by way of comparison, lasted a day and a half. And Detroit wasn't the only riot that went on for six days.

We were unable to stop and unable to win the war in Vietnam.

Crime and welfare both tripled between 1965 and 1975.

This was a tremendous change. The elite media explained it by saying, In an unfair country like this, where there's lots of poverty, what can you expect? In fact, the country, in response to the civil rights movement, had become much more racially tolerant and nondiscriminatory, and the economy overall was growing.

The big units that had done so well in getting us through the Depression, winning World War II, and building postwar America lost their governmental, economic, and moral authority. Increasingly, we again became a country of cultural variety, as we've been through most of our history. America is a prosperous country, and Americans are free to seek their own niches, so we go to our own churches, patronize our own shopping malls, and watch our own cable television channels.

Increasingly, we have a choice of media. As recently as the late 1970s and early 1980s, most people watched one of the big three network television newscasts every night. Now viewership has declined vastly because people have alternatives. They don't want to watch the news generally, or they don't want to watch the news on the big three networks, all of which are located on the west side of Manhattan, all staffed by people who are well to the left on economic and—even more important—cultural issues.

Cultural Politics

Cultural differences naturally have emerged into politics. One of the key catalysts was the *Roe v. Wade* decision, an attempt by elite judges to impose a consensus, as they thought they'd done in some of the civil rights cases. *Roe* was an accident that resulted from the fact that it was assigned to the only one of the 108 Supreme Court justices in our history who spent most of his career working for doctors, Minnesota's Harry Blackmun. Fourteen states, with

40 percent of the population, had already liberalized their abortion laws. The *Roe* decision came down in January 1973, just as the legislatures in almost every state were going into session. The process was happening, but the Court and Justice Blackmun felt obliged to intervene.

More than anything else, it was *Roe v. Wade* that gave birth to what are now the two major forces in the political process: the religious right and the feminist left. These groups—and I'm speaking of groups not in the narrow sense, but of people who share a wide variety of views—are now the leading sources of energy, enthusiasm, and élan in the two political parties. If you go to the Republican National Convention, you will run into lots of people whom you have characterized as the religious right. If you go to the Democratic National Convention, you will see the feminist left in great numbers. Both represent many millions of Americans.

Back in the 1970s, neither was a significant political force. The feminist groups were so weak at the 1972 Democratic National Convention that the McGovern campaign abandoned them in delegate challenges. In 1976 the Republican Party nominated Gerald Ford, who was pro choice, for president of the United States; the religious right vote, to the extent that we can measure it from polls and surveys, went to Jimmy Carter, the Democratic candidate. It's inconceivable that those things could happen today.

The religious right coalesced as a political force by opposing abortion.

With the Supreme Court trying to take this issue totally out of the political realm, they had to go to extraordinary lengths to try to change the Constitution, and so they became a movement. The feminist left, after failing to get the Equal Rights Amendment passed in 1982, arose to fight the antiabortion movement, the religious right. There was a sense in both cases of the whole process going so heavily against you that you must fight back—of going on the offensive because you feel very much on the defensive.

These movements changed the shape of the two political parties, to the point that it seems inconceivable to us that a Republican presidential candidate can be nominated without opposing abortion.

Moral Niches

All of this has brought urgency and moral fervor into politics. On many issues, the differences between the candidates are, in practical terms, very marginal. Some of the abortion issues that come up in the legislative context—parental consent, exceptions for rape and incest, partial-birth abortion—involve small numbers of people compared to the 1.3 million to 1.5 million abortions that take place in America every year.

This is also true of some of the other cultural issues of the 1990s, like gun control and tobacco. Banning a few weapons of a certain description—assault weapons—doesn't have any measurable impact on the supply of guns in the country. And even with a

big tobacco tax, we're talking about a relatively marginal effect on people's behavior. These are nonetheless symbolic issues of considerable importance because of moral principles that people feel strongly about—and that are mutually exclusive in many cases.

Politicians who are concerned about their coalitions being split tend to say, Hey, why can't we just be practical and not worry about small numbers of cases? But the moral issues are not insignificant, and they engage and mobilize people and keep them fighting. This has led to a politics in which people defend their niches fiercely against people of whom they know little, though they may live in the same neighborhoods. They don't really spend much time with people of substantially different views on these issues.

In the process, we get fierce attacks on politicians. People feel justified because they believe the moral stakes are high.

We have the attacks in the Supreme Court nomination process, the attacks on Robert Bork and Clarence Thomas. The assault on Bork was particularly unscrupulous; the intellectual dishonesty of his opponents is breathtaking. Ted Kennedy said that Bork was going to bring back the coat-hanger abortion, when Bork simply said that abortion laws should be a matter for state legislatures to handle, and it's clear that a large majority of state legislatures are going to allow abortion. That set a precedent for retaliation against some Democratic appointees.

