

Democratic versus Republican Perspectives

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INTRODUCTION

Despite still being a relatively young country, the United States of America has a long and colorful political history. Each of the surviving major political parties continues to brag about numerous larger-than-life political figures that have defined and shaped today's Democratic and Republican parties. Vastly differing Americans, with vastly differing backgrounds, living in vastly differing regions of the nation collectively appear to be divided almost equally – at least judging by the results of recent major elections during which the electorate split near evenly between liberal Democratic principles and more conservative Republican ideology. A review of the major issues of the day clearly demonstrates this divide; a nation split almost evenly and debating the key issues of the day in a fashion that likely would please our Founding Fathers.

PARTY BACKGROUND

The Democratic Party was founded over 200 years ago, in 1792 by Thomas Jefferson. The Party is committed to helping the excluded, the disfranchised and the poor by providing a governmental framework which provides them the full opportunity to earn a piece of the American Dream (Democratic Party, 2008). The Democrats pledge to provide a stable government present in almost all aspects of human need. The Democratic Party is therefore built upon a broad popular base focused on the strength and power of socially diverse citizens.

After competing with numerous political parties during the 1800s, The Democratic Party truly flourished throughout the 1900s, with a series of great democratic presidents serving the American people including Woodrow Wilson, Franklin Roosevelt, and John F. Kennedy. The Democratic Party has a long history of protecting the interest of working Americans, and remains to this day one of the two surviving major parties in the United States.

The Republican Party was formed in the early 1850s. The first Republican president, Abraham Lincoln, established the party's ideology when he stated, "In all that people can do for themselves, the government should not interfere" (Republican vs. Democrats, 2004). The Republicans then established themselves as a major party proficient enough to hold onto the White House for sixty of the next one-hundred years, and survive as one of today's two major parties.

In modern times Republican ideology was demonstrated by the presidency of Ronald Reagan. When his presidency began in the early 1980s, the country was in economic recession and a series of foreign policy failures in the 1970s left the country questioning its future. Ronald Reagan's large tax decreases and "get tough" foreign policies, both of which embody the heart of Republicanism, led to strong and consistent economic growth and ultimately contributed to the fall of the Soviet Union.

Interestingly, the Democratic and Republican Parties are the only two major parties in current politics of six which existed in the mid-1800s. The four other parties of that time included the Whig Party, which existed from 1834-1854 after which it divided into sectional factions; the Liberty Party, in existence from 1839-1844, whose members at the time supported the Free-Soil and Republican Parties; the Free-Soil Party which

existed from 1848-1854 supported by Liberty Party members, and finally the American Party (referred to as the Know-Nothings) from 1849-1860, which supported anti-immigrant and anti-catholic platforms (Appleby, 2005).

PRINCIPLES

Democrats generally follow what is called a liberal philosophy, believing that the proper role of the government is to regulate and oversee the economy (On the Issues, 2000). In addition to overseeing and regulating most aspects of American life, Democratic principles also include redistributing economic wealth to the benefit of the more needy. They believe the government should ensure that all people are taken care of by, for example, providing welfare, food stamps, education opportunities, and healthcare to those in need. Simply stated they believe the government should provide both a social safety net and provide opportunity for every individual regardless of wealth or power. These principles are particularly well demonstrated in Lyndon Baines Johnson's comments on the "Great Society" of the 1960's, "In our time a broadened concept of freedom requires that every American have the right to a healthy body, a full education, a decent home, and the opportunity to develop to the best of his talents" (Witcover, 2003).

Republicans follow what is considered a far more conservative philosophy. Their belief is that while it is the role of government to regulate and oversee morality (Ask Me, 2000); it is not the government's responsibility to care for each individual. The Republican Party is based on the principles of personal responsibility, that individuals determine how they want to live their life, and should be allowed to succeed or fail based upon their own merits without government interference. For example, Republicans believe that the decision of an American citizen to pursue an education or not, work or be unemployed, practice good health or not are all personal choices, and that it is not the government's role to determine such outcomes.

Republicans believe that each individual's dignity, freedom, ability and responsibility must be honored and that everyone deserves equal rights, justice, and opportunity regardless of race, faith, sex or disability (Republican Principles, 2008). However, their more market-oriented, minimal-government philosophy causes the Republicans to sometimes be accused of being too business-oriented by Democrats. As noted by D.R. Mayhew, Democrats often suggest that "The economic basis and principal interest of the Republican Party is business" (Mayhew, 1966).

Recently, noted by former Republican presidential candidate Ron Paul in the *Wall Street Journal*, Republican ideology remains unchanged to this day "It is each and every citizen's job to manage our own decisions, bear the fruits or painful consequences and learn our lessons" (Penner, 2008). "The free market is the essence of our society's strength and is rooted in the Lincolnian precepts of accountability and responsibility" (Penner, 2008). Republicans remain committed to the idea that the best government is that which governs least.

