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CITIZEN INVOLVEMENT - FEDERAL LEVEL

Sam Brownback
U.S. House of Representatives - Kansas

I have a few comments to make on what's taking place on the political landscape across America today and I give it to you from my perspective in the second district of eastern Kansas. It is a fascinating time of real change in Washington and we've got a number of big issues coming up. I came in with a big new class of people, 72 Republican freshman that tilted the balance of power in the House for the first time in a generation to the Republican side of the aisle. I came in with a lot of interesting people. It isn't the standard collection of lawyers and Rotarians that normally come into Congress. We have football players. We watched J.C. Watts from Oklahoma before and we're seeing him again. We have Steve Largent with the Seattle Seahawks, and Sonny Bono is probably the most famous new member of Congress.

This last election was both a conservative and populous election. And I put equal emphasis on both conservatism and populism taking place across America. As I campaigned up and down eastern Kansas the people were just angry at their government.... "Don't tell me what all it's done good for me, I just want to tell you what it's done bad to me." They would give me countless different examples. I would go to Lecompton, Kansas, and walk up and down the streets and they would complain about the fire department that had a ramp that was handicap accessible. It was made to specification 20 years ago and they just got a letter telling them it's not good enough. The ramp needs to be longer, have a slower slope. Fine. But that's going to cost them \$20,000 to take the old ramp out and put in a new one. That wasn't rational thinking in their minds. They were mad that they were going to have to spend that kind of money in a town of roughly 700 people to change something that had worked for years. I hear countless comments about they're just tired of being poked at and dumped on.

It reminded me about the 1890's time period when there was a populous movement in America. The object of the anger at that time was, if you recall some of the policy history, big railroad and big banks were controlling everything. The poor little guy down here didn't feel like he could do anything about it. He felt like they were just sitting on him like a big brother sits on his little sister. But, she can't move him. She can't hit him. And, they felt the same way towards big government. You can say it's irrational. It's not right. Look at the things government has done. It didn't matter. They were mad and they were angry. They wanted change and they wanted it now. They didn't want to study. They didn't want commotion. They wanted action and they wanted it to take place.

They also said that they didn't trust their system of government anymore. Whether it comes from campaign financing or self-serving people in Congress. They just don't trust it any more. I had a lot of people come look me in the face and say, "Just don't forget us little people out here."

I would hear it day after day. What is it in our government in this national representative democracy that would cause people to continuously come up and say, "Just don't forget us little people out here?" I think they just didn't feel like they could move their system of government anymore. It didn't represent them anymore. That was the electoral force that brought new members from across the spectrum into the Congress. The people had no hope that they could change the system, but I think they have some fragile hope now.

I don't think everybody is happy with everything that we've done thus far. There is a lot to be in disagreement about. But at least they're seeing some change taking place.

Fundamentally, we're in one of those revolutionary times. In revolutions big things happen fast and in evolutions small things happen slow. We're at one of those revolutionary times where you're seeing massive changes taking place on a very rapid scale.

Take a look at welfare reform that we are going to pass through this Congress -- shipping it back to the states, because we failed at the federal level. Take balancing the budget in a seven-year time period. I think seven years is plenty of time to balance the budget. I voted to balance it in five because most people don't think that we're going to balance it all. That we're never going to get it done. You can take a look at the farm program that is being debated right now. Some massive changes in farm programs are being considered as we speak today. These are revolutionary times. There are a lot of forces in play out there.

I came back from the August break, having traveled through my district a great deal trying to sense again what it is that people are saying. I've been comparing notes with a number of my fellow freshman representatives. None of them came back from break saying people are looking at us saying, "Are you guys any different than the last bunch we threw out? Are you really going to change the place? Did we just trade one set of special interests for another set of special interests?" They were saying again, "We want our government back. We want our government to be smaller. We want it to be more efficient and more focused. We want you to be fair about it." It's a very electric electorate and it's watching. It's watching very aggressively. For me that's a great thing, because for too long the electorate hasn't been watching very closely.

What do they want? It seems to me that they want several things. They want to balance the budget, but they want to do it fairly. I get 80% of my mail running, "I'm all for balancing the budget, but don't cut this program or don't cut my program, or this one is absolutely imperative." Let me tell you, at the end of the day, if we keep on this track to balancing the budget, that's not enough. I not only want to balance the budget, I want to start paying off the debt. And, that's 4.9 trillion dollars of debt. So we not only need to balance the budget but begin running account surpluses to do that. But if we're going to do that by the end of day, we're going to cut everything. Everything is going to be addressed in this downsizing phase. We are just on year one, and you just hear about year one. Wait until we get to years five and seven when we get into this budget balancing routine. Then if we stay on the track of not just balancing, but also running account surpluses, we can begin to pay off the debt.

We have a long way to go because we have dug ourselves a heck of a hole. It's Republicans and it's Democrats and it's the Tim Pennys and the Sam Brownbacks and everybody. We've all done it. It's time we balance the budget and begin to work our way out of the deficit. The people want us out. They want welfare reform. They want a smaller, less intrusive federal government, that is more focused and more efficient. They want us to keep reforming the system so they can trust it again.

I think there is even a bigger thing that's moving across America right now. It's having an impact on the political landscape. But, I think it's going to blow through the political landscape, and move to the culture of society and the morality of America. Because I think we're at a time of major moral questioning of what's taking place in the nation. Let me ask you a question, because I ask this of all my audiences that I speak to in my district: Do you think the greatest problems facing our country are economic, or moral? How many of you think it's economic? The greatest problems facing our nation -- and be square with me -- how many of you think they're economic? How many of you think they are moral? I get about 9 to 1 moral when I ask that of people across my district, and it may be a problem they've had in their own family. It may be a problem they see in society in general, where people don't respect other people. Whether its so much crime, or this or that. Maybe it's the center of the family. But people cite that, and they say this is something that is truly bothering them. I see it's impact in American politics today. I think it's going to blow through politics and go to the cultural and societal nature of the atmosphere that we are in today.

I think we are on the edge of a moral and spiritual revival in America. If you look back at some historical parallels to the 1880's, there was a big revival type of movement that was taking place at that time. It's activating people who have

never been active before. It's an area in which people feel like they've been under attack. Their own morals and values have been under attack for some period of time and they are tired of it. They want to take their country back.

But I don't see it as just a political issue. It goes much more to the deeper societal, cultural, moral roots of this nation. It's having a big impact and I think it's going to continue to have a big impact. A lot of people are being very active and very involved in changing the face of this nation. I think it's going to be very positive at the end of the day.

It could have some negative downsides. Certainly the front end of populism has a distractive phase and I think we are probably in that distractive phase at this point. It generally comes out in the end more progressive, or into more of a re-awakening time period. I think we're at those front edges and moving into those various phases of something we've seen before. It's going to be a massive cultural shift. It's going to have some problems with it, but by the end of the day it is going to be a positive force for us as a nation.

I hope you will encourage people to be involved. I think you may start to see different types of people coming out to your meetings on policy education. I would encourage you to involve different types of people than you have historically seen coming out to some of your policy education meetings, talking in more moral terms, instead of just economic terms that we have traditionally spoken to most of the time. And I would encourage you to read and look at some of the historical parallels that exist from prior populist movements throughout much of the midwest. "Raise less corn and more hell" type of movements from the past. See what parallels are there and what can be used in the policy education process to encourage and bring people forward to participate. Once they participate and work in the process hopefully they will begin to trust their democracy more.