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Debating the Two-Party System

Earlier this week, I spent two hours arguing with a very witty libertarian and an avuncular Israeli Rush Limbaugh fan about whether the two-party system is ruining America.

No, it wasn't just another typical night around my dinner table. It was part of a debate sponsored by Intelligence Squared, held at NYU's Skirball Center for the Performing Arts.

I joined David Brooks in arguing for the proposition that the two-party system is making America ungovernable. Arguing against were Zev Chafets and P.J. O'Rourke. *Nightline's* John Donvan moderated.

Before the debate, which will be shown next week on Bloomberg Television (starting Monday at 9pm), David and I huddled in the green room, plotting our strategy -- actually mostly making sure we weren't planning to say the same things.

We were soon ushered onto the stage in front of a great crowd. Each seat in the auditorium had an electronic device that allowed audience members to vote on which team they thought had won the debate (more on this later).

The debate itself made me nostalgic for my Cambridge Union days.

P.J. showed why he is the most quoted living author in the Penguin Dictionary of Modern Humorous Quotations, tossing off acerbic "a pox on both their houses" rants like, "Republicans and Democrats don't have ideologies. They just have these vague platform planks made of rotten wood of political expediency. If American party platforms were backyard tree forts, you would not let your children climb in them."

Zev adopted the mien of the exasperated outside observer: "In multi-party systems there are many people who also don't feel that they're represented by any of the parties. And I, having lived in a country that has 14 parties, can tell you that I didn't find any that represented me. That's a sort of inherent problem of democracy." He was full of self-deprecation, at one point joking that he couldn't read his own notes because they were in Hebrew, so he was reading backwards.

David made the case that most politicians are "better people than one would anticipate," but that the two-party system has become so polarized that even good people are driven to a lockstep groupthink that punishes those who have original, nonpartisan ideas. He also bemoaned the fact that members of the two parties no longer mix socially, saying: "it's just like junior high."

I focused on all the evidence that the two-party system is failing us everywhere we look:

Why are the too big to fail banks still too big to fail? Why is there still so little emphasis on jobs at a time when 26 million Americans are unemployed or underemployed? Why did our system recently fail us in three spectacular ways: the financial meltdown, the Upper Big Branch mining disaster in West Virginia where 29 miners died, and the BP oil spill in the Gulf?

Because the two-party system is hopelessly broken -- only capable of producing what Tom Friedman calls "sub-optimal solutions" to our major crises. And, as he put it, while sub-optimal is okay for ordinary times, these are not ordinary times.

On issue after issue -- education, our crumbling infrastructure, the rising costs of health care, the deficit, the steady decline of the middle class, foreign policy (where the two parties marched arm in arm into invading a country that did not after all have WMD or pose a threat to our national security) -- our current two-party system has failed us.

It has ossified to the point where it can only deliver short-term fixes. It has led to entrenched thinking, complacency, and the deification of conventional wisdom -- all conditions that have made it harder and harder to challenge a broken status quo.

And the two-party system has not just narrowed our choices, it's narrowed our thinking. It has deeply infected our political discourse, our media, and our politicians. To paraphrase Einstein, the problems we are facing today cannot be solved by the same level of thinking that created them.

The hunger for change is evident on both sides of the political spectrum -- from the meteoric rise to power of an outsider candidate like Barack Obama to the lightning in a bottle creation of the Tea Party -- both the result of grassroots, anti-establishment movements. The American people clearly want alternatives.

On practically every level, potential nominees in each party are running away from the establishment label and desperately trying to show their independence from the establishment wings of the two parties that are held in such low esteem.

And the Internet and social media are making the shakeup of the two parties much more likely, with young people less and less aligned with large, established institutions -- and more empowered than ever to connect with each other and cut through the spin perpetrated by politicians and special interests.

In my closing statement, I summed things up by comparing the two-party system to a stale marriage. Democrats and Republicans need something to spice it up. They need to go on Craigslist and find a third party. (And if that third party isn't wearing a shirt, they really should do a background check, because he might turn out to be a member of Congress... and you don't want to go there.)

Interestingly, right from the start, the other side basically conceded the issue, admitting that the two-party system isn't working, but arguing that, to paraphrase Churchill, the two-party system is the worst political system, except for all the others that have been tried. What, they wondered, would work better?

The rules of the debate held that the winning team would be the one that changed the most minds over the course of the evening. Before the debate, 46 percent of the audience said they were for the motion (i.e. agreed that the two-party system was making us ungovernable), 24 percent were against and 30

percent were undecided. After the debate, 50 percent voted "for", 40 voted "against" and 10, despite two hours of heated argument, remained unsure where they stood. So even though the majority of the crowd agreed with David and me, P.J. and Zev were the winners. I instantly understood how Al Gore felt in 2000.

But P.J. and Zev were more than worthy victors, having kept everyone -- including David and me -- in stitches during the debate.

But, on substance, I'm still with Thomas Jefferson, who said: "I never submitted the whole system of my opinions to the creed of any party of men whatever, in religion, in philosophy, in politics, or in anything else, where I was capable of thinking for myself. Such an addiction is the last degradation of a free and moral agent. If I could not go to heaven but with a party, I would not go there at all."

Look around: It's clear our two-party system is not taking us to heaven. In fact, it's rapidly taking us in the other direction.

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