

The Washington Cartel

By JAY COST

A 90 percent incumbency rate, legions of lobbyists, ignorant reporters, an apathetic electorate . . . There's no easy fix. Last week, BuzzFeed published a provocative article by Eve Fairbanks about Mark Halperin. For all the damage that Halperin's sexual misdeeds have done, Fairbanks contends that they pale in comparison to his destructive work as a journalist, particularly in writing *The Note*, his "chummy daily political newsletter" for ABC: *The Note* purported to reveal Washington's secrets. In fact, its purpose was the exact opposite: to make the city, and US politics, appear impossible to understand. It replaced normal words with jargon. It coined the phrase "Gang of 500," the clubby network of lobbyists, aides, pols, and hangers-on who supposedly, like the Vatican's cardinals, secretly ran DC. That wasn't true — power is so diffuse. But Halperin claimed he knew so much more than we did, and we began to believe it. Once you believe that, it's not hard to be convinced that politics is only comprehensible, like nuclear science, to a select few.

There were those chosen ones — the people who'd flattered Halperin to get a friendly mention in his newsletter, the ones he declared to be in the know — and the rest of us. Halperin wrote about Washington like it was an intriguing game, the kind that masked aristocrats played to entertain themselves at 19th-century parties: Everyone was both pawn and player, engaged in a set of arcane maneuvers to win an empty jackpot that ultimately meant nothing of true importance. Fairbanks is hearkening back to the court-versus-country distinction that was popularized among English republicans in the early 18th century. The basic idea was that the rulers (the court) are able to govern independent of the people (the country), thereby

undermining the principle of self-government. Fairbanks's argument is that Halperin created a court party out of whole cloth — which makes him “the single journalist most responsible for Donald Trump.” This essay has all the hallmarks of an online #hottake. It seizes upon an overlooked aspect of a story and improbably turns it into something of enormous consequence.

Normally, such pieces are not worth giving a second thought to. However, Fairbanks makes a basic error that is worth correcting, because it illuminates a larger truth about our politics. Egypt mosque attack: Death tolls surpasses 300 00:05 00:58 Powered by She claims that power in Washington, D.C., is too “diffuse” for Halperin's “Gang of 500” to be in control. That is fair, but only up to a point. Power is too diffuse in Washington, D.C., for a cabal of 500 to wield it effectively. Nevertheless, it is spread among political actors who share the same values, which Ted Lowi defined as “interest-group liberalism”: It may be called liberalism because it expects to use government in a positive and expansive role, it is motivated by the highest sentiments, and it possesses strong faith that what is good for government is good for the society. It is “interest-group liberalism” because it sees as both necessary and good that the policy agenda and the public interest be defined in terms of the organized interests in society. Significantly, these “organized interests in society” do not sample randomly from society at large. As E. E. Schattschneider once observed, “the flaw in the pluralist heaven is that the heavenly chorus sings with a strong upper-class accent.” Moreover, it is a fallacy of composition to suggest that doing the bidding of various, organized interests is the same as securing the public good. The two are often quite distinct, in fact. I think this nicely summarizes the mentality of Washington, D.C. — on both sides of the aisle. The power of government is to be wielded unabashedly, and mostly for the interests that dominate the political process. The main differences between Republicans and Democrats — with a few notable exceptions on the left (Bernie Sanders) and the right (Mike Lee) — is how they believe power should be wielded and which interests should benefit.

There is a kind of “court party” in American politics — one that is actually strengthened by the diffusion of power across Washington, D.C. It behaves like a cartel, restricting alternative supplies of policies or ideas. Political theorists have called this the “mobilization of bias.” In other words, there are just certain ways of getting things done in Washington, D.C., and alternative methods of policymaking are not up for discussion. The court party continues to exist because the country cannot be bothered to do anything about it.

This court party is sustained by several features of our polity. The first, and most important, is the overwhelming rate at which politicians are reelected. It tops 90 percent in most cycles. Apart from a handful of bellwether districts, incumbents are all but guaranteed victory when they choose to run again. Voters simply do not care enough to separate the wheat from the chaff. The court party continues to exist because the country cannot be bothered to do anything about it. The second important feature is the way political campaigns are financed. Forget for a moment the super PACs, those well-heeled, largely anonymous entities that swoop in during competitive elections. Again, most elections are not competitive. Incumbents in these contests raise funds by drawing in large measure upon the interests that have business before the government, particularly the jurisdictions they oversee in their committees. This conflict-of-interest financing of our politics is a bipartisan phenomenon. Third, there is lobbying. Put aside any traditional views on how lobbying works. It is not a brown envelope stuffed with cash, or even a fancy dinner on the corporate card. It is the provision of information. Legislators are required to make judgments on all sorts of policy matters that they cannot possibly hope to possess expertise on. Where do they gain the knowledge necessary to make prudent decisions?

Not from the tiny congressional staff, which is overworked, underpaid, and inexperienced. Instead, lobbyists provide a large body of information about

the political and policy consequences of particular legislation. Such knowledge is hardly objective or comprehensive; naturally, it favors the interests of those who provide it. The fourth is the revolving door between the public and private sectors. This gives those in government an incentive to look out for private interests, as they anticipate that they'll need to have a job after they retire from public service. It also creates cultural and social affinities between people with private interests and those who are in public service. Everybody is in the same "club." We have a fourth estate that often does little more than transcription. These are the main pillars that support today's court party. Note that journalists are nowhere to be found among them. In my view, the importance of journalism in sustaining or challenging this architecture has declined dramatically over the years. Slumping ratings for the broadcast networks, the sharp drop-off in newspaper subscriptions, and the rise of cable-news talk shows have forced mainstream media outlets to make all sorts of cutbacks in their traditional journalism. The result is that journalists lack the expertise necessary to understand, let alone dominate, the byzantine pathways of Washington, D.C., power relations. Factor in as well that journalists are themselves part of the revolving door: How many former reporters ended up in the Obama administration? How many former Obama officials now work in media outlets? Given this cycling, we have a fourth estate that often does little more than transcription.

Think back to Ben Rhodes's quip, in an interview with the New York Times' David Samuels, about playing journalists like fiddles on the Iran deal: The average reporter we talk to is 27 years old, and their only reporting experience consists of being around political campaigns. That's a sea change. They literally know nothing. Samuels observed: "In this environment, Rhodes has become adept at ventriloquizing many people at once." It would be nice if one guy like Halperin was responsible for the dysfunction in Washington, D.C. That would make for an easy fix. But it is just not true. The problem gets down to power relations that systematically

favor certain interests and worldviews over others, and a broader electorate that is unwilling to bear the burdens of citizenship required to reform it.

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