

Dr. Norman Ornstein Global Issues Evening Presentation
“National Security Challenges and the 2012 Election”
November 29, 2011

On November 29th, 2011 Dr. Norman Ornstein of the American Enterprise Institute (“AEI”) and Co-Director of the AEI-Brookings Election Reform Project addressed the Global Issues Evening at UNF. He spoke about the current dysfunction in Congress and its impact on the upcoming 2012 elections. The current dysfunction, he claimed has been growing since the early 1990s with partisan division resulting in the decline of institutional loyalty, disappearance of deliberation and compromise and unprecedented abuse of congressional procedure to block and delay opposing legislation.

Barak Obama’s overwhelming victory in 2008 and the democratic gains in both houses did not bring about a more functional government as hoped. Republicans, rather than seeking compromise with the majority, united to defeat any democratic initiative. The healthcare bill passed with support of democrats alone.

With a struggling economy following the financial crisis, the Republicans reclaimed the majority in the house and strengthened their position in the Senate in the mid-term elections. The GOP gains were fueled by anger and distrust of Obama as a leader and a mandate to reduce government. There would be no compromise with the president. Expectation of bipartisan compromise was dispelled, according to Dr. Ornstein, “when Senate Republican Leader Mitch McConnell said in an October 2010 interview that the ‘single most important thing’ he needed to achieve was making Obama a one-term president.” A policy in which there would be no yielding resulted in a near impasse with the first breach of debt limit and continued with the failure of the Super Committee to reach an agreement on spending cuts.

According to Dr. Ornstein, the American political process is supposed to be messy and cumbersome to prohibit legislation from being enacted too swiftly and decisively. But where did the center disappear to help broker compromise? Dr. Ornstein recounted that when he first came to Washington in 1969, Nixon, in his approach to Vietnam, had the support of the Southern conservative Democrats (“Boll Weevils”) representing 40 percent of the majority in Congress; his opponents were the northern liberal and moderate Republicans (“Gypsy Moths”) that constituted a quarter of the minority party in Congress. Nixon successfully forged a centrist conservative coalition that included the Southern Democrats joining most of the congressional Republicans. However, as seniors moved to the south, the Democratic South became more Republican and, as Latino Americans and more moderate liberals moved west, the Republican New England and West Coast shifted into Democratic strongholds. With these shifts, the Boll Weevils and the Gypsy Moths disappeared and the parties became more divided and homogeneous with no center remaining.

That Congress has become more partisan is evident, according to Dr. Ornstein, during “the first two years of the Obama presidency, the National Journal’s vote ratings showed that the most conservative Democratic senator was to the left of the most liberal Republican.” The consequence is that there is no common ground between the parties. Thus, Republicans can

threaten and have the power to block legislation. Partisan contentiousness is further bolstered by two recent phenomena-the permanent campaign and the rise of partisan media. Distinct seasons of campaigning based on coalition building have yielded to bitter contests representing the far left vs. right margins of the parties. The partisan media which has a broad reach thrives on confrontational and often irresponsible positions.

While conflict is inherent in our political system, our political parties have become tribal. It no longer matters what is said but who says it. Congress has a 9% approval rating. The 2012 elections will result in close margins in both houses furthering ideological polarization.

Probably the most quoted analogy from Ornstein's presentation was when he talked about Republican and Democrats in Congress gathering for a meeting on a football field. If you looked down you would see them mingling between the 40 yard lines. Today, if you looked down the Democrats would be bunched between the goal line and the 10 yard on one end of the field and the Republicans would be in the same space on the opposite side of the field. They are that far apart.

-Dori Walton