

debate forum



FILLIBUSTER: KILLING DEMOCRACY SOFTLY

By Rana Odeh

As soon as children are old enough to make simple decisions, they are taught that real-life situations are not black or white. The two-party system is supposed to create checks and balances, but fails to represent citizens who fall in the many shades of gray. Although the American political party system is theoretically a multi-party system, in effect it is a two-party system. If political candidates had equal opportunity to be on the ballot, if Americans were truly informed about each candidate running for office, if the media were not biased, if all candidates had equal access to media, and if Wall Street did not have as much influence over politics through financial contributions, then the system we currently have would be fair and democratic. We all know that is not the case.

Ballot access laws make it nearly impossible for third party and Independent candidates to make it on the ballot. Georgia, for example, requires new party and Independent candidates to submit a petition signed by 5 percent of registered voters to get on the ballot for any office. The state has not had a third party candidate on the ballot for U.S. House of Representatives since the law passed in 1943. Florida is another example of strict ballot access laws; it requires candidates to obtain over 196,000 valid signatures. No Independent candidate in any state in the U.S. has ever successfully complied with a signature requirement greater than 134,781 signatures. Even when Independent and third party candidates manage to meet the ballot access law requirements, they are often hit by law suits from Democrats and Republicans challenging the validity of the signatures they have collected and asking for proof of identity for the people who signed the petition.

Many Americans do not know who their elected representatives are and are even less informed about Independent candidates running for office. The media ownership concentration in the U.S. creates an environment where independent critical voices are often not heard. Do you think Rupert Murdoch would give an Independent candidate equal access to air time on Fox News? Just the fact that the media is financially dependent on political campaign and corporate advertising demonstrates the bias that the media has in favor of the two major parties, Democrats and Republicans, because they are funded heavily by Wall Street and special interest groups. With last month's Supreme Court decision on campaign finance reform, the chances for a successful third party to emerge are even less likely.

We cannot have a successful third party when people are afraid to vote for a third party candidate out of fear that they are giving away their vote in favor of the party they most oppose. The Democratic and Republican parties are the two major and most powerful parties. Even people in favor of the third party candidate

will decide which of the two major parties would be their second best choice, and often vote that way, because they know the third party is not strong enough to win the election and they would rather have their 'second best' win than the party they least favor. I did not feel confident in voting for a third party candidate, so I voted for one of the two major candidates just so my vote would not be wasted, and ultimately put the party I did not want in office.

A filibuster situation is indicative of the failure of lawmakers to compromise and come to a mutual agreement to solve the nation's problems. The attempts by Senators Jeanne Shaheen (D-NH) and Tom Harkin (D-IA) to pass a bill ending

“TRUE DEMOCRACY
COMES WITH WELL
INFORMED VOTERS
AND FROM DEDICATED,
RESPONSIBLE PUBLIC
SERVANTS, REGARDLESS
OF THEIR POLITICAL
AFFILIATION.”

filibuster was met by opposition last week. Our senators could not even come to an agreement on a law to eliminate filibusters. How can we expect them to come to a consensus about health care reform, global warming, financial regulation and confirmation of President Obama's nominees? Adding a third or multiple parties with the same mindset is not going to eliminate congressional gridlocks. We can hope that new congressional blood entering the system as a result of elections in November 2010 and 2012 will help solve the current stalemate and filibuster problem, but considering that the new blood will not fall from the sky, and instead will come from within our political system with allegiance to one party and will be elected with the financial support of the same interest groups, the hope is frail. It does not really matter if we have two, three, four or 10 political parties if they still represent corporate interest rather than the interest of the average citizen. True democracy comes with well informed voters and from dedicated and responsible public servants, regardless of their political affiliation. When our elected representatives finally decide to work for the people, and not the money, the filibusters and stalemates will come to an end.

Rana Odeh is a graduate of the University of Dayton with a major in English and a minor in philosophy. Her research and writings focus on issues of race, class and gender. She can be reached at contactus@daytoncitypaper.com

www.DaytonCityPaper.com

THIS IS NO TIME FOR BIPARTISANSHIP

By David H. Landon



Let me see if I have this right. President Obama has invited Congressional Republicans to join him at a White House bipartisan summit this Thursday to discuss how the two sides can come together on health care reform legislation. The president promised that at this meeting Republicans will have a chance to pitch their ideas for health care reform. Could it be possible that a spirit of bipartisanship could really be emerging in Washington? Is President Obama trying to meet his campaign promise to have an open and bipartisan approach to governing in Washington? Nope. Fake-out! This summit is nothing more than a photo-op infomercial.

