

BUSINESSMEN IN POLITICS

ANDREW HACKER* AND JOEL D. ABERBACH†

INTRODUCTION

The "businessmen in politics" movement began in earnest with the announcement of the results of the 1958 congressional election. There was no doubt that this election was a striking victory for the Democratic Party and a humiliating rout for the Republicans. Whereas the line-up in the Eighty-fifth Congress' House of Representatives consisted of 235 Democrats and 200 Republicans, the margin in the newly-elected House widened to 282 to 153. Moreover the Senate lost, through defeat or retirement, such pro-business lawmakers as John Bricker, Edward Thyne, George Malone, Arthur Watkins, Chapman Revercomb, Alexander Smith, William Knowland, and William Jenner. There were further indications that the new arrivals in both houses of Congress had been supported by trade union funds and the doorbell-ringing campaign of the AFL-CIO's Committee on Political Education (COPE). The next two years would be difficult ones for business, at least so far as the legislative prospect was concerned. Nor was it heartening to know that in five out of six states voters rejected "right to work" law referenda.

In anticipation of and in response to this turn of events, the members of the business community began to sound warnings. An executive of the Gulf Oil Corporation minced no words in calling attention to the "predatory gangsterism and crackpot socialism that are thriving and expanding under labor's congressional benevolence."¹ The president of du Pont, looking over the election returns, complained that "corporations as such are disenfranchised and are without political identity."² Less than a month after the Eighty-sixth Congress settled down to business a Ford Motor Company spokesman felt entitled to speak of "labor's domination of the present United States Congress."³

The answer, of course, was for businessmen to get into politics and to act as a countervailing force against trade union power and the general trend towards socialistic legislation. The president of the United States Chamber of Commerce exhorted that association's members:⁴ "We must roll up our sleeves and get to work

* A.B. 1951, Amherst College; B.A. 1953, Oxford University; Ph.D. 1955, Princeton University; Associate Professor of Government, Cornell University. Author, *POLITICS AND THE CORPORATION* (1958); *POLITICAL THEORY: PHILOSOPHY, IDEOLOGY, SCIENCE* (1961). Contributor to political science and general periodicals.

† B.A. 1961, Cornell University. Graduate Student at Harvard School of Business Administration, 1961-1962. Currently Graduate Student in Political Science, The Ohio State University.

¹ Archie D. Gray, quoted in *Washington Post and Times Herald*, Sept. 23, 1950, p. 26.

² Crawford H. Greenewalt, *A Political Role for Businessmen*, address delivered before the North Carolina Citizens Association, March 25, 1959.

³ Thomas R. Reid, *Political Action: A New Dimension of Responsibility for Management*, speech delivered before the American Management Association General Management Conference, Jan. 26, 1959.

⁴ William A. McDonnell, quoted in *Time* magazine, Oct. 6, 1958, p. 82, cols. 1-2.

at the precinct and ward levels where political decisions are made and officeholders chosen." Another Chamber official chided businessmen for thinking that post-election lobbying would secure their interests. "Too much effort to enact sound legislation takes place too late after the legislators are elected," he said.⁵ Executives would, of course, prefer to attend to their business concerns and not get involved in extra-curricular activities. However it was becoming clear that the economy overlapped the political arena in important ways, and like it or not management personnel would have to find the time for taking on political responsibilities. A General Electric official admitted that businessmen were being "dragged unwillingly into politics by our ideological competitors and intended executioners."⁶ A survey of 2,700 *Harvard Business Review* subscribers revealed that seventy-one per cent of them felt that it was proper for companies to give executives time off to work in political campaigns.⁷ From the end of the summer of 1958, gathering momentum after the votes had been counted in November, and continuing throughout 1959 and 1960, politics became the great concern of America's corporate community. It seemed that every second speech delivered by a major executive was on this subject. And, in the American business tradition, talk was to be followed by action.

