

tus quo is, he argues, the same thing demanded of all homosexuals, writ large. The “attack queers” are popular because their loyalty is to their predominantly heterosexual audience and not to some conception of a gay community; their tithe is paid out by routinely “attacking” their homosexual peers. And although Goldstein never explicitly states this, throughout the book he keeps insinuating that their ultimate loyalty is to their careers and the fulfillment of their own ambitions. Reading *The Attack Queers*, one begins to wonder if Goldstein isn’t perhaps more outraged by the homocons’ success than he is by their ideas.

Goldstein could have launched his attack squarely at Sullivan’s politics without utterly distorting his books, which are relatively sensitive and nuanced. He could have risked a real debate on the legal and constitutional particulars of gay civil rights. But in order to do so, he would have had to ditch his glib phraseology and narrowed the scope of his critique, because

on most gay issues Sullivan is liberal, and on most political and economic issues Paglia is not a conservative. Goldstein renders himself powerless to respond to such criticism, and for what? For the privilege and pleasure of labeling other gay journalists heretics.

Ultimately, Goldstein’s insistence on a vital link between homosexuality and progressive politics fails to convince. It is difficult to share his surprise and horror over the fact that, now that many of the goals of the gay liberation movement have been achieved, gays feel less and less tied to a strictly gay, strictly left politics. One can theorize endlessly about the connection between the development of a person’s sexuality and political beliefs. But it’s hard to see this relationship as of any political or public value; it is a personal and an aesthetic understanding of self, better suited to a navel-gazing memoir than a radical polemic. ●

BOB BERENS is a New York-based writer.

A Golden Age That Never Was

Rick Perlstein

**DOWNSIZING DEMOCRACY:
HOW AMERICA SIDELINED ITS CITIZENS
AND PRIVATIZED ITS PUBLIC**

by Matthew A. Crenson and Benjamin Ginsberg
Johns Hopkins University Press, 2002
294 pp \$29.95

WHERE HAVE ALL THE VOTERS GONE?

by Martin P. Wattenberg
Harvard University Press, 2002 200 pp \$39.95

MATTHEW A. CRENSON and Benjamin Ginsberg have a creepy theory about what popular democracy is: in the nineteenth century, the powerful granted the powerless such privileges as the right to vote,

civil rights, some small voice in politics, and the opportunity to buy government bonds; in return, the powerless—now classed as citizens—gratefully served in the military, paid their taxes, and allowed themselves to be administered. This is how Crenson and Ginsberg define their golden age—a time, now past, when “citizens were the backbone of the Western state, providing it with the administrative, coercive, and extractive capabilities to conquer much of the world.” It’s an unpromising way to begin a book whose title—*Downsizing Democracy: How America Sidelined Its Citizens and Privatized Its Public*—would tempt many of us to pick up.

On this shaky foundation they propound a thesis at least a little more promising. It is that America’s elites have lately learned that they can conquer the world without bothering about citizens at all. “In one public setting after an-

other,” Crenson and Ginsberg write, “government disaggregates the public into a mass of individual clients, consumers, and contributors,” leading to “new and nonparticipatory ways of doing business.” Elites have exploited that development to counter a structural flaw within the old model: namely, that a mobilized citizenry cannot be controlled. With pesky citizens out of the way, the powerful can defend their interests in less risky ways—in courtrooms, “by manipulating administrative procedures,” through privatization. Citizens are left subject to a “personal democracy” of individual access to government services and redress—which is, to these authors, always bad. This is a bit of a creepy theory as well. Because personal democracy is not all bad, any more than their golden age was all good.

What Crenson and Ginsberg, both Johns Hopkins professors, have produced is a series of not-so-well-linked portraits of a great number of governmental and quasi-governmental sieves that divert the possibility of ordinary citizens exerting influence over their workings. And it certainly can be said, to get the praise out of the way, that some of these portraits are impressive. The section on those innocent-sounding monsters called “government sponsored enterprises”—Sallie Mae, Freddie Mac, and so on—is devastating: they are revealed as mere conduits for middle-class welfare, for-profit corporations that receive all kinds of government-granted advantages and offer very little public good in return.

