

United States Democracy and the Possibility of the Rise of an Autocracy

Recent political events over the last year with the rise of “Trumpism” and the many citizens who seem enamored with this authoritarian business approach to governance, leave many wondering if we are slipping towards an autocratic approach to dealing with the many issues facing our daily lives. For the purpose of this seminar, we are using the Meriam Webster Dictionary definition of autocracy: “a form of government in which a country is ruled by a person or group with total power.”

The last decade of congressional gridlock and in-fighting, along with propagandizing of citizens by cable media, have left many voters cynical and wanting leaders who can “cut through the crap and get things done.” Those voters want clear-cut, common sense “bar chair” solutions to the problems they believe we are facing. Unfortunately, the average Jane or Joe have not thought about the potential harmful consequences for democracy of such governance.

Our discussion will center around two articles. The first is by David Frum, who is a senior editor at The Atlantic and the chairman of Policy Exchange. In 2001–02, he was a speechwriter for President George W. Bush. This article appears in the March issue of the Atlantic. He makes the argument that we are in danger of becoming an Autocracy under the Trump presidency. The second article is by Jonathan Rauch, which appeared in the July 2016 issue of Atlantic Magazine. In his paper, he outlines a scenario of the country in 2020 shortly after President Trump decided to retire “after a single wretched term.”

To Prepare for the seminar, please do the following:

- 1) Read the two articles below and think about the following questions:
 - a) In what ways do the articles relate to your thoughts of our current situation?
 - b) What are some other perspectives that could add to the discussion of possible scenarios that may evolve from our present political situation?
 - c) If we find ourselves moving towards an autocracy, what are the responsibilities of citizens to maintain a representative democracy? What about the media?
 - d) Are there alternative ways of considering our current political situation than those presented by the two authors?
- 2) If you have other materials you would like to bring to the conversation either in support of the position of the authors, or in opposition to their thinking, please feel free to do so.

I will be leading the seminar and I am looking forward to the conversation

Hilary Goodman

How to Build an Autocracy

David Frum

Jan 30, 2017

It's 2021, and President Donald Trump will shortly be sworn in for his second term. The 45th president has visibly aged over the past four years. He rests heavily on his daughter Ivanka's arm during his infrequent public appearances.

Fortunately for him, he did not need to campaign hard for reelection. His has been a popular presidency: Big tax cuts, big spending, and big deficits have worked their familiar expansive magic. Wages have grown strongly in the Trump years, especially for men without a college degree, even if rising inflation is beginning to bite into the gains. The president's supporters credit his restrictive immigration policies and his TrumpWorks infrastructure program.

The president's critics, meanwhile, have found little hearing for their protests and complaints. A Senate investigation of Russian hacking during the 2016 presidential campaign sputtered into inconclusive partisan wrangling. Concerns about Trump's purported conflicts of interest excited debate in Washington but never drew much attention from the wider American public.

Allegations of fraud and self-dealing in the TrumpWorks program, and elsewhere, have likewise been shrugged off. The president regularly tweets out news of factory openings and big hiring announcements: "I'm bringing back your jobs," he has said over and over. Voters seem to have believed him—and are grateful.

Most Americans intuit that their president and his relatives have become vastly wealthier over the past four years. But rumors of graft are easy to dismiss. Because Trump has never released his tax returns, no one really knows.

Anyway, doesn't everybody do it? On the eve of the 2018 congressional elections, WikiLeaks released years of investment statements by prominent congressional Democrats indicating that they had long earned above-market returns. As the air filled with allegations of insider trading and crony capitalism, the public subsided into weary cynicism. The Republicans held both houses of Congress that November, and Trump loyalists shouldered aside the pre-Trump leadership.

The business community learned its lesson early. “You work for me, you don’t criticize me,” the president was reported to have told one major federal contractor, after knocking billions off his company’s stock-market valuation with an angry tweet. Wise business leaders take care to credit Trump’s personal leadership for any good news, and to avoid saying anything that might displease the president or his family.

The media have grown noticeably more friendly to Trump as well. The proposed merger of AT&T and Time Warner was delayed for more than a year, during which Time Warner’s CNN unit worked ever harder to meet Trump’s definition of fairness. Under the agreement that settled the Department of Justice’s antitrust complaint against Amazon, the company’s founder, Jeff Bezos, has divested himself of The Washington Post. The paper’s new owner—an investor group based in Slovakia—has closed the printed edition and refocused the paper on municipal politics and lifestyle coverage.

Meanwhile, social media circulate ever-wilder rumors. Some people believe them; others don’t. It’s hard work to ascertain what is true.

Nobody’s repealed the First Amendment, of course, and Americans remain as free to speak their minds as ever—provided they can stomach seeing their timelines fill up with obscene abuse and angry threats from the pro-Trump troll armies that police Facebook and Twitter. Rather than deal with digital thugs, young people increasingly drift to less political media like Snapchat and Instagram.

Trump-critical media do continue to find elite audiences. Their investigations still win Pulitzer Prizes; their reporters accept invitations to anxious conferences about corruption, digital-journalism standards, the end of NATO, and the rise of populist authoritarianism. Yet somehow all of this earnest effort feels less and less relevant to American politics. President Trump communicates with the people directly via his Twitter account, ushering his supporters toward favorable information at Fox News or Breitbart.

Despite the hand-wringing, the country has in many ways changed much less than some feared or hoped four years ago. Ambitious Republican plans notwithstanding, the American social-welfare system, as most people encounter it, has remained largely intact during Trump’s first term. The predicted wave of mass deportations of illegal immigrants never materialized. A large illegal workforce remains in the country, with the tacit understanding that so long as these immigrants avoid politics, keeping their heads down and their mouths shut, nobody will look very hard for them.

African Americans, young people, and the recently naturalized encounter increasing difficulties casting a vote in most states. But for all the talk of the rollback of rights, corporate America still seeks diversity in employment. Same-sex marriage remains the law of the land. Americans are no more and no less likely to say “Merry Christmas” than they were before Trump took office.

People crack jokes about Trump’s National Security Agency listening in on them. They cannot deeply mean it; after all, there’s no less sexting in America today than four years ago. Still, with all the hacks and leaks happening these days—particularly to the politically outspoken—it’s just common sense to be careful what you say in an email or on the phone. When has politics not been a dirty business? When have the rich and powerful not mostly gotten their way? The smart thing to do is tune out the political yammer, mind your own business, enjoy a relatively prosperous time, and leave the questions to the troublemakers.

In an 1888 lecture, James Russell Lowell, a founder of this magazine, challenged the happy assumption that the Constitution was a “machine that would go of itself.” Lowell was right. Checks and balances is a metaphor, not a mechanism.

Everything imagined above—and everything described below—is possible only if many people other than Donald Trump agree to permit it. It can all be stopped, if individual citizens and public officials make the right choices. The story told here, like that told by Charles Dickens’s *Ghost of Christmas Yet to Come*, is a story not of things that will be, but of things that may be. Other paths remain open. It is up to Americans to decide which one the country will follow.

No society, not even one as rich and fortunate as the United States has been, is guaranteed a successful future. When early Americans wrote things like “Eternal vigilance is the price of liberty,” they did not do so to provide bromides for future bumper stickers. They lived in a world in which authoritarian rule was the norm, in which rulers habitually claimed the powers and assets of the state as their own personal property.

The exercise of political power is different today than it was then—but perhaps not so different as we might imagine. Larry Diamond, a sociologist at Stanford, has described the past decade as a period of “democratic recession.” Worldwide, the number of democratic states has diminished. Within many of the remaining democracies, the quality of governance has deteriorated.

What has happened in Hungary since 2010 offers an example—and a blueprint for would-be strongmen. Hungary is a member state of the European Union and a signatory of the European

Convention on Human Rights. It has elections and uncensored internet. Yet Hungary is ceasing to be a free country.

The transition has been nonviolent, often not even very dramatic. Opponents of the regime are not murdered or imprisoned, although many are harassed with building inspections and tax audits. If they work for the government, or for a company susceptible to government pressure, they risk their jobs by speaking out. Nonetheless, they are free to emigrate anytime they like. Those with money can even take it with them. Day in and day out, the regime works more through inducements than through intimidation. The courts are packed, and forgiving of the regime's allies. Friends of the government win state contracts at high prices and borrow on easy terms from the central bank. Those on the inside grow rich by favoritism; those on the outside suffer from the general deterioration of the economy. As one shrewd observer told me on a recent visit, "The benefit of controlling a modern state is less the power to persecute the innocent, more the power to protect the guilty."

