

The Madisonian System

The Framers believed that human nature was self-interested and that inequalities of wealth were the main source of political conflict (ex: factions as discussed in Federalist #10).

The Framers, like Locke, largely believed that government should protect private property (existing inequality) rather than create economic equality.

They believed that “democracy” was a threat, the type of democracy associated with “mob rule” or the “tyranny of the majority” so they devised a government that would promote compromise between different factions.

In other words, they sought to create a government that would allow majority rule, but also protect minority rights. Framers such as James Madison believed that minority factions (the wealthy) would be easy to control because they could be outvoted. It was majority factions (the lower class, or the mob) that was seen as the greatest threat to individual rights (property).

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The Framers' views about majority factions being a threat to individual rights was informed by the majoritarianism that flourished at the state level.

In designing the new federal government, the Framers were concerned with protecting individual rights (minorities) from the power of the majority.

They also wanted to preserve as much state power as possible. The counter-majoritarian design of the new federal government was intended to make it difficult for the federal government to interfere with state power.

The U.S. Constitution is understood as being more “conservative” than the existing state constitutions in that it placed many limits on government power. Meaning: it will be more difficult for a majority to use the federal government's power than for a majority to use state government's power.

In other words, what we think of as “gridlock” is somewhat built into the design for a reason.

Avoiding “tyranny of the majority”

The Madisonian System is a constitutional republic; or representative democracy that aims to avoid “tyranny of the majority.”

1. Place as much of the government as possible beyond the direct control of the majority.
2. Separate the powers of different institutions and construct a system of checks and balances.
3. Divide power between national and state governments.

Madison articulated these aims in Federalist #51.

Limiting Majority Control

The Constitution only placed one element of government, the House of Representatives, within direct control of the votes of the majority.

Senators were to be selected by state legislatures.

Special electors were to select the president.

Therefore, a small minority, not the people themselves, would elect most government officials.

The Constitution has been gradually democratized in that the 17th Amendment established direct election of senators in 1913 and that the Electoral College now votes according to the popular vote in each state.

Separation of Powers

Each of the three branches of government

executive (the president)

legislative (the Congress)

judicial (the courts)

would be relatively independent of one another so that no single branch could control the others (power is separated and shared).

Checks and Balances

Because each branch of government *shared* power, they each required the consent of the others for many of its actions. This created “checks and balances” in terms of Madison’s vision in Federalist 51 to have “ambition counteract ambition.”

The idea of “checks and balances” is that if a faction takes control of one institution, it still cannot damage the whole system because it has to work with other branches.

Other than the “checks and balances” between the three branches of the national government, what other division of power exists?

Answer: federalism (division of power between national and state government)

Madisonian Politics

The Madisonian System is designed to prevent “tyranny of the majority” and to protect minority rights and states’ rights.

In terms of the policymaking system, the Madisonian design favors the status quo rather than big, comprehensive changes.

Is “gridlock” somewhat built into our government? What is the significance of this? How should we approach politics?

Changes in public policy come slowly, incrementally, require compromise, and are generally moderate.

At certain points in time, a sizable majority can pass comprehensive legislation without minority consent or input, but this is rare and is NOT unconstitutional.

Do you agree with Madison that majority factions are more dangerous than minority factions?

Is this system ineffective and inefficient in terms of addressing pressing issues?