

servers who argue against the potential for a new national party are in fact advocates of the virtues of two-party democracy. They naturally would want any new party effort to fail.

Our two-party system, as we have practiced it since 1965, is about as big a failure as any system can be. In the process of failing, the parties have managed to antagonize and alienate two out of every three voters. The party system has become one gigantic payoff system, with candidates accepting large electoral bribes

in exchange for delivering the public policy sought by the PACs and other interest groups. The much ballyhooed turnover this year in Congress is substantially (over half) a product of Congress's "bribing" members to retire by allowing them to retain huge campaign war chests for their personal use.

The analogy between former Soviet communism and the American two-party system, though absurd on the surface, is frighteningly pertinent. Both systems have conspired to artificially maintain the status quo. Communism survived by threat

of force; the two-party system by eliminating voter choice through gerrymandering, by attracting huge amounts of PAC money, and through incumbent perks. In addition, both systems have existed through eliminating (or in the US, greatly curbing) the ability of challengers to gain access to the ballot. A New York voter, for example, does not have a choice when 147 of the 190 incumbents for the state senate are unopposed. But now there is reason to take heart: Ten years ago the collapse of communism seemed far more unlikely than the creation of a third political party in the United States does today.

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AMERICANS NEED (BUT DON'T WANT) A PARLIAMENTARY SYSTEM

By Burns W. Roper

The American public is not happy with the country's present political situation; in fact, it's very upset. A number of things make this clear—not the least, the rise of Ross Perot last spring and early summer to the point that he actually led the Republican and Democratic standard bearers in several polls. But while it's clear that the public is unhappy with the way the political system is now working, it's not that clear just what the public is dissatisfied with and what changes it would make to correct the situation.

The two most frequently talked about ideas for changing and improving our political system are term limits on the Congress (we already have term limits on the presidency) and creating a strong, viable third party. My judgment is that neither of these changes would advance the reform the US needs. I'll explain why I think so, and then discuss the sweeping institutional change I believe is necessary.

Limit Members' Tenure?

Both term limits and the concept of a third party have fared well—both in the polls and in the election. A review of the polls indicates that in the 1940s, '50s, and '60s about half of the public favored term limits for senators and representatives; in most cases, the limits asked about represented a total of twelve years. Recently, sentiment for term limits has risen: 60% to 80% now favor them for members of Congress. Again, the limit most frequently asked about is twelve years for both senators and congressmen. However, a CBS News/New York Times poll, which asked a more open-ended question, suggests that many Americans prefer an eight year limit.

In his new book, *The Wedge: A Case For Term Limits For Congress* (NY: The Free Press, 1992), George Will makes the most compelling case I have seen for term limitation. One of his main arguments is that with a term limitation people could not make a career of serving as a representative or senator. He argues that there are

many politicians who know how to gain and hold office but who have no real interest in governance—only in self-perpetuation. Term limitations would eliminate such "careerists." He acknowledges that many good people would be forced out of office before they should be, but argues that the gain would exceed the loss.

One potential additional drawback to term limitations has been little discussed. If there were an eight or twelve year limit, and hence no long-term career path to serving as an elected official, then time in Congress might well become a stepping stone to a person's ultimate career as a lobbyist or influence-peddler. Learn the ropes, get to know the key people, and then sell your know-how and contacts to industry, foreign governments, whoever has an axe to grind. Changing the office from a career to a stepping stone might thus attract less dedicated candidates.

Would we have better medicine if doctors were limited to twelve year ca-

reers? Would we have better journalists or college professors or architects or lawyers, if they were limited to twelve year careers? The typical, "median" professional under such a limitation would have six years of experience. Do most people peak at six years and then start a decline to a level that becomes unacceptable beyond twelve years?

Are Term Limits Really Needed?

Right now, of course, we can vote members of the House out of office at the 12-year mark, or even after 2 years. There are obvious advantages to incumbency, but it by no means guarantees an unlimited career in office. A year ago the citizens of New Jersey voted out the Democratic majorities in both houses of their legislature, and gave the Republicans majorities of sufficient size to override the Democratic governor's vetoes. At the same time, in neighboring Pennsylvania, the public voted down Richard Thornburgh in favor of the relatively new and untested Harris Wofford. While there was no actual incumbent in that election, Thornburgh was akin to one. He had been the governor of Pennsylvania in earlier years and he was the attorney general in the Bush administration at the time he left to run for the Senate. In neighboring states, then, voters threw out the incumbent Democrats (New Jersey) and the "incumbent" Republican candidate for senator (Pennsylvania.) This year, many House incumbents either lost in primaries or resigned in anticipation of losing in November because of voter anger.

Congressional term limits are neither desirable nor necessary.

Form a New Political Party?

A number of polls, particularly in recent years, have shown substantial public interest in a third party. A Gallup Poll of July 17, 1992 showed that the public felt Ross Perot's then-suspended candidacy had brought about real change in the two major political parties. During the early to mid 1980s, 40% to 50% said they favored a third party. Polls conducted this summer show 55% to 66% favoring the

emergence of a significant third party. It's not clear from the poll data I have reviewed whether people think that a third party would itself produce better candidates—candidates who could themselves win the presidency, or at least cause the two major parties to "shape up"—or whether they see it as a third force that could ally itself with one of the two major parties and thus achieve concessions. I suspect that there isn't a well thought-out reason for favoring a third party. Rather, it's likely that many people are thinking: "I don't like the candidates the Republicans and the Democrats are producing. Maybe a third party could come up with someone I'd like better."