Prime Minister Viktor Orbán's rule over Hungary does depend on elections. These remain open and more or less free—at least in the sense that ballots are counted accurately. Yet they are not quite fair. Electoral rules favor incumbent power-holders in ways both obvious and subtle. Independent media lose advertising under government pressure; government allies own more and more media outlets each year. The government sustains support even in the face of bad news by artfully generating an endless sequence of controversies that leave culturally conservative Hungarians feeling misunderstood and victimized by liberals, foreigners, and Jews.

You could tell a similar story of the slide away from democracy in South Africa under Nelson Mandela's successors, in Venezuela under the thug-thief Hugo Chávez, or in the Philippines under the murderous Rodrigo Duterte. A comparable transformation has recently begun in Poland, and could come to France should Marine Le Pen, the National Front's candidate, win the presidency.

Outside the Islamic world, the 21st century is not an era of ideology. The grand utopian visions of the 19th century have passed out of fashion. The nightmare totalitarian projects of the 20th have been overthrown or have disintegrated, leaving behind only outdated remnants: North Korea, Cuba. What is spreading today is repressive kleptocracy, led by rulers motivated by greed rather than by the deranged idealism of Hitler or Stalin or Mao. Such rulers rely less on terror and more on rule-twisting, the manipulation of information, and the co-optation of elites.

The United States is of course a very robust democracy. Yet no human contrivance is tamper-proof, a constitutional democracy least of all. Some features of the American system hugely

inhibit the abuse of office: the separation of powers within the federal government; the division of responsibilities between the federal government and the states. Federal agencies pride themselves on their independence; the court system is huge, complex, and resistant to improper influence.

Yet the American system is also perforated by vulnerabilities no less dangerous for being so familiar. Supreme among those vulnerabilities is reliance on the personal qualities of the man or woman who wields the awesome powers of the presidency. A British prime minister can lose power in minutes if he or she forfeits the confidence of the majority in Parliament. The president of the United States, on the other hand, is restrained first and foremost by his own ethics and public spirit. What happens if somebody comes to the high office lacking those qualities?

Over the past generation, we have seen ominous indicators of a breakdown of the American political system: the willingness of congressional Republicans to push the United States to the brink of a default on its national obligations in 2013 in order to score a point in budget negotiations; Barack Obama's assertion of a unilateral executive power to confer legal status upon millions of people illegally present in the United States—despite his own prior acknowledgment that no such power existed.

Donald Trump, however, represents something much more radical. A president who plausibly owes his office at least in part to a clandestine intervention by a hostile foreign intelligence service? Who uses the bully pulpit to target individual critics? Who creates blind trusts that are not blind, invites his children to commingle private and public business, and somehow gets the unhappy members of his own political party either to endorse his choices or shrug them off? If this were happening in Honduras, we'd know what to call it. It's happening here instead, and so we are baffled.

“Ambition must be made to counteract ambition.” With those words, written more than 200 years ago, the authors of the Federalist Papers explained the most important safeguard of the American constitutional system. They then added this promise: “In republican government, the legislative authority necessarily predominates.” Congress enacts laws, appropriates funds, confirms the president's appointees. Congress can subpoena records, question officials, and even impeach them. Congress can protect the American system from an overbearing president.

But will it?

As politics has become polarized, Congress has increasingly become a check only on presidents of the opposite party. Recent presidents enjoying a same-party majority in Congress—Barack

Obama in 2009 and 2010, George W. Bush from 2003 through 2006—usually got their way. And congressional oversight might well be performed even less diligently during the Trump administration.

The first reason to fear weak diligence is the oddly inverse relationship between President Trump and the congressional Republicans. In the ordinary course of events, it's the incoming president who burns with eager policy ideas. Consequently, it's the president who must adapt to—and often overlook—the petty human weaknesses and vices of members of Congress in order to advance his agenda. This time, it will be Paul Ryan, the speaker of the House, doing the advancing—and consequently the overlooking.

Trump has scant interest in congressional Republicans' ideas, does not share their ideology, and cares little for their fate. He can—and would—break faith with them in an instant to further his own interests. Yet here they are, on the verge of achieving everything they have hoped to achieve for years, if not decades. They owe this chance solely to Trump's ability to deliver a crucial margin of votes in a handful of states—Wisconsin, Michigan, and Pennsylvania—which has provided a party that cannot win the national popular vote a fleeting opportunity to act as a decisive national majority. The greatest risk to all their projects and plans is the very same X factor that gave them their opportunity: Donald Trump, and his famously erratic personality. What excites Trump is his approval rating, his wealth, his power. The day could come when those ends would be better served by jettisoning the institutional Republican Party in favor of an ad hoc populist coalition, joining nationalism to generous social spending—a mix that's worked well for authoritarians in places like Poland. Who doubts Trump would do it? Not Paul Ryan. Not Mitch McConnell, the Senate majority leader. For the first time since the administration of John Tyler in the 1840s, a majority in Congress must worry about their president defecting from them rather than the other way around.

A scandal involving the president could likewise wreck everything that Republican congressional leaders have waited years to accomplish. However deftly they manage everything else, they cannot prevent such a scandal. But there is one thing they can do: their utmost not to find out about it.

“Do you have any concerns about Steve Bannon being in the White House?,” CNN's Jake Tapper asked Ryan in November. “I don't know Steve Bannon, so I have no concerns,” answered the speaker. “I trust Donald's judgment.”

Asked on 60 Minutes whether he believed Donald Trump's claim that “millions” of illegal votes had been cast, Ryan answered: “I don't know. I'm not really focused on these things.”

What about Trump's conflicts of interest? "This is not what I'm concerned about in Congress," Ryan said on CNBC. Trump should handle his conflicts "however he wants to."

Ryan has learned his prudence the hard way. Following the airing of Trump's past comments, caught on tape, about his forceful sexual advances on women, Ryan said he'd no longer campaign for Trump. Ryan's net favorability rating among Republicans dropped by 28 points in less than 10 days. Once unassailable in the party, he suddenly found himself disliked by 45 percent of Republicans.

As Ryan's cherished plans move closer and closer to presidential signature, Congress's subservience to the president will likely intensify. Whether it's allegations of Russian hacks of Democratic Party internal communications, or allegations of self-enrichment by the Trump family, or favorable treatment of Trump business associates, the Republican caucus in Congress will likely find itself conscripted into serving as Donald Trump's ethical bodyguard.

The Senate historically has offered more scope to dissenters than the House. Yet even that institution will find itself under pressure. Two of the Senate's most important Republican Trump skeptics will be up for reelection in 2018: Arizona's Jeff Flake and Texas's Ted Cruz. They will not want to provoke a same-party president—especially not in a year when the president's party can afford to lose a seat or two in order to discipline dissenters. Mitch McConnell is an even more results-oriented politician than Paul Ryan—and his wife, Elaine Chao, has been offered a Cabinet position, which might tilt him further in Trump's favor.

Ambition will counteract ambition only until ambition discovers that conformity serves its goals better. At that time, Congress, the body expected to check presidential power, may become the president's most potent enabler.

Discipline within the congressional ranks will be strictly enforced not only by the party leadership and party donors, but also by the overwhelming influence of Fox News. Trump versus Clinton was not 2016's only contest between an overbearing man and a restrained woman. Just such a contest was waged at Fox, between Sean Hannity and Megyn Kelly. In both cases, the early indicators seemed to favor the women. Yet in the end it was the men who won, Hannity even more decisively than Trump. Hannity's show, which became an unapologetic infomercial for Trump, pulled into first place on the network in mid-October. Kelly's show tumbled to fifth place, behind even *The Five*, a roundtable program that airs at 5 p.m. Kelly landed on her feet, of course, but Fox learned its lesson: Trump sells; critical coverage does not. Since the election, the

network has awarded Kelly's former 9 p.m. time slot to Tucker Carlson, who is positioning himself as a Trump enthusiast in the Hannity mold.

From the point of view of the typical Republican member of Congress, Fox remains all-powerful: the single most important source of visibility and affirmation with the voters whom a Republican politician cares about. In 2009, in the run-up to the Tea Party insurgency, South Carolina's Bob Inglis crossed Fox, criticizing Glenn Beck and telling people at a town-hall meeting that they should turn his show off. He was drowned out by booing, and the following year, he lost his primary with only 29 percent of the vote, a crushing repudiation for an incumbent untouched by any scandal.

