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De-Bunking the CW on Partisanship

Michael Sean Winters | Jul. 29, 2011 Distinctly Catholic

At least one good thing has emerged from the debt ceiling negotiations. The conventional wisdom that Washington is mired in partisanship has been debunked. Washington doesn?t suffer from too much partisanship, indeed it can?t suffer from too much partisanship because there is no such thing any more as a political party.

Can you imagine Speaker Sam Rayburn having a day like Speaker John Boehner had yesterday? Of course not. This does not reflect poorly on Speaker Boehner?s leadership or intelligence or powers of persuasion. It reflects the fact that today the smoke-filled room is gone, not an entirely bad thing that, but it has not been replaced by any other appropriate venue for forging compromises and cutting deals. That power to cut a deal and make it stick no longer exists within the walls of Congress.

The leader of a party in Congress has little of the power his predecessors had. He cannot distribute, or withhold earmarks, those special add-ons to appropriations bills that targeted federal largesse to specific projects in a congressman?s district because they did away with earmarks. However offensive those earmarks were to our notion of fiscal responsibility ? and we all remember the bridge to nowhere ? they never amounted to much money and they greased the legislative wheels. Maybe a few earmarks would not have been enough to get the Boehner bill across the finish line. Who can tell?

However much people like to denounce the ways of Washington, the city accurately reflects the way power is achieved in the hinterlands. Speaking about why he and his fellow South Carolinian Republicans refused to back Boehner, Congressman Harold ?Trey? Gowdy said, ?I was thinking about a furniture salesman in Westminster, South Carolina, who ? but for one vote ? might be the governor of South Carolina.? He was referring to former Cong. J. Gresham Barrett who backed his party?s leadership (and their President, Sarah Palin?s recollections not withstanding ? Palin the other day said that President Obama, not President Bush, has been responsible for TARP) on the controversial TARP vote in the autumn of 2008 and consequently was denied his party?s nomination for the governorship.

Any member of Congress who rode to victory last year on the back of the Tea Party had to know that they risked a Tea Party-backed challenger in a GOP primary. If they had forgotten that fact, there was the ubiquitous Ms. Palin to remind them via Facebook. After recalling the hard work and campaign contributions from the ?little people? in ?flyover country? who constitute the Tea Party, Palin bluntly added, ?P.S. Everyone I talk to still believes in contested primaries.?

The ability of ideologically driven extremists to take over a party?s nominating process is not news, although you would have thought the defeat of Sharron Angle and Chrtine O?Donnell and Ken Buck last year might have made some reconsider the value in nominating an ideologically pure Tea Party candidate. In the 1980s, NOW and NARAL and Emily?s List came to exert a similar power in Democratic primaries. Armed with effective fundraising lists and now with all the possibilities presented by social netowrking, these groups have more and more influence.

Primaries are low turnout affairs in which the most motivated voters tend to be disproportionately represented.

Local party organizations lack the money and the influence to determine a primary choice in the face of organized special interest political activity and it takes someone with real chops to stand up to them. The last time I recall that happening effectively was in 2006 when Democratic National Committee Chairman Howard Dean went to pro-choice groups and told them to back off their threats to challenge the candidacy of pro-life Democratis candidate, now Senator, Bob Casey, Jr. Dean?s actions harkened back to the leadership of John Bailey. But, it was the exception, not the rule.

The demise of party influence and its replacement with powerful single-issue organizations and fundraising bundlers was exacerbated by the Citizens United Supreme Court case which blew away long-standing limits on campaign contributions and requirements for full disclosure. That case was the final nail in the coffin of political parties, a fact little noted at the time. At least we formerly knew when NOW or the NRA was pouring money into a race. Now, undisclosed donors can pump millions of dollars into races through shadowy organizations that are accountable to no one.

Is there a cure? One step in the right direction is emerging in a few states that have turned over re-districting to non-partisan panels. The results have been uneven, but one of the principal ways to diminish the influence of ideological extremes within either party is to craft districts that are more evenly divided along partisan lines. If a candidate has a district that is a shoe-in for any Democrat or any Republican, then the primary is the only race that matters. In California, a state that often leads the way in sparking national political trends, a non-partisan panel has been mulling new congressional districts. The process has not been entirely removed from political considerations but, nonetheless, many of the districts are likely to be more evenly divided between Democrats and Republicans. Both parties, therefore, if they intend any chance of winning, will need to nominate candidates that can appeal to the center, not to the extremes. This will require a party structure and apparatus that can stand up to the organized special interest groups that currently dominate party primaries. It will be fitful. It will be ugly. It will produce some bizarre results. But, it is a step in the right direction.

The link between re-districting and the demise of the parties is reflected in Washington. There is no ?Gang of Six? in the House, but there is in the Senate. Why? Because you can?t redistrict a state?s boundaries. While some states are pure blue or pure red, but so long as there are Republican senators from Maine and Democratic senators from Nebraska, the possibility of centrist compromise exists.

How will all this turnout? Who knows. On the one hand, Boehner?s bill is dreadful and its passage will strengthen his hand in negotiations. On the other hand, if he is weakened too much, with precisely whom will Sen. Harry Reid and the White House negotiate? Evdiently, Boehner spent all day yesterday trying to coax reclacitrant Tea Partyers to back his bill, but I hope he had time to call former Speaker Nancy Pelsoi and begin negotiations premised on obtaining 100 Democratic votes for a compromise. None of the news reports this morning indicate that such a call was made. It is a shame. But, then again, Pelosi, like Boehner, is from a district that is rock solid. Her only incentive to reach a deal, and increasingly Boehner?s only incentive to reach a deal, is because it is the right thing to do. Not a bad reason that.

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