We have gotten to the point where the position of surgeon general—not important in practical terms, but symbolically important—could not be filled for several years.

And if the Clinton surgeons general have been controversial because of the abortion issue, so is Dr. Everett Koop, who was the Reagan surgeon general. He is now, because of his stand on tobacco, a hero of the cultural left. He was then, because of his position on abortion, a hero of the cultural right. He has stayed in the same place on these issues, but he's gotten different sets of political champions.

The Partisan Press

Where are the media in all this? Out in left field, I'm tempted to say.

Some people don't understand the function of the media in a free society. Our function is to prowl the battlefields and shoot the wounded. Again, what we take to be the norm in American history is the exception, not the rule, and what we're seeing now is much more like the rule, though all the main-line media people will tell you that they still run objective news organizations.

The objective media were an exception in American history that arose in significant part out of the regulation of the broadcast industry.

In the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries, the media were totally partisan; they were created by the political parties. When you got into office, you would give your printing contract to your party's newspaper and take it away from the other party's newspaper.

We've still got a few politicians who threaten to do this every so often: the governor of Puerto Rico, for example, recently took the official notices out of one paper and gave them to another.

New York in the 1920s had something like twelve or thirteen daily papers. People didn't read all of them. You read the one you agreed with and that represented your party's view—the one that in effect was giving you your marching orders. The partisan media were vitriolic and vicious and in many cases unfair. They launched harsh attacks on people on the other side without much restraint.

The idea that there can and should be objective media originated in the 1930s and 1940s with the emergence of new national magazines, although some of the magazines formed in the 1920s, like *Time* and my own employer, *Reader's Digest*, do have a discernible point of view, though *Time's* has changed over the years. Regulation of the broadcast industry, starting with the Radio Control Act of 1927, required objectivity. If you weren't objective, the government could yank your license, so the broadcast networks promoted the idea that they were objective and fair-minded.

Metropolitan newspapers increasingly started doing that too, particularly as they got monopolies in their towns. The business of a metropolitan newspaper is to sell to everybody—or at least everybody who can buy anything—in order to attract advertisers. They don't want to have a partisan tilt. By the 1950s and early 1960s, we had

media that said they were objective, that for the most part did not go into scurrilous attacks, that at least professed cultural uniformity, and that tended not to pierce the veil of those who might be violating conventional morality.

This is what we've come to think of as the norm, though it is actually unusual. The mainline media today are very much on one side of the cultural battle and very much against the other. They are protagonists more often than they are objective referees, onlookers, bystanders, or recorders.

Since Watergate, the media have had a stake in scandal and pulling people down. To get an idea of what the incentive is, drive by the gates of one of Bob Woodward's several homes. The people who wrote up objectively what the Nixon White House said was happening—White House denies involvement with second-rate burglary—are not living in million-dollar houses today. This is not lost on people in the press. Finding a scandal is one of the ways to get ahead in the business, and the press tends to have a heartier appetite for scandal in a Republican administration than in a Democratic administration.

You can see it in the coverage of the Clinton scandals. Bill Clinton, of course, thinks that he has the worst press of any president of all time. He is the forty-first president who has had this idea. In fact, if you look at the coverage, the appetite for scandal is not quite so hearty. Nine hundred FBI files were found in the Clinton White House, and the New York Times ran an article on page B29—one of the

“bomber pages,” in the words of the late publisher of the Washington Post — headlined “Bureaucratic Snafu Results in FBI Files in the White House.”

That story would have been very different, and differently placed, if it had been a Republican administration. Reporters, being mostly on the left, don't think that Democratic administrations are made up of the kind of people who would violate civil liberties by invading records that should be kept private. They think Republican administrations are that kind of administration, and of course we have one example of a Republican administration that was. It takes a while for it to click with them that a Democratic administration could do this.

Striking a Balance

Surveys have shown that the press is about 90 percent Democratic and about 10 percent Republican. It's somewhat evenhanded on economic issues because the press, having gone to college and taken Econ 1, has discovered what the economics profession—the one academic discipline that has moved significantly to the right in the past thirty years—and the rest of the world have discovered: markets very often work. But it's totally skewed on the cultural issues. Feminist left thought is dominant among members of the press, who are 95 percent prochoice. Somebody once said to me that the feminist thought-police patrol newsrooms, and you can see it in the coverage.

Leaders of the press say that it doesn't make any difference, because they're objective. That's obviously

nonsense. Of course it makes a difference. You look for stories where you think stories are going to be. Where you think stories are going to be is affected in important ways, although not totally determined, by how you think the world works, and that's related to your political orientation.

