Madison and the Perils of Populism

George Thomas

This fraught election year has highlighted our political divisions. And yet it has also revealed an area of profound agreement. On both the left and the right, among Republicans and Democrats, a simplistic view of democracy has become pervasive. Populist democracy has had an indelible resurgence, and not just in America. If no one has gone quite so far as to insist vox populi vox Dei, there has been a deep reluctance, particularly among elected representatives, to question the putative voice of the people. Few have been willing to venture that an election year is a chance to educate the public mind rather than simply gauge it.

On the Republican side, the idea that a brokered convention might select a presidential candidate other than Donald Trump, whom many Republican elites view with horror, was condemned in the name of the people. Faced with the prospect of delegates’ choosing the candidate they thought best qualified at the convention, Trump complained that the system was “rigged.” Many Republican voters agreed. Endorsements of Trump were put in terms of the démos speaking and the “wisdom” and “purity” of the voters. Senate Majority Leader Mitch McConnell insisted, “I have committed to supporting the nominee chosen by Republican voters.” Senator John McCain, who was attacked by Trump for being captured during the Vietnam War, nevertheless echoed this sentiment, saying it was “foolish to ignore” the will of GOP voters.

Similarly, when it looked as if Hillary Clinton might need super-delegates to secure the Democratic Party’s nomination, Senator Bernie Sanders and his supporters claimed the system was rigged — that it would

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not reflect the will of Democratic voters but that of party elites. Sanders, in fact, insisted on reforms that would not only do away with superdelegates, but that would also require open primaries—allowing the people, whatever their party affiliation, to choose the Democratic Party’s candidate (something nearly half the states in the Democratic contest already do). But then Sanders himself is an independent who just happened to run for the Democratic Party’s nomination. All of this is deemed to be more democratic, more expressive of the voice of the people.

Obscured by the turn to populist democracy is any sense that representatives and political parties play an important role in educating and shaping the public mind, or that democracy depends on political leadership to refine, channel, and elevate popular wants. This is curious because it is so at odds with the understanding of liberal democracy that underlies our Constitution, an understanding that is increasingly under pressure. It is particularly curious that Republicans, who not only purport to revere America’s Constitution but have made a habit of insisting that it is being undermined, have embraced a populist view of democracy.

Indeed, for all of their rhetoric about the Constitution, Republicans (especially of the Tea Party variety) have often embraced candidates who display a, let us say, less-than-proficient understanding of the Constitution and the thought of the founding generation. In Trump they have embraced a candidate who mistakes constitutional ignorance for a virtue. But Trump is not alone in abdicating the educative dimensions of representative office. He is only an extreme form, the raw voice of the people—the id, as he’s been called—insisting that he expresses what the people want to say but cannot.

Aware of the fragility of popular government, the founding generation worried about such “popular arts,” where the people might be “stimulated by some irregular passion,” or where they might be “misled by the artful misrepresentations of interested men.” Against the prevalence of simple-minded democracy, we stand to benefit from James Madison’s more sophisticated—and more realistic—understanding of democracy. Madison was not only America’s leading democratic and constitutional theorist, but he was also a leading political actor and statesman who brought theory and practice together in a singular manner.

Madison’s thinking offers a timely antidote to populist democracy. While he began from the premise that the will of the people ultimately ought to govern us, he insisted that political institutions and
intermediary civic institutions were essential to cultivating the “cool and deliberate sense of the community.” And if he famously insisted that we should not design a government trusting that “enlightened statesmen” will “always be at the helm,” he nevertheless thought that political leadership was essential to educating the public mind.

Revisiting Madison’s thought is not best understood as an act of nostalgia, lamenting our fall. Conservatives who admire the founding are particularly prone to this sentiment, as if a recurrence to the founders would solve the contemporary problems that beset America. Indeed, I venture that a Madisonian mindset liberates us from a staid constitutional veneration and opens us to political reform. Madison viewed the Constitution in instrumental terms, and he turned to political parties as a necessary constitutional reform, a crucial means of educating popular opinion, when the constitutional system failed to work as its framers imagined. This is the sort of voice that can help us negotiate and modernize our politics, carrying forward our republican experiment in these still-early years of the 21st century.

