

The Prospects for Political Change in a Divided Country

[excerpt from *Philadelphia Battlefields: Disruptive Campaigns and Upset Elections in a Changing City* by John Kromer (Temple University Press, 2020)]

Unfinished Business

On May 15, 2019, Alabama governor Kay Ivey signed into law a bill that would prohibit abortions at nearly every stage of pregnancy, making no exceptions for cases of rape or incest. In a statement issued by her office, Governor Ivey said, “This legislation stands as a powerful testament to Alabamians’ deeply held belief that every life is precious and that every life is a sacred gift from God.”²

The governor’s declaration about the preciousness of life is at odds with her state’s poor performance in promoting health and welfare practices that have proven successful in other states and that, if adopted in Alabama, would affirm the value of life on a much larger scale. Alabama is one of the nation’s worst-performing states with respect to addressing infant mortality and low birthweight rates.³ Because of its rejection of Medicaid expansion, made possible through the Affordable Care Act, the state missed out on an opportunity to reduce the cost of services to pregnant women by a projected \$43 million over a four-year period.⁴

Why would public officials who claim to care so deeply about life consistently fail to support measures that would improve the lives of their constituents? When questions of this kind are raised about situations such as this one, a familiar response is “It’s just politics.” On the face of it, that response may be accurate, but the underlying reality is this: they do not care.

Uncaring lawmakers and the substitution of symbolic gestures for constructive action are nothing new in American politics. What is new is the fact that this combination of political pageantry and empty policies is being made routine at a time when, for millions of households, wealth is steadily eroding and quality of life is steadily worsening. As economic hardships increase for many Americans, the population of this country is coming to more closely resemble that of nations governed by nationalistic and authoritarian leaders. The quality of U.S. education and health care systems has fallen below that of two dozen other nations.⁵ In 2016, nearly half of the nation’s renter households were “cost-burdened”—spending more than 30 percent of income for housing.⁶ In that year, food insecurity—a household’s

inability to obtain adequate food because of lack of money or other resources—remained elevated above pre-recession levels, affecting about 13 million children in 2016.⁷

Many of these problems will not be resolved in the short term. The replacement of bad politicians on election days will not necessarily be followed by an era of positive, transformative change. Seating a whole new generation of much more responsible leaders may take decades.

Much of the constructive political change that needs to happen will not originate in the White House or the Capitol. At the federal level, bipartisanship has been a rare phenomenon, and gridlock may continue to be Washington's default position for the foreseeable future. Instead, the best new public policies are likely to emerge as initiatives that are introduced and tested at the state and local level, then authorized by the federal government and expanded on a national basis. The best-known example of this policy development sequence is the Affordable Care Act, modeled after the 2006 health care reform law approved in Massachusetts during the administration of then-governor Mitt Romney.

Other policies that are formulated by state governments and do not conflict with federal mandates will be replicated in other states without the need for any federal involvement. Legislation authorized in Michigan enabled Genesee County treasurer Dan Kildee (who was later elected to Congress) to organize a county land bank as a vehicle for facilitating the acquisition and development of vacant and abandoned properties in Flint, Michigan. After witnessing the positive results that land banks produced in Flint and other Michigan communities, many other states adopted land bank legislation, giving themselves a more systematic approach for addressing blighted property challenges in rural as well as urban areas.

Most of the political leaders of the future, like the political leaders of the past and present, will get their start in politics at the local level. In terms of their career path, they will look more like Dan Kildee (who won his first election as a candidate for the Flint Board of Education) and Maria Quiñones Sánchez than like Mitt Romney and Donald Trump.

[*Philadelphia Battlefields*] is primarily about how ambitious individuals succeeded in long-odds elections by employing creative campaign strategies, by finding the most effective ways to communicate with voters, and by understanding the political opportunities available in the social and economic environment in which their campaigns were taking place. In this way, the book is intended to convey a positive message: under certain circumstances, a reform candidacy can succeed; under certain circumstances, reform candidacies can succeed again and again. Citizens who are concerned about the future of American democracy need to be aware that elections held every year at the municipal and county level will, in the aggregate

and over the long term, determine the extent to which government at the national level could fundamentally improve, or not.

