“Voters may have chosen divided government,” President Obama said (http://www.nytimes.com/2011/08/03/us/politics/03fiscal.html?_r=1&ref=todayspaper&pagewanted=all) Tuesday, just after signing the debt-limit bill, “but they sure didn’t vote for dysfunctional government.”

The President is making a common mistake here. He may be right about the second point*, but what about his opening premise? Is he right that “voters”—that is, actual human beings who vote—have “chosen divided government”?

In fact, few voters ever “choose” divided government, and those voters are never a majority. The majority always wants united government. Some voters want it united under Republican auspices, some want it under Democratic auspices. Almost no one wants divided government as such (although, of course, almost everyone would rather have their own party control part of the government than have the other party control all of it).
A voter wishing to “choose” divided government would split his or her ticket in Presidential years. Ticket-splitters are a small minority and always have been—fewer than twenty per cent throughout most of American history, including during the past couple of decades. Ticket-splitting spiked to nearly thirty per cent in 1972, when Nixon invented the “southern strategy,” but it has drifted back to normal in sync with the migration of the conservative white South to the G.O.P.

On the question of divided government, in other words, more than eighty per cent vote “no.”

Voters don’t choose (http://www.politicalreviewnet.com/polrev/reviews/JOPO/R_0022_3816_450_1004691.asp) divided government. It’s chosen for them by a system, unique in the democratic world, of multiple overlapping elections held at different intervals in which different electorates fill different offices, none of whose occupants have ultimate responsibility. The electorate of 2008 chose Obama and the Democrats. The electorate of 2010—consisting mainly of McCain voters, and smaller by forty-five million (http://www.nybooks.com/articles/archives/2011/aug/18/next-election-surprising-reality/)—chose the Republicans. Hardly anybody voted as they did out of a desire for “divided government,” as opposed to a desire for a government that would embody their own political and ideological leanings.

(I treated this subject more fully just after the last election, in a post (http://www.newyorker.com/online/blogs/hendrikhertzberg/2010/11/the-public-prefer-divided-government.html) that argued that the fact that our system often produces divided government does not prove that the public wants divided government, just as the fact that our system has produced a huge national debt proves that the public wants a huge national debt.)
There is, of course, a small cohort of fanatics on the political right who regard government (especially the federal government) as an inherently malign force, and therefore may actually prefer dysfunctionality. But it would be hard to find a member of even this group who has ever gone so far as to vote for a liberal Democrat in order to forestall the possibility that undivided (conservative Republican) control might render the government dangerously functional.