

Real Problem in Congress is Unresolved Debate on Role of Government Itself

By Bill Humphrey - 10/7/11 - "No Apathy" Competition

On August 24, following a drawn-out crisis in Washington over debt ceiling negotiations, the satirical newspaper The Onion published this story: "Congress To Bet The Farm On One Last Big Bill." The intrepid journalists at The Onion reported:

"[T]he ambitious 15,980-page bill effectively puts all the nation's eggs in one basket, but congressional leaders from both parties agreed the time had come to "put up or shut up" and draft one huge piece of historic legislation that would address every conceivable issue facing the United States."

If only it were reality! The scale of long-term, unresolved problems facing the nation has become daunting. With such a bill we could tackle climate change, transform our energy supply, reduce poverty and hunger, stabilize entitlements, overhaul our tax code, reduce health care costs, reform subsidies, upgrade infrastructure, re-train our workers for the new economy, and reform immigration.

It would precipitate a huge leap forward for America if all our elected Representatives and Senators sat down together with a vision and found solutions to all of these problems in one giant wheel-and-deal, instead of kicking the problems down the road with countless temporary extensions of various programs. Of course, that will never happen, but it *would* be magnificent if it did.

In recent decades, the phrase "Washington is broken" has become an increasingly commonplace crowd-pleaser on the campaign trail from every candidate. Paradoxically, Washington seems to be getting more dysfunctional, no matter how many candidates pledge to fix it. And by Washington, everyone really

means Congress. Forget what the White House wants, these days our Representatives and Senators can hardly even agree *within* their own chambers on policies, let alone between chambers. Even under briefly unified Democratic control, the Senate's insistence on preserving 1970s procedural adjustments as divine law reduced a supermajority of 60 Democrats to negotiating with themselves to produce any meaningful legislation. It has only worsened under dual-party control.

That said, one party bears more blame for the chronic dysfunction. The Republican Party regularly uses rhetoric explicitly stating that government is bad, should be prevented from doing much, and should be much smaller overall. This view moved from a fringe position within the Party in the 1950s to the overwhelming view of Congressional Republicans in 2011. It should surprise nobody that there would be heavy resistance to addressing almost any of our unresolved issues.

It used to be said that both parties wanted the same results for the country, but merely differed on how to get there. Today, regardless of one's politics, anyone paying attention can see that there is a titanic struggle underway right now on the question of the very purpose of our Federal government. If Republicans stand against the idea that the government should even be involved in an issue at hand, they are going to drag their heels as hard as possible to prevent passage of any policy at all. An almost infinite number of trades offered to Republicans – a standard legislative tactic for centuries – will not sway their members who do not believe in those trades or the overall proposal. Worse, Senate Republicans realized in 2009

that they could block policies they opposed by blocking *everything* on the agenda, whether or not they supported the other items. Our republic nearly ground to a halt.

It has also now become common for Congressional Republicans to slam a copy of a bill running several hundred pages onto the lectern and to decry its physical size alone as a reason to vote against it, though their own majorities produced long bills for years. Republican presidential candidate Herman Cain proudly declared that if he were president, he would not sign any bills longer than three pages! Perish the thought that it might take a few hundred pages to make changes needed throughout the U.S. legal code to implement the complex ideas being debated, without causing large unintended consequences for a population of 312 million.

With the number of urgent, longstanding problems we face, this country really *could* use a 15,980-page omnibus bill delivering interconnected solutions for many of our problems. Unfortunately, because of the big-bill-is-big-government metaphor, Congress has trended toward splitting up interrelated issues, eliminating all leverage and negotiating space on any one issue. If corn subsidies are addressed separately from alternative energy, for example, it is less likely either bill will get passed. Thus, a huge bill would actually be better.

But until we address the reality that one major party is ideologically opposed to government itself with few exceptions, we are not going to do anything except kick these issues further down that proverbial road. But since we probably slashed the funding for our geologists in the last round of budget cuts, at least we won't see the cliff at the end until we are sailing off of it...

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