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# THEME

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**A** political institution is many things: a pattern of power; an embodiment of authority; a useful function; a reflection, direct or distorted, of social powers and authorities; and a means for the attainment of the purposes that are claimed to be distinctive to a particular collectivity. The American Constitution defines the terms of our major national political institutions, and the Preamble to the Constitution identifies the purposes: "a more perfect Union . . . justice . . . domestic tranquility . . . defense . . . general welfare, and . . . liberty . . ."

This, the second issue of *democracy*, is devoted to some of the major political institutions of this country; in subsequent issues we plan to deal with others. The title of the theme, "Democracy's State," was selected for its double meaning: democracy's condition and democracy's political form. Democracy's condition is summed up in the single fact that "the state" exists. From the sixteenth century onward *state* has signified supreme authority, occupying an exalted plane far above the one on which ordinary mortals live. The idea of the state, historically, has not been accommodating to ideas of popular participation, equality, or the diffusion of power. Its current vogue is, accordingly, a commentary on democracy's condition.

The presidency, which figures prominently in the articles that follow, is a major element in the American state, one that acquired strong democratic associations beginning with the Jacksonian presidency and retained them until the era of the Vietnam war and Watergate. The recent election—remarkable not only for its low turnout of voters but for the widespread dismay about both candidates—may well mark the exhaustion of the 150-year-old association between democracy and the presidency. There will be other Presidents, of course, and there may be moments of national crisis that will cause citizens to rally around the symbolism investing the person; but it is doubtful that future Presidents will serve as spokesmen for all the people or as mobilizers of their vitalities and aspirations. A leaner future, with scarcity, shortages, unemployment, an inflation, will not require a President who can point to beckoning frontiers and great societies, but rather one who must justify patterns of sacrifice that, under our political economy, fall hardest on the powerless; this President must also try to lead a citizenry that has observed too many scandals and too many instances of the corrupting role of corporate money and influence.

The impression that one has of our major political institutions—the presidency, Congress, and the bureaucracy—is that they have exhausted the tenuous relationship that historically has connected them with democratic purposes and values. Politically, we are not so much living on the substance of democracy as living off the memory of it. The Congress represents not “the people” but the money that finances elections and the organized corporate interests that determine most legislative behavior. The bureaucracy, once conceived to be the impartial and expert branch of government, is now deeply mired in Washington politics. As a result, it has surrendered, or at least compromised, its former claim to be above politics and hence objective. Bureaucracy has not, however, formed a substitute principle, and so the justification for its actual functions remains obscure. To legitimate what the bureaucracy is actually doing would require a coherent theory of the larger state structure of which it is a central part. We would need to be persuaded that the nature of the state is such that the present form of the administrative apparatus is required. At present we have a state system without a preamble.

But, as Philip Green suggests, democracy has an investment in the state. The welfare functions of the state have made it of crucial importance to the lives of millions of citizens who would otherwise have no defenses against the vicissitudes of the economy. Plainly to call for the dismantling of the state would be the height of cruelty as well as folly. Yet it is equally foolish to believe that the salvation of democracy lies in promoting a more efficient state or a stronger President. It may be necessary for ordinary citizens to take upon themselves the responsibility for getting out from beneath state structures and the relations of dependency that they foster. Harry Boyte’s piece is the first of several we hope to publish on the broad problem of how democracy can find a different ground for its practice. Boyte is one of a growing number of writers that identifies democracy with the politics of local citizen movements. Unlike some grassroots pragmatists, who wave aside “theory” and are largely indifferent to the importance of local cultures, Boyte is seeking to integrate democratic and participatory politics with the historical cultures of communities and regions. He is, in effect, trying to redefine the theory and practice of democratic citizenship. His piece has the merit of reversing the usual order of priorities. Many prominent political commentators have warned repeatedly that an “excess” of democracy makes it difficult for the leaders of the state to govern effectively. Boyte suggests that the state has grown so enormously that democracy, far from being a threat, is reduced to a marginal status. The immediate task for democrats is to establish new political forms that will escape the state and provide the basis for a revitalization of genuine politics.