

The Republicans control both chambers of Congress and the presidency, yet they seem to have trouble coming up with a bill on healthcare (and on other major issues) that they can agree on among themselves — no less one that they can pass into law. I think the difficulty the Republicans are experiencing stems from the success that both parties have had in gerrymandering.

In a two party system, such as we have in the United States, elections are typically the vehicle for achieving consensus. To illustrate, consider a diverse voting group where there are many worldviews. In this environment, a candidate can only be successful if she adopts policy positions that a majority of her constituents support. To win an election, a candidate will have to be moderate; therefore, a political consensus is reached by electing this candidate. This process plays out across the country, filling Congress with moderate legislators. The party leaders will have the relatively easy task of trying to reach a compromise among a bunch of legislators who are moderate, so they do not have huge differences in their policy preferences.

In contrast, many multi-party systems, such as the governments in Italy and Israel, achieve their consensus in the legislative body. In these countries, politicians can be elected by holding extreme positions. For instance, a representative may be elected with 15% of the vote, so she did not need to moderate her positions to attract more voters. The result is a legislative chamber filled with people with vastly different positions on the issues. The compromise necessary to write legislation is mostly achieved by the party leaders in the chamber. The leaders must fashion a compromise that a wide array of legislators can support. As you can imagine, this is a difficult task.

In recent times, the differences between the two-party and the multi-party systems have narrowed, mostly because U.S. political parties have become very good at gerrymandering. In gerrymandering, the parties have manipulated the congressional districts into funny shapes so that very few races are competitive. Politicians in these "safe districts" do not have to adopt moderate positions to win elections because their constituents are not a representative sample of the voters in a state; rather, they represent a concentration of like-minded people with extreme views. As a result, we end up with elected politicians with very different views — which is a result that we would expect from the multi-party systems in Italy and Israel and which is not the result we hope for in a two-party system.

Today, the political leaders in Congress have a task that mirrors the job party leaders have in a multi-party democracy. They must build a consensus among legislators with widely varying views. This job is about as easy as herding cats, so it is not surprising that Speaker Ryan in the House has had trouble producing legislation that can pass his chamber.

Because of gerrymandering, and the widely divergent views of the elected officials it produces, party leaders have a much tougher job than they had in years past when elections, not party leaders, were responsible for achieving most of the compromise. In order to achieve legislative goals, the party leadership will have to find compromises that appeal to hardliners, such as the members of the Freedom Caucus, and to moderates, such as the members of the Tuesday Group. This country has produced great legislative compromises to put off crises, including the Missouri Compromise and the Compromise of 1850. However, in today's world, the ability to produce "great compromises" will be needed for mundane legislation and will no longer be reserved for averting a crisis.

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