CURRENT BOOKS

SCHOLARS' CHOICE

Me-First Politics

WHY AMERICANS HATE POLITICS. *By E. J. Dionne, Jr. Simon & Schuster. 430 pp. $22.95*

THE UNITED STATES OF AMBITION: Politicians, Power and the Pursuit of Office. *By Alan Ehrenhalt. Times Books. 309 pp. $23*

American politics today is in a mess. Elections appear to be held in the interests of candidates, and political parties seem largely irrelevant to many voters. The Democrats have all but disappeared as a credible force in presidential elections, while they continue to outnumber Republicans in Congress, state legislatures, and in most other elected offices. For the first time in American history, divided government has become the normal state of affairs. And divided government matters: It produces a politics of collision (the epic 1990 budget battle, for example), collusion (the multibillion-dollar savings-and-loan fiasco), and general evasion of responsibility (the bipartisan commission to resolve the 1984 social-security funding crisis).

Nor is that all. Over the past generation, the political nation has broken up into ideologically polarized interest groups—again to a degree without parallel in earlier times. By 1980, Ronald Reagan could run effectively against unpopular liberal interest groups, claiming instead to speak for a general national interest. George Bush won in 1988 by linking his Democratic opponent with every unpopular interest group in sight. Meanwhile, very serious problems were left to fester amid all the position-taking, finger-pointing, and blame-avoiding. Should we be surprised that public disgust with politics has now reached historic heights?

This political pathology has been analyzed in a spate of books both journalistic and academic. Two journalists in particular, E. J. Dionne, Jr., of the *Washington Post*, and Alan Ehrenhalt, the editor of *Governing*, offer complementary and convincing treatments of what is really one political problem.

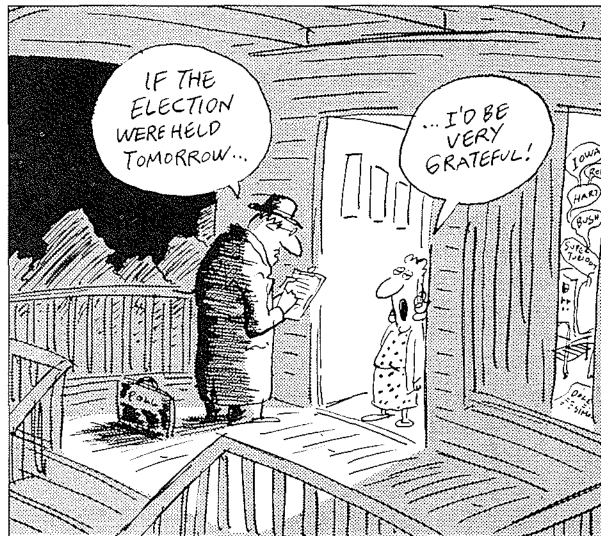
In *Why Americans Hate Politics*, Dionne traces the history of presidential politics from the 1960s through the 1980s, which in reality is the history of the fall and rise of a set of political ideas. Dionne's subject is the disintegration of a once-dominant liberalism and the subsequent rise and rapid exhaustion of its conservative successor. His approach synthesizes much recent research and analysis, from Austin Ranney's *Curing the Mischiefs of Faction* (1974) to Jonathan Rieder's *Canarsie: The Jews and Italians of Brooklyn against Liberalism* (1985). Dionne's book is what the French call, respectfully, *haute vulgarisation*: He speaks clearly and coherently to the general reader.

Liberalism was once the politics of what Arthur Schlesinger, Jr., called the "vital center." That center was held together in domestic policy by the New Deal and then Keynesian economics and by anticommunism in the world arena. It was, in short, Cold War liberalism. It flourished as long as the American economy flourished, and as long as the costs of worldwide imperial maintenance were not too high.

Dionne correlates the decline and fall of this liberalism to the general crisis that engulfed American politics during the late 1960s. The Vietnam War unleashed pressures that overwhelmed the old guard, thus making room for the entry of quite new groups onto center stage.