Fox is reinforced by a carrier fleet of supplementary institutions: super PACs, think tanks, and conservative web and social-media presences, which now include such former pariahs as Breitbart and Alex Jones. So long as the carrier fleet coheres—and unless public opinion turns sharply against the president—oversight of Trump by the Republican congressional majority will very likely be cautious, conditional, and limited.

Donald Trump will not set out to build an authoritarian state. His immediate priority seems likely to be to use the presidency to enrich himself. But as he does so, he will need to protect himself from legal risk. Being Trump, he will also inevitably wish to inflict payback on his critics. Construction of an apparatus of impunity and revenge will begin haphazardly and opportunistically. But it will accelerate. It will have to.

If Congress is quiescent, what can Trump do? A better question, perhaps, is what can't he do?

Newt Gingrich, the former speaker of the House, who often articulates Trumpist ideas more candidly than Trump himself might think prudent, offered a sharp lesson in how difficult it will be to enforce laws against an uncooperative president. During a radio roundtable in December, on the topic of whether it would violate anti-nepotism laws to bring Trump's daughter and son-in-law onto the White House staff, Gingrich said: The president "has, frankly, the power of the pardon. It is a totally open power, and he could simply say, 'Look, I want them to be my advisers. I pardon them if anybody finds them to have behaved against the rules. Period.' And technically, under the Constitution, he has that level of authority."

That statement is true, and it points to a deeper truth: The United States may be a nation of laws, but the proper functioning of the law depends upon the competence and integrity of those charged with executing it. A president determined to thwart the law in order to protect himself and those in his circle has many means to do so.

The power of the pardon, deployed to defend not only family but also those who would protect the president's interests, dealings, and indiscretions, is one such means. The powers of appointment and removal are another. The president appoints and can remove the commissioner of the IRS. He appoints and can remove the inspectors general who oversee the internal workings of the Cabinet departments and major agencies. He appoints and can remove the 93 U.S. attorneys, who have the power to initiate and to end federal prosecutions. He appoints and can remove the attorney general, the deputy attorney general, and the head of the criminal division at the Department of Justice.

There are hedges on these powers, both customary and constitutional, including the Senate's power to confirm (or not) presidential appointees. Yet the hedges may not hold in the future as robustly as they have in the past.

Senators of the president's party traditionally have expected to be consulted on the U.S.-attorney picks in their states, a highly coveted patronage plum. But the U.S. attorneys of most interest to Trump—above all the ones in New York and New Jersey, the locus of many of his businesses and bank dealings—come from states where there are no Republican senators to take into account. And while the U.S. attorneys in Florida, home to Mar-a-Lago and other Trump properties, surely concern him nearly as much, if there's one Republican senator whom Trump would cheerfully disregard, it's Marco Rubio.

The traditions of independence and professionalism that prevail within the federal law-enforcement apparatus, and within the civil service more generally, will tend to restrain a president's power. Yet in the years ahead, these restraints may also prove less robust than they look. Republicans in Congress have long advocated reforms to expedite the firing of underperforming civil servants. In the abstract, there's much to recommend this idea. If reform is dramatic and happens in the next two years, however, the balance of power between the political and the professional elements of the federal government will shift, decisively, at precisely the moment when the political elements are most aggressive. The intelligence agencies in particular would likely find themselves exposed to retribution from a president enraged at them for reporting on Russia's aid to his election campaign. "As you know from his other career, Donald likes to fire people." So New Jersey Governor Chris Christie joked to a roomful of Republican donors at the party's national convention in July. It would be a mighty power—and highly useful.

The courts, though they might slowly be packed with judges inclined to hear the president's arguments sympathetically, are also a check, of course. But it's already difficult to hold a

president to account for financial improprieties. As Donald Trump correctly told reporters and editors from The New York Times on November 22, presidents are not bound by the conflict-of-interest rules that govern everyone else in the executive branch.

Presidents from Jimmy Carter onward have balanced this unique exemption with a unique act of disclosure: the voluntary publication of their income-tax returns. At a press conference on January 11, Trump made clear that he will not follow that tradition. His attorney instead insisted that everything the public needs to know is captured by his annual financial-disclosure report, which is required by law for executive-branch employees and from which presidents are not exempt. But a glance at the reporting forms (you can read them yourself) will show their inadequacy to Trump's situation. They are written with stocks and bonds in mind, to capture mortgage liabilities and deferred executive compensation—not the labyrinthine deals of the Trump Organization and its ramifying networks of partners and brand-licensing affiliates. The truth is in the tax returns, and they will not be forthcoming.

Even outright bribe-taking by an elected official is surprisingly difficult to prosecute, and was made harder still by the Supreme Court in 2016, when it overturned, by an 8–0 vote, the conviction of former Virginia Governor Bob McDonnell. McDonnell and his wife had taken valuable gifts of cash and luxury goods from a favor seeker. McDonnell then set up meetings between the favor seeker and state officials who were in a position to help him. A jury had even accepted that the “quid” was indeed “pro” the “quo”—an evidentiary burden that has often protected accused bribe-takers in the past. The McDonnells had been convicted on a combined 20 counts.

The Supreme Court objected, however, that the lower courts had interpreted federal anticorruption law too broadly. The relevant statute applied only to “official acts.” The Court defined such acts very strictly, and held that “setting up a meeting, talking to another official, or organizing an event—without more—does not fit that definition of an ‘official act.’ ”

Trump is poised to mingle business and government with an audacity and on a scale more reminiscent of a leader in a post-Soviet republic than anything ever before seen in the United States. Glimpses of his family's wealth-seeking activities will likely emerge during his presidency, as they did during the transition. Trump's Indian business partners dropped by Trump Tower and posted pictures with the then-president-elect on Facebook, alerting folks back home that they were now powers to be reckoned with. The Argentine media reported that Trump had discussed the progress of a Trump-branded building in Buenos Aires during a congratulatory phone call from the country's president. (A spokesman for the Argentine president denied that the two men had discussed the building on their call.) Trump's daughter Ivanka sat in on a meeting with the Japanese prime minister—a useful meeting for her, since a government-owned

bank has a large ownership stake in the Japanese company with which she was negotiating a licensing deal.

Suggestive. Disturbing. But illegal, post-McDonnell? How many presidentially removable officials would dare even initiate an inquiry?

You may hear much mention of the Emoluments Clause of the Constitution during Trump's presidency: "No Title of Nobility shall be granted by the United States: And no Person holding any Office of Profit or Trust under them, shall, without the Consent of the Congress, accept of any present, Emolument, Office, or Title, of any kind whatever, from any King, Prince, or foreign State."

But as written, this seems to present a number of loopholes. First, the clause applies only to the president himself, not to his family members. Second, it seems to govern benefits only from foreign governments and state-owned enterprises, not from private business entities. Third, Trump's lawyers have argued that the clause applies only to gifts and titles, not to business transactions. Fourth, what does "the Consent of Congress" mean? If Congress is apprised of an apparent emolument, and declines to do anything about it, does that qualify as consent? Finally, how is this clause enforced? Could someone take President Trump to court and demand some kind of injunction? Who? How? Will the courts grant standing? The clause seems to presume an active Congress and a vigilant public. What if those are lacking?

It is essential to recognize that Trump will use his position not only to enrich himself; he will enrich plenty of other people too, both the powerful and—sometimes, for public consumption—the relatively powerless. Venezuela, a stable democracy from the late 1950s through the 1990s, was corrupted by a politics of personal favoritism, as Hugo Chávez used state resources to bestow gifts on supporters. Venezuelan state TV even aired a regular program to showcase weeping recipients of new houses and free appliances. Americans recently got a preview of their own version of that show as grateful Carrier employees thanked then-President-elect Trump for keeping their jobs in Indiana.

"I just couldn't believe that this guy ... he's not even president yet and he worked on this deal with the company," T. J. Bray, a 32-year-old Carrier employee, told Fortune. "I'm just in shock. A lot of the workers are in shock. We can't believe something good finally happened to us. It felt like a victory for the little people."