KEY ISSUES

Both the Democratic and Republican Party positions on a number of key issues of the day reflect their underlying philosophical foundations. The Republican beliefs in less government, economic survival of the fittest, and less income distribution, as well

as the Democratic beliefs in larger government and greater income redistribution to help less fortunate Americans are embedded in their differing positions on the following issues:

Energy: Democrats believe Americans deserve a more environmentally focused energy policy that creates a cleaner, stronger America. Their promise is to place greater emphasis on renewable energy sources and open select offshore areas to oil and natural gas production (Energy, 2006). Consistent with their history numerous Democratic politicians have called for higher taxes to support more economically friendly renewable energy sources.

While both parties believe dependence on foreign oil is a threat to our economy and national defense, Republican proposals focus on more traditional sources of energy development. They believe nuclear power is abundant, affordable and clean, and trust in the free market's ability to provide it safely into the future. While continuing to promote today's main sources of electricity—coal, nuclear power, natural gas, and renewable sources (RNC, 2008)—they see a mix of energy options as less risky for the American Economy.

Education: The Democratic Party continues to propose further expansion of educational opportunities provided for children today. Consistent with their philosophy of expanded governmental support, they also propose cutting student loan rates and making college tuition tax deductible. Once again, the provision of expanded educational opportunities for all, paid for with higher taxation, is an obvious illustration of their redistribution of wealth principles.

While determined to improve the skills of students and promote scholastic achievement, the Republican position on education is rooted more in personal responsibility and accomplishment with far less emphasis on governmental support. Despite believing that the future of a brighter America consists of a brighter generation, the Republican view remains that the federal government should in no way interfere with state and local control of schools (Criticism, 2004).

Health Care: Consistent with Party ideology, the Democrats want the federal government to provide a health care system that works for everyone, one that insures that every single citizen will have access to health care coverage. They support forcing citizens to purchase health care insurance through the government (Republican vs. Democrats, 2004). They also propose to fix the prescription drug program, and invest in stem cell and other medical research.

While the Republican Party proposes to make health care more affordable, accessible, and flexible to Americans, their plan is to lower taxes for those who purchase health insurance, making it easier for them to purchase on their own. True to their principles, Republicans believe something is wrong in America when those on welfare are provided health insurance through Medicaid, while many hard working individuals and families cannot obtain health insurance (Republican vs. Democrats, 2004).

Jobs and the Economy: The Democratic Party supports fair trade, balancing budgets, and paying down national debt through increased taxes on higher income Americans. Consistent with their core beliefs, Democrats believe that the government can and should attempt to create economic opportunities and intervene to help victims

of the current real estate crisis. Republicans understandably charge the Democrats with being true to their philosophy of higher government spending and taxes.

On the other hand, the Republican Party believes in restraining spending by the federal government despite the weak economic activity, and reforming tax codes to lower the tax burden. Republicans remain true to their core belief that the best conditions for job opportunity and economic growth come from individual freedom, limited government, low taxes and spending (Republican vs. Democrats, 2004).

Real Security and Safety: The Democratic Party proposes to strengthen our military. They support protecting our homeland and the achievement of a sustained level of success and progress in Iraq. Despite this, many Democratic politicians continue to call for a relatively rapid withdrawal of our troops from Iraq, consistent with the liberal philosophy of a reduced U.S. presence in global affairs.

Once again the Republican Party view is quite different. It supports the idea of protecting Americans at home by being honest to our troops, citizens, and allies. They believe in securing the needs of the twenty-first century by repairing the military, winning the war on terror, protecting our homeland security, ensuring success in Iraq, and freeing the U.S. of its independence on foreign oil (RNC, 2008). These policies remain consistent with the more conservative Republican view of a dominant U.S. presence in global affairs.

Immigration: Though the Democrats want to secure our borders, they are willing to allow Immigrants who are already in America, working, and paying taxes the ability to earn the same opportunities as U.S. citizens. This again is consistent with the long party history of expanding a broad political base by openly embracing immigrants to the U.S.

The Republican Party's political ideology simply does not include allowing immigrants here illegally to earn the same opportunities or take on the responsibilities of U.S. citizens. As they illegally take jobs that our own citizens could have. Republicans believe immigrants who have entered the country illegally should not remain in America.

CONCLUSION

The differing political ideologies of Democrats, who generally favor governmental involvement and income redistribution from the rich to the needy, and Republicans, who favor the market economy, personal responsibility and lower tax burdens are clearly demonstrated in their position on the major issues of the day. With a presidential election near, and most Americans split close down the middle on many of the issues key to our country's future, this fall's election is once again expected to be extremely close. The election will most likely once again come down to the simple philosophical choices, either Americans' preference for greater government intervention and a reduced role in global affairs or less government intervention at home and a dominant role on the world stage.

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