

# Republican Futures

By ELIZABETH ARENS

MESMERIZED BY STARK swaths of red and blue, political writers studying the 2000 electoral map have produced some alarming analyses. In the January issue of *Commentary* magazine, for example, Terry Teachout laments that the United States has become “two nations” separated by vast differences in lifestyle and philosophy. Responding to the article, Gertrude Himmelfarb, an earlier proponent of the theory that the population of the United States has fragmented into two groups with distinct and often hostile worldviews, agrees that if not two nations, we have certainly become “two cultures.”

This interpretation very soon found superficial support in the furor surrounding President Bush’s nomination of John Ashcroft for attorney general. Bush and Gore strategists, as if by collusion, had managed to keep controversial cultural issues off the table during the presidential campaign. But the Ashcroft nomination demolished their careful structures of inoffensive words and images with extraordinary speed. Ashcroft’s record on racial issues, attitude toward homosexuality, and stance on abortion stirred activist organizations on the left into a vehement protest. Images of the “armies of compassion” were dispelled in favor of the bloody coat hanger on one side, the aborted fetus on the other. Democratic senators, initially inclined to approve Ashcroft on account of standard deference accorded Cabinet nominations, respect for a former colleague, and the prevailing rhetoric of bipartisanship, were caught by surprise. They ended up subjecting Ashcroft to

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harsh questioning, and the vast majority voted against his nomination. The controversy had all the appearances of another outbreak of our ongoing culture wars.

Yet the noise surrounding Ashcroft died down as quickly as it flared up. Within days of his confirmation, the political whirlwind had moved on. And the electoral map is less easy evidence than it might appear. Red districts were not uniformly Republican, nor blue districts uniformly Democratic, and the voting breakdown in most counties was closer to 60-40 than 90-10. So where does this leave us? The United States has a population which is more conservative, and a population which is less conservative. There are people at the far ends of both sides of this spectrum, true believers who find the perspective of the other side alien if not morally disgusting. The geographical distribution of these groups may have evolved. But this is a political landscape not fundamentally different from that which has existed throughout American history.

## Losing the center?

**T**HAT SAID, REPUBLICANS still have cause for concern. One need not be an impassioned culture warrior to cast votes on election day. And if the electoral map isn't evidence of a national cultural crisis, it does underscore the dwindling potential of the Republican Party's longtime electoral coalition and the party's need for a new political framework. Why should a refiguring of Republican politics be necessary, given the eventual triumph of the GOP candidate in what looked like daunting electoral circumstances — a thriving economy, a popular incumbent? Parsing the electoral returns, writers in the *National Review*, the *Weekly Standard*, and the *Wall Street Journal* all discerned less-than-promising trends. Immigrant groups for which the Republicans had high hopes — Asians and Hispanics in particular — voted overwhelmingly for Gore. Also discouraging for the GOP, upscale suburban areas, longtime bastions of Republicanism, grow increasingly Democratic. Gore triumphed in New York City suburbs like Westchester county, Nassau county, and Bergen and Passaic counties in New Jersey, even in Greenwich, Conn., the Bush family seat. The notoriously old-WASP towns of mainline Philadelphia also went Democratic, as did the suburbs of Chicago and Detroit, and several wealthy California counties. Democrats control the coasts, the cultural and intellectual centers of the nation. And throughout the red Republican middle of the electoral map, the small blue areas tend to be the densest and most dynamic — urban areas and their suburbs, which are now home not only to residences but to the business ventures of the information age.

As Daniel Casse pointed out in the March issue of *Commentary*, it looks like the GOP is now paying for the success of the electoral strategy it began to pursue in the 1960s and which culminated in the election of Ronald

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Reagan in 1980. From a base made up in large part of pro-free-market, relatively traditional businessmen, the Republicans built a political framework which embraced formerly Democratic social conservatives of the South, Midwest, and West. They developed a powerful ideology around this new coalition, the crux of which was the notion of limited government. This principle had long appealed to traditionalists who believe that the government had expanded far beyond its proper sphere, impeding the functioning of the market and turning the country in an increasingly socialistic direction. But with Southern and Western social conservatives, the ideal of limited government took on a cultural dimension and a strong emotional quality. These Americans feared and detested government, because they had come to believe that political power was permanently lodged in the hands of a left-wing elite intent on imposing institutionally a set of values alien to their own.