The rationale of the "businessmen in politics" movement was really quite simple. Labor unions had mobilized their members not only into active voters but also as party workers. While it was never clear how many of the fifteen million AFL-CIO members were persuaded by COPE to contribute their time and money to partisan activity, many executives were convinced that labor politicians were instrumental in deciding who were to be Democratic candidates for public office. Moreover, it appeared that trade unions were turning out the votes that elected those candidates in increasing numbers. If this force was to be countered, a new group of citizens would have to enter the partisan arena in an organized and purposeful way. Since the end of World War II, America's large corporations had been augmenting their white-collar labor force in an unprecedented way. At the same time that technological developments were slackening the need for production workers, millions of new jobs were being created for clerical, professional, and managerial people. These employees were on salaries rather than wages; they came to work at 9:00 A.M. rather than 8:00 A.M.; they thought of themselves as belonging to the middle class. They were impervious to unionization and not a few of them regarded themselves as businessmen, albeit of the managerial rather than the entrepreneurial variety. If these citizens, hitherto indifferent to and aloof from politics, could be drawn into the parties then a mighty conservative influence would be brought to bear.

The central theme of the "businessmen in politics" programs was to motivate middle-management employees to become part-time politicians. Corporations offered classes, seminars, and workshops which were designed to impart fundamental political lore, the most important lesson being that parties are local in their base.

⁵ Arthur H. Motley, quoted in *N.Y. Times*, Jan. 30, 1959, p. 12, col. 1.

⁶ Lemuel R. Boulware, quoted in 2 *EDITORIAL RESEARCH REPORTS* 755-56 (1958).

⁷ Fenn, *Problems in Review: Business and Politics*, *Harv. Bus. Rev.*, May-June 1959, p. 142.

To become influential within a party, a citizen must make a place for himself at the ward or precinct level as a beginning. Students in the company-sponsored practical politics courses were advised to seek out their precinct leaders and to volunteer their services. By virtue of hard work and the expenditure of time they would rise to positions in the party hierarchy. As they labored longer in the vineyard, so would they ultimately participate in the conclaves where candidates for public office were chosen. The theory, in short, was one of infiltration. If businessmen applied themselves to party work, they would in time gain party power. If tens of thousands of white-collar and managerial employees did this throughout the country, then both major parties would be brought to nominate candidates sympathetic to business. Not only was this corps of potential infiltrators available; it was equipped with middle-class talent and middle-management skills. With the expectation that the injection of these new party workers into the political system would pay off, hundreds of corporations gave their white-collar employees released time to take the courses.

As so often happens, national associations entered the scene to give aid and guidance to companies embarking on new ventures. In this instance the United States Chamber of Commerce designed a textbook entitled *Action Course in Practical Politics* that was sold to corporations. The package consisted of eight boxed pamphlets plus a looseleaf notebook containing homework assignments and field-work instructions. By the end of 1959 the Chamber reported that their text had been adopted by 107 corporations in 532 communities and forty-seven states. Among the companies were such names as Aluminum Company of America, American Can Company, Armstrong Cork Company, Boeing Airplane Company, Borg-Warner Corporation, du Pont, Eastman Kodak Company, Esso Standard Oil Company, Ford Motor Company, General Electric Company, H. J. Heinz Company, Hershey Chocolate Corporation, International Business Machines, Inc., S.S. Kresge Company, Monsanto Chemical Company, Mutual of Omaha, Northern Pacific Railroad, Pittsburgh Plate Glass Company, Prudential Insurance Company, Quaker Oats Company, R. J. Reynolds Tobacco Company, Sears Roebuck, Sun Oil Company, Union Carbide Corporation, United States Steel Corporation, and Weyerhaeuser Timber Company. All in all, the Chamber reported that under the auspices of companies and associations, 100,000 people had taken their "practical politics" course.

Some corporations went even further. They appointed, at the executive level, directors of departments of civic or public affairs. These individuals had the responsibility of encouraging white-collar employees to take in-plant courses and then to enlist in local party activities. These executives set up their own national association, the Effective Citizens Organization (ECO), and met at workshops and conferences to exchange ideas and develop techniques. Among the companies establishing such departments and belonging to ECO were (in addition to many of those listed as using the Chamber of Commerce course): Allis-Chalmers Manufacturing Company, American Cyanamid Company, American Oil Company, Armco

Steel Corporation, Bank of America, Chase Manhattan Bank, Chrysler Corporation, Dow Chemical Company, Eli Lilly and Company, Ethyl Corporation, General Dynamics Corporation, General Foods Corporation, Gulf Oil Corporation, Inland Steel Company, International Harvester Company, Johnson and Johnson, Jones and Laughlin Steel Company, Mutual Benefit Life Insurance Company, New York Central System, Richfield Oil Corporation, Shell Oil Company, Standard Oil Company (Indiana), United States Rubber Company, and Western Electric Company. ECO puts out a monthly bulletin, called ECHO, for its civic and public affairs members, detailing the most recent political activities of various companies. Typical reports are entitled "Monsanto Appoints Director of Civic Affairs," "Ford Broadens Program," "Chase Bank Acts," "Weyerhaeuser Platform," "Inland Steel Plans," "Caterpillar Company Workshops," "Scott Paper States Policy," "Union Carbide Urges Party Work," and so on.

