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Photo by Chris Valleggio.

A conversation with Paul Starr

What is political entrenchment?

To entrench a change is to cement it. My particular concern is the cementing of the foundations of society and politics. So entrenchment isn't the opposite of change; it's the making of foundational changes in ways that become hard to undo. That can happen through deliberate efforts—what I call “strategic entrenchment.” A good example is a constitution. Or it can happen in an emergent process, often through chains of decisions or countless anonymous choices, whose results become too costly to reverse or so deeply embedded in social relations and understandings that people find alternatives inconceivable.

An important distinction here is between the entrenchment of rules and the entrenchment of power. If rules are entrenched, they're enforced even in contradiction to the desires of the powerful. If power is entrenched, those who possess it are able to keep it, use it, and enlarge it despite public preferences and rules to the contrary.

Should we be worried about it?

Societies need entrenched rules. Democratic constitutions entrench rules that organize government and protect our liberties, but those rules are never immaculately conceived. So, yes, we should be worried about entrenchment, particularly the entrenchment of concentrated wealth and power, even as we recognize that all sides are interested not just in achieving their goals but in making their achievements stick. Entrenchment is a dangerous but unavoidable game. There is nothing so much to be feared in politics—and in life—as the other side permanently getting its way, and no temptation greater than the opportunity to get one's own way decisively and for good.

Entrenchment

Wealth, Power, and the Constitution of Democratic Societies

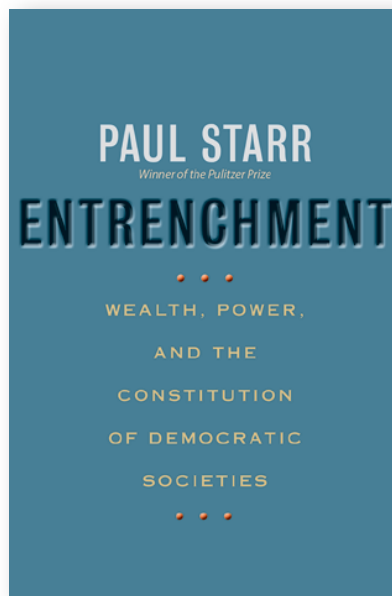
Paul Starr

An investigation into the foundations of democratic societies and the ongoing struggle over the power of concentrated wealth

In this wide-ranging book, Paul Starr examines how wealth and power become entrenched and how they have been fought over. Overcoming the power of landed aristocracy was the formative challenge of eighteenth-century revolutions. Overcoming slavery was the central problem for American democracy. Beginning with these conflicts, Starr explores the entrenchment of competing interests in democratic constitutions, electoral systems, courts, international treaties, and progressive taxes and social policies. While unequal and unjust power can be entrenched, so can rights to freedom and equality.

Much of our politics continues to be a struggle over entrenchment—efforts to bring about change in ways that opponents will find difficult to reverse. Today, rising oligarchical power and populist nationalism pose the danger that illiberal forces will entrench themselves. Starr raises fundamental questions about the origins of our institutions and urgent questions about the future. The stakes couldn't be higher.

PAUL STARR is professor of sociology and public affairs at Princeton University, cofounder and coeditor of *The American Prospect* magazine and winner of the Pulitzer Prize for General Nonfiction and the Bancroft Prize in American History. He has published seven previous books including *Remedy and Reaction: The Peculiar American Struggle over Health Care Reform*.



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