**Political Institutions and Representation**

Madison began from the premise that “ultimate authority...resides in the people alone.” And the chief object of government was “the public good, the real welfare of the great body of the people.” But to say that the people are the ultimate sovereign authority is not to say that the people should govern directly, or that the people’s immediate will, even if discernable, is commensurate with the public good. Recognizing a gap between the people’s often “intemperate” will and “passions” and the public good, yet also recognizing the people as the “real sovereign,” Madison sought to create a government rooted in popular sovereignty but designed to foster and secure the long-term interests of a diverse political community.

Our political institutions were crafted to be responsive to the people over time, but also to put space between the people and their representatives. Self-government also required self-restraint. This would allow the often inchoate and disparate views of the public to be formed by way of the political process. Particularly in a large country, as Madison said, it is often difficult for the public’s “real opinion to be ascertained.” A diversity of interests and opinions naturally exists in a complex society. Public opinion is not a simple given; nor, even if it can be “ascertained,”
is it necessarily reflective of the public good. Madison aimed to craft political institutions that could balance these sometimes-competing aims.

As Madison put it in Federalist No. 57, “The aim of every political constitution is, or ought to be, first to obtain for rulers men who possess most wisdom to discern, and most virtue to pursue, the common good of the society; and in the next place, to take the most effectual precautions for keeping them virtuous whilst they continue to hold their public trust.” Representation was an essential element of this framework. Elected political leaders, who held their office as a public trust, were not merely to act as a mouthpiece of the citizenry but to see farther than ordinary citizens: “to refine and enlarge the public views,” to have the wisdom to “discern the true interest of their country,” and to do so against “temporary or partial considerations.” Representative democracy was preferable to direct democracy precisely because it was designed to place those of superior political understanding and judgment in office.

The dynamic — and often contentious — interaction between the branches of government is similarly designed to advance the public good by channeling, shaping, and refining popular opinions. We associate Madison first and foremost with checks and balances, with the idea that the government itself must be limited and constrained, but even the separation of powers is designed to instruct popular understandings. Consider that the institutions of the national government represent different facets of the people. The people are not represented as a single entity, but are broken into different versions, as it were.

Members of the House represent small districts that are likely to have homogeneous interests and opinions. Senators represent the whole people of their respective states, which necessarily broadens the range of interests and views represented. The president does represent the people as a whole, though not on account of a national plebiscite but by way of the different states. And the federal judiciary, by way of the appointment process and life tenure, is distant from the people. Republicans’ insistence, after President Obama’s nomination of Judge Merrick Garland to fill the late Justice Antonin Scalia’s empty seat, that no justice be appointed before the people have “spoken” in this election would close this distance: They have given new voice to the old aphorism that the Supreme Court follows the election returns.

Even the terms of national offices, staggered as they are, were designed to give voice to the people in different capacities, as well as to
shape and educate that voice. The two-year terms of representatives keep them close to the people and allow for a highly responsive expression of popular understandings, based on a range of opinions reflected in the variety of House districts. A six-year term in the Senate, on the other hand, allows for a longer-range vision, which can resist popular passions. Given that senators represent the states, they will also tend toward more moderate views, as their constituencies will be drawn from a larger and more diverse selection of the people in comparison to House districts. The four-year term of the presidency similarly allows for resistance to “every sudden breeze of passion” or “every transient impulse” of the people, while also broadening the office to listen to the whole public, diluting the more impassioned voices to strike a balance among the multitude of interests and views across the nation.

