



9 Joshua Cohen and Joel Rogers

AMERICAN EXCEPTIONALISM AND THE POLITICS OF FRAGMENTATION

Joshua Cohen and Joel Rogers situate the Constitution within the broader context of the "exceptional" nature of the American state, which lacks the class-based politics that characterizes other advanced capitalist democracies. They argue that the basic structures of our polity, including its constitutional framework, encourage fragmentation among people of ordinary means and raise their costs of collective action. When this pattern becomes entrenched, popular control of public policy is constrained and the inequalities flowing from the economy are difficult to challenge. Students may want to focus on two aspects of Cohen and Rogers's piece. First, locate the six historical factors that, in their view, have contributed to the fragmentation of democratic politics. Second, consider their claim that the "essence of politics is collective action." Doesn't this cut across the grain of our "look out for number one" culture? Perhaps the ideology of liberal individualism, one of the focal points of articles in Chapter 2, is itself a factor that limits meaningful democratic action.

The essence of politics is collective action—different people acting together for the achievement of common aims. There are many conditions for such action—including common interests, an awareness of those interests, a willingness to cooperate with one another, and the ability to sustain the costs of that cooperation.

On all these dimensions and others, the structure of the U.S. political system tends to constrain collective action by people of ordinary means. Most importantly, *American political conflict and bargaining is extremely fragmented*. Instead

of bringing people together, the basic structures of American politics tend to keep them separate and divided, while encouraging the pursuit of narrower interests. This division raises the costs of coordination. Its effects are most sharply pronounced among those who have few resources to begin with—that is, among those whose "strength is in numbers," and not in their wallets.

Reflecting these tendencies to fragmentation, ordinary people in the U.S. are among the most politically disorganized in the world. Most strikingly, perhaps, the U.S. is virtually unique

Source: Joshua Cohen and Joel Rogers, *Rules of the Game: American Politics and the Central America Movement*, Boston: South End Press, 1986, pp. 4–16.

among advanced industrial capitalist democracies in never having had a labor party or socialist movement of significant strength and duration. To this day, conventional political debate here is not marked by the sort of class-based cleavages and terms ("workers" versus "capitalists") characteristic of the political systems of Italy, France, Germany, England, and indeed most of the advanced industrial world. This peculiar absence of class politics in the U.S.—one instance of the general fragmentation of the U.S. political system—is called "American exceptionalism."

... What generates these conditions in the first place? As might be expected, the answer is that over the course of U.S. history many factors have contributed, and that the importance of particular factors, and their interaction with others, has shifted over the course of U.S. history. Such historical variation and political complexity pose severe problems in providing an adequate rendering of American exceptionalism—problems which, we should emphasize, we do not pretend to solve here. These important complexities aside, however, there are six basic factors which can be identified as having contributed throughout *all* of U.S. history. Reinforcing one another, and given varied political expression, they have always been central to producing, and reproducing, the politics of fragmentation.

CONSTITUTIONAL DESIGN

The basic founding document of the U.S., the Constitution, mandates a fragmented government structure. This has permitted, within a single nation, considerable political experimentation, particularly at the local level, and has helped ensure certain limits on the abuse of centralized powers. But the clear effect of constitutional fragmentation has also been to limit the potential for political cooperation among people of ordinary means, and this was something that the architects of the constitutional system, the "founding fathers," clearly recognized and desired.

In *The Federalist Papers*, for example, James Madison explained that a fragmented system

would help cure "the mischiefs of faction," whose most common source was the distribution of property ownership:

Those who hold and those who are without property have ever formed distinct interests in society. Those who are creditors, and those who are debtors, fall under a like discrimination. . . . The regulation of these various and interfering interests forms the principal task of modern legislation and involves the spirit of party and faction in the necessary and ordinary operations of government.

Madison was particularly concerned that a "majority faction" composed of those owning little property might come together to challenge inequalities in wealth and income. He saw two ways to prevent its formation:

Either the existence of the same passion or interest in a majority at the same time must be prevented, or the majority, having such coexistent passion or interest, must be rendered, by their number and local situation, unable to concert and carry into effect schemes of oppression.

In the constitutional scheme they eventually agreed upon, Madison and the other framers accordingly sought both to prevent majorities from forming common programs, and to impose barriers to the implementation of those programs, should they be formed. The most straightforward way this was done was by weakening and dividing the American state.