Trump will try hard during his presidency to create an atmosphere of personal munificence, in which graft does not matter, because rules and institutions do not matter. He will want to associate economic benefit with personal favor. He will create personal constituencies, and implicate other people in his corruption. That, over time, is what truly subverts the institutions of democracy and the rule of law. If the public cannot be induced to care, the power of the investigators serving at Trump's pleasure will be diminished all the more.

“The first task for our new administration will be to liberate our citizens from the crime and terrorism and lawlessness that threatens our communities.” Those were Donald Trump's words at the Republican National Convention. The newly nominated presidential candidate then listed a series of outrages and attacks, especially against police officers.

America was shocked to its core when our police officers in Dallas were so brutally executed. Immediately after Dallas, we've seen continued threats and violence against our law-enforcement officials. Law officers have been shot or killed in recent days in Georgia, Missouri, Wisconsin, Kansas, Michigan, and Tennessee.

On Sunday, more police were gunned down in Baton Rouge, Louisiana. Three were killed, and three were very, very badly injured. An attack on law enforcement is an attack on all Americans. I have a message to every last person threatening the peace on our streets and the safety of our police: When I take the oath of office next year, I will restore law and order to our country.

You would never know from Trump's words that the average number of felonious killings of police during the Obama administration's tenure was almost one-third lower than it was in the early 1990s, a decline that tracked with the general fall in violent crime that has so blessed American society. There had been a rise in killings of police in 2014 and 2015 from the all-time low in 2013—but only back to the 2012 level. Not every year will be the best on record.

A mistaken belief that crime is spiraling out of control—that terrorists roam at large in America and that police are regularly gunned down—represents a considerable political asset for Donald Trump. Seventy-eight percent of Trump voters believed that crime had worsened during the Obama years.

Civil unrest will not be a problem for the Trump presidency. It will be a resource. Trump will likely want to enflame more of it.

In true police states, surveillance and repression sustain the power of the authorities. But that's not how power is gained and sustained in backsliding democracies. Polarization, not persecution, enables the modern illiberal regime.

By guile or by instinct, Trump understands this.

Whenever Trump stumbles into some kind of trouble, he reacts by picking a divisive fight. The morning after The Wall Street Journal published a story about the extraordinary conflicts of interest surrounding Trump's son-in-law, Jared Kushner, Trump tweeted that flag burners should be imprisoned or stripped of their citizenship. That evening, as if on cue, a little posse of oddballs obligingly burned flags for the cameras in front of the Trump International Hotel in New York. Guess which story dominated that day's news cycle?

Civil unrest will not be a problem for the Trump presidency. It will be a resource. Trump will likely want not to repress it, but to publicize it—and the conservative entertainment-outrage complex will eagerly assist him. Immigration protesters marching with Mexican flags; Black Lives Matter demonstrators bearing antipolice slogans—these are the images of the opposition that Trump will wish his supporters to see. The more offensively the protesters behave, the more pleased Trump will be.

Calculated outrage is an old political trick, but nobody in the history of American politics has deployed it as aggressively, as repeatedly, or with such success as Donald Trump. If there is harsh law enforcement by the Trump administration, it will benefit the president not to the extent that it quashes unrest, but to the extent that it enflames more of it, ratifying the apocalyptic vision that haunted his speech at the convention.

At a rally in Grand Rapids, Michigan, in December, Trump got to talking about Vladimir Putin. “And then they said, ‘You know he’s killed reporters,’ ” Trump told the audience. “And I don’t like that. I’m totally against that. By the way, I hate some of these people, but I’d never kill them. I hate them. No, I think, no—these people, honestly—I’ll be honest. I’ll be honest. I would never kill them. I would never do that. Ah, let’s see—nah, no, I wouldn’t. I would never kill them. But I do hate them.”

In the early days of the Trump transition, Nic Dawes, a journalist who has worked in South Africa, delivered an ominous warning to the American media about what to expect. “Get used to being stigmatized as ‘opposition,’ ” he wrote. “The basic idea is simple: to delegitimize accountability journalism by framing it as partisan.”

The rulers of backsliding democracies resent an independent press, but cannot extinguish it. They may curb the media's appetite for critical coverage by intimidating unfriendly journalists, as President Jacob Zuma and members of his party have done in South Africa. Mostly, however, modern strongmen seek merely to discredit journalism as an institution, by denying that such a thing as independent judgment can exist. All reporting serves an agenda. There is no truth, only competing attempts to grab power.

By filling the media space with bizarre inventions and brazen denials, purveyors of fake news hope to mobilize potential supporters with righteous wrath—and to demoralize potential opponents by nurturing the idea that everybody lies and nothing matters. A would-be kleptocrat is actually better served by spreading cynicism than by deceiving followers with false beliefs: Believers can be disillusioned; people who expect to hear only lies can hardly complain when a lie is exposed. The inculcation of cynicism breaks down the distinction between those forms of media that try their imperfect best to report the truth, and those that purvey falsehoods for reasons of profit or ideology. The New York Times becomes the equivalent of Russia's RT; The Washington Post of Breitbart; NPR of Infowars.

One story, still supremely disturbing, exemplifies the falsifying method. During November and December, the slow-moving California vote count gradually pushed Hillary Clinton's lead over Donald Trump in the national popular vote further and further: past 1 million, past 1.5 million, past 2 million, past 2.5 million. Trump's share of the vote would ultimately clock in below Richard Nixon's in 1960, Al Gore's in 2000, John Kerry's in 2004, Gerald Ford's in 1976, and Mitt Romney's in 2012—and barely ahead of Michael Dukakis's in 1988.

This outcome evidently gnawed at the president-elect. On November 27, Trump tweeted that he had in fact “won the popular vote if you deduct the millions of people who voted illegally.” He followed up that astonishing, and unsubstantiated, statement with an escalating series of tweets and retweets.

It's hard to do justice to the breathtaking audacity of such a claim. If true, it would be so serious as to demand a criminal investigation at a minimum, presumably spanning many states. But of course the claim was not true. Trump had not a smidgen of evidence beyond his own bruised feelings and internet flotsam from flagrantly unreliable sources. Yet once the president-elect lent his prestige to the crazy claim, it became fact for many people. A survey by YouGov found that by December 1, 43 percent of Republicans accepted the claim that millions of people had voted illegally in 2016.

A clear untruth had suddenly become a contested possibility. When CNN's Jeff Zeleny correctly reported on November 28 that Trump's tweet was baseless, Fox's Sean Hannity accused Zeleny

of media bias—and then proceeded to urge the incoming Trump administration to take a new tack with the White House press corps, and to punish reporters like Zeleny. “I think it’s time to reevaluate the press and maybe change the traditional relationship with the press and the White House,” Hannity said. “My message tonight to the press is simple: You guys are done. You’ve been exposed as fake, as having an agenda, as colluding. You’re a fake news organization.”

This was no idiosyncratic brain wave of Hannity’s. The previous morning, Ari Fleischer, the former press secretary in George W. Bush’s administration, had advanced a similar idea in a Wall Street Journal op-ed, suggesting that the White House could withhold credentials for its press conferences from media outlets that are “too liberal or unfair.” Newt Gingrich recommended that Trump stop giving press conferences altogether.

Twitter, unmediated by the press, has proved an extremely effective communication tool for Trump. And the whipping-up of potentially violent Twitter mobs against media critics is already a standard method of Trump’s governance. Megyn Kelly blamed Trump and his campaign’s social-media director for inciting Trump’s fans against her to such a degree that she felt compelled to hire armed guards to protect her family. I’ve talked with well-funded Trump supporters who speak of recruiting a troll army explicitly modeled on those used by Turkey’s Recep Tayyip Erdoğan and Russia’s Putin to take control of the social-media space, intimidating some critics and overwhelming others through a blizzard of doubt-casting and misinformation. The WikiLeaks Task Force recently tweeted—then hastily deleted—a suggestion that it would build a database to track personal and financial information on all verified Twitter accounts, the kind of accounts typically used by journalists at major media organizations. It’s not hard to imagine how such compilations could be used to harass or intimidate.

Even so, it seems unlikely that President Trump will outright send the cameras away. He craves media attention too much. But he and his team are serving notice that a new era in government-media relations is coming, an era in which all criticism is by definition oppositional—and all critics are to be treated as enemies.