While uncomfortable with some elements of their party members' social conservatism, the more moderate, Eastern Republicans did share what can be considered traditional social values (including an emphasis on work and merit, an opposition to welfare and redistributive economic policies, and support for traditional family structure). Moreover, the Democratic Party, a profligate spender and exponent of far-left social values, held little attraction for them. The Republican Party's current demographic woes can be traced both to the waning of earlier affinities and to the new respectability of the Democrats. Survey data as well as anecdotal evidence suggest that affluent Americans have far more liberal social values than they did in the past. Moreover, under the Clinton administration, the Democrats managed to shed their reputation for fiscal irresponsibility and for cultural radicalism, at least for the time being. Clinton was blessed with highly favorable economic winds, as well as a revered Federal Reserve chairman. In addition, Clinton succeeded in refashioning the welfare state rhetorically, and to some extent in fact, into a safety net and economic springboard not for the lazy and parasitic but for the great mass of working people.

All of these factors served to make the Democrats more palatable to upper middle class suburbanites. Though friendly to market principles, like most Americans they have grown accustomed to and do not view as threatening the level of responsibility the federal government has assumed since the New Deal. Furthermore, they lack the visceral distrust of government that took root in the South and parts of the West, the attitude that associates Washington with an alien and hostile culture. This attitude, in fact, tends to puzzle and frighten moderates, along with the bedrock social conservatism associated with it. The image of the Republican Party prevalent among the today's young, affluent elite is less of stuffy pin-striped bankers than of backward and bigoted rednecks, Kansas school boards, and gun-toting extremists.

The notion that the old rhetoric fails to captivate and the Reagan alliance no longer holds together is not news to the Republican Party. While strate-

gists debated the issue internally, *Weekly Standard* writer Christopher Caldwell advanced the argument in highly public fashion with his 1998 *Atlantic Monthly* article, “The Southern Captivity of the GOP.” Presenting a persuasive if overdetermined analysis, Caldwell argued that the Southern wing of the party had chased away its moderate wing. He concluded dramatically that the GOP was “obsolescent.” This past year’s election results lend weight to his claims, if not of the party’s obsolescence, than of the increasing concentration of its support. All sides now concede that the “Republican Revolution” of 1994 was not, as was thought at the time, the dawning of a new age.

## Enter “compassionate conservatism”

OVER THE COURSE of the recent campaign, Republican leaders and the party’s intellectual class visibly strove to cultivate a new constituency and new political language. A variety of frameworks were proposed, offering different solutions to the principal Republican dilemma: how to handle the religious, culturally conservative, largely Southern Americans who now make up the party’s base and have become both the GOP’s greatest strength and its constant irritant. These Americans are the party’s most active advocates and dependable supporters, but association with them can also frighten away voters who might push the party’s electoral support above the 48 percent mark. They give the party its moral fervor, but their moralism too often appears to others to shade into narrow-mindedness and the invasion of privacy. In short, the Republicans need an approach that will keep social and religious conservatives enthusiastic and capture their sense of purpose, while dulling their sectarianism and channeling their energy into policies with broader appeal.

From its beginning, the Bush campaign seized on the theme of “compassionate conservatism.” The slogan is commonly associated with Marvin Olasky, who took it for the title of his 1999 book, but the phrase predates the book and the theory has broader roots, leaning on the works of civil-society theorists and Catholic and evangelical communitarians of the early 1990s. These writers argued that great social benefits would result if the provision of various welfare services was devolved from large impersonal government bureaucracies to local, private, most often “faith-based” groups.

As governor of Texas, Bush had embraced policies such as education reform and support of “faith-based” organizations that meshed with the ideas of these thinkers, and Republican strategists urged that the language of compassionate conservatism would be the key to returning moderate, affluent voters to the Republican fold. For most of his campaign, Bush shied away from the Reagan/Gingrich antigovernment message. Like Clintonian Third Way liberalism, compassionate conservatism involves judicious

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reliance on market mechanisms and local civic renewal. But unlike Reagan or the congressional warriors of 1994, Bush didn't talk about slashing government or scaling back the federal bureaucracy. On the contrary, he granted the principle Democrats had long fought for: that the federal government should be the ultimate guarantor of health, employment, and financial security. In the language of his convention speech, Social Security and Medicare must be "strengthened" and "repaired." Local schools must be held federally accountable. Private charity was important, but the state must aid and support it, "helping the helper, encouraging the inspired." Compassionate conservatism may favor market incentives, decentralization, and private charity, but it envisions the federal government overarching it all, supporting and nurturing.