I also like one of their ideas about the transformation of the American party system: they point out that the sixty million presidential nonvoters would seem a political bonanza for whichever party would endeavor to tap it, but that the parties have little interest in doing so—as shown by Walter Mondale’s advisers telling him “that the idea of mobilizing new voters was ‘backward thinking.’” The authors then argue that the parties’ antique goal of mobilizing the masses has been partly supplanted by a system of “new patronage,” whereby parties rely on the power of their built-in base of loyal activists ensconced within sectors of the government they control: the social service bureaucracy for the Democrats and the military-industrial complex for the Republicans.

It’s an interesting insight, and yet . . . Take one of their examples of the retreat of mass mobilization: the Florida Recount Show. Once upon a time, recounts could become festivals of popular democracy, with candidates mobilizing grassroots networks to swarm the canvassing boards to vouchsafe a favorable outcome. In 2000, by contrast, Al Gore and Joe Lieberman “spent hours on the telephone each day contacting contributors”—to help pay for the lawyers, of course. “I’m quite sure that the polls don’t matter in this, because it’s a legal question,” Gore told a television reporter. Better he should have found a way to make the polls matter, because they showed that an overwhelming number of Americans favored the full recount that would have given him the victory. But that would have meant putting grassroots troops in the street; which, for today’s parties, is even more backward than mobilizing habitual nonvoters. Instead, to the party that best activated its professional cadres went the spoils.

CRENSON AND Ginsberg don’t mention that the Republicans were able to raise \$13.8 million for the fight, Gore and Lieberman only a quarter of that. The distortion that campaign finance introduced into the system—weighted heavily toward the more corporate-friendly Republicans—is exactly what comes to mind first when most of us think about how democracy has been downsized. It doesn’t figure here. But then, acknowledging institutionalized entrenchments of unequal power has never been a strong suit of American political science. Crenson and Ginsberg ignore such bedrock realities in favor of a rickety structural scheme, rooted in a beggared reading of history: that the mobilizing of the masses through party discipline is the only variable that matters when measuring democracy.

Even their actual illustrations of this ideal betray very little to be proud of. Consider this example: “Republican party workers brought more than 25 percent of the Republican voters from every state in the union to walk past candidate William McKinley’s home in rural Ohio as part of McKinley’s ‘front porch’ campaign.” From such glories, the Progressive movement—which proposed that trained ex-

pert watchdogs could better vouchsafe fairness and accountability than boss-led voting blocs and would allow citizens better means to deal with the government as individual consumers of services—could only represent a precipitous fall. Of course it wasn't an awful judgment for those Progressives to make—just a compromised one.

But here is an underlying problem of this book: Crenson and Ginsberg brook no equivocation, recognize no tradeoff—anything that takes politics out of the realm of mobilizing mass party coalitions is inherently awful. Independent regulatory commissions become mere vessels for capture by industry. Issue-and-constituency-based interest groups become mere springboards for self-perpetuating and unaccountable bureaucracies. As if there has never arisen a problem of governmental administration that a political machine getting 90 percent of the public to the polls, by means fair and foul, couldn't solve, which is ridiculous.

But not as ridiculous as when they move on to the true villains of the piece: you and me. Their account of the post-Progressive progressives begins with a mangled and bizarre genealogy of what they think describes the "New Politics" of the late sixties and after. In actuality, the New Politics was a failed attempt at electoral realignment—the recognition *and mobilization* of a potential new political majority in which a new class of humanistic professionals made up but one part, alongside minorities, disillusioned youth, the new public service unions, and so on. Crenson and Ginsberg instead remember the New Politics as a greedy, antidemocratic cartel. Post-sixties, the American government become more and more the plaything of issue-driven ideological entrepreneurs, funded by the Ford Foundation, whose only true constituency was a media elite that disastrously fell for their specious claim to speak for the "public interest," and whose only accomplishment was "the delegation of government tasks and public funds to nongovernmental institutions likely to be staffed by fellow practitioners of the New Politics—non-profit social service agencies, legal services clinics, public interest law firms, and the like." These are today's democracy-downsizing elites: "Having established their political influence

... the liberal heirs of the New Politics were understandably reluctant to place it at risk by issuing appeals for mass activism. They were likely to flourish politically in a low-turnout environment."