Nixon's overwhelming defeat of George McGovern in 1972 revealed that the Democrats' ideas, coalitions, and interest groups were in the most serious kind of political trouble. Dionne suggests that Nix-

on's refusal to disengage from Vietnam before 1973 was shrewdly calculated to drive deeper wedges between cold warriors and the antiwar forces within the Democratic opposition, thus ensuring the nomination of his weakest opponent. If so, it was an early and covert example of the new politics of divisiveness that, by 1988, the American Right had come to play with virtuoso skill in broad daylight. Meanwhile, the civil rights movement, with its affirmative-action quotas and forced busing, appeared to blue-collar whites as an effort by middle-class liberals and their black clients to create unfair advantages against them in life's struggle. The liberal "vital center" completely fell apart under that most ill-starred of presidents, Jimmy Carter. Near-runaway inflation sent the message across the country that the economy was out of control. Also in jeopardy, many voters thought, was America's once-commanding position in the world. The Iranian hostage crisis, the Soviet intervention in Afghanistan, and the Sandinista revolution in Nicaragua were all cases in point.



Few ideas in politics ever become "hegemonic." When one set of ideas replaces another, the whole political order changes. This does not happen very often in a single human lifetime, and it has happened only six or so times since the Constitution went into effect two centuries ago. Modern conservatism, as Dionne makes clear, was born in reaction against the liberal hegemony. If a birthdate is required, William F. Buckley's launching of the *National Review* in 1955 will do. But conservatism then was rather like the mammals in the Age of Dinosaurs: small if shrill, and largely ignored by the giants who seemed to be running things. Yet with each division within the old liberal coalition, and with each failure to stay in control of fundamentals like the economy and world order, came a right-wing riposte. Cultural ideas once considered extremist or passé were repackaged and presented to the public: the supply-side economists' panacea of more revenue with lower tax rates; the religious Right's opposition to abortion; the defense intellectuals' attacks on the "little-Americanism" of the Democratic Left; the right-wing populists' critique of civil-rights policy. All these finally found a mass market.

As it enters the 1990s, this conservative coalition is encountering two serious problems, Dionne finds. First, its component groups live in very uneasy coalition with one another. Capitalist revitalizers and religio-cultural traditionalists, for example, have quite discordant agendas. Second, the initial impetus has come and gone with the Reagan Revolution. Conservatism, if not yet repudiated like its liberal counterpart, plainly is exhausted. American politics as a whole is thus left with neither vision nor leadership nor purpose. Instead, the political order has become as vacuous as it is nasty, as the 1988 presidential campaign showed.

Why Americans Hate Politics is essentially the story of the collapse of institutions, particularly the political parties, that once bound Americans together. Dionne concludes his book with an appeal for getting out of the ideological, interest-group trenches and for recreating some new moderate-pragmatic "vital center" in

American politics. These are noble sentiments, but one is reminded of an 18th-century recipe for hare stew: First catch your hare. The underlying causes of the fragmentation must somehow be addressed before the political consequences begin to dissipate, and no one knows how that might be accomplished. Moreover, when candidates achieve brilliant successes by exploiting the politics of divisiveness, what incentives can they have to do otherwise?

It is politicians and their incentives that Alan Ehrenhalt examines in *The United States of Ambition*, and it is the best treatment of this subject that I have ever read. "Who sent these people?" Ehrenhalt's first sentence asks. Once, as a rule, it was political party organizations that did the sending. Today, by contrast, the newer breed of politician is made up of *individual* entrepreneurs. They send themselves.

Ehrenhalt cites Connecticut as a state that was once nationally renowned for the power and cohesion of its party organizations. Things are very different there now. In January 1989, renegade Democrats joined with the GOP minority in the state House of Representatives to defeat a liberal Democratic Speaker and replace him with a more conservative Democrat. This would have been unthinkable not so many years ago; the central party organization would have imposed fatal sanctions on the rebels. One of the Democratic rebels in 1989 was Representative Shaun McNally, who made light of party sanctions:

> I've had people threaten from leadership positions that my bills would be killed, but most of them seem to get through. I've had people say they were going to line up a Democratic opponent for me, but they haven't had much success. What kind of patronage can it cost me? I don't even want patronage. That's not what I'm up here for.

Nearly a generation ago, a new breed of politicians like McNally began challenging the established leadership structure throughout America. The old organizations eventually crumbled. Getting along by going along, the old motto, was replaced by "doing your own thing."

