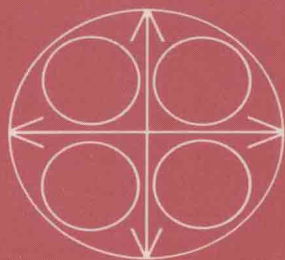


# THE MALEVOLENT LEADERS

Popular Discontent  
in America

STEPHEN C. CRAIG



POLITICAL CULTURES SERIES

WESTVIEW PRESS

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# **THE MALEVOLENT LEADERS**

## Popular Discontent in America

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Stephen C. Craig

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**Westview Press**

BOULDER • SAN FRANCISCO • OXFORD

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*Political Cultures*

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Published in 1993 in the United States of America by Westview Press, Inc., 5500 Central Avenue, Boulder, Colorado 80301-2877, and in the United Kingdom by Westview Press, 36 Lonsdale Road, Summertown, Oxford OX2 7EW

Library of Congress Cataloging-in-Publication Data

Craig, Stephen C.

*The malevolent leaders : popular discontent in America* / Stephen C. Craig

p. cm. — (Political cultures)

Includes bibliographical references and index.

ISBN 0-8133-1886-6. — ISBN 0-8133-1887-4 (pbk.)

1. Political participation—United States. 2. Political culture—United States. 3. United States—Politics and government—1945–1989. 4. Political leadership—United States—Public opinion. 5. Public opinion—United States. I. Title.

II. Series.

JK1764.C7 1993

320.973—dc20

93-19807  
CIP

Printed and bound in the United States of America



The paper used in this publication meets the requirements of the American National Standard for Permanence of Paper for Printed Library Materials Z39.48-1984.

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# **THE MALEVOLENT LEADERS**

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## POLITICAL CULTURES

Aaron Wildavsky, *Series Editor*

Political cultures broadly describe people who share values, beliefs, and preferences legitimating different ways of life. This series will be distinguished by its openness to a variety of approaches to the study of political cultures; any defensible comparison, definition, and research method will be considered. The goal of this series is to advance the study of political cultures conceived generally as rival modes of organizing political and social life.

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## Preface

Being a political scientist is not nearly as disreputable these days as being a politician, but it does make some people wonder. When new acquaintances learn that I am a university professor, they often are impressed; upon being told what it is that I teach, their reactions tend to be quite different: “Oh, really?” (as though I must be joking) or maybe “Yecchh! I can’t stand politics” (implying some basic flaw in my own character for being even indirectly associated with such nasty business). Others mutter something unintelligible and try very hard to avoid further eye contact. The truth is that, unlike many of my colleagues, I did not choose to study politics because of a desire to join the world of academia. Instead, I did so mainly as a result of my fascination with the nature of political competition itself. The give-and-take among candidates at election time, the debates over rules of procedure, the public and private maneuverings among interested parties when policy options are discussed—finding out that I could forge a career out of observing, teaching, and writing about these things was a revelation.

As it happens, my earliest political memory is of my father teasing my mother about her supposed intention (which she steadfastly denied) to vote for Adlai Stevenson in 1956. Four years later, I sat with a seventh-grade classmate along the first-base line of old Al Lang Field in St. Petersburg listening to presidential candidate Richard Nixon—and enjoying every minute of the experience, though I could not have understood a fraction of what he said. I watched people passing around the Kentucky Fried Chicken buckets (for donations) at a George Wallace rally in 1968 and stood for three hours waiting to see Bill Clinton and Al Gore when they visited Gainesville in 1992 (my patience rewarded by the picture I was able to snap of Hillary Clinton holding my one-year-old daughter, Kathryn; unfortunately, because the young man in front of me declined to move his head, friends and family will have take my word for it that the child in question is who I say it is). Because of my role as coordinator of the University of Florida’s graduate program in Political Campaigning, election night at the Craig home has become something of a tradition—a cacophony of sights, sounds, flavors (dinner is potluck), and emotions (the gatherings are necessarily bipartisan). I am no longer willing to stay up until dawn to learn the outcome of key races, but sleep always

comes slowly after all the excitement. My wife and I talk about many things over the course of a day, and politics is invariably one of them. Politics, not policy. I have strong views on most issues, but it is process rather than substance that has interested me since I was a child. Although there is a smile on my face when I describe politics as a spectator sport, I am not exactly joking. Film critics Gene Siskel and Roger Ebert have their “guilty pleasures” (including, for Ebert, I believe, the original *Emmanuel*), and I have mine. It is politics.