It's entirely possible that a third party could become the balance of power, and by forcing concessions from one or both of the old established parties, contribute more to better governance than the two-party system. But it's also possible that an effective third party could throw many presidential races into the House of Representatives, bringing government to a halt until the House acted. It's doubtful whether this would improve people's satisfaction with our chief executives. Also, there is a distinct possibility that a third party in the US would have little more impact on policy than the Liberals, and now the Social Democrats, have had in modern-day Britain.

Term limits on the one hand, and a third party on the other, have the effect of limiting power. This is specifically what term limits are intended to do. Establishment of a third party would result in a diffusion of power. More divided power would therefore be more limited power. Both approaches go further than the nation has already gone in the direction of checks and balances, and would probably further increase the stalemate.

The US Needs More Sweeping Institutional Change

I would suggest that we need to make a change in the opposite direction. I know of no polling data on my proposal, but I feel quite sure that if they existed, they would reject my idea rather than endorse

it. We should consider adopting—or adapting—the British parliamentary system to our own needs. We have carried the founding fathers' preference for checks and balances to the point of total stalemate and gridlock, and to a situation where the president can conveniently blame Congress for his lack of effectiveness, while Congress can blame the president for its ineffectiveness. I know there is strong public support for having control of the administration in one party's hands and control of Congress in the other's. A Roper poll in August of this year, which repeated our one-party versus two-party control question, showed the public still favoring split control of the government, even though by a slightly reduced margin from 1977.¹

I rarely argue with public opinion. On the matters of a third party, term limits, and two-party control of the government, however, I think the public is wrong. We need a system that would focus both power and responsibility in one party or the other. In the British parliamentary system, the House of Commons cannot blame the prime minister, or the prime minister the House of Commons, for both are controlled by the same party. This creates a responsibility our system conveniently avoids.

There would be problems adapting the British system to our own. We have two elected legislative bodies where the British have only one. To which chamber would the American parliamentary executive be responsible if the House were Democratic and the Senate Republican? There are several ways this could be resolved. One example: Since the House and Senate are co-equal bodies, each House member could be counted as one "unit;" each Senator as four "units." This would mean 835 legislative "units" in all. Whichever party had 418 or more legislative "units" would determine who would form the government.

If we were to adapt the parliamentary system to our own government, would this mean we would never have a real say in who our prime minister would be, that the ruling party (or coalition) in the Con-

gress would come up with its choice without any public referendum? That really isn't an issue, I think. In Britain and other parliamentary democracies, voters backing a particular party know who the prime minister will be should that party gain a majority. Americans, too, in voting for a particular individual as representative would know that they were, in the process, favoring the candidacy of one prime minister designee over another, and thus were "voting" for prime minister as well. [Globally, parliamentary democracies refer to the head of government as prime minister, or premier, or the equivalent. In the US, the title of president would probably be preferred.]

As I've said, I feel certain that any system that would centralize governmental control at any time in one party would be "voted down" in a US public opinion poll. At the same time, it's necessary if we

are to correct our present situation. Unless we give the party the public favors the power to act, and make it responsible for its failure to act or act well, we will continue with gridlock.

I suspect that what the public really wants is "better people" in government, rather than a change in our formal system. But reviling candidates for office in the press, having opponents for a given office defame each other, and having public opinion scorn politicians in general, will not lead to the "better people" that the public is looking for. Increasing the inability of these "better people" to accomplish anything while in office is not likely to attract more of them either.

Giving a party the power to act and putting it at risk if it doesn't act wisely, might well attract "better people" and end gridlock.

Endnotes:

¹ In the Roper Organization survey of February 1977, the question was asked: "With regard to our federal government, some people think it is better to have the majority in Congress and the President in the same political party, so they will work together and get more accomplished. Other people think it is better to have one party control Congress and the other party to be in the White House, so there are checks and balances between the two branches of government. What do you think...?" Thirty-six percent favored one party control, 48% favored split-party control, and 16% said "don't know." When this same question was asked in a survey of August 1992, 34% backed one-party control, 44% backed split-party control, and 22% said "don't know."

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AMERICANS NEED A MODEST RETURN TO PARTY GOVERNMENT (BUT STILL DON'T KNOW IT)

By Everett C. Ladd

From 1969 through 1992, a Republican occupied the White House all but 4 years while Democrats enjoyed a House of Representatives majority—usually a large one—every year. The Republicans have not, in fact, had a House majority since 1954. This historically unprecedented experience with (1) extended divided party control over the national government, and (2) extended continuous one-party dominance of a national government institution, has had devastating effects on the operation of the American polity.

The public knows something is amiss, but it still hasn't thought its way through to the source of the problem. I argue that the latter is evidently the case, even though come January next one party will again, at least temporarily, control the government at both ends of Pennsylvania Avenue.

Gordon Black and Benjamin Black argue in the lead article that the political malfunctioning which has deformed our politics and so troubled many Americans will be cured by the appearance of a "Mr./Ms. Right"—in the form of a new centrist party committed to "good government" reform. But the source of our present discontents isn't radical parties—we have two centrist ones now—or evil politicians. It's that the public has lost control over the government of the United States—which is Congress and the presidency—because it has so substantially diminished the mechanism it needs to exert that control, the political party.

Burns Roper sees the latter result, but goes on to argue that the US should therefore take a massive leap from its presidential to a parliamentary system. My objec-

tion here is that the end he seeks might be achieved without so violent a break with two centuries of political tradition—indeed without a break at all. We need only *return* to the limited, modest party government which *was* our tradition through most of our history, until the departure of the last several decades. To bring the public on board, a major educational effort is needed, and probably some legislation as well, but nothing here seems beyond the capacities of a people who have sustained the world's oldest democracy.

The Novel Experiment in Divided Government

Split results, where one party controls Congress and the other the presidency, were highly uncommon prior to the 1950s. When they did occur, it was