It is a pleasure to have been asked to address this conference on the eve of serious and sustained American political campaigning in a bi-election year. I’m from a country that by now lives with what Sidney Blumenthal over twenty years ago (1982) so prophetically termed “the permanent campaign.” I’m from a country that is so fixated on political campaigning that we’re almost surprised when we confront a discussion in our political culture about, not the dynamics of campaigning, but the difficulties faced by political actors and institutions in actually governing. We face a governing crisis.

The crisis in governing the United States arises from multiple events: Washington D.C.’s current preoccupation with how to run the country with a lame-duck president; a seemingly arrogant executive branch parts of which are under sustained attack in both the media and the courts; a legislative branch uneasy when the polarization characteristic of a two-party system actually forces votes on agonizing issues—issues such as war policy and financing, prescription drugs, electronic surveillance of citizens, permissible civil unions between same-sex partners, torture, and other hot-button issues that will have significant electoral consequences; and a judicial apparatus where the process of confirming judges via “the advice and consent” of the Senate permits the country to see in glaring clarity the religious-secular, conservative-liberal, classed, gendered, and raced lesions in the body politic. It’s hard to run a business-as-usual bi-election when
difficulties in governance may make the actual issues—and not campaign slogans, photo opportunities, slick ads, and handsome families—the determinants of electoral outcomes.

I of course should not have to tell a British audience that certain periods in political history witness governance itself a central campaign issue. But I will tell you, anyway, if only to confess that I have never been trained in American politics. My doctoral thesis was on the parliamentary debates surrounding the Regency Crisis of 1788-89 (Gronbeck, 1970). My first trip to this country had me living in the British Library, the Public Record Office, and the Sheffield Public Library in search of the nearly hundred pamphlets published during that crisis, Secret Service records documenting the Pitt government’s payments to hacks and printers, and Edmund Burke’s meticulous notes from historical, constitutional, political, and medical sources that he tried to use to justify transforming the Prince of Wales into George IV.

Here was but one incident from the reigns of Georges III and IV where crises in governing, that is, the very machinery of governing, took center electoral stage. Indeed, the whole period, I would argue, from at least the Westminster Scrutiny of 1784 through the election of 1790 (see Namier & Brooke, 1964, and, more broadly, Stasavage, 2005) was a period in Great Britain where questions of governance, ministerial responsibility in times of fiscal and political crisis, and relationships between in- and out-of-doors as well as between government and corporations such as the East India Company dominated the political scene. That is, as I have taught this period, framed by the American Rebellion on the front end and the coming of the French Revolution on the other, Great Britain’s mixed form of government was trying to sort through the mix—relationships between
and among the Crown, Parliament, the citizenry at large, and the non-governmental managers of the Second British Empire.

Now of course you did not come here to listen to me talk about that which initially attracted me to political rhetoric—the reign of George III. But, I would suggest that the United States presently is living through a political crisis—actually, through what Berger and Luckman (1967) termed a crisis in political legitimation—that has analogues to what Great Britain was experiencing from the accession of George III perhaps even until the accession of Victoria. Furthermore, it is during times of institutional crises in political legitimation that the foundations of political culture lay exposed. Agitation over systemic aspects of governments and their operative politics shows us their deep structure and permits some of our best opportunities to think of ways of escaping from climates of confusion, consternation, and constitutional conflict.

And those are the goals for this keynote: to understand some of the major changes in political campaigning and governance that developed across nearly a century of American politics with particular attention to gaps and pressure points in democratic political institutions that they revealed, and then to point to the most urgent problems needing attention from American legislators, judges, presidents, academics, pundits, and, yes, citizens willing to shoulder the burdens of systemic reform. I wish to consider briefly five systemic changes in American governance since its constitution in the late eighteenth century. I will argue that these five points-of-change account for some of the most problematic aspects of American politics today. They are: (1) *popularity* or the increase of public participation in political activity; (2) *populism* or the rise of serious political activity outside of established political institutional spaces; (3) *spectacle* or the
increasing visual access of citizens to politicians and of politicians to citizens; (4) 

*electrification* or the opening of electronic channels of communication between leaders and the led; and (4) *backlash* or the rise of a cynical and outraged portion of the citizenry ready to form well financed public pressure groups to battle political institutions and work as political vigilante blocs in the public sphere.

Remaking American Political Culture in the Twentieth Century

The traditional institutions of national politics and governance in the United States, of course, were analogues to those of the Colonies’ mother country, built into executive, legislative, and judicial centers of activity interwoven through a series of checks and balances seemingly guaranteeing that no one central governing power could wholly control the other two. As initially conceived of in the United States constitution, the citizenry was to be served by the governing centers, but they actually participated only at times of elections, voting only for presidential electors, members of the House of Representatives, and state officials.¹ But, step by step, the insulated national political system underwent assault and reform. Let me move briefly to five changes that I take to be absolutely fundamental to the systematic reconstitution of American political culture.

