

## How American Politics Went Insane

It happened gradually—and until the U.S. figures out how to treat the problem, it will only get worse

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.... Astonishingly, the 2016 Republican presidential race has been dominated by a candidate who is not, in any meaningful sense, a Republican. According to registration records, since 1987 Donald Trump has been a Republican, then an independent, then a Democrat, then a Republican, then “I do not wish to enroll in a party,” then a Republican; he has donated to both parties; he has shown loyalty to and affinity for neither. The second-place candidate, Republican Senator Ted Cruz, built his brand by tearing down his party’s: slurring the Senate

The Republicans’ noisy breakdown has been echoed eerily, albeit less loudly, on the Democratic side, where, after the early primaries, one of the two remaining contestants for the nomination was not, in any meaningful sense, a Democrat. Senator Bernie Sanders was an independent who switched to nominal Democratic affiliation on the day he filed for the New Hampshire primary, only three months before that election. He surged into second place by winning independents while losing Democrats. If it had been up to Democrats to choose their party’s nominee, Sanders’s bid would have collapsed after Super Tuesday. In their various ways, Trump, Cruz, and Sanders are demonstrating a new principle: The political parties no longer have either intelligible boundaries or enforceable norms, and, as a result, renegade political behavior pays.....

And here is the still bigger point: The very term *party leaders* has become an anachronism. Although Capitol Hill and the campaign trail are miles apart, the breakdown in order in both places reflects the underlying reality that there no longer *is* any such thing as a party leader. There are only individual actors, pursuing their own political interests and ideological missions willy-nilly, like excited gas molecules in an overheated balloon.

No wonder Paul Ryan, taking the gavel as the new (and reluctant) House speaker in October, complained that the American people “look at Washington, and all they see is chaos. What a relief to them it would be if we finally got our act together.” No one seemed inclined to disagree. Nor was there much argument two months later when Jeb Bush, his presidential campaign sinking, used the c-word in a different but equally apt context. Donald Trump, he said, is “a chaos candidate, and he’d be a chaos president.” Unfortunately for Bush, Trump’s supporters didn’t mind. They *liked* that about him.

Trump, however, didn’t cause the chaos. The chaos caused Trump. What we are seeing is not a temporary spasm of chaos but a chaos *syndrome*.

Chaos syndrome is a chronic decline in the political system’s capacity for self-organization. It begins with the weakening of the institutions and brokers—political parties, career politicians, and congressional leaders and committees—that have historically held politicians accountable to one another and prevented everyone in the system from pursuing naked self-interest all the time. As these intermediaries’ influence fades, politicians, activists, and voters all become more individualistic and unaccountable. The system atomizes. Chaos becomes the new normal—both in campaigns and in the government itself.

Our intricate, informal system of political intermediation, which took many decades to build, did not commit suicide or die of old age; we reformed it to death. For decades, well-meaning political reformers have attacked intermediaries as corrupt, undemocratic, unnecessary, or (usually) all of the above. Americans have been busy demonizing and disempowering political professionals and parties, which is like spending decades abusing and attacking your own immune system. Eventually, you will get sick.

The disorder has other causes, too: developments such as ideological polarization, the rise of social media, and the radicalization of the Republican base. But chaos syndrome compounds the effects of those developments, by impeding the task of organizing to counteract them. Insurgencies in presidential races and on Capitol Hill are nothing new, and they are not necessarily bad, as long as the governing process can accommodate them....

Like many disorders, chaos syndrome is self-reinforcing. It causes governmental dysfunction, which fuels public anger, which incites political disruption, which causes yet more governmental dysfunction. Reversing the spiral will require understanding it. Consider, then, the etiology of a political disease: the immune system that defended the body politic for two centuries; the gradual dismantling of that immune system; the emergence of pathogens capable of exploiting the new vulnerability; the symptoms of the disorder; and, finally, its prognosis and treatment.

