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NEW HAMPSHIRE **UNION LEADER**

ANOTHER VIEW - DENNIS BLAIR, A.B. STODDARD, AND RYAN CLANCY: NH SHOULD SEND PROBLEM SOLVERS TO WASHINGTON

November 29, 2017

By Dennis Blair, A.B. Stoddard and Ryan Clancy

You might not think a meeting on national politics the week of Thanksgiving three years from a presidential election would be a big draw.

But when No Labels came to Manchester last week for an open discussion about how to get Washington focused on solving problems again, a packed house of 150 local citizens came out.

The tenor of the conversation, like nearly every discussion about politics these days, was tinged with frustration and anger.

The crowd, a mix of Republicans, Democrats and independents, was incensed by Washington's constant bickering.

These militant moderates have been spurred to action by a realization that neither the far right nor far left has durable answers to our nation's problems.

Not everyone in the room agreed on every issue, but that's fine. Disagreement is part of what makes American democracy so special.

But there was a broad consensus that Washington won't change until our leaders start putting country before party and finding a way to work with one another.

Fortunately, as we reported to the assembled crowd, there is a very promising recent development.

After years of work, No Labels has inspired the creation of a new bipartisan bloc in Congress that is trying to get to "yes" on key policy issues while the rest of D.C. is stuck on "no."

Here's the background. Earlier this year, a group of Republican and Democratic members of Congress came together to form the Problem Solvers Caucus, co-chaired by Rep. Josh Gottheimer, D-N.J., and Rep. Tom Reed, R-N.Y.

Today, the caucus includes 48 members evenly divided between the parties.

From the outset, some dismissed the Problem Solvers Caucus as a gimmick. Skeptics figured everyone in the caucus would cave and become partisan when push came to shove.

But during the last several months, the Problem Solvers have proven the critics wrong and made clear this is much more than a bipartisan coffee club.

It began with a commitment the caucus members made to not campaign against any other member of the caucus; a big deal that certainly didn't make the party leaders and committee chairs happy. Caucus members also agreed to a vote threshold where they agreed to vote as a bloc on a policy position if it garnered the support of 75 percent of the caucus and a majority of Democrats and Republicans.

In April, the caucus passed the first test of this vote threshold when it released a bipartisan statement in support of a "clean" continuing resolution that kept the government from shutting down. Then, last summer, after the collapse of the Republican-led effort to repeal the current health care law, the Problem Solvers released a fix of their own, the only bipartisan approach offered in this Congress.

That compromise became the basis for the legislation Sen. Lamar Alexander, R-Tenn., and Patty Murray, D-Wash., crafted to stabilize the individual insurance marketplace and provide more flexibility to the states.

As Congress nears several critical vote deadlines in December, the Problem Solvers are working to forge bipartisan solutions on immigration and border security as well as a deal to avert another government shutdown and a debt ceiling default. The caucus is also now having regular working meetings with their Senate colleagues, particularly, Sen. Susan Collins, R-Maine, and Sen. Joe Manchin, D-W.V., who recently became honorary co-chairs of No Labels.

Membership of the Problem Solvers Caucus has continued to grow throughout the year. Unfortunately, something is missing: No member of New Hampshire's congressional delegation has become a No Labels Problem Solver.

That needs to change, which is why we asked every one of the 150 citizens who came to the Puritan Center recently to mobilize their friends, family and neighbors. The goal is to convince New Hampshire's current congresswoman, as well as the candidates running for the open 1st District seat, to join the Problem Solvers Caucus, and the state's two senators to join with Collins and Manchin to support bipartisan legislation to the country's problems.

The Problem Solvers Caucus represents the single best near-term option our nation has to reverse this vicious cycle of partisan dysfunction and to begin solving some actual problems.

In the next year, many candidates will be touting their pragmatism and their ability to go to D.C. to shake up this do-nothing Congress.

If the people of New Hampshire want to see who is really serious, just ask them a simple question.

If elected, will you join the Problem Solvers Caucus?

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