

AMERICANS' DESIRE FOR STEALTH DEMOCRACY: HOW DECLINING TRUST BOOSTS POLITICAL PARTICIPATION

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ABSTRACT

While the prevailing wisdom is that Americans want to be more involved in matters of governance, we argue, on the basis of survey and focus group data, that the last thing most people want is to be more connected to politics of any kind. They despise debate and compromise and nearly half like the idea of turning political decisions over to “successful business people” or to “unelected experts.” The reason for these attitudes is that many Americans are relatively unconcerned with democratic niceties such as accountability and really only want to get power out of the hands of those who have an incentive to act in a self-interested fashion. As such, and again contrary to conventional thinking, mass participation in politics is stimulated by perceptions that elected officials are selfish and therefore not to be trusted. The much-discussed decline in governmental trust since the late 1960s has probably boosted political participation, not decreased it. People want out of politics and only get involved when they believe that by doing so they might be able to diminish the amount of self-serving action in government.

Observers of American politics believe that the people desire greater involvement in the political system. Alan Ehrenhalt (1992: xviii) provides a good example of this belief when he writes that, according to the public, a successful political system is one in which “ordinary people with middle class values take time out from their lives to offer their decency and common sense to the solution of common problems.” Data seem to corroborate these perceptions of popular desires. Two-thirds of the American public believe citizen input should be increased at the expense of input from elected officials and political institutions. Over three-quarters of the adult population believe the American people do not have enough power whereas only four percent believe the federal government does not have enough power. Four-fifths of American adults support greater use of direct democracy in the form of ballot initiatives and referenda.¹ Americans obviously want a greater voice in politics.

Then again, maybe not. Even as the people call for giving more influence to the people, they make it clear that they would prefer not to be much involved in political decision making. When it comes to politics, many people want, as one focus group participant put it, “to be left alone.” Another focus group participant adamantly stated, “When I leave here, when I walk out this door, I’m not going to volunteer for anything. I’m not going to get involved in anything....I’m lazy. I’m not going to do it. I’m too busy obsessing on other

² When given the chance to have a direct say in politics through ballot initiatives and referenda, people often feel manipulated and inadequate and think the wording on ballot initiatives and referenda baffling (see Broder, 2000). So people appear to want more say in politics but are clearly far from eager to be politically involved.

Our explanation for this puzzling confluence of views is relatively straightforward. People’s most

¹ These data are from the Democratic Processes Survey, Gallup Organization, 1998, which we describe more fully later.

²The focus groups from which these quotes were obtained are also described more fully later in this paper.

intense desire for the political process is that it not take advantage of them by allowing certain entities, such as special interests and elected officials, to reap personal gains at the expense of ordinary people like themselves. Increasingly, scholars are realizing that the desire to avoid being played for a sucker is an intensely-held human motivation (for a good review, see Guth, 1995). And rank-and-file Americans are convinced the existing structures of American politics allow ordinary people to be played for suckers. Except perhaps for a small, issue-motivated stratum, the people's strongest and most earnest political desire is to get power away from those they believe to be self-serving, and until they achieve that goal many people are compelled to participate for no other reason than to hold in check self-serving officials.

The people's passion to stamp out self-interest in politics frequently leaves the impression that they want to empower ordinary people but this populism is largely, if not entirely, chimerical. Instead of a people-centered political decision-making structure, many Americans want a political process that does not require their monitoring let alone their active participation. We contend that many Americans prefer stealth democracy; that is, they want democratic procedures to exist but do not want those procedures to be reliant on people's specific preferences and do not want procedures to be particularly visible unless people are in the mood to see them. Wanting policy to be made without the people being taken advantage of is not the same as wanting the people to make policy. Unfortunately, typical survey items and research designs (which often present popular influence as the only alternative to decision-making by self-serving elites) have made it difficult to distinguish these two very different desires.

To start the process of determining people's actual desires, we employ data from two valuable data sets. The first consists of a specially commissioned national survey on public attitudes toward governmental processes that was conducted in the late spring of 1998.³ The second consists of transcripts from a series of

³ The survey was conducted from mid-April to mid-May 1998. The Gallup Organization administered the survey via telephone interviews. Gallup generated a random-digit-dial sample that provided equal access to all operating telephones. Using the standard methodology of the Gallup Poll, respondents were chosen with a three-call design using the "youngest male-oldest

focus group sessions on the same topic held across the U.S. in late 1997.⁴ While the 1266 respondents to our 125-item survey lend a needed systematic quality to the available data, the focus group comments lend the needed depth. We were heartened to discover that these two very different sources pointed to the same general conclusions.

Do Americans Want To Participate More or Less?

At first blush, it appears that evidence supporting the notion that Americans want to participate actively in political decision making is rampant. Our own survey results can be read as indicating that Americans are direct democrats at heart. These results show that people overwhelmingly support increased opportunities for “people to vote directly on policies through ballot initiatives” (86 percent). They believe the

female” respondent selection procedure. Average length of the interviews was 28 minutes, and the data are weighted to match the sample with the population (adults in the U.S. 18 or older) based on the most recent U.S. Census. See Hibbing and Theiss-Morse, 2001, for more information on the survey.

