

Regional

Reasons for government frustration are many

In poll after poll the American people say that the U.S. Congress is the most unpopular institution in the nation. This degree of dissatisfaction has not been heard since the so-called “do nothing Congress” of the Truman era when, in fact, Congress passed six times the amount of legislation that it does today. So, what is happening with one of the most vital of our political institutions? And why?

To answer this and other questions I talked with Kenneth Moffett, an associate professor in the department of political science at Southern Illinois University Edwardsville. A native of Milwaukee, Wis., Moffett grew up in central California, and obtained his bachelor’s degree in political science and economics at California State University in Fresno and his master’s and doctorate in political science from the University of Iowa. He proved a great source to discuss just what is wrong with today’s Congress.

“Lots of things,” he said. “Congress is not getting done the things that need to get done. For example, the budget. In the last several years Congress has not gotten a budget done on time, or have not gotten a budget done at all and budgeted by resolution. And the budget is the kind of thing, whether you’re a Democrat or Republican, that needs to be done and it needs to be done on time. And that’s just an example of things Congress needs to do but is not doing.” One word that seems nowhere to be found these days in politics is compromise.

“Part of the answer lies in party polarization,” Moffett said. “If we graph it historically, the Democrats and Republicans in Congress and the president are as far apart as they have ever been in American history, and you have to go back to about the 1890s or the Civil War to find something comparable.” Another issue that the American people do not understand is why the Senate, despite a Democratic majority, also has trouble passing anything and even confirming presidential appointees. But, Moffett added, there seems to also be a historical reason for that.

“In short, the Senate was never designed to be a purely majoritarian institution in the same way that the house was,” he said. “The Senate was set up to be a much more deliberative body, one that is much more resistant to change. Part of that was the enactment of the filibuster rule. Back in the day it used to require two-thirds of members. It’s now down to



Picture by Jeremy Burmeister

Dr. Moffett at the Indiana State Capital Building in Indianapolis, Indiana in August, 2012.

60.”

Even clear majorities do not ensure smooth legislation. In states like Illinois, for example, the governor has a super majority, but still has problems getting things through the legislature. For Moffett, these issues are not as simple as which political party has the most members.

“Parties are not as unified as they are portrayed as being,” he said. “There are fissures in the respective political parties that tend to surface under extremely unified partisan control. Examples include Illinois, where a party like the Republicans can’t agree on

which direction it is going to go.”

Another important topic that Moffett addressed was the recent decision by the Supreme Court that struck down a key element of the Voting Rights Act. What impact will that have on participation in elections?

“The state of Texas, shortly after that decision, decided they are going to go with a voter ID law. Now there is a debate about whether voter ID laws affect turnout and if so what kind of effect they have,” Moffett said. “I was reading an article in *The Washington Post*, which stated the Justice

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Department is still going to enforce the other provisions with regard to the act and is still going to hold states pretty accountable with respect to civil rights violations.” When it comes to public participation in elections we are also seeing some changes due to technological advances.

“The Obama campaigns in 2008 and 2012, because of their use of social media and other online tools, were able to get a much larger and substantially different donor base than previous Democratic candidates,” Moffett explained. But is the electorate really educated about choices? After all, Thomas Jefferson once said that the biggest danger to democracy is an uninformed electorate.

“Political scientists have found that the electorate is never as informed as many people would like them to be,” he said. “My take on that is that there are enough people that are informed enough to make the political decisions, say, at the ballot box.” Some blame the cost of political campaigns as part of the problem, particularly the cost of television time for advertising. They see this as an issue of fairness, particularly since the airwaves belong to the American people.

“On the one hand I can see it limiting the influence of money in politics. On the flip side of it, I can see a scenario where corporations would argue that it is limiting their free speech or limiting their ability to go out and get advertising,” Moffett said. “To further complicate matters, there is the Supreme Court, through the Citizens United decision, allowing corporations to freely contribute to political campaigns. As a practical matter, I could see requiring media companies to provide free airtime as a condition of having a license as a way of reducing the costs of campaigns.”

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