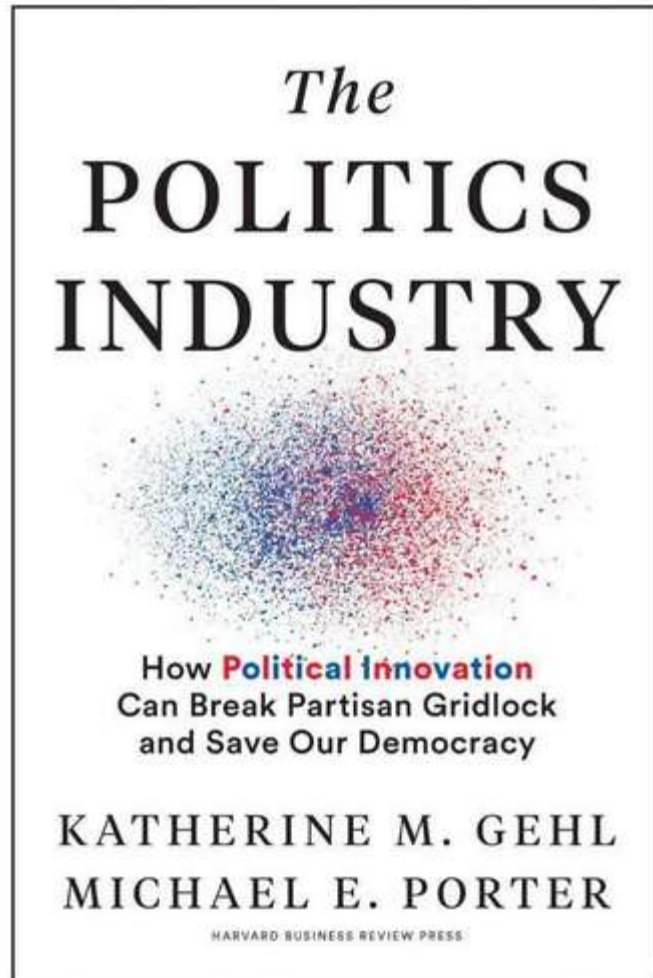


Undeniably Insightful:

Authors urge complete overhaul for the greater good

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“The Politics Industry: How Political Innovation Can Break Partisan Gridlock and Save Our Democracy” by Katherine M. Gehl and Michael E. Porter. Boston: Harvard Business Review Press, 2020. 272 pages, \$30 (hardcover).



“As with the Cold War, 9/11 and the Great Recession, there will be American children who remember where they were when the news of the coronavirus pandemic first broke and what happened to their families during the nation’s response to it,” Katherine M. Gehl and Michael E. Porter explain near the beginning of “The Politics Industry: How Political Innovation Can Break Partisan Gridlock and Save Our Democracy,” their recently-released treatise on our broken political system and how to fix it. “The pandemic and its aftermath will define generations. But it could also redefine our politics.”

“When a new normal comes, there will be a moment; a window for big, sweeping change,” they continue. “For the good of all Americans, and to honor those who we will have lost and the sacrifices made by so many, we pray that enough of us will put country over party and invest in the political innovation that can revivify our politics with healthy competition – and make sure we don’t get caught unprepared again. There is a path forward.”

So begins one of the most forward-thinking expositions I have had occasion to read in quite some time. Eloquently executed and supported by a solid evidence-driven framework, Gehl and Porter meticulously dissect what’s wrong with our contemporary political system and then propose an outside-the-box but undeniably insightful treatment plan. As anyone who has ever been to the doctor knows, the key to effectively treating an illness lies in the efficacy of the diagnosis. The authors make a convincing argument that our elected officials, and the engrained bureaucratic and partisan machinery that defines their daily existence, have brought us to a tipping point in our nation’s history. We no longer seem capable of acting in our own self-interest as we are barely even able to recognize the extent of our horrendous condition.

