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GOP Congress: Faith Over Facts; Politics Over Policy

A Newspaper Column by Evan Barrett

December 1, 2017

The Republican Party is in the DC driver's seat, having majorities in both House and Senate, along with having the Presidency, with all of its institutional strength, and the Vice President to break tie votes in the Senate.

Such singular dominance over procedure provides the opportunity for excess. We've seen it time and again at the federal and the state level. Extreme political positions become the norm when there are no checks within the system. When one side of the political spectrum can make things happen with impunity just because they "can do it," bad things often happen. Looking through the wide lens of history, you can see that after such periods a counter-balancing reaction often takes place. The dominating group is usually marginalized or thrown out by the opposition when the people realize the damage that has been done by unfettered political actions that overwhelmed the system.

A recent example was when, in the 2006 election, Democrats took over control of the House of Representatives and the Senate because prior to that election the combination of GOP control of both houses with the GOP Bush/Cheney administration had given us a tragic war in Iraq based upon false pretenses.

Another example was when the Democrats were voted out of control of the US House in 1994 for the first time in 42 years after the Democratic control of Congress combined with the presidency of Bill Clinton to advance a number of progressive policies that the GOP was able to arguably portray as out of the mainstream.

While there is some comfort in the fact that the wide lens of history shows such reaction and re-centering of politics happening over time, in the middle of such moments of excess, extreme and often harmful policies are put into place. That's where we are today with total GOP control in Washington DC.

When all political power is with one side of the belief spectrum, articles of faith within that belief system soon become "facts" that drive decisions – often terribly harmful and difficult to unwind. Such is the case with the current GOP "tax reform" taking place in Congress, aided and abetted by the Trump administration. It's an article of GOP faith that "trickle-down" economics works while there is absolutely no evidence that it is anything but a belief system. But because there is no check on the GOP legislating its faith-based policy preference of focusing tax breaks on the very wealthy and large corporations, we may see the "fact" that our horribly unbalanced economic playing field is being made even worse.

Yes, faith over facts – a very harmful change being advanced because there is not enough political power on the other side to stop a juggernaut driven to confirm its faith, just because they can.

Likewise, when all of the political strength is on one side, it's easy to advance things based on political advantage rather than good policy. Current GOP Congressional and executive control has resulted in repeated efforts to make major policy changes to America without proper process. Marking up major bills behind closed doors with only the GOP present, instead of in public open committee meetings with both minority and majority (and the press) present, is not good legislating. Open public balanced testimony is replaced by the majority talking in private only to their preferred lobbyist friends and to themselves.

The “regular order” public hearing process Sen. John McCain reminded us was needed guarantees a serious public discussion and vetting of policy alternatives before policy is changed. But the closed door processes followed by the GOP allow things to be done for political reasons rather than because a policy change has passed proper public muster. So, right now, major changes (I refuse to use the word “reform”) in our tax system are being done not because they are good policy but because the GOP has determined politically that they “must pass something, anything” or they will be in trouble in the 2018 elections. This is clearly a case of politics over policy just because the GOP majority can do it.

So, this is where we are. Faith over facts. Politics over policy. As President Trump would tweet: “SAD.”

Evan Barrett, who lives in historic Uptown Butte, recently retired after 47 years at the top level of Montana economic development, government, politics and education. He is an award-winning producer of Montana history films who continues to write columns and record commentaries, and occasionally teach Montana history and contribute to community and economic development projects.

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