Much of the book soars, while some parts (as is the case with all books) tread more familiar ground. One may not be convinced that the novel theory advanced fully explains all the variation, but it is a compelling account. For my own taste, the risks and benefits of judicial extraterritoriality could have been explored more. But these are quibbles, and minor ones at that. As a whole, the book is a thoughtful, insightful, and welcome entry in a growing and important area.

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As the book’s title indicates, William G. Howell and Terry M. Moe believe that the Constitution was drafted for purposes more appropriate for a bygone era and that today it prevents the political system from addressing pressing national problems. In making this claim, the authors try to distinguish their argument from contemporary critiques of the political system that focus on a polarized Congress, a faulty electoral system, a divided public, or the role of money, to name some of the most commonly cited explanations for the nation’s political dysfunction. The problem, they argue, runs much deeper, rooted in a document written during a vastly different time, when expectations for what the national government should do were much lower and political participation was far more restricted than is the case today. Real reform will occur only by recognizing that the Constitution is a relic and proceeding accordingly.

Their argument unfolds in four chapters. The first summarizes the Framers’ goals when writing the Constitution, most notably, the desire to establish a more effective government based on popular consent, but with limits to direct popular participation. Within a century, however, this system of shared powers, superimposed on existing state governments, became increasingly anachronistic as barriers to political participation fell and the public’s desire for a more effective national government grew. This disconnect between expectations and government capacity spawned the Progressive movement—the first sustained effort to reform the system of shared powers. Perhaps the most important consequence of this reform effort, the authors suggest, was the effort to strengthen the presidency, in part by accentuating the office’s ties to the public.

Unfortunately, the authors contend, the Progressive reforms were only partly successful in overcoming the barriers to effective government posed
by the Constitution. In particular, as they describe in Chapter 2, Congress is particularly plagued by structural inefficiencies rooting in constitutionally derived incentives. Three in particular stand out: members are parochial, focused primarily on appealing to their constituencies in order to win reelection; because of frequent elections, they operate under a too-short time horizon; and the geographic basis of representation means policy tends to be constructed in piecemeal fashion. The result is a Congress that often cannot act, and when it does act, it does so in a haphazard fashion that is more likely to replace old problems with another, more durable problem set.

How to remedy these structural defects? By strengthening the presidency. As the Progressives recognized, and as Howell and Moe discuss in the book’s third chapter, the presidency as an institution has attributes that Congress lacks: it is a unitary office, one whose occupant has incentives to think both nationally and long term for reasons of historical legacy. To demonstrate the difference between the two institutions, the authors present a series of case studies ranging from Dwight D. Eisenhower’s push for the interstate highway system through George W. Bush’s failed effort to reform the social security system to show how presidents, in contrast to Congress, do try to exercise leadership directed toward solving national problems and that when they fail, it is primarily because of Congress’s institutional deficiencies.

To this point, the reader might wonder whether any of this argument is really all that new. Efforts to reform the defects associated with the constitutionally based system of separated powers by strengthening the presidency has a long intellectual lineage. In the 1980s, for example, many scholars believed the only way to address the burgeoning structural budget deficit was through institutional reforms designed to allow the president to form a government amenable to his direction, much like prime ministers in parliamentary systems. But it is here that the authors’ argument becomes distinctive. Whereas previous reform efforts focused on large-scale institutional change, such as coterminous elections and terms of office for the president and Congress, in Chapter 4, the authors propose a much simpler reform: amending the Constitution to give the president fast-track authority on all presidential proposals. This would entail two key provisions: forcing Congress to vote on all presidential proposals within a fixed time period, but only in an up-or-down fashion. The virtue of this reform, they suggest, is that it builds on the president’s institutional advantage as a unitary actor with national orientation but still allows for Congress to weigh in on policy, albeit in a manner designed to ameliorate the impact of its more dysfunctional tendencies. Moreover, they point out that their proposed reform builds on existing fast-track trade policy, so it has the virtue of familiarity, in contrast to many proposed constitutional reforms.
This is an extended advocacy piece, crisply and concisely written, that will appeal to lay persons as well as political scholars and practitioners. Whether one agrees with the reform may depend in part on how one answers the age-old debate that dates back to Alexander Hamilton and Thomas Jefferson: do we have more to fear from a government that fails to act, or from one that acts in ways that endanger basic liberties? In this respect, some readers will find the authors’ assumption that, in the era of Trump, the presidency is an office focused on the long-term good of the nation a bit too optimistic. Similarly, critics may find fault with the authors’ focus on legislative productive as the sine qua non of effective government. As the authors would surely respond, however, nothing in their proposal prevents Congress, and the courts, from protecting basic liberties, and from blocking a president’s proposals from becoming law. Their larger point is that judging the current governing framework using standards dating back two centuries is no longer tenable. It is a perspective that merits consideration, even if one disagrees with the specific reform.

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Given the manifold difficulties of the early Donald Trump presidency and its unrealized public policy ambitions, the issue of evaluating a president’s policy accomplishments has been very much in the news. In Bush on the Home Front (2010), John D. Graham detailed the domestic policy successes and failures of George W. Bush’s presidency, and now in Obama on the Home Front, he does the same for Barack Obama’s presidency.

Graham declines to pass judgment on whether Obama’s domestic policy efforts were good or bad for the country and instead focuses only on the extent to which Obama succeeded or failed in his policy goals. The book also presents a nine-point theory of presidential effectiveness in times of political polarization, which involves outreach, the inclusion of elements to appeal to the base and also to moderates, the use of interest groups, and going public both nationally and locally, among other things. Beyond this theory, the book uses case studies and counterfactual considerations to evaluate Obama’s policy performance.

Most of Graham’s analysis is made up of seven case studies of Obama’s policy efforts, several of which are essentially couplets: the short-term response