⁴ Eight focus groups were conducted in the late fall of 1997: two each in Nebraska, Maine, California, and Georgia. Each focus group consisted of 6 to 12 participants who were recruited either by professional recruiters (in California by the Social and Behavioral Research Institute at California State University, San Marcos, and in Georgia by TDM Research of Birmingham, Alabama) or by advertisements, flyers, random telephone calls and announcements at various civic and social meetings (Nebraska and Maine). Each session lasted approximately two hours and participants were paid from \$20 to \$50 for their time. The sessions were tape recorded.

federal government has too much power (61 percent) and that the American people do not have enough power (78 percent). They do not believe public officials care about what people like them think (72 percent). And 80 percent disagree with the suggestion that members of Congress should do what they think best regardless of the views of their constituents. Taken together, these results seem to support the conclusion that the people lean toward popular control and away from representative government.

But other items in our survey raise questions about this interpretation. Many people do not find politics intrinsically interesting. They express no desire to re-engage with the political process. They do not follow most political issues because they do not care about most issues. As a result, they want someone else to take care of the political sphere for them. When presented with a spectrum ranging from pure direct democracy at 1 to pure institutional democracy at 7, the people's mean preference is not for 1 or 2 or even 3, but rather 4, exactly halfway between the extremes. People most definitely do *not* want to take over political decision making from elected officials.

As Cronin (1989: 228) admits, "Americans overwhelmingly endorse leaving the job of making laws to their elected representatives." We would take this observation one step further because it appears Americans do not even want to be placed in a position where they feel obligated to provide input to those who *are* making political decisions. People *seem* to want to be more active and involved in politics only because it is one of the few ways they can see (or the only option presented to them) of stopping decisions from being made by those who directly benefit from those decisions. People often view their political involvement as medicine they must take in order to keep the disease of greedy politicians and special interests from getting further out of hand.

It could well be the case, however, that Americans are averse to participating themselves but want decision making in the hands of the people. That is, they do not want to participate but they want other ordinary citizens to be heavily involved in politics. In this way, people could keep a desired distance from politics but still have "the people" making the decisions. Surprisingly, perhaps, this is not the case.

Americans lack confidence in the abilities of their fellow Americans. Almost three out of four respondents agreed that politics is too complicated for “people like me” to understand; 65 percent believed that “people lack the time and knowledge to make political decisions”; 60 percent do not think “most people can be trusted”; and nearly half (45 percent) disagreed that “if the American people decided political issues instead of relying on politicians” the country would be better off. The last result may be the most surprising. It is true that more than half of the respondents believed people would make better decisions than politicians, but the fact that 45 percent believed politicians would make better decisions than the people suggests that the belief that people are superior to politicians is not nearly as universal as implied. Moreover, when asked to evaluate the individual traits of ordinary people and politicians, the people rate politicians as far more informed and somewhat more intelligent than ordinary people.

The focus group comments provide even stronger support for our argument that people are not enamored with either their own or the American people’s political abilities. Participants in every single one of the eight focus groups were negative and self-effacing. Consider the following examples:

Mike: People don’t care. They’re like, “what’s this issue? Oh, I don’t care. You know, whatever.”

Jackie: And I’m the same way. I don’t read the newspaper. I listen to the news in the morning...while I’m getting ready to go to work, and that’s all I know.

Ron: You’ve got so many people that are just blind sheep that follow everything that the media throws at them...We are a very lazy society that wants everything given to them.

Robin: People aren’t that bright. [Laughter] No, seriously. Have you ever worked with the public? There are people, I mean, they’re just not that bright.

Carol: You know, we say that we don’t have time, but nobody goes to city council meetings. I had to go for a class. I had to go so I went. I don’t have to go now so I don’t go. “Wheel of Fortune” is on. I’m comfortable. It’s cold out. So I am as guilty as anybody.

John: People in general are like, “I don’t have time, I don’t have time.” But how many of us make

Given the unflattering view people hold of the American people, it should not be surprising that many are quite content, even eager, to turn political decision making over to those individuals willing to

spend more time on those issues. Suggestions of the people playing a larger role in the political decision-making process were met with disfavor, as the following comments indicate:

Moderator: What are your thoughts if we had a direct democracy such that every person would be making directly the decisions that affect us...It would be like...a New England town meeting...What do you think of that?

Cathy: It would be chaos.

Liz: No.

John: There would be a lot of violence.

Jim: I agree. I think it would be chaos because, you know, a lot of us don't take time to find out about issues...That may work in...a small town. You couldn't do it in [a large city] and it wouldn't work for [his state].

Carol: If you get this little kind of town meeting and these people are trying to vote against gay rights, do you really think the gay man standing there is saying, "oh, you know what, I disagree with this?" I don't think so. I think he'd be quiet for fear of retribution...Also, the people that go to these meetings are the ones who really want this. What about the apathetic people who kind of want to get involved but they can't get a sitter and they're not sure [about their views]?

Micheline: Somebody's got to do it [make political decisions] and...I don't want the job. I'm not interested in it.

Americans do not prefer putting decision-making power in the hands of ordinary people. They would much prefer having objective decision-makers who understand the concerns of ordinary people hopefully because they are ordinary people themselves and therefore spend time among other ordinary people. No overt public input would be necessary. If such a system seems less than democratic, remember that the people want to be certain that if they ever *did* opt to get involved, if an issue at some point in the future happened to impinge so directly on their lives that they were moved to ask the system for something, their request would be taken with the utmost seriousness. This, to many people, is as democratic as they want their political system to be; they do not want a system that is characterized by regular sensitivity to every whim of the people (and that thus expects and requires an attentive and involved public), but rather a system that is instinctively in touch with the problems of real Americans and that would respond with every ounce of courtesy and attentiveness imaginable if ordinary people ever did make an actual request upon the system.

