

Graham Vyse

Professor Sarah Menke-Fish

Honors Capstone: "Creating a Voice for Centrism"

3 May 2011

Honors Capstone Executive Summary

I. Overview

For my Honors Capstone, I created a blog called "The Center Fielder," which sought to cover centrist politics in America, avoiding the coverage of the conventional left and right. The idea was to focus on the bipartisan compromise and consensus that actually moves legislation forward in Washington and in the states. Over the past three months, the Center Fielder published aggregated news stories about centrist politics and policy, as well as original interviews with centrist politicians and activists. For example, I discussed the future of the centrist group No Labels with two of its young staffers, and I had a lengthy conversation with Third Way president Jonathan Cowan and what it means to be a moderate Third Way Democrat today. I composed 21 Center Fielder posts in total, including five substantive interviews.

I also created a seven-minute documentary about Lincoln Chafee's centrist 2010 gubernatorial campaign. The campaign resulted in Chafee's election as Rhode Island's first independent governor. I was the campaign's communications manager, and the documentary included footage I shot in that capacity. The documentary tells the story of how a centrist politician can actually get elected.

II. The Proposal

It's a tough time to be a centrist in America. National politics is increasingly polarized, as is the media environment. There are plenty of prominent political blogs and niche news websites covering politics from a liberal or conservative point of view. Liberals have the Huffington Post and the Daily Kos. Conservatives have the Drudge Report and the Daily Caller. Centrists, meanwhile, have nowhere to turn. There are no blogs or websites offering daily coverage focused specifically on centrist public policy, centrist political activism, and the centrist lawmakers who often broker compromises and forge alliances to pass legislation. There should be at least one.

With this in mind, I began my Capstone three months ago, laying out a plan to create and cultivate a blog covering centrist politics, with a focus on national politics in Washington, D.C. I planned to aggregate news and opinion content while also conducting interviews with key centrist players in Washington and elsewhere across the country. I knew a blogger covering centrism would need to keep in mind a series of big questions: What does it mean to be a centrist today? Is centrism just synonymous with pragmatism? What portion of Americans identify as centrist? Compared to their elected officials, how divided are Americans in terms of public policy preferences and political philosophy? Does the polarization in Washington and the media accurately reflect the nation? What role has centrism played in recent American history? To what extent, if any, can centrism be traced back to America's founding? Who are the key centrist players in Washington, and how do they see the future of centrism in America?

As I began blogging about centrism, I also began editing a short documentary piece about Lincoln Chafee's 2010 gubernatorial campaign in Rhode Island. Chafee, a Republican-turned-independent who serves in the U.S. Senate from 1999 to 2006, is a famous centrist. I was the communications manager for his gubernatorial campaign, which made him Rhode Island's first independent governor, so I wanted to include my experiences in this Capstone.

III. The Process

Like most projects, this Capstone had its share of challenges. For example, my full course load of 18 credits made it difficult for me to make time for blogging. Several of the people I intended to interview were ultimately unable to speak with me. However, a great deal went right during this process. Thanks to SOC professor Amy Eisman, who lent me a book about new media, I learned some tips for blogging that improved my work in tangible ways. For example, I learned to sprinkle my posts with hyperlinks and to announce the publication of each new post on Twitter. I learned to tag each post with keywords. These are all best practices for professional bloggers. In addition, I was able to interview several prominent centrist leaders. I sat down with young staff members from No Labels, a prominent centrist group that launched late last year. I sat down with Jonathan Cowan, president of Third Way, the most prominent Democratic think tank. I also talked with a former attorney general candidate from Rhode Island's Moderate Party and a current candidate for mayor of New London, Connecticut. All of these interviews enhanced my project, filling my blog with interesting insights about centrist politics in America.

IV. The Result

I published 21 posts to the blog, including five substantive interviews. I completed a seven-minute documentary, which included footage I shot throughout the Chafee campaign and some of the campaign's television advertisements. The documentary featured lengthy political analysis of the campaign through my voiceover. This Capstone clearly demonstrated that an enterprising journalist could establish a niche by reporting about the political center. He or she would find an abundance of relevant news to cover and countless centrist sources in Washington, D.C. and across that nation.

V. Accessing the Blog

The blog will remain online at <http://centerfielder.tumblr.com>