



The Game of Extreme Politics

by Sheila Morago

There's a new game in town – extreme politics. Unlike extreme sports, this game is not fun to watch – especially if you are a Native American. This game threatens to change the balance of power in our country at every level of government, replacing the voice of reason and moderation with a culture of shrillness and fear. You only have to look to the far, far right and the far, far left to realize that there are powerful forces working to divide this country.

We have people who say they want to “take back our country,” which leads to the obvious question, “from who?” to fears about immigration and, of course, financial doom. Rand Paul, the Tea Party candidate from Kentucky, admitted on national TV that he does not support the Civil Rights Act of 1964. Whether or not you agree with their politics, these divisive voices have created a seismic event that is making civil relationships almost impossible and threatening passage of important legislation as it relates to Indian Country.

In all the shouting, it is hard to remember that President Obama came into office a little more than 18 months ago promising to find solutions for our nation that can be supported by everyone. Extreme politics has made that an impossible dream. Instead of working to find common solutions, the Republican Party is in lockstep against anything that this administration wants and almost all Democrats (a more rare occurrence) are in lockstep against the Republicans. If there is a winner in this battle, it is the sport of extreme politics in which the hard line has become the party line.

Why should this matter to us? It matters because for many years we have worked to establish Indian gaming as a respected mainstream industry to protect our future. We have worked at this in a variety of ways, from making sure that we follow best business practices to supporting candidates who support us on issues that we care about. Traditionally, our supporters have been centrists, regardless of their party affiliation. They have been leaders on both the state and national levels who take the larger rather than more narrow view of issues. They have been people who were willing to listen to our concerns and find solutions that work for all of us, not just for a small group of like-minded people. Whether working at the national level on acts of Congress or at the state level on compacting issues, we have benefitted greatly from the presence of this moderate middle. And we are in serious danger of losing it.

So what can we do? We can start by voting in primary elections. Traditionally, party extremists vote in primaries, while mainstream voters turn out for general elections. Do the math. If political extremists turn out in droves for these

elections (and they do) and you stay home, who wins? We can also commit to voting in every election, from school boards to City Council seats to state offices and Congressional elections. Don't “save” your vote for “important elections” because extreme politics makes every election important and decisions that affect us happen at every level of government.

Who you vote for is your business. If your politics align with either of the extremes, you will have an easier time marking your ballots. But if you fall into the middle – and more and more people do fall into this category as seen by ever-increasing numbers of registered Independents – you may have a more difficult decision if none of the candidates are a perfect “fit” for you. My suggestion is to consider those issues that are important to Indian people – health care, education, social services, land-into-trust, economic development and, of course, gaming, and then make an effort to learn how your candidates stand on these issues. In Arizona, AIGA provides tribal leaders with a “cheat sheet” that shows how legislators voted on issues that impact tribes in our state. This is a valuable tool when those legislators are up for re-election.

It is pretty simple, really. The rule of politics has always been that if we elect people at all levels of government who care about the issues that we care about, we build a stronger base of support. If we allow extreme politics to erode that base, we will run the risk of losing that support. Realistically, if all the rhetoric is about rage and race, our issues and our voice will never be heard.

Historically, Native Americans have had to fight hard to make our voices heard. We have not been seen as a large enough or powerful enough voting block to be courted by either party, and until we opened gaming casinos, we were not seen as potential “checkbooks” either. But today's extreme and splintered political climate presents us with a real opportunity. If Native people get out the vote in both primaries and general elections, and throw our support behind candidates who care about and support our issues, our votes can make a difference. Support takes many forms. We can write personal checks. We can raise money for candidates on a national, state and local level. We can join campaigns and go door-to-door. We can set up car pools to get voters to the polls. And, most importantly, we can vote – by mail or in person – in all elections. We cannot afford to let the extremists win. ♣

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