

# The Political Forum

*A review of social and political trends and events  
impacting the world's financial markets*

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### DID THE RISE OF RADICAL EGALITARIANISM GIVE RISE TO ROSS PEROT?

Mark L. Melcher

There's something strange going on, you know. It isn't just that the President looks like Oz's wicked witch from the West after Dorothy threw water on her. And it isn't just that much of the public has suddenly become enamored with an oddball billionaire, whose policies merge the feel good promises of traditional American populism with some of the worst characteristics of Europe's Social Democrats, namely an affection for protectionism and industrial policy.

These are examples of weirdness. But what's happening out there in America today is bigger, more fundamental than just Bush's paralysis and the public's fondness for Perot. And contrary to what Perot, Clinton and much of the media would have us believe, the weirdness isn't a reaction to the fact that the nation is in the midst of a terminal economic, social and moral crisis.

The nation isn't experiencing such a crisis. Yes, there are problems. But the country isn't even close to being as troubled as Bush's critics claim. On the contrary, the United States is the strongest economic and military power the world has ever known. And with the end of the cold war, it is likely to become relatively even more powerful, both economically and militarily.

So what's happening? Well I can't explore in any depth an issue of this magnitude in one article. But I just returned from a week's vacation in St. Thomas, and three of the books I read while there offer fascinating food for thought on the subject.

They don't offer a concrete explanation for Perot and related phenomena. But all are fun, all are off the beaten track, and together they offer a different perspective from which to assess what's happening out there in the good ol' U.S. of A. I'll take these books one at a time, over the next few weeks, hoping readers will remember that they should be considered together.

I'll begin this week with *The Rise of Radical Egalitarianism* by Aaron Wildavsky. This book, published in 1991 by The American University Press, is based on a series of lectures the author

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gave at that institution's School of Public Affairs. I didn't agree with all of it. But Wildavsky provides real food for thought. And he does it with humor and originality.

Wildavsky's thesis is that America is undergoing enormous cultural change. He divides society into four cultural groups, cautioning that these groups not be confused with traditional categories of left, right, conservative, liberal.

o Individualists are society's entrepreneurs, people who believe in equal opportunity, not equal results. They believe in a minimum of government involvement in all spheres of society, except where law and order is concerned, so they will remain free to transact with others as they see fit. They seek opportunities to be different; they realize that to diminish social differences requires a central redistributive authority, which they abhor.

o Egalitarians favor equality of results, not equality of opportunity. They believe in the moral virtue of diminishing differences among people of varying incomes, genders, races, sexual preferences, and especially power. They generally reject authority as a *prima facie* case of inequality.

o Hierarchists believe that it is healthy for different groups in society to have different roles. This group is composed of such diverse groups as America's traditional establishment, Mormons, Protestant fundamentalists, and Orthodox Jews. They praise traditional moral norms and institutions. They excoriate deviance. George Bush, Wildavsky says, is a hierarchist.

o Finally we have everyone else, the fatalists who believe that inequality is the norm, who expect to be ruled by others.

Wildavsky says that what makes America special is the deeply imbedded belief that liberty and equality--the culture of individualism and egalitarianism--are (or can be) mutually reinforcing. But he says, the drop in power of hierarchists, who used to keep egalitarians in check, has led to an increasingly powerful egalitarian movement, which is threatening their traditional alliance with individualists. Hence the problem.

Wildavsky's theory's are complex and I can't do them justice in so short a piece. But basically his position is that the effect of the rise in egalitarianism is to "lower our standard of living, decrease our health, debase public discourse, lower the quality of public officials, weaken democracy, make people more suspicious of one another." In addition, he cites the constant denigration of American life--our polity, economy and society--with no viable alternative to take its place.

According to Wildavsky, egalitarians place "diversity" ahead of academic excellence in our universities. This, he says, leads to demands for a student body, faculty and administration that contain proportional numbers of women and racial minorities. "In one fell swoop," he says, "the idea that America stands for the recognition and reward of talent goes by the boards," and the quality of education declines.

Egalitarians incessantly attack technological change in all sectors, including health care. They are, he says, opposed to taking technological risks because they see such risks as supporting

inegalitarian markets and coercive hierarchies. They believe that inegalitarian society insults the environment, just as it exploits poor people. And what better way, Wildavsky asks, to weaken the institutions they believe create inequalities—the capitalist corporation—than to claim that it causes cancer?

Finally, the constant contradictory demands of egalitarians demoralize government. Regarding this point, Wildavsky says that on the one hand egalitarians want government to do a great deal more--regulate vast areas of society. Yet on the other hand, since they believe leadership is suspect because it signifies an unequal relationship with followers, they constantly seek to undermine authority. The egalitarian desire for bureaucracy without authority is not good for democratic government, he says.

