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Washington, D.C.**

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A NEW PROGRESSIVE ERA FOR THE SECOND GILDED AGE

BY ROBERT G. CHRISTIAN III

Pope Francis' economic message challenges all of us. In our personal lives, how many of us can be satisfied with the degree to which we reject consumerism and materialism? In politics, how many of us think we deserve to be seen as champions of the poor? It is easy to denounce the free market fundamentalism of Pope Francis' critics, which is based on precisely the type of idol-worship that Pope Francis has condemned. But this should not lead to a sense of complacency. A real plan to overcome those who stand in the way of social and economic justice is required.

This demands entering into the muck of American politics. While we might wish to avoid the agitation and acrimony of politics, Pope Francis views political engagement as a duty: “Politics, according to the Social Doctrine of the Church, is one of the highest forms of charity, because it serves the common good. I cannot wash my hands, eh? We all have to give something!”¹

Yet for those who are committed to the common good, our current political system can inspire despair. Economic elites dominate both parties. There is little room for social justice Republicans or pro-life Democrats, even as a third of the Democratic party is pro-life. Each party has increasingly purified itself of those who do not embrace the dominant ideology. Republicans who reject economic libertarianism are subject to primary challenges from the right, financed by those who see politics as a transactional process to serve their own interests. Democrats who reject social libertarianism often lack the funds to compete in primaries against those backed by the rich pro-abortion rights groups that hold so much sway in the party. Moderates, centrists, and communitarians are left to choose between two deeply flawed candidates in each election.

There is a certain powerlessness in this process, and it can be demoralizing for regular voters and citizens. It can generate apathy and indifference. Many have left their parties, wishing to disassociate themselves from their parties’ deeply flawed platforms. Last year, a record-high 42% of Americans identified as independents.² Yet this has only intensified the ideological purification of the parties. The electoral system, particularly in places with closed primaries (where only members of a particular party may vote in that party’s primary), reward those who remain within a party, rather than choosing to become an independent. In general elections, powerful interest groups restrain candidates from moving to the center to attract a wider

range of voters. The impact of money on electoral outcomes makes it difficult to claim that the United States is a genuine representative democracy rather than a plutocracy of government of, by, and for the rich.

The debilitating polarization and partisanship of Washington is also fostered by the nature of Congressional districts. Modern technology has allowed politicians to draw districts that are non-competitive, diminishing the need for candidates to appeal across party lines. Modern technology has resulted in gerrymandering-on-steroids. This problem is compounded by the geographic sorting that has occurred as more and more Americans move to communities where others share their partisan and ideological commitments. Congress is unproductive and unpopular at historic levels, yet the status quo has remained in place. What can be done?

What is needed is not merely a new set of policies or legislative proposals to promote the common good. Nor is it a matter of trying to find better candidates, who are more dedicated to the common good. Each of these is necessary, but something else is needed, something more radical. There is a need for a second Progressive Era to overturn the second Gilded Age in which we live. There is a need to fundamentally reform the structure of American politics. When we think of the Progressive Era, we often think about legislative achievements: child labor laws, anti-monopoly laws, laws protecting workers and consumers, and minimum wage laws, among many others. But these were accompanied by structural changes to the system of government, changes that were necessary to break the stranglehold that unscrupulous economic elites had on American politics. These included the direct election of Senators, women’s suffrage, the referendum, the recall, primary elections, and the secret ballot. Political reform was needed to achieve policy reform. A corrupt system, which is precisely what we have today, eats away at the integrity

of those who enter office with good intentions. Genuine public servants need a system that matches their intentions. And today's plutocrats need to be stripped of their undue influence like the city bosses and titans of industry of the first Gilded Age.

This type of reform requires new thinking and creativity. How can we foster a more democratic system that serves the common good? Just as the Progressive Era reforms were designed to remedy the injustices generated by industrialization, we need an updated system that reflects our contemporary global economy. Surely this will require numerous changes, but there are three that would likely be a good start: campaign finance reform, redistricting reform, and primary election reform.

Campaign finance reform is essential to reducing the disproportionate power of the wealthiest Americans and the special interest groups that reflect elite interests and values. Fundraising is the primary occupation of members of Congress, occupying far too much of their time, and the money they raise comes with strings attached. It is no surprise that the best Congressional representatives favor campaign finance reform to level the playing field and allow legislators to focus on creating policies that will serve the common good and improve people's lives.

Redistricting reform will help to create more competitive districts. This, when combined with the other reforms, will result in an increased number of competitive elections. When general elections are not competitive, primary elections become a race to the left in the Democratic party and to the right in the Republican party. If independent or nonpartisan commissions draw districts, rather than partisan politicians, candidates will have greater incentives to appeal to independents, centrists, communitarians, and others outside of their own base.

Finally, open primaries or other alternatives to closed primaries that give independents a say over the general election candidates for office will undermine the power of the hardcore partisans. Together, these three reforms will not remedy all of the ills in American politics, but they will increase participation and undermine the power of those most responsible for Congress' failure to support policies that would safeguard human life and dignity. If we want policies that will protect the vulnerable, the first place to start is with political reform.



NOTES

1 Pope Francis, "Christians Must Pray for Their Leaders: Daily Homily at *Domus Sanctae Marthae*" (16 September 2013), *Vatican Radio* transcript available at <<http://www.news.va/en/news/pope-francis-christians-must-pray-for-their-leader>>.

2 See Gallup poll of 8 January 2014, available at <<http://www.gallup.com/poll/166763/record-high-americans-identify-independents.aspx>>.



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