In an online article for The New York Review of Books, the Russian-born journalist Masha Gessen brilliantly noted a commonality between Donald Trump and the man Trump admires so much, Vladimir Putin. “Lying is the message,” she wrote. “It’s not just that both Putin and Trump lie, it is that they lie in the same way and for the same purpose: blatantly, to assert power over truth itself.”

The lurid mass movements of the 20th century—communist, fascist, and other—have bequeathed to our imaginations an outdated image of what 21st-century authoritarianism might look like.

Whatever else happens, Americans are not going to assemble in parade-ground formations, any more than they will crank a gramophone or dance the turkey trot. In a society where few people walk to work, why mobilize young men in matching shirts to command the streets? If you're seeking to domineer and bully, you want your storm troopers to go online, where the more important traffic is. Demagogues need no longer stand erect for hours orating into a radio microphone. Tweet lies from a smartphone instead.

“Populist-fueled democratic backsliding is difficult to counter,” wrote the political scientists Andrea Kendall-Taylor and Erica Frantz late last year. “Because it is subtle and incremental, there is no single moment that triggers widespread resistance or creates a focal point around which an opposition can coalesce ... Piecemeal democratic erosion, therefore, typically provokes only fragmented resistance.” Their observation was rooted in the experiences of countries ranging from the Philippines to Hungary. It could apply here too.

If people retreat into private life, if critics grow quieter, if cynicism becomes endemic, the corruption will slowly become more brazen, the intimidation of opponents stronger. Laws intended to ensure accountability or prevent graft or protect civil liberties will be weakened.

If the president uses his office to grab billions for himself and his family, his supporters will feel empowered to take millions. If he successfully exerts power to punish enemies, his successors will emulate his methods.

If citizens learn that success in business or in public service depends on the favor of the president and his ruling clique, then it's not only American politics that will change. The economy will be corrupted too, and with it the larger culture. A culture that has accepted that graft is the norm, that rules don't matter as much as relationships with those in power, and that people can be punished for speech and acts that remain theoretically legal—such a culture is not easily reoriented back to constitutionalism, freedom, and public integrity.

The oft-debated question “Is Donald Trump a fascist?” is not easy to answer. There are certainly fascistic elements to him: the subdivision of society into categories of friend and foe; the boastful virility and the delight in violence; the vision of life as a struggle for dominance that only some can win, and that others must lose.

Yet there's also something incongruous and even absurd about applying the sinister label of fascist to Donald Trump. He is so pathetically needy, so shamelessly self-interested, so fitful and

distracted. Fascism fetishizes hardihood, sacrifice, and struggle—concepts not often associated with Trump.

A would-be kleptocrat is better served by spreading cynicism than by deceiving followers.

Perhaps this is the wrong question. Perhaps the better question about Trump is not “What is he?” but “What will he do to us?”

By all early indications, the Trump presidency will corrode public integrity and the rule of law—and also do untold damage to American global leadership, the Western alliance, and democratic norms around the world. The damage has already begun, and it will not be soon or easily undone. Yet exactly how much damage is allowed to be done is an open question—the most important near-term question in American politics. It is also an intensely personal one, for its answer will be determined by the answer to another question: What will you do? And you? And you?

Of course we want to believe that everything will turn out all right. In this instance, however, that lovely and customary American assumption itself qualifies as one of the most serious impediments to everything turning out all right. If the story ends without too much harm to the republic, it won't be because the dangers were imagined, but because citizens resisted.

The duty to resist should weigh most heavily upon those of us who—because of ideology or partisan affiliation or some other reason—are most predisposed to favor President Trump and his agenda. The years ahead will be years of temptation as well as danger: temptation to seize a rare political opportunity to cram through an agenda that the American majority would normally reject. Who knows when that chance will recur?

A constitutional regime is founded upon the shared belief that the most fundamental commitment of the political system is to the rules. The rules matter more than the outcomes. It's because the rules matter most that Hillary Clinton conceded the presidency to Trump despite winning millions more votes. It's because the rules matter most that the giant state of California will accept the supremacy of a federal government that its people rejected by an almost two-to-one margin.

Perhaps the words of a founding father of modern conservatism, Barry Goldwater, offer guidance. “If I should later be attacked for neglecting my constituents' ‘interests,’ ” Goldwater wrote in *The Conscience of a Conservative*, “I shall reply that I was informed their main interest is liberty and that in that cause I am doing the very best I can.” These words should be kept in mind by those conservatives who think a tax cut or health-care reform a sufficient reward for enabling the slow rot of constitutional government.

Many of the worst and most subversive things Trump will do will be highly popular. Voters liked the threats and incentives that kept Carrier manufacturing jobs in Indiana. Since 1789, the wisest American leaders have invested great ingenuity in creating institutions to protect the electorate from its momentary impulses toward arbitrary action: the courts, the professional officer corps of the armed forces, the civil service, the Federal Reserve—and undergirding it all, the guarantees of the Constitution and especially the Bill of Rights. More than any president in U.S. history since at least the time of Andrew Jackson, Donald Trump seeks to subvert those institutions.

Trump and his team count on one thing above all others: public indifference. “I think people don’t care,” he said in September when asked whether voters wanted him to release his tax returns. “Nobody cares,” he reiterated to 60 Minutes in November. Conflicts of interest with foreign investments? Trump tweeted on November 21 that he didn’t believe voters cared about that either: “Prior to the election it was well known that I have interests in properties all over the world. Only the crooked media makes this a big deal!”

What happens in the next four years will depend heavily on whether Trump is right or wrong about how little Americans care about their democracy and the habits and conventions that sustain it. If they surprise him, they can restrain him.

Public opinion, public scrutiny, and public pressure still matter greatly in the U.S. political system. In January, an unexpected surge of voter outrage thwarted plans to neutralize the independent House ethics office. That kind of defense will need to be replicated many times. Elsewhere in this issue, Jonathan Rauch describes some of the networks of defense that Americans are creating.

Get into the habit of telephoning your senators and House member at their local offices, especially if you live in a red state. Press your senators to ensure that prosecutors and judges are chosen for their independence—and that their independence is protected. Support laws to require the Treasury to release presidential tax returns if the president fails to do so voluntarily. Urge new laws to clarify that the Emoluments Clause applies to the president’s immediate family, and that it refers not merely to direct gifts from governments but to payments from government-affiliated enterprises as well. Demand an independent investigation by qualified professionals of the role of foreign intelligence services in the 2016 election—and the contacts, if any, between those services and American citizens. Express your support and sympathy for journalists attacked by social-media trolls, especially women in journalism, so often the preferred targets. Honor civil servants who are fired or forced to resign because they defied improper orders. Keep close watch for signs of the rise of a culture of official impunity, in which friends and supporters of power-holders are allowed to flout rules that bind everyone else.

Those citizens who fantasize about defying tyranny from within fortified compounds have never understood how liberty is actually threatened in a modern bureaucratic state: not by diktat and violence, but by the slow, demoralizing process of corruption and deceit. And the way that liberty must be defended is not with amateur firearms, but with an unwearying insistence upon the honesty, integrity, and professionalism of American institutions and those who lead them. We are living through the most dangerous challenge to the free government of the United States that anyone alive has encountered. What happens next is up to you and me. Don't be afraid. This moment of danger can also be your finest hour as a citizen and an American.

About the Author



David Frum is a senior editor at The Atlantic and the chairman of Policy Exchange. In 2001–02, he was a speechwriter for President George W. Bush.

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

Jonathan Rauch

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It's 2020, four years from now. The campaign is under way to succeed the president, who is retiring after a single wretched term. Voters are angrier than ever—at politicians, at compromisers, at the establishment. Congress and the White House seem incapable of working together on anything, even when their interests align. With lawmaking at a standstill, the president's use of executive orders and regulatory discretion has reached a level that Congress views as dictatorial—not that Congress can do anything about it, except file lawsuits that the divided Supreme Court, its three vacancies unfilled, has been unable to resolve.

On Capitol Hill, Speaker Paul Ryan resigned after proving unable to pass a budget, or much else. The House burned through two more speakers and one “acting” speaker, a job invented following four speakerless months. The Senate, meanwhile, is tied in knots by wannabe presidents and aspiring talk-show hosts, who use the chamber as a social-media platform to build their brands by obstructing—well, everything. The Defense Department is among hundreds of agencies that have not been reauthorized, the government has shut down three times, and, yes, it finally happened: The United States briefly defaulted on the national debt, precipitating a market collapse and an economic downturn. No one wanted that outcome, but no one was able to prevent it.