This form of latent representation, of stealth democracy, is not just what people would settle for, it is what they prefer since it frees them from the need to follow politics. For this to happen, though, people need to be assured that decision-makers are interested in them as people, are potentially open to popular input, and are not benefitting materially from their service and decisions. This desire for empathetic, unbiased, other-regarding, yet uninstructed public officials is about as distinct as possible from the claim that people want to provide more input to decision-makers than they currently provide.

Fondness for Non-Democratic Decision-Making Structures

If our interpretation of people's procedural preferences is correct, if they are not suspicious of the concept of elite decision making generally but rather only suspicious of those elites who are able and willing to serve selfish interests, then people's desire to keep ordinary people out of the political process should lead them to be surprisingly open to empowering any elite they believe will not be particularly selfish. Is it possible for them to envision elite decision makers who are not? To be sure, this is a difficult image to conjure, but three items in the survey make an attempt. They read:

1. Our government would run better if decisions were left up to successful business people.
2. Our government would run better if decisions were left up to non-elected, independent experts rather than politicians or the people.
3. Our government would work best if it were run like a business.

While none of these statements advocates replacing democracy with a dictatorial style of government, it is fair to say that support for business-type approaches to governing or for turning authority over to something as amorphous and unaccountable as "non-elected, independent experts" instead of "politicians or the people" suggests moving in a different direction than the populist reform agenda widely attributed to the public today. Giving more political influence to successful business people⁵ or to unelected

⁵ Why might the people believe successful business people to be less self-serving than elected officials? Here is one try at an explanation. A successful business person is financially well-to-do and, even though this may reduce the ability to empathize with common people,

experts would entail a significant diminution in the influence of the run-of-the-mill American. If the populist argument is right, the American people, with their desire for the people to play a bigger role in political decisions, would reject such notions out of hand. If we are right, however, these less-than-democratic options would appeal to a substantial number of people.

[Table 1 about here]

As is evident in Table 1, surprising percentages of people respond favorably to the mention of decision-making structures that are not democratic and not even republican. It may be possible to discount the enthusiasm of people for suggestions of running government like a business (as seen in Column 3, nearly 60 percent think this is a good idea). The concept of a smoothly-running, directed, coordinated entity, moving with the efficiency demanded by market competition, may be so attractive to people that they respond in the affirmative without taking into consideration that the decision-making processes of most businesses are not accurately described as democratic. But answers to the other two questions are more difficult to dismiss. Nearly one-third of the respondents agreed that the political system would be better if “decisions were left to successful business people” and a similar percentage agreed the political system would be better if “decisions were left to non-elected experts” rather than to “politicians or the people.” (The mention of people in the item makes the response all the more surprising.) Some people, of course, liked both the expert and the

someone who is already wealthy has less motivation to take advantage of ordinary people. Moreover, the concept of giving authority to someone who did not seek it is also deeply appealing to people. Americans like decision makers to be reluctant to take power since this situation raises fewer suspicions about motive. Thus, people may not believe successful business people to be a cut above the rest of us but their wealth and the fact that they would be given power they did not seek may make them attractive.

business people options, but cross tabulation indicates nearly 48 percent of all respondents agreed with at least one of these two less-than-democratic options.

So how can people simultaneously express a desire to give more influence to ordinary people and to business people and unelected experts? We believe the key to explaining this puzzle is recognition that many Americans accept the (somewhat related) ideas that 1) ordinary people are more or less in agreement on the fundamental goals for the nation and that 2) governing is therefore basically a management problem of determining how best to achieve those goals. The first notion was most famously expressed by Rousseau (*The Social Contract*, in Barker, 1947) and remains a popular myth both among academics and the populace. A general will exists and becomes evident if elites, special interests, and other counterproductive elements are kept at bay so that the noble and consensual instincts of the rank and file are allowed to emerge.

Since the people agree on societal goals, no conflict need exist and governing is reduced to the mechanical process of implementing a good plan for attaining these shared goals. Determining appropriate policy action thus requires no (and, in fact, is likely to be harmed by) elaborate institutions and powerful elected officials. Burke's trustees, with their industry and judgment, are not needed (see Burke's *Speech to the Electors of Bristol*, in Hoffman and Levack, 1949). Their industry alone is quite enough. Better yet, why not turn to unbiased, perhaps even scientifically informed experts to figure out the best way to achieve the public's goals? In so doing, the people are empowered and democracy is not weakened. James Morone (1990) may have best captured this aspect of the American belief system. He points out that the combination of "direct democracy with scientific administration is a contradiction only when observed from liberal ground. If, instead of clashing interests, the people really did share an underlying communal good, then both methodologies served the same end" (126).

The important point in the people's thinking is that anybody *not* connected with biased special interests and self-serving elected officials would basically arrive at the same place. That is why the public is remarkably cavalier about giving more power to unelected experts or to unelected business people. It is the

same reason that ostensibly populist Americans give a puzzlingly warm embrace to extremely rich candidates. A 1992 Harris poll found that 55 percent of respondents agreed with the statement “Because Perot is a billionaire he won’t be influenced by the special interests who make big campaign contributions.” As a focus group participant put it, Perot said, “‘Look, I will not be influenced.’ He said, ‘You have the Democrats. You don’t know who’s buying them off and who is pulling their strings. Republicans, same thing.’ [Perot] said, ‘I’ll tell you what. The people will be the only people pulling my strings.’ And just that concept got my vote, you know.” The people are comforted by the thought of a decision maker who is clearly not motivated by money and perquisites. They would rather center the political process around such individuals even if it limits accountability on the issues. Because many people have limited interest in most issues, policy accountability is not a pressing concern for them.

