

review of Eitan Hersh's book *Politics is for Power*

...service to one person at a time aggregates into power.¹

The title of this book was off-putting to me. Seeing a chapter called “Learning to Want Power” in the table of contents was even more off-putting. Is that truly one of the big problems in the world—not enough people trying to exert their will over one another?

Hersh makes a good case that it is. Or at least, that society would benefit from more *serious* efforts to acquire *long-term* power, and less time spent on lazy and reactive forms of political engagement. He calls the latter “**political hobbyism**”. Such hobbyism is characterized by activities like consuming lots of news and posting on social media. He gives evidence that political hobbyism is:

- by far the most predominant form of political engagement among Americans;
- particularly predominant among college-educated whites;
- more prevalent now than it was a few decades ago; and
- causing us to push our politicians to behave in ways that hurt our own causes.

In hobbyist mode, we have strong opinions and strong emotions and we declare them loudly. But we don't do the work that might actually persuade our opponents to join our side.

One organizer I talked to in 2018 told me that his Democratic friends who aren't involved beyond news-following believe that their political positions are self-evidently correct. They don't volunteer in politics because if they have to convince anyone of their ideas, that means the ideas aren't self-evidently correct. So the friends don't want to struggle to move politics toward what they think is right because they think they shouldn't have to. It's a strange, utterly doomed logic...²

When a shock like the 2016 Trump victory does spur us to action, we often choose actions that feel good but are useless or counterproductive. One example Hersh gives is how Demo-

¹Eitan Hersh, *Politics Is for Power: How to Move Beyond Political Hobbyism, Take Action, and Make Real Change*, First Scribner hardcover edition (New York, NY ; London: Scribner, an imprint of Simon & Schuster, Inc, 2020), 5.

²Ibid., 9.

cratic protestors pressured Chuck Schumer to filibuster the confirmation of Neil Gorsuch to the Supreme Court, scuttling a compromise plan:

A group of Senate moderates tried to preserve the filibuster rule...: Several Democrats would vote for Gorsuch to get him sixty votes. In exchange, several Republicans would commit to preserving the filibuster the next time President Trump was able to nominate someone to the Supreme Court. At the next Trump nomination, stakes might be even higher because, unlike Gorsuch, who was replacing a conservative, the next nominee could be replacing a liberal or replacing the court's swing vote, Justice Kennedy.³

Gorsuch's confirmation was inevitable, so by dismissing this plan in favor of a no-compromise stance which predictably resulted in Republicans eliminating the filibuster, we Democrats simply reduced our own future bargaining power. Self-righteous grandstanding did not save us from conservatives taking over the court.

What might save us? What tactics could get our opponents to vote differently? Hersh provides some case studies of activists who he believes are genuinely effective and worth emulating. Some of the common threads are:

- a focus on the local community
- building lasting relationships and organizations
- listening to people attentively
- performing acts of service to meet concrete needs of community members
- commitment to making gradual progress even if it will take years or decades to sway any elections

He praises the approach of “deep canvassing”, which involves long, unscripted, personal conversations where the canvasser does a lot of listening, as opposed to brief interactions focused on delivering a pre-approved message. He also advocates for building popularity and loyalty by directly helping individuals with their problems. At one point he even floats the idea of political parties using volunteers or donations to immediately address some of the needs that they ultimately want the government to address.

Imagine if a political party in a city or state said, “We want to support working families. We know how hard it is when childcare or eldercare falls through. We

³Ibid., 113.

have public policy ideas that support families, but we also want to convey in the most concrete way that we care about your daily struggles. We will get you providers when you need backup care.”⁴

What I like most is the connection Hersh draws between power-seeking and **empathy**:

...the organizers I have met while researching this book are some of the most empathetic people I’ve ever encountered. ... **They cultivate empathy because they want power for their views. Getting power means convincing people to take actions they wouldn’t otherwise take.** Power-seeking organizers can’t do that by yelling or whining. They need to show empathy.⁵

It is, of course, common for one group to exercise power over another without bothering to empathize with them at all. It feels like that’s what many of the loudest voices on the left want to do: just make the right sit down and shut up and swallow their tears, because they’re too evil to be worth talking to or worrying about. I think that attitude is repugnant and misguided for multiple reasons, but the most relevant one here is: it simply won’t work. It *isn’t* working. We don’t have the numbers to sideline conservatives in the current system without their consent, and we don’t have any realistic way to change the system without their consent. We need to persuade them to think differently, and persuasion requires a deep level of empathy.

⁴Ibid., 211.

⁵Ibid., 128, emphasis added.