The Constitution, for example, mandates a *separation of powers* at the national level. The legislative, executive, and judicial functions are each assigned to distinct branches of government, and each branch is given powers to block the activities of the other two. While the power of the judiciary to curtail Congressional or Presidential action is great, probably the most important separation and source of blockage is that between executive and legislative authority. In contrast to parliamentary systems of

representation, where the leader of the dominant party (or coalition of parties) in the legislature is also the chief executive of government, the U.S. Constitution mandates separate elections for Congress and the Presidency. This has commonly meant that the President comes from a party that does not command a majority within the legislature. Such differences between the executive and the legislature typically generate barriers to concerted national policy—except of course in those cases (foreign affairs being the source of most examples) where “bipartisan consensus” obtains between the major parties.

Additionally limiting the effectiveness of the national government, and limiting the potential for the emergence of majoritarian factions, is the principle of *federalism*. This means that public power is shared between the national government and the states. By contrast with “unified” governments, where subnational units are extensions of a central authority, the United States is a “divided” government, in which the states enjoy powers independent of the Federal government. Competing with the Federal government and one another, the fifty states produce wide variations in policy on basic issues, and reinforce political diversity and division. . . .

Even within national government, moreover, federalism shapes the perspective and interests of Congress. Candidates for Congress are not selected by national parties, but by state and local organizations. Members are then elected by local constituencies, and to stay in Congress they must satisfy the interests of those constituencies. Local interests are thus represented both in state governments and the national legislature. In fact, aside from the Presidency (and even there the case is ambiguous), there is no Federal office or body whose members are selected by exclusively national criteria. As House Speaker Tip O’Neill often points out, in the U.S. “*all politics is local politics.*”

One effect of this is to immensely complicate the consideration of national issues, and to introduce yet additional barriers in generating coherent national policies. A closely related effect is

the *discouragement* of attempts at such national coordination, and the *encouragement* of a local or regional orientation in political action. This orientation, in turn, tends to solidify differences and divisions among people located in different places.

GEOGRAPHY AND NATURAL RESOURCES

In comparative terms, the United States has always been an enormous country, larger at its founding than all other countries of the time except Russia, and today, more than 200 years later, still larger than all countries but the Soviet Union, Canada, and China. Early on, the framers recognized that sheer size, like constitutional divisions, would tend to impose barriers to the existence and formation of mischievous majority factions. Rejecting the received wisdom in political theory, *The Federalist Papers* extolled the virtues of a “large commercial republic.” Size would encourage a diversity of interests, and that diversity would in turn pose barriers to the existence and coordination of any stable popular majority.

In addition to encouraging diversity, the great size of the land, which for long periods had an open frontier, helped to provide a safety valve for social unrest. Those who did not like it in one place—and were not slaves—could simply leave. The widespread availability of free or very cheap land, moreover, facilitated widespread land *ownership*. This helped confirm Americans’ status as a race of independent and free (white) men, and provided a ballast of popular support for a private property regime.

The repeated acquisition of new land helped prolong the period of an open frontier. Even after the rate of acquisition slowed, however, and even after the frontier was closed, the U.S. would also enjoy comparatively low population densities. Combined with the sheer size of the country, the sparse settlement of the land in turn meant that its different inhabitants could afford to operate in relative isolation from one another. This in turn encouraged extremely diverse, and largely

uncoordinated, forms of political organization, giving further substance to the constitutional fragmentation of American politics.

Political fragmentation was also encouraged by America's strategic isolation. For most of its history—at least from the peace with Britain that concluded the War of 1812 to the Japanese attack on Pearl Harbor in 1941—the U.S. enjoyed a long unbroken period of strategic isolation, during which thousands of miles of ocean provided a bar to credible attack from abroad. It could thus develop without much concern for the activities of other nations, and could afford the highly decentralized political system that more threatened nations could not.

Finally, in addition to being big and isolated, the U.S. enjoyed (and continues to enjoy) tremendous advantages of climate and natural resources. Even leaving aside the productive activities of men and women, it is truly the richest nation on earth. Virtually all of the country is located in the temperate zone, which is ideal for agriculture and industry. Early settlers found vast deposits of timber and basic minerals, some of the best farmland on earth, apparently limitless water resources for farming and industry, and extended systems of lakes and rivers that eased the flow of trade. Once these resources were taken from their Native American owners, this was an almost perfect setting for economic development, which proceeded quickly.

