

TOO MUCH OF A GOOD THING: WHY WE NEED LESS DEMOCRACY

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In an 1814 letter to John Taylor, John Adams wrote that “there never was a democracy yet that did not commit suicide.” That may read today like an overstatement, but it is certainly true that our democracy finds itself facing a deep challenge: During my recent stint in the Obama administration as director of the Office of Management and Budget, it was clear to me that the country’s political polarization was growing worse—harming Washington’s ability to do the basic, necessary work of governing. If you need confirmation of this, look no further than the recent debt-limit debacle, which clearly showed that we are becoming two nations governed by a single Congress—and that paralyzing gridlock is the result.

So what to do? To solve the serious problems facing our country, we need to minimize the harm from legislative inertia by relying more on automatic policies and depoliticized commissions for certain policy decisions. In other words, radical as it sounds, we need to counter the gridlock of our political institutions by making them a bit less democratic.

I know that such ideas carry risks. And I have arrived at these proposals reluctantly: They come more from frustration than from inspiration. But we need to confront the fact that a polarized, gridlocked government is doing real harm to our country. And we have to find some way around it....

Facing this problem is crucially important because our current legislative gridlock is making it increasingly difficult for lawmakers to tackle the issues that are central to our country’s future—issues like climate change, the hard slog of recovering from a financial slump, and our long-term fiscal gap. It is clear to everyone that a failure to act will lead to undesirable outcomes in these areas. But polarization means that little action is possible. This is why I believe that we need to jettison the Civics 101 fairy tale about pure representative democracy and instead begin to build a new set of rules and institutions that would make legislative inertia less detrimental to our nation’s long-term health....

What we need, then, are ways around our politicians....

...A significant part of the response to polarization and gridlock must involve creating more independent institutions....

The problem with such commissions is that, like automatic stabilizers and backstop rules, they reduce the power of elected officials and therefore make our government somewhat less accountable to voters....

I wish it were not necessary to devise processes to circumvent legislative gridlock, but polarization isn't going away. John Adams may have been exaggerating when he pessimistically noted that democracies tend to commit suicide, yet, as we are seeing, certain aspects of representative government can end up posing serious problems. And so, we might be a healthier democracy if we were a slightly less democratic one.



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