As the presidential primaries unfold, Kanye West is leading a fractured field of Democrats. The Republican front-runner is Phil Robertson, of Duck Dynasty fame. Elected governor of Louisiana only a few months ago, he is promising to defy the Washington establishment by never trimming his beard. Party elders have given up all pretense of being more than spectators, and most of the candidates have given up all pretense of party loyalty. On the debate stages, and everywhere else, anything goes.

I could continue, but you get the gist. Yes, the political future I've described is unreal. But it is also a linear extrapolation of several trends on vivid display right now. 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 Republican leader, railing against the Republican establishment, and closing the government as a career move.

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.

Political disintegration plagues Congress, too. House Republicans barely managed to elect a speaker last year. Congress did agree in the fall on a budget framework intended to keep the government open through the election—a signal accomplishment, by today’s low standards—but by April, hard-line conservatives had revoked the deal, thereby humiliating the new speaker and potentially causing another shutdown crisis this fall. As of this writing, it’s not clear whether the hard-liners will push to the brink, but the bigger point is this: If they do, there is not much that party leaders can do about it.

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. Years before the Senate had to cope with Ted Cruz, it had to cope with Jesse Helms. The difference is that Cruz shut down the government, which Helms could not have done had he even imagined trying.

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.

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.

The Framers worried about demagogic excess and populist caprice, so they created buffers and gatekeepers between voters and the government. Only one chamber, the House of Representatives, would be directly elected. A radical who wanted to get into the Senate would need to get past the state legislature, which selected senators; a usurper who wanted to seize the presidency would need to get past the Electoral College, a convocation of elders who chose the president; and so on.

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.

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.

Parties, machines, and hacks may not have been pretty, but they did their job—so well that the country forgot why it needed them.

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.

In March, when Republican Senator Jerry Moran of Kansas told a Rotary Club meeting that he thought President Obama’s Supreme Court nominee deserved a Senate hearing, the Tea Party Patriots immediately responded with what has become activists’ go-to threat: “It’s this kind of outrageous behavior that leads Tea Party Patriots Citizens Fund activists and supporters to think seriously about encouraging Dr. Milton Wolf”—a physician and Tea Party activist—“to run against Sen. Moran in the August GOP primary.” (Moran hastened to issue a statement saying that he would oppose Obama’s nominee regardless.) 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.

We reformed Congress. For a long time, seniority ruled on Capitol Hill. To exercise power, you had to wait for years, and chairs ran their committees like fiefs. It was an arrangement that hardly seemed either meritocratic or democratic. Starting with a rebellion by the liberal post-Watergate class in the ’70s, and then accelerating with the rise of Newt Gingrich and his conservative revolutionaries in the ’90s, the seniority and committee systems came under attack and withered. Power on the Hill has flowed both up to a few top leaders and down to individual members. Unfortunately, the reformers overlooked something important: Seniority and committee spots rewarded teamwork and loyalty, they ensured that people at the top were experienced, and they harnessed hundreds of middle-ranking members of Congress to the tasks of legislating. Compounding the problem, Gingrich’s Republican revolutionaries, eager to prove their anti-Washington bona fides, cut committee staffs by a third, further diminishing Congress’s institutional horsepower.

Smoke-filled rooms were good for brokering complex compromises in which nothing was settled until everything was settled.

Congress's attempts to replace hierarchies and middlemen with top-down diktat and ad hoc working groups have mostly failed. More than perhaps ever before, Congress today is a collection of individual entrepreneurs and pressure groups. In the House, disintermediation has shifted the balance of power toward a small but cohesive minority of conservative Freedom Caucus members who think nothing of wielding their power against their own leaders. Last year, as House Republicans struggled to agree on a new speaker, the conservatives did not blush at demanding "the right to oppose their leaders and vote down legislation without repercussions," as *Time* magazine reported. In the Senate, Ted Cruz made himself a leading presidential contender by engaging in debt-limit brinkmanship and deriding the party's leadership, going so far as to call Majority Leader Mitch McConnell a liar on the Senate floor. "The rhetoric—and confrontational stance—are classic Cruz," wrote Burgess Everett in *Politico* last October: "Stake out a position to the right of where his leaders will end up, criticize them for ignoring him and conservative grass-roots voters, then use the ensuing internecine fight to stoke his presidential bid." No wonder his colleagues detest him. But Cruz was doing what makes sense in an age of maximal political individualism, and we can safely bet that his success will inspire imitation.

We reformed closed-door negotiations. As recently as the early 1970s, congressional committees could easily retreat behind closed doors and members could vote on many bills anonymously, with only the final tallies reported. Federal advisory committees, too, could meet off the record. Understandably, in the wake of Watergate, those practices came to be viewed as suspect. Today, federal law, congressional rules, and public expectations have placed almost all formal deliberations and many informal ones in full public view. One result is greater transparency, which is good. But another result is that finding space for delicate negotiations and candid deliberations can be difficult. Smoke-filled rooms, whatever their disadvantages, were good for brokering complex compromises in which nothing was settled until everything was settled; once gone, they turned out to be difficult to replace. In public, interest groups and grandstanding politicians can tear apart a compromise before it is halfway settled.

Despite promising to televise negotiations over health-care reform, President Obama went behind closed doors with interest groups to put the package together; no sane person would have negotiated in full public view. In 2013, Congress succeeded in approving a modest bipartisan budget deal in large measure because the House and Senate Budget Committee chairs were empowered to "figure it out themselves, very, very privately," as one Democratic aide told Jill Lawrence for a 2015 Brookings report. TV cameras, recorded votes, and public markups do increase transparency, but they come at the cost of complicating candid conversations. "The idea that Washington would work better if there were TV cameras monitoring every conversation gets it exactly wrong," the Democratic former Senate majority leader Tom Daschle wrote in 2014, in his foreword to the book *City of Rivals*. "The lack of opportunities for honest dialogue and creative give-and-take lies at the root of today's dysfunction."

We reformed pork. For most of American history, a principal goal of any member of Congress was to bring home bacon for his district. Pork-barrel spending never really cost very much, and it helped glue Congress together by giving members a kind of currency to trade: You support my pork, and I'll support yours. Also, because pork was dispensed by powerful appropriations committees with input from senior congressional leaders, it provided a handy way for the leadership to buy votes and reward loyalists. Starting in the '70s, however, and then snowballing in the '90s, the regular appropriations process broke down, a casualty of reforms that weakened appropriators' power, of "sunshine laws" that reduced their autonomy, and of polarization that complicated negotiations. Conservatives and liberals alike attacked pork-barreling as corrupt, culminating in early 2011, when a strange-bedfellows coalition of Tea Partiers and progressives banned earmarking, the practice of dropping goodies into bills as a way to attract votes—including, ironically, votes for politically painful spending reductions.

Congress has not passed all its annual appropriations bills in 20 years, and more than \$300 billion a year in federal spending goes out the door without proper authorization. Routine business such as passing a farm bill or a surface-transportation bill now takes years instead of weeks or months to complete. Today two-thirds of federal-program spending (excluding interest on the national debt) runs on formula-driven autopilot. This automatic spending by so-called entitlement programs eludes the discipline of being regularly voted on, dwarfs old-fashioned pork in magnitude, and is so hard to restrain that it's often called the "third rail" of politics. The political cost has also been high: Congressional leaders lost one of their last remaining tools to induce followership and team play. "Trying to be a leader where you have no sticks and very few carrots is dang near impossible," the Republican former Senate Majority Leader Trent Lott told CNN in 2013, shortly after renegade Republicans pointlessly shut down the government. "Members don't get anything from you and leaders don't give anything. They don't feel like you can reward them or punish them."

Like campaign contributions and smoke-filled rooms, pork is a tool of democratic governance, not a violation of it. It can be used for corrupt purposes but also, very often, for vital ones. As the political scientist Diana Evans wrote in a 2004 book, *Greasing the Wheels: Using Pork Barrel Projects to Build Majority Coalitions in Congress*, "The irony is this: pork barreling, despite its much maligned status, gets things done." In 1964, to cite one famous example, Lyndon Johnson could not have passed his landmark civil-rights bill without support from House Republican leader Charles Halleck of Indiana, who named his price: a NASA research grant for his district, which LBJ was glad to provide. Just last year, Republican Senator John McCain, the chairman of the Senate Armed Services Committee, was asked how his committee managed to pass bipartisan authorization bills year after year, even as the rest of Congress ground to a legislative standstill. In part, McCain explained, it was because "there's a lot in there for members of the committees."

