



## “You don’t seize the center, you create the center”

by Tim Kowal on April 29, 2013

When I learned it, I thought the motion for this month’s Intelligence Squared U.S. debate – [“The GOP Must Seize the Center or Die”](#) – was simply dreadful. How could the opposing case possibly be made without fighting a losing battle with the proposition itself? *Of course* the GOP needs to win more votes from the center; *of course* they’ve been successfully characterized as out-of-touch with centrists. And indeed, the pre-debate poll showed a staggering 65% in favor of the motion and only 14% opposed. This lousy motion seemed certain to succeed.

Yet Laura Ingraham and Ralph Reed, to their great credit, defeated David Brooks and Mickey Reynolds by successfully convincing the audience,\* as Ingraham put it, that “You don’t seize the center; you create the center.” And not only that, but that the GOP could successfully create a new center instead of settling for the one we have.

Both Ingraham’s and Reed’s performances were excellent, and Brooks and Edwards performed ably, but Ingraham’s closing deserves special mention:

I want to start by saying — you’re not going to believe I’m saying this. But I’m going to say you should reject this proposition that the Republican Party should seize the center or die because I have a lot of faith and respect in the decision-making that Barack Obama made when he could have gone that way. He could have, himself, seized the center. He could have seized it in 1985 when it looked like liberalism was on the run. He could have seized in 1994, when this Newt Gingrich guy just took the country by storm, love him or hate him, but changed the face of politics. He could have given up hope in 2001 and 2002 when the whole country was rallying toward this war in Iraq, and he decided, "You know something? It’s — in my view, it’s the wrong thing to do. Because the establishment and everyone around him was probably telling him, "The center has moved. You’ve got to go that way."

He didn’t go that way. He had a certain set of principles. I disagree with him deeply, but he had a certain sense of himself and sense of principles that he decided to follow, and he followed in a new way by reaching out to all those disaffected Democrats who were kind of tired of the old way and Republicans who were kind of sick of where the Republicans were falling down. And, lo and behold, Barack Obama, by not seizing the center, unseated the establishment candidate of, of course, Hillary Clinton, decided, "Guess what? Liberalism is back. I never let it go. I never moved to the center, and I’m going to bring along constituency after constituency in looking at

the world and the country in a new way." He found his center. Republicans, guess what? They know where they — what they believe and how they believe it.

Seizing the new center is political death. Please reject the proposition.

I strongly agree with Ingraham. The premature reports of average Americans' leftward turn are greatly exaggerated. Polls show Americans still [prefer state and local government to federal government](#). [Most want smaller government](#). [A vast majority favor making second and third term abortions illegal](#) (64% and 80% respectively). (Did you know that? I didn't. Even the cited Gallup poll buries that underreported fact near the bottom of the page, underneath nonsense questions like whether people identify as "pro-choice" or "pro-life," or whether *Roe v. Wade* should be overturned (ignoring that it's already been largely overturned by *Planned Parenthood v. Casey*.) The claim that most Americans are conservative even passes dejected fact-checker muster: [Kevin Drum glumly exonerated Marco Rubio when he made the claim](#): At least a plurality of Americans self-identify as conservative, and a Politico poll last year reported an overwhelming 61% of likely voters identified as conservative.

Ingraham is right: It would be folly to rush to adopt the views of such a "mushy middle" held together in large part by a personally popular president now in his second term. The problem with talking about "the center" is that it is a constantly shifting thing. That a generally conservative nation has gotten on board with a big-federal-government lefty suggests that there's lots of room for the GOP to remake the center – should the GOP get its messaging act together, that is. Best that the GOP not cash out during this string of bad hands. Keep a seat at the table and wait for a new dealer – it likely won't be another New Dealer, after all.

\*Per the debate rules, the team that wins the most number of converts to its position by the end of the debate wins, no matter whether its side of the motion wins a majority of votes.