

Reasonable Reforms for a Fractured America

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Donald Trump's imminent victory in the Republican primary and Bernie Sanders' staying power in the Democratic race testify to widespread public revulsion with business-as-usual in our nation's capital.

But the anti-establishment ire that Trump and Sanders are riding goes well beyond the immediate issues that will determine the next president. Buffeted by unreasonable expectations and dragged down by dashed hopes, the American public's bad mood is likely to get worse before it gets better.

Government's sheer incompetence explains much of voters' mounting frustration. The public's grievances include a stagnant economy, an ocean of government debt, a broken system of immigration, failing public schools, rising health care costs, expanding health care bureaucracy and diminishing health care options, a dysfunctional Congress and an imperial executive, and a disheartening record abroad of failed American interventions followed by feckless withdrawals and inept retrenchments.

This catalogue of particulars would be enough to turn any sentient voter sour. But Trump's difficult-to-digest triumph and Sanders' unexpected appeal suggest that something deeper is bubbling to the surface—a disconcerting sentiment reaching across party lines that the system as a whole is ceasing to make sense.

One source of that discontent is the escalating conflict between government's growth and our increasing desire for personal autonomy. Government in this country has never been larger, costlier, or more intrusive. Its democratic legitimacy depends on a shared conception of the public interest and the public's willingness to submit to a distant authority, but neither condition holds in America today.

On the contrary, division and fragmentation are deepening to an alarming degree. Americans have never been more likely to live alone. Americans have never had more choices—about where to reside, how to dress, what to read and hear and view, whom to marry or not marry, and whom or what to worship or to not worship at all. And we have never been more inclined to view private conscience as the highest authority.

No wonder people are grasping at desperate remedies. Large forces are pushing and pulling in opposite directions. As government becomes more lumbering and overbearing, we ask it to do more and more. Yet as the state asserts itself more deeply into more areas of our lives, we

are increasingly ill disposed to submit to its authority, or to authority of any sort.

In these precarious times, Yuval Levin's "The Fractured Republic: Renewing America's Social Contract in the Age of Individualism" arrives not a moment too soon. With a rare mix of public policy expertise, historical and social analysis, and political philosophy, it presents a deft diagnosis of our predicament and outlines a package of reforms that takes seriously American circumstances and American character.

A former White House and congressional staffer, the founder and editor of the quarterly *National Affairs*, and a leading figure in the reform conservative movement, Levin argues that a "perilous mix of over-centralization and hyper-individualism" marks the present era. Our excessive reliance on government coupled with our excessive aversion to authority, he writes, have conspired to weaken the intermediate associations or mediating institutions—family, faith, work, education, neighborhood organizations, civic clubs and more—that stand between the massive state and the solitary individual. It is in these now-embattled associations and institutions of civil society that Americans have learned love and friendship, acquired moral and intellectual virtues, and gained appreciation of the pleasures and responsibilities of community.

Levin rejects the left's recurring dream that the next generation of elected technocrats, thanks to their even more sparkling intelligence and sophisticated sensibility, will bring a big government that will minister effectively to citizens' wants, needs, and desires. But he does not share the right's conviction that we are only one cycle away from electing committed conservatives who will save the republic by drastically cutting government down to size.

Levin is certainly a limited-government man who wants to temper the state's enormous role in regulating the economy and providing a social safety net. At the same time, and in the spirit of America's founders, Levin recognizes the need in 21st century America for the state to supply effectively a minimum of economic regulation and establish a floor of basic provision.

Judicious student of Edmund Burke and Alexis de Tocqueville that he is, Levin takes human beings as we are and always have been, while shrewdly exploring how the evolution of individual liberty, democracy, the free market, and popular culture color Americans' passions, aspirations, and virtues and vices. The great political challenge of our era, he believes, is to devise reforms that accept the desire to govern their own lives that courses through Americans' veins while encouraging individuals to seek satisfaction in civil society, where the exercise of autonomy is morally rewarding and politically salutary.

Reformers, Levin argues, should aim at "drawing people back into the middle layers, and doing so in a 21st century way: by offering choices and options there." Reformers should also implement the principle of subsidiarity by shifting power to the level of government that is as close as is feasible to the people. Reformers should seek to modernize and reconfigure the

social safety net by taking advantage of market forces wherever possible. And reformers should encourage the development within civil society of “moral subcultures,” including conservative subcultures, that can flourish without aspiring to impose through law their conception of moral life on the nation as a whole.

These are, to paraphrase James Madison’s characterization (in Federalist 10) of the intentions that informed the Constitution, liberal and democratic reforms designed to counteract the diseases to which liberal democracy in America is most prone. They are the preferred alternative to business as usual.

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