*Popularity*. First came new levels and kinds of public participation in politics. The new levels were largely matters of more direct and frequent contact between citizens and candidates during the electoral process. While presidential campaigning, more specifically, always had been the raucous, spectacular affair that had amazed French observer Alexis de Tocqueville (1835-1840/2001) in 1831, it was not until the late nineteenth century that the candidates themselves were on display. So, in 1996 candidate
William McKinley sat on his front porch as some 750,000 delegates and well-wishers passed by. In the next election cycle, however, Theodore Roosevelt hit the road, traveling some 21,000 miles in 1900 in search of votes (Miller & Gronbeck, 1994, 4-6). Such reaching-out to people peaked in 1960, when Richard Nixon lived out his convention promise by visiting all fifty states, including Hawaii and Alaska, during that campaign.

In talking about popularity in tonight’s analysis, then, I am referring to the growing sensitivity of national political institutions to the citizenry. The public’s importance during elections, especially, has only grown since the turn of the twentieth century, through expansion of the web of presidential primaries and caucuses as means of winnowing candidates in and out of the running and, with the coming dominance of electronic media, through the need for staggering amounts of money to run for president in a country with over 200,000,000 eligible voters.

But, more fundamentally still, popularity has become a central aspect of not only campaigning but also governing. As Jeffrey Tulis and some of his colleagues (Tulis, 1996; Tulis, 1987; Ceaser, Thurow, Tulis, & Bessette, 1981) have argued, Franklin Roosevelt successfully appealed to the public and public opinion for support of proposals that he knew would be resisted by Congress. Roosevelt’s fabled “fireside chats” were directed, not to the legislative and judicial branches of government, but to the people. He described the problems he believed that the federal government should be addressing, and asked the public’s help. The public responded with letters to the president and to members of Congress; the public was becoming directly involved in governing.
And so, for at least three-quarters of a century, presidents more and more often make direct appeals for public support and for public pressure on Congress in support of presidential policy. Thanks to the ubiquitous public opinion poll (e.g., Alsina, Davies, & Gronbeck, 2001), which personifies citizen voices in terms of agreement, disagreement, and no opinion on specific issues, the citizenry has a highly visible and verbal place in national politics. Not only are citizen voices aggregated statistically, but individual citizens have gained easier access to national decision makers. Now, with about eighty percent of Americans online, e-mails have replaced snail mail in congressional and executive offices. Literally every corner of the federal bureaucracy can be contacted electronically. The Internet has put the pop in popular politics.

**Populism.** Consider a related set of phenomena, what I term “populism.” I use that word to reference, not simply a political theory of citizen rights, but the profound growth of citizen action blocs and organizations over the last almost two hundred years that has made what you Brits call the politics of out-of-doors at least as important as the politics of constituted institutions. We of course blame this all on you—the Catholic Association of Ireland, the Chartist movement, the anti-Corn Law associations that lobbied for free trade, the British Peace Society, the Home Rule cabals, and all of the other 19th-century public agitations for policy changes. The United States, of course, had parallel social-political movements in the same period organized around tariffs, abolition of slavery, the public school movement, labor unionization, and the like. But, you showed the western world how to build organized, usually peaceful, public pressure groups made out of the massed bodies of citizens with a cause.
What is particularly important about the formation of public blocs and political organizations is that they formed a set of politicized structures existing, as it were, between citizens and governmental centers of power. Their force was to expand the places of the *polis*, which is to say, the places where politicking gets done. While I do not have time to review the evolution of the vocabulary of the political that has been traced so suggestively by the Finnish historian of political theory, Kari Palonen (Palonen & Parvikko, 1993), this much I can emphasize: When the word “politics” was used in the West prior to the nineteenth century, it almost always referred to the treatise tradition focused on advice to governors or descriptions of political systems. That is, Aristotle’s book *Politics* together with his *Nicomachean Ethics* as well as Cicero’s *De officiius* represented the foundational treatises of what politics was about: the behavior of leaders in the *polis* as appropriate to how that space for public business was organized in different systems of government—in tyrannies, oligarchies, timocracies, democracies, and so on. The product of politics in that tradition was presumably virtuous government—leadership making decisions that ameliorated foreign or domestic difficulties and stabilized society. And so, to Aristotle (1954, 1359b-1360a), governing was a matter of magistrates and popular assemblies smoothing the course of society through time and space by providing proper attention to ways and means, war and peace, national defense, imports and exports, and legislation.

With the coming of populism, public agitations and the formation of citizen reform groups with enough membership and financial stability to wage sustained campaigns, however, the idea of “politics” came to encompass not only virtuous governing but also political activity outside of institutionalized political centers.
Habermas (1989) taught us all to call the places of citizen political activity the public sphere, and Palonen (1993) urged us to realize that our understanding of politics had to be extended. The verb “politicking” and a public process called “politicalization” were added to our basic vocabulary (ibid.).