Measuring and Explaining Preferences for Stealth Democracy

In a stealth democracy, governmental procedures are not visible to people unless they go looking; the people do not routinely play an active role in making decisions, in providing input to decision makers, or in monitoring decision makers. The goal in stealth democracy is for decisions to be made without commotion and disagreement and without decision makers benefitting themselves. As such, procedures that do not register on people’s radar screens are preferred to the noisy and divisive procedures typically associated with democratic government.

Measures of support for each of the many components of stealth democracy are unavailable, but several survey items provide a reasonable start. Specifically, since supporters of stealth democracy tend to believe that only special interests cause a deviation from consensus, they also tend to believe that debate is not helpful, that compromise between conflicting sides is not necessary, and that things would be better if decision making were turned over to entities that are largely, perhaps completely, unaccountable but that seem less self-serving and more objective. Thus, for our purposes, stealth democratic tendencies are

indicated if a respondent 1) agreed that “elected officials would help the country more if they would stop talking and just take action on important problems,” 2) agreed that “what people call compromise in politics is really just selling out on one’s principles,” and 3) agreed either that “our government would run better if decisions were left up to non-elected, independent experts rather than politicians or the people” *or* “our government would run better if decisions were left up to successful business people.” While an admittedly imperfect measure, people who are dismissive of debate and compromise and accepting of government by detached entities are clearly in possession of some of the core attitudes we are associating with supporters of stealth democracy.

The distribution of people on these measures is presented in Table 2. It is somewhat remarkable to us that only 6.5 percent of the national survey respondents are devoid of stealth democratic attitudes; that is, only about one in 15 Americans values political debate and compromise and recoils from government by either unelected experts or successful business people. On the other hand, 27.2 percent hold all three stealth democratic attitudes and 42.4 percent have two of the three. At the least, the conclusion has to be that Americans’ support for standard features of democracy such as deliberation, compromise, and accountability are substantially more tepid than is usually imagined.

[Table 2 about here]

Still, Table 2 makes it clear that substantial variation exists in people’s preference for stealth democracy. What accounts for this variation? We do not pretend to have a complete answer to this important question, but if the arguments presented earlier are correct, people who simply are uncomfortable with political disagreement, people who believe most Americans agree on the political agenda (or at least on the most important item on that agenda), and people who have virtually no interest in political issues should be more inclined to support political procedures in which they (and other ordinary people) did not have to take an active part. The reason conflict-averse individuals should prefer stealth democracy is obvious: any method of reducing political disagreements is bound to make such people happy. And it would also be

rational for those who believe Americans agree on the items most in need of governmental attention or, alternatively, who are too disinterested to appreciate the importance of policy details to be the most accepting of stealth democracy.

It is important to notice that only one of these three conditions (conflict-aversion, perceptions of agenda consensus, or political disinterest) needs to be present to push someone toward stealth democracy. If an individual is uncomfortable in the presence of political disagreement, it does not really matter if he or she sees consensus or is politically interested because conflict aversion on its own is enough to make stealth democracy attractive. Thus, our key independent variable indicates whether or not political disagreement is either disliked, uninteresting, or perceived as unnecessary. Accordingly, it is dichotomous, coded 1 if a person either “feels uneasy and uncomfortable when people argue about political issues,” believes “most” people agree on the most important problem facing the country, or expresses “no” or only “slight” interest in politics.⁶ People who have none of these three attitudes or perceptions are coded 0. For shorthand, we refer to this variable as “negative view of political disagreement.”

In addition to this key independent variable we rely upon a standard battery of demographic and political controls to help us understand variations in support of stealth democracy. More specifically, we

⁶ We repeated our procedures using an additive combination of these three variables and the results are very similar but the conceptualization used in Table 3 seems more consistent with theoretical expectations. Moreover, we substituted a more elaborate measure of specific policy interests (drawing on whether respondents claimed to “feel strongly” about preferred approaches to the policy areas of welfare and environment), but the complicated operationalization produced results similar to the basic interest measure so we will stick with the formulation described in the text.

include variables for gender, age, income, race, education, party identification, and political ideology. The relationships between several of these control variables and preferences for stealth democracy are interesting in their own right. The results obtained when our measure of support for stealth democracy is regressed on the main independent variable of interest as well as the nine control variables is presented in Table 3.

[Table 3 about here]

Beginning with the controls, only one of the demographic variables approaches statistical significance. Other things being equal, non-whites are more likely to hold negative views of the value of debate and compromise and to think turning over authority to successful business people or to independent experts is a good idea. Perhaps members of racial minorities think they would do better with a less politicized form of government; at any rate, on balance they certainly do not believe that debate, compromise, and policy accountability are the keys to good government. Equally interesting are the demographic variables that do *not* account for variations in support for stealth democracy. Whites may be less accepting of stealth democracy than non-whites, but women are not less accepting than men, the young are not less accepting than the old, the rich are not less accepting than the poor, and the educated are not less accepting than the uneducated.⁷

⁷ The (insignificant) coefficient for years of education may be the most surprising to many readers. It would have been reasonable to expect education to encourage an understanding of the necessity of debate, compromise, and democratic accountability. We believe at least part of the explanation for the fact that additional education does not clearly lead people to be less supportive of stealth democracy is the unfortunate emphasis in most schools on consensus (Hibbing and Theiss-Morse, 1996). Difficult, contentious issues are often avoided, meaning that students are unable to gain an appreciation for the necessity and nature of conflict in a heterogeneous society.