### I. Immunity--WHY THE POLITICAL CLASS IS A GOOD THING

The Founders knew all too well about chaos. It was the condition that brought them together in 1787 under the Articles of Confederation. The central government had too few powers and powers of the wrong kinds, so they gave it more powers, and

also multiple power centers. The core idea of the Constitution was to restrain ambition and excess by forcing competing powers and factions to bargain and compromise.

....They were visionaries, those men in Philadelphia, but they could not foresee everything, and they made a serious omission. Unlike the British parliamentary system, the Constitution makes no provision for holding politicians accountable to one another. A rogue member of Congress can't be "fired" by his party leaders, as a member of Parliament can; a renegade president cannot be evicted in a vote of no confidence, as a British prime minister can. By and large, American politicians are independent operators, and they became even more independent when later reforms, in the 19th and early 20th centuries, neutered the Electoral College and established direct election to the Senate.

The Constitution makes no mention of many of the essential political structures that we take for granted, such as political parties and congressional committees. If the Constitution were all we had, politicians would be incapable of getting organized to accomplish even routine tasks. Every day, for every bill or compromise, they would have to start from scratch, rounding up hundreds of individual politicians and answering to thousands of squabbling constituencies and millions of voters. By itself, the Constitution is a recipe for chaos.

So Americans developed a second, unwritten constitution. Beginning in the 1790s, politicians sorted themselves into parties. In the 1830s, under Andrew Jackson and Martin Van Buren, the parties established patronage machines and grass-roots bases. The machines and parties used rewards and the occasional punishment to encourage politicians to work together. Meanwhile, Congress developed its seniority and committee systems, rewarding reliability and establishing cooperative routines. Parties, leaders, machines, and congressional hierarchies built densely woven incentive structures that bound politicians into coherent teams. Personal alliances, financial contributions, promotions and prestige, political perks, pork-barrel spending, endorsements, and sometimes a trip to the woodshed or the wilderness: All of those incentives and others, including some of dubious respectability, came into play. If the Constitution was the system's DNA, the parties and machines and political brokers were its RNA, translating the Founders' bare-bones framework into dynamic organizations and thus converting conflict into action.

The informal constitution's intermediaries have many names and faces: state and national party committees, county party chairs, congressional subcommittees, leadership PACs, convention delegates, bundlers, and countless more. For purposes of this essay, I'll call them all *middlemen*, because all of them mediated between disorganized swarms of politicians and disorganized swarms of voters, thereby performing the indispensable task that the great political scientist James Q. Wilson called "assembling power in the formal government."

The middlemen could be undemocratic, high-handed, devious, secretive. But they had one great virtue: They brought order from chaos. They encouraged coordination, interdependency, and mutual accountability. They discouraged solipsistic and antisocial political behavior. A loyal, time-serving member of Congress could expect easy renomination, financial help, promotion through the ranks of committees and leadership jobs, and a new airport or research center for his district. A turncoat or troublemaker, by contrast, could expect to encounter ostracism, marginalization, and difficulties with fund-raising. The system was hierarchical, but it was not authoritarian. Even the lowliest precinct walker or officeholder had a role and a voice and could expect a reward for loyalty; even the highest party boss had to cater to multiple constituencies and fend off periodic challengers.

Parties, machines, and hacks may not have been pretty, but at their best they did their job so well that the country forgot why it needed them. Politics seemed almost to organize itself, but only because the middlemen recruited and nurtured political talent, vetted candidates for competence and loyalty, gathered and dispensed money, built bases of donors and supporters, forged coalitions, bought off antagonists, mediated disputes, brokered compromises, and greased the skids to turn those compromises into law. Though sometimes arrogant, middlemen were not generally elitist. They excelled at organizing and representing unsophisticated voters, as Tammany Hall famously did for the working-class Irish of New York, to the horror of many Progressives who viewed the Irish working class as unfit to govern or even to vote.

