

Do You Hear What I Hear

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Senator Smith writes about how the dialogue has changed between candidates, elected officials and constituents.

MADISON - As I reflect on this year and the campaign that just ended last month, I must thank the voters who showed up and cast ballots. I know not everyone reading this voted for me, but I'm grateful that enough did so I can continue to serve all of you in the Wisconsin State Senate.

It's rare for anyone to get everything they hoped for. Elections are a triumph for some and a huge letdown for others. Many of you may be experiencing both emotions as some of the candidates you voted for won while others lost. Once campaigns end, though, it's time to accept results and work together.

Campaigns are full of opportunity for someone like me. I enjoy meeting new people so knocking on doors is right up my alley. While I only find someone home at about 1 in 5 doors, there are enough conversations each day to give me a sense of what folks expect from their elected legislators. I look forward to continuing those conversations with my stop and talk listening sessions when the weather warms up.

Too many think they can't trust elected officials or that their vote doesn't matter, but your vote is precious to our democratic-republic. It isn't easy to learn all you want to know about each person on the ballot. Especially when candidates only want you to see the positive side of themselves. It's harder to make your choice at the polls when fewer and fewer open forums are scheduled for candidates to debate. How do you know who or what to believe if the public can't ask the candidates questions?



Voters lose when they don't have the opportunity to interact with and learn about the candidates running for elected office. Even public radio debates have changed, with individual interviews replacing traditional call-in shows where voters could ask each candidate questions. That leaves too many voters depending on ads, mail and fringe internet groups to learn only what candidates want you to know.

I often encounter confusion over state and federal offices and responsibilities. Because there's little or no coverage of the day-to-day workings of state government, most people just don't know what happens in Madison. We're overshadowed by the national drama. This allows legislators to operate with very little scrutiny and accountability. So, during a campaign, it's the best time to educate voters about what elected officials do and how we serve.

That brings me around to the duties of the branches of government. The top of the ticket gets the attention but many forget that the governor or president isn't able to do much more than what the legislature or congress send them. The legislature determines what's funded and by how much. The governor might negotiate using the power of the veto pen.

That's why holding the majority in the Legislature is so valuable. Whoever holds that majority

determines what bills get public hearings and votes, what committees are created and who chairs them, and even when and how often the body meets in session. I'm always struck by voters who say they are disappointed when government isn't working, but they plan to vote for the party already in charge. Since 1994, Republicans have held the majority in our State Assembly 26 out of 28 years while also holding the Senate majority most of those sessions.



Those in power have drawn district lines to ensure they don't need to worry about re-election. It's why most elected officials don't feel the need to show up for public forums. In turn, most elected officials don't feel the pressure to hold public hearings or pass legislation, even on issues strongly favored by their constituents.

That's why I offered a resolution last session to allow citizens to gather signatures to place binding referenda questions on the ballot. Elected officials shouldn't be able to refuse action on clearly-decided issues overwhelmingly favored by voters. Citizens need to have the power.

Moving forward, I'm hopeful that more folks will stay engaged when it comes to what elected officials can do to improve our communities and the issues that matter most to Wisconsin.

Tags: Untagged