By providing the basis for a comparatively high standard of living, these natural endowments tended to discourage efforts at collective organization along class lines. Throughout almost all of American history, and even after they had changed from a race of independent farmers to a population of wage and salary workers, ordinary people in the U.S. were paid more, and lived far better, than their counterparts in Western Europe and the rest of the developed world. In this relatively affluent environment, and especially given all the other social and political incentives to seek private gains, the appeal of collective organization was diminished. As the German economist Werner Sombart once overstated the point,

"Socialist utopias came to nothing on roast beef and apple pie."

UNEVEN ECONOMIC DEVELOPMENT

The very rapid emergence of the U.S. as a major economic power concealed tremendous differences within the U.S. in the level and scope of economic activity. It was only after the Civil War that capitalism was firmly established as the exclusive mode of economic production in the U.S., and only after World War II, with the industrial development of the South, that it was possible to speak of a truly national industrial economy. This unevenness, combined with the tremendous diversity of American economic activity, encouraged different and competing interests in different regions of the country. An incalculably large part of American politics—from immigration to energy policy—is and always has been concerned with managing these differences.

Like so many other dynamics of American politics, this phenomenon of regional diversity was most dramatically highlighted by the Civil War. In that effort, infant industry and finance in the Northeast and Midwest joined with independent farming interests to crush the plantation South, initiating a period of economic and political subordination that would last well into the twentieth century. The long deflation that followed the war (like most major wars, it had been paid for by printing money) eventually ignited the great agrarian protest movement of the Populists, which drew particular strength from independent farmers in the South, Midwest, and West. But within a generation of the close of the war predominantly Northeastern industrial and financial interests had crushed the Populists as well, and were busy rolling back political organization, and even electoral participation, among the dependent classes.

Such dramatic events aside, and even after the great levelling of regional differences that has occurred over the past forty years, uneven and diverse economic development tends to fragment

U.S. politics. Among elites, the enduring vitality of regional splits is evident in phenomena like the "Sagebrush Rebellion," which pits Western business interests against the Northeast in a battle over environmental regulation and Federal land management in the West. Among nonelites, it is evident in the difficulties northern workers have encountered from their southern counterparts in responding to "runaway" shops down South. Regional economic differences continue to slow concerted national responses to problems, and to divide ordinary people with potentially shared interests from one another.

RACISM

The first black slaves were brought to America in the early 1600s. By the time of the Declaration of Independence in 1776, slavery was established in all thirteen colonies. Oppressive relations between whites and blacks in America are as old as the country itself.

The history since is familiar, or should be. Shortly after the Revolution, the "First Emancipation" began in New England, as state after state abolished slavery, or phased it out. The most substantial black populations, however, were located in the South, and this "emancipation" stopped at Virginia. Growing tensions between the slave and non-slave states, which were importantly tensions between a precapitalist plantation economy and the imperatives of free capitalist development, eventually erupted in the Civil War. Ostensibly the war freed the slaves, but with the collapse of "radical" efforts to reconstruct the South in the postwar period, an elaborate system of oppressive and segregationist race relations was soon reestablished.

It would not be until well into the twentieth century—when the combined push of the mechanization of southern agriculture, and the pull of labor-starved northern industry in World War II, brought millions of blacks north—that racism began to be seriously addressed on a national scale. And it would not be until the 1960s, and only then under the pressures of massive protest

and civil disobedience, that the major legal components of discrimination would be broken down. The fight over *de facto* discrimination—in housing, education, employment, and other essentials—continues, and blacks and whites in this country continue to live very different sorts of lives.

Volumes have been written on American racism. Suffice it to say here that there is no more persistent form of division in American politics, and none more debilitating to popular democratic politics. In the pre-Civil War period, the small number of "freemen" who trickled North were almost universally excluded from early worker organizations. In the late nineteenth century, each of the great attempts at forging classwide ties in labor failed to confront the race question, giving force to endless employer strategies of "divide and conquer" between antagonistic racial groups. In the twentieth century, at the peak of worker organization immediately after World War II, the failure to press the issue of racial equality by organizing the South defined the limits of labor's national power for a generation, and hastened its decline. And even today, 120 years after the close of the Civil War, racial animosity and fear, and the forms and habits of political association based on them, continue to impede the construction of a truly popular democratic coalition. The racial and ethnic tensions which marked the Rainbow Coalition's effort in 1984 provide ample evidence on this point.

ETHNIC AND RELIGIOUS DIVISIONS

At least until the turn of the twentieth century, the great natural wealth of the U.S., along with its rapid economic development and low population density, produced chronic labor shortages. The solution to this problem was provided by immigrant labor.