When your villain in the downsizing of democracy is the Ralph Nader of the high consumer advocacy phase, you have a very compromised project. Most of the institutions they choose to indict are not democratic sinkholes; they are messy tradeoffs. True, courtrooms might be vulnerable to exploitation by cynical advocates. But many class action suits are life-savers (trial lawyers would not be revered as folk heroes in much of the low-service, low-union South if they did not serve a democratic purpose). What's more, absent personal democracy's allowance for "private attorneys general" to sue on behalf of the public interest, and to recoup their legal costs if they win, America would not just have a big government—it would have a gargantuan one, with federal police powers as the only disincentives against powerful wrongdoers. They even see the laws that require federal advisory commissions to be fairly balanced in terms of points of view and their proceedings to be open to the public as cruel hoaxes: mere invitations to monopolization by issue-driven "experts" no more representative of the public than are regulated industries. It's a woeful capitulation to abstraction. Would it be better that administrative organs of the government be closed to the public? Would they be more effective if monopolized by politicians who owed their positions to the bosses who mobilize the anonymous masses to march past their porch bearing tapers and shouting acclamations?

ON ITS OWN, *Downsizing Democracy* would not deserve the attention I'm giving it. But around the same time I ran across it I discovered another book that led me to suspect this idiosyncratic fetishization of nineteenth-century machine-based politics, and its mid-twentieth-century progeny, is not a fact so idiosyncratic among political scientists. I find this disturbing.

Where Have All the Voters Gone?, by UC-Irvine's Martin P. Wattenberg, is a valuable book. Wattenberg offers some novel ap-

proaches to the puzzle of half a nation voluntarily disenfranchising itself. He starts off by citing some bad predictions. Mid-century social scientists knew, as we do, that the educated are more likely to vote than the uneducated—and the population as a whole was fast becoming more educated. They also observed how systems that institutionalized low voter turnout in the South were in retreat. From these facts they concluded that voting rates could only be expected to increase. Instead, beginning in the sixties, they began to fall. To approach the “why,” Wattenberg makes an interesting move: he puts the data in international perspective. And he finds that at least for the early part of that period, “If there was any worldwide trend in turnout” in industrialized countries comparable to the United States, “it was an upward one.” Their participation rates increased. Why did ours fall? And how might they be raised?

Wattenberg is a quantification guy, so he locks the possible hypotheses into neat—probably too neat—variables. Is it the difficulty Americans have registering to vote? No, other countries have more difficult procedures (and in North Dakota, with no registration requirement, turnout has also declined precipitously). Is it because races are less competitive here? He finds no correlation between competitiveness and turnout. Is it Americans’ paltry choice between only two viable candidates in nearly every election, or the absence of a working-class-identified party, or the narrowness of the ideological spectrum generally? It may in fact be so. But since the rest of the industrial world is moving in our direction—with elections everywhere devolving into contests between two umbrella coalitions led by personality-based candidacies—it seems unlikely that the trend will bend back any time soon.

Other parts of his research focus on the United States. The stuff on the effect of negative ads is great. The favorite complaint among politicians is that such ads depress turnout (the bromide serves them well because it focuses attention away from the cracks in the political system itself). Wattenberg proves that the very premise is drivel: The most-cited work on the subject is based on controlled experiments, not actual election data—which in fact shows that

the more respondents remember ads, the higher their turnout is. Also impressive is his debunking of the argument, presented, among other places, in these pages by Ruy Teixeira, that greater turnout wouldn’t help the Democrats and the left generally. The problem with studies propounding this conclusion, Wattenberg demonstrates, is that they overgeneralize from presidential election years, where a big electorate more closely matches the actual opinions of the general population. But it is the low-turnout ones in between where non-voting distorts ideology the most. In 1994, 30 percent of people without high school diplomas voted compared to 62 percent with college degrees; “If turnout rates had been equal among all education categories,” Wattenberg concludes, “the Republican share of the vote would have fallen from 52.0 percent to 49.2 percent”—for “registered nonvoters in 1994 were consistently more pro-Democratic than were voters on a variety of measures of partisanship.” It’s an argument with a bonus: armed with it, you get to credit not Dick Morris for Clinton’s 1996 reelection but simply a routine increase in turnout from 1994.