The campaigns described in Part I are analyzed in terms of the ward- and-division system populated by ward leaders and committeepeople. This system functioned most effectively during the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, when government jobs and contracts could be offered in exchange for political support or campaign contributions. Because this system could not (and should not) be reconstituted on that basis, it could be worthwhile to consider the possibility of dismantling it in favor of an alternative that might be more appropriate for the present time. However, before accepting this conclusion as inevitable, consideration should be given to the fact that, in terms of its design, Philadelphia's ward-and-division system is an excellent model for representative government. As described in Chapter 1, the city of Philadelphia is conceived, in this model, as consisting of about 1,500 "villages"—the small geographic units known as divisions. Political party members in each division elect two representatives—the committeepeople—and this pair meets with counterpart pairs in nearby divisions to elect a ward leader. That person joins with other ward leaders in organizing the resources of the political party they represent and in (it is assumed) promoting voter registration and education.

Although this model may appear to be ideal from an academic perspective, it has become, in many respects, a failure in practice. But is it a failure because of some inherent, uncorrectable flaw—or is it a failure because the leaders of the system have been, more often than not, the wrong people?

The "right people" are not some group of elites that should be appointed to take charge of the ward-and-division infrastructure. Many of the right people already occupy committeepeople positions and would be prepared to take on greater leadership responsibilities if they could be joined by others who share their views; and some of the right people who are not committeepeople would consider running for that office if they had a better understanding of how the system works and of its potential value to their communities.

Although the current system is deeply flawed, the fact that the composition of each ward organization's leadership—consisting, collectively, of the ward leader and committeepeople—is, in most instances, highly reflective of the composition of the community it represents (in terms of diversity of age, race, income, employment status, and other factors) should not be taken lightly. In many instances, the leadership of the typical ward organization is more representative of its community than the leadership of the vast majority of neighborhood-based organizations, service agencies, and community-serving institutions within Philadelphia, as it is any many other municipalities.

Is the ward-and-division system like a horse-drawn buggy that has no utility in today's environment? Or is it instead like an older factory building that can be rehabilitated and repurposed to become successful in today's economy as housing, work space, or an eating-and-drinking place—successful, in part, because the underlying structure is sound and capable of adaptation? To the extent that more people learn more about how the system works and why it is not working effectively, the more likely it is that any changes that are subsequently instituted will be the best ones.

Next Steps: Giant or Incremental?

The events of the first quarter of the twenty-first century have demonstrated that some fundamental changes in public policy and political leadership that many would never have dreamed of can happen in the short term— with great or terrible consequences. Recent political history demonstrates the obvious: if more citizens are committed to political activism at the grassroots level and are educated about the best ways to join in—whether the vehicle be the Tea Party or Black Lives Matter—it becomes more likely that big results will be achieved.

So, if we had our way, what big opportunities would we pursue? With respect to voting and election day activity, innovations such as lowering the voting age, making voter registration automatic, instituting ranked voting, and expanding the use of mail-in ballots have found support in a variety of states, the populations of which represent a diversity of political views.⁸

Making Election Day a federal holiday is a proposal that apparently has strong bipartisan support but has not been advanced in Congress.⁹ Making that new holiday, in part, a day of celebratory events as well—actually making Election Day fun rather than simply a time when one observes an obligation to interact with a voting machine—would broaden its appeal.¹⁰ If this proposal were to be adopted, then, in Philadelphia, the Committee of Seventy could expand the program described in Chapter 10 on a citywide basis, recruiting and training high school students to provide voter information and answer questions at every polling place in the city. Then more people would gain an understanding of, for example, how to evaluate candidates for the judiciary or how to respond to referendum questions that are often included on the ballot.

Because the Democratic Party's dominant role in Philadelphia's political system makes the city, in effect, a one-party municipality, the election day that is nearly always decisive is the spring primary; with relatively few exceptions, the Democrats who are successful in the primary will win by wide margins in the fall general election. In Philadelphia and similar cities, this system could be made more consistent with principles of democracy if an "open primary" approach were to be adopted, in which any voter, regardless of party affiliation, would be permitted to

vote for any candidate, regardless of party affiliation, in the primary election. In the primary election at present, registered Democrats and other voters who are members of a particular party may vote only for candidates belonging to that party; independent and unaffiliated voters may not vote for any candidates and can vote only on referendum questions. This change would restore value to the fall general election and give the election-day holiday authenticity.

Consideration should also be given to activities that are undertaken in a political context but are designed to benefit the public at large, not just party insiders. As the open-wards initiative supported by Philadelphia 3.0 and the Committee of Seventy illustrates, democratizing ward-meeting management and the candidate endorsement process is likely to produce better-qualified endorsed candidates and, in this way, reduce the number of underachieving officeholders and elected officials who are subsequently convicted of criminal activity.