Party-dominated nominating processes, soft money, congressional seniority, closed-door negotiations, pork-barrel spending—put each practice under a microscope in isolation, and it seems an unsavory way of doing political business. But sweep them all away, and one finds that business is not getting done at all. The political reforms of the past 40 or so years have pushed toward disintermediation—by favoring amateurs and outsiders over professionals and insiders; by privileging populism and self-expression over mediation and mutual restraint; by stripping middlemen of tools they need to organize the political system. All of the reforms promote an individualistic, atomized model of politics in which there are candidates and there are voters, but there is nothing in between. Other, larger trends, to be sure, have also contributed to political disorganization, but the war on middlemen has amplified and accelerated them.

Pathogens

Donald Trump and other viruses

By the beginning of this decade, the political system’s organic defenses against outsiders and insurgents were visibly crumbling. All that was needed was for the right virus to come along and exploit the opening. As it happened, two came along.

In 2009, on the heels of President Obama’s election and the economic-bailout packages, angry fiscal conservatives launched the Tea Party insurgency and watched, somewhat to their own astonishment, as it swept the country. Tea Partiers shared some of the policy predilections of loyal Republican partisans, but their mind-set was angrily anti-establishment. In a 2013 Pew Research poll, more than 70 percent of them disapproved of Republican leaders in Congress. In a 2010 Pew poll, they had rejected compromise by similar margins. They thought nothing of mounting primary challenges against Republican incumbents, and they made a special point of targeting Republicans who compromised with Democrats or even with Republican leaders. In Congress, the Republican House leadership soon found itself facing a GOP caucus whose members were too worried about “getting primaried” to vote for the compromises necessary to govern—or even to keep the government open. Threats from the Tea Party and other purist factions often outweigh any blandishments or protection that leaders can offer.

So far the Democrats have been mostly spared the anti-compromise insurrection, but their defenses are not much stronger. Molly Ball recently reported for The Atlantic’s Web site on the Working Families Party, whose purpose is “to make Democratic politicians more accountable to their liberal base through the asymmetric warfare party primaries enable, much as the conservative movement has done to Republicans.” Because African Americans and union members still mostly behave like party loyalists, and because the Democratic base does not want

to see President Obama fail, the Tea Party trick hasn't yet worked on the left. But the Democrats are vulnerable structurally, and the anti-compromise virus is out there.

A second virus was initially identified in 2002, by the University of Nebraska at Lincoln political scientists John R. Hibbing and Elizabeth Theiss-Morse, in their book *Stealth Democracy: Americans' Beliefs About How Government Should Work*. It's a shocking book, one whose implications other scholars were understandably reluctant to engage with. The rise of Donald Trump and Bernie Sanders, however, makes confronting its thesis unavoidable.

Using polls and focus groups, Hibbing and Theiss-Morse found that between 25 and 40 percent of Americans (depending on how one measures) have a severely distorted view of how government and politics are supposed to work. I think of these people as "politiphobes," because they see the contentious give-and-take of politics as unnecessary and distasteful. Specifically, they believe that obvious, commonsense solutions to the country's problems are out there for the plucking. The reason these obvious solutions are not enacted is that politicians are corrupt, or self-interested, or addicted to unnecessary partisan feuding. Not surprisingly, politiphobes think the obvious, commonsense solutions are the sorts of solutions that they themselves prefer. But the more important point is that they do not acknowledge that meaningful policy disagreement even exists. From that premise, they conclude that all the arguing and partisanship and horse-trading that go on in American politics are entirely unnecessary. Politicians could easily solve all our problems if they would only set aside their craven personal agendas.

If politicians won't do the job, then who will? Politiphobes, according to Hibbing and Theiss-Morse, believe policy should be made not by messy political conflict and negotiations but by *ensids*: empathetic, non-self-interested decision makers. These are leaders who will step forward, cast aside cowardly politicians and venal special interests, and implement long-overdue solutions. *ensids* can be politicians, technocrats, or autocrats—whatever works. Whether the process is democratic is not particularly important.

Chances are that politiphobes have been out there since long before Hibbing and Theiss-Morse identified them in 2002. Unlike the Tea Party or the Working Families Party, they aren't particularly ideological: They have popped up left, right, and center. Ross Perot's independent presidential candidacies of 1992 and 1996 appealed to the idea that any sensible businessman could knock heads together and fix Washington. In 2008, Barack Obama pandered to a center-left version of the same fantasy, promising to magically transcend partisan politics and implement the best solutions from both parties.

No previous outbreak, however, compares with the latest one, which draws unprecedented virulence from two developments. One is a steep rise in antipolitical sentiment, especially on the

right. According to polling by Pew, from 2007 to early 2016 the percentage of Americans saying they would be less likely to vote for a presidential candidate who had been an elected official in Washington for many years than for an outsider candidate more than doubled, from 15 percent to 31 percent. Republican opinion has shifted more sharply still: The percentage of Republicans preferring “new ideas and a different approach” over “experience and a proven record” almost doubled in just the six months from March to September of 2015.

The other development, of course, was Donald Trump, the perfect vector to concentrate politophobic sentiment, intensify it, and inject it into presidential politics. He had too much money and free media to be spent out of the race. He had no political record to defend. He had no political debts or party loyalty. He had no compunctions. There was nothing to restrain him from sounding every note of the politophobic fantasy with perfect pitch.

Democrats have not been immune, either. Like Trump, Bernie Sanders appealed to the antipolitical idea that the mere act of voting for him would prompt a “revolution” that would somehow clear up such knotty problems as health-care coverage, financial reform, and money in politics. Like Trump, he was a self-sufficient outsider without customary political debts or party loyalty. Like Trump, he neither acknowledged nor cared—because his supporters neither acknowledged nor cared—that his plans for governing were delusional.

Trump, Sanders, and Ted Cruz have in common that they are political sociopaths—meaning not that they are crazy, but that they don’t care what other politicians think about their behavior and they don’t need to care. That three of the four final presidential contenders in 2016 were political sociopaths is a sign of how far chaos syndrome has gone. The old, mediated system selected such people out. The new, disintermediated system seems to be selecting them in.

Symptoms

The disorder that exacerbates all other disorders

There is nothing new about political insurgencies in the United States—nor anything inherently wrong with them. Just the opposite, in fact: Insurgencies have brought fresh ideas and renewed participation to the political system since at least the time of Andrew Jackson.

There is also nothing new about insiders losing control of the presidential nominating process. In 1964 and 1972, to the dismay of party regulars, nominations went to unelectable candidates—Barry Goldwater for the Republicans in 1964 and George McGovern for the Democrats in

1972—who thrilled the parties’ activist bases and went on to predictably epic defeats. So it’s tempting to say, “Democracy is messy. Insurgents have fair gripes. Incumbents should be challenged. Who are you, Mr. Establishment, to say the system is broken merely because you don’t like the people it is pushing forward?”

The problem is not, however, that disruptions happen. The problem is that chaos syndrome wreaks havoc on the system’s ability to absorb and channel disruptions. Trying to quash political disruptions would probably only create more of them. The trick is to be able to govern through them.

Leave aside the fact that Goldwater and McGovern, although ideologues, were estimable figures within their parties. (McGovern actually co-chaired a Democratic Party commission that rewrote the nominating rules after 1968, opening the way for his own campaign.) Neither of them, either as senator or candidate, wanted to or did disrupt the ordinary workings of government.

Jason Grumet, the president of the Bipartisan Policy Center and the author of *City of Rivals*, likes to point out that within three weeks of Bill Clinton’s impeachment by the House of Representatives, the president was signing new laws again. “While they were impeaching him they were negotiating, they were talking, they were having committee hearings,” Grumet said in a recent speech. “And so we have to ask ourselves, what is it that not long ago allowed our government to metabolize the aggression that is inherent in any pluralistic society and still get things done?”

