

Joe Lieberman in Polarized America

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Are polarized activists taking over American politics? In his recent *New York Times* column about our book *Polarized America*, Paul Krugman asserts “there isn’t any center in modern American politics. And the center won’t return until we have a new New Deal.”

The recent travails of Connecticut senator Joe Lieberman illustrate the problems of the centrists. Lieberman is not a right-wing Democrat. He is a moderate Democrat. Our analysis of his voting record in the current Senate shows that 16 of the 44 Senate Democrats, including the minority leader Harry Reid, are more conservative than Lieberman. Lieberman generally votes with his party, but like all senators, from time-to-time goes his own way. He is generally pro-business and has taken a number of conservative positions on social issues. But it was his support of the Iraq war that constituted his largest breach with Senate liberals. Lieberman’s position on Iraq motivated a wealthy challenger, Ned Lamont, to enter the race. This challenge has been fueled in large part by the left-wing blogosphere and 527 groups. If Lamont makes it into the Senate, the Democratic Party is likely to be pushed further in a liberal direction. And not simply because Lamont is liberal, but because it will strike fear in the remaining Democratic moderates.

Lamont’s challenge comes just two years after Arlen Specter, a moderate Republican, squeaked through a Pennsylvania primary challenge from conservative congressman Pat Toomey. Toomey received funding from the conservative Club for Growth whose leader calls for the “extinction” of RINOs (Republicans-in-Name-Only). Although Specter survived, overall more extreme politicians are doing well. After the moderate John Heinz was killed in a plane accident, his Pennsylvania Senate seat was taken by the liberal Harris Wofford who then lost it to the conservative Rick Santorum. Energy, passion, and money are all on the extremes these days. It is hard to find a new moderate willing to spend personal wealth to join the millionaire’s club in the Senate. More typical is Jon Corzine of Goldman Sachs, one of the most liberal Democrats during his Senate years. Moderates resign from or retire from Congress more frequently than more extreme members. During the past decade over two-thirds of the departing members of the House of Representatives have come from the moderate wings of their party. Among the most cited reasons for leaving is that the intense battles of the ideologues has made life in Congress unbearable and has weakened its capacity to legislate and problem-solve.

In the end Specter survived his electoral scare only because conservatives like Santorum and George W. Bush decided that a wholesale purge of Republican moderates wasn’t the best way to promote the conservative cause. Losing that seat and alienating moderates would have been counterproductive.

Liberals could learn from the Specter scenario. Voting for a Ralph Nader, blogging for a Howard Dean, or doing a Gavin Newsom on gay and lesbian marriage is unlikely to

accomplish their policy objectives if it ultimately costs Democrats elections and turns off moderate voters. Just as Barry Goldwater preferred “to be right than to win” in 1964, many liberal Democrats today prefer “to be left than to win”. The liberal New Deal that Krugman admires resulted only after a complete meltdown of the economy. Waiting for another Great Depression is not a winning strategy.

The country has been polarized, largely by a successful conservative move by Republicans. This occurred because, after 1964, conservative activists recognized that their success depended on the electoral success of the Republican Party as a whole. Republicans have largely avoided the intra-party civil war that some on the left seem intent to ignite in the Democratic Party. Polarization by Democratic activists and the ideological purification of the party is not an effective response, at least until the next economic Armageddon. The Clintons get this; much of the rest of the party doesn't.

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