ECO estimated that in 1960 as many as 250,000 American adults took practical politics courses under one or another business auspices. These were conducted not only by individual companies but also by local chambers of commerce and similar groups. What is lacking in all of this literature is a serious evaluation of the results of the "businessmen in politics" program. Virtually all of the reports are written by executives who are involved in drawing up and promoting the programs; and they almost invariably emphasize the number of courses given or the number of people taking them or the number of companies sponsoring practical politics activities. What is missing is a systematic follow-up to determine how many of the graduates have actually plunged into party work in a meaningful way. This is curious on its face because it is customary for businesses to take stock of their operations periodically to see if they are "profitable." Clearly when all the expenses and released time for employees are reckoned up, corporations have poured large sums of money into these endeavors. Indeed, the civic and public affairs departments within companies, with their directors and assistant directors and field offices and staffs, have burgeoned into impressive corporate budget items. Yet it is one thing for executives to give speeches about the need for political involvement, to hold conferences and set up courses and expose employees to the facts of political life. It is quite another thing to demonstrate that these white-collar and managerial employees have been taking the lessons to heart. For it must be shown that they are devoting their energies, on their own time and in their own communities, to infiltrating the local party organizations.

THE SYRACUSE EXPERIENCE

The pioneer in the "businessmen in politics" movement was not a single company, but rather the Manufacturers Association of Syracuse (MAS). As early as November 1957, this Upstate New York group was organizing practical politics courses for the employees of its member firms. The city, with a population of 200,000, or 300,000 including the suburban fringe, contained branch plants of such corporations as Atlantic Refining Company, Carrier Corporation, Crucible Steel

Company, Chrysler Corporation, General Electric Company, and Sealtest Foods. General Electric was by far the largest employer in the metropolitan Syracuse area and also the most enthusiastic backer of the MAS program. The organizers drew up their own textbook and put out a complete instructional kit weighing ten pounds and costing \$200. This kit contained not only printed class assignments and an instructor's handbook but also four sets of illustrated slides and a tape recording on which Richard Nixon gave his non-partisan imprimatur to the entire project. "Choose the party that comes closest to your political ideas and beliefs," the Vice President told the businessmen-students, "and roll up your sleeves and go to work." During the spring of 1958 employees of twenty-two companies in the area participated in seminars. By July, according to an MAS report,⁸ the county chairmen of both major parties were handed the names of "225 alert, aggressive and trained businessmen"; and these course graduates were, the report continued, "eager to participate in any capacity the organizations might use them." By Election Day of 1960 there were 1,500 graduates.

The Syracuse program was given great publicity throughout the business community. Impressive and complimentary articles appeared in *Fortune*, *The Wall Street Journal*, *Nation's Business*, *U.S. News and World Report*, *Public Relations News*, *Industrial Relations News*, and *Kiplinger Letters*. Committees of the MAS, in response to invitations, traveled across the country telling the Syracuse story to large audiences of businessmen. And during the first eight months of operation the organizers received more than 1500 requests for information from companies and associations in every state. If "businessmen in politics" was to become a "movement" it is clear that Syracuse was the prime mover. And an analysis of the Syracuse experience should give some indication of the over-all record of the program throughout the nation. If anything, its performance, due to the early start, should be superior to that of latecomers on the scene.