“The Politics Industry” is extensively researched, with 36 pages of source notes at the conclusion of the introduction, six chapters and a conclusion that comprise the main narrative. Conceptually, the

manuscript is divided into two sections, “Part I: Political Competition,” which consists of the first three chapters, and “Part II: Political Innovation,” which is made up of the last three chapters. The book has a distinct logical flow to its structure; the authors spend roughly a third of the book describing how we arrived at the current imbroglio before taking the remaining two-thirds to provide a roadmap for getting us out of the god-forsaken wilderness that characterizes the contemporary national landscape.

No doubt like many readers, I have had the feeling for quite some time that things are going in the wrong direction. Apparently there is a basis for our collective uneasiness. Consider the following from “Consequences and Outcomes,” the third chapter and one of the most alarming:

“Since the beginning of the new century, productivity growth has fallen behind historic trends, leading to a significant drop-off in economic output and a smaller pie to divide among the population. Established firms are investing less, and our economy is becoming less dynamic as the rate of new-business formation has slowed. Workers – our most valuable national asset – are underutilized. ... The era of shared prosperity has ended. For the first half of the post-World War II era, all Americans – from the most affluent to the least advantaged – saw their fortunes rise with a growing economy. Today, while middle-class Americans struggle to compete with lower-paid workers in other countries, higher-skilled Americans benefit from global markets and technological advancement. Accordingly, recent gains have been concentrated at the top of the income distribution.”

Gehl is the founder of the Institute for Political Innovation. Her resume includes a stint as president and chief executive of Gehl Foods, a high-tech manufacturing company in Wisconsin, as well as a number of positions in industry and government. She has a BA from the University of Notre Dame, an MA from Catholic University of America and an MBA from the Kellogg School of Management at Northwestern University. Porter is the Bishop William Lawrence University Professor at the Harvard Business School. He has a BSE in aerospace and mechanical engineering from Princeton University, an MBA from the Harvard Business School and a Ph.D. in economics from Harvard’s School of Economics.

Again, one of the endearing qualities of “The Politics Industry” revolves around the authors’ irrefutable focus on offering solutions instead of just defining problems. Toward this end, one of the more creative recommendations they provide involves “nonpartisan top-five primaries.” Personally, I find the idea fascinating for a number of reasons – not the least of which is its potential to move us beyond the partisan gridlock that permeates our political machinery at all levels.

“In a top-five primary, you will no longer vote in a Democratic primary or a Republican primary,” they note in “New Rules of the Game,” the fifth chapter. “Instead, there will be a single, open, nonpartisan primary. Every candidate from every party as well as independents appear on this single ballot (with a partisan affiliation next to their name if they so choose). All voters are eligible to vote in the primary (unlike party primaries, which, depending on state rules, often exclude independents and third party supporters). The top-five finishers, regardless of their partisan affiliation, advance to the general election. Instead of one Democrat and one Republican facing off in a head-to-head matchup in November, the general election could become a contest between three Republicans and two Democrats; or one Republican, one Democrat, and three independents; one Democrat, one Republican, one Libertarian, one Green, and one independent. Top-five primaries create a new way of determining who gets to compete and sets up a broader competitive field of five candidates for the general election.”

By the way, if your knee-jerk reaction to this proposal is to dismiss it out of hand, you are probably a big part of the problem in this country, at least according to Gehl and Porter. As Einstein once famously said, “We cannot solve our problems with the same level of thinking that created them.” The solution to the paralyzing and self-serving partisan system we have now will not be provided

by partisan politicians who stand to lose if we de-emphasize the mechanisms by which they hold onto their power. But we really do need a system that works for all of us – not just those we perennially elect to “represent” us.

As you may have surmised, I like this one. Unlike many writing in this arena, Gehl and Porter are advocating fundamental change for the greater good – not a superficial tune-up, but a complete overhaul for the greater good. More power to them. Highly recommended.

– Reviewed by Aaron W. Hughey, University Distinguished Professor in the Department of Counseling and Student Affairs at Western Kentucky University.

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