

Opinion



How Do We Assess Congress?



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If you look at the polls of how Americans feel about the job Congress is doing, they've been remarkably consistent for the last few decades. The institution's favorability rating, as measured by Gallup's monthly surveys, hasn't been above 50 percent since 2003; these days it's in the low 30s—though that's certainly better than the teens and low 20s it saw last year.

But this raises a question: How do we assess Congress? For many of us, I suspect the answer is simple: If it passes a bill we like, we think it's doing a good job; if it passes a bill we don't like, we think it's doing a poor job. In

other words, we tend to judge Congress by how it's performing on issues of concern to us. In a country as polarized as ours, it would be a minor miracle if Congress *did* enjoy majority support.

But there's more that goes into how members are doing at their jobs than big-ticket legislation. Think, for instance, about so-called pork-barrel spending, which sends money to a project in a particular district or state. A lot of Americans don't like it, since it smacks of insider horse-trading, but—and this is important—they tend to be just fine with it if the money is coming to a highway repaving project or infrastructure improvement nearby. The truth is legislators have to be diligent in representing their districts and seeking projects for their districts and states. This is true for direct spending as well as for bills that allocate money according to some formula; you'll find intense

battles within Congress over tweaking allocation formulas.

A lot of Americans also don't much like that Congress is responsive to organized special interests: business and industry, labor, professional organizations, farm organizations, veterans' groups... You can come up with a long list. Watching members of Congress cater to particular special interests can be disconcerting, but in many ways, it makes the political world go 'round: many Americans are members of one group or another with a presence on Capitol Hill. In a pluralist society like ours, with so many cross-cutting causes, it's how the voices of both ordinary people and well-heeled groups get represented.

Over the years, I've also found that for many Americans, how Congress approaches the size and role of government plays a big part in how they judge it.

Assessing Congress See Page 5

Thanks Shelly For Your Hometown 'vision'

Thanks goes out to Shelly Mikkelson, for your vision of a Hometown Showcase and the countless hours to make it a reality! The atmosphere in the PAC on Friday was amazing!! There are so many hours that go in to putting on an event like this. Thanks to Julie Carroll for all of your time and help with this as well, and to Brock Duncan for

your tech support. Benson should be so proud of the talent we saw on Friday night. It brought everyone true joy!

**Stacy Lindahl
Kim Ness
Emily Foslien
Lizzie Koehl
Deb Ose**

Schools Should Make Gains With Robust Funding

While Minnesota legislators deserve a grade of A when it comes to school funding, school boards across the state should do their homework to not only make schools whole from pandemic cuts but also look for ways to improve and innovate.

The Legislature approved a bipartisan school funding bill that provided the biggest school funding increase in 15 years, with a 2.5% and 2% increase in each of the next two years. It doesn't sound like a lot of money, but it is a significant boost to budgets battered when enrollment declined during the pandemic.

While the funding does not include new mandates and lets local schools make decisions on where the money should go, there was also money earmarked for early childhood programs, affordable day care, mental health support, summer programs, diversifying teacher ranks and long underfunded special education programs.

Some educators, like Duluth Supt. Dan John Magas, said the budget created "exciting times" for education. "We have had a shift, a major reset," he told the

Star Tribune. We share his optimism and can see great opportunities for the funding at local schools that have a reputation for innovating.

Still, some schools face budget struggles and have plans to lay off teachers due to enrollment losses during the pandemic. And even with enrollment lower, schools still have the same fixed costs for running school buildings and providing services.

In June, the Mankato Area Public Schools Board approved \$7.5 million in budget cuts and cut 100 staff positions. Those cuts were made on an assumption of a 1% increase in state funding with the thought that anything over that would go toward replenishing reserves.

With new state money that will be a stable addition to yearly budgets, some of those cuts should be reconsidered.

Enrollment will continue to be the wild card. The Mankato schools and others are not anticipating regaining all the enrollment that was lost during the pandemic. Some students switched to private schools.