What if you advanced as a theoretical proposition that people would depend rather heavily on this entity called the press for information about politics and government, and that 90 percent of the people in the press would be from one of two political parties and 10 percent from the other? Particularly if you didn't know which party was going to get the 90 percent, you might not think this is the best way to do it.

I once advanced before one of our press leaders in Washington the proposition that if affirmative action to include in the newsrooms blacks and others who weren't previously there had resulted in coverage that might not have existed otherwise and was in some cases actually interesting, illuminating, and helpful for all of us, perhaps we ought to implement quotas for the Christian right, Republicans, and other exotic groups that you seldom see in newsrooms.

Alan Murray, the Wall Street Journal Washington bureau chief, said we couldn't do that: it would be unfair, and we would be asking people personal questions. But a caucus in the newsroom of the New York Times recently insisted that the new reporter on the AIDS beat be somebody who was HIV positive. That's kind of a personal ques-

tion to ask somebody.

Obviously, the press is skewed. People have responded to this through the marketplace, through old technology and new, by creating alternative media. Now we have a right-wing media that ranges from the august precincts of the Wall Street Journal editorial page to the populist thunder of Rush Limbaugh on talk radio. We've got George Will, *The American Spectator*, a lot of local radio personalities. People on the left were talking for a while about talk radio as a danger to the republic. In fact, it is a danger to an ABC-NBC-CBS monopoly on the news. It's giving people what they want.

Some of the technology—the Internet, for example—is new. Some of the technology is old. Rush Limbaugh is on AM radio, which started broadcasting in 1920. Newt Gingrich is communicating with us through a technology called the book that goes back to 1454. So it's not just new technology, it's new ways of reaching out.

What is the solution? The fact is that harsh political debate based on strongly held moral differences radiated throughout all sorts of decentralized media is going to be harmful for some people. Is it deterring some good people from being in politics? I'm sure it is. No seat in Congress has gone vacant because nobody ran for it, but one could imagine improvements on some of the incumbents.

I'm not sure that there is a solution. Remember, Lord Bryce was concerned about the same problem. In this kind of country, we tend to get this kind of media, and this kind of fractionation.

The best that most of us can do, in our partisan zeal, is sometimes to take a step back, take a deep breath, and try to look seriously at other people's points of view. Every so often, put yourself in the mind of a good-hearted person who takes a position exactly the opposite of your own on an issue that you feel strongly about, and try to figure out how a decent person could come to that conclusion. It's an interesting exercise. We in the press should try it.

The press isn't doing a good enough job of understanding and reporting accurately. We're too busy championing our particular causes and trying to jam the values of an articulate elite down the throat of a country that doesn't entirely share them.

Following his talk, Michael Barone took questions from his American Experiment audience, including Vin Weber and Tim Penny, former Minnesota members of Congress.

Vin Weber: I know that the dichotomy of the religious right and the feminist left stands for more than just those words, but it implies that the main division in American politics revolves around the role of women. It seems to me that what you're describing is more of a division between secularists and people of faith. Isn't that really the divide on the issues you've been talking about, and, in terms of the media, is that not a more helpful way of thinking about the country?

Michael Barone: In the 1996 and 1992 presidential election exit polls,

and I think in the 1994 and 1996 congressional races as well, the biggest divider was not economics, not even race. It was religion. Nonreligious people and Jews voted something like 80 percent for Bill Clinton and the Democratic Party. Traditional believing Protestants tended to be about 75 to 80 percent for the Republican Party and for Bob Dole and George Bush. That's a terrific difference. It's like the religious difference over Kennedy and Nixon in 1960, when the issue was whether we would elect the first Catholic president.

The pollsters have been struggling to ask intelligent questions that get at the degree and character of religious faith, since it seems to carry over into politics.

Tradition-minded people of whatever denomination tend to vote for the Republicans. Secular-minded, less traditional Protestant, Catholic, and Jewish people tend to vote for the Democrats. We are trying to understand that. The character of religious faith is important in public life. We are uncomfortable with this, but it is a factor.

In his recent history of the American people, Paul Johnson says that the Great Awakening of the religious movement of the 1740s made possible the American Revolution and that the second Great Awakening of the 1830s brought out the abolitionist movement as well as the movement toward Southern Baptist churches, and it helped to explain the Civil War. We have more to learn about this.

I sense that on both sides of the cultural divide, women feel more strongly. Most middle-aged American women today feel tremendously conflicted by

the decisions they've made in their personal lives. They feel under attack.

Women who have stayed at home to raise children say that they can't admit this at parties because people will think they can't talk about anything but diapers; they will be attacked for being stupid and wasting their time and not being competent professionally.