The non-demographic variables, especially party identification, are revealing. Since it would be a mistake to assume the effects of party identification are linear, we included separate terms for people who identify with the Democratic party (29.6 percent of the sample), with the Republican party (27.2 percent), and with a third party (a surprising 10.3 percent). Independents (29.2 percent) constitute the excluded term so the coefficients for the other parties should be read as the extent to which identifiers of the party are different from Independents. Interestingly, though Independents appear slightly more supportive of stealth democracy than partisans, Independents, third party identifiers, and Republicans are not significantly different from each other. The odd-person-out is the Democratic identifier. Other things being equal, Democrats are significantly less dismissive of debate and compromise and more suspicious of decision-making forms that are unaccountable; in other words, less likely to be stealth democrats. The surprisingly high level of sympathy in the American public for stealth democracy cannot be laid at the doorstep of the Independent since Independents are not much different from Republicans and third party identifiers (this conclusion holds true for each of the three component parts of the stealth democracy measure). And the aversion of Democrats to stealth democracy is difficult to explain since the effect is independent of “negative views of disagreement.” In other words, the effect cannot be explained by any tendency of Democrats to be more comfortable with political arguments than Republicans, to see less consensus than Republicans, and to have more interest in politics than Republicans.⁸

⁸ As would be expected, some multicollinearity exists between party and ideology. The Pearson’s R between them is .31. But of course, multicollinearity does not affect the sign or size of the coefficient, it only inflates standard errors, thus raising the possibility that some coefficients

will appear insignificant when they are not. Since party and ideology are both significant even with the multicollinearity, the danger to misinterpretation is not severe. Just in case, we ran the regression with the party variables but not ideology and with ideology but not the party variables. No features of the equation were appreciably affected by the removal of the variables, so we focus on the results with both included.

But the main variable of interest in Table 3 is the one called “negative view of disagreement.” It distinguishes between those respondents who either are not comfortable around political arguments, believe there is strong agenda consensus in the U.S., or are politically disinterested. The results indicate that the presence of any one of these traits strongly encourages stealth democratic attitudes. As we expected, people who are made uncomfortable by political disagreement or who feel conflict is unnecessary are more likely to believe it might be preferable to do away with debate, compromise, and accountable procedures. Willingness to govern via a stealth democracy, not surprisingly, would diminish if people tolerated political disagreements, if they recognized that consensus among ordinary people does not exist except on meaninglessly vague goals such as peace, economic prosperity, good schools, and safe streets, and if they were convinced that political issues are important. People enjoy many kinds of conflict (e.g., sporting events) but they believe political conflict is an indication that decision makers are being self-serving. Thus it is not surprising that the main message in Table 3 is that the more negative people’s view of political conflict, the better stealth democracy looks to them.

Rethinking the Causes of Participation in Politics

We are far from the first political scientists to observe that ordinary Americans are not eager to participate in politics. Our emphasis on people’s desire to prevent decision-makers from being self-interested, however, is perhaps more novel and carries with it some intriguing implications for a variety of matters including the type of individuals who are most likely to override their natural aversion to politics by getting involved. In the remaining pages of this paper, we provide an initial empirical test of the possibility that a lack of trust in the motivations of politicians causes people to participate more in politics.

The standard explanation for the reluctance of the American people to participate in modern politics is that they do not trust politicians, that they are fed up with the influence of special interests and that they want to get involved but feel they have been excluded from the process. At root, the explanation is that

people turn away from politics because they lack trust and confidence in government. More specifically, people withdraw from politics due to their disgust with politicians who appear to selfishly embrace the riches special interests can bestow on them. As noted by Rosenstone and Hansen, “many observers blame decaying confidence in government for the decline in electoral participation” (1993: 150; see also, Gans, 1978; Burnham, 1982).

But if we are correct that people simply do not like politics and that they only participate when participation seems to be a reasonable way of getting at rapacious politicians, then it should actually be the case that the less favorably the people view the motivations and actions of elected officials the *more* likely they are to take part in the selection of those officials. To put it differently, if our take on the desires of the American people is accurate, successful efforts to clean up the political system would quite likely cause many people to turn away from politics. After all, people would then be freed from the need to attempt to curtail the selfish actions of elected officials. The people participate because something is wrong with the political system not because something is right. Most people would happily seize the opportunity to spend their time doing something other than politics if only they were convinced that elected officials would not then be able to use their positions for their own self-interest.

In this regard, our theory leads to a fundamentally different prediction than that generated by conventional wisdom. We expect the perception that elected officials are self-serving to lead people to participate in politics more. Conventional wisdom expects the perception that elected officials are self-serving to lead people to participate in politics less. The reason for the difference in expectations can be traced to a basic theoretical difference of opinion regarding people’s orientation to politics. We believe that people do not want to participate in politics. Thus, if all that is bad were driven from the political arena they would be free to not participate at all. Conventional wisdom holds that people *do* want to participate in politics and only refrain from doing so because of particular flaws in the political system. Thus, the notion is that if all that is bad were driven from the political arena people would then eagerly involve themselves in all

manner of politics.⁹

While it is impossible to offer definitive evidence of what would happen if people believed politics was devoid of any self interest, we can offer preliminary evidence about the relationship between perceptions that decision-makers are self-interested and people's level of political participation. To do so, we return to the national survey conducted in 1998. Instead of the usual vague items about "trust in government to do what is right" or about the government's tendency to "waste a lot of money," respondents in this survey were asked directly about the extent to which they believed elected officials to be selfish. Specifically, respondents placed elected officials on a scale running from 1 to 7 with one being "extremely selfish" and seven being "extremely unselfish." For purposes of comparison, respondents were also asked to place "the American people" on that same scale. By subtracting one from the other, we can obtain an indication of the extent to which each respondent sees public officials as being more selfish than ordinary Americans (higher values equate with the perception that politicians are more selfish).