Furthermore, once social-political movements were organized and permitted to operate, the West slowly began to understand that not only were matters of political policy at stake in politicking but also what we learned to call political polity. Just as Members of Parliament in 18th-century Great Britain were organized, not by party, but by “connexion,” so was a country’s citizenry constructed not simply by ideology but by causes that became central to individuals’ political identity. Just as the Chartist movement took its name from people self-identified with the cause of parliamentary reform, so a peacenik or a Pro Lifer is essentialized as a political actor so committed to a cause as to embody that cause.

In other words, with the organization of populism in the public sphere came important reconceptualizations of life in the polis itself: “politics” as public, institutional activity expanded to include “politicalization” as processes whereby needs or interests as well as identities were welded together into unofficial-but-powerful political entities. Politics came to have as its outcomes not only policies but also polities. The new political blocs and organizations of the nineteenth and twentieth centuries in both of our countries created bottom-up issues and identities, experientially based policies and polities.

*Spectacle and specularity.* Martin Jay (1994) has termed all western cultures ocularcentric—societies that put their reason and faith in what can be seen. Even Plato’s famous allegory of the cave (2004, 514a-520a) was a story about being able to see reality and not the imaginative-but-distorted shadows on the wall, and to see by the light, not
from a hypnotic-but-artificial flame, but from the source of all illumination, from the sun itself. In this conception, seeing is not only believing but knowing, and what is taken as knowledge is the basis for individual perception and collective action.

Spectacle, of course, has been part and parcel of political performance since prehistoric cave paintings, the Trojan horse, Roman triumphal parades of conquered prisoners, medieval mystery plays and iconography, the battlefield flags in the War of the Roses, Elizabeth I and Sun-King Louis XIV’s use of reflected light to suggest their charisma (Geertz, 1977), and the pomp that accompanies every coronation, inauguration, and other national ceremonies of empowerment. Spectacular political performances still are part of political culture, but in our time we have been subjected as well to a patently pictorial bombardment. Political posters can be traced back to near the invention of the printing press, while political lithographs and photography were mainstays of the nineteenth century. The twentieth century saw the introduction of film, television, and, especially with the coming of digitalization of images, the World Wide Web full of QuickTime movies, streaming videos, and photoshopped cartoons and pictures.

Governments were quick to use visual media to present themselves to the public. Newsreels were imported from France into the United States in 1911 (Fielding, 1972), and by the middle of World War I, the U.S. Department of War was making films for distribution to the movie houses around the country. More famous were the Farm Security Administration’s documentaries during the 1930s and 1940s (MacCann, 1973), modeled on John Grierson’s famous British documentaries but with their distinctively American subject matters—including soil conservation, water erosion, the desirability of hydroelectric plants along the great rivers, and Frank Capra’s stunning “Why We Fight”
series from World War II. As well, government photographers were always on hand to snap a picture of the president kissing a baby, christening a battleship, or laying a memorial wreath. And then, of course, with the coming of television, hour upon hour of political images flowed into the living rooms of American households from the early 1950s and onward. Politicians such as John Kennedy stood for a record number of televised press conferences, the major U.S. networks all made television documentaries and so-called White Papers on the issues they believed needed resolution (Curtin, 1996), and innumerable government spokespersons made themselves available every day to cameras in time for the evening news.

Now of course it is true that the great web of political action groups I mentioned when talking about populism also could command television cameras, but what John Welsh (1985/1990, 399) called “the dramatization of authority” that relies upon “processes of mystifying the social relations” almost always is best performed by the recognizable figures of central government— in our time, President Bush, Secretary of State Rice, Secretary of Defense Rumsfeld, and, on a secondary level, the majority and minority leaders of the congressional parties, and even George Bush’s poodle. The centers of political power garner the most television time, almost without exception.

What, then, of the citizenry? Media theorist Hanno Hardt (2004, 5; cf. Kellner, 2005) has argued loudly that “the mass production of information and entertainment—supported by an authoritative economic interest in public responses to commercial or political appeals throughout most of the last century—has steadily eroded the give and take of participatory communication.” More than that, definitions of political problems and their solutions are all too often, perhaps, the product of what can be visualized. As
political scientist Murray Edelman argued in 1988 (1): “The spectacle constituted by news reporting continually constructs and reconstructs social problems, crises, enemies, and leaders and so creates a succession of threats and reassurances. These constructed problems and personalities furnish the content of political journalism and the data for historical and analytic political studies. They also play a central role in winning support and opposition for political causes and policies.”

