

attendance, and the timed tickets are said to be sold out on some days, I found I was alone in many rooms while I was there, more alone than I recall being on my last visit to Merion. What Barnes said would happen still happened. I saw things anew. The power of form became the power of feeling itself, whether in Cézanne's unforgettable portrait of a young man seated at a table with a skull or in Renoir's incandescent studies of bathers. I felt the generosity of Barnes's vision. It was inspiring, for example, to see a painting by the American Maurice Prendergast in the great central gallery, right next to masterworks by Seurat and Cézanne, proof positive that Prendergast can hold his own. I was again glad to see Barnes's loyalty to his high school friend William Glackens, who introduced him to the mysteries of art. And it was fascinating to realize that Barnes was still buying new Matisse's around 1940, daringly reduced canvases of two women in a room that have still not received their due in America. Too often we forget that Barnes remained open to new developments in art, finding a place in his collection for work by Miró and the eccentric abstractionist Wols.

The irony that haunts the Barnes Foundation and the battles over its fate is that what Albert Barnes created was too great for the world to ignore and too idiosyncratic for the world to leave alone. Nobody except a few true believers, probably members of the Friends of the Barnes, can deny that there was always something odd, maybe even crazy, about having so much great art hanging on the walls of a building on a suburban street in Merion, Pennsylvania. That Barnes insisted his Foundation remain the same forever—that there be no color reproductions, no loans, no changes in the hanging, no admission for the general public—was perhaps not the most sensible thing to do. If he had been a little more flexible, perhaps his dream would not have been so completely shattered. Those who long ago pushed to extend the visiting hours in Merion were not wrong.

But there is another side to the story. Nobody who was entirely sensible would have done what Barnes did in the first place, which was to go to Paris and put down good money for what were regarded by most people as very strange paintings done by very strange people. The Barnes contains eighteen works by Henri Rousseau, the customs inspector who has remained an enigma to even the closest students of his career: he regarded himself as a great academic artist while Picasso and others regarded him as an accidental leading light of the avant-garde.

There are some marvelous paintings by Van Gogh at the Barnes, and he was, by anybody's estimate, including his own, more than a little mad. As for Cézanne, arguably the central figure at the Barnes, he was also pretty peculiar, a recluse in Aix whose work was as much a legend as a reality at the time of his death in 1906.

Perhaps Barnes was himself a little mad. Perhaps it takes somebody who is a bit of a madman to so fully embrace the madness of art. What is certain is that the wonderful strangeness of the Barnes is no more. On Benjamin Franklin Parkway a well-mannered conformism that nowadays passes for sanity sadly prevails. ♦

Paul Starr

POLITICS IN THE ORBIT OF MONEY

THE UNHEAVENLY CHORUS: UNEQUAL POLITICAL VOICE AND THE BROKEN PROMISE OF DEMOCRACY

By Kay Lehman Schlozman,
Sidney Verba, and Henry E. Brady
(Princeton University Press,
693 pp., \$35)

OLIGARCHY

By Jeffrey A. Winters
(Cambridge University Press,
323 pp., \$29.99)

THE MOVEON EFFECT: THE UNEXPECTED TRANSFORMATION OF AMERICAN POLITICAL ADVOCACY

By David Karpf
(Oxford University Press,
237 pp., \$27.95)

THIS IS A SEASON of political anxiety, and the source of that unease is not only the election and looming economic uncertainties. There is a deeper worry about the sheer power of money in American politics pulling the country sharply to the right. But since politics and money have hardly been strangers throughout American history, is there anything new to be concerned about? Inequalities in income and wealth have increased, but does that mean political inequality has grown, too? And what about the potential of the Internet to act as an equalizer—to enable people to mobilize politically on the cheap?

Three new books, all by political scientists, shed light on the realities of unequal power in America today. Kay Lehman Schlozman, Sidney Verba, and Henry E. Brady are the nation's leading analysts of participatory inequality, and *The Unheavenly Chorus* is their magnum opus—a wide-ranging, heavily statistical analysis of how Americans try to make themselves heard as individuals and through organizations of different kinds. I would be tempted to call

their nearly seven-hundred-page volume comprehensive, except that the other two books reveal some of its limitations. Taking a wholly different approach, Jeffrey Winters's *Oligarchy* is a comparative historical study ranging from the ancient world to the contemporary United States and focusing on the political power of extreme wealth—what many today think of as the “1 percent,” though what Winters has in mind is closer to the 0.0001 percent. And David Karpf's *The MoveOn Effect* provides a ray of hope. If there is any way to counter the power of money, it will have to involve the low-cost methods of political mobilization made possible by the Internet.