⁹To be fair, we should point out that previous scholars have often commented on the fact that the data rarely reveal a positive relationship between trust and participation (see Citrin, 1974; Rosenstone and Hansen, 1993: 150). Few, if any, however, have taken the next step of contending that the relationship may actually be negative.

Our expectation is that, far from encouraging people to become detached from the political system, perceptions that elected officials are self-serving will cause people to become more involved. But to test this expectation satisfactorily, we need to control for the known causes of political involvement. Chief among these are the primarily demographic variables of age, education, income, political knowledge, gender, and race. The expectations generated by most of these variables are obvious: participation is likely to go up when respondents are older, have more education, have more income, and have more political knowledge. We include gender and race to round out the demographic concepts even though in recent years, women have participated as much as men and the participation levels of whites have not been appreciably higher than those of other races.¹⁰

One other control variable was included and it deserves additional explanation. Perhaps the most favored explanation for varying participation levels is whether individuals perceive there to be a reason to participate. The most compelling reason to participate, political scientists typically assume, occurs when a person is much closer to the policy positions of one party than the other party (Downs, 1957; Hinich and Ordeshook, 1970; Ordeshook, 1970; McKelvey, 1975). In the survey, respondents were asked to place themselves on policy (or ideological) space from 1 to 7 with 1 being extremely liberal and 7 being extremely conservative. They were then asked to locate each of the two major political parties on that same continuum. To determine the extent to which respondents have a policy stake in political participation, we subtracted the absolute value of the distance between the respondent's policy position from each of the parties. The larger the resulting number the greater the extent to which the respondent is closer to one party than the other. The greater the extent to which the respondent is closer to one party than the other, the greater the respondent's policy stake and, theoretically, the more likely the respondent is to participate. This policy stake concept is

¹⁰On the general correlates of participation, see Brody, 1978; Wolfinger and Rosenstone, 1980; Piven and Cloward, 1988; Verba, Schlozman, and Brady, 1995.

political scientists' preferred theoretical explanation for why some people participate and others do not.

We would be surprised if the policy stake variable were not significantly and positively related to participation in politics but our research leads us to believe that many citizens are not as concerned with policy outcomes as is usually assumed (see Hibbing and Theiss-Morse, 2001). We believe perceptions that politicians are selfish (in other words, a lack of trust in politicians) will exert a significant independent effect on mass participation. More importantly, we believe the effect will be positive; that is, the more selfish politicians are believed to be, the more involved the citizen will be, other things being equal.

All that remains before conducting the analysis is to explain how we measured political participation, the dependent variable. Our primary operationalization includes three traditional methods of being involved in politics: voting, contributing money, and contacting a public official. These three modes of political participation were combined to form an overall index ranging from 0 for someone who did not participate in any of these three possible manners, to 3 for someone who participated in them all. Later, we will focus exclusively on the decision to vote but for now we attempt to explain variance in the additive index of these three modes of participation.

The Causes of Variation in Political Participation

In Table 4 we present the results produced when this index of political participation is regressed on the eight independent variables described above. The control variables perform largely as expected. Income, education, and age are all strongly and positively related to political participation as is an index of political knowledge.¹¹ No significant difference exists in the participation levels of men and women or between whites and non-whites, once other factors are controlled. These results are generally in line with previous research

¹¹ Political knowledge is measured as the number of correct answers to the following four items: what political office does Al Gore hold (remember the survey was taken in 1998)?; what political office does Tony Blair hold?; which institution has final authority to decide if a law is constitutional or not?; and which party currently has the most members in the U.S. Senate?

on the causes of political participation in the United States (see, for example, Verba and Nie, 1975).

[Table 4 about here]

More interesting are the two remaining variables. The first is “policy stake” and it measures the degree to which a respondent has policy positions closer to one party than the other. As would be expected on the basis of previous theorizing, those who see themselves as closer to the policies of one party than the other are indeed significantly more likely to participate. Why would anyone become involved in politics other than to try to get their preferred policies enacted? Actually, the final variable in the equation indicates why. Even with all these other variables (including “policy stake”) controlled, the trust people have in the motives of politicians is a cause of turnout. But, contrary to popular belief, the more selfish people perceive politicians to be, the *more* likely it is that people will participate in politics.

If this finding seems counterintuitive, it is only because most observers begin with the erroneous assumption that politics, if conducted properly, is something in which ordinary people like to be involved. But as was apparent in the first part of this paper, people do not enjoy politics and would not enjoy being involved in it even if they trusted decision-makers. Other pursuits strike them as infinitely more pleasurable. People want to trust politicians so that they, the people, can get out of politics not so they can participate more. The only thing that keeps many people “in” politics is the belief that politicians are selfish. Far from being a turnoff, lack of trust in the motives of elected officials often inspires people to participate.

