Rauch's Case That Reform Ruined U.S. Politics

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By Peter Berkowitz
RCP Contributor
June 22, 2016

From ordinary citizens to seasoned reporters and veteran political scientists, Americans bemoan their malfunctioning political system. The symptoms are evident. The causes and cures are very much in dispute.

Democrats are preparing to nominate for president a soon-to-be septuagenarian whom scandal has followed since she stepped on the national stage more than two decades ago and who is under criminal investigation by the FBI for allegedly mishandling classified information. Despite enormous advantages in money, organization, and party backing, Hillary Clinton had trouble shaking off the challenge of the bedraggled, long-time socialist and full-fledged septuagenarian Bernie Sanders, an unlikely repository of the hope for change vested in him by millions of young liberals.

Meanwhile, Republicans are on the verge of selecting as their candidate a vain and vulgar 70-year-old billionaire, a political neophyte who has exhibited little appreciation of either the basic elements of domestic and foreign policy or even the fundamental principles of limited constitutional government. Despite having been the front-runner since shortly after he threw his hat in the ring a year ago and having apparently sewn up the nomination in early May, Donald Trump can't quiet the calls to rewrite Republican convention rules to release his delegates so that the party can nominate someone else. Nor can he ease anxieties that his candidacy, whether he wins or loses, is ripping the GOP apart.

Experts across the political spectrum identify political polarization, amplified by social media, as a major cause for the grandstanding, ineptness, and paralysis fueling voter disgruntlement. Progressives further emphasize the radicalness of congressional Republicans' determination to foist on the nation a harsh right-wing agenda. Conservatives additionally stress the stifling regime of political correctness imposed by the media, Hollywood, universities and the president's high-handed, my-way-or-the-highway approach to dealing with a recalcitrant legislative branch dominated by the other party.

Everyone agrees that the establishment—Republican, Democratic, or both—shoulders the lion's share of the blame. Almost everyone, that is.

In a just-released Atlantic magazine cover story, "How American Politics Went Insane," Jonathan Rauch argues that the fundamental *weakness* of the two parties—not their stranglehold on the system—is the main culprit. A contributing editor at the Atlantic and a senior fellow at the Brookings Institution, Rauch contends that American government suffers

from “chaos syndrome,” which he defines as “a chronic decline in the political system’s capacity for self-organization.” Trump and Sanders are only the latest evidence that “the political parties no longer have either intelligible boundaries or enforceable norms, and, as a result, renegade political behavior pays.”

To understand the healthy condition from which we have deteriorated, Rauch returns to America’s founding charter. “The core idea” of the Constitution, he writes, “was to restrain ambition and excess by forcing competing powers and factions to bargain and compromise.” But the Constitution only established basic political institutions and the relations among them. The multifaceted work of self-government required Americans to develop “a second, unwritten constitution” involving “state and national party committees, county party chairs, congressional subcommittees, leadership PACs, convention delegates, bundlers, and countless more.”

These “middlemen” historically have stood between voters and politicians while facilitating the bargaining and compromise to which the Constitution is dedicated. “If the Constitution was the system’s DNA,” Rauch observes, “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.”

Parties, machines, and political brokers have never presented a pretty sight. Deploring the unsavory spectacle, reformers—sometimes bipartisan, sometimes conservative, but by and large progressive—sought to curtail the dispensing of favors, the doling out of dollars, and the peddling of influence. According to Rauch, they succeeded all too well: “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.”

Reformers replaced the old nominating system, which consisted of “insider-dominated processes” that yielded moderates who were inclined to “sustain and build the party brand,” with direct primaries dominated by narrow interest groups and hyper-partisan voters.

Reformers limited money in politics to “reduce corruption (or its appearance) and curtail the power of special interests.” But the regulations they enacted impelled deep-pocketed donors to shift money from parties to “private political machines” that 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."

Reformers, in the name of merit and efficiency, diminished Congress’s seniority and committee system. This change undermined lawmakers’ incentives for teamwork, encouraged showboating, and invited brinksmanship.

Reformers curbed closed-door negotiations by congressional committees and federal advisory committees. The transparency produced by television-camera-filled rooms withered “the delicate negotiations and candid deliberations” that smoke-filled rooms facilitated and

which yielded the “complex compromises” essential to governing an extensive, pluralistic, and free society.

And reformers ended pork-barrel spending in Congress. The unintended result of banning relatively inexpensive earmarks—the practice of obtaining individual members’ votes by including in bills small, targeted benefits to their districts—was to throw a huge wrench into the general legislative appropriations process. Congressional leaders lost a crucial lever for assembling majority support and rewarding party loyalty.

Rauch worries that today’s angry public will reject even such modest measures for restoring middlemen as repealing restrictions that inhibit parties from coordinating with candidates, lifting limits on donations to parties, restoring earmarks, and increasing insiders’ influence on nominations. Blinded by a “neurotic hatred of the political class,” the people have lost sight of their interest in parties, machines, and political brokers.

Rauch singles out two groups for special criticism. With its misguided belief in pure principle, he argues, the Tea Party fosters contempt for the messy realities of politics, while “politiphobes” deny the existence of “meaningful policy disagreement,” supposing instead that “empathetic, non-self-interested decision makers” can identify reasonable and pragmatic policy solutions.

Rauch has produced a major contribution to the public debate and a testament to the continuing vitality and distinctive virtues of long-form journalism. Weaving together political reporting, history, and political science, he illuminates the long-term causes of our political infirmities and points the way to effective cures. But when it comes to claiming that “the general public’s reflexive, unreasoning hostility to politicians and the process of politics” is “the biggest obstacle” to remedying the political dysfunction that plagues America and that the Tea Party is a leading embodiment of it, he argues with uncharacteristic imprecision.

The Tea Party is a young, grassroots political movement that aims to recover the Constitution. The true “politiphobes,” by contrast, embrace the very dogmas that have inspired American progressives since the late 19th century when then-political scientist Woodrow Wilson proclaimed formal constitutional constraints detrimental to the public interest.

Yes, Tea Party members have erroneously ascribed to constitutional principles a power to straightforwardly resolve contemporary public policy puzzles. But these advocates of limited government are devoted to democratic political action. Theirs is a healthy if raw reaction to the progressive conceit coursing through the American political system for more than a century—and aggressively promulgated by contemporary political scientists and legal scholars—that democracy is best left to the experts.

Rauch persuasively argues that to overcome today's political dysfunction we must reestablish American's unwritten constitution. Restoring a place for the middlemen in our political system, however, depends on effectively countering the long-standing and well-entrenched progressive ambition to neutralize our written Constitution and its openness to, and wise channeling of, genuine diversity of political opinion.

Peter Berkowitz is the Tad and Dianne Taube senior fellow at the Hoover Institution, Stanford University. His writings are posted at PeterBerkowitz.com and he can be followed on Twitter @BerkowitzPeter.