While moving away from the conservatism of limited government (let alone its libertarian variant) in order to attract moderate voters, compassionate conservatism aimed to hold on to the religious wing of the party by praising faith and the faithful and promising to channel government responsibilities through their local organizations. Candidate Bush constantly affirmed the importance of religion both in his own personal life and in the nation's civic life. He argued that many social welfare services were better performed by private groups that could combine material assistance with a strong moral message. He also boosted the role of religion and religious organizations in education, offering vouchers that would enable families to send their children to religious schools. Such a policy had appeal for religious conservatives, even when they would not directly benefit, since it ratified their belief that parents should have a greater role in shaping the content of their children's education.

This moderate/right-wing coalition would hold together in part through altering the moderates' view of religious conservatism. By pandering less to their hostility to government and mistrust of secular society, and by playing up their charitable efforts and biblical responsibility to do good works, compassionate conservatism hoped to soften the public image of the religious right. The Kansas School Board would be replaced by the dedicated soup kitchen volunteer. Moderates could be made to believe that religious conservatives, just as much as themselves, wanted "to leave no child behind."

## Enter "national greatness"

CAN A SUCCESSFUL coalition be built around the foundations of compassionate conservatism? It is difficult to judge purely on the basis of the recent election, since Bush himself retreated from this vocabulary as the campaign wore on, Al Gore adopted a populist posture, and the debate reverted to a more traditional left/ right dynamic. It appears that early on, Bush's "compassion" was instrumental in casting him as a more moderate kind of Republican, in contrast to the rabble-rousing mem-

bers of his party in Congress. On the other hand, many voters, particularly males, were turned off by compassionate conservatism's sentimental tone, preferring the "straight talk" of John McCain.

For a theme pushed heavily by the GOP frontrunner, compassionate conservatism found surprisingly few adherents among Republican intellectuals in Washington. With the principal exception of *City Journal*, the major conservative magazines were at times critical of both the trappings and the substance of compassionate conservatism, and many proposed rival frameworks for the campaign and beyond.

The *Weekly Standard* emerged with a theme that was dubbed "national greatness" conservatism. This was a politics that married the interventionist, moralistic foreign policy supported by its editor William Kristol with the patriotic message of John McCain, which emphasized the continuing relevance of classic American ideals and sought to bring public service to a more central place in American life. The magazine never formally endorsed McCain, but numerous editorials argued that McCain was the type of candidate the Republican Party badly needed, someone with an impressive biography, someone politically centrist but with the ability to galvanize an apathetic public with calls for reform. The editors wrote that "McCain's campaign reminds us that citizenship entails more than just voting, and the business of America is more than just business." The winning Republican candidate, they argued, is the one "who can convince voters that the presidential campaign isn't about who can deliver the most chum; it's about America's purpose and greatness." After McCain bowed out, the magazine continued to sound these themes and urge that Bush take them up.

The *Weekly Standard's* editors were explicit about how their approach intended to tackle the problem of the social right — it would channel their moralism and traditionalism into a patriotic rather than religious politics. Describing a McCain campaign speech in a March 2000 editorial, Kristol and David Brooks wrote that "when John McCain starts talking about religious faith, he ends up talking about patriotism." Perhaps unwittingly, "McCain would redirect a religiously based moral conservatism into a patriotically grounded moral appeal." They added: "by framing this moral crusade as patriotic rather than a religious movement, McCain could create an alliance between the independents and most social conservatives."