During the mid-twentieth century, the standard pluralist defense of American democracy held that the free play of organized interests expresses the popular will. The authors of *The Unheavenly Chorus* derive their title from a criticism of that view: “The flaw in the pluralist heaven,” the political scientist E. E. Schattschneider wrote in 1960, “is that the heavenly chorus sings with a strong upper-class accent.” The metaphor may be dated—what is an upper-class accent today?—but the evidence of radical inequalities in political voice is stronger than ever.

Schlozman, Verba, and Brady provide the appropriate context for their analysis by first reviewing the central philosophical questions about equality and the long arc of American political development. The United States, they argue, has an “ambivalent” tradition of equality, as expressed, for example, in the history of both the federal and state constitutions. From the beginning, professions of human equality have co-existed uneasily

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with suspicion of the unruly masses and with policies of political exclusion. Despite this ambivalence, America seemed to Tocqueville and other Europeans in the nineteenth century to embody a far more equal society than their own. But this has not been the comparative picture for a long time. According to the data on economic inequality and public opinion presented by Schlozman and her co-authors, the United States now ranks among the least egalitarian of the major Western democracies.

Turning to its central theme of unequal voice in America today, *The Unheavenly Chorus* sets out a detailed account of differences in individual political participation. Voting is relatively egalitarian, at least compared with political contributions. Americans in the top fifth in socioeconomic status (a combined measure of income and education) are “roughly twice as likely to go to the polls as those in the bottom quintile” but about eight times more likely to make a political donation. The more affluent also vote with greater regularity from one election to the next: when turnout is low, it tends to drop the most among the disadvantaged. As a result, inequalities in voting participation are related to the overall level of turnout.

Some research suggests that non-voters do not differ in their views from voters, but *The Unheavenly Chorus* assembles broader evidence on participation showing that the politically inactive differ systematically from the active public. They are more likely to be in economic need and to favor universal health insurance and other social benefits. Studies of the responsiveness of government to different socioeconomic groups confirm that enacted policies reflect the views of the more affluent. In research cited by Schlozman and her co-authors, Martin Gilens of Princeton University analyzed nearly two thousand questions in public-opinion surveys about proposed national policies from 1981 to 2002. On issues where opinion varied by income, he found that the policies finally adopted were strongly related to the preferences of upper-income people, and not at all to what the poor or even middle-income Americans wanted.

The data on organized interests tell a similar story about unequal power, though with many complicating details. The authors of *The Unheavenly Chorus* draw on a variety of sources, but mainly they rely on an analysis that they conducted of twelve thousand organizations listed in the *Washington Representatives* directory. Contrary to a widespread misunderstanding, only a small proportion

of groups represented in Washington (12 percent) are associations made up of individuals. The majority are corporations, governmental bodies, and associations of institutions. By sheer numbers, “representation of business is dominant.” In contrast, most workers who are neither professionals nor managers have no group in Washington representing their occupational interests, unless they are unionized—and only 7 percent of private-sector workers are now unionized. In no form of organized advocacy do organizations representing the poor register “more than a trace.” The socioeconomic tilt of the pressure-group system is hardly a mystery, especially when it comes to costly services such as lobbying. As Schlozman and her co-authors write, “Because pressure politics relies so heavily on the services of paid professionals, it is a domain that facilitates the conversion of market resources into political advocacy.”

But surely, you might think, many organizations help to rectify that situation by tapping into the less active portions of the public. Alas, *The Unheavenly Chorus* finds that the efforts of political groups to recruit new members and donors reinforce the socioeconomic bias in political voice. Groups searching for support act as “rational prospectors”—they hunt where the ducks are—seeking out the more affluent and educated because those are the most likely to respond. Solicited political activity turns out to be even more unequally distributed than actions that individuals say they take spontaneously on their own.

Similarly, Schlozman and her co-authors do not find that the Internet has brought about significant change. Though they qualify their findings because of the pace of change in media, the evidence from a survey conducted in the midst of the 2008 campaign shows the same socioeconomic disparities in online as offline participation. As a result, they suggest the Internet may be a “weapon of the strong.”

Some readers may interpret *The Unheavenly Chorus* as saying that although political voice is unequal, it has always been that way. Drawing on Roper surveys from 1973 to 2002, for example, the authors compute an index of individual political activity (voting, attending a political meeting, running for office, contributing financially, and so on) and find no clear trend in socioeconomic differences. Levels of activity fell for all groups during those years, but the ratio between the top and the bottom fifth of the population did not change. The “main story,” the authors say, is “less about change than about continuity,” but then they

acknowledge that if the size of political contributions were taken into account, it would be “reasonable to infer that ... inequality has grown over time.” That is not a small qualification.