By way of the clash of different interests and ideas, nourished by institutional design, the Madisonian vision seeks the refinement and enlargement of popular opinion. As Madison put it in Federalist No. 10, “it may well happen that the public voice, pronounced by the representatives of the people, will be more consonant to the public good than if pronounced by the people themselves.” Contrary to populist democracy, Madison deemed it a virtue that popular will cannot be immediately translated into public policy; this was the great improvement in republican institutions and the advantage a republic held over a democracy. Republican and democratic government were both forms of popular government rooted in the authority of the people, but Madison favored a republic to “pure” democracy precisely because of its educative and enlightening ambitions.

Obviously we still have representative government, and our political institutions allow for distance between the people and the government. Yet we tend more and more toward a plebiscitary understanding of our representative institutions. This is most evident in the party primary system, but it increasingly encompasses the whole of American political institutions. In Democracy for Realists, Christopher Achen and Larry Bartels persuasively claim that “the folk theory of democracy’ is triumphant.” What they dub “the folk theory” is the simple idea that majority desires should be translated into governmental policy. We may have representative institutions, but the folk theory rests on the idea that representative democracy should directly reflect the people’s voice.
Yet, based on empirical evidence, Achen and Bartels demonstrate that this isn’t so easy. A populist understanding of democracy assumes that (i) ordinary citizens have detailed preferences on a range of issues, (2) they are informed about how their preferences are ordered, and (3) they have a sense of how public policy can ensure that their preferences are implemented. But the empirical evidence Achen and Bartels draw on reveals that specific voter preferences with regard to public policy are elusive.

We cannot assume, as populist democracy does, that citizens with strong preferences are just lying about, waiting to have them enacted into public policy. Voters are often unclear about their own preferences, have little understanding of complex issues, and possess very little knowledge about what policies will best achieve their interests. Nor do they display an understanding of how different policies fit together, as if they have intuitively grasped the inevitable balancing needed in order to pursue multiple policy goals that are often in tension with one another.

This would hardly surprise Madison. He wrote eloquently about the passions of the public sitting in judgment rather than its reason. He resisted the popular impulse not simply because he knew that men were not “angels” — which applies just as powerfully to those in power — but because he understood that in the ordinary course of things the untutored people were not prepared to govern.

While this positions Madison as a critic of populist democracy, he was nevertheless a defender of popular government. Popular government is a delicate and precious thing, and Madison attempted to design American political institutions to overcome its weaknesses, which required enlightening the public mind. This is not because the people are naturally foolish or incapable of self-government. Ordinary citizens are busy with private life and obligations closer to home. Self-government requires them to be generally informed and able to make judgments about their representatives, but we cannot expect them to be experts on the range of issues they are now asked to speak to during elections. I am a professor of government at a highly selective college, yet I find the issues I am asked to decide in California politics mind-boggling. A realistic form of democracy requires leadership and intermediary institutions to perform this educative function. Precisely because, as Madison said, “public opinion sets bounds to every government, and is the real sovereign in every free one,” we depend on the institutions of civil society to enlighten public opinion.
American democracy depends on a generally educated citizenry, but it does not depend on all citizens being constitutional and political experts. Rather, citizens are likely to take their cues from ideas generated by political and intellectual leaders, whom Madison referred to as “the cultivators of the human mind—the manufacturers of useful knowledge—the agents of the commerce of ideas—the censors of public manners—the teachers of the arts of life and the means of happiness.” The intermediary institutions of civil society—political parties, the press, churches, schools, and other forms of civic association—are essential to shaping a democratic people.

Civic engagement is a healthy and necessary feature of democratic politics. But there is an important distinction between an active and engaged citizenry—which can weigh in on matters as important as constitutional questions—and a populist spirit. Indeed, political observers from Alexis de Tocqueville to Robert Putnam have suggested that a decline in civic engagement is associated with more populist forms of democracy. As individuals are isolated and increasingly distant from civil society, they are prone to seek refuge in less liberal forms of democracy. So we should not confuse populism with civic activism; it is more likely driven by an alienation from civic institutions, as it turns to the easy emotionalism of expression and away from the difficult business of citizenship.