Although this book is primarily about political activism and civic engagement at the municipal level, it is not unreasonable to also consider ways in which statewide civic engagement and coalition building could lead to major policy changes that yield broad benefits. Through dialogues at annual conferences and in consultations with local and county leaders in urban and rural areas, Elizabeth Hersh, then-executive director of the nonprofit Housing Alliance of Pennsylvania, found that communities that may have political differences share similar views about the urgency of addressing the widespread problem of blighted and neglected real estate. Regardless of political orientation, no one liked vacant, abandoned houses and industrial properties. No one liked absentee owners of neglected properties. Most people were concerned about the risks associated with speculator participation in tax-sale auctions. Some people were unequivocally opposed to the use of eminent domain power as a means of acquiring property, but many of them were not opposed to the use of conservatorship, a court-ordered assignment of a neglected vacant property to a responsible developer. As a result of coalition-building activity undertaken by the Housing Alliance in close coordination with legislators and their staff, Pennsylvania created a portfolio of state-authorized interventions that municipalities or counties can use to support blight prevention measures and reinvestment strategies. As it happened, some of the leaders who were most responsible for securing legislative authorization for these actions were Republican legislators who represented largely rural districts.

Persistent Habits and Small Changes

Small plastic bottles of water can be found in the executive offices of national charitable foundations that fund smart growth advocacy initiatives sponsored by nonprofit organizations. They can be found in the workplaces of many of the grantee organizations that these foundations support. They are delivered by the caseload to conferences hosted by academic institutions, research institutes, and industry

groups that promote sustainability and green building policies and practices. They are present in the chambers of general assemblies where officeholders deliberate over environmental protection laws and regulations, as well as in the legislative offices and district offices of the representatives and senators who have made the enactment of these measures a top priority.

Bottled water is a necessity in communities where the water supply is contaminated or threatened by hazards. But when did consumers in the broader marketplace decide to start buying small plastic bottles of water, and why did they continue to do so until the presence of these items became regarded, in a way, as a necessity? Many people living today remember a time when water was never purchased and consumed in this manner and when the term “hydrate” was not commonly heard in the public realm. Is it possible that there are other, less environmentally harmful ways to “hydrate”?

Ideally, small plastic water bottles would disappear from the marketplace altogether at some time in the future. However, although eliminating these items immediately would provide enormous benefits, doing so at once would also have serious economic consequences, the burden of which would be borne largely by working people. Would it be possible to plan for a gradual phase-out of this product over some period of time? Working to create such a plan would be desirable even though, at present, it would be difficult to imagine what it would look like. With the plastic water bottle as an example, people who seek to reform government and improve society should be mindful of the need to distinguish between changes that require immediate action and changes that cannot be implemented in the short term and will need to be worked on.

They also have to be self-aware. Those who strive for political reform and positive social change do not need to adopt a monastic lifestyle or subject themselves and their allies to Cultural Revolution–style self-criticism and reeducation, but they do have to be self-critical. With respect to plastic water bottles and other issues, they have to think about and act on lifestyle changes that they will choose to require themselves to make—in some cases, while refraining from insisting that others do so as well.

Benediction

In a 2019 conversation with me, former Philadelphia Mayor W. Wilson Goode criticized elected officials past and present, who had campaigned as reformers but who, once elected, had failed to follow up in advancing a reform agenda.

They ran as reformers, but they became the people they sought to replace. . . . They really don't clearly understand that they're policy people. They're there to make changes in policy. They're not there to have community meetings or summer festivals in the park—to do what community leaders and nonelected people can do. They're

there to develop ways to perfect a broken system and to help people. We need people in elective office who understand what their job description is. It's not to do what others can do—it's to do what only they can do, and that's to pass laws to bring about change.¹¹

In this time of deep uneasiness and uncertainty, it would not be inappropriate to consider how these comments relate to ourselves individually, not just to elected officials. Political reform is not going to be achieved without bold and constructive action by individuals like those who, in the aftermath of the 2016 election, decided they had to do something. We should feel compelled to ask ourselves questions similar to those that they, as well as the challengers whose stories are described in Part I, must have asked themselves: What should I do? What can I do that others cannot do? What is that thing that only I can do?

<https://philadelphiabattlefields.org>