

# Partisanship is Only One of the Problems

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As partisan rancor in Washington shows no signs of abating, the calls for bipartisan approaches to politics are becoming stronger. While the devolution of our politics to what at times seems like shouting matches with both sides talking past each other is not a good development, there is reason to be wary of bipartisan politics as well. It is also worth noting that for most of the 20th century, while partisan fighting was intense, it was not always reinforced by ideology. For much of the 20th century, the Democratic Party included socialists and supporters of apartheid, while the Republican Party included radical free marketers and northern liberals who supported the New Deal. During these years it was not uncommon to read about the problems of the weakness of ideology in the American party system.

Things have, of course, changed since then as party politics are now linked to ideology to a far greater degree. This is also what has made partisanship more intense in Washington. The problem is not that the culture of cooperation and working together has changed, but that with fewer liberal Republicans and conservative Democrats, for example, there is genuinely less room for agreement between the parties than was the case a generation or two ago. Nonetheless, given the structure of our political system with its array of checks and balances, some degree of cooperation between parties is necessary to get anything done.

Similarly, while intense partisanship may be part of the political problem in Washington there are other parts that are equally significant. Some of these, such as the role of money in politics, are somewhat obvious. It is no accident that the most successful third party candidacy of the last fifty years, and the most talked about potential third party candidacy of 2008 and again in 2012, were those of billionaires able to spend extraordinary amount of their own money on their campaigns. If the only way out of the problem of hyperpartisanship is to turn to a self-funded billionaire, the problem is clearly more than partisanship.

Prominent people calling for new thinking about bipartisanship or new centrist approaches to solving our political problems are not only billionaires able to spend their own money, but they are politicians who have recently lost a primary or an election. If a conservative is a liberal who has been mugged, a centrist is an incumbent who has lost a primary. Examples of this include like Charlie Crist and Mike Castle. There are exceptions such as Blanche Lincoln, who lost a general election, and Evan Bayh who decided he had enough and left the senate.

With leaders like Michael Bloomberg, Castle or Bayh, any centrist movement is at risk of becoming the refuge for ambitious billionaires and disgruntled defeated politicians. Bayh, Lincoln and Castle all worked in their respective parties for years, winning elections and getting reelected well into the current period of extreme partisan rancor. Crist and Bayh were even mentioned as potential running mates for John McCain and Barack Obama in 2008. It is hard to imagine a successful centrist movement built by people who spent decades on the inside before they realized there was something wrong.

More bipartisanship might make our politics more pleasant, but probably would not solve any of the major problems facing the country. Bipartisanship is essentially legislators of opposing parties treating each other civilly and occasionally compromising on key pieces of legislation. In the latter respect, perhaps surprisingly, President Obama has an extraordinary record of bipartisanship, tirelessly reaching across the aisle to incorporate key Republican ideas into his legislation.

It is additionally unlikely that a big picture problem like extensive partisan fighting will be solved by political insiders. One of the defining characteristics, and ironies, of our current political environment is that while more people than ever can inform themselves about politics, participate in debates and discussions and follow events in Washington closely, the division between ordinary Americans and the political class remains sharp, perhaps even sharper than in the past. In our political culture, the term "outsider" is something of a mockery referring to somebody who, like Sarah Palin has served as a governor rather than a senator. A workable centrism needs to develop from ordinary people, not political insiders. Unfortunately, most people who succeed, or even survive, in politics do so by becoming insiders, to even well meaning politicians and other political actors bring their own agendas to these processes.

A truly post-partisan framework for crafting policy and solving programs will require more than just compromises between the two parties -- we already have this -- but the ability to think differently about problems and to ask questions that are not currently asked. Questions like why we make education like a resource, whether we need a strategy for ratcheting down US involvement in the rest of the world, or what the post global economic crisis American economy might look like, are just some examples of questions that are not addressed by our politicians and are unlikely to be addressed by a smaller subset of politicians whose primary qualification is either having billions of dollars or having recently lost an election or primary.