Women who go out into the workforce are asking themselves if they are raising their children as well as they were raised themselves. Everybody says they have to do it for the money. The fact is, we all have a higher standard of living than we grew up on, and many of us could revert to the average income in this country if we wished to do so.

I hear women on both sides talking about this. They are conscientious enough to be concerned about whether they are doing a good job. These are not just abstract political issues; they are important issues in the women's own lives about which they are ambivalent.

Vin Weber: Journalists often have a double standard: they want to apply certain criteria to the politicians they cover, but they wouldn't want to be subjected to that level of scrutiny themselves. Where is the line? What should be the balance, and what can we do about it?

Michael Barone: When I respond to questions about the journalistic profession, I am tempted to say that we are not talking about a first-rate profession. The fact is that we don't apply those standards to ourselves; we don't want

to disclose a lot of things. You can argue that the members of Congress have a monopoly on enacting legislation, while we in the press don't have a monopoly over anything, though some of us work for publications and broadcast news organizations that used to look like they had monopolies.

I said once to a Republican gathering, "Remember, the Constitution guarantees a free press, not a fair one." I'm perfectly willing to agree with the proposition that we in the press are self-righteous and give ourselves undeserved credit for objectivity.

Wally Johnson: What do you see as the values that undergird the elite press?

Michael Barone: They are similar to those of the university elite, and they are not invariable. Broadcast journalists Tim Russert and Cokie Roberts are against abortion, for example.

Though there obviously are exceptions, the values of the elite press tend to be secular—a sort of Voltairean view of the world: the history of the world is a history of slow liberation from enslavement and religious wars caused by religious faith. There's a somewhat skeptical belief that government programs may help.

Thirty-five years ago, the same group had a more absolute faith that government programs were the key to ending poverty and discrimination. Now there is hope that some of those programs can do some good, but some skepticism as well.

Twenty-five years ago, a lot of people thought that America was an evil force imposing tyranny on people around the

world who wanted to have socialist-type governments. We have a different view now that we have a Democratic president from the liberal baby-boom generation—suddenly America is not spelled with a k by these people anymore—but still a sense that American motives are suspect, that we are much more moral if we act through international organizations and are joined by the leaders of Zaire or China. Somehow that is morally preferable to America's acting alone.

We have different Americas with different taboos. One of my favorite examples is gun control. We have two tracks on gun control. Nationally, we have more gun control laws, though their effects tend to be marginal. Political dialogue favors gun control, and in some of the big states like New York, California, and Illinois, that is probably the popular way to go. Locally, most states now allow law-abiding people the right to carry guns all the time. The backers of these laws argue that criminals are less likely to attack someone if they think that the law-abiding person might be armed, and also that an armed person in a school cafeteria, for example, could disarm a dangerous person. Whether you agree with it or not, it is at least a serious argument.

John Morrison: You said that in the 1960s there was an anti-American shift in the elite leadership of the country. I agree, but I don't understand why it occurred.

Michael Barone: The best I've been able to come up with is this: the elite decided to make a war but didn't think it was important enough to send

its own sons to fight in; therefore, it couldn't be much of a country. We fought the Vietnam War with the same structure of draft exemptions we had for World War II. In World War II, just about everybody got drafted because the manpower needs were very great. In Vietnam, we didn't need as many people, and the manpower pool was expanding with baby boomers; people born in 1946, as Bill Clinton was, turned eighteen in 1964.

The K-12 teaching profession has been an institutional stronghold of the feminist left, partly through the teacher unions. The elite universities have become adversarial strongholds. They've got concentrations of crazies in the English departments and to a lesser extent the history departments. We as a country have allowed this to happen. We hope that kids don't pay much attention to their professors.

My sense is that kids applying to college tend to self-select according to the nature of the school, so those who think they'll like the elite left will go to, say, Brown. Applicants to the University of Texas at Austin and Texas A&M at College Station have similar test scores, but UT Austin is 60 percent Democrat and Texas A&M is 70 percent Republican. They are sorting themselves out by the character, or the perceived character, of the school. It's another way in which we Americans are seeking comfortable niches.

The media tend to come from the left. If I were running a media outlet, I would scour the Texas A&M's of the country just as these outfits scout the historically black colleges and universi-

ties. There are slight movements in the media executive suites to do this. I have fragmentary evidence that Gannett, for example, wanted to get more balance in its writing staff. Some of the other outfits, too, though they are afraid of losing market position.

Vin Weber: Despite the media bias that you have described, Ronald Reagan got elected twice and George Bush got elected once. Bush didn't lose in 1992 because of media bias, and Congress came back to the Republicans in 1994. The public seems to be able to sort it all out. n