I wrote a draft of this article a couple of years ago, but every farm magazine I ran it past said they didn’t think it applied to their readers because it didn’t deal directly with farm policy. Even though it may be just a review of high school civics, I think many of us need to be reminded periodically just how our government works.

As Jim Wiesemeyer told the Association of Agricultural Production Executives this past August, there are three things that will have a significant impact on their businesses over the next few years - politics, politics and politics. He pointed out that most major companies are now making strategic decisions based as much on being positioned to react to what the government might do as on market fundamentals, because the former is increasingly driving the latter.

What initially prompted me to write this is that every day I hear someone complaining about national politics and wondering why politicians just don’t seem to listen. From what I’ve observed, politicians do pay attention; but, primarily to those who count. I’m going to use two situations to illustrate my point. The first is the presidential election campaign and the second is congressional representatives’ voting patterns.

Even in the most contested presidential elections, only a little over 60 percent of the eligible voters will go to the polls. For example, 61.7 percent voted in 2008. Pollsters and political strategists have become sophisticated enough to know the voting population’s demographic and geographic characteristics. Using this knowledge allows them to pretty accurately identify the 75 percent of eligible voters from which the 60 percent will come. They also know that about one-third of that 75 percent will vote Democratic even if the candidate’s qualifications or ethics are suspect. Likewise, another third will vote Republican, regardless of who the person is. What that translates to is that the remaining one-third of the 75 percent (25 percent of the total eligible voters) actually decide the election’s outcome. Political strategists also ensure there will be a lot of rhetoric and chest beating to appeal to the party loyalists; while they can be secure in the knowledge of regardless what is said or done, nearly 40 percent the eligible voters will remain disengaged. Therefore, the focus is on the undecided voters who might vote. In the end, the eventual winner doesn’t need to get them all, just more than half. The math isn’t quite as straightforward as I’m laying out; but, it’s not far off. The point is that from an election standpoint, the dollars, the effort and the message will be disproportionately focused on the 25 percent of eligible voters who “count.”
Furthermore, if you consider that many states are almost certain to be red or blue, in reality the resources will be even more focused on the undecided voters in the “battleground” states.

While the major polls show that there are more people who classify themselves as independents than as either democrats or republicans, a much higher proportion of the independents fall in the non-voter category because they have either given up on or become fed up with the process.

Congressional representative’s vote from a different standpoint. Congressional issues are more localized and more partisan. Over a 2-year term, a representative will vote on roughly 1000 pieces of legislation. However, only about 30 of these bills will play heavily in her/his local re-election. While the representative may not know the exact 30, he can be pretty sure of the 40 from which the 30 will come. For these pieces of legislation, his re-election hinges not just on how he votes, but whether he gets them passed. As a result, how he votes on the other 960 issues is going to be heavily influenced by two factors. The first factor which will weigh on his decision is the ability to trade his support (vote) in order to get support for his own important issues, i.e., I’ll vote for yours if you’ll vote for mine. The second factor is supporting the party line. Why? Partly for philosophical reasons; but, probably more importantly because supporting party leadership affects committee assignments, support for his legislative agenda, and party funding support in his re-election campaign. Conscience, integrity, and personal beliefs about what would be best for the country are important; but, politics comes first 95 percent of the time.

The key point in the previous paragraph is that a representative can potentially leverage his voting power 24:1 (960:40) on issues that really matter to his home district. There are 435 voting representatives in Congress. Therefore, a majority is 218 votes. If 10 representatives have an issue that is mutually important to them, they potentially have enough clout to affect legislation. This provides the opportunity for small constituencies and minority interests to have a say, to be heard. However, it generally requires an organized effort, i.e. a special interest group. There is a tendency to label special interest groups as some sort of evil; but, we’re all part of special interest groups. It may not be something as organized as a union or the trial lawyers; but, any group with a common interest or objective is a special interest group, whether it’s corn growers, cotton producers or just a local group interested in preserving an historic site.

The fact that politicians focus on “those who count,” may frustrate the general public. However, politicians are going to continue to do what they get
rewarded for. For their behavior to change, 1) more of the truly independent voters would have to vote; 2) voters would need to use their heads and study both sides of the issues rather than relying on their emotions, single issues, political pundits, media bias and following the party line; and, 3) addressing causes of problems rather than treating symptoms would have to become more important. The latter point is particularly problematic because the payoff to treating causes often takes years and elections occur more frequently. Therefore, those who would affect change often wouldn’t be able to show any immediate results and the credit would go to someone years later who is in office when the results come to fruition. The result is that politicians tend to do what is expedient and popular.

I’m not holding my breath. If anything, the increasing emphasis on political correctness, partisanship, sound bites, spin and what have you done for me attitude appear likely to increase the level of voter apathy. From an economic and social management perspective, my biggest concern is that the political process tends to be very short sighted.

As you evaluate candidates, particularly those up for re-election where with a little research you have the ability to vote on their actions rather than their rhetoric, remember the following: a politician is always looking toward the next election, a true statesman is always looking toward the next generation. The two aren’t necessarily mutually exclusive; but, the person’s true colors show when they are. It’s like telling how good a manager someone is. You don’t really know until you see how they perform under adversity.

I’ll wrap this sermon up with two of my favorite Mark Twain quotes. “It’s not what you don’t know that bothers me, it’s what you do know that just ain’t so.” And, “If you don’t read the newspaper you are uninformed, if you do read the newspaper you are misinformed.”
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