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Sunday Dialogue: Will a Third Party Help?

Published: December 31, 2011

A letter writer's call for a centrist third party to help ease our political dysfunction was met with both praise and skepticism.

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The Letter



Part & Parcel

To the Editor:

Why does America have only two political options? Every day, the news from Washington showcases the inability of our two political parties to govern effectively.

Rigid partisanship has repeatedly hindered or prevented Republicans and Democrats from reaching compromise solutions on vital legislation, provoking a crisis of confidence in our political and economic system. And elected officials beholden to lobbyists and special interests allow their priorities to supersede those of ordinary citizens.

The economy is stagnant, unemployment remains high, and budget deficits and the national debt keep climbing. Yet no answers are forthcoming from our representatives in Washington. The continuing dysfunction reinforces the need for a third party of the center as an alternative to the current parties.

Using the Internet and social networks to organize and raise money from small donors, this new centrist party could be independent of the special interests and able to work for the benefit of all Americans. Its hallmarks would be ethical conduct, transparency and pragmatism. Instead of being constrained by ideology, it would be guided by common sense and practicality in its search for solutions.

A centrist third party could prosper in today's political environment and end the stalemate in Washington. There is a large body of moderate Republicans, disaffected Democrats and dissatisfied independents looking for the kind of political home that this party could provide. Unhappiness with the political options now available to Americans will sooner or later translate into a groundswell for alternatives.

ROBERT A. LEVINE

Westport, Conn., Dec. 23, 2011

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The writer is a neurologist and the author of “Resurrecting Democracy: A Citizen’s Call for a Centrist Third Party.”

Readers React

Dr. Levine calls for a centrist third party to “end the stalemate in Washington.” There is little historical evidence that third parties have ever accomplished that goal. The Progressive Party of Theodore Roosevelt, the American Independent Party of George Wallace, the Independent Party of John Anderson and the Reform Party of Ross Perot did not end legislative stalemates, and none achieved sustainability.

It is estimated that a quarter of Americans consider themselves independents. But this independent constituency is quite heterogeneous and would be unlikely to coalesce into a united, cohesive third party.

Any efforts to form a third party would likely result in splintering into multiple, smaller parties, each with its own agenda. One only has to look at the European parliamentary systems to appreciate the inherent inefficiencies of multiple political parties. The growing body of independents would be better served by leveraging their increasing influence within the current two-party system.

KEVIN R. LOUGHLIN

Boston, Dec. 28, 2011

I agree with Dr. Levine that a party guided by pragmatism rather than ideology is what our country needs. I’m not sure if “centrist” is the correct orientation. Much of the problem with today’s Republican and Democratic parties is that they cast too wide a net and represent no one effectively. I believe that they are both effectively centrist. Both parties campaign at the extremes and govern in the center, and I find very little to actually distinguish one from the other.

Instead of trying to recruit centrists from the Republicans and the Democrats into a new party, I’d like to see two or more new parties that would siphon off the Tea Party-libertarian constituency, the progressive constituency and even the religious constituency. This would leave healthier Republican and Democratic parties, and allow people to more realistically vote their conscience. It’s likely that no party would win a clear majority, and the resulting governing coalitions would be a more honest representation of the will of the people.

For any such multiparty plan to work, we will have to have major campaign finance reform, and a complete reworking of the election laws that give special privileges to the two major parties.

TIMOTHY TAYLOR

Lathrup Village, Mich., Dec. 28, 2011

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As a political consultant who worked to help Ross Perot craft his message for his 1996 campaign, I know the electoral rules of the game are rigged against third parties. An independent candidate for president has never won. The key to change is not the presidency; it is the House. Reformers need to win only a small number of Congressional seats to give them the balance of power in organizing the next House.

Reformers can concentrate on just 30 to 40 competitive Congressional districts. Primary elections in competitive districts attract larger numbers of candidates, so the winner needs fewer votes — often a plurality, not a majority. And primaries have vastly reduced turnout.

These two factors allow an organized group of reform-minded voters to “take over” a handful of close primaries in the two major parties. The third party can ask its followers to vote for the reform candidate whom it endorses within both the Democratic and the Republican primaries.

FRANK RICHTER

Detroit, Dec. 28, 2011

No, it is not time for a third party. Third-party politicians are just as corruptible as Republicans and Democrats. They may sprout like innocent little flowers from the fertile soil of the Internet, but just like Republicans and Democrats, they will grow up groveling for big campaign donations, letting corporate lobbyists tell them how to vote, and walking through the revolving door to lucrative influence-peddling jobs when they leave office.

It would be better for Republicans and Democrats to try to reform their own parties and the campaign finance system than to indulge in wishful thinking about third parties.

KEN FREEDLAND

St. Louis, Dec. 28, 2011

The reason democracy in the United States is in gridlock right now is not for lack of centrists — after all, Barack Obama campaigned and has governed as a moderate — but

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because the right is using gridlock as a campaign tactic. It's hard to imagine how having a new third party would suddenly cause right-wing Republicans to abandon obstructionist tactics, when those very tactics continue to win them support from their conservative base.