He is disdainful of the egalitarian propensity to blame society, not the actions of individuals, for every ill. Among other things, he says, the United States, "must be the only place in the world that suffers simultaneously from a Social Security and a health care crisis, since people cannot be living longer and shorter at the same time."

According to Wildavsky, the political consequences of egalitarian culture are nowhere more apparent than in the changing fortunes of government institutions. He explains it this way.

"The textbook definition of a political party is an organization that nominates candidates for office. If this vital function is transferred to primaries, where voters cannot know the candidates, and where no deliberation about their qualifications can take place among knowledgeable politicians, then parties can no longer integrate various political viewpoints.

"Coalitions that will help candidates govern cannot be formed before the election. For one thing, candidates no longer need parties--they need not even be politicians--because party leaders cannot help them get nominated. Nominee selection has been so disintegrated into numerous primaries and rules for delegate selection that the only people now excluded from the process are in fact the majority of the population, whose votes are needed for election, and the majority of officeholders, whose support is necessary to govern."

According to Wildavsky, "there is a connection between public apathy and regulations requiring proportional representation of gender and racial groups. By choosing delegates among self-selected activists, according to nonparty criteria, the nominee selection process produces politicians who are far more extreme than their party's voters."

The story is the same with Congress, Wildavsky says. "The more it reforms itself to encourage expressiveness by individual members, so they can show their moral sincerity, the worse its collective performance becomes. As each congressman becomes more influential--through downgrading of seniority, better committee assignments, more staff, and other such equalizing devices--Congress as a collectivity becomes less cohesive."

As for the executive branch, "the long-term decline in presidential popularity, the decrease in the time in office of Cabinet members and top officials, and the willingness of the media to criticize presidents are all indicators of an institution in trouble."

Matching this failure in government's integrative institutions is the apparent success of disintegrative institutions, Wildavsky says. Single-issue, special interest groups, which are growing rapidly across the nation as a result of rising egalitarianism, are known by what they do not do--take positions on a wide range of issues and attempt to reconcile preferences and establish priorities among them.

Why, Wildavsky asks, "as government grows bigger, is it subject to a corresponding crescendo of criticism? We understand the critique of individuals who were always opposed to a large public sector, but how do we explain the hostility of those on the liberal-left who are still its strongest supporters?"

The answer, he says, can be found in the egalitarian hypothesis--"a preference for programs to redistribute income, and opposition to the authority the government represents, make sense to people in a political culture that favor equality of result but not the exercise of hierarchical authority."

I said earlier that this book is fun. And it is. So before I run out of space, let me advance one of Wildavsky's more whimsical premises. It deals with his "Growth of the Oppression Gap" theory, which is based on the observation that the number of "oppressed minorities" in the United States has spread like wildfire.

It used to be, Wildavsky says, that an oppressed minority was a group that suffered direct discrimination, like Jews, blacks and, in an earlier period, the Irish. Today, we no longer consider each individual as a whole, he says, but instead allow facets of the person to be parceled out among various aspects of oppression. Once that is done, he continues, it is not difficult to discover that everyone suffers abuse in one way or another. In fact, Wildavsky claims that 374% of Americans suffer from oppression. At the same time, he says, the idea of oppression has been expanded to include both psychic damage and failure to achieve a hypothetical potential.

How did this happen? Well, Wildavsky says the explanation is that demand creates its own supply. In his words, "the politics of noblesse oblige has become the preeminent status symbol of our time. No one who is anyone, who wishes to be thought well of by his fellows, can fail to make his contribution. All he needs is an oppressed minority willing to let him help it."

However, the proportion of privileged elites (defined as people of high formal education and income) has been increasing at a geometric rate, while the proportion of oppressed minorities for them to lead has been decreasing at an arithmetic rate (as evidenced by the steady drop in the proportion of the population who qualify as "poor.")

Thus, Wildavsky notes, "the country was faced with a situation in which oppressed minorities would not have been available for aspiring elites at virtually any price. In economic terms this would be considered a catastrophe: there would be no way to clear the market." So supply was created.

This trend, he notes, played into the hands of the egalitarians, since "it stands to reason that oppressed minorities do not proliferate in a just society." From this premise we move to two otherwise implausible consequences of egalitarianism: that "injustice in America grows

apparently in direct proportion to efforts to alleviate it," and that "people must be treated unequally in order to achieve 'equality.'"

In closing, let me repeat that I don't think Wildavsky's book, by itself, explains President Bush's problems, Ross Perot's political ascendancy, or the Democratic party's quadrennial passion for self-immolation. But I think it offers some worthwhile insights into the society in which these political events are occurring. Next week, we'll explore the views of a less contemporary author and try to apply them to today.

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