I have been covering Washington since the early 1980s, and I’ve seen a lot of gridlock. Sometimes I’ve been grateful for gridlock, which is an appropriate outcome when there is no working majority for a particular policy. For me, however, 2011 brought a wake-up call. The system was failing even when there was a working majority. That year, President Obama and Republican House Speaker John Boehner, in intense personal negotiations, tried to clinch a budget agreement that touched both parties’ sacred cows, curtailing growth in the major entitlement programs such as Medicare, Medicaid, and Social Security by hundreds of billions of dollars and increasing revenues by \$800 billion or more over 10 years, as well as reducing defense and nondefense discretionary spending by more than \$1 trillion. Though it was less grand than previous budgetary “grand bargains,” the package represented the kind of bipartisan accommodation that constitutes the federal government’s best and perhaps only path to long-term fiscal stability.

People still debate why the package fell apart, and there is blame enough to go around. My own reading at the time, however, concurred with Matt Bai’s postmortem in *The New York Times*:

Democratic leaders could have found the rank-and-file support they needed to pass the bargain, but Boehner could not get the deal past conservatives in his own caucus. “What’s undeniable, despite all the furious efforts to peddle a different story,” Bai wrote, “is that Obama managed to persuade his closest allies to sign off on what he wanted them to do, and Boehner didn’t, or couldn’t.” We’ll never know, but I believe that the kind of budget compromise Boehner and Obama tried to shake hands on, had it reached a vote, would have passed with solid majorities in both chambers and been signed into law. The problem was not polarization; it was disorganization. A latent majority could not muster and assert itself.

As soon became apparent, Boehner’s 2011 debacle was not a glitch but part of an emerging pattern. Two years later, the House’s conservative faction shut down the government with the connivance of Ted Cruz, the very last thing most Republicans wanted to happen. When Boehner was asked by Jay Leno why he had permitted what the speaker himself called a “very predictable disaster,” he replied, rather poignantly: “When I looked up, I saw my colleagues going this way. You learn that a leader without followers is simply a man taking a walk.”

Boehner was right. Washington doesn’t have a crisis of leadership; it has a crisis of followership. One can argue about particulars, and Congress does better on some occasions than on others. Overall, though, minority factions and veto groups are becoming ever more dominant on Capitol Hill as leaders watch their organizational capacity dribble away. Helpless to do much more than beg for support, and hostage to his own party’s far right, an exhausted Boehner finally gave up and quit last year. Almost immediately, his heir apparent, Majority Leader Kevin McCarthy, was shot to pieces too. No wonder Paul Ryan, in his first act as speaker, remonstrated with his own colleagues against chaos.

Nevertheless, by spring the new speaker was bogged down. “Almost six months into the job, Ryan and his top lieutenants face questions about whether the Wisconsin Republican’s tenure atop the House is any more effective than his predecessor,” Politico’s Web site reported in April. The House Republican Conference, an unnamed Republican told Politico, is “unwhippable and unleadable. Ryan is as talented as you can be: There’s nobody better. But even he can’t do anything. Who could?”

Of course, Congress’s incompetence makes the electorate even more disgusted, which leads to even greater political volatility. In a Republican presidential debate in March, Ohio Governor John Kasich described the cycle this way: The people, he said, “want change, and they keep putting outsiders in to bring about the change. Then the change doesn’t come ... because we’re putting people in that don’t understand compromise.” Disruption in politics and dysfunction in government reinforce each other. Chaos becomes the new normal.

Being a disorder of the immune system, chaos syndrome magnifies other problems, turning political head colds into pneumonia. Take polarization. Over the past few decades, the public has become sharply divided across partisan and ideological lines. Chaos syndrome compounds the problem, because even when Republicans and Democrats do find something to work together on, the threat of an extremist primary challenge funded by a flood of outside money makes them think twice—or not at all. Opportunities to make bipartisan legislative advances slip away.

Neurotic hatred of the political class is the country's last universally acceptable form of bigotry.

Or take the new technologies that are revolutionizing the media. Today, a figure like Trump can reach millions through Twitter without needing to pass network-TV gatekeepers or spend a dime. A figure like Sanders can use the Internet to reach millions of donors without recourse to traditional fund-raising sources. Outside groups, friendly and unfriendly alike, can drown out political candidates in their own races. (As a frustrated Cruz told a supporter about outside groups ostensibly backing his presidential campaign, "I'm left to just hope that what they say bears some resemblance to what I actually believe.") Disruptive media technologies are nothing new in American politics; they have arisen periodically since the early 19th century, as the historian Jill Lepore noted in a February article in *The New Yorker*. What is new is the system's difficulty in coping with them. Disintermediating technologies bring fresh voices into the fray, but they also bring atomization and cacophony. To organize coherent plays amid swarms of attack ads, middlemen need to be able to coordinate the fund-raising and messaging of candidates and parties and activists—which is what they are increasingly hard-pressed to do.

Assembling power to govern a sprawling, diverse, and increasingly divided democracy is inevitably hard. Chaos syndrome makes it all the harder. For Democrats, the disorder is merely chronic; for the Republican Party, it is acute. Finding no precedent for what he called Trump's hijacking of an entire political party, Jon Meacham went so far as to tell Joe Scarborough in *The Washington Post* that George W. Bush might prove to be the last Republican president.

Nearly everyone panned party regulars for not stopping Trump much earlier, but no one explained just how the party regulars were supposed to have done that. Stopping an insurgency requires organizing a coalition against it, but an incapacity to organize is the whole problem. The reality is that the levers and buttons parties and political professionals might once have pulled and pushed had long since been disconnected.

Prognosis and Treatment

Chaos syndrome as a psychiatric disorder

I don't have a quick solution to the current mess, but I do think it would be easy, in principle, to start moving in a better direction. Although returning parties and middlemen to anything like their 19th-century glory is not conceivable—or, in today's America, even desirable—strengthening parties and middlemen is very doable. Restrictions inhibiting the parties from coordinating with their own candidates serve to encourage political wildcatting, so repeal them. Limits on donations to the parties drive money to unaccountable outsiders, so lift them. Restoring the earmarks that help grease legislative success requires nothing more than a change in congressional rules. And there are all kinds of ways the parties could move insiders back to the center of the nomination process. If they wanted to, they could require would-be candidates to get petition signatures from elected officials and county party chairs, or they could send unbound delegates to their conventions (as several state parties are doing this year), or they could enhance the role of middlemen in a host of other ways.

Building party machines and political networks is what career politicians naturally do, if they're allowed to do it. So let them. I'm not talking about rigging the system to exclude challengers or prevent insurgencies. I'm talking about de-rigging the system to reduce its pervasive bias against middlemen. Then they can do their job, thereby making the world safe for challengers and insurgencies.

Unfortunately, although the mechanics of de-rigging are fairly straightforward, the politics of it are hard. The public is wedded to an anti-establishment narrative. The political-reform community is invested in direct participation, transparency, fund-raising limits on parties, and other elements of the anti-intermediation worldview. The establishment, to the extent that there still is such a thing, is demoralized and shattered, barely able to muster an argument for its own existence.

But there are optimistic signs, too. Liberals in the campaign-finance-reform community are showing new interest in strengthening the parties. Academics and commentators are getting a good look at politics without effective organizers and cohesive organizations, and they are terrified. On Capitol Hill, conservatives and liberals alike are on board with restoring regular order in Congress. In Washington, insiders have had some success at reorganizing and pushing back. No Senate Republican was defeated by a primary challenger in 2014, in part because then-Senate Minority Leader Mitch McConnell, a machine politician par excellence, created a network of business allies to counterpunch against the Tea Party.

The biggest obstacle, I think, is the general public's reflexive, unreasoning hostility to politicians and the process of politics. Neurotic hatred of the political class is the country's last universally

acceptable form of bigotry. Because that problem is mental, not mechanical, it really is hard to remedy.

In March, a Trump supporter told *The New York Times*, “I want to see Trump go up there and do damage to the Republican Party.” Another said, “We know who Donald Trump is, and we’re going to use Donald Trump to either take over the G.O.P. or blow it up.” That kind of anti-establishment nihilism deserves no respect or accommodation in American public life. Populism, individualism, and a skeptical attitude toward politics are all healthy up to a point, but America has passed that point. Political professionals and parties have many shortcomings to answer for—including, primarily on the Republican side, their self-mutilating embrace of anti-establishment rhetoric—but relentlessly bashing them is no solution. You haven’t heard anyone say this, but it’s time someone did: Our most pressing political problem today is that the country abandoned the establishment, not the other way around.

About the Author

Jonathan Rauch is a contributing editor at *The Atlantic* and *National Journal* and a senior fellow at the Brookings Institution.