United States

The Founding Fathers – the 55 delegates who drafted and signed the Constitution – intended to establish a government that was much more democratic than any the world had ever seen. Reacting to the monarchical system in England, they strove to define certain rights for American citizens that could not be taken away.

Yet, a government ruled by a majority – and therefore susceptible to mob rule – scared them. As a consequence, they founded a constitutional republic where power is spread and counter-balanced among three branches of government: Congress, the president, and the courts. Passing laws is a slow, deliberate process that requires approval from all three of these branches.

This system of checks and balances enabled America to become a superpower economically, militarily, and morally by the 20th century. Unfortunately, our complicated and overly legalistic system can be a disadvantage in today's fast-moving world with rapidly changing technology, open borders, dependent economies, and international competition.

In order to achieve a union among the 13 original states, the constitutional delegates compromised to allow each state equal representation in the Senate, inadvertently creating a structure in which a determined minority of citizens can effectively stalemate the wishes of the greater majority. The requirement that both branches of Congress – the Senate and the House of Representatives – must agree in order for a bill to become law was deliberately established with the thinking that the Senate's longer terms would give it greater immunity from the pressures of biannual elections, thus making it the more conservative body.

House of Representatives

In the first Congress (1789-1791), the House of Representatives totaled 65 members. By the 112th Congress, this number grew to 435 representatives, at which time the Permanent Apportionment Act of 1929 established that number as fixed in order to keep the size of the body manageable.

In 1776, each congressman represented about 30,000 citizens. Based upon the 2010 census, each member of the House represented about 711,000 citizens. As our population grows and shifts, individual states lose and add representatives to reflect their relative populations. Since 1940, the Northeast and Midwest regions of the country have lost 59 representatives to the South and West regions, the greatest growth going to the West.

Senate

The Senate is composed of two members from each state, each serving a six-year term. Since only a third of all senators are subject to election every two years, the founders hoped the body would have a greater sense of continuity and, as James Madison said, would proceed “with more coolness, with more system, and with more wisdom” than the House. Until 1913 and the passage of the 17th Amendment, senators were appointed by their respective state legislators, rather than being popularly elected.

Since each state has two senators, the less populous states wield substantial power. For example, seven states – Alaska, Delaware, Montana, North Dakota, South Dakota, Vermont, and Wyoming – have only one member in the House and together represent 1.6% of its total votes, but they collectively have 14 senators representing 14% of the Senate. Based upon a 2012 estimate by the U.S. Census Bureau, each California senator represents more than 19 million people while each Wyoming senator represents about 288,000 people. Since 51 votes are necessary to pass a bill in the

Senate, a coalition of the 26 least populous states representing slightly more than nine million people could thwart the wishes of more than 300 million people living in the other 24 states.

History of Split Congresses

Even George Washington had to contend with a Congress controlled by two different parties. During the 3rd and 4th congressional sessions, anti-administration elements – Democratic-Republicans – controlled the House while his allies, the Federalists, controlled the Senate.

Congress has now been split between two parties for 21 of the 109 sessions since Washington. Republican Ronald Reagan worked with a split Congress for three of the four sessions during his two terms, the fourth session controlled completely by Democrats. Republican George H.W. Bush worked only with a Democrat-controlled Congress during his single term, while Bill Clinton's Democrats controlled the 103rd Congress, his first, and Republicans controlled both houses in the 104th through 106th sessions.

George W. Bush's party controlled Congress for three-quarters of his service – only the 110th Congress was controlled by the Democrats. Barack Obama's Democrat party controlled both houses for the 111th session following his election, but has dealt with a split Congress since, Democrats controlling the Senate and Republicans controlling the House.

There are three general combinations that can determine the balance of power between the executive and legislative branches of government:

1. President, Senate, and House controlled by a single party.
2. President controlled by one party, Senate and House by the other.

3. President and one of the congressional branches controlled by one party, the other branch controlled by the opposing party.

The last of these is most likely to wind up in stalemates and deadlocks. While some major issues do get addressed – usually because of their critical nature – more often than not, parties fail to find common ground due to ideological differences and political maneuvering.

