

Power, Balance and the Status Quo

Posted on Mar 29, Posted by [Jeff Smith, State Senator District 31](#) Category [Wisconsin](#)



Senator Smith writes about the balance of power in the Wisconsin Legislature, where Republicans have had thirty years to change the status quo but have refused to do so.

MADISON - The English language has many words loaned from Latin, and the phrase “status quo” is one of the most recognizable. “Status quo” is Latin for “existing state,” and in our modern use, status quo is the existing state of affairs, especially regarding social or political issues.

If the rules are tilted in your favor or you hold power, you definitely have a vested interest in maintaining the status quo. After all, change threatens the existing state of affairs. Our political systems often pit those advocating for change against those who fear change will result in their being less well-off. In that way, the idea of the status quo defines our political environment as well.

The solution is never simple. But I would like everyone to consider how we get stuck in the mud and so little is accomplished. Somehow the people in power are able to convince voters to keep them there.

Here in Wisconsin it is downright puzzling to look back over the last 30 years. It's typical for a sitting president to lose members of Congress of their same party in the middle of their term, known as the "midterm elections." Rightly or wrongly, voters attribute the changes that occurred in the last two years as mostly the president's doing, and often opt to create a "balance" by voting for the opposite party for Congress.

The midterm change sentiment often trickles down the ballot to state elections. Let's look at Bill Clinton's first midterm as an example. In 1994 Newt Gingrich riled voters up with what he called the "Contract with America" (the details of which we are still waiting to hear). By painting Clinton and his policies as the "status quo," Republicans won majorities up and down the ballot across the country. These congressional and state legislative majorities retained power for decades.

Wisconsin is a good example of this national trend. Starting with the 1995 legislative session the Republican Party has held the majority in our state Assembly nearly continuously. Last year's election did not change that, and Republicans have gerrymandered their way into two more years of power. With the current session majority decided, that makes 28 out of 30 years of Republican legislative majorities in the state Assembly. Though the Senate majority changed hands on occasion during that same 30-year period, power has not flipped in either house since 2011 – status quo in Wisconsin.



Many people say, "That's why we need term limits." But studies show term limits exacerbate the influence of the status quo, as new legislators rely increasingly on information from special interests and lobbyists. I won't dive into all the reasons term limits don't work in a democratic republic, but one reason is that those who hold the power (the status quo) are the same ones that would have to change the rules to limit their time in power.

Meanwhile voters ask why we can't – or won't – come to agreement on anything. Almost every meeting with constituents in my office reminds me that we have so much opportunity to make lives better. When visitors to my office mention that they have visited other offices "across the aisle," I wonder how my colleagues believe that doing the same thing over and over again will result in different outcomes.

The next time you hear a politician complain about the current state of affairs or tell you we need change, ask them what they've done to effect positive change lately. When those expressing frustration with the status quo are the ones maintaining it, their words ring hollow. Such politicians are only parroting their constituents' concerns, giving lip service to change while maintaining the status quo.

The Wisconsin legislature can act to meet the needs of our people. We could accept Medicaid expansion as 40 other states have already. We could follow the lead of over 70% of our citizens and legalize medical marijuana. In my experience, these policies are overwhelmingly popular with Wisconsinites. But we don't have a legislature that works for the needs of those we serve. We have a legislature that serves the status quo.

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