Later Schlozman and her co-authors conclude that what they have found is “an expanded version of an old and disturbing process.” One change in particular is critically related to that augmented pattern: the shrinking portion of the labor force represented by unions. *The Unheavenly Chorus* estimates that union members accounted for 25 percent of political activity in 1967 but for only 18 percent in 1990, and for just 11 percent in 2006. Meanwhile, corporations and the wealthy have been busily converting “market resources into political advocacy.”

Yet *The Unheavenly Chorus* strangely fails to focus much attention on those with the greatest market resources. The survey method on which the authors mainly rely is not sufficiently fine-grained to disclose the political power of great wealth. A random survey of the American public is not likely to include Sheldon Adelson, who recently declared that he will spend up to \$100 million this year to elect Republicans, or Charles and David Koch, who are reported to be spending even more. Nor will the methods of *The Unheavenly Chorus* identify the political influence that Rupert Murdoch has exerted on politics on several continents. To understand the power of those in command of enormous wealth requires a different approach.

JEFFREY A. WINTERS’S *Oligarchy* is both an extraordinarily ambitious and a relatively modest book. It is ambitious in its historical range and the boldness of its argument. Winters conceives of oligarchy not as rule by the few, but as a kind of minority power created by great concentrations of material wealth. Compatible with a wide range of regimes, oligarchy can co-exist and even be “fused” with democracy as it is today in the United States. The central oligarchic interest in politics is what Winters calls “wealth defense,” and oligarchs can deploy unparalleled material resources for this purpose. In a fascinating synthesis, Winters shows how seemingly disparate historical cases fit into a coherent analysis of the political struggles involving concentrated wealth.

The modesty of Winters’s book is that it does not attempt to explain all of politics, at least not in an oligarchic democracy such as the United States. On issues unrelated to wealth, “ranging from abortion rights to better environmental standards

to gun laws,” oligarchs have different views and may cancel each other out. They use their power more consistently on taxes and other policies directly related to their interests, though they may not win all of those battles. So while constraining democracy in critical respects, they do not necessarily control it or make it a sham.

As Winters himself emphasizes, his book is not concerned generally with elites, which would include people whose power comes from their position in organizations. When C. Wright Mills wrote about “the power elite” in the 1950s, he was specifically referring to decision-makers at the pinnacle of corporate, military, and civilian bureaucracies. Winters rejects elite theory as a “detour,” and reaches back to an older tradition of thought stressing the distinctive role of wealth as a foundation of power. He traces his theory of oligarchy to Aristotle (“whenever men rule by reason of their wealth, whether they be few or many, that is an oligarchy”) and to Machiavelli, who was concerned with the means by which a republic could limit the power of wealth. While Winters seems to me too dismissive of elite theory, his narrowed focus on oligarchy clarifies an aspect of power that has been critically important in most societies and is peculiarly relevant to contemporary American politics.

In a style that evokes the historical sociology of Max Weber, Winters divides oligarchies into four ideal types. Two of these are situations in which oligarchs have direct control of the means of violence. In “warring oligarchies,” such as feudal Europe, nineteenth-century Appalachia, and failed states today, each warlord fends for himself, and in “ruling oligarchies,” such as ancient Athens, the Roman Republic, and fourteenth-century Venice and Siena, oligarchs rule collectively. In the two other types, oligarchs surrender control of violence—to a single “sultanistic” ruler as in Suharto’s Indonesia or Marcos’s Philippines, or to an impersonal state that upholds the rule of law, as in the United States and Singapore. In this fourth type, which Winters calls “civil oligarchy,” the government does not have to be democratic. The crucial element in civil oligarchy is that the rule of law guarantees property rights and frees oligarchs from fear of direct expropriation, while still leaving them at risk of losses from taxation and other redistributive policies.