1. Challenge of American Myths

Patriotism is universal. Citizens of every country believe their society is superior to every other nation. Americans are particularly proud of what we have accomplished, and rightfully so. Exaggerated, or even invented, truths, however, grow most powerful when they become myths – "persistent, pervasive, and unrealistic,"

Here are some of the more powerful and enduring American myths:

•**The Romance of the Past**. As Tea Party organizer Jeff McQueen says, "Things we had in the '50s were better. If a mom wanted to work, she could, if she didn't, she didn't have to. Tell me how many mothers work now? Now it's a necessity." Longing for the way things were, like McQueen does, ignores the great technological and social advances of the last half-century, as well as the fact that many Americans, minorities and women, suffered discrimination and persecution.

•**Equal Opportunity for All**. This myth goes hand-in-hand with self-reliance: "I did it by myself – why can't they do the same?" However, it ignores the fact that the benefits of industrialized countries are rarely available to all strata of society on an equal basis. The son or daughter of a tenant farmer in Mississippi does not have the same opportunities as the scion of a Wall Street banker, nor the child of a software

engineer in Silicon Valley. Differences in family stability, expectations, community mores, and morals all play a role in determining access to opportunity, as do education (early and secondary), familial and social relationships, and finances. Those who arise from, or even survive, childhoods in some of the nation's poorest neighborhoods are truly exceptional people – not evidence of equal opportunity.

•**The Great Melting Pot**. The idea of America being a melting pot where members of different ethnic, racial, and national origin combine to form a harmonious whole has been popular since the late 1700s, glorified by writers from Ralph Waldo Emerson to Frederick Jackson Turner. Unfortunately, this view is more romantic than real. Immigrants historically have lived in isolated communities until they reached critical mass and transformed their neighborhoods into pockets of their own culture. Little Italys, Chinatowns, and Spanish barrios exist in cities and towns across the country. Hispanics – now the largest minority, with most coming from a single country, Mexico – are influencing culture and politics in many states, representing 31% of the population of California and 28% of Texas. Attracting a significant portion of these new voters is a matter of life or death for the political parties and a major factor in the redrawing of congressional districts.

As our established myths have been challenged by reality, many Americans today feel threatened, believing that their way of life is under attack by religious, social, and political enemies. This environment of fear is kindled and intensified by a 24/7 news cycle comprised of irresponsible politicians, journalists, and social commentators, unrestrained by truth or logic, who pander to a public struggling to adjust to sweeping changes in technology, the economy, and society at large.

2. Gerrymandering

Every decade following a census, the 435 congressional districts are reapportioned and redrawn to reflect population shifts in a process called “redistricting.” Politicians understand that the ability to draw one’s district to reflect a majority of voters to a particular political party is critical to maintaining power. According to Robert Draper in the October 2012 issue of The Atlantic, this process “has become the most insidious practice in American politics – a way, as the opportunistic machinations following the 2010 census made evident, for our elected leaders to entrench themselves in 435 impregnable garrisons from which they can maintain power while avoiding political reality.”

The 2012 election demonstrated the Republican Party’s superiority in the redistricting wars, providing a large majority of seats in the House of Representatives, even though a Democratic president won the majority of the popular votes across all districts. Their strategy, described perfectly in the October 3, 2013 issue of the The Economist, was based upon winning numerous districts with a comfortable – though not extravagant – majority (by margins of 15% to 30%) while forcing Democrats into tightly packed districts of their constituents.

Princeton professor Sam Wang, a noted poll aggregator, as well as a neuroscientist and statistician, claims that Republican gerrymandering led to a swing in margin of at least 26 seats, almost the size of the new majority in the House. The advantages were especially egregious in the states of Michigan, North Carolina, Pennsylvania, and Wisconsin.

Because Republicans now come from very safe districts, generally requiring vote swings of 10% or more to lose their seats, they are increasingly immune from popular opinions, even widespread anger from the public over the 2013 government shutdown and national debt increase. Their safety and desire to appease the extreme members of their party is likely to lead to further confrontations and deadlocks.