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Candidates need to run as Publicrats

Voters have figured out that party labels are anachronisms to be ignored. The only platform most Americans are interested in these days is good government.

COMMENTARY

BY JERRY CAMMARATA



Jerry Cammarata is a member of the New York City Central Board of Education and a former candidate for the New York State Assembly.

THE IDEA HATCHED BY OUR Founding Fathers that the public good ought to be put before adherence to party identity was not only right, it also worked – and it works today in government and, happily, even in electioneering.

The American people are tired of partisan combat. The era when families were either Democratic or Republican from generation unto generation is long gone.

Just look at the topsy-turvy politics all around us. Rudolph Giuliani is mayor of New York City – a Republican re-elected to a second term by a huge margin in a city where Democrats outnumber Republicans five to one, and in a town that has been a Democratic garrison since Aaron Burr helped found the Tammany Society. Not long ago, Pat Buchanan drew what votes he got in the last round of presidential primaries from restless union members fearful of the implications of free trade. More recently, over one-third of House Democrats bucked their party's leadership and voted for the partial-birth abortion ban. Of course, there are also the "Blue Dog" Democrats of Congress, who are among the most ardent of the fiscally conservative, balanced budget advocates.

What is a politician to do? A politician – and a campaign manager – is to get the message: voters have figured out that party labels are anachronisms to be ignored. The only platform most Americans are interested in these days is a commitment to good government, and the only ideology they look for in a candidate is a doctrinaire adherence to the philosophy of What Works.

Voters now want Publicrats in office.

Think about the recent history of the broadest issues facing the nation. Is campaign finance reform only a Republican or Democratic issue? Are restrictions on lobbying inherently conservative, liberal or Perotist? Does the stabilization of Social Security and Medicare have to be a right-wing or left-wing cause? Can only one party say kids who are graduating from high school should be able to read, write and calculate well enough to get a job or go to college? These questions miss the point – which is precisely the point. Voters don't care what label candidates put on these issues. They're much more interested in finding

constructive solutions.

The irrelevance of partisanship is also the reason Ross Perot garnered 19 percent of the vote in the '92 presidential election. It's the reason the convention delegates of the Perot-inspired Reform Party almost universally trashed every candidate running for the Republican and Democratic nominations in 1996: none of the logs cut as presidential timber were taking specific stands on meaningful government, school, election and fiscal reform issues. The delegates left with tension headaches and the average voter yawned his or her way through that election.

Publicrat campaigning not only works, though: it's good for the country. Campaign professionals ought not be mere "buyers" for parties that become generic political department stores. They have a responsibility to select not just marketable candidates, but candidates who will provoke substantive debate as candidates and who will shape thoughtful policy if elected.

The party loyalists may point out that those original representatives who were making high-minded pledges in 1776 did not have to run for their seats – though they may have had to run for their lives. However, the first chief executive to lead the new democracy they created did have to face an election, twice in fact.

In 1796, as George Washington was nearing the end of his second term as president, he published a document which has come to be known as his "Farewell Address." Though written as a speech, Washington never actually delivered it orally.

"The spirit of party," Washington wrote, "serves always to distract the Public Councils, and enfeeble the Public Administration. It agitates the Community with ill-founded jealousies and false alarms; kindles animosity of one part against another, foments occasionally riot and insurrection. It opens the door to foreign influence and corruption, which find a facilitated access to the government itself through the channels of party passions."

Washington gave the above advice to a new nation, but also to future generations of candidates and political consultants – and he remains the only president ever to win the unanimous vote of the Electoral College.

Now that's something to think about. ■