

Why Liberals Need Heath Shuler

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Some liberals have begun to argue that losing the House majority may ultimately be “good” for Democrats by purging the party of Blue Dogs and other moderates. As one liberal commentator recently opined in *The New York Times*, “Democrats would be in better shape, and would accomplish more, with a smaller and more ideologically cohesive caucus.”

This small tent strategy could not be more wrong.

Both politically and substantively, liberals need moderates. By rejecting the big-tent coalition that brought them power in the first place, the only things Democrats will accomplish are permanent minority status and the frustration of their legislative priorities. Here are three reasons liberals need moderates:

1. Liberal members need the votes of moderate colleagues to make legislative progress.

Passing legislation still takes 219 votes in the House of Representatives—a threshold Democrats can’t reach without the very moderates derided by some liberals as “fake Democrats.”

Liberal members make up nowhere near a majority of the House. Nor do they make up a majority of the current House Democratic Caucus. The Progressive Caucus, the flagship coalition of liberals, has just 78 House members.

In fact, the Progressive Caucus comprises less than one-fifth of the House and just 30% of its 255 Democratic members. In contrast, 105 current House members are Blue Dogs, New Democrats or both. Moderates, not liberals, are the numerical base of the Democratic caucus.

2. Liberal members need moderate voters to win and keep their seats.

According to Gallup, 42% of Americans now call themselves “conservative,” while 35% call themselves “moderate” and only 20% consider themselves “liberal.” Liberals aren’t just the smallest political constituency in America; they’re outnumbered 4 to 1 by moderates and conservatives. In no state are liberals either a majority or a plurality.

Even in Rhode Island—America’s most liberal state—moderates outnumber liberals 36% to 32%. In purple states such as Colorado, moderates outnumber liberals 33% to 27%. In Nevada, the moderate-liberal ratio is 41% to 17%.

Winning moderates is the only way to overcome these numerical disadvantages, which is exactly what Democrats did in 2006 and 2008. The Congressional majority won in those years (thanks to the Schumer-Emanuel big-tent strategy liberals scorn) was a moderate, not liberal, wave involving deeply purple, if not outright red, districts.

Many seats now belonging to such moderate Democratic members as Reps. Jason Altmire, Frank Kratovil and Mike McMahon were wrested from Republican hands. Not surprisingly, 42 of the Democrats elected in the last two cycles are Blue Dogs and New Democrats, while just 14 have joined the Progressive Caucus—and of these 14, four are also New Democrats. Call them “fake Democrats,” but they delivered a real majority.

3. Liberals need moderates—from both parties—to forge good policy.

While liberals now find it fashionable to label moderates as obstructionists of a progressive agenda, this ignores historical reality. Most of the signature pieces of progressive legislation passed in the 20th century were the products of broad, bipartisan coalitions, not liberal victories eked out over moderate and conservative opposition.

The Civil Rights Act of 1964, for example, was a bipartisan compromise reached after a 54-day filibuster in the Senate led, incidentally, by a Democrat—Georgia Senator Richard Russell.¹ The final bill passed 73–27 after Minority Leader

Everett Dirksen rounded up enough Republicans to invoke cloture.²

Likewise, the Social Security Act of 1935 passed with 372 yeases in the House and 77 yeases in the Senate,³ while Medicare passed the House in 1965 with 307 votes in the House and 70 votes in the Senate. Politifact.com rated a longstanding liberal claim that no Republicans supported Social Security and Medicare until the very end as “false.”⁴

William Galston of Brookings and Elaine Kamarck of Harvard University argue in a forthcoming Third Way paper that Congress’s most productive period was between roughly 1929 and 1974—a period that coincided with the existence of a broad bipartisan and moderate coalition. In their view, polarization, not moderation, is what actually leads to gridlock.

Moreover, a more ideologically diverse Democratic coalition ensures vigorous policy debate. Liberals may believe their positions represent the best choices, but many moderates have principled and legitimate policy disagreements with liberals on trade, energy, deficits, education, terrorism and other issues. Challenging often outdated liberal orthodoxies is crucial for Democrats—liberals should not be afraid to battle for their ideas or to forge sensible center-left solutions where necessary.

Conclusion

To believe a small-tent strategy can achieve a big agenda is folly. In the aftermath of expected losses next week, Democrats should reject the purity test view that moderates are either unnecessary or destructive. Instead of shrinking the tent still further, they should redouble their efforts to expand it.

END NOTES

1. http://www.senate.gov/artandhistory/history/minute/Civil_Rights_Filibuster_Ended.htm

2. <http://judiciary.senate.gov/about/history/CivilRightsAct.cfm>
3. <http://www.ssa.gov/history/tally.html>
4. <http://politifact.com/truth-o-meter/statements/2009/aug/28/howard-dean/dean-claims-social-security-and-medicare-were-pass/>