

Professor Sheds Light on American Political System
by Janette Ballard



In this era of partisan politics, when a political candidate considers the opposing party the “enemy,” one may believe that the political party system is beyond repair. Not so, says DU political scientist Seth Masket. Although the media and political pundits may lead us to believe that the system is broken, Masket says it’s actually a great time to be observing, and participating in, politics.

“Many of today’s pundits long for us to return to the politics of the mid-20th century, when the parties weren’t fiercely ideological and when party leaders could get together for drinks and hammer out compromises,” said Masket. “But all that comity came at some major costs. Important issues like civil rights often went unaddressed so that the parties could continue to get along.”

Elections today are more meaningful, noted the chair of the political science department.

“Voters don’t follow politics closely but they have a better idea about the differences between Democrats and Republicans and they are better able to hold elected officials accountable,” he said. “And issues don’t get ignored like they used to. The fact that there’s so much fighting means that important issues are actually being debated. Disagreement is a very healthy thing for a democracy.”

While reading political coverage, Masket has found that there isn’t a great understanding about the way political parties function. To explain the complexities of the American political system to the average reader, Masket, along with several grad-school friends, cofounded the blog *Mischiefs of Faction*. The blog, picked up by Vox.com in September, aims to improve the public’s understanding of political parties.

Masket also has found that biases based on political coverage exist in the classroom, and he enjoys undermining any preconceptions.

“A lot of students come in knowing and caring a lot about politics, but also buying into ideas that parties are stupid, Congress is a mess, campaign contributions are bribery,” he said. “That’s certainly understandable. That’s how a lot of reporters and pundits talk about these things. But I like to take the time to walk students through these issues, not so much to defend the institutions as to allow students to see their logic and function.”

“It’s gratifying to see my students engaging these issues on a deeper level, understanding both the value of the systems we have and also what it would take to change them,” he added.

After receiving a BA in political science from the University of California at Berkeley, Masket worked in the early ‘90s as a senior writer in President Clinton’s Office of Correspondence.

“I got to write a lot of holiday messages and proclamations, which I loved doing,” he said. “I drafted everything from an Independence Day message to citations for Medal of Freedom recipients to the proclamation officially announcing the death of Richard Nixon. Probably the best part was when I got to be an Easter Bunny at the White House Easter Egg Roll.”

Masket earned a PhD in political science from the University of California at Los Angeles, and joined the faculty at the University of Denver in 2004. His areas of interest include American politics, state and local politics, political parties and campaigns and elections.

He is the author of *No Middle Ground: How Informal Party Organizations Control Nominations and Polarize Legislatures*, and is working on a new book, *The Inevitable Party: How Political Parties Survive Attempts to Kill Them*.

“My new book is about efforts to limit or even eliminate political parties in various states,” said Masket. “I look at the nonpartisan legislature in Nebraska, California’s nonpartisan recall elections, and the campaign finance reform in Colorado that limited party funding.”

“The most notable feature of all the reforms I examine is their failure — parties emerge as strong, if not stronger, after the reform, usually within just a few years. Not only do these reforms tend to fail, but they usually leave democracy worse off in their wake, making it harder for people to understand or participate in politics. My argument is that reformers often misunderstand just what parties are and how endemic, and essential, they are for a functioning democracy.”