Political parties are of particular interest here. They were originally defended as a remedy for the weakness of popular government. Even with the constitutional scheme, without political parties we would depend on individual leaders to shape the public mind. Yet Madison insisted this was a mistake: A dependence on great men was a weakness because it opened the political order to the unscrupulous and immoderate. Not only are statesmen rarely available, as the Federalist Papers pointed out, but we must also guard against the would-be demagogue who, using the “popular arts,” flatters the prejudices of the people in a manner that betrays their interests.

Party government was a means to direct and channel popular opinion. Parties, among other devices, would temper the vices of a popular government aimed at securing liberty. As Edmund Burke, a great defender of party government, put it in *Reflections on the Revolution in France,*
To make a government requires no great prudence. Settle the seat of power; teach obedience: and the work is done. To give freedom is still more easy. It is not necessary to guide; it only requires to let go the rein. But to form a free government; that is, to temper together these opposite elements of liberty and restraint in one consistent work, requires much thought, deep reflection, a sagacious, powerful, and combining mind.

America found such a mind in Madison. Madison’s liberal-democratic Constitution sought to balance different elements in a manner that would temper popular government. And, if Madison began as a skeptic of political parties, he ultimately accepted and defended their role. Insofar as differences in interests and ideas would persist, as they will in a pluralistic democracy, parties were unavoidable. But this reality could be turned to political advantage by “making one party a check on the other.” Madison saw the creation of parties as a necessary supplement to shortcomings in the constitutional scheme. From the beginning, he realized that the Constitution was imperfect, that maintaining its great ends would require innovations and alterations. Parties connected the people with the government, articulating popular concerns, but they also educated public opinion.

The superdelegates in the Democratic Party are a lingering reminder of this understanding of party. Today’s parties tend to select candidates by way of political primaries, with rank-and-file voters — often not even members of the party — choosing the candidates. Superdelegates are unelected and unpledged delegates, usually officeholders or leaders within the party, who may vote for the candidate they think best represents the party. The idea, in line with Madison’s understanding, is that those who hold political office will have a superior knowledge of politics and policy: Superdelegates will represent an educated vote that prudently speaks to the party’s principles and long-term interests. This system has been under pressure for much of the 20th century. And while many 20th-century reforms, which opened the nomination process up to the public, are healthy democratic developments, they have also opened the door to a more populist form of democracy.

In this new understanding of democracy, our political parties tend to misapprehend their importance. At their best, parties do not simply discover and articulate static interests and divisions. Rather, they are
actively engaged in forming and organizing beliefs that seek to articulate important political differences. But they also play a moderating role in recognizing the inevitability of politics: It requires compromise. This is one of the things that parties teach—particularly to those whom Burke termed, in politics, “the less inquiring.” But what happens when political leaders and the parties themselves seem to be composed of the “less inquiring”? What happens when our leadership class abdicates the educative role that Madison envisioned?

In our current moment, the political parties are often vehicles for expressing unrefined popular opinion, rather than intermediary institutions that educate and channel it. This is perhaps most evident in the case of Donald Trump. The real-estate magnate himself reflects a stunning ignorance of America’s Constitution and the political process as a whole. Many in the Republican Party find his ascendency deeply disturbing. Yet, given that he garnered the most votes in the GOP primary, it seems “undemocratic” to deny him the nomination. This abdicates the enlightening role that intermediary institutions are supposed to play in a healthy democracy. Today’s media, political parties, and representative institutions often augment the worst features of democracy rather than moderating them. Trump is only the most notable example of this. But we can expect this sort of populist demagoguery when the institutions that once balanced against it now reinforce it.