Over 1820–1830, only a little over 150,000 immigrants came to the U.S. Three decades later, over 1851–1860, the inflow had risen to 2.6 million. By 1881–1890, as the U.S. entered a peak phase in industrialization, the number doubled

to 5.2 million. And at its high point, over 1901–1910; it rose to 8.7 million, or better than 10 percent of the resident population. In today's terms, that would amount to roughly 25 million new workers over the course of the 1980s.

Given all the other constraints on popular action, the fact that the population of the U.S. was comprised of people from diverse cultural backgrounds—while surely one of the appealing features of American society—contributed to the general fragmentation of U.S. politics and the weakness of worker organization within it. Coming to a vast land, with a decentralized political structure, successive waves of immigrants took up residence in communities that were often isolated from one another, and developed political commitments and organizations peculiar to individual locales. The deeply ethnic character of much local American politics—Slavs in the Midwest, Irish in Boston, Jews in New York—can be traced to this experience. The fact that the system was sufficiently porous and diffuse to permit such localized expressions, in turn, tended to consolidate patterns of organizational isolation along ethnic grounds. The myth of the American “melting pot” was only that—a myth. In all sorts of ways, immigrants found that they could preserve ethnic identities in the new land. But the maintenance of these diverse identities also tended to undermine attempts to forge alliances among workers that cut across ethnic differences.

Complementing the barriers of language and custom, and immensely important throughout American politics, were the deep religious splits with which ethnic divisions were commonly associated. In part because Americans never had to struggle for land or political rights against an entrenched church, the U.S. has always been a deeply religious country, and throughout its history religion has often served as an organizing metaphor for political action. Popular support for the Revolutionary War, for example, was fueled by the “First Great Awakening” of Protestant religious fervor; and black churches have long supplied the backbone of struggles for civil rights.

Even more often, however, religious differences have served to undermine or distort popular democratic politics. The arrival of waves of Irish Catholic immigrants in the 1850s, for example, led to the nativist backlash of the “Know Nothing” movement, and helped trigger the realignment of political parties that issued in the modern Republican and Democratic parties. This divided workers along Protestant/Catholic lines, reflected not only in the parties but in all manner of popular organizations. And just as the U.S. was entering the second great phase of industrialization in the late nineteenth century, a tidal wave of new immigrants from southern and eastern Europe introduced yet additional divisions into emergent worker organizations. Ably exploited by employers, ethnic and religious cleavages repeatedly wrecked efforts at working class solidarity.

STATE REPRESSION

Despite the many structural barriers to their coordination, ordinary Americans have often banded together to attempt to improve their condition. With some rare and notable exceptions, these efforts have met with physical violence, imprisonment, brutally applied court sanctions, or more subtle forms of harassment and intimidation sponsored by the state. Such state repression makes for a long history, coextensive with the history of the United States. It runs roughly from the 1786 suppression of the protests of indebted farmers in Massachusetts (Shays's Rebellion), through the labor injunctions that helped wreck worker organizations in the late nineteenth century, to the Reagan administration's surveillance of Central America activists, and prosecution of church groups offering sanctuary to refugees from U.S. policies in that region.

Over the last 200 years, there have been too many government sponsored shootings, beatings, lynchings, police spies, agents provocateurs, goons, scabs, rigged trials, imprisonments, burglaries, and illegal wiretaps to permit easy summary here. Once again we only note the obvious. By raising the costs of political action to

individuals—in money, physical pain, imprisonment, or the destruction of their personal lives—repression makes it less likely that individuals will be willing to engage in collective political activity at all. And this is especially true for those individuals, comprising the most obvious mischievous faction, who can least afford those costs, since they have little “property” or other resources of their own.

Over the course of U.S. history, these six basic factors—constitutional design, geography and natural resources, uneven economic development, racism, ethnic and religious divisions, and

state repression—have repeatedly constrained popular democratic action in the U.S. As indicated earlier, appreciating the interaction of these different factors at different times would require discussion of the peculiarities of particular circumstances and periods, and of the ways in which these divisions were themselves institutionalized and given political expression. This, again, we cannot do here. What is important to recognize, however, is that these sources of divisions are enduring and ongoing features of U.S. politics, and not merely of historical interest. They operate now, as well as having operated in the past.

DISCUSSION QUESTIONS

1. Cohen and Rogers state that “ordinary people in the United States are among the most politically disorganized in the world.” What evidence of this do the authors provide and how does that relate to the issue of “American exceptionalism”?
2. Have the six basic factors contributing to American exceptionalism been equally important in U.S. history? Which are most important today?