

Authors deliver nice blueprint on how to overcome gridlock

"The most powerful potential leverage in any democracy is the ability of the citizenry to throw the bums out," Thomas E. Mann and Norman J. Ornstein assert in their new book, "It's Even Worse Than It Looks: How the American Constitutional System Collided with the New Politics of Extremism."

"But this instrument of democratic accountability is especially blunt in times of polarized politics," the authors caution. "During periods of economic crisis, the opposition loses its incentive to alleviate Americans' pain and instead is encouraged to err on the side of allowing harmful conditions to fester as a price worth paying for political gain. Referendum voting in times of economic difficulty also tends to obscure the policy choices that the competing parties offer."

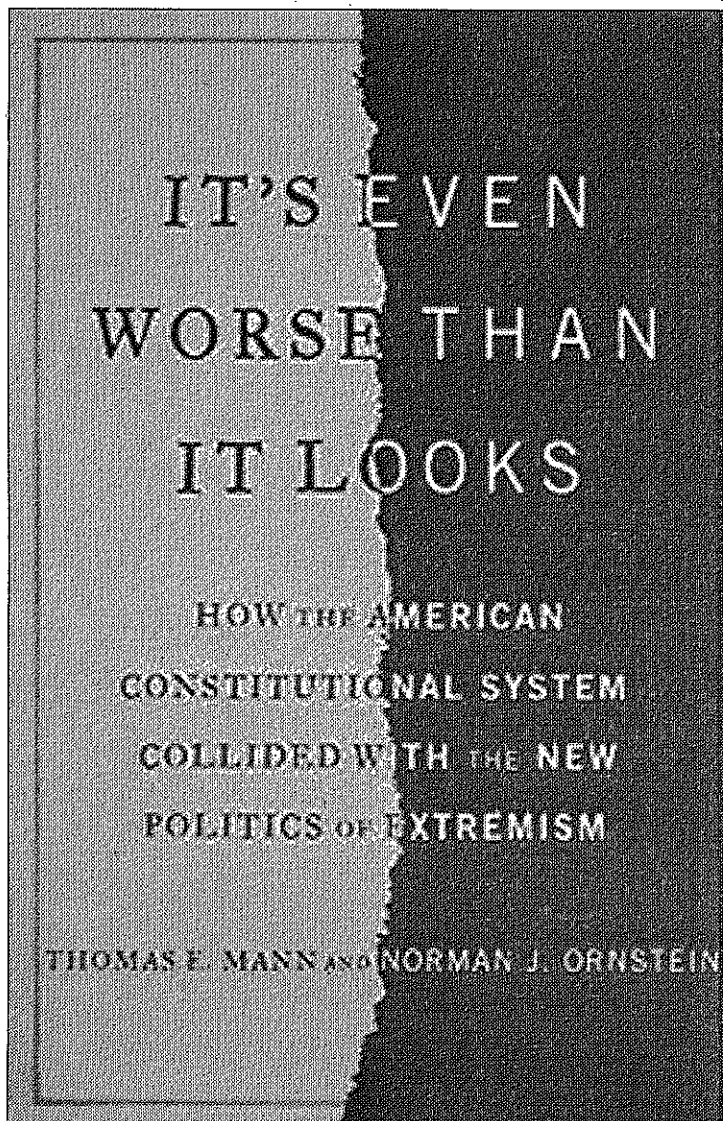
Mann is a former director of the American Political Science Association, a fellow of the American Academy of Arts and Sciences and a member of the Council on Foreign Relations. He currently works at the Brookings Institution, where he is the W. Averell Harriman Chair and a senior fellow in Governance Studies. Ornstein is a resident scholar at the American Enterprise Institute who writes a weekly column for Roll Call in addition to being an election analyst for CBS News. He is also a fellow of the American Academy of Arts and Sciences.

"It's Even Worse Than It Looks" consists of seven relatively straightforward chapters arranged in two major sections: Part I: The Problem, and Part II: What to Do About It. And even though the book is rather concise – it can be easily digested in a couple of sittings – the subject matter it addresses is nonetheless extensively researched, with no less than 14 pages of source notes at the conclusion of the main text.

In Part I, the authors do a masterful job of bringing the reader up to speed regarding how we got to the present stalemate in our legislative process. Their starting point is the 1978 midterm elections – the year Newt Gingrich was first elected to the House of Representatives from Georgia's Sixth Congressional District.

"The Democrats had controlled the House that Gingrich entered for 24 years, and he believed that the great advantages conferred by incumbent status made a race-by-race approach to winning a majority for his party a losing one," Mann and Ornstein observe. "He was both passionate about his goals and coldly analytical in his means. The core strategy was to destroy the institution in order to save it, to so intensify public hatred of Congress that voters would buy into the notion of the need for sweeping change."

In large measure, Gingrich succeeded with his approach as evidenced by the midterm elections of 1994, when 73 freshmen were elected to the House of Representatives; fully a third of those were hard-core Gingrich loyalists who shared their leader's disdain for the status quo. The authors argue convincingly that the stage was



"It's Even Worse Than It Looks: How the American Constitutional System Collided with the New Politics of Extremism" by Thomas E. Mann and Norman J. Ornstein. New York: Basic Books, 2012. 224 pages, \$26 (cloth).

being set for the exasperating standoff that came to epitomize our government in recent years.

The same strategy Gingrich adopted in 1978 was still being pursued in 2012 – primarily because it does seem to work if the goal is to bring the legislative process to a grinding halt.

"Like-minded party members representing more homogenous constituencies are willing to delegate authority to their leaders to advance their collective electoral interests, putting a premium on strategic partisan team play," the authors continue. "It's better to have an issue than a bill, to shape the party's brand name and highlight party differences. The extent of change toward tribalism is clear when party line voting spills over to issues with no discernible ideological content and where liberal and conservative positions are impossible to identify."

Mann and Ornstein believe we have arrived at a pivotal point in our nation's history. They feel our system of governance has grown increasingly dysfunctional due primarily to ideological differences and an unwillingness on the part of legislators to forge the kind of compromises necessary for a democracy to be successful. Driven primarily by innate and seemingly irreconcilable differences in economic and social policies, the authors contend the imbroglio that currently exists in Washington is actually a manifestation of a deeper culture war that has been incubating in our country for the past

five decades.

Although Part I held my interest for the most part, when I read this kind of political discourse I inevitably find myself more intrigued by the authors' proposed solutions to the problems they have outlined. After all, it is always easier to describe the extent of a predicament than to offer a viable course of action that will effectively lead us to a better place. Toward this end, Mann and Ornstein do not disappoint. Part II is a virtual blueprint for overcoming the gridlock that has come to characterize Washington.

"To be sure there are some signs of green shoots sprouting throughout the country," Mann and Ornstein observe. "One is the model set forth by our metropolitan areas – 51 of which have populations greater than 1 million – that are finding public-private partnerships and cross-party alliances to solve their problems in transportation, social welfare, education and infrastructure. Another is that, even in this awful political environment, some of the best and brightest and most admirable in our society are still stepping forward to do public service and to run for political office."

"We are confident that better times and a return to a better political system, do indeed lie ahead," they conclude. After reading their book, I tend to agree.

— Reviewed by Aaron W. Hughey, Department of Counseling and Student Affairs, Western Kentucky University.