

LEADERSHIP CAPTIVE

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We might not have much respect for them, but we should have some sympathy for the leaders of the new world we've created. We demand that they solve, or at least manage, a multitude of interconnected problems that can develop into crises without warning; we require them to guide us through an increasingly turbulent reality that is, in key respects, literally incomprehensible to the human mind; we buffet them on every side with bolder and more powerful special interests that challenge every innovative policy idea; we submerge them in information, much of it unhelpful and distracting; and we force them to make decisions in ever-shorter time frames and to act at an ever-faster pace. Moreover, we expect them to do their job, in the face of all these pressures, with tools provided by political institutions that were designed to meet the challenges of the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries.

A major force shaping our political landscape is the lightning-fast advance of information technology. This advance is part of a larger process – a technology-driven shift of power from the state to individuals and subgroups. As technologies become easier to use, cheaper, faster, and more potent, we become individually more powerful relative to large, cumbersome, hierarchical institutions that are weighed down by bureaucracies and rigid standard operating procedures.

Many people believe that this shift is indisputably a good thing – to them, anything that weakens the state relative to the individual is a positive development. People who adopt this viewpoint tend to downplay, even to distrust, the state's role in providing public goods – including well-functioning markets, courts, and health and educational systems – that are vital to our well-being. Their implicit assumption seems to be that individual human nature is fundamentally benign, and that human beings, even with amazing technological power at their disposal, will behave constructively when left to their own devices.

But human nature and behavior can be malicious as well as benign. And so our assessment of the consequences of a technology-driven shift of power to individuals has to be much more complex. Whether

the shift is a good thing depends (to put it crudely) on whether the people empowered by it are good guys or bad guys, and on whether the state that is weakened is beneficent or predatory. When bad guys are empowered and good states weakened, the delivery of social ingenuity – in the form of good institutions – can grind to a halt.

Even under the best of circumstances, reforming institutions or creating new ones is hard. As Niccolò Machiavelli wrote in *The Prince* in 1513, "there is nothing more difficult to execute, nor more dubious of success, nor more dangerous to administer than to introduce a new system of things: for he who introduces it has all those who profit from the old system as his enemies, and he has only lukewarm allies in all those who might profit from the new system." But the task of institutional reform is made even harder by the rising power of subgroups and vested interests that don't have the broader interests of society at heart. We need sophisticated institutions more than ever, to deal with our increasingly complex and fast-changing world, but concerted and truly visionary institutional reform has become exceedingly difficult to achieve. It's now too easy for narrow coalitions and interest groups to block change that isn't in their interest.

This is the dark side of the communications revolution: using the Internet, email, talk radio, and computerized address lists of carefully targeted sympathizers, lobby groups mobilize millions of people to hobble creative legislation. Politicians' offices are inundated with messages poured out by automatically programmed email and fax computers. These technologies are particularly potent when coupled with new techniques – including scientific polling, direct marketing, and image management – for mobilizing and manipulating public opinion to support specific causes.

Buffeted by these pressures, politicians and policy-makers become tightly bound to the unreflective whims of constituents mobilized by special interests. Governance is gradually reduced to plebiscites. We lose the engaged deliberation among citizens essential to effective democracy. Decisions on highly technical matters of public policy are instead made by leaders glued to polling results. And given the nature of polling procedures, the poll respondents – the people our leaders now listen to – don't have a chance to discuss the issues they are being asked about, to learn about their nuances and connections to other things

that matter, or to move beyond the ordinal ranking of prepared answers offered by the pollster.

The power of obstructionist subgroups and special interests is further boosted by today's frenetic pace of social change. In democratic societies, consensus on behalf of a particular policy must usually be built slowly across interest groups, among legislators, and within the public. But as the pace of change increases, the time available for consensus-building falls, and it's easier for nimble small groups to derail agreement.

This is a nasty mix: info-glut abbreviates our attention span and encourages people to over-simplify and sensationalize policy issues; technologically empowered special interests bog down the policy process; and polls reduce governance to plebiscites. The result is a vicious circle. People dislike politics and politicians, because politics seems so corrupted by special interests, because politicians seem so craven, and because both seem too often unable to address society's deep-seated and chronic problems. People withdraw their moral support from government (as indicated by falling turnouts at elections), and so government in turn becomes more the pawn of powerful narrow interests. Perhaps most disturbingly, high-caliber citizens are reluctant to enter politics because they have no desire to be considered, and treated like, scum. We are increasingly left with leaders who pander and prevaricate – brilliant soundbite demagogues with little vision and even less spine.

In the end, though, it's wrongheaded to blame our leaders for everything we don't like about our world. They're just human beings, after all, and they operate in an ever more ferocious political environment that taxes their merely human abilities to the utmost. We only make it worse for them, and ultimately worse for ourselves, if we just sit back in our splendid cynicism and carp.

As technology boosts our political power as individuals, so it boosts our responsibilities. Our citizenship duties now extend far beyond the simple act of voting: somehow, we have to preserve time in our pressured lives to learn about, discuss, and really think through the hugely complex social and political issues of the day. Somehow, we have to give our leaders the space they need to be creative, to deliberate carefully, and to make mistakes. And somehow, for their good and ours, we have to find the tolerance and understanding to give our leaders respect.