In recent years, Edelman’s argument has been substantially supported by the succession of presidential justifications for the Iraqi war. President Bush has told American and world audiences, via regular telespectacles (Gronbeck, 1995), that war in Iraq has been necessary because (1) of the stockpiling there of weapons of mass destruction, (2) of connections between al Qaida and Saddam Hussein, (3) of the atrocities committed by Hussein against his own people and Iraq’s neighbors, (4) of the need to liberate Iraqis from dictatorial government, and (5) of the need to build and set the foundations for a new Middle-Eastern democracy. Each of these explanations has been visually played out on television: then-Secretary of State Colin Powell’s U.N. slide show on Iraq’s presumed weaponry, maps and fuzzy pictures showing what were purportedly secret meetings between al Qaida operatives and high-ranking Iraqi officials, pictures of mass graves and torture rooms, testimonials given by Iraqi citizens, and, just recently, pictures of Iraqis voting for parliamentary representatives then showing cameras their fingers dyed purple, which is the latest icon of democratic political participation. If seeing is believing and knowing, then . . . but I need not finish that argument.

In this view, electronically visualized, mass-mediated political spectacles bring with them specularity, that is, what has been termed subject-positioning by media critics
(e.g., Mulvey, 1975; Fiske, 1987). Simply put, we are positioned in relationship to, or oriented toward, what we see by the images themselves. That image on a television screen is framed so as to limit the range of our vision; the scene is shot from a particular point in the environment that controls our perspective on what we’re seeing; and of course the actual images that have been selected for our viewing are all that we can look at. Specularity, then, is a matter of having our objective knowledge and even subjective experience of the world controlled by the sights, sounds, and words of what the networks show us.

Now, some might want to argue that control over a citizenry’s information and opinions is no different in the age of film and television than it was in the heyday of newspapers. There’s some truth to that assertion, though if we go back to Martin Jay’s (1994) characterization of western individual and social epistemology as ocularcentric, the visual has a special place in subjective and intersubjective experience and is not so vulnerable to the limitations of literacy that printed language is. Furthermore, the power of the pictorial is testified to in every news stall in this city: British tabloids have been leaders in featuring the pictorialization of politics in newspapers and news magazines.

*Electrification.* The fourth change affecting American political culture determinatively is, then, electrification. It must be separated from the specular or visualizing mass media, of course, because not all electrified media use visual channels of communication. Just think of the telegraph, telephone, radio, and, for most of its history, the Internet. Furthermore, not all electrified media are created equal, and that notion needs to occupy our time for a bit.
Some media are consumed in a state of comparative inactivity; you often just listen to radio or watch the telly. Others require comparative activity; you talk (usually) on the telephone or digitally manipulate the keys of a computer in deciding where to ask it to take you. Some media are used largely for mass dissemination; radio and television signals move from central points via atmosphere or wires to distributed points. Others such as the telegraph and telephone are employed mostly for point-to-point communication. And still others, most notably the computer, carry both mass disseminated and point-to-point messages (see Manovich, 2001, for a thoughtful review of media characteristics as “languages”).

Now, it is true that when we talk about the electrification of politics (e.g., Gronbeck, 1990), we usually think about the electronic media of mass distribution of messages—film, radio, television. And, as I certainly was suggesting when discussing telespectacles, mass-mediated political images seemingly work most powerfully in the West when positioning citizens in particular relationships to politics, public policies, and even each other. I say “each other” in recognition of an argument that runs from Walter Lippmann’s analysis (1922) in the 1920s of media power to Hanno Hardt’s most recent (2004) pronouncement: that the disseminating mass media create our senses of publicness, of who we are, of what Benedict Anderson (1991) called our imagined communities, or what Anthony Cohen (1985, 98) meant when he said: “Our sense of community—our collective identity—is rhetorically constructed. We set our social boundaries or definitions of ‘we’ and ‘they’ via discourses of community.” Political telespectacles build such communities.
But yet, we need not, indeed we ought not, consider only the media of mass
distribution as sources of political culture and participation in that culture. Telephones tie
individuals together and hence help in the formation of political blocs; the fax machine
got messages out of the Republic of China independent of officially approved film and
video outlets during the 1989 Chinese resistance centered in Tianemmen Square; and all
of the mass protests to the World Trade Organization or WTO from Seattle in 1999 to
Hong Kong last month were assembled via Internet networks—good old fashioned e-mail
and listservs as well as those creatures of the late ‘90s, blogs (for general background on
cyberpolitics, see Wiese & Gronbeck, 2005). In our time, especially, digitalization of the
computer, allowing web-like connections between ideas and people through simple
searches and message-forwarding capabilities, has helped create whole new political
blocs forming without regard to the traditional limitations of time and space. You don’t
need bodily presence to participate. Virtual democracy, built around online groups
(Galston, 2002) who now can raise tremendous amounts of money from small
contributions (Wiese & Gronbeck, 2005), is exerting kinds of political pressure
electronically that run in dialogically opposite ways to the political force of the
telespectacles of radio, television, and film.