**Populism and Politics**

Curiously, if America suffers from too much democracy in the primary process and in the rhetoric of elections, it may suffer from too little in terms of actual governance. As Steven Teles has argued in these pages (see “Kludgeocracy in America” in the Fall 2013 issue), the defining feature of American governance in the early years of the 21st century is complexity. While critics of America’s constitutional system argue that too many “veto points” hinder effective government, giving multiple players a chance to “stymie action,” this is only a part of the story. As Teles argues, we can see “veto points” as tollbooths: The gatekeeper gets to “extract a price in exchange for his willingness to allow legislation to keep moving.” This allows individual politicians to protect pet projects or add on special-interest programs as the price for joining legislation.

The result is that lawmaking can turn on access, which gives preference to interest groups and other elites who are connected to various
policy networks where legislation is created, negotiated, and protected. The Madisonian separation of powers is designed to resist populist tendencies by fostering deliberation and providing for effective government. But it can also give rise to the influence of interest groups—with regulatory capture and rent-seeking—that thwart the general preferences of the public. The proliferation of money in politics, and its connection with interest groups and businesses, only compounds this problem. In some policy areas, as Michael Lind recently pointed out, the power of “electoral majorities really has ebbed away.”

This rise in the prominence of interest groups complements the tendency toward more populist democracy. As parties and other intermediary institutions perform less of an educative function—allowing for more things to be enacted based on popular understandings, and sometimes decided by bypassing representative institutions altogether (as with referendums)—this opens the door to interest groups and other “policy entrepreneurs.” In California, the rise of direct democracy by way of referendums has correlated with the decline in the quality of governance and representative institutions. And this is because, as Achen and Bartels demonstrate in pointing to the limits of the “folk theory” of democracy, such innovations overestimate the capacity of citizens to make informed judgments about complex issues while also disparaging the importance of intermediary institutions in educating the public mind and ensuring that it is capable of making informed judgments.

Paradoxically, the longing for “authentic” democracy can actually lead to less democracy. It also opens democracy to demagoguery. Impatient and frustrated with the political process and governing institutions that do not deliver on their preferences, the people can be seduced by leaders who make extravagant promises—promises to get things done without respecting constitutional checks that might inhibit democracy. As Madison put it in criticizing ancient forms of democracy, the larger the group deciding an issue, the larger the share of people who are “of limited information and of weak capacities.” It is no surprise that in ancient democracies demagoguery was an acute problem. Precisely because the passions of the people could be openly played upon, it was often the case that a “single orator” was “seen to rule with as complete a sway as if a scepter had been placed in his single hand.” Such democracies were prone to tyranny and collapse, giving popular government itself a bad name.
This craving for strong leadership also indicates a frustration with democratic politics, which requires persuasion. Skeptical of having to construct, negotiate, and work toward a public good, the populist spirit takes the answers to complex questions to be obvious: Politics itself—where conflicting interests and ideas are balanced by deliberation, negotiation, and compromise—is seen as the problem. So Trump insists he will build a wall and have Mexico pay for it, replace the Affordable Care Act with something “terrific,” and save Medicare, Medicaid, and Social Security without cutting benefits or raising taxes. When he turns to grappling with ISIS, barring Muslims from the country, or tolerating torture, free speech, an independent judiciary, and the like, Trump does not acknowledge—or is unaware of—constitutional limits and the other branches of government.

The difficult business of politics is also suspect for those who insist on the “purity” of their principles, with little recognition that many others do not share their understanding of the public good. We see this tendency at times from Sanders and his supporters and from the Tea Party wing of the Republican Party. Insistence on political principle is an important feature of democratic politics, but it must be coupled with a recognition that persuading others and building coalitions is a crucial part of politics and essential to the creation of viable public policy.

Sanders, for instance, barely acknowledged that Hillary Clinton in fact won more votes to secure the Democratic nomination and was not just the overwhelming choice of the party’s superdelegates. Sanders and his supporters want influence within the party, which is understandable. Yet they also threaten to harm the Democratic Party if their interests and ideas are not adopted. Progressive populism can too readily presume that the public interest is not a matter of debate and contention, but a simple matter of reason. In this, progressives are perhaps too eager to overcome partisanship and politics; they are too willing to assume that reasoned principles alone can settle things, that rational thought can do the difficult work of politics.