But perhaps these surprising results are due to the fact that our measure of participation combines voting with contributing and contacting. After all, contributing and contacting are both fairly specialized activities (only about 300 in our entire sample reported contributing and a little over 400 reported contacting a public official). To determine if the results were skewed by the inclusion of contacting and contributing, we repeated the regression analysis with voting as the (dummy) dependent variable rather than the index of

participation utilized in Table 4. The results are presented in Table 5.¹²

[Table 5 about here]

Gender becomes significant under this formulation with females voting more frequently than males and income drops to insignificance when contributing money is no longer a part of the dependent variable. But other than these two matters, the demographic variables remain much as they were in the previous table. Both the variables “policy stake” and “politicians are selfish” are less influential when the focus is solely on whether or not the respondent voted. Interestingly, however, the results suggest that while policy stake does not have a statistically significant ability to increase turnout, the perception that politicians are selfish does increase turnout, albeit only at the permissive .10 level of significance. If anything, the more people believe politicians are selfish the more likely people are to cast a vote, while less evidence exists that turnout is encouraged when one party is much closer than the other to the respondent’s own policy positions. Lack of trust appears to enhance voter turnout. While the effect may not be substantial, the direction of the relationship is noteworthy.

Moreover, the “politicians are selfish” variable we have been employing is an inadequate measure of the central concept and therefore almost certainly generates an underestimate of the effect of perceived selfishness on political participation. What we would really like to know is whether or not, parallel to policy stake, people perceive the politicians of one party to be more self-serving than the politicians of the other major party (a “selfishness stake”). If people believe candidates of both parties are equally self-serving, then even though non-self-interested politicians are their main desire, people would have no reason to participate because their participation would not help to bring about that goal. They would just be replacing one group

¹² Given the nature of the dependent variables in Tables 3, 4, and 5, alternative estimation procedures suggest themselves. Preliminary tests indicate that, as usual, substituting probit for OLS does little to alter the direction, size, and significance of the relationships we report.

of self-serving politicians with another. At this level, those previously speculating that a lack of trust will drive down participation are entirely correct. In this sense, the key is not just people's distrust of politicians' motives but also whether people feel they have ways to improve those motives.

But the positive sign for the "politicians are selfish" variable in Tables 4 and 5 indicates that some people must believe their participation is of at least marginal assistance in decreasing the extent to which politicians are self-serving. If we had a way of distinguishing between the truly cynical, those who believe all politicians are out only to improve their own financial situation, from those who believe people's participation could somehow reduce the level of selfishness in politics (presumably by electing candidates who are less self-serving), the effect (of "politicians are selfish") among the latter would be even stronger. That people want non-self-interested politicians seems clear; that they believe popular participation in politics can help to achieve this desire is another story.

Unfortunately, our data do not allow us to determine the extent to which people see the members of one party as less selfish than the members of the other party in a fashion similar to how we determined if people saw the policies of one party as more preferable than the other. Our hunch is that there is some overlap between preferred policies and perceived level of selfishness. It is easier to perceive as self-serving a party that promotes distasteful policies. But our addendum is that the causal relationship does not always run this way. After all, we know that people typically begin to identify with a party before that identification has any policy content (Campbell, Converse, Miller, and Stokes, 1960). Perceptions that a party is self-serving and perceptions that a party promotes mistaken policies are likely to run back and forth, each influencing the other, in the minds of many Americans. Remember, most people do not have firm policy positions (Zaller, 1992; Delli Carpini and Keeter, 1996)

Conclusion

Our goal in the first part of this paper was to convince readers that Americans' notion of an ideal

political system is not one in which ordinary people are intimately involved but rather is a stealth democracy in which the actions of decision-makers generally do not register on the radar screens of ordinary citizens. People want decision-makers to be unable to take advantage of the people (by acting in a self-serving fashion) and if this could be accomplished without the people having to do any work themselves, they would be happy as could be. The fact that most people do not have many if any intensely-held policy positions makes it somewhat more sensible that their concerns would often be focused on the motivations of decision-makers rather than on the decisions themselves.

In the second part of the paper we reasoned that since people actually prefer to leave politics to somebody else but are reluctant to turn decisions over to officials who could feather their own nests, then traditional expectations regarding the factors that encourage people to get involved in politics are mistaken. Specifically, our view leads to the expectation that those people who do not trust politicians to act in a non-self-interested fashion will actually be more not, as the conventional wisdom holds, less likely to become politically involved. The empirical tests reported support our expectations. A lack of trust in the motives of politicians on average increases participation.

Ironically, if Common Cause and reform-minded academics and pundits were successful in making it impossible for elected officials to reap personal rewards for any governmental action they might take, the people's participation in politics would drop dramatically. This is not to say serious campaign finance reform, gift-giving restrictions, junket prohibitions, and limitations on post-governmental-service-employment with special interests are necessarily bad ideas; only that reformers need to recognize that the people support these ideas because they want to cease their involvement with politics. The belief that the people would become more involved in politics if only the political arena could be cleaned up is simply wrong. A surprising number of people are eager to cede decision-making authority to anyone who appears to be objective and non-self-serving. For better or for worse, the perception that decision-makers are benefitting themselves by promoting the cause of special interests encourages the political involvement of many

Americans who would otherwise prefer to withdraw from the unpleasant world of politics.