Today a higher caliber of officeholder is elected than in the past. But these politicians' independence and individual entrepreneurship make coalitions chaotically fluid and institutional performance grossly inadequate. The equality, openness, and individualism which these politicians espouse are surely not unworthy values. But their dominance is incompatible with other, no-less-important values: leadership, discipline, and the organized pursuit of larger-than-personal goals and goods through political action. Private virtue can translate into public vice—an irony only equalled by that of the reformers who ousted party bosses merely to get a system more in need of reform than ever. "Why," Ehrenhalt asks, "is machine government a greater affront to democracy than a government of leaderless individualists prone to petty rivalry and endless bickering?"

Ehrenhalt, unlike Dionne, provides us with no answers. But his argument nonetheless has an important implication: One cannot make bricks without straw. Serious change is only possible if individual ambition is pursued in a way that yields competent government as a byproduct. But how do we change the context within which ambition is pursued? Indeed, how do we reorient politicians and political campaigns toward serious discussion of the country's future?

If the past is any guide, such change seems most unlikely in the near term, short of some catastrophe, particularly in the economy. Disasters concentrate the mind wonderfully. And the system which Dionne and Ehrenhalt describe will one day collapse, unbalanced by its growing deficit in both competence and popular legitimacy. Only if we naively suppose that history really has come to an end or that, being Americans, we are spared the fates that afflict lesser mortals, can we really believe otherwise.

The democratic way out requires, at the very least, the reconstruction of political parties in some form. But this reconstruction would require reversing ev-

ery trend that Dionne and Ehrenhalt have described—and this would mean a change as large as any in American history. There are also, of course, possibilities for a non-democratic political future: Watergate and Irangate have supplied the most spectacular trial runs so far. Certainly Dionne and Ehrenhalt have sounded the alarm that our democracy is not just undergoing reconstitution, but is, rather, in danger of moving into ever-deepening eclipse.

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But What Does Music Mean?

MUSIC SOUNDED OUT. *By Alfred Brendel. Farrar, Straus. 258 pp. $25*

MUSIC AS CULTURAL PRACTICE 1800–1900. *By Lawrence Kramer. Univ. of Calif. 241 pp. $24.95*

MUSIC AND THE HISTORICAL IMAGINATION. *By Leo Treitler. Harvard. 352 pp. $35*

MUSIC AND DISCOURSE: Toward a Semiology of Music. *By Jean-Jacques Nattiez. Trans. by Carolyn Abbate. Princeton. 272 pp. $45*

Many years ago I did a stint as music critic for the *Irish Times* and, under a pseudonym, for the *Leader*, a small magazine in Dublin. In the *Irish Times* I reviewed concerts, two or three a week; in the *Leader* I filled a page with talk about the social and political considerations loosely related to music. Loosely, because my sense of the relations between music and society was rudimentary; I wrote the column without knowing what I was doing. Music was much in the air, however. I was a student of *lieder* at the Royal Irish Academy of Music, and it didn't seem more dubious to talk about music than about anything else. Besides, there were readable masters: Ernest Newman in the *Sunday Times*, Eric Blom in the *Observer*, Hans Keller in the *Listener*. If they could write music criticism, it didn't follow that I could, but that there was no principle against my writing it. Now I'm not so sure.

The analysis of music is a recent activity. The elucidation of a work of music used to be merely offered as a model for composition, an inventory of correct practice. But in the late 18th century, philosophers like Kant began attempting to establish a moral basis for values other than that of self-interest. To find such a basis, they turned to the example furnished by aesthetics. The analysis of music, as Leo Treitler remarks in *Music and the Historical Imagination*, thus began with "the contemplation of beauty for its own sake and without self-interest." The art of symphonic music, free of the distraction of words and references, made discussing the disinterestedness of aesthetic experience easier or at least more pointed. Words are always in a hurry to be completed by their meanings. Notes in sequences have nothing, or nothing very urgent, to say. Furthermore, if you emphasize the unity of a work of art, you find this unity more evident in music than, say, in literature. Whatever we mean by content, in music we never find it separable from form. That is why all art, as Walter Pater said in *Studies in the History of the Renaissance* (1873), "constantly aspires toward the condition of music."

But, beyond that grand aspiration, what can one say about music? Clearly, a technical description of a piece of music is possible, if not necessarily widely appealing. In *Music Sounded Out*, Alfred Brendel has collected his technical studies of Schubert's last sonatas, Liszt's B minor sonata, Beethoven's Diabelli Variations, and many other works. About the opening of Beethoven's Sonata Op. 57 he asks us to note: