

POLITICS & GOVERNMENT

Against Leadership

“Democracy and the Problem of Statesmanship” by Richard S. Ruderman, in *The Review of Politics* (Fall 1997), Box B, Notre Dame, Ind. 46556.

Liberal statesmanship, as practiced by democratic leaders from Pericles to Lincoln and Franklin Roosevelt, is out of favor these postmodernist days. It smacks too much of “elitism” and being “judgmental.” Contemporary democratic theorists such as Benjamin R. Barber want political leaders instead to act as “facilitators,” drawing citizens out, helping them to discover what *they* want to do, and letting *them* rule. Ruderman, a political scientist at the University of North Texas, objects.

Barber, a political scientist at Rutgers University and author of *The Conquest of Politics* (1988), argues that even the best statesmanship undermines democracy. By accepting the need for leaders, democratic citizens reduce themselves to mere followers. Thanks in part to communications technology, he contends, it is now possible to do what is safer, more fulfilling, and more just: let all citizens exercise political judgment. Leadership, Barber claims, is now “a matter of effective citizenship.” Robert Dahl, a prominent Yale University political scientist and author of *Democracy and Its Critics* (1989), adds that a democracy can develop only if all members of society “perceive themselves as about equally qualified to govern.” It should not be assumed that “only some people are competent to rule.”

Democratic citizens “are often sounder judges, even of moral dilemmas, than all but the greatest statesmen,” Ruderman acknowledges. Nevertheless, “leading or even on occasion opposing the people is a defensible and even essential element of

democratic politics.” Indeed, the chief attribute of a statesman may be “his ability to foresee problems before they are apparent to others.”

Barber’s “deepest objection to statesmanship,” writes Ruderman, is that it may impede the “often irresponsible desire to act—and act now—in imposing a ‘simple’ or ‘obvious’ solution to the problem of injustice.” To Barber and other critics, Ruderman says, the statesman appears as Lincoln did to Frederick Douglass, when viewing him from a strictly abolitionist perspective: “tardy, cold, dull, and indifferent.” But when Lincoln was measured “by the sentiment of his country, a sentiment he was bound as a statesman to consult,” Douglass reflected in 1876, “he was swift, zealous, radical, and determined.” It was not Lincoln’s moral judgment that slavery was wrong that set him apart, Ruderman says. “It was his additional capacity for political judgment—namely, what to *do* about this tolerably clear moral judgment—that truly elevated him above his fellow citizens.”

The liberal statesman does not wish to do away with vigorous debate, Ruderman says, but when the talk is finished, “there may still be a need (at least in all the hard cases) for someone . . . to decide what must be done—perhaps by compromising or picking and choosing, or even ‘completing’ the partial and partisan arguments that he has heard.” As democratic theorists until recently well understood, there is nothing inherently undemocratic about that kind of political leadership.

An Emerging Democratic Majority?

“An Emerging Democratic Majority” by Paul Starr, in *The American Prospect* (Nov.–Dec. 1997), P.O. Box 383080, Cambridge, Mass. 02238; “Man Trouble” by Paul Starobin, in *National Journal* (Dec. 6, 1997), 1501 M St. N.W., Washington, D.C. 20005.

The Emerging Republican Majority was the title of Kevin Phillips’s famous and prescient 1969 book. Starr, co-editor of the liberal *American Prospect*, would like to think it’s now the Democrats’ turn to have

an emerging majority. Though explicitly refraining from making that prediction, he argues that the Democrats’ “long-term prospects may not be as dire as they look.”

The two parties are now roughly equal

in electoral strength, he says. “Republicans can now usually count on majorities among men, Democrats on majorities among women. Republicans win majorities among whites; Democrats can sometimes assemble majorities from whites and other groups combined. The parties have exchanged regional bases with the South trending toward Republicans, New England toward Democrats.”

But he discerns some trends that could prove favorable to Democrats. Chief among them: a dramatic increase in the number of Hispanics (an estimated 18 percent of the population by 2025) and seniors (about 20 percent). “Their growing numbers provide a historic opportunity for a flip of the lower, ‘Latinized’ Sunbelt back to the Democrats,” Starr believes.

He assumes that a continuing maldistribution of economic rewards will keep Hispanics “predominantly working-class in orientation” and thus more disposed to vote Democratic. As for the elderly of 2025, he expects them to be more Democratic than they were in middle age. Because men tend to die at a younger age than women, there will be a larger proportion of women. Joining these elderly widows will be large numbers of divorced women of all ages. The “gender gap” that works to the Democrats’ advantage, Starr notes, is chiefly among *unmarried* women.

Much ink has been spilled over the Republican Party’s woman problem. Less noticed, observes *National Journal* correspondent Starobin, is the Democratic Party’s man problem—the “Guy Gap.”

“Desertions by men cost the Democrats control of Congress in 1994,” he writes.

“Democrats did better among men in 1996, but not well enough to regain control of Capitol Hill.” Since then, according to a recent survey, support among men for Democratic congressional candidates has dropped sharply. Men favor Republicans over Democrats in the midterm elections coming up later this year by a margin of 14 percentage points. “You wouldn’t see Republicans elected in many places if it wasn’t for the fact that Democrats get trounced by men,” Republican pollster Glen Bolger told Starobin.

For men who embrace what Theodore Roosevelt once called “the stern and virile virtues,” the GOP is now home, Starobin contends. “The base of the pump-iron culture is in the South, the GOP’s stronghold, but its values strike a chord with men all over the country—and not only with ‘angry white males’ . . . In both the African-American and Hispanic communities, Democrats fared worse among men in the 1996 elections.” Exit polls that year showed that men and women have different visions of the role of government. In one survey, men, by a margin of 26 percentage points, said they believed that government was “doing too much,” while women divided evenly on the question. Men worried more about foreign policy and taxes; women, about education and health care.

Despite their party’s Guy Gap, Starobin says, Democrats don’t seem to be doing much to overcome it. As one unhappy moderate in Congress told him: “Many Democrats are more committed to trying to advance an agenda than in getting back a majority.”

The Pitfalls of Compassion

“Moist Eyes—From Rousseau to Clinton” by Clifford Orwin, in *The Public Interest* (Summer 1997), 1112 16th St. N.W., Ste. 530, Washington, D.C. 20036.

Compassion is one of the cardinal virtues in American political life. Candidates who appear to have it will find many vices forgiven. Those who do not soon begin thinking about careers in the private sector.

Americans’ compassion, however, is not the same as that of Jesus or Plato, argues Orwin, a political scientist at the University of Toronto. It owes its character to Jean Jacques Rousseau (1712–78), who, in

Émile (1762) and other works, “set out to devise a worldly, egalitarian, post-Christian, and post-Enlightenment morality” grounded in compassion.

Rousseau’s notion of compassion was different from the Christian idea of charity, says Orwin. “Charity is a theological virtue . . . : to love one another as God has loved, we must overcome our natural human self-love. Compassion, as Rousseau