Conservatives can also evince a suspicion of politics in the name of pure political principles. The Tea Party wing of the Republican Party in particular can seem intent on obstruction in the name of principle. Tea Party populists in Virginia helped to oust Eric Cantor, the former House majority leader, in a party primary because he was perceived to be too willing to compromise. Despite Cantor’s seemingly sterling conservative
credentials, he was acutely aware that conservative Republicans did not comprise a majority of House Republicans. Given this, they would have to work with more moderate Republicans, and perhaps even Democrats, to get things accomplished in Congress. But this was deemed treasonous by the Tea Party voters who helped defeat him.

In our polarized moment, no group is going to get everything it wants, which means that, in a divided government, compromise is inescapable if anything is going to be accomplished. Yet within populist elements of both parties, there is a disdain for building political coalitions among groups who are certain to disagree. This mindset is also blind to the fact that government is trying to achieve multiple ends, which are often in tension with one another. Achieving numerous ends requires a recognition that the difficult business of politics is often about finding the right balance between competing goals, given limited resources.

The Madisonian vision sought to force this recognition, partly by requiring give-and-take, to achieve lasting policies within a system of separated powers. An anti-compromise insistence on pure political principles clashes with this framework, dispensing with the sort of political leadership essential to democracy. It also reinforces popular frustrations: Promises to deliver on the narrow vision of particular constituents inevitably fail because they lack majority support. Tom Cole, a Republican representative from Oklahoma, captured this in criticizing the Freedom Caucus’s unrealistic goals: “You’re not going to repeal Obamacare while a guy named Obama is President of the United States.”

Precisely because it opens itself to a variety of interests and ideas, democracy is particularly in need of a moderating politics. It not only requires attempts to reason with and persuade one’s fellow citizens, but it also requires that one be open to being persuaded by others. But it is not all deliberation and reason, as much as Madison hoped to elevate those. It is also about bargaining and compromise, knowing the limits of what politics can achieve. Politics is about making difficult choices and requires public leadership and a citizenry capable of general judgments.

The populist temptation is understandable in our deeply polarized time, particularly when the government often does seem paralyzed and dysfunctional. All the more so when the evidence points to a growing class divide, a shrinking middle class, and a lack of upward mobility for those at the bottom. Increasingly, we live in separate Americas economically and culturally. Much of the populist anger that Trump and Sanders
have tapped into is legitimate. And our political parties have not done a good job of addressing it. The so-called establishment is under strain for good reason. Yet a full-blown turn to populism is not the answer; it threatens to undo liberal democracy in America and abroad. Populist frustrations could be a healthy wake-up call, pushing us to consider political and constitutional reforms that address our current situation. A Madisonian mindset will help in this effort.

**Madison’s Model for Reform**

Madison treated our political institutions as a means to achieve certain ends. We are increasingly confronted with the question of whether our political institutions currently achieve the sort of ends laid out in the Constitution. Certainly, critics of our Madisonian system, with its various “veto points,” abound.

Francis Fukuyama has gone so far as to dub America a “vetocracy,” referring to our government’s many checks and balances that allow collective decision-making to be thwarted at numerous points in the political process. William Howell and Terry Moe, in their new book, *Relic*, argue that America’s political institutions — particularly the constitutional separation of powers — are at the root of the country’s political dysfunction. Within the separation of powers and checks and balances, various minority positions consistently thwart public policy favored by a majority. Our political institutions make effective and functional government difficult to achieve. Not only is the government unable to act on pressing public-policy concerns, but when it fails to act, we the people have a difficult time holding our representatives accountable, because our institutions disperse power and responsibility. It is not always clear just who is at fault. According to Fukuyama, Howell, and Moe, frustrations with our political institutions have helped fuel democratic discontent. Given this, we should not be surprised that the people have such low levels of trust in our political institutions. Worse, Roberto Foa and Yascha Mounk point to recent opinion polls that suggest Americans’ support for democratic government is in decline.

