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Thomas Mann, author of "The Broken Branch," speaks on how congress is failing America by being too polarized and too susceptible to executive authority.

Congress is 'the broken branch'

Congressional expert Thomas Mann visits campus

Dustin Gardiner

Posted: 9/22/06

When Thomas Mann looks at the U.S. Congress today, he sees a branch of government that is failing its people.

Mann said representatives don't have the necessary respect and desire to debate issues: They spend little time in Washington, D.C., have little regard for checks and balances, and blindly accept presidential seizures of power.

Indeed, Mann said he believes Congress is the "broken branch" of government and is mostly responsible for both the strong ideological divide in America and the failure of other areas of government.

Mann, a national authority on Congress and coauthor of the book *The Broken Branch: How Congress is Failing America and How to Get it Back on Track*, spoke to a full crowd at the Hinckley Institute of Politics on Thursday.

"I believe that the U.S. has always seen ourselves as a paragon of democracy for the world," he said, "and now the world looks at us and chuckles about the frailties, flaws and shortcomings of our own system."

Mann described how Congress has changed from the branch of government that most reflects the voice of the people to a corrupt body fiercely polarized along party lines.

"It's barren land in between (Democrats and Republicans)-there's no political center," he said. "It's led to genuine tribalism in Washington."

Matthew Fisher, a junior in political science, agreed with Mann that the ideological divide in the Congress is bad for America.

"Even though we have increased our straight-party-ticket voting, most people are somewhere in the middle," he said.

Mann has observed Congress since he moved to Washington in the early 1960s. While he said "the seeds" of Congress' current problems were planted 30 years ago, the lack of concern among our legislators has grown.

Legislators, Mann said, fly into Washington, D.C., on Tuesdays just in time to vote on bills and leave Thursday after voting is finished, often to catch a plane back to their home states.

"There is no sense of community (in Washington)," he said. "It's encouraged by (party) leadership that doesn't want its members around."

Mann said the current congressional session is only 95 days long and is even shorter than the sessions of the "Do-Nothing Congress" during Harry Truman's presidency.

But Mann's complaints extend beyond session lengths. Congress is allowing the president to grab too much power, he said.

"In the face of the most aggressive exertion of executive power in our lifetime and perhaps history, there is little blowback from the Congress."

While Mann said the Republican Party is responsible for many failures of the "broken branch," he also said neither party is without blame.

"Recent examples are Republican examples because Republicans have controlled the Congress for the last 12 years," he said.

Mann said the American public has traditionally been the watchdog of Congress and, he said, it needs to once again reign in or kick out the out-of-control representatives.

"It's going to be difficult," Mann said. "In the end, politicians need to get scared."

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