The Do-Negative Congress

The United States’ 80th Congress, in session during Harry Truman’s presidency, is one discussed in many history classrooms. This Congress is known mainly for its low passage of bills, being denoted as the “Do-Nothing Congress”. People actually believed that the low activity of this Congress made them believe that Congress was actually doing nothing. However, in recent Congressional sessions, it appears that Congress has not only returned to passing the same low number of bills, but has even declined further.

In this “Do-Nothing” Congress, around 25.9% of all of the bills introduced in the House were passed, while 54.2% in the Senate were passed (U.S. House of Representatives, 1948). In the current Congress, an alarming 12.5% of bills introduced in the House were passed, while only 20.2% in the Senate were passed (U.S. House of Representatives, 2014). Note that in both of these cases, under half of the percentage of bills passed in both houses of the 80th Congress were passed in the 113th Congress. Congress isn’t doing nothing, they are doing substantially less than nothing. They are the “Do-Negative” Congress.

The current “Do-Negative” Congress has led to increased executive orders as well as increased action by independent government agencies. Recently, on the subject of executive orders, the president has executed executive orders such as “Improving Critical Infrastructure Cybersecurity”, “Combating Antibiotic-Resistant Bacteria”, and “Improving the Security of Consumer Financial Transactions” (Kramer). Some executive orders are used for management of the executive branch or to manage independent government agencies, while some are used for bypassing Congress.

Aside from executive orders, independent agencies have avoided Congressional gridlock by taking matters into their own hands. For example, during the recent Great Recession, the Federal Reserve instituted quantitative easing to help stimulate the economy by essentially buying the debt from failing banks. Although criticized mainly by conservatives, quantitative easing can be tied directly to increased employment rates (Kramer).

Although progress has been made without the help of Congress, one question must be asked: why is Congress not passing bills? One reason is that in recent years there has been increased polarization of Congress, where most Congressmen vote strictly on party lines. But why has this happened? When did the House of Representatives and the Senate decide to only vote on what everyone in their party is voting on? This increased separation within Congress has led me to believe one thing: Congress has turned into a competition.

Congress is now a competition, Congressional seats held by a party are counted like a scoreboard, and being strictly partisan is seen as being loyal to one’s team. This strict partisanship can be seen through a recent GOP initiative to shed light on the number of bills not brought to the floor in the Senate. This initiative was brought to twitter under the hashtag #StuckInTheSenate, arguing that over 300 bills being passed by the House are being intentionally held off the floor, specifically by Senate majority leader Harry Reid. Although yes, there are over 300 bills held off the floor, in 11 of the last 19 Congresses, this has been the case (Bump). Nothing here is new, although the GOP is willing to make this an issue to take a shot at the Democrats in order to gain a political edge.

It is easy to see that the GOP is using this as a political edge, but why are they doing this? Because they see Congress as a competition. Competing causes people to pick sides, causing strict partisanship. Honestly, this is disappointing. Congressman are elected to lead this country, pass bills to help move the country forward. However, Congress has devolved into some sort of rivalry of two teams fighting for a trophy. Serving the American people is not a prize when one party wins, it is the duty of all Congressmen elected. If Congress wants to get anything done, each Congressman has to realize that they aren’t fighting for their party, they are fighting for the American People.

Resources:

Bump, Phillip. "Yes, the Senate Is Ignoring Hundreds of Bills Passed by the GOP House. But It’s Always That Way." Washington Post. The Washington Post, 8 Aug. 2014. Web. 17 Dec. 2014.

Kramer R. The 113th Congress and the Dangers of Doing Nothing. Financial Executive [serial online]. October 2013;29(8):3-4. Available from: Business Source Alumni Edition, Ipswich, MA. Accessed December 16, 2014.

U.S. House of Representatives (1948). *Resume of Congressional Activity (Eightieth Congress)*. Retrieved from <http://library.clerk.house.gov/>

U.S. House of Representatives (2014). *Resume of Congressional Activity (One Hundred and Thirtieth Congress)*. Retrieved from <http://library.clerk.house.gov/>