The Age of Ideology
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The country’s traumatic “debt crisis” may be over, but it’s far from gone. The aftermath of the months-long imbroglio still lingers as we assess the harm done to the nation’s fiscal image, the wreckage to stocks, and the collateral damage to an already fragile recovery. Worse perhaps, it failed to deal with the nation’s mammoth $14.5 trillion debt.

To be sure, there were real and serious issues about spending and taxes that underlaid the debt debate. Moreover, as a nation we are inarguably spending too much money given the demands of entitlements and the level of taxes. So some of what we went through was probably necessary.

But why did it last so long, become so rancorous, and end up costing so much to resolve? If politics is the art of compromise, there was neither much art nor much compromise in Washington’s search for consensus on the debt limit. In the end it became a frightening game of chicken, finally settled when a majority in Congress realized they were about to take the country off the cliff.

Some will say it took so long to resolve because congressional centrists and moderates are largely absent from the scene, replaced in the last several elections by movement politicians on both the right and the left—politicians for whom the word compromise is anathema. That point, as far as it goes, is correct.

The centrists who once fought to achieve moderate compromises on the great issues of the day are no longer on the scene. Gone, retired, or electoral causalities are names like Specter, Chafee, Bayh, Simpson, Danforth, and Stafford. Those few remaining, like Olympia Snowe and Susan Collins, seem increasingly muted as they struggle to survive in a political world grown hostile to them. So, yes, the center is disappearing from American politics.

But that observation has become almost a commonplace among political analysts today. The much more urgent question now is why American moderates have become today’s political dinosaurs. After all, moderates epitomized the quintessential American politician for a long time. From the end of the Civil War until well into the 21st century, moderates of both parties dominated American politics. And they did it by wielding their trademark tools—bargaining and compromise—to fashion political consensus on issues both large and small.

But no more! In their place are ideologues on the right and the left, politicians animated very little by the “art of the possible,” as Lyndon Johnson described politics, but very much by ideas, grand visions, and—most importantly—coherent, consistent, and unchanging views of what government should and shouldn’t do.

America, in short, is producing something heretofore seen only fleetingly in national life—ideological politics. Ideological politics arguably played a role in the 18th century American Revolution, drove much of the 19th century Civil War debate, and influenced heavily the 20th century Great Depression/New Deal period. With those exceptions, however, political ideologies have played a modest role in American history.
True, there have been strong ideologues on the right and the left throughout American history. But they have been mostly marginalized figures, often of brief tenure and little influence. American politicians by and large have been non-ideological types given to practical politics and pragmatic solutions rather than great ideas or grand principals.

There’s no mystery why American politicians historically have been mostly non-ideological—the electorate who put them in office has been even less ideological. Indeed, until recently no quality better described the American electorate than its non-ideological character. Average American voters might have considered themselves strong conservatives or liberals. But in fact few possessed anything close to a consistent ideology, instead veering right on some issues, left on others, and dead center on most.

Today’s growing ideological cleavage can be traced to many factors. Most recently, polarization levels among the electorate have risen drastically in the wake of the post-9/11 debate over foreign policy, interventions in both Iraq and Afghanistan, and massive federal spending to combat the recession. At the same time, the rise of talk radio, cable news, and social media have deepened voter awareness of political issues while sharpening the nation’s political dialogue.

Whatever the cause, the American voter today is motivated more by ideology, and that is producing more American politicians who are ideologues.

The problem with all this is that our two-party, federal system does not mesh well with the heightened polarization associated with ideological politics. For most of American history the process has relied on centrist politicians, bargaining, and compromise to make it all work. If that’s gone for good it’s not clear what replaces it.

Painfully clear, however, is that the centrist mechanisms that once routinely brought policy consensus do not work in this new ideological age. In the short run that probably means regular replays of ideological debates similar to the debt crisis fight. What it means in the long run is likely to be the focus of the next presidential election—and possibly many more after that.

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