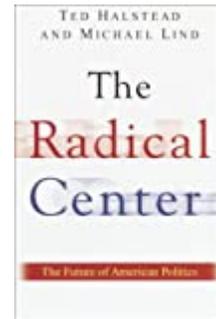


H-Net Reviews

in the Humanities & Social Sciences



Ted Halstead, Michael Lind. *The Radical Center: The Future of American Politics.* New York: Doubleday, 2001. 272 pp. \$24.95 (cloth), ISBN 978-0-385-50045-6.



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Those of us who study Western Europe have spent the last few years exploring what Prime Minister Tony Blair and his adviser, Anthony Giddens of the London School of Economics, call the third way. As they see it, the third way is a fresh approach that, to use the title of one of Giddens' earlier books, goes beyond left and right. Many critics argue that there is more rhetoric than reality to Blair's third way or the versions of it championed by German Chancellor Gerhard Schroeder or former American President Bill Clinton.

There is plenty of substance to this new book by Ted Halstead and Michael Lind which truly does go beyond left and right and charts a whole new path for American public policy. The starting point of their argument is not new. They claim that the United States has entered a third phase of its history, the digital age, following the industrial and agrarian, respectively, which they describe in ways most readers will have seen before.

The book's real value lies in the way the authors develop three sets of concrete policy proposal, drawing on both traditional left and right wing principles and new ones designed to meet the needs of the digital age. All of their proposals are designed to, first, get us beyond the public policy paradigm we inherited from the New Deal and, second, to "increase the amount of choice available

to individual citizens" (p. 19) who have grown both more sophisticated and more disaffected since the beginning of our information-driven age.

The first describes what they see as a new social contract for a new economy. Here, for instance, they want to break the connection between work and the provision of health insurance. Instead, they propose a system of compulsory insurance with the government serving as a safety net. Poor people would be given a series of subsidies through a reformed tax system. Similarly, they argue that the social security system needs to be replaced by a system of compulsory private savings plans like those adopted by such different countries as Singapore and Sweden. They even propose giving each child a \$6,000 fund at birth which could not be touched until he or she was at least 18.

Second, they want to expand individual choice in political life. In their terms, the decline in civic engagement stems from the fact that the two main parties in Congress have moved toward the extremes and away from cooperation. So, for example, they advocate a shift to a system using a single transferable vote in which voters rank all the candidates in a race. If no one wins a majority of first preference, the second preference of the one who came in last is added to the remaining first ones. That process

continues until one candidate does, indeed, have a majority. This “instant runoff” system, they argue, would likely lead to an increase in the number of political parties, some of which would be more moderate, some of which might be more extreme than the Democrats and Republicans.

Finally, they assess questions of community and unity. In their proposals on education, for example, they both support a dramatic increase in school choice, including much larger vouchers than those proposed by the Bush Administration (on this, also see the journal *Education Next*). At the same time, they advocate the abolition of state and local taxes as the main form of educational funding because they lead to the tremendous disparity in spending and thus on educational quality.

The Radical Center is the most thought-provoking

book on public policy in an industrialized society I’ve read in years. As the authors point out, they do not advocate a centrism that is bland or valueless. Rather, they realize that the next transformation in American politics will come from people from different backgrounds working together, perhaps using the kind of consensus policy making tools we are developing at Search for Common Ground. It is extremely well written and should make an exceptional addition to any course on public policy at the graduate or undergraduate level.

The book is by no means perfect. I did not agree with everything they propose, especially what they have to say about race. And, it has one major and predictable flaw. They spend a lot less time and have too few concrete suggestions for how these political changes could be forged. But otherwise, this is a must-read for students and professors alike, not to mention policy wonks.

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