For the first time during the health care legislative process the meeting will take place on C-Span. President Obama is setting up the Republican leadership for an ambush. This is political strategy. When Republicans are unable to reach agreement with the president and are forced to walk away from the summit empty handed, the Republicans will be labeled the "party of no."

Accepting this invitation makes as much sense as if George Custer accepted a written invitation from Chief Sitting Bull. "Dear George: Please join me at Little Big Horn next Tuesday afternoon. First be so kind as to divide your forces in half and send the second half off in another direction. I will then arrive with all the Indians available in the Montana Territory and we'll discuss coming to a bipartisan agreement over this reservation issue. Your friend, Chief Sitting Bull. P.S. Wear something casual."

Although the latest report is that the Republicans are planning to show up, President Obama made it clear over the weekend that he and the Democratic Congress were going to pass government controlled health care with or without Republican participation, through the reconciliation route. The president even posted

“IN THIS HIGHLY
CHARGED POLITICAL
ATMOSPHERE,
BIPARTISANSHIP
CAN BE RISKY.”

the combined House and Senate version of the health care bill online on Monday that proposes the same massive government takeover of health care that the American people have already rejected. This is the same failed approach that will drive up premiums, destroy jobs, raise taxes and slash Medicare benefits. There is no evidence that President Obama honestly wants Republican input into health care reform.

Is it possible for Republicans and Democrats to work together on the nation's problems? I think there probably are some issues where it is possible. There are some areas of common ground on the economy and war on terror. Americans expect the two parties to compromise

and to work towards the common goals of solving these problems. The mainstream media often has been critical of the Congress for not working together. There have been examples in recent years of moderate Republicans and moderate Democrats working across the aisle to solve perplexing problems that have gridlocked the Congress. The "Gang of 14" whom I'll discuss more in the following paragraphs is an example of such a bipartisan effort.

The very real problem now is that the two sides have never been so far apart on how to fix the problems that we face. The Democrats are determined that we can spend our way out of the economic mess in which we find ourselves. On the other hand, it would appear the Congressional Republicans have finally gotten the message: When you're in a hole and want to climb out of that hole, put down the shovel and stop digging. There are two fundamentally different philosophies at work here. The Republicans' approach values personal freedom and responsibility and the Democrats' approach values government intervention. Finding a middle ground between these two very different approaches to government is increasingly difficult.

Participating in a bipartisan effort on a particular piece of legislation is not without its risks. Senator Mike DeWine was one of the "Gang of 14" that fashioned a compromise on picking federal judges. The compromise allowed an up or down vote on 95 percent of President Bush's judicial nominees. The compromise also allowed changing the Senate rules to reduce the number of votes needed from 60 to 51 to end a filibuster; the so-called "nuclear option." Had DeWine and the "Gang of 14" not reached that bipartisan compromise, and the Senate rules had been changed to require only 51 votes to end a filibuster, then President Obama's health care reform would have been already passed and signed into law. The federal government would be in charge of our health care. Let me say again, thank you Senator DeWine for saving us from that fate.

What was DeWine's reward for his reach across the aisle to achieve that compromise? He was constantly castigated for not being conservative enough, and although that compromise was hardly the sole reason, he lost his Senate race in 2006. Some Republicans still have trouble supporting him today as their Attorney General candidate, pointing to that compromise. In this highly charged political atmosphere, bipartisanship can be risky.

Perhaps the best way to find middle ground is to let the voters tell Washington how they should proceed. If the 2010 elections go well for the Democrats, then we have the answer. Keep spending. However, if the Republicans regain control of Congress we also have an answer: we have to start living within our means.

David H. Landon is the former Chairman of the Montgomery County Republican Party Central Committee. He can be reached at contactus@daytoncitypaper.com

FEB. 24-MARCH 2, 2010 DAYTON CITY PAPER 15

Location Finder | Full-Page Ads | Advertising | Contact Info | Calendar

126 N. Main Street | Suite 240 | Dayton, Ohio 45402 | Phone: 937-222-8855 | Fax: 937-222-6113