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Saying No Is Not Nihilism

Nationalize health-care and you are a realist; oppose it and you are a radical.

It was shortly after Rand Paul won the GOP Senate primary in Kentucky, and MSNBC's Andrea Mitchell was mystified. Why would anyone want to be a senator, she wondered, if he opposed most government programs? "After all," she mused, "isn't that what [legislators] do? They legislate."

And therein, perfectly encapsulated, is the bias of the mainstream media and the elite political classes, a belief that if there is a problem — any problem — then government must do something to fix it. Expressed another way: How many times has President Obama told us that he wasn't sent to Washington to argue, but to "solve problems?" It's the same for virtually every other politician.

It is not a partisan phenomenon, not confined to media liberals or Democrats. Conservative pundits like David Brooks speak of the "nihilism" of those who oppose Obama's programs without proposing their own. After all, as George W. Bush once put it, "When someone is hurting, government has got to move."

Meanwhile self-styled moderates regularly lament the partisanship that keeps us from "getting things done."

Thus, a Democrat who voted for a government takeover of one-sixth of the U.S. economy is considered mainstream. But a Republican who wants to repeal the health-care bill is extreme. Candidates who supported programs that increased the size of government from 21 to 28 percent of GDP — and put us on a trajectory to 40 percent by 2050 — raise not even an inquiring eyebrow. But candidates who call for cuts in government spending end up as a special segment on *Hardball*. It is considered radical to propose reforming Social Security or Medicare, but not to ignore the combined \$100 trillion in future shortfalls facing those programs.

Of course, that means that raising taxes to pay for all this increased government is responsible, but cutting them is to risk fiscal disaster.

Yet, at least this year, voters do not seem to evince much desire for a problem-solving government. A CNN poll in July asked Americans whether the government was “trying to do too many things that should be left to individuals and businesses” or “should do more to solve our country’s problems.” By a stunning 61–35 margin, Americans said “too many things.”

On specific issues as well, the public mood seems opposed to the conventional wisdom of an activist government, roaming the countryside and fixing whatever ails us. According to the most recent Rasmussen poll, likely voters support repeal of the health care law by a margin of 56–27. Another poll shows that by 52–28 voters believe government spending does more harm than good. It’s not just tea partiers that are seeking smaller government these days.

That suggests that those so-called radical or extreme Republicans should show a little courage rather than allow themselves to be intimidated by the media or by the voices in their own party that chastise them for being “the party of no” or demand that they develop a positive agenda.

Republicans should not try to do things like the Democrats — only a little less expensively or with a little less bureaucracy — but instead should present an agenda of personal and economic liberty. After all, cutting taxes and reducing regulation *is* a positive alternative to a Democratic jobs program. Repealing the government takeover of the health-care system *is* a way to give people better health care. Allowing younger workers to invest a portion of their Social Security taxes *is* a positive alternative to the debt and taxes to come from a bankrupt system.

Or perhaps they should just take inspiration from Barry Goldwater, who wrote, “My aim is not to pass laws, but to repeal them. It is not to inaugurate new programs, but to repeal old ones that do violence to the Constitution, or that have failed their purpose, or that impose on the people an unwarranted financial burden. . . . And if I should later be attacked for neglecting my constituent’s ‘interests,’ I shall reply . . . that their main interest is liberty, and that in that cause I am doing the best I can.”

Voters rejected the big-government “do something” conservatism of the Bush years. Voters are now rejecting the big-government “do something” liberalism of President Obama, Nancy Pelosi, and Harry Reid. If Republicans are going to take advantage of this, they will have to show that this time they are indeed in favor of something positive.

It's called freedom.

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