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The segment of the center-left who swoon over Elizabeth Warren are fond of quoting Barney Frank’s statement that “government is the name for the things we decide to do together.” Now, the idea that government is the embodiment of things “we” decide to do presupposes some non-trivial correlation between public desires and what government actually does. But according to a Princeton University study (Martin Gilens and Benjamin Page, “Testing Theories of American Politics: Elites, Interest Groups and Average Citizens”), the effect of public opinion on actual public policy is roughly comparable to that of the sunspot cycle.

The study found no correlation at all between public opinion and policy. Graphing the correlation, the chance any random policy proposal will be adopted is a flat 30% regardless of the level of public support. On the other hand the correlation between the economic elite’s policy preferences and the policies adopted shows up

on the graph as a nice, neat upward-slanting line at 45 degrees, with a 70% correlation between strong elite support and policy adoption.

That really shouldn't be too surprising. The government set up under the U.S. Constitution was created in response to elite complaints that state governments were too democratic, too responsive to popular sentiment, to the point of seriously inconveniencing economic elites. In many of the newly independent states, radical coalitions of farmers and small tradesmen in the legislatures passed land reforms and stays on debt and opposed tax increases to pay off the Continental war bonds held by the rentier classes.

The main political constituencies behind the Constitution were economic elites like the landed and mercantile interests. Their Constitution — created by an illegal coup against the Articles of Confederation — set up a government designed as an oligarchy run by economic elites like themselves, with popular control kept as nominal and indirect as possible. The government we have today, despite the “democratic” civics book rhetoric in official propaganda, is still in its essential features the same oligarchy they set up over 220 years ago.

Leaving the Constitution aside, the overall institutional structure of the American society, economy and political system make such elite dominance inevitable. When every aspect of national life is governed by an interlocking framework of centralized government regulatory agencies, several hundred giant corporations and banks, and giant bureaucratic think tanks, universities and charitable foundations, and the same tiny elites shuffle back and forth between these institutions, it stands to reason that the main influence on policy will be the mindset of those running such large institutions. This would be true even with the liberal panacea of public campaign financing, because the main factor in policy is not money but the unconscious assumptions of the Very Serious People making policy (and the people like themselves they automatically regard as sources of credible advice) about what is normal and natural.

What Robert Michels called the Iron Law of Oligarchy — the tendency, regardless of how nominally democratic an institution is, for real power to accumulate in the hands of agents and representatives at the expense of principals and the represented — is inevitable. You'd be hard-pressed to find even a local government in a community of more than a few tens of thousands of residents where policies aren't set almost entirely by real estate developers, the Chamber of Commerce and the public school administration. In fact many key “reforms” in municipal government promoted by “progressives” a century ago — larger wards, at-large representation, city manager-board government, non-partisan elections — were deliberately designed to reduce the influence of ordinary workers and small businesspeople on local government and instead hand policy-making over to “competent” upper-middle-class professionals.

Simply put, the kind of democracy Barney Frank talks about isn't just an unrealistic description of American reality. It's flat-out impossible. States originated as executive committees of the ruling class, created to serve the interests of economic elites by enforcing the artificial scarcities, artificial property rights and monopolies by which they extract rents from the rest of us. To expect them to do otherwise is like expecting a pig to fly.