The series of *Weekly Standard* editorials outlining the national greatness theme presented a succinct and coherent account of the state of the American political landscape, the appeal of John McCain, and the promise his themes hold for a Republican Party. But even members of the magazine's



staff, more than one of whom has commented that “there’s no ‘there’ there with national greatness,” admit that the theme lacks an accompanying domestic policy agenda. Campaign finance reform was the central theme of the McCain campaign. The *Standard* argued sympathetically that McCain’s obsession with reducing corporate influence in politics promised the hope of reviving active citizenship, but it never endorsed his proposals. The editors insisted that a new way must be found to talk about government, one that portrayed participation in the public sector as noble, not parasitic, and which acknowledged government’s positive contribution to American life. In his controversial editorial “The Era of Small Government is Over,” David Brooks wrote that “conservatism has never just been about government getting out of the way . . . it is possible to use government in a limited but energetic way to advance . . . conservative ends.” Nonetheless, the *Standard* never developed specific proposals for “limited but energetic” government action, nor did it back away from its support for traditional Republican measures.

It is worth asking whether a theme emphasizing national greatness would continue to captivate if advanced by a candidate without a McCain-like record of service to his country. There can be no doubt that McCain’s extraordinary and inspiring history was central to his popularity as a candidate and to the resonance of his patriotic message. Voiced by other politicians, appeals to patriotism might sound narrow or jingoistic; by others, mere rhetoric. Additionally, there is little evidence that even McCain would have succeeded in absorbing the religious right into a more moderate politics. Of course, McCain fatally cut short his chances of wooing the right by attacking religious leaders Pat Robertson and Jerry Falwell as “agents of intolerance.” Even before this campaign catastrophe, however, religious conservatives were not enthusiastic about the McCain candidacy.

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## Enter the “new investor class”

**A**N ALTERNATIVE FRAMEWORK for politics and policy, one which has less rhetorical potential but is perhaps more grounded in voter’s immediate interests, centers on the idea of the “new investor class.” This approach has been promoted in the *National Review* by Richard Nadler and NR editor Ramesh Ponnuru and on the op-ed page of the *Wall Street Journal* by Lawrence Kudlow and Paul Gigot. In a nutshell, these writers argue that since investors tend to lean Republican, the party should endeavor both to court them and to create more of them. As a political strategy, this approach sidesteps hot-button cultural issues in favor of a relentlessly economic message.

The growth in the number of investors appears to be one demographic development Republicans can cheer. The numbers of Americans participating in the stock market, either directly or through investment plans sponsored by their employers, has risen to over 80 million. In 1998, according to the Federal Reserve Board's Survey of Consumer Finances, 48.8 percent of American households owned stock equity through some means. The rate of ownership grew by over 17 percentage points in the course of the preceding decade. This increase includes a jump of more than 20 percentage points among Americans earning from \$25,000 to \$50,000. A considerable percentage of these stock owners have traditionally held their equity in pension plans which they had little power to influence and hence little reason to pay attention to. However, defined benefit retirement plans, in which workers automatically receive a specified pension, are being rapidly supplanted by defined contribution plans, in which workers choose the amount of their contribution to an investment account over which they exert some control. This and other trends, proponents of an investor class approach argue, mean that workers are following their holdings more closely and managing them more actively.

Polling data suggest that investors do incline towards Republican positions — supporting cuts in the capital gains and estate taxes, favoring Social Security privatization, and looking negatively on new government regulation and antitrust action. In the 2000 election, the CNN exit poll recorded that voting investors supported Bush over Gore by 51 percent to 46 percent. (This electoral result stems in part from the fact that investors on balance are wealthier than noninvestors, and wealthier voters on balance tend to vote Republican (though less now than in the past). Still, several surveys indicate that investors are more free-market oriented and likely to lean Republican than noninvestors who are demographically similar.

Proponents of an investor class strategy argue the Republican Party should work actively to expand the ranks of investors by opening, via government policy, new avenues for individual participation in the market. The first item on their agenda has been George W. Bush's Social Security plan, which would divert incoming funds into individual accounts that are personally owned and privately managed. But that is far from the end. Through generous use of matching tax credits, federal and state governments could encourage individual investment accounts to save for education, home ownership, medical expense, and entrepreneurial ventures. Eventually, Nadler envisions the formation of a single, universal account that could be used for all of these purposes.

As *National Review* sees it, the investor class presents, finally, an opportunity to emulate the Democrats' success in building constituencies for their party. Through welfare benefits, the hiring of "100,000 new teachers," and liberal immigration policies, Democrats created large voting blocs tied tightly to their party and policies. Ponnuru, Nadler, and Kudlow believe the investor strategy to be similarly self-sustaining. Once new investors enter the



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financial markets, they will eventually come to support tax cuts and pro-business policies. (This is the group which, initially sympathetic to Gore's rhetorical assaults on big drug companies, watched with dismay as the value of their Pfizer stock fell.) And as their wariness of the market wanes, they become more likely to support the further privatization and marketization of government responsibilities. Thus their ties to the Republican Party would strengthen, as would their commitment to the expansion of "investor class" policies.

