

Hewing to popular opinion doesn't guarantee a wise decision

Written by Wauneta Breeze

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A Capitol Commentary

By Mary Kay Quinlan

Elected officials these days devote considerable energy and expense to staying in touch with their constituents, at least in part to determine which way the political winds are blowing on the issues of the day.

They hold town hall meetings. They commission polls. They solicit Facebook fans. They even tweet from the floor of Congress to fellow Twitterers — or is that twits? — during the president's State of the Union message, presumably to let voters back home know how much they want to stay in touch.

And many rely on the assessments of longtime friends and political supporters to relay a sense of what voters are thinking.

But what if voters don't know what to think? What if they don't have time to focus on the details of a complex issue? What if they are so bombarded by messages from deep-pocketed advocates of a particular viewpoint that they tune out altogether?

And what if their views are just plain dumb, like those of placard-carrying Tea Party demonstrators earlier this year whose signs famously read: "Keep the government out of my Medicare?"

Nebraska lawmakers called into special session over the proposed Keystone XL oil pipeline face a barrage of competing opinions, but the apparent uncertainty and lack of consensus on

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the issue might reflect a similar uncertainty among many of their constituents.

So what are elected officials to do when they don't have a clear reading on what constitutes a politically safe vote?

They might do well to remember a line from the musical "1776," based with considerable historical accuracy on the drama surrounding the signing of the Declaration of Independence.

Lyman Hall, a delegate from Georgia, tells his fellow delegates that while he favors independence, most people in Georgia oppose it so he plans to err on the side of his constituents and vote no.

A couple of scenes later, though, he changes his vote, telling the assembly:

"In trying to resolve my dilemma I remembered something I'd once read, 'that a representative owes the People not only his industry, but his judgment, and he betrays them if he sacrifices it to their opinion.' It was written by Edmund Burke, a member of the British Parliament."

That line from the musical is, in fact, a reasonable paraphrase from a 1774 speech by the Irish-born political philosopher who indeed supported the American Revolution. Burke was an intellectual leader in articulating the principles of representative government.

Burke, of course, lived a couple centuries before a time when opinion polling, coupled with forms of instant communication, makes it possible to accumulate and statistically analyze the purported views of virtually anybody about virtually anything.

In some ways, that probably makes it easier — or at least politically safer — to campaign for and hold public office.

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But lawmakers and executive branch officials who decline to act in the absence of consensus among their constituents are abdicating their responsibilities, as Edmund Burke saw it.

He believed voters elected a representative with the expectation that he — and in Burke's day it was always he — would use his judgment about how best to govern his fellow citizens, knowing they wouldn't always agree.

Not an easy thing to do, using independent judgment.

But that's the standard our form of government demands from our elected officials, even if it means telling constituents you think they're wrong.

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