This is not the sort of thing one readily admits in polite company today. Having witnessed and, in a limited way, experienced personally three of the most dramatic upheavals of any era (the civil rights movement in the South, Vietnam, and Watergate) during my adolescent and early adult years, I come by my interest in politics more or less as generational theorists suggest that I should. But many Americans responded altogether differently to these and subsequent events. They became angry with their elected leaders, frustrated with an electoral process that no longer provided accountability, and increasingly concerned about what the future might hold for themselves and for their children. In fact, I am angry, too—but I also believe that the general public must shoulder at least part of the blame for what has happened and that in the end it is we who are ultimately responsible for our own fate. Too many citizens see politics *only* as a spectator sport or, even worse, as something akin to a carnival freak show whose unwholesome allures are to be resisted by anyone wishing to maintain his or her self-respect. Yet, however little we may think of the job our politicians have been doing lately, change is unlikely without a strong push from below. Apathy, indifference, and an unfocused disdain for all things political accomplishes nothing.

Some people would disagree, of course, and their views are well represented in the pages that follow. My approach here stems from a belief that we must look beyond the impact of specific events and personalities and beyond the large-scale opinion surveys that try to gauge citizens’ reactions to those events and personalities; only by so doing will we gain a better understanding of why Americans feel the way they do about their governmental leaders and institutions. Surveys are a wonderful tool for studying the overall contours of public opinion, but they simply do not come close to capturing the full breadth and complexity of views that people have on this particular subject. Accordingly, I chose to take the unorthodox step (for a political scientist, anyway) of combining traditional survey analysis with an examination of qualitative materials derived from both in-depth and elite interviews—the former designed to learn more about the nature and meaning of contemporary discontent among the general public, the latter to see whether one key group of elected officials are as baffled by what is happening as they sometimes appear to be. The result, I hope, is a fresh and informative look at the contentious relationship that has developed between rulers and ruled in the United States over the past thirty years or so.

Since deciding to move ahead with this project in fall 1984, I have self-consciously referred to it as my “alleged” book on discontent. That I can at last drop



the adjective is a tribute not only to my own stubbornness but also to the support and encouragement I've been fortunate to receive along the way—from my colleagues at the University of Florida and elsewhere (including Jennifer Hochschild and Pam Richards, who early on persuaded me that a qualitative approach could take me where I wanted to go); the twenty-eight Floridians and twenty-six members of Congress who generously shared with me their time and their thoughts about the quality of American democracy as we near the end of the twentieth century; Westview's Jennifer Knerr and Aaron Wildavsky, who had many opportunities to lose patience with my deliberative (i.e., slow) pace but for some reason never did; and Dean Jaros et al. (1968), who inadvertently provided me with the book's title. Special thanks must go to my wife, Diane, for her willingness (I think) to accept my assurances that there *was* a light at the end of the tunnel and, more directly, for giving me someone to talk to when the brain cells were momentarily blocked; and to Kathryn, whose arrival put the entire enterprise into proper perspective. Politics in the United States today is not for the faint of heart, but my daughter shows every sign of being able to hold her own. Go get 'em, kid.

*Stephen C. Craig*

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## A Crisis of Confidence?

*I wanna grow up to be a politician and take over this beautiful land.*

—the Byrds, “I Wanna Grow Up to Be a Politician,”

by R. McGuinn and J. Levy

*Only thing worse than a politician is a child molester.*

—from the movie *Extreme Prejudice*

In 1979 President Jimmy Carter spoke to the American public about a growing “crisis of confidence” that, in his view, threatened “to destroy the social and political fabric” of our nation. There was widespread disrespect not only for government but also for “churches and for schools, the news media and other institutions.” According to the president, the gap between citizens and their leaders had “never been so wide” and the political system in general was virtually “incapable of action” to solve the country’s problems. Carter predictably criticized Congress for contributing to this tendency toward “paralysis and stagnation and drift” by allowing itself to be “twisted and pulled in every direction by hundreds of well-financed and powerful special interests.” Yet he also portrayed the people alternately as victims (for understandably having lost faith in their ability “to serve as the ultimate rulers and shapers of our democracy”) and as obstacles to needed change (for worshipping “self-indulgence and consumption” rather than making sacrifices on behalf of the common good).