Under these conditions, oligarchs do not need to involve themselves directly in politics to protect their wealth. If a Michael Bloomberg decides to run for office, Winters

points out, it is not because he is trying to keep his wealth safe from rivals or necessarily to advance his material interests. In a civil oligarchy, rather than seeking out the spotlight, the superrich can use their money to exert political influence, and they can hire the busy “worker bees” of what Winters calls the “Income Defense Industry,” including banks, investment advisors, and law and accounting firms. Here he devotes much attention to tax avoidance and evasion, particularly to the creation of tax shelters so costly that they are available only to the ultra-rich. One striking aspect of Winters’s analysis is his emphasis on the difference in interests between the very rich and the “mass affluent.” He argues, for example, that oligarchs have an interest in pushing tax obligations down to the mass affluent through a lower threshold for the highest tax bracket, which deflects some of the burden and may win the super-rich more allies in opposing higher marginal rates.

In his preface Winters contrasts his analysis of political inequality with the standard political science view, which sees the gap in participation between the poor and the affluent as the explanation for skewed national policy. The problem with that approach, Winters says, is that the “the lion’s share” of recent gains in income and wealth have gone “to a sliver of the population,” the top “1/10th and even 1/100th of the top 1 percent of households.” If political participation were the key, economic gains should at least have been diffused more widely among the mass affluent. Winters is assuming, however, that taxes and other policies enacted as a result of oligarchic influence are the main explanation for the increased concentration of income and wealth. But market-generated returns have also diverged because of changes in technology and the global economy, and although aggressively egalitarian policies might have

limited the breakaway gains at the top, those policies were blocked by a conservative ideological resurgence that cannot be reduced to the influence of big money.

Still, Winters is right to single out the distinctive political role of wealth. Indeed, he could have done a better job analyzing it by dealing with a subject he hardly touches: the financing of political campaigns, and its relationship to his central theme of wealth defense. There is no better illustration than Adelson, number eight on the Forbes’s list of the 400 richest Americans, with a fortune estimated at \$25 billion and an enormous amount at stake in this year’s election. Adelson’s Las Vegas Sands Corporation pays a tax rate of only 9.8 percent (compared with the statutory rate of 35 percent), because 90 percent of its earnings come from hotels and casinos in Singapore and Macao. Obama has proposed ending the deductions and credits that enable Sands to shelter billions in revenue from taxes. Adelson is also facing a Justice Department investigation of potential violations of the Foreign Corrupt Practices Act in his Macau dealings. Another big GOP donor, the Texas financier Harold Simmons, has used political contributions to win favorable legislation in his own and other states advancing his nuclear-waste business, as Charles Homans has documented in these pages (see “The Operator,” April 20, 2012), and is in a position to reap a windfall if the federal government uses his waste facilities. Simmons is one of the key donors behind American Crossroads, Karl Rove’s super PAC, which in the 2010 election cycle received 91 percent of its money from billionaires and is harvesting enormous sums from the same sources this year.

Yes, the wealthy have always had influence, but the difference now is that the Supreme Court has done away with limits on contributions and has created legal channels for secretly donated funds to slosh through the political system. In this new context, renouncing the search for big money is so obviously naïve and suicidal that no one can resist the search. In the age of *Citizens United*, all of American politics is in the orbit of money.

Fortunately, as Winters points out, even oligarchs do not agree on most political issues, so we have the civil equivalent of a warring oligarchy. Many of the super-rich are culturally liberal, and some, such as Warren Buffet, recognize an injustice when they pay a lower tax rate than their secretaries do. But this year at least, the Democrats do not have donors in the Adelson, Simmons, or Koch

Today's Menu

All we got, mister,
Is an empty bowl and a spoon
For you to slurp
Great mouthfuls of nothing,

And make it sound like
A thick, dark soup you're eating,
Steaming hot
Out of the empty bowl.

CHARLES SIMIC

class, and in the long run the congruence between conservative ideology and the short-term self-interest of the super-rich is so strong that liberals can never hope to prevail if politics depends on the quest for oligarchic patronage. There have to be ways of assembling support that somehow escape the rule of money.

WILDLY EXAGGERATED forecasts of democratic change from the Internet became so common in the 1990s that an anti-utopian reaction was inevitable—actually, two different reactions. Some critics pointed to dangerous tendencies online, such as heightened extremism from self-reinforcing echo chambers of political partisans; others suggested that rather than bringing about any radical change, the Internet merely reproduces politics as usual. The analysis of online politics in *The Unheavenly Chorus* belongs in the latter category: *plus ça change, plus c'est la même chose*.