Let me consider briefly one of the most popular American Internet-based political
webs, MoveOn.org (MoveOn.org, 2005). It was founded in 1998 by two West Coast
entrepreneurs, Joan Blades and Wes Boyd, who were frustrated with the country’s focus
on Bill Clinton’s sexual behavior. In September 1998, they called upon Congress to
censure Clinton and then “move on” to important political matters. They began with
electronic petitions, got into political campaigning in 2000 by supporting liberal
candidates, and, as the Bush administration began to pursue war and seemingly avoid important domestic activities, they split into three sections: (1) MoveOn.org as a general listserv providing individuals with political information, (2) MoveOn.org Political Action, which was registered as a political action committee or PAC, meaning that it pursued partisan causes and was subject to the tax and contributions laws governing PACs, and (3) MoveOn.org Civic Action, which is a 501(c)(4) nonprofit organization, which means it is registered with the Internal Revenue Service as a public reform organization seeking to open up spaces in the electronic media for citizen participation in political processes.

Each section of MoveOn.org works pretty much the same, off listservs to which anyone can subscribe. The initial part of MoveOn.org is just an informational listserv, regularly telling its subscribers about upcoming legislation that they might be interested in supporting or opposing. MoveOn.org Political Action is more aggressive. It has periodically—for example, during the buildup to the American invasion of Iraq—asked its members to flood congressional offices with e-mail messages and phone calls opposing the invasion. It sought to—and partially succeeded in—tying up computer systems and phone lines one day in 2003. It also makes political ads that play as streaming videos on the Internet; it then requests enough small contributions from subscribers to have the best ads played on broadcast television during something like a large football game. And, it offered financial support to eighty-one political candidates during the 2004 election. The third entity, MoveOn.org Civic Action, is involved in campaign finance reform, anti-war activities, and tax reform. In all, 3.3 million Americans subscribe to the various sections of MoveOn.org (moveon.org, 2005).
Now of course, 60-90 million Americans might watch a major political speech or debate on television; citizen participation in politics as such is minimal on most occasions. Yet, the fact that a single virtual political group can hold unto 3.3 million Americans, certainly most of voting age, is a sign that new forms of political action are taking shape on the newest of the electrified political media.

**Backlash.** And now, finally, as a fifth focus for systematic change in American political culture, I come to the most ephemeral of the factors—backlash. The idea of backlash, certainly, is simple enough: At times, citizens become so fed up, disillusioned, or frustrated with the lack of government activity or the ways in which it actually operates that they rise up, putting their bodies on the line—materializing their beliefs and attitudes through physical presence or absence. A protest march is a kind of statement through physical presence, while a strike is a genre of message offered by physical absence. American history is filled with examples of public, political backlash behavior: Shay’s Rebellion of 1786-87, when New England farmers and laborers protested high taxes and unresponsive government; the 1854 Boston riots in the wake of the arrest of a fugitive slave, Anthony Burns; the 1894 Pullman strike, the first nationwide labor shutdown in the United States; the Bonus March on Washington, D.C., in 1932, with World War I veterans demanding the bonus they’d been promised for European service; and the great civil rights Marches on Washington in 1963 and 1968, with citizens camping through the center of the District of Columbia.

In general, then, backlashes are efforts by groups of citizens asking the ship of state to correct its course, to sail in fairer climes and more productive waters. Historically, of course, citizen uprisings such as the Peasants’ Revolt of 1381-82, led by
the redoubtable Wat Tyler and John Ball, were usually crushed and scattered, but as rule of law and legislative supremacy began to take hold in the West, backlash movements became more than disruptions. They became instruments of petition, even demand.

In our time, backlash movements have made their demands in shrill and even physically forceful ways. Protests at abortion clinics have often made it impossible for patrons to enter; arrests regularly are made. Members of both the Animal Liberation Front and the Environmental Liberation Front—ALF and ELF, respectively—break into laboratories, chain themselves to factory gates, and destroy property. Indeed, backlash movements in current U.S. politics are associated with the inflamed moral issues that make politicians who try to compromise flush with worry—issues such as abortion, the death penalty, animal rights, gun control.

Morality tinged topics painted in Christian hues provided the United States with some of its virulent backlash politics. Thomas Franks’ 2004 best-seller, *What’s the Matter with Kansas? How Conservatives Won the Heart of America*, documents the political remanufacture of a liberal-populist state into one of the bastions of Midwestern, religious-right conservatism. As Franks (2004, 69) says of Kansas politics, “Kansas has trawled its churches for the most aggressively pious individuals it could find and has proceeded to elevate them to the most prominent positions of public responsibility available, whence these saintly emissaries are then expected to bark and howl and rebuke the world for its sins.” Here is just the most recent manifestation of an engaged Christian right that has been a periodic, significant factor in American politics for two decades. Morris Fiorina (2005) insists that such groups really do not swing elections, that so-called red states still would have been in the conservative column in 2000 and 2004 even
without them, though there’s little doubt that conservative backlashers have the means to reach into the inner circles of the current Washington administration.

Whether the current Christian-right backlash plays a determinative role in the Bush’s foreign and domestic policies, however, is moot. What is significant is that publicly visible, active backlash movements, organizing at street level and creating televised images of angry citizen protest, most of it on moral rather than political grounds, can come to disturb the world inside the Beltway—the tidy world of the executive, legislative, and judicial branches of government.