The tone of the practical politics seminars was set by the slide presentation that opened each course. The set, revised following the 1958 congressional election, stated that "the AFL-CIO had endorsed fifty-four of the ninety-six U.S. Senators now making up the Senate, and a total of 220 of 436 House members. Thus, labor leaders now control a clear majority of members in both houses of Congress." The seminar leader was then told to ask, rhetorically, what was to be done about rectifying this parlous state of affairs. The answer was not money, because business could not compete with the millions of dollars in "union treasuries fattened by compulsory union membership." Nor should businessmen try to best the welfare proposals of their opponents for that would play into the hands of those who aim for "socialistic control of business enterprises." And, attractive as it may sound, it just is not

⁸ MANUFACTURERS ASS'N OF SYRACUSE, SEMINARS ON PRACTICAL POLITICS, FIRST ANNIVERSARY REPORT 2 (1958).

possible to produce hundreds of thousands of conservative "ready-made, prepaid, year-round campaign workers." The slide presentation concluded.⁹

The answer must come from business and industry by tapping our resources of trained and skilled manpower at the middle and junior and top management levels and putting our American business ingenuity to work in the political arena on a continuing, effective, and long-range basis. Business must learn to "speak out" and, we've got to use our leadership where it counts, in both parties.

Ten-week in-plant seminars were the cornerstones of the practical politics program. A typical seminar had about twenty participants, all volunteers. At the outset there was a permanent course leader for each ten-week session, with a rotating schedule of chairmen for each weekly meeting of the course. However, this democratic procedure was soon abandoned as the need for expert direction became apparent. Thus the seminar leader took on the additional role of chairman, with some increase in the effectiveness of the teaching. Nevertheless, even the leader was not far ahead of his pupils, as he had only undergone a two-day training session himself on the ins and outs of practical politics. Quite often he was unable to deal with the factual or technical questions on party organization that inevitably arose. Each seminar ran for two hours and half of the ten sessions brought in guest speakers, usually local party officials. The students were given a textbook that had the sterling advantage of gearing its treatment to the vagaries of Syracuse-area politics. They were also presented with various pamphlets and booklets, plus a copy of J. J. Weurthner's *Businessman's Guide to Practical Politics*. This book, written by a General Electric executive and published by the Henry Regnery Company in early 1959, accentuated the business-labor struggle in the political arena.

The sessions covered such topics as party organization, ward and precinct politics, and county government. The pervasive theme was the importance of political participation by individual citizens and this was stressed in the course discussions, the reading assignments, and by the guest speakers. The students were told to visit their election district committeeman after work and to make personal contact with their state senator or assemblyman. Most important each participant was expected to ask his local party officials: "What specific job can you give me for this campaign?" The student was presumably prepared for party work, as one of the out-of-class field-work assignments involved canvassing ten of his neighbors. The course was bipartisan at all times even if the syllabus was less than sympathetic to labor unions. Reprinted in the textbook was G. Mennen Williams' *Harvard Business Review* article "Can Businessmen be Democrats?,"¹⁰ the answer being most assuredly that they could. Indeed, the organizers of the program, departing perhaps from the former Michigan Governor's intention, felt that it was the Democratic Party that especially needed a conservative leaven and that the infiltration of businessmen could achieve this end.

⁹ Script of Film Slide, in MANUFACTURERS ASS'N OF SYRACUSE, PRACTICAL POLITICS SEMINARS, POLITICAL EFFECTIVENESS: NEW HORIZON FOR MANAGEMENT 12, 20 (1958).

¹⁰ Williams, *Can Businessmen Be Democrats?*, *Harv. Bus. Rev.*, March-April 1958, p. 100.

It has been indicated that by the 1960 election there were approximately 1500 graduates of the Syracuse course. In late November 1960, printed questionnaires were mailed to all of these individuals. Enclosed with the form was a letter from a MAS officer explaining that this survey was a Cornell University project, that responses would be anonymous, and asking for the cooperation of the participants. Postpaid envelopes were included in the hope that this would raise the level of returns. The questionnaire had been drawn up at Cornell and revised in cooperation with the MAS; the joint sponsorship was made clear to the respondents. The intention of the survey, quite simply, was to determine how many graduates participated in politics and in what ways. A total of 578 forms were returned. This means that somewhat under a thousand former students did not reply. It could mean, of course, that these graduates were so busy with local party work that they did not have time to fill out a form about their work. Or it could mean, more likely, that the seminar had not motivated them to participate in politics and they had little or nothing to report. The suspicion arises that the response of slightly over one-third contained most of those course participants who did actually embark upon party activity of some sort. Of the respondents 152 indicated that they took the seminar in 1958, 211 in 1959, and 187 in 1960.

