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Centrists cool to polarized elections

The broad center of the political spectrum — not the extremes and the zealots — should determine the next president.

Larry R. Bradley of Omaha, a retired Army major, preaches that centrist message. Two years ago, he wrote a book, “Neither Liberal nor Conservative Be: An Action Plan for People Disgusted by Polarized Politics.”

Iowa caucusgoers last week picked anti-establishment candidates Barack Obama and Mike Huckabee. But if those two still lead after the next couple of primaries, Bradley predicted, opposition campaigns will get vicious — even more so if they win the nominations.

The establishment, he said, has a lot riding on the election.

“People will protect their own rice bowls,” Bradley said. “That’s an old Army expression: ‘I got mine, and you better not mess with it.’ ” When his book came out in 2006, Bradley said that *re a s o n a b l e*, middle ground people — 70 to 80 percent of the populace, he estimated — were withdrawing from politics.

Newsweek magazine last week, using similar estimates, put it another way: “Partisan warriors may love our polarized political culture. Everyone else is turned off, and tuning out.”

Record numbers of Iowans turned out Thursday, but Iowa’s caucus system is unique. Overall voter turnout in America has generally declined since 1960.

The broad middle, Bradley says, must reassert itself: Instead of allowing attack advertising and wedge issues to prevail, insist on political principles.

The three areas from which he says all politics should flow: limited government, fiscal prudence and social tolerance.

He also argues for an extremely strong military defense system and for getting serious about energy independence.

Larry Bradley isn’t a political science professor, a campaign staffer or a professional spinmeister. He has been registered Democrat or independent, but voted for Ronald Reagan and George H.W. Bush.

A native of Springfield, Mo., he earned a degree in political science at Missouri State, spent a career in the Army, worked in sales, was widowed and married an Omahan. He is fed up with politics as usual.

With the New Hampshire primary on Tuesday and others to follow, he foresees a lot of negative politics — as usual.

But he has his eye on an unusual meeting Monday at the University of Oklahoma. A bipartisan group of about a dozen political heavyweights will meet, ostensibly to find ways to move beyond polarization and raise the level of political discourse.

The meeting may prove to be a mere curiosity, a one-day story. But participants may discuss the viability of a third-party presidential campaign. As unlikely as that seems, Bradley wants to be there and hear what is said. Among those attending will be Mayor Michael Bloomberg of New York and U.S. Sen. Chuck Hagel, R-Neb.

While not necessarily endorsing a third-party campaign, Bradley contends that the current system isn’t working.

“It’s as if you had only two automobile manufacturers,” he said. “One offers a radio, but no heater; the other has heaters but no radios. But if someone offered radios and heaters and a car at a reasonable price, the first two would lose market share.”

In any case, he said, the election can’t be left to zealots.

“If you argue with a zealot, it’s like wrestling with a pig,” he said. “Both get dirty, but the pig loves it.”