Some Features of American Political Culture Today

Now of course I realize that I have been operating at a dangerous level of, simultaneously, abstraction and reduction. I suppose that’s one of the reasons I enjoy keynotes—the risks of over- and understatement can be written off to the keynoter’s mission, which is to champion reassessment and forward thinking. In keeping with that mission, let me think about some of the consequences to American political culture of the five-forces-of-systemic-change that I’ve outlined. What have popularity, populism, spectacle, electrification, and periodic citizen backlash done to the United States Constitution of 1787 that so grandly built central governmental mechanisms for a new country?

Before I approach that question, I must mention an enduring feature of all attempts to construct an American society and an American government. That feature is something that we carry around in our pockets everyday, for it is inscribed on our coins: *e pluribus unum*, “out of many, one.” As a country cobbled together out of immigrants
(discounting as we almost always do the Native Americans), the “United States” is probably misnamed, for we certainly have never been united in any enduring way. For goodness sakes, we wrote a constitution in 1787 and only four years later passed a Bill of Rights that amended the document ten times and, as recently as 1992, amended it a twenty-seventh time.²

_E pluribus unum_ is a statement of the endemic problem of how a nation-state without deep structuring traditions can keep from over-emphasizing manyness, which leads to fragmentation, or oneness, which leads to repression. The history of U.S. political culture, always, is in a significant way the history of how to balance and rebalance, assert and renegotiate, relationships between a unified government and a diversified population—between central mechanisms of both justice and freedom, between the one and the many.

If there has been a single, overarching consequence of the five mechanisms-of-change, it has been the rapid—perhaps too rapid—democratization of the machinery of governance. The 1787 Constitution, as I’ve noted, built a nice, tight triumvirate of an executive, a legislative, and a judicial system beholding to each other, but much less so to the citizenry it served. Essentially, the population was not written into the machinery except as voters. Otherwise, people were expected to watch, yes, but to stay out of the way. The principal sign of a successful national government was citizen acquiescence, even what Murray Edelman (1964) called quiescence. The Bill of Rights protected individual rights, but collectively, as a lumpen mass, Americans had little to do with government except vote and watch the machine make policy.
The cry of popularity or the awakening of citizen privilege and the emergence of populism or intermediate structures that could plead the cases of individuals with needs or even focused identities were forces aimed at turning a representative or federal government into a pluralistic-democratic one. The disseminating mass media, especially the electrified channels, brought government into the towns and homes of the entire country, bestirring political consciousness. And while film and television gave government actual visual presence, showing citizens how hard it was working for them, those media weren’t automatically empowering for the politicians themselves. Fictional films of the 1920s and 1930s often depicted heartless, power-hungry scions of state, and television broadcasts of the 1950s—and I’m thinking of the Army-McCarthy hearings of 1954 or the CBS documentary *Harvest of Shame* about treatment of migrant Mexican workers—depicted government officials seeking personal glory or victimizing those that they should be serving. Popularity, populism, and telespectacles powered by new technologies together produced a heightened democratic consciousness that soon expressed itself in cries for citizen entitlements and anger when those cries were ignored.

If democratization, even hyper-democratization, was one consequence of the revolutions I’ve suggested, the emergence of a public voice was another. Certainly voices at election time have been a hallmark of American politics—part of what Alexis de Tocqueville found so interesting, even quaint, about American political activity. If at times those voices were called, as a 1792 newspaper editor called them, “the Voice of Grog” (quoted in Miller & Gronbeck, 1994, 5) because of all of the alcohol consumed at election rallies, yet an active citizenry has always been sought out in U.S. electoral politics.
But, the twentieth-century electronic media opened up new forms of journalism with new places for voices. Radio and television turned journalists into intermediaries between government and audiences, delivering government voices and images to the citizenry but also the actual voices and bodies of citizens to government officials. In the 1960s, Daniel Boorstein (1964) complained about what he called pseudo-events—events staged by national spokespersons and by groups of citizens with a cause for each other. Pseudo-events were opportunities for voice and body to be presented for journalists to transmit to audiences-that-matter. The places where citizen voices were amplified and given even national presence we started to call “the public sphere” (e.g., Habermas, 1989). The public sphere came to be understood as a virtual or symbolic space where the voices of institutional officials and the voices of citizens, whether individually or collectively in blocs, could address each other in non-official ways. Presidents, members of their cabinets, groups of legislators, and federal agency spokespersons hold press conferences and appear on talk and interview shows to address citizens, while citizens and their advocacy groups do the same so as to respond to government officials.