A total of 432 out of the 578 replies said they were active in the 1960 campaign. When specific questions were asked about the form that activity took, the responses were as follows:

| | |
|---------------------------------------|-----|
| Donated Money | 281 |
| Attended a Political Event | 257 |
| Helped or Urged Others to Register | 232 |
| Distributed Campaign Materials | 203 |
| Canvassed Voters | 164 |
| Joined Political Club or Organization | 149 |
| Joined a Campaign Committee | 134 |
| Solicited Campaign Funds | 72 |
| Wrote a Letter-to-the-Editor | 37 |
| Served as Election Day Official | 32 |
| Ran for Party Office | 25 |
| Ran for Public Office | 21 |

How impressive a record this is depends, in the first place, on whether 1500 or 578 is used as the standard for comparison. It also depends on other considerations that will be discussed later on.

The graduates were then asked how many hours of party work they had put in during the just-completed 1960 campaign. This presumably is the most important single question, because its answers indicate how assiduously the former students were attempting to earn a place for themselves within the local party organizations. If the intention of the program was to infiltrate businessmen into the parties, it was

emphasized that only by toiling in the political vineyard would such preferment come. The campaign lasted for about nine weeks—from Labor Day through Election Day—and the total hours of work reported for this period were:

| | |
|-----------------|-----|
| None | 273 |
| 1 to 5 hours | 64 |
| 6 to 10 hours | 71 |
| 11 to 20 hours | 83 |
| 21 to 50 hours | 53 |
| 51 to 100 hours | 16 |
| Over 100 hours | 18 |

Some of these figures may not square easily with the reports on activities cited earlier. For example, 164 graduates said they canvassed voters but only 87 put in more than twenty hours of work during the nine-week campaign. The 164 may have done some canvassing but it is clear to anyone who has undertaken such a job that not many doorbells can be rung in less than twenty hours.

Also emerging from the survey was the fact that no less than 124 out of the 578 respondents had engaged in political activity *before* taking the practical politics course. This is an impressive proportion and it is interesting that these individuals felt the need to take the seminar even though they already had practical experience. However, their existence adds a new dimension to the figures on the number of hours worked. For when it comes to serious party workers—here defined as those putting in more than fifty hours—it seems that most of these were politically active prior to enrolling in the seminar. Of those who worked more than fifty hours, sixty-five per cent were doing party work before taking the course. Put another way, of the thirty-four graduates who recorded over fifty hours only twelve were people who were introduced to practical politics through the seminars. In light of the program's aim of making party workers out of businessmen who had hitherto been aloof from politics, this is rather a scanty record.

One more set of figures will complete the picture. The seminars began in 1958 and ran through 1960. It might be surmised that those who participated in them at the earlier date would lose their enthusiasm and be less likely to show activity in subsequent campaigns. But this was not the case. Indeed the reverse effect could be observed. The respondents were asked, in general terms, whether they had been active in the 1960 campaign:

| | |
|-----------------------|-----|
| <i>Active in 1960</i> | |
| 1958 graduates (152) | 84% |
| 1959 graduates (211) | 74% |
| 1960 graduates (187) | 69% |

The most plausible reason for this decline is that the early students in the course were at the managerial and junior executive level. As the program proceeded the

companies ran out of managers and executives and had to descend to clerks and secretaries to fill the seminars. By 1960 the white-collar gamut had been run and the saturation point had been reached. For it became apparent that the lower down one reaches the less likely it is that potential party workers will be found. The point is that clerks and secretaries are not really "businessmen" and do not feel that intensely about entering politics to promote the interests of the companies that employ them. Indeed, it was with recognition that the bottom of the white-collar barrel was being scraped that the MAS decided to curtail the seminar program in 1961.

Those businessmen who did approach their local party organizations were not heartened by the welcome they received. Over two-thirds of those responding in the survey felt that their talents were not being used by the party organizations. Whereas the MAS styled its graduates as "alert, aggressive and trained businessmen" who were "eager to participate in any capacity," the parties wanted not so much executives or policy-makers as envelope-stuffers and doorbell-ringers. As a result comparatively few showed up for a second appointment or asked when they could be used again. This disillusionment was shared by the party officials. One committeeman cited a typical example. He was approached by an executive who offered his services, and this overture was enthusiastically accepted. The assignment was a customary one, to conduct a canvass of a small area in the district. But the canvass was never made, the businessman pleading "lack of time." He subsequently telephoned the committeeman, apologized, and asked if he could come down to the polls on Election Day and help out. Again he failed to show up. Of all this the committeeman said: "He was a really bright and important man. I thought he was a find. And we do need people who will work." Further interviews among party officials revealed that instances such as this one were commonplace. And because of this the practical politics program was viewed skeptically by the party regulars at the local level.