How can anyone look at our political landscape and conclude that what we need is more of the centrism that got us into this mess? After all, the economic crisis would not have happened if Democrats had not moved to the right to allow deregulation of the financial industry and regressive tax policies.

What America does need, and what we're finally getting in the form of the Occupy movement, is a grass-roots revolt against the political and economic corruption that has left America's poor and middle-class majority without a voice. In other words, the emergence of a left-wing, progressive third party.

PAUL MOONEY

San Francisco, Dec. 28, 2011

The inability of Democrats and Republicans to govern together will not be resolved by resort to a third party. The structural and financial barriers are too high, and the potential for further splintering an already divided electorate too great.

Rather, we need voters to participate in the two-party system. The rise of the independent voter has left the major parties' nomination processes in the hands of the extremes of both parties. If these politically diverse independents participated in the nomination processes of the two major parties, they would have a moderating influence at both political extremes. We would once again have a system that produced liberal, moderate and conservative Republicans and Democrats, able to come together and govern.

BARBARA E. TAYLOR

Arlington, Va., Dec. 29, 2011

Just like every other industrialized country, the United States has many political parties — Green, Libertarian, Socialist, American Independent, to name a few. Unlike other industrialized countries, the media recognize only two political parties, only two are allowed in debates, only two get millions of dollars in campaign donations, and only two are represented in our national government.

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Today, as rarely before, the United States faces serious challenges, yet our political system has room only for the Democrats, whose nostrums were tried and failed in the 20th century, and the Republicans, whose nostrums were already outdated in the 19th.

To meet the challenges of the 21st century, the United States needs some fundamental rethinking and restructuring. Democracy can produce successful solutions, but only if there's real debate where all legitimate views are given a fair hearing. It's time for the media to stop pretending that Democrats and Republicans represent the total political spectrum.

DAVID FAIRLEY

San Francisco, Dec. 28, 2011

The writer is treasurer of the San Francisco Green Party.

A third political party is a terrible idea:

¶As the history of third parties in the United States illustrates, not only do they have no chance to win, but they can also lead to a result at odds with most third-party voters' likely second choice. (See Bush v. Gore v. Nader, 2000.)

¶Based on the polls I've seen, it's not true, as Dr. Levine asserts, that "there is a large body of moderate Republicans."

¶The "rigid partisanship" that Dr. Levine describes is a characteristic of the obstructionist Tea Party-led Republicans, not the ready-to-compromise Democrats.

The current Democratic Party is as centrist a party as I could imagine. We would be a lot better off if the few moderate Republicans would come into the Democratic Party's "big tent."

DAVID JASPEN

Bronx, Dec. 28, 2011

Dr. Levine's call for a third party is well intentioned but misguided. This country doesn't need a centrist third party because that is what the Democratic Party largely is. What

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this country needs is not only a third party, but also a fourth and fifth party with the possibility of many more.

Our system of winner-take-all politics is the problem. We need a parliamentary-style democracy and runoff elections on top of oodles of campaign finance reform. This will not happen any time soon, or at all if we continue hyping mythical centrism.

So instead of a third party that would simply average the bad ideas that come out of Washington under the guise of centrism, let's advocate a fairer system that lets all voices in our country be represented, and let the politicians form coalitions to get the job done.

ZAC EICHMEYER

Denver, Dec. 28, 2011

The Writer Responds

A centrist third party can be the answer to the seemingly intractable problems the nation faces today. Extreme partisanship and corruption make the current parties unable to provide cogent solutions.

In answer to Mr. Loughlin, history is not necessarily a guide to the future in terms of electoral politics, as changing circumstances can lead to different outcomes. Third parties in the past never confronted the gridlock, partisanship and dysfunction that exist in Washington today. And past third-party movements have usually been constructed around a single person or issue. These parties never prospered over the long run because their platforms did not have broad national appeal, or because their leaders lost interest.

I agree with respondents like Mr. Freedland, who cast money and special interests as the villains in politics. But they are not going to go away as long as the Republicans and the Democrats hold power. The current parties are not going to relinquish their stranglehold on the political system voluntarily by agreeing to reform measures that will reduce their advantageous positions. The only way true electoral, campaign finance and ethical reform will be enacted is through a third party that is not in thrall to the special interests.

In response to Mr. Mooney and others who say that a third party needs to be progressive rather than centrist, I believe that the two are not mutually exclusive. As this new party would be guided by pragmatism and not constrained by ideology, on some issues it might veer to the left and on others to the right. In some areas, big government might be seen as the problem and in others as the solution. Market-based answers might work for some problems and worsen others.

When a centrist third party emerges, it will have to organize and be able to compete on a municipal, district, state and national level to gain credibility. And Mr. Richter's idea that a centrist third party should contest Congressional seats in order to hold the balance of power has validity. Even if a third party were able to have its candidate take the presidency, he or she would still have to deal with a gridlocked Congress.

The bottom line is that America's political system is broken and needs to be fixed if the nation is to deal successfully with the challenges ahead. Since the Republicans and the Democrats show no interest in more than cosmetic changes, repair has to come from outside. A third party of the center that is pragmatic and emphasizes transparency and ethics is needed to accomplish the necessary reforms.

ROBERTA A. LEVINE

Westport, Conn., Dec. 29, 2011