

How over-centralization is breaking American government

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August 11, 2026

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"The American political system . . .
[is] a relatively efficient system for
reinforcing agreement, encouraging
moderation, and maintaining social
peace in a restless and immoderate
people operating a gigantic,
powerful, diversified, and incredibly
complex society."

Robert Dahl, 1956

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How to govern at scale?

- The US is one of biggest, complex, and dynamic societies in history
- The governmental system is not equal to the challenges of size, complexity, and dynamism
- **The design problem is over-centralization**
- Result of decades of well-meaning reforms with unintended consequences
- Thoughtful decentralization would improve performance and resilience
- Important given challenges ahead

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The centralizing century

- **Centralization of *policy responsibilities***
 - *Vertical* – shift from states to Washington
 - *Horizontal* – shift from Congress to the presidency
- ***Partisan* centralization**
 - Growth of national party networks
 - party operatives, consultants, donors, think tanks, aligned media
 - Nationalization of state policy agendas and voting
 - *Presidency-centered* party mobilization
- ***Judicial* centralization**
 - Increased profile and importance of SCOTUS, especially on rights questions
- A profound shift in political culture

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Why centralization?

- A century-long bipartisan reform project
- Aimed at making the country stronger
 - *Prosperity*: Building and managing a national economy
 - *Security*: Promoting homeland and national security
 - *Justice*: Assuring fair and equal treatment
- Driven by crises, and the ratchet effect
- Based on assumptions about:
 - Competence and trustworthiness of states
 - William Riker: federalism = racism
 - Talent in Washington: “the best and the brightest”
 - Fading sectional and ideological differences

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Unexpected consequences

- In many ways, centralization worked as expected
- But reform also had unintended consequences
 - Overload and quality of decision-making
 - Gridlock on critical issues
 - Administrative sclerosis
 - Intensified polarization
- What reformers did not anticipate
 - How scale complicates action
 - Overestimating talent at the top
 - Underestimating persistent differences

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Redesign for resilience

- Rough waters ahead
- Thoughtful decentralization could improve performance and resilience
- This means:
 - Devolution of responsibilities from Washington to states or multistate compacts
 - Building state capacities so they can carry more of the load and are trusted on rights
 - Redesigning institutions in Washington to improve representation and promote conciliation
- A big project – but so was centralization