Of the 578 who took part in the survey, twenty-five reported that they ran for party office and twenty-one for public office. Unfortunately, no correlation was made to see how many of these forty-six graduates were people who had been active in local politics prior to taking the seminar; however, some follow-up interviews indicated that some of them were. Of the twenty-five who were candidates for party positions, twenty-two were elected district committeemen. Of the twenty-one who ran for public office, one was elected a town supervisor, three were defeated in races for county supervisor, five out of seven were successful in campaigns for town councilman, and six out of ten were elected to other local offices. The over-all record, therefore, consists of twenty-two graduates in party offices and twelve in public offices. Whether this is a sign of the program's success or failure depends, of course, on the expectations one has for it. The infiltration of thirty-four businessmen into party and governmental positions in a medium-sized metropolitan area may be more significant than first hits the eye. But against this is the fact that Syracuse com-

panies invested uncounted time, energy, and money in training 1,500 employees in the arts of practical politics. And if it is assumed that many of the thirty-four were politically active before the advent of the program, then its dividends are really quite meager.

Several interviews among graduates employed at the two largest corporations gave hints as to why the lessons of the seminars were generally ignored. "If a businessman spends much time in politics, he cannot do his job adequately," one young executive said. "I have been encouraged to take part in local politics, but this will not help me to get promoted." Another manager, while he approved in principle of the aims of the program, had personal reservations. "As men go higher," he said, "they must expect to work greater hours. Company policy tells men to expect this as salary goes up. At the same time there is pressure to be active in politics. How can a man in my position do both?" This last question was posed by most of the people who were interviewed. And these were, for the most part, the kind of alert and aggressive individuals who could have made a mark for themselves in local politics. Another one put it this way: "My job comes first. All one gets for serving on the County Board of Supervisors is \$6.00 per day. I recently got a salary promotion for hard work outside company hours. If I had spent this time in politics I would not have gotten the raise." And this attitude was even held by graduates who had engaged in party work. A veteran of several campaigns commented:¹¹

The objectives are excellent and the courses should be continued. Unfortunately, most businessmen are too busy with extra-curricular business activity and "casual" overtime that they do not have the time to spend at politics. In addition, most political parties want doorbell-ringers and are not anxious to delegate other work. After two elections of doorbell ringing, I feel that I've had it.

Finally, it should be added that of those who responded to the survey 479 said that they were Republicans and seventy-four were professed Democrats. The Syracuse area is predominantly Republican and its business community is even more so. One of the seventy-four Democrats expressed his reluctance to get openly involved in politics. "Most Democrats don't want to become too active because of their business relations," he said. "They don't want to be registered as Democrats." Perhaps he and others took the hint when they heard the tape-recorded voice of Richard Nixon, hardly a nonpartisan figure, that opened each of the MAS practical politics sessions.

CONCLUSION

The "businessmen-in-politics" movement in general and the Syracuse experience in particular raise some interesting questions about recent trends in American political and social life.

The first of these concerns the political anxieties of business. Granted that the 1958 congressional election was a Democratic sweep, the fact remains that the

¹¹ Interview with Joel Aberbach.

Eighty-sixth Congress remained a conservative body. If anything, its major accomplishment was the passage of the Landrum-Griffin bill regulating labor unions. Indeed, the winds of electoral change have little effect on the composition of either the House of Representatives or the state legislatures, and these remain fundamentally sympathetic to business. Moreover, they are able to check or veto the more liberal proposals of the President, the Senate, and the governors within the states.

