'Trump … didn't cause the chaos. The chaos caused Trump.'

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Jonathan Rauch, in the Atlantic (and here on Theatlantic.com), has a really insightful article about "how American politics went insane" — the terrible dysfunction that characterizes both U.S. politics and (not coincidentally) the institutions by and through which we govern ourselves.

Rauch has a nuanced and subtle argument (as befits a very complex problem), and I do recommend taking the time to read it through; but my imperfect summary would be: We have succumbed to a bad case of "democratitus," systematically crippling or disabling our politicians and our political institutions, usually in the name of "good government" and "democratic values" so that they no longer can function to do the job of governing that they have done for so long.

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. . . .

[This informal system consists of] many names and faces: state and national party committees, county party chairs, congressional subcommittees, leadership pacs, convention delegates, bundlers, and countless more. [I] call them 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. . . .

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.

[Emphasis added.] Rauch gives any number of examples of how this has worked over the years: shifting to direct election of senators at the turn of the 19th century; limiting the ability of congressional representatives to insert "pork" into legislation; increasing use of lawmaking-by-referendum; curtailing the congressional seniority system, the power of committee chairpersons and the ability to conduct closed-door negotiations; limiting political contributions to candidates and parties; reforming nomination processes at all levels, with the switch to primary elections instead of "conventions, caucuses, and other insider-dominated processes" …

All worthy ideas, enacted for the worthy purposes of making politics more transparent and more responsive and fighting corruption. But in the process, Rauch argues (persuasively, to my eyes), we have lost Madison's very delicate balance, the core constitutional idea that the best way to restrain governmental ambition and excess is to have *multiple* centers of power, responsive to different constituencies and factions, requiring push-and-pull compromise among all of them to get anything done (i.e., to govern the country). Those crazy "undemocratic" features of the Constitution — the Electoral College, equal state representation in the Senate, senatorial election by state legislatures, life tenure for judges, the nominating process for the Supreme Court — are there for a reason, to act as gatekeepers and buffers between the many and the few, to distill and to refine the "voice of the people" so as to ensure, as far as possible, that governing would be the product of deliberation and compromise and not the raw exercise of power.

The political parties have been critical pieces of this governance infrastructure, repositories of a portion of this power for the past 200 years or so — but no more. Party leaders, as Rauch points out, have no power anymore; "the very term 'party leaders' has become an anachronism." *See, e.g.,* Boehner, John. They can't make deals because they have no power, and they have no power because they can't make deals.

Many of you, I realize, may be saying "And a damned good thing it is, too!" in response to all this. Bring the whole rotten system down! Those politicians all stink — the hell with them! Power to the people!

Rauch argues that three of the four final candidates for president — Donald Trump, Sen. Bernie Sanders (I-Vt.) and Sen. Ted Cruz (R-Tex.) — had, basically, this agenda, so there's obviously a great deal of sentiment moving in that direction. I think it's misguided; a government that can't do anything is a government that can't, well, do anything; call me when your Medicare checks have stopped coming, or the bridge goes out, or there's lead in your water. And if you think that dismantling these institutions is a good way to ensure that we have a government that "governs best by governing least," I think you're wrong about that, too. These political institutions were an integral part of the system that helped *check* the exercise of governmental power, and unchecked government power is not a recipe for limited government.

The Democratic National Committee email scandal so perfectly illustrates Rauch's thesis that I wouldn't be surprised to learn that he masterminded the hack of the DNC servers.

Just kidding! I sure would like to know who *was* behind it, though, and I do hope that more information comes to light about that. Imagine anyone suggesting that the Republican presidential candidate could be responsible for breaking into the DNC offices and stealing documents — surely *that* could never happen!

The DNC was helping Hillary Clinton's campaign at the expense of Sanders'. No kidding! Who didn't assume that was happening? I was under the impression that everyone knew that Clinton was the Establishment candidate and that Sanders was the Insurgent. I was also under the impression that the DNC *was* the Establishment — that's kind of its job, to *be* the Establishment. Why wouldn't it have been helping Clinton?

"Because they're supposed to be neutral," you say, "just counting up the votes evenhandedly, from the various primaries, and applying the delegate-selection rules to see who won and who lost. 'The party' doesn't have a say in this fight — only we, the people, do. 'The party' has to stay neutral until we decide, and then it must do our bidding."

This, of course, just illustrates Rauch's central point — if 'the party' is just a vote-counting machine, it quickly becomes an irrelevance; having influence within 'the party' will not matter, and nobody in his or her right mind will want to invest a great deal of time or effort trying to obtain that influence. And then we'll get TV celebrities running for president.