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## David Strom: Divided government: You know you want it

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As much as we Republicans would like to believe otherwise, the difficulties facing President Obama and the Democrats are not so much an endorsement of Republican governance as a repudiation of the Democrats'. The GOP remains about as stubbornly unpopular today as it was a year ago when Obama took power.

Voter discontent, which Obama sought to soothe in last night's State of the Union address, is of course partly ideological. Obama and congressional Democrats are moving too far left, far too fast. But it is also about a growing distaste for how the process of government has been working. In short, Americans believe that government is broken.

In the best of times the American system of government is slow and inefficient. But in the words of computer programmers, that is a feature, not a bug. The layers of checks and balances the founders created were designed precisely to slow down the pace of change and to preserve our liberty by weighting the system toward government inaction over "getting things done."

And these are not the best of times. Voters, believing that George W. Bush's presidency was foundering, sent congressional Republicans packing in 2006 and 2008 after 12 years of controlling Congress. With Obama's election, Democrats regained control of all of the levers of power in Washington -- something they had not had since 1994, when America voted overwhelmingly for dividing government power between Republicans and Democrats.

This fact alone is enough to explain why Americans believe that things are going so terribly wrong in Washington. No, not that Democrats are stupid or venal (although as a conservative I vehemently oppose much of what they promote). Rather, recent history shows us that one-party rule almost inevitably leads to political disaster.

The two most-successful recent presidencies, those of Ronald Reagan and (I hate to say it) Bill Clinton, were both characterized by divided power in Washington. Under Reagan, the Washington beast was temporarily tamed, and under Clinton, the federal budget actually went from deficits to surpluses once the Republicans took over Congress.

Americans instinctively know that divided government often works better than one-party control. Our system of government was designed with competing factions fighting over power in mind, and recent experience has reinforced the wisdom of the founders in designing a certain amount of gridlock into the system.

Divided government and the party infighting it generates helps to restrain the worst impulses of both Republicans and Democrats, severely limiting what either party can accomplish alone. This is especially true with federal spending. According to the Cato

Institute, federal spending increases three times as fast when one party is in control of government than when control is divided.

It even seems that major reforms tend to be more likely under divided government. Welfare reform, perhaps the most important domestic achievement of the last 20 years, grew from a compromise between Clinton and Newt Gingrich's Congress. Reagan's revolutionary tax cuts and economic reforms were the result of wrangling with Tip O'Neill's Democratic Congress. Even the 1964 Civil Rights act was passed with a bipartisan majority.

Reform is possible precisely because it can only be the result of negotiations that produce a compromise everyone can live with.

Single-party control is more likely to give us new programs, new spending and bigger government. Under George W. Bush, we saw the expansion of Medicare with a new prescription drug benefit, while Obama is attempting to radically restructure the American economy along more statist lines.

The current train wreck we are witnessing in Washington isn't just the result of the Democrats' wrongheaded ideology. It is also a result of too much power concentrated in the hands of too few people who think too much alike.

That, as much as anything else, is the source of the growing unease Americans have about their government today. Expect Republicans to continue winning elections at least until power in Washington is more evenly divided.

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