

Republican & Democrat Contenders in Their Primaries Exposes Establishment = Oligarchy

Carl V. Rabstajnek, P.E., M.B.A., Ph.D.

History is nothing but the biography of the Great Man.

Thomas Carlyle

Public awareness and interest in the tenacity of oligarchies has been sensitized by the “outsider” challengers to the establishment picks for the 2016 American presidential election. Ironically, two candidates—from opposite political extremes—opposed and exposed the maneuvering of their party’s oligarchy and the difficulty of running against political “insiders.” Obviously, establishment and oligarchy are synonyms identifying *entrenched representatives* who were supposedly elected or appointed to carry out the wishes of rank-and-file members of democratic organizations.

Growing organizations inevitably employ leadership and professional staff and Michels established his place in history by identifying the [Iron Law of Oligarchy](#): “Who says organization, says oligarchy.” For a century, sociologists have analyzed this law against various situations.

Roberto Michels was dissatisfied with the oligarchy’s tendency toward maintaining the organization’s status quo. When he first wrote his classic book, [Political Parties](#), on oligarchies, in 1911, he lamented that the hired leaders were concerned with maintaining their jobs and were therefore too conservative. Michels, an advocate, was a member of the German Social Democratic Party and complained about his party leadership’s moderate pursuit of his radical goals.

Discontinuity between an organization’s membership and its “leadership” is the focus herein. The Republican and Democrat primaries each proffered a contestant counter to the preference of their party’s establishment. This occasion provides a unique opportunity to compare challenges to oligarchies within both parties, short-circuiting any partisan tendency to mock the opposition. Each side uses influence, money, access, delegates, support, and other power tactics to hobble the challenger. Interested voters just need to follow the news to see entrenched officeholders’ tactics at work.

History of Oligarchical Control

Some oligarchies moved from conservative to liberal over the past century. In politics, certainly, there have been [political machines](#) and political bosses predating the last century. The [progressive movement](#) dates back to the 19th century. Thus, top-down manipulation has a long history.

[Thomas Carlyle’s](#) quotation leading off this essay points out his importance of great leaders. It also reminds us that for generations of humankind the governance of society was *hierarchical*. Superiority and subordination was generally a fixed “caste” in life at birth and rarely changed. Michels introduced the case of democratic organizations where the leadership is supposed to represent the general membership.

We are psychologically imbued with an age-old history of directive societies and situations. Sure, formal hierarchies are still maintained to this day, where following orders from those in elevated positions is required. Many times this makes sense. The challenge faced by the rank-and-file is to determine whether obedience or independence is the appropriate response to corporate influence. Making sound judgements, however, requires understanding our conscious and unconscious motivations to unquestionably follow the leader or, possibly, in some cases, to resist manipulation.

In this case, the goal is to determine when our psychic history resists reasonably asserting independence. This paper is not focused on one’s family and developmental issues, which are surely an individual’s issue. (My father, a postal supervisor, got a kick out of “I may not always be right but I’m always the boss.”) Personal issues can compound our tendency to subject our self to others, but the focus here is assumption of authority over us by “employees.” Authority is not only assumed by executives and technical authorities but by clerks and administrators, over time. (I met a coop’s secretary who issued directives independent of the board.)

The lesson of the 2016 election process is the amount of money spent to preserve control by the oligarchy (a.k.a. the establishment). Usually the establishment wins, except two mavericks from opposite ends of the political spectrum challenged the rules. The rules include fidelity to the organization and support of programs handed down—with money and access to members favoring the oligarchy.

Persistence of the Oligarchies

Extraordinary effort and possibly unique circumstances are required to effect change in an oligarchy. They have the money, resources, communication means, and an aura of being experts. Constituents, members, and directors avoid confrontation by not rocking the boat. Thus, the scales are balanced in favor of those fighting to maintain their power. This can go on for a long period of time—if there is money.

Money comes not only from members but grants from governments and philanthropies or profitable products. Also, if membership is required for employment, such as closed-shop unions, the organization can maintain itself. Some groups are like governments in they can levy assessments.

The importance of money is reflected in the decline of [mainstream churches](#) where parishioners “voted with their feet.” While the religious percentage of the population declined, the raw numbers increased. People found alternates more to their liking. Ironically, the synods are looking within their clergy for answers. *Oligarches prevail and persist!*

When an example exposing oligarchical influences plays out blatantly in the public media it is worth paying attention to the process. Political parties once chose candidates and their constituents dutifully went along. In 2016, “gadflies” upset the system—enabling the public to be observers and participants in an important citizenship and human drama.