But Wattenberg also proposes a master culprit for the steady decline in turnout since 1960, and it’s an unsatisfying one: the complexity of the American ballot. In most industrialized countries—save Switzerland, whose ballot complexity, and low voter turnout, mirrors our own—voting is as simple as choosing between two slates every two years. “The information costs that Americans typically encounter as they decide whether or not to vote are often overwhelming,” he says. Couldn’t those “information costs” be cut appreciably if all citizens were able to cast their ballot by mail, allowing them the opportunity to carry out as much or as little research about the different races as they care to? But Wattenberg rejects the universal mail ballot. Numbers in Oregon, the one state where the mail ballot has been tried, were indeed unimpressive for the first attempt, in 2000. But Oregon’s turnout exploded in 2002—too late for inclusion in his book.

It betrays a bit of bias, this hasty conclusion, as if blaming complexity is something Wattenberg is a little too eager to do. He re-

jects same-day registration as a panacea as well, dismissing Jesse Ventura's Minnesota gubernatorial victory as an outlier—the unfortunate prerogative of the quantifier with data that can't be crammed into a pet thesis. He scorns the effects of the motor voter statute because it has increased voting only incrementally. But isn't an incremental increase better than none at all? Wattenberg stacks the deck toward pessimism. Perhaps there is something to the notion that ballot decisions could be made less complex. But wouldn't the tradeoff for that be less democracy—fewer choices about how we are governed?

WHY THIS ODD fixation on ballot complexity? The answer, it seems to me, has something to do with the same images of a crystalline nineteenth-century “popular democracy” that motivate Crenson and Ginsberg—in this case updated for the 1960s. Wattenberg is much enamored of his finding that the states where turnout has declined most dramatically since 1960 are the ones that once had the strongest political machines. They “formerly facilitated the turnout of people with marginal political interests and/or commitments,” Wattenberg observes. They “once provided the key glue that held the process together—getting people to the polls and simplifying a complex set of ballot decisions.” But his prime example will catch you up short. In West Virginia, turnout went from 78 percent in 1960 to 45 percent in 1996. West Virginia once had some of the nation's mightiest political machines. They collapsed in the sixties. If the machines had stayed, people would still be voting in West Virginia.

Wattenberg, along with Crenson and Ginsberg, reductively interprets the decline in mass electoral mobilization, and the rise of more “personal democracy” in its place, as an unmitigated bad thing. It can also be seen, on balance, as a good thing. Look again at Wattenberg's case study of West Virginia. One way the machines there held sway was

through dastardly corruption—rarely more glaringly than in 1960, when Joseph Kennedy slathered West Virginia Democrats with cash to ensure a presidential primary victory for his son. Here was a place where the organization certainly got people to the polls and simplified a complex set of ballot decisions. West Virginia could hardly be called a place that well served the needs of its most powerless citizens. Upsizing turnout was a way of downsizing democracy—concentrating power in the hands of those best able to “get out the vote.” That unmotivated subalterns do not vote at all today is still a disaster, because those who do not vote are precisely the ones for whom our system does not deliver. But that political scientists seem to pine for an era in which subalterns were herded to the polls by bosses (a word that appears in neither of these books) is a bit of a disaster, too. Coal miners might be robbed just as well if they voted than if they didn't, couldn't they?

Wattenberg proceeds with the assumption that voter turnout is a simple proxy for the health of democracy. Crenson and Ginsberg likewise assume that any system of administration that relies for its legitimacy on mass citizen mobilization is preferable to one that also relies on the policy entrepreneurship of public-spirited experts. Ask, instead, why your benchmark for healthy democracy is a system in which unmotivated citizens are marched to the polls in exchange for lumps of coal from ward bosses showing them how to vote. Ask, instead, who served the health and welfare benefits of West Virginians better: the descendants of Boss Tweed or the avatars of Ralph Nader? It's a complex question, and the answers aren't mutually exclusive. Its complexity is not served well by these books' sentimental longing for the good old days. ●

RICK PERLSTEIN is the author of *Before the Storm: Barry Goldwater and the Unmaking of the American Consensus* and is at work on a book about the Nixon years.