All in all, it was an extraordinary speech. Originally planned as an address on energy policy, the president’s remarks ended up sounding more like a “sermon” than anything else.<sup>1</sup> Historian and journalist Theodore White remarked that “[n]o president since Abraham Lincoln had spoken to the American people with such sincerity about matters of spirit. What Carter ... said was true, and long overdue in the saying” (White 1982, pp. 268–269). For David Broder (cited in Strong 1986, pp. 646–647) of the *Washington Post*, it was a speech “that only Jimmy Carter could have given. ... It dealt with what he believes are the fundamentals. The character and spirit of the American people. The values that built the nation. The trust that must exist between the government and the governed.” Initial public re-

action was generally quite favorable, with polls showing a substantial jump in the president's job approval ratings over the next several days (Strong 1986; Caddell 1979).

This effect was short-lived, however, as Carter's subsequent firing of three cabinet members conveyed the impression of an administration in serious disarray. Over the long term, the president's standing was further eroded by events occurring both at home and abroad during the remainder of 1979 and throughout the election year of 1980 (continued economic stagflation, the Soviet invasion of Afghanistan, American hostages in Iran). These developments played into the hands of critics, who from the beginning naturally tended to see Carter's speech as a self-serving justification for his own incompetent leadership and policy failures; some attempted to trivialize the overall message by reducing it to a single word, *malaise*, that the president had not even used that night.

Such judgments were not entirely fair. The "crisis of confidence" speech may have been bad politics and, in retrospect, probably should never have been given. Yet the plain truth is that, whatever his motives, Carter was describing a phenomenon that has troubled political observers and social analysts for more than a quarter century. By the late 1970s, citizens were indeed more likely than not to express feelings of mistrust toward government and to doubt the integrity and capabilities of its leaders. There was also a widespread belief that the affairs of state, and perhaps even of one's own life, were beyond the scope of individual influence and control. When asked, for example, whether the government was run "by a few big interests looking out for themselves" or "for the benefit of all the people," 70 percent of a 1980 national sample (compared with 28 percent in 1964) chose the former. In the same group, 73 percent felt that the government in Washington could be trusted to do what is right "only some (or none) of the time"; the figure sixteen years earlier was a mere 22 percent.<sup>2</sup>

Of course, the political culture of the United States has always contained a strong commitment to individualism and a corresponding aversion to the unrestricted exercise of state power. Popular suspicion of government and politics has, therefore, been the norm since the nation's founding.<sup>3</sup> The evidence to be reviewed in this book, however, suggests that our traditional *ambivalence* toward politics gave way in the 1960s and 1970s to a deeper and more pervasive *negativism*. Even the modest rise in public trust observed during the era of Ronald Reagan (an apparent response to improved economic conditions and to the president's leadership style) did little to produce a genuine turnaround in the long-term trend; especially after the Iran-contra revelations began to unfold in 1986–1987, opinion polls indicated that the so-called confidence gap was alive and well in American politics (Lipset and Schneider 1987; Miller and Borrelli 1991).

As the 1980s drew to a close, there were hopes that the "kinder, gentler America" envisioned by George Bush would include policies and standards of official conduct aimed at resolving any lingering doubts about the competence, integrity, and public-spiritedness of political decisionmakers. Yet the generally nasty tone

set in Bush's 1988 presidential race against Democratic nominee Michael Dukakis (Germond and Witcover 1989; Taylor 1990)—followed over the next twelve months by the Senate's rejection of John Tower as secretary of defense, an acrimonious debate concerning alleged ethics violations by House Speaker James Wright, the savings-and-loan bailout, repeated efforts to pass a congressional pay raise, tales of fraud and political favoritism at Reagan's Department of Housing and Urban Development, and continued inaction on the question of matching public revenues with social needs—provided early warning signals that the restoration of trust in government would be more elusive than many wanted to believe. A similar message was conveyed in 1990, when voters in three states (Oklahoma, Colorado, and California) gave voice to the antiincumbency feelings of Americans everywhere by passing ballot initiatives limiting the number of terms that various elected officials were permitted to serve;<sup>4</sup> and was conveyed again in 1992, when fourteen additional states passed term-limitation measures, when an unusually large number of congressmen were persuaded (by the voters, by campaign advisers, or by their own desire to escape the rat race that a congressional career has come to represent) to retire, and when H. Ross Perot burst out of nowhere to pose the strongest independent or third-party challenge for the presidency in eighty years.