And the Internet only amplified the citizen voices. Citizen now can gather together virtually, without regard to time or place, to share information, opinions, and courses of action. Blogs are so popular that print and electronic news operatives build their own. More than that, they’re significant enough to become sources of information for news outlets. If you know the story of the Abu Ghraib prison photos of abuse, you know a story that circulated on the Internet well before it was picked up by CBS’s 60 Minutes II and Seymour Hersh of the New Yorker (CBS, 2004; Hersh, 2004; cf. Rajiva, 2005). Citizen voices now are loud, holding conversations in the public sphere that are
overheard by politicians. The voices are loud enough to sometimes force Congress or the President to respond. The U.S. Senate resolution on torture is a good example. Expanded political dialogue between people and the state is fostered by new media.

A third consequence is what can be called promotional politics (e.g., see Bennett, 1995). The executive and legislative branches talk to each through the electronic media, that is, in the presence of a citizen not only watching the telespectacles but also playing parts in them. The mass-mediated political conversations of our time flow like sales dialogues. That is, they have much in common with public relations and advertising campaigns. Presidents are selling legislative proposals to legislators and the citizens whose public opinions can make those legislators take notice. Presidents are selling positive images of themselves as well, knowing that a publicly supported executive can create fear or compliance in Congress. Think of Bill Clinton in 1998. The Lewinsky scandal had the Republicans of the House and Senate salivating in anticipation of impeachment proceedings, but public support of Clinton barely dipped. Even with lurid stories of cigars, stained blue dresses, and sexual liaisons in the Oval Office, Clinton’s citizen support was strong enough to push a balanced budget through both houses of Congress, which meant that almost everyone had to give up some small pet legislative projects to create a majority. And, the Articles of Impeachment went down. Clinton, along with Reagan, was the greatest promotional president of the twentieth century. In an era of telespectacles, electrified politics, and intermediate organizations and power blocs existing between citizens and the state, if you can’t sell it, it won’t get done.

And yet, in the fourth place, the phrase “it won’t get done” suggests one final consequence of the systemic changes I’ve been examining: gridlock. “Gridlock” is an
electronics term that has made its way into the heart of American politics, at both the national and the state levels. The analogue in product advertising would be situation in which the consumers have listened to so many advertisements that they don’t know which brand of toothpaste or automobile to buy. Legislators listen to the special interests who’ve made contributions to their election campaigns, presidents and governors who threaten them with dire consequences if they violate executive expectations, journalists who publish public opinion polls daily (Alsina, Phililps, & Gronbeck, 2001), and citizens who bombard them with marching orders via telephone, mail, and Internet messages. Those legislators may well campaign by taking strong stands on tax cuts or new spending on education or abortion reform, but once they’re in the House or Senate chambers, often facing a president or governor from the other party, they become extremely cautious. They spend an amazing amount of time blaming the other party or office for inactivity.

The passage of the USA PATRIOT Act (Gronbeck, 2004) is the exception that proves the rule. Many sections of the Patriot Act had been proposed before 9/11. Congressional committees had debated new forms of electronic surveillance, for example, throughout the 1990s. But it was not until the shock to the political system of 9/11 that electronic surveillance of cell phone calls, bank and commercial transactions, and even library checkout records was allowed. The fact that the United States Senate just last month resisted renewal of those controversial sections of the Patriot Act is an indication that a business-as-usual atmosphere has returned to Washington, D.C. The President and the House want renewal; senators are listening to the voices of civil libertarians. Push and pull, push and pull—gridlock is back.
And so here we are: The traditional, institutionally constituted governmental system of the United States has been buffeted by winds of change—an engaged citizenry, issue-based and ideologically-based citizen blocs, means for the state and its constituencies to see, envision, and engage each other, and near-constant confrontative expressions of citizen demand and anger. And the systemic consequences? Hyper-democratization, vocal dialogues that require politicians to listen to well-financed citizen groups, public relations politics, and, paradoxically, legislative inaction in most sessions.

And So, Now What?

So, presently, American democratic institutions regularly beat up on each other in front of a bewildered and perplexed citizenry. Politicians generate very little trust—even less than lawyers.3 Kids no longer are told that they can grow up to be President of the United States—that statement is more a threat than a promise. Americans by now are aswim in political information, bombarded as they are by newspapers, magazines, screaming radio and television talk show hosts and coiffeured news anchors, special-interest newsletters, and innumerable Internet-based alarmists and pundits. We have far too much political knowledge but also, alas, far too little political knowledge. We don’t know what to do. Period.

Actually, we do know something about the consequences of change that need to be addressed. One of our great difficulties is that we have reconstituted the American documentary in a land of plenty. We’re not just a democracy; we’re a capitalist-democracy with an unholy amount of money available for influencing governmental actions. We run our presidential elections campaigns for about two years each, in front
of some 200,000,000 voters stretched across not only fifty states but also the American territories, the American military, and American abroad. The cost of running U.S. elections in the presidential years runs into, not just millions of dollars, but billions of dollars—$1.67 billion for the national elections alone in 2004 (Center for Responsive Politics, 2005). That figure is up compared to the cost of the 2000 elections, in spite of the passage in 2002 of the Bipartisan Campaign Reform Act or BRCA. BRCA simply redistributed some of the campaign spending, and, because it allowed presidential candidates who didn’t take federal money to avoid spending limits, it provided no control whatsoever over the big spenders.