The old machines were inclusive only by the standards of their day, of course. They were bad on race—but then, so were Progressives such as Woodrow Wilson. The more intrinsic hazard with middlemen and machines is the ever-present potential for corruption, which is a real problem. On the other hand, overreacting to the threat of corruption by stamping out influence-peddling (as distinct from bribery and extortion) is just as harmful. Political contributions, for example, look unseemly, but they play a vital role as political bonding agents. When a party raised a soft-money donation from a millionaire and used it to support a candidate's campaign (a common practice until the 2002 McCain-Feingold law banned it in federal elections), the exchange of favors tied a knot of mutual accountability that linked candidate, party, and donor together and forced each to think about the interests of the others. Such transactions may not have comported with the Platonic ideal of democracy, but in the real world they did much to stabilize the system and discourage selfish behavior.

Middlemen have a characteristic that is essential in politics: They stick around. Because careerists and hacks make their living off the system, they have a stake in assembling durable coalitions, in retaining power over time, and in keeping the government

in functioning order. Slash-and-burn protests and quixotic ideological crusades are luxuries they can't afford. Insurgents and renegades have a role, which is to jolt the system with new energy and ideas; but professionals also have a role, which is to safely absorb the energy that insurgents unleash. Think of them as analogous to antibodies and white blood cells, establishing and patrolling the barriers between the body politic and would-be hijackers on the outside. As with biology, so with politics: When the immune system works, it is largely invisible. Only when it breaks down do we become aware of its importance.

## II. **Vulnerability** -- HOW THE WAR ON MIDDLEMEN LEFT AMERICA DEFENSELESS

Beginning early in the 20th century, and continuing right up to the present, reformers and the public turned against every aspect of insider politics: professional politicians, closed-door negotiations, personal favors, party bosses, financial ties, all of it. Progressives accused middlemen of subverting the public interest; populists accused them of obstructing the people's will; conservatives accused them of protecting and expanding big government.

To some extent, the reformers were right. They had good intentions and valid complaints. Back in the 1970s, as a teenager in the post-Watergate era, I was on their side. Why allow politicians ever to meet behind closed doors? Sunshine is the best disinfectant! Why allow private money to buy favors and distort policy making? Ban it and use Treasury funds to finance elections! It was easy, in those days, to see that there was dirty water in the tub. What was not so evident was the reason the water was dirty, which was the baby. So we started reforming.

*We reformed the nominating process.* The use of primary elections instead of conventions, caucuses, and other insider-dominated processes dates to the era of Theodore Roosevelt, but primary elections and party influence coexisted through the 1960s; especially in congressional and state races, party leaders had many ways to influence nominations and vet candidates. According to Jon Meacham, in his biography of George H. W. Bush, here is how Bush's father, Prescott Bush, got started in politics: "Samuel F. Pryor, a top Pan Am executive and a mover in Connecticut politics, called Prescott to ask whether Bush might like to run for Congress. 'If you would,' Pryor said, 'I think we can assure you that you'll be the nominee.'" Today, party insiders can still jawbone a little bit, but, as the 2016 presidential race has made all too clear, there is startlingly little they can do to influence the nominating process.

Primary races now tend to be dominated by highly motivated extremists and interest groups, with the perverse result of leaving moderates and broader, less well-organized constituencies underrepresented. According to the Pew Research Center, in the first 12 presidential-primary contests of 2016, only 17 percent of eligible voters participated in Republican primaries, and only 12 percent in Democratic primaries. In other words, Donald Trump seized the lead in the primary process by winning a mere plurality of a mere fraction of the electorate. In off-year congressional primaries, when turnout is even lower, it's even easier for the tail to wag the dog. In the 2010 Delaware Senate race, Christine "I am not a witch" O'Donnell secured the Republican nomination by winning just a sixth of the state's registered Republicans, thereby handing a competitive seat to the Democrats. Surveying congressional primaries for a 2014 Brookings Institution report, the journalists Jill Lawrence and Walter Shapiro observed: "The universe of those who actually cast primary ballots is small and hyper-partisan, and rewards candidates who hew to ideological orthodoxy." By contrast, party hacks tend to shop for candidates who exert broad appeal in a general election and who will sustain and build the party's brand, so they generally lean toward relative moderates and team players.

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Moreover, recent research by the political scientists Jamie L. Carson and Jason M. Roberts finds that party leaders of yore did a better job of encouraging qualified mainstream candidates to challenge incumbents. "In congressional districts across the country, party leaders were able to carefully select candidates who would contribute to the collective good of the ticket," Carson and Roberts write in their 2013 book, *Ambition, Competition, and Electoral Reform: The Politics of Congressional Elections Across Time*. "This led to a plentiful supply of quality candidates willing to enter races, since the potential costs of running and losing were largely underwritten by the party organization." The switch to direct primaries, in which contenders generally self-recruit and succeed or fail on their own account, has produced more oddball and extreme challengers and thereby made general elections less competitive. "A series of reforms that were intended to create more open and less 'insider' dominated elections actually produced more entrenched politicians," Carson and Roberts write. The paradoxical result is that members of Congress today are simultaneously less responsive to mainstream interests and harder to dislodge.

Was the switch to direct public nomination a net benefit or drawback? The answer to that question is subjective. But one effect is not in doubt: Institutionalists have less power than ever before to protect loyalists who play well with other politicians, or who take a tough congressional vote for the team, or who dare to cross single-issue voters and interests; and they have little capacity to fend off insurgents who owe nothing to anybody. Walled safely inside their gerrymandered districts, incumbents are insulated from general-election challenges that might pull them toward the political center, but they are perpetually vulnerable to primary challenges from extremists who pull them toward the fringes. Everyone worries about being the next Eric Cantor, the Republican

House majority leader who, in a shocking upset, lost to an unknown Tea Partier in his 2014 primary. Legislators are scared of voting for anything that might increase the odds of a primary challenge, which is one reason it is so hard to raise the debt limit or pass a budget.

.... Purist issue groups often have the whip hand now, and unlike the elected bosses of yore, they are accountable only to themselves and are able merely to prevent legislative action, not to organize it.

*We reformed political money.* Starting in the 1970s, large-dollar donations to candidates and parties were subject to a tightening web of regulations. The idea was to reduce corruption (or its appearance) and curtail the power of special interests—certainly laudable goals. Campaign-finance rules did stop some egregious transactions, but at a cost: Instead of eliminating money from politics (which is impossible), the rules diverted much of it to private channels. Whereas the parties themselves were once largely responsible for raising and spending political money, in their place has arisen a burgeoning ecology of deep-pocketed donors, super PACs, 501(c)(4)s, and so-called 527 groups that now spend hundreds of millions of dollars each cycle. The result has been the creation of an array of private political machines across the country: for instance, the Koch brothers' Americans for Prosperity and Karl Rove's American Crossroads on the right, and Tom Steyer's NextGen Climate on the left.

Private groups are much harder to regulate, less transparent, and less accountable than are the parties and candidates, who do, at the end of the day, have to face the voters. Because they thrive on purism, protest, and parochialism, the outside groups are driving politics toward polarization, extremism, and short-term gain. "You may win or lose, but at least you have been intellectually consistent—your principles haven't been defeated," an official with Americans for Prosperity told *The Economist* in October 2014. The parties, despite being called to judgment by voters for their performance, face all kinds of constraints and regulations that the private groups don't, tilting the playing field against them. "The internal conversation we've been having is 'How do we keep state parties alive?'" the director of a mountain-state Democratic Party organization told me and Raymond J. La Raja recently for a Brookings Institution report. Republicans told us the same story. "We believe we are fighting for our lives in the current legal and judicial framework, and the super PACs and (c)(4)s really present a direct threat to the state parties' existence," a southern state's Republican Party director said.

The state parties also told us they can't begin to match the advertising money flowing from outside groups and candidates. Weakened by regulations and resource constraints, they have been reduced to spectators, while candidates and groups form circular firing squads and alienate voters. At the national level, the situation is even more chaotic—and ripe for exploitation by a savvy demagogue who can make himself heard above the din, as Donald Trump has so shrewdly proved.

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