Can a strategy succeed which seems based exclusively on economic interest? True, these interests can be cast as something broader when advanced, as Bush began to in the campaign debates, in terms of the value of ownership, responsibility, and freedom of choice. But some writers, Nadler in particular, have taken an even broader approach, arguing that investor class policies offer a remedy for our most difficult political problems. Social Security is fast running out of money — why not encourage workers to invest on their own, thus taking control of their future and earning a much larger return to boot? Many of our public schools are failing — why not provide incentives for people to save the money to send their children to private or parochial schools? Health care system in crisis? Support the formation of investment accounts to pay for all basic medical needs short of severe illness. Need to jump start a flagging economy? Design tax policies to favor investment funds for the opening of new entrepreneurial ventures. In this fashion, the arguments of investor class proponents reach beyond private economic concerns and toward broad public policy.

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There are aspects of investor class policies that might give Republicans pause. To base so much of the social safety net on the strength of investments is to create a powerful temptation for government intervention to boost the market artificially. Additionally, the proposed matching grants and tax incentives seem likely to further complicate the already unwieldy tax code. The implementation stage, however, is still far in the future. It remains to be seen whether full-blown marketization of social welfare, a notion born of boom-time market optimism, will continue to captivate during a prolonged period of recession or a stagnating stock market.

Clearly, an investor class approach sidesteps the more divisive social issues in the hope of attracting adherents among moderates. But it is difficult to see what this approach offers to the religious wing of the party. More than the other frameworks discussed above, it lacks a cultural dimension. Furthermore, prominent social conservatives such as Gary Bauer have come out against Social Security privatization. Noting this, Ponnuru has argued

“it has to help conservatives of all stripes if capital ownership makes people think harder about the long term consequences of their actions and about the behavioral conditions of long-term success.” No doubt, but investment-savvy urban elites are just the sort of people that religious conservatives view warily. And from the perspective of those elites, though the editors of the *National Review* would like them to believe otherwise, free-market policies are not bound together in a seamless and inescapable logic with opposition to abortion, gun control, and the prohibition of prayer in public schools. Advocates of an investor class politics promote their strategy as a more hard-headed alternative to the sentimentality of compassionate conservatism and the vagueness of national greatness. But it seems they themselves would benefit from a more hard-headed grappling with the priorities of their party’s religious wing.

## The Bush beginning

**T**O FIND FLAWS with these different strategies is not to discredit their creative and intelligent authors, nor to suggest that a perfect formula is achievable. Some amalgam of all these approaches — one marrying patriotism, an appeal to material interests, greater individual freedom, and concern for the welfare of the less fortunate — could conceivably build an invincible party. But no one has managed to replicate Reagan’s success in building this kind of amalgam in the postcommunist era, when old battles have been won and new problems loom. Bush took up this challenge in his inaugural address, and came off well with his four-part theme of “civility, courage, compassion and character.”

Can he continue to do so once the policy battles have begun?

Bush launched his agenda on the note he sounded throughout the campaign: compassionate conservatism. He early established the White House Office of Faith-Based and Community Initiatives, an office designed “to expand the role of such efforts in communities and increase their capacity through executive action, legislation, Federal and private funding, and regulatory relief.” Debate about the office has concentrated on its faith-based dimension; secular organizations that might find expanded support under this administration have barely been discussed. This focus has perhaps been to Bush’s detriment, since his proposals have drawn fire both from liberals who declare that they threaten the barrier between church and state, and from some religious conservatives, who argue that Bush’s stated intention to enforce a strict separation between a church’s charitable and evangelical activities will promote bureaucratic meddling and destroy the element of church social services that makes them so effective. It seems unlikely, though, that these criticisms will damage Bush’s popularity among religious Americans, given the ongoing rhetorical validation of “faith” that he offers.

