

How American Politics Went Insane

EQ: How have theory, debate, and compromise influenced the U.S. Constitutional System?

Aim: How does the current state of politics connect to the Foundations of American Democracy?

Directions:

Step 1: As you read:

1. Highlight examples of **Popular Sovereignty (yellow)**, **Republicanism (pink)**, and **Social Contract (green)**.
2. Underline anything that stands out to you or that you find interesting.
3. Circle any words that stand out to you or that you do not know.

Step 2: Complete the attached 3-2-1 questions.

Key Terms:

- **Popular Sovereignty:** basic U.S. principle which holds that the people are the source of all governmental power
- **Republicanism:** A philosophy of limited government with elected representatives serving at the will of the people. The government is based on consent of the governed.
- **Social Contract:** belief that the state only exists to serve the will of the people, and they are the source of all political power enjoyed by the state. They can choose to give or withhold power

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

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Add a title for each paragraph



Highlight examples of **Popular Sovereignty (yellow)**, **Republicanism (pink)**, and **Social Contract (green)**



Main ideas/details each paragraph in 2-3 bullet points



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.

Former presidential hopeful Jeb Bush called Donald Trump "a chaos candidate." Unfortunately for Bush, Trump's supporters didn't mind. They *liked* that about him. (Charles Rex Arbogast / AP)

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.

In their different ways, Donald Trump and Bernie Sanders have demonstrated that the major political parties no longer have intelligible boundaries or enforceable norms. (Charlie Neibergall / AP)

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.

House Speaker Paul Ryan has already faced a rebellion. The reality is that there no longer is any such thing as a "party leader." (Cliff Owen / AP)

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.

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, common sense 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.

“Pork” can be a vital tool of democratic governance.

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 politiphobic 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 politiphobic 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.

3-2-1

Three things you learned :	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1. 2. 3.
Two things you found interesting :	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1. 2.
One question you still have :	