Why can’t campaign financial limitations work? For two reasons: One, the people who would have to pass strict campaign spending limits are the people who’ve profited from the current system, the incumbents themselves. Two, more difficult is an ideological equation that limitations on spending are limitations on free speech. In United States politics, money literally talks. So long as free speech is equated with purchased speech, American politics will continue to follow the money. Campaign winners doesn’t always spend more money than losers, but it happens often enough to keep politicians trying to raise more dollars than their challengers.

And so, the U.S. continues with one of the most cumbersome electoral systems in the world, and one that’s so expensive and lengthy that, as I noted when I started this talk, we live in a permanent campaign. Governing seems to almost always take second place to campaigning even in the face of crises in governing. It’s been suggested that we could solve some of our problems not only through campaign finance reform but also by shortening the campaign period or maybe even getting rid of the Electoral College system
in favor of direct popular elections. I would respond to such suggestions by saying that we cannot shorten the campaign season unless we eliminate private monies, PAC contributions, and the so-called Sec. 527 groups from affecting campaigning. In other words, we would have to go from privately financed elections to either publicly financed campaigns or campaigns that could be waged only on contributed radio and television time. But, of course, with the Internet now weighing significantly in the process (Gronbeck & Wiese, 2005) and with almost no national-network broadcast campaign ads now used, control of broadcast media use may not be an optimal solution anymore. As for direct popular elections, presidential campaigns almost inevitably would become focused on the most populous states—California, New York, and the great Rust Belt states from Pennsylvania through Ohio and Michigan into Illinois. The small states, as they did when the Electoral College was invented, would complain loudly—and, I think, determinatively. We’re a long way from direct elections.

So, if effective reform of the electoral system is next to impossible in the foreseeable future, is there any hope visible on the horizon? I suspect that all that remains of hope is a fantasy featuring a reign of political virtue. If the U.S. could find ways to repair the break between the executive and legislative branches of power, if we had in our party system something akin to at least the basic relationships between your ministers and parliamentary parties, we might find ourselves with more political accountability. Now of course I realize that even Great Britain has been Americanized in a way that regularly dominates international conferences on politics and globalization. And, I realize that Tony Blair’s 1997 campaign very much resembled Bill Clinton’s 1996
campaign. You, too, are faced with most of the same changes in political operations that we are even though our governance systems are so different.

Reigns of virtue, as well, are notoriously repressive—just ask the French. If virtue is too strong a word, then maybe responsiveness and responsibility are more appropriate. But, in neither your country nor mine will the governors of the nation-state become more responsive and responsible until citizens require it. If Murray Edelman was right over forty years ago—if constituencies will acquiesce quiescently so long as their representatives seem to be working hard—then we’re doomed. But, if the battle cry of so many of today’s good government organizations turns into political behavior, we have a chance to survive. Listen to the cries for an engaged citizenry, for an Internet to work as a civic web, for participatory democracy to become the way we live our lives in political culture, for politicians to spend at least much time governing as they do campaigning.

As is almost always the case, the demands and the consent of the governed—not of political action committees, not of fat cats with the money to direct campaigns in directions they want them to go, not of the spellbinding ideologues of right or left, but of the governed themselves—only if their demands and their consent are channeled into large-scale reform will the reconstitution of American political culture be progressive. Large-scale reform begins, not at the top, at the point of oneness, but at the bottom, with the many—person by person, community by community, county by county, state by state. That’s a lot to ask of a country assembled, as it says on New York City’s Statue of Liberty, out of “your tired, your poor,/ Your huddled masses yearning to breathe free,/The wretched refuse of your teeming shore” (Lazarus, 1903/1990).
But clearly, the tired, poor, huddled, wretched citizens of the United States ultimately have to save themselves. We must start saying the same thing to ourselves that we’ve been telling Iraq since 2003: only citizen commitment to political participation and oversight makes democracy work.

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Notes

1 In the original U.S. constitution and until the 17th Amendment, senators were elected by state legislatures and the president, by the Electoral College—electors from each state chosen via citizen ballots. As well, the only direct power given to citizens was the franchise. Only with amendments to the Constitution did additional, specified rights—to free speech, to militia formation, to freedom from the quartering of troops in homes, to freedom from unreasonable search and seizure, to speedy trials, etc.—come into being.

2 The 27th Amendment is among the oddest: no pay raises for senators or representatives can take effect until after an election.


4 Emma Lazarus wrote “The New Colossus” when the Statue of Liberty arrived from France, though the poem was not put on a plaque in the monument until 1903. Her descriptors of immigrants reflected the views of many Americans, who believed that the huge flow in the late 19th and early 20th centuries would destroy American community.