Among political centrists, Bush is running up against one of the more

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interesting paradoxes of the middle-American political mind. In survey after survey, Americans insist that their nation has suffered a moral decline, caused in part by a gradual attenuation of religious belief. They are recorded as believing that the United States would be better off if the public and our political leaders were more religious. This mentality, which seems to favor religion generically, without regard for denomination, is very new in our country, which has seen fierce sectarian battles. It is in fact a symptom of the attenuation it laments, and it is the only attitude which could permit an office such as the one President Bush has established, which is designed to give support indiscriminately to Protestant, Catholic, Jewish, and Muslim organizations. But these same surveys also record American's firm distaste for coercion, especially in matters of religious belief. (So much so that a majority of Americans are recorded as believing that children should select their own religious affiliations.) The possibility that people might be badgered into accepting a religion in the course of curing an addiction or getting off welfare provokes deep discomfort.

Ultimately, however, Bush's faith-based activities may not continue to receive the attention, both positive and negative, they did during the campaign and in the early months of his administration. The population these charitable efforts are aimed at and stand to benefit is the poor. It is interesting to note that Republicans started talking about the poor just as the Democrats backed away to embrace "working families." How wise a long-term electoral strategy this is remains to be seen. The poor have never been a natural constituency for the Republican Party, nor do they vote reliably or in great numbers. And the poor are only intermittently on the radar screen of middle-class Americans, who may cease to pay attention if they are not directly involved in providing or receiving, once the novelty of compassionate conservatism wears off.

Meanwhile, much to the relief of economic conservatives, Bush moved forward just as resolutely with the tax cut proposals outlined in his campaign platform. Opponents of these proposals have portrayed them as the very antithesis of compassion; they argue that the cuts disproportionately favor the wealthy and endanger the already tenuous solvency of Social Security and Medicare. But Bush infuriated these critics, and the media generally, by insistently making a compassionate conservative case for the tax cuts. He brought forth waitresses and auto mechanics to talk about how the extra \$600 gained from the Bush plan would help them buy groceries or pay off the car loan. Although for years now, polls have not ranked a tax cut as a high priority among Americans, Bush's proposal enjoyed a steady increase in public support in his first months in office.

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At least in the early going, then, Bush demonstrated some of the qualities of persistence, psychological insight, and rhetorical flexibility that made Reagan such a successful politician, enabling him to meld the disparate beliefs of his constituents into a coherent whole. In retrospect, some of the gloom that pervaded the Republican intellectual classes during the campaign and in the aftermath of the election seems unfounded. Though doubtlessly needing to address the progressive narrowing of its electoral base, the GOP does not appear to be “obsolescent.” And the claim, advanced by the *Weekly Standard* in the heat of primary season, that the party has “rotted from within” now seems an exaggeration. It may be that a talented politician who can embrace new ideas like compassionate conservatism while maintaining positions that reassure the party base (and smoothly ignoring any incompatibilities that may result) is all a party needs for electoral success. Such an approach might not have the nice coherence of the strategies proposed by conservative intellectuals. But it also lacks some of the deficiencies of those strategies, and hence may stand a better chance of achieving what the party needs — to assimilate controversial views into a more centrist politics. Republicans have been asking the right questions; to the surprise of many, Bush has offered some persuasive answers.

# Democracy Out of Balance

## *Civil Society Can't Replace Political Parties*

By IVAN DOHERTY

MAX WEBER ONCE REFERRED to political parties as “the children of democracy,” but in recent years civil society, in the new and emerging democracies, has often become the favored child of international efforts to assist democracy. Civil society has been described as the “wellspring of democracy,” a romantic, if perhaps exaggerated, claim. The international community has promoted civic organizations, assisted them, and supported their expansion and development, often building on the ruins of discredited political parties. This has been a good and necessary endeavor. Yet the almost exclusive focus on civil society has moved beyond fashion. For some it has become an obsession, a mantra.

Increasingly, resources are being channeled to programs that develop civil society to the exclusion of political parties and political institutions such as parliaments. Many private and public donors feel that it is more virtuous to be a member of a civic organization than a party and that participating in party activity must wait until there is a certain level of societal development. There is a grave danger in such an approach. Strengthening civic organizations, which represent the demand side of the political equation, without providing commensurate assistance to the political organizations that must aggregate the interests of those very groups, ultimately damages the democratic equilibrium. The neglect of political parties, and parliaments, can

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