School Funding See Page 5

Newspapers, Government Have Vital Partnership



A Drop of Ink

By Reed Anfinson
Publisher

It wouldn't be surprising if most people thought of newspapers and those serving in government, whether elected or appointed, as natural adversaries. Often, we are portrayed that way in film and books. The press seeking to uncover incriminating evidence of wrongdoing by the government officials is a common theme.

It's true that at times public officials hide information. Perhaps, they've done something foolish, or criminal, that they don't want the public to find out about. It's our job to expose wrongdoing, whether intentional or not. Only through our reporting can the public judge the honesty and competency of their elected officials, then hold them accountable. Their informed judgment helps citizens decide whether someone deserves another term or should be replaced.

Who those elected officials hire to administer our schools, cities, and counties also says something about their competency and oversight responsibilities.

For the most part, our local officials are diligent and honest. Our administrators do a conscientious job in carrying out their duties. It is the rare exception when we have to report stories that set us at odds with our local leaders.

For the most part, we collaborate on informing the public about important issues. When a community loses its newspaper, among those who miss it the most are the local government leaders. It is why they should have a keen interest in the future of their local newspaper.

There are stories essential to health and safety, finances, economic development, education of our youth, housing availability, childcare, and quality of life that they need and want told.

A school district may be looking at cutting courses in language, art, music, and science because declining enrollment in our rural areas has meant a substantial loss in state funds.

Each student brings in about \$8,000 in government revenue to a school district. The loss of 10 students over one year means \$80,000 less in funding. If that pace keeps up, in five years, \$400,000 in financial support is gone.

There are two solutions to address the lost funding: cut staff and programs, or raise taxes. Knowing what steps a school board has taken to maintain a tight budget helps inform their decision. Knowing the value of these courses to a child's education will have an impact on their decision.

The school board wants those stories told. It helps earn the support that gets an education levy passed.

Your city is faced with a critical housing shortage that is holding back the expansion of local businesses. When those businesses bring prospective employees to town, they might find the community attractive but decline the job because they can't find affordable housing.

To address the housing problem, the city council is looking at hiring someone whose focus will be to find solutions to the housing challenge. That person may also spend time on the broader economic development challenges facing a rural community.

Our job is to inform the public about why the council is spending the funds to hire another person when the budget might already be tight and people don't want their taxes raised. It is our job to tell the taxpayers about the costs and sacrifices the council's decision will entail. It is also to tell them what long-term benefits the community could see by hiring that new staff person.

Our city council wants that story told.

During the COVID-19 pandemic, we've been partners with local health providers and governments in educating the public.

We are partners with law enforcement in informing the public about scams circulating in the community. We work with them on safe driving campaigns and public awareness about a rash of car break-ins.

There is an old saying often attributed to Mark Twain: "It ain't what people know, it's that they know so much that ain't so." Too often in our communities, the public knows a lot of stuff that "ain't so." It is our job to give them accurate information about what our local governments are doing or not doing. Elected officials and administrators need an accurately informed citizenry to achieve their goals without facing headwinds caused by misinformation.

What are the options for citizens without their community newspaper?

There are just two in our small towns. First, the government will likely be hir-

ing an "information officer" at taxpayer expense who will provide citizens with its spin on what it is doing. Of course, a lot of people who don't trust the government will push back on its version of the story.

Secondly, social media will provide dozens of takes on what local government is doing with taxpayer money. Based on our experiences with social media, we know a great deal of it will be inaccurate and laced with snide comments or angry accusations.

We already know the most probable outcome of a community left with these two choices for information: a more bitterly divided citizenry. Local leaders will find it more difficult to motivate citizens to back actions necessary for the community's common good and its future.

There are times when the public will ask us why we didn't cover a topic or inform them about an activity. We can't be everywhere all the time with our slim staff. We rely on local officials to reach out to us at these times; not all do so willingly. It's a mistake on their part. Through the relationships our public bodies create with the public, they earn support critical to the backing of their future needs and plans.

How do we know this important partnership between local governments and the community newspaper exists? We've covered public bodies – city, school, county, hospital, and economic development – for more than 40 years. We've seen what a good working relationship between the press and local leaders can do for a community, even if we face those inevitable clashes from time to time.

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