

FBB FEDERAL RELATIONS

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Peter Friedmann's View from Washington, DC – October, 2020

As November 3 approaches, predictably, the media is breathless. Anything that Trump or Pelosi says is repeated, magnified, amplified. If one were to actually believe the media, one would think that what's happening now in politics, is unprecedented. So once again, we are reminded, turn off the noise, get the facts, and let us reach our own conclusions.

Yes, we are in unprecedented times – but it's COVID that is unprecedented, not the politics. We have had bitter partisan unruly politics before – how Abraham Lincoln gained his party's nomination makes for sensational/appalling reading. But we haven't had a pandemic such as this -- with infection numbers, the death toll, the shuttering of the economy, closing schools, physical and social isolation, long-term impacts on a generation of children. Washington DC is not exempt.

At Federal agencies, most are working from home. We lobby Capitol Hill by phone and FaceTime with staff who may or likely may not actually be on the Hill. 'Fly-in's' and 'lobby days' of associations, thronging the halls of Congress, and crowding restaurants and hotels of the District, are no more (and not coming back till Spring or later). Commuter buses that usually bring several thousand to the District each morning, and home again in the afternoon/evening, are running about 10% full. Congress is conducting hearings virtually. For the first time in history, the House conducts votes without requiring the Member to be present on the Floor. The leaders of the Armed Services, the Chiefs of Staff, are not present this week, as they are in quarantine; one wonders, can our national defense be run virtually? Last week the nation learned of the latest aggressive COVID treatments, as they were administered to the President. COVID's impact is unprecedented and very visible here in DC.

Not only is the pandemic unprecedented, but so is the digital revolution, which in addition to changing how all of us shop, meet, eat, work, makes possible all of the above.

One would think that COVID and digital transformation would be sufficient.

But media wants more - politics. Breathlessly speculating the one party could control the House, the Senate and the White House. Would that be unprecedented? No, it would be the usual: of the last 7 Presidents, 5 (Carter, Clinton, Bush, Obama, Trump) benefited by their party holding the majority in both houses of Congress – at least for parts of their terms.

So is anything unprecedented in politics here in DC during this election year? They're tense, messy and partisan with impeachment hearings and investigations. They are getting in the way of some urgently needed legislation (in this case, a fifth COVID relief bill) – but that's all 'normal' in an election year. What is unusual, is how much this partisan, divided Congress and White House has accomplished in an election year: unprecedented amounts of spending (COVID), avoiding a government budget shutdown, passing a major trade bill. A passably productive (even if partisan and angry) Session of Congress is not what the media is interested these days.

But hang on, the Supreme Court confirmation hearings are just beginning...