We must confront these criticisms of our Madisonian institutions. Given our experience of the institutions Madison helped craft, we have some sense of how they have functioned and where they have failed over the last 200 years. And there have unquestionably been some failures. Recall that Madison’s defense of political parties was rooted in the first
evident shortcomings of the Constitution in the 1790s—shortcomings that involved the place of popular opinion in the constitutional scheme.

Indeed, Madison’s defense of political parties as connecting voters with representative institutions may not have been altogether consistent with things he argued while urging ratification of the Constitution. Scholars continue to agonize over his consistency, and there has been disagreement for nearly two centuries that will almost certainly persist. But we do not need to sort out Madison’s consistency. Indeed, the important point to consider is that, if Madison changed his mind on a particular issue, he did so, from his perspective, to achieve consistent ends. This offers a model of political reform. When institutions do not work as we expect, or when social and political changes alter how our political institutions and civil society function, we need to be able to alter our thinking based on experience.

We should understand our political institutions—indeed the Constitution itself—in instrumental terms: They are a means to achieve the public good. This includes, as the preamble to the Constitution announces, preserving justice, our liberties, and the general welfare. No constitution will be perfect in this regard. And maintaining the Constitution, or more importantly the ends it marks out, requires that we consider how its political architecture is working in our own day: How does it apply to conditions in the early years of the 21st century? We cannot escape the difficult work of thinking through contested political principles in light of our fundamental commitments and applying them to our new conditions. We should also consider the structure of our political institutions, including the supplemental institutions of civil society they depend on.

For starters, we could do away with such extra-constitutional features as the Senate filibuster, which requires a supermajority to bring issues before that chamber at all. We could also do away with other forms of committee referral that easily allow small numbers of representatives to block possible legislation before it can even get a hearing. America’s patchwork administrative state, with its bureaucratic complexity, is another area in need of reform. To ease the current conflict over Supreme Court appointees, we might consider a proposal that provides for 18-year terms for the justices, which would allow two Supreme Court appointments for every presidential term. These are, in the large scheme of things, minor reforms that only partly speak to our most pressing contemporary concerns.
But they are reforms that would find support among Democrats and Republicans. More pressingly, we should treat the shrinking middle class as a kind of constitutional problem: A healthy middle class is essential to the long-run viability of America’s political institutions.

Revisiting a Madisonian view of democracy is not an act of nostalgia, but an effort to recapture the spirit and mindset needed to maintain democratic machinery set in motion two centuries ago. This spirit was on display in Federalist No. 14, when Madison called on his fellow citizens to recognize the failure of the Articles of Confederation and to not fear the need for profound reform: “Is it not the glory of the people of America, that, whilst they have paid a decent regard to the opinions of former times and other nations, they have not suffered a blind veneration for antiquity, for custom, or for names, to overrule the suggestions of their own good sense, the knowledge of their own situation, and the lessons of their own experience? To this manly spirit, posterity will be indebted for the possession, and the world for the example, of the numerous innovations displayed on the American theatre, in favor of private rights and public happiness.”

It is beyond the scope of this essay to engage in the admittedly difficult work of formulating a comprehensive list of reforms that might be necessary. Reforms aimed at both limiting and enabling democracy would be Madisonian in the best sense, yielding a complex understanding of popular government. And such a mindset is necessary to preserve America’s democratic experiment. It is under pressure from populist appeals, which are all the more difficult to grapple with precisely because they are rooted in the very nature of popular government. Yet populism opens us to the threat of illiberal forms of democracy — and worse. We must recognize this challenge; we cannot assume that America’s liberal-democratic institutions will be self-perpetuating. Nor should we be seduced by the view that the cure for the current ills of democracy is always more democracy. Educating the public mind, and preparing it for democratic self-government, is more important than ever.