What, precisely, are the origins of this increasingly strained relationship between citizens and their leaders? In one sense, the answer is obvious: Government in general, and the national government in particular, simply has not done a very good job of dealing with the country's most important problems. At first there was the anger and sense of betrayal felt on both sides of the civil rights struggle and the waging of a long and controversial foreign war, the resolution of which left a bitter taste among supporters and opponents alike. Subsequent years brought us Watergate and numerous other scandals (political, corporate, religious); gas shortages and higher energy costs; the polarizing debate over abortion; budget and trade deficits that seemed to grow exponentially; occasional periods of high inflation and/or unemployment; schools in which our children did not learn how to read or to do basic math; acid rain and the threat of global warming; the plights of the homeless and of the urban underclass; an avalanche of drugs flowing into the United States from abroad; the nightmare of AIDS; more crime and more criminals than ever before being shuffled through our already overburdened judicial system; the spectacle of an administration willing to negotiate with terrorists after having promised never to do so; and a new war in the Persian Gulf that stirred popular passions while at the same time evoking (at least in some quarters) unpleasant memories of Vietnam. With such a steady stream of bad news, it is understandable that many people began to lose confidence in their governmental leaders and institutions. Yet there is nothing to indicate that the erosion of trust has been accompanied by diminished feelings of national loyalty or national pride. In a 1987 survey more than 90 percent of all respondents agreed—either strongly or somewhat—with the statements that (1) "whatever its faults may be, the Ameri-



can form of government is still the best for us” and (2) “I would rather live under our system of government than any other that I can think of.” A similar proportion endorsed U.S. electoral arrangements by agreeing that “voting is an effective way for people to have a say about what the government does” (Craig et al. 1990). Such overwhelming numbers would appear to suggest that the crisis of confidence may not be much of a crisis after all, and they certainly belie the notion that discontent significantly boosts “the potential for revolutionary alteration of the political and social system” (Miller 1974b, p. 951).

Moreover, numerous studies show that the average American is relatively satisfied with most aspects of his or her private life (including marriage, family, job, friends, housing, neighborhood, and the like; e.g., Hamilton and Wright 1986; Inglehart 1988; but cf. Kanter and Mirvis 1989). This basic sense of satisfaction is important for at least two reasons. First, it helps to explain why political disaffection has not yet led to any sort of mass upheaval: Why should citizens jeopardize their private satisfactions in order to correct problems that they tend to see as fairly remote from their everyday concerns (Hamilton and Wright 1986; Wright 1981)? The simple fact is that politics and the affairs of government are of limited salience to many people. Except in rare instances, official malfeasance is therefore likely to arouse strong emotions or a sense of personal grievance—and to stimulate corrective action—only among a small segment of the general public.

Second, the cultural emphasis on individualism noted earlier means that there is little inclination to hold government responsible for solving whatever personal problems citizens do have (Sniderman and Brody 1977; Verba and Schlozman 1977). Just as political dissatisfactions do not usually spill over into the personal sphere, research indicates that personal hardships are infrequently politicized in the sense of generating specific demands on governmental decisionmakers. Despite the growth of the welfare state since the 1930s, most Americans continue to accept responsibility for handling personal problems (e.g., finding a job, seeing that the bills are paid, coping with illness or poor health) themselves. We might wonder, then, whether the policy failures of the past quarter century are really sufficient cause for the erosion of public trust. Without demands, the expectations people have concerning the performance of our leaders and institutions should be relatively modest; and without failed expectations, inadequate performance does not figure to tell us a great deal about the origins of popular discontent in the United States.

The limited involvement of the mass public in political affairs provides further reason to doubt that trust is a function of the correspondence between citizen demands (or expectations) and governmental performance. In an article challenging what he calls the traditional “policy-demand-input” model of democratic representation, John Wahlke presented a rather unflattering portrait of the American electorate. According to Wahlke (1978, p. 75),