The troubling questions assail us in a seemingly unending assault on our national equilibrium. Is America in trouble? Why does our economy seem to be collapsing? Why do our politicians fail us? What is wrong with our government? What should we do? What can we do?

With increasing urgency, such questions are being asked these days by pundits, analysts, writers, and thinkers of every stripe. The answers offered—and there are many—mostly emphasize economic solutions to our many woes. America is in trouble, we are told, because it is spending too much or too little; America is in trouble because it is taxing too much or too little; America is in trouble because it favors big business too much or too little. And it goes on. The common denominator in almost all these prescriptions is that the solution to America’s problems is economic in nature.

But it isn’t.

Not that we don’t have economic problems, plenty of them. We desperately need to bring back jobs, stabilize our debt, and resume a healthy rate of economic growth. But we have confronted and solved these sorts of economic problems many times in our national history. What is preventing us from solving it now is not a lack of economics but a plenitude of politics. America has a political problem. The nature of that political problem is deeply embedded in the constitutional structure of American government. America’s vaunted “separation of powers” allows—if not actually encourages—“divided government” in which the White House is controlled by one party and one or both houses of Congress is controlled by another.

Actually, throughout much of early American history, divided government was relatively rare. American’s tended to support one party at a time. Beginning about mid twentieth century, however, that changed. Voters increasingly “split their tickets” putting one party in control of the presidency and the other in charge of Congress. Since 1969, sixteen of twenty-two Congresses have featured divided government, eleven of them in just the past thirty-one years.

Why voters became infatuated with divided government is attributed to multiple causes. Initially, it probably reflected the gradual weakening of party loyalty, rising education levels, and the emergence of media dominated political campaigns. But once voters got a taste of divided government, many decided they preferred it, discovering that divided government kept taxes low, reduced spending, and constrained government growth. Indeed, various studies and statistics tend to support these conclusions. Data show for example that the economy generally grows at a somewhat higher rate under divided government while government deficits are lower under divided government, sometimes even producing surpluses. Bottom line: voters, not irrationally, now strongly prefer divided government.

That doesn’t sound like a problem. And it wasn’t until American’s recently discovered ideology and began to eschew both “moderates” and moderate politics. In the past decades, moderates, moderation, bargaining, and
compromise have become pejorative terms across American politics. The very values that once made divided
government work so well are increasingly rejected as wimish if not corrupt by both politicians and regular
voters.

In an age of ideology and partisan polarization, divided government has become a synonym for chaos and
dysfunction. Whether ideological politics is good or bad for America is something that reasonable folks can
argue about. Inarguable, however, is that ideological politics, fueled by take no prisoners’ style political
tactics, leaves little room for divided government. Indeed, in parliamentary democracies such as the United
Kingdom, ideological politics is alive and well precisely because divided government is impossible. Both the
executive branch and legislative branch are always controlled by the same party.

Clearly, that’s America’s way out of its emerging crisis. The once expedient strategy of turning one branch of
government over to one party and the other(s) over to another is no longer a rational option for American
voters. It’s not a question of whether divided government is a good thing or not; good or bad, we simply can
no longer afford it.

In 2012, whether we look to the Republican Party or the Democratic Party is for the voters to decide. But
unlike earlier elections, voters won’t have the responsible option of deciding not to decide by again splitting
control of government between the parties. This stark reality makes the upcoming 2012 election a high stakes
test of the adaptability of our political system. We simply cannot endure four more years of the political
paralysis we now suffer. Both the American politician, and especially the American voter, must recognize and
adjust to this new reality: the nature of American national politics has changed—and so must we.

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