In addition, businessmen are making their influence felt in a variety of significant ways. Executives of large corporations on the national level and small businessmen on the local level make substantial contributions to the campaign funds of conservative candidates. If national and local business donations are added together, it is safe to assume that these form a greater total than that provided by labor unions. To be sure, money alone does not elect anyone to office. But it is important as a means of bringing a candidate's name and personality before the public. Business lobbying is also well received, whether by trade associations or individual companies. Again, it may be assumed that spokesmen for business interests have more prestige and receive a warmer welcome from more legislators than do their labor counterparts. At all events both companies and industries seem to get the laws that they want in no small degree. Furthermore, quite a few corporations are engaged in expensive and extensive public relations campaigns of a political character. These programs, using both the mass media and personal contact at the community level, are aimed at persuading the public that what is good for business is good for America. It is difficult, probably impossible, to measure the ultimate effectiveness of these campaigns. What can be said is that while the public elects the men who make the laws, public relations efforts can have an effect on the kind of laws that are made. That is, these campaigns can build popular sentiment for conservative legislation and thus influence the behavior of all but the most liberal legislators. Finally, businessmen have been coopted into high positions in all administrations regardless of party. The viewpoint of the business community has been well represented in the Departments of Defense, Treasury, and Commerce, plus the Atomic Energy Commission, the Federal Power Commission, and a whole host of lesser agencies. This is far more the case, even under a Democratic President, than is so for trade union spokesmen.

All in all, it is difficult to explain why businessmen have been so worried about the drift of American politics. One answer is that they are chronic worriers and have always been so. Listen to Charles Dickens describing the fears of the businessmen of Coketown over a century ago:¹²

Surely there never was such fragile china-ware as that of which the millers of Coketown were made. Handle them never so lightly, and they fell to pieces with such ease that you might suspect them of having been flawed before. They were ruined, when they were required to send labouring children to school; they were ruined when inspectors were appointed to look into their works; they were ruined, when such inspectors considered

¹² CHARLES DICKENS, *HARD TIMES* 123-24 (1898 ed.).

it doubtful whether they were quite justified in chopping people up with their machinery; they were utterly undone, when it was hinted that perhaps they need not always make quite so much smoke. . . . Whenever a Coketowner felt he was ill-used—that is to say, whenever he was not left entirely alone, and it was proposed to hold him accountable for the consequences of any of his acts—he was sure to come out with the awful menace, that he would “sooner pitch his property into the Atlantic.” This had terrified the Home Secretary within an inch of his life, on several occasions.

So far as politics are concerned, it is always *Hard Times* in the business community. Businessmen have a habit of looking back to better days when labor was cheap and docile, when profits were generous and markets secure. If they are not satisfied with the outlook of the political parties or the content of legislation it is because they can imagine how things used to be. Yet their dissatisfactions, in mood if not in substance, are shared by most Americans. For the political system gives no one everything that he wants. When it is said that businessmen have done well out of the system this does not mean that they will either acknowledge that they have been successful or that they will cease complaining. Indeed, if they did not complain there would be some reason to believe that something was amiss.

There are also grounds for suspecting that the “businessmen-in-politics” programs were one of those periodic fads that recur in the business community. At one time it was “economic education,” the idea being to impart the virtues of free enterprise to employees and the public in general. More recently it has been conferences and courses in “anti-communism,” designed to waken an apathetic citizenry to the dangers of internal subversion and external aggression. Chronologically the “practical politics” fad came between “economic education” and “anti-communism.” The life of each of these programs is prolonged by full-time staff people within companies and trade associations, who have a personal interest in selling the idea and expanding its operations. It is curious that top executives, allegedly so hard-headed and cost-minded, will pour so much company time and money into programs that pay doubtful dividends. If they are gullible, it is partly because times have been good and there is extra cash available to be spent in these areas. And once the programs, plus their staffs, are entrenched in the organizational chart it is difficult to dislodge them. But, most important perhaps, they stand as a commentary on the lack of sophistication that businessmen have on most matters other than business. Whether it is economic theory or practical politics or communism, most corporation executives and small entrepreneurs seem willing to buy any nostrum that accords with their ideological sensibilities.

The “practical politics” movement never got moving because those who planned it had an unrealistic conception of what motivates people to participate in party activity. The individuals who took the courses were simply not the kind of individuals who want or can be induced to take part in local politics. Two explanations can be given for this.

