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Gridlock is bad. The alternative is worse.



By **Morris P. Fiorina** February 25, 2014

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Frustration with the current state of American government is widespread in the electorate, the commentariat and the academic community. Public appraisal of government in general and Congress in particular plumbs new depths. The public and the media agree that the current Congress is “[the worst ever](#).” Academic commentators consider — and in some cases advocate — significant institutional reforms, even constitutional revisions.

Although I share in the general frustration, I am loath to support the large-scale institutional changes proposed by some of our colleagues. In fact, institutional changes that reduce the checks on today’s governing majorities may have the paradoxical effect of moving public policy further from what a majority of voters would prefer.

One widely discussed argument runs along the following lines. In recent decades the United States has evolved responsible parties that historically are more characteristic of parliamentary democracies. Such parties are highly cohesive and reflexively oppose any policies advocated by their opposition. While other democracies may function satisfactorily with such parties, the United States does not have the institutional structure of a parliamentary democracy. In two-party (an important caveat) parliamentary democracies such as Britain and Germany, the party that wins the most seats in the legislature automatically wins the executive (except, inconveniently, when there are a bit more than two parties, as is currently the case in both countries). In parliamentary democracies, parliamentary majorities toe the line set by the executive, and there are no powerful independent judiciaries. The majority can govern — and be held accountable.

The United States, in contrast, has checks and balances and powers shared by presidents, representatives and senators, all of whom are independently elected (set aside the unusually powerful courts for this discussion). The system abounds with veto points that enable organized interests and intense minorities to block action. If one accepts this argument, the obvious solution is to simplify the institutional structure to drastically reduce the number of veto points and instill a common purpose in elected officials. So, abolish the filibuster. [Restrict campaign finance.](#) [Make House and Senate terms the same length, and elect representatives and senators at the same time as the president.](#) [Empower the presidency.](#) Unleash the majority.

But what if there is no majority? In the terminology of political science, our single member simple plurality electoral system manufactures majorities. But the fact that the winners in two-party competition get more votes or seats than the losers by no means guarantees that the winners' positions are those actually favored by a majority of the voters, only that those positions are likely to be preferred to those of the losers. Consider abortion. The 2012 Republican platform plank stated essentially: never, no exceptions. The Democratic platform plank stated the opposite: any time, for any reason. How many Americans would want a government in which either a powerful Democratic or Republican government was able to enact its abortion platform plank? Given public opinion on the issue, [75-80 percent would answer in the negative.](#) Unleashing the majority would unleash a policy with nothing approximating majority support among voters.

Abortion may be an extreme issue, but public opinion data suggest that on other issues as well — immigration, deficit reduction, environmental and energy issues — majorities of Americans would prefer something between the polar programs advocated by the bases of the two parties. That fact has contributed to the voter backlash observed in recent episodes of unified control of government. Roughly speaking, Democrats build their electoral coalition from the left, and Republicans from the right, but given the [generally centrist distribution of public opinion](#), each must capture enough of the center to win. Once in office, if the party governs as its base demands, marginal members of the electoral majority defect. The result of this party overreach is the 2006 Republican “thumpin’ ” and the 2010 Democratic “shellacking.”

The preponderance of political science thinking about responsible party

**It's less than two n
the race.
The Post's James F**

Hillary Clinton will she can just get tr show up, but that' done. African Ame four and eight yea and distaste for D them to the polls.

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[The Daily 202: Clint
Pennsylvania >>](#)



government reflects the experience of 20th century Britain, a far more homogeneous society than the United States, where political conflict took place largely across a simple economic redistribution divide. Such conditions provided a maximal opportunity for elections to produce clear majorities. Nevertheless, in my undergraduate courses decades ago, professors noted the instability of British policy (let's nationalize, no — denationalize, then nationalize again) as a reason to prefer American institutions to British. Moreover, the old thinking may well be dated. In their recent elections the winning parties in Britain and Germany failed to win a majority of seats and were forced into protracted negotiations and uncomfortable compromises before forming governments. Perversely, the result of “letting the majority rule” when clear majorities do not exist might well be the strengthening of minor parties.

As I have [argued elsewhere](#), and as this [series of posts on political polarization has reinforced](#), the current state of American government reflects a cumulation of economic and demographic developments that have created new tensions and problems and strained old political coalitions. Unlike the true believers who dominate the two parties, many Americans have lost faith in the old solutions but are uncertain about what new paths to follow.

By no means am I happy with the status quo. This country faces serious problems. How long before the political system seriously addresses the problems of pensions and health care, immigration, an increasingly inefficient tax system and a variety of other problems? But failing to deal with them may be no worse than attempting to deal with them in ways that do not have anything approaching majority support in the electorate. However unsatisfying the present state of affairs, voters may prefer muddling along to ping-ponging between two minorities that attempt to govern entirely by their own lights.

Further Reading

This is the latest post in our [ongoing series on political polarization](#). The previous posts are listed below. — *Dan Hopkins*

[What we do know and don't know about our polarized politics](#)

[American politics is more competitive than ever. That's making partisanship](#)

Clinton vs. Trump

Hillary Clinton may lead over Donald Trump than a month ago August had Clinton



46%

[In Colorado, Trump complacency >>](#)

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Our poll shows the

[See data on all 50 st](#)



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