But now that we know not to expect digital salvation, it may be time for sober research that brings out what is genuinely new in the online political world. David Karpf's *The MoveOn Effect* is not another breathless account of online wonders. Through a series of careful case studies—only one chapter is about MoveOn—Karpf convincingly shows that digital communication is, in fact, transforming political advocacy in unexpected ways that can be particularly valuable to liberals and the left. Although he devotes some attention to conservatives, Karpf focuses on left-of-center groups because, he argues, they were the primary innovators in recent years. By the “Moveon effect,” he means the impact on advocacy organization and fund-raising of the new techniques for mobilization on the cheap pioneered by MoveOn and taken in varying directions by Daily Kos, Democracy for America, the Progressive Change Campaign Committee, and other organizations that emerged between 2003 and 2010.

The advent of these online groups, Karpf claims, represents a new stage in the history of political advocacy. Traditionally—going back to the great movements for temperance, women's rights, and other causes in the nineteenth and early twentieth century—the leading civic and political groups built nationwide federations with members organized in state affiliates and local chapters. Beginning in the 1970s, however, a new generation of interest groups largely dispensed with local chapters and face-to-face meetings, asking members primarily to write checks to support professional staffs in Washington and state capitals

that lobbied and litigated on issues such as the environment or civil rights. The terms often used to describe these groups, “check-writing” or “letterhead” organizations, identify their dependence on the method of fund-raising known as “direct mail” to those who send it and “junk mail” to those who receive it. A key technological development—the falling costs of computational power, allowing the use of large-scale mailing lists—made direct-mail fund-raising economical and played a central role in the explosion of specialized advocacy.

Karpf understands this kind of organization well because he was a vice president and board member of one such group, the Sierra Club, before receiving his doctorate in political science. Initially dismissive of online organizing, he became convinced that the new models of advocacy being developed by MoveOn and other new groups had important lessons for “legacy” organizations such as his own. The contrasts between the two organizational types are quite dramatic. The professionally staffed organizations that dominated progressive advocacy in the late twentieth century are expensive to run, typically focused on a single set of issues, ostensibly nonpartisan, and slow to change. The new organizations operate on absurdly small budgets, often with minimal full-time staff and no physical offices. Instead of being concerned with only one slice of progressive politics, they are “issue generalists,” continually shifting priorities in response to events. At a time of partisan polarization, they respond to heightened partisan concerns and play a role in electoral politics; most have been set up as limited partnerships rather than tax-exempt nonprofits. Steeped in what Karpf calls a “culture of analytics,” they test different strategies (for example, different appeals on their e-mail lists) and then quickly adjust their direction to correspond with their members' interests.

The new groups also raise money in a way that is a better fit with contemporary social practices. The older organizations emerged in an era when most people received their bills in the mail and paid them by check; but now people increasingly pay their bills and make contributions online and through their phones. As the costs of direct mail rise and the yield falls, the older organizations often face shrinking resources or become heavily dependent on major donors. Although they often understand the need to adapt to new conditions, many older organizations simply find it difficult to change.

The new online groups are by no means a complete substitute for the older

organizations. They cannot undertake many staff-intensive tasks, such as litigation. They also vary a great deal in the kind of relationships that they have with their members. The organizations that emerged in the late twentieth century redefined membership from participating in a local chapter to writing a check once a year. Some new online groups have defined membership down merely to being an e-mail recipient; as Karpf points out, many such people may not even think of themselves as members. Yet other organizations that he profiles have created online communities or encouraged members to develop local groups that meet periodically in person. In addition, because of their continual testing of different strategies, the new online groups often have a better understanding of what their members want than the older, professionally run organizations.

While arguing that left-of-center groups led online innovation in the first decade of this century, Karpf rejects the idea that they have an inherent digital advantage. For most of this period, Democrats were out of power, and Karpf's view is that the “out-party” has special incentives to develop new means of organization. Whether that hypothesis holds up in other times and places, I'm not sure. But whatever the general pattern proves to be, the new online form of organization has two benefits of particular value to American liberalism today. In recent decades, while conservatives developed into a strong and cohesive political force, the rise of specialized, issue-based progressive advocacy led to a proliferation of separate agendas. So the rise of politically oriented “issue generalists” on the liberal side is a welcome development. In addition, the new groups are cheap to run, and they easily scale up to large dimensions.

Karpf's work does not contradict the findings in *The Unheavenly Chorus* about socioeconomic disparities in online participation, but to suggest that the Internet is a “weapon of the strong” is to miss a crucial point: online organization does not depend on patronage by the wealthy. The new low-cost methods of organizing are especially important at a time when one of the central threats to American democracy is the entrenchment of oligarchic power. The new organizations cannot provide the impetus for a progressive revival, but they can help to supply the infrastructure. In an anxious season when too much of our politics is about money, this is at least one basis for confidence that we have not yet lost the means for making democracy work. ♦