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Newsletters



## Could America use a Parliament?

A fusion of legislative, executive branches would streamline government, but give it more power



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As Americans watched the economic crisis escalate in past weeks, they saw a Congress that at first seemed slow to act, a president whose pleas for his legislative package seemed unheard, even by his own party, and a House and Senate that each seemed to be steering its own course. In the end, Congress passed the economic rescue package. And in fact, the end result is what is surprising: action by our Congress is more unusual than inaction.

Before uttering the usual moans and complaints, let us stop for a moment and consider what the framers of the Constitution had in mind. Since American government is designed to be more concerned with protecting the minority out of power than with facilitating the rule of the majority in power, it may be seen as partly responsible for a perception among our citizens that the political system is sluggish, unresponsive and distant.

The system of checks and balances set up by our Constitution actually was intended to thwart quick legislative action and encourage debate, deliberation, and yes, delay. Why? Because the framers were as afraid of tyranny of the many as they were of tyranny of the few. They set up a system of majority rule with minority rights, almost ensuring that legislation would face an uphill battle.

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Could things be different if we had a parliamentary system? Of course. We could change our system in three notable ways: regularize contact between the president and Congress, allow those in the president's Cabinet to also be members of the Legislature, and allow for elections to remove unpopular presidents. These changes would require amendments to the Constitution, and would change our current system to allow for quick and decisive legislative action, and mitigate the effects of divided government.

First, the problem of divided government could be modified if the executive and legislative branches were brought closer together. This

reform proposal envisions that the president would regularly attend legislative sessions with members of his Cabinet, similar to the case of the British prime minister. Regularized executive-legislative contact could improve both communication and collegiality between the two branches of government.

Second, it might be a good idea to repeal Article I (6) (2) of the Constitution, so that Cabinet officials might simultaneously be members of Congress. The net result of this change might be that the executive and legislative branches would better understand each other, and that the House speaker could emerge as a sort of congressional prime minister, focusing power and simplifying the law-making procedure. Removing the constitutional ban on members of Congress serving in the executive branch might lead to a much less confrontational relationship between the two branches.

Third, perhaps it would be useful to reform our presidential system with the introduction of a method for special elections to reconstitute a failed government. One of the most frustrating political situations facing the American public is the development of a lame-duck president, or an ineffective Congress. Certainly, if the United States were to adopt this so-called parliamentary "safeguard" (i.e. governments can be dissolved at any time, and new elections can be scheduled quickly) weak or ineffective governments in office for long periods of time would become a thing of the past. This reform could make the presidential system considerably less stable but could promote effective governance by freeing the current presidential system from its confinement to the elections timetable.

But before we move too quickly (and the possibility of amending the Constitution in such a way is remote), we need to consider why we have a system of checks and balances in the first place. The threat of tyranny -- which so concerned the framers -- is as valid today as ever.

So, should we really try to significantly alter this system of government? A parliamentary system fuses the legislative and executive powers, allowing for quick action, but also allowing for more concentrated power. Would we really want, say, a President Nixon, a President Franklin Roosevelt, a President Clinton, a President Bush -- or any president for that matter -- to control both the executive and legislative branches?

Probably not.

Let us be cautious as we consider the options. The framers struggled with how to organize their new democracy at the end of the 18th century, and made their determination. Now, the question is up to us. What should we do? As Americans, we tend to be as suspicious of as we are dependent on government. And we, in general, prefer to keep an eye on our government officials rather than giving them free rein.

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