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Table 1. Public Attitudes Toward less Democratic Arrangements

	Leave Decisions to Successful Business People	Leave Decisions to Non-elected Experts	Run Government Like a Business
Strongly Agree	3.7%	3.0%	9.6%
Agree	27.5	28.0	49.8
Disagree	58.5	59.9	37.2
Strongly Disagree	10.2	9.2	3.4
Strongly Agree and Agree	31.2	31.0	59.4

Source: Democratic Processes Survey, Gallup Organization, 1998

Table 2. Prevalence of Stealth Democratic Characteristics

Those with...	Number	Percent of All Respondents
No Stealth Democratic Traits	83	6.5
One Stealth Democratic Trait	302	23.8
Two Stealth Democratic Traits	538	42.4
All Three Stealth Democratic Traits	345	27.2
Total	1268	99.9

Source: Democratic Processes Survey, Gallup Organization, 1998

Table 3. Support for Stealth Democracy Regressed on Demographic and Political Variables Plus Whether or Not Political Disagreement Is Viewed as Distasteful, Unnecessary, or Uninteresting

Variable	b	s.e.	p
Gender	-.07	.06	.21
Age	.01	.02	.77
Income	.01	.01	.35
Non-White	.14	.08	.06
Education	-.04	.03	.11
Democrat	-.28	.07	<.01
Republican	-.04	.08	.62
Third Party	-.12	.09	.20
Ideology	.10	.03	<.01
Negative view of disagreement	.20	.06	<.01
Constant	1.86	.16	<.01
Adj. R ²	.05		
N	1010		
F	5.68 (p<.01)		

Source: Democratic Processes Survey, Gallup Organization, 1998

Note: Support for Stealth Democracy ranges from 0 to 3 and is an additive index consisting of answers to the following questions – officials should quit debating and just take action (0=no, 1=yes), compromise is just selling out on principles (0=no, 1=yes), and country would be better off if either successful business people or unelected elites made decisions (0=no, 1=yes); Gender=1 if female, 0 if male; Age= reported age in years; Income ranges from 1 (less than \$5,000) to 13 (greater than \$100,000); Non-white=0 if white, 1 if not white; Education ranges from 1 (no high school) to 8 (post-graduate work); Democrat=1 if identify with the Democratic party, 0 if not; Republican=1 if identify with the Republican party, 0 if not; Third Party=1 if identify with a third party, 0 if not; Ideology=0 if liberal, 1 if moderate, 2 if conservative; Negative View of Disagreement=0 if none of the following holds and 1 if any of the following holds – find political argument unpleasant (0=no, 1=yes), most Americans agree on the country’s most important problem (0=no, 1=yes), and not at all or only slightly interested in politics (0=no, 1=yes).

Table 4. Accounting for Variations in Political Involvement

Variable	b	s.e.	beta	p
Gender	-.03	.05	-.02	.53
Age	.19	.02	.24	.00
Income	.04	.01	.15	.00
Non-white	-.00	.07	-.00	.96
Education	.14	.03	.17	.00
Political Knowledge	.13	.03	.18	.00
Policy Stake	.04	.02	.07	.02
Politicians Are Selfish	.03	.01	.07	.01
Constant	-.32	.14		.02
Adj. R ²	.24			
N	948			
F	39.00 (p<.01)			

Note: Political Involvement ranges from 0 to 3 and is an additive index consisting of answers to the following questions – vote in the 1996 presidential election, contribute money to a party or candidate, contact a public officials; Gender=1 if female, 0 if male; Age= reported age in years; Income ranges from 1 (less than \$5,000) to 13 (greater than \$100,000); Non-white=0 if white, 1 if not white; Education ranges from 1 (no high school) to 8 (post-graduate work); Political Knowledge ranges from 0 to 4 and consists of correct answers to the following questions – what political office does Al Gore hold, what political office does Tony Blair hold, which institution has final authority to decide if a law is constitutional or not, and which party currently has the most members in the U.S. Senate; Policy Stake = | respondent’s ideological placement -ideological placement of Democratic Party | - | respondent’s ideological placement - ideological placement of Republican Party | ; Politicians Are Selfish = perceptions of the American people (7=unselfish to 1=selfish) minus perceptions of elected officials (7=unselfish to 1=selfish).

Table 5: Accounting for Variation in Electoral Turnout

Variable	b	s.e.	beta	p
Gender	.07	.03	.08	.01
Age	.11	.01	.30	.00
Income	.00	.00	.02	.57
Non-white	-.02	.03	-.02	.60
Education	.07	.01	.17	.00
Political Knowledge	.06	.01	.16	.00
Policy Stake	.01	.01	.04	.20
Politicians Are Selfish	.01	.01	.05	.10
Constant	-.01	.07		.86
Adj. R ²	.21			
N	948			
F	32.80 (p<.01)			

Note: Electoral Turnout=1 if voted in 1996, 0 if did not vote; Gender=1 if female, 0 if male; Age= reported age in years; Income ranges from 1 (less than \$5,000) to 13 (greater than \$100,000); Non-white=0 if white, 1 if not white; Education ranges from 1 (no high school) to 8 (post-graduate work); Political Knowledge ranges from 0 to 4 and consists of correct answers to the following questions – what political office does Al Gore hold, what political office does Tony Blair hold, which institution has final authority to decide if a law is constitutional or not, and which party currently has the most members in the U.S. Senate; Policy Stake = | respondent’s ideological placement - ideological placement of Democratic Party | - | respondent’s ideological placement - ideological placement of Republican Party |; Politicians Are Selfish = perceptions of the American people (7=unselfish to 1=selfish) minus perceptions of elected officials (7=unselfish to 1=selfish).