First of all, local politics are really local. The people who serve as committeemen

and precinct workers are, more often than not, longtime residents in their communities. Many of them are locally based, having a business or a professional practice in the area. They know the people in their neighborhoods and they build up a fund of knowledge and goodwill. The American politician is an insider rather than an outsider, and he identifies himself closely with the town or ward or precinct where he was born or brought up. The young people who are in middle-management and technical positions in large corporations are remarkably transient. They are constantly being transferred from branch to branch within the company and they never have time to set down roots in any single community. Of the 578 graduates replying to the Syracuse survey, 404 were not born in the area. This means that they find it difficult to become involved with the political problems of what is, for them, only a temporary residence. And the fact of transiency is all the more true for the kinds of people, for example junior executives and engineers, that were supposed to pitch into party work. It has already been seen, in the responses to the interviews, that these young men on the way up identify with their jobs and their companies. If they have extra time it becomes overtime devoted to furthering their corporate careers. Energy spent in political participation, they figured, would be of no aid in determining their futures. Local, homegrown politicians, in contrast, see a close relationship between party activity and the life they lead as individuals. They engage in party work not because anyone has exhorted them to but because it is second nature to them. The problems of transient residence and corporate careers that face people in middle-management are important if only because they serve to withdraw a significant segment of the population from political involvement at the local level. This tendency will become stronger as the years progress and it will have consequences that deserve serious thought.

A second reason why the response to the program was disappointing was that no one had bothered to assess the general political outlook of the individuals who were to take the courses. Citizens who take the time to participate in party politics are frequently those who have a personal interest in questions of public policy. At the local level, which is always the starting point in party activity, it is very usually lawyers or small businessmen or other professional people who are drawn into committee posts or who run for office. These individuals have coherent interests to promote or defend, and they can see how particular lines of action on the part of governmental bodies will help or harm them. The "politics of interest" has been an integral part of our political fabric since James Madison set down its principles in the *Federalist*.¹³ Those who have specific interests of their own have every reason to become active in political life. Whether those interests involve building up a law practice or modifying zoning regulations or advancing the status of chiropractors, these individuals do not have to be told that political activity will be to their advantage. The white-collar employee of a large corporation, on the other hand, does not possess identifiable interests that can readily be promoted through political action.

¹³ THE FEDERALIST No. 10 (Madison).

He does have concerns—better schools, a sound dollar, peace with honor—but these are too general and vague to be secured by the avenues of political participation open to him. If he is indifferent about working with a party it is because, quite simply, he does not see what he will get out of it. When benefits cannot be visualized it is difficult to become involved. It is this lack of involvement that is increasingly the case with middle-class individuals who are salaried employees of large organizations. The debates of local politics, and often national politics as well, are remote from their own lives. It is not enough to tell them that every piece of public policy, local or national, ultimately affects them. No one likes to think in ultimate terms.

It follows, too, that the people who comprised the student body of the practical politics seminars do not think in ideological terms. In fact, it is not entirely clear how many of them think of themselves as “businessmen” in the traditional sense. With the professionalization of management and the specialization of roles it often seems that they worry less than their elders about the increasing power of government in the economy. Unlike the self-employed entrepreneur or the top corporation executive, the man in middle-management is not as exercised over what appears to others to be the diminution of economic freedom. This is because it is not his freedom that is at stake, and he is not at the point where a wound inflicted on the corporation that employs him is regarded as a personal injury. It is not at all clear that, even if these people were infiltrated into the political parties, they would be a conservative force. Not being concerned with ideology, they might equally as well discover some rationality in policies that call for more rather than less governmental control. As suburbanites many of them have demonstrated that they are not opposed to increasing public expenditures; and as voters, not a few of them cross party lines to support attractive liberal candidates when they appear on the scene. This outlook was illuminated at one Syracuse seminar when the slide presentation depicted labor unions as a mortal threat to all that might be held dear. Not only was the course leader embarrassed by these forebodings of doom, but the students’ comments were such that it was clear they were not losing sleep over the prospect of Walter Reuther in the White House. If not personal interest, it takes some measure of ideological commitment to lead a citizen into politics. And this was not in evidence.

As an episode in the annals of American business and as a case-study in political behavior, the “businessmen-in-politics” movement is of more than passing interest. For it raises some vexing questions about the level of political participation in this country at this time. The reluctance to take part in politics that was encountered among Upstate New York businessmen and that persisted despite the urgings of their corporate employers, can plainly be observed throughout the country. If this constitutes a “problem,” and opinions can differ on whether in fact it does, then the causes of that problem have deep roots in American society.