

Who Speaks for the Centrist Voter?

Governments have become increasingly incapable of representing the values of those in the middle.

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Where have all the centrists gone? *Photographer: Paul J. Richards/AFP via Getty Images*

If you're among the two-thirds of Americans who have an unfavorable view of either the Democratic or Republican Party and are in the political middle, I feel your pain. Having covered state politics for more than 30 years, mostly in Florida, I can honestly say that governments have become increasingly incapable of representing the values of the centrist voter.

The reasons for this evolution are vast and varied but let me start with an example. Imagine driving along a mountain path in the dark of night. You rely on guardrails to guide you and to steady your path. In politics that means a strong two-party system to keep

charlatans away, competitive elections to tamp down extremism and hold power to account, and the public expectation that elected officials behave with dignity.

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Those systems all seem so basic and quaint today. But the barriers are broken. It's a free-wheeling ride with no guideposts in sight.

There are lessons to be learned here, and that's what I'll be writing about in these columns. Some of the nation's most important policy decisions are being made by state governments, particularly in the Southeast. Here, many of the guardrails we take for granted are eroding, and experiments in extremist policies are taking place.

But these developments are too often overshadowed by the presidential horserace, and a political class that has decided it's easier to get people engaged by sowing division over culture wars, than by fostering unity.

Instead, I'll be examining the shortcomings and successes of the ideas and issues emerging in states, the calculations and consequences of the elected officials pursuing them, and exploring the stakes involved.

From my vantage point in Tallahassee, all politics has been nationalized. Republican governors and candidates have commanded attention by focusing on issues such as the nation's failed immigration policies and distorting the science around Covid vaccines. These are convenient distractions. Think what could be accomplished if they directed that energy toward addressing issues where they can exercise some control, such as training workers to fill state labor shortages, creating affordable housing in urban cities and staunching the persistent poverty in the rural South?

But they get away with it because their political pundits tell them these are the issues their base wants to hear. If you're a centrist voter, they're not talking about you.

Strong legislatures used to be a check on the executive branch. But just as decades of economic inequality hollowed out the middle class in America, decades of gerrymandering have squeezed out the moderate middle in legislatures and Congress. Because there are few competitive legislative races left in most states, primaries are the only game so candidates appeal to the extremes.

Contributing to this growing divide is a fragmented media ecosystem and decline in independent local journalism. People don't really know much about their local candidates anymore. What they learn is delivered through social media information bubbles, or from curated narratives managed by campaigns and opposition research.

Each of these factors has contributed to the mess we have today. There's no incentive for electing centrists to office. That's how we get unrepresentative democracy where the minority rules. The nation becomes more polarized.

Partisan polarization isn't just an inconvenient development for voters who don't embrace either party. It's bred hostility and increased distrust of our institutions, making it harder to govern. When politicians can't command the respect of the majority, they turn to policies that keep their entrenched advantage. They suppress rights, speech, and liberties of their opponents. They become authoritarians.

There is a way out.

It involves rejecting candidates on either side that spout extremist rhetoric – even if their fear mongering has you worried, too. Reward politicians willing to listen to opposing viewpoints and don't punish anyone for seeking meaningful compromise.

There are signs that voters are already finding ways to cultivate this middle ground. In the midterm elections earlier this month, voters in Kentucky, Ohio, Virginia and Mississippi demonstrated they could split their allegiance over multiple election cycles. They voted based on their personal values and beliefs and moved their states away from one-party control.

That's step one. Just as important is step two: to go beyond national politics and pay attention to what's happening closer to home. Are your state leaders open to forming coalitions to adopt policies for the whole? Do they go beyond giving dissenters lip service

and invite them to the table? Or are hard questions discouraged and debate stifled? Stay tuned. We'll be watching too.

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