

# **“The two American political parties are dominated by internal coalitions.”**

## **Discuss.**

### **Introduction**

Back in the 1780s, the Founding Fathers at the Philadelphia Convention were divided about the form of government they would implement. The Federalists who were the party of George Washington and of James Adams wanted to move to a more centralised form of government. They represented the commercial and business interest of the new republic; this is what traders and merchants wanted. The Anti-Federalists who were the party of Thomas Jefferson and of James Madison were opposed to the notion of a centralised government; instead they believed a highly decentralised form of government was the way forward... as they represented the agricultural and land-owning interests.<sup>1</sup> This suggests that the two major parties have had completely opposing values and ideologies since its creation. Yet there are claims that the two parties are dominated by an internal coalition, the notion that they are to an extent internally working together, overlapping their values and ideologies. This essay will submerge into the historic and current ideologies of the two American political parties, investigating this claim.

### **Slavery**

An issue which has been extensively debated over the years is slavery. Back in the 1800s the Democratic Party which was becoming the party of the South endorsed slavery. Although it was only contained to the states to the south of what was known as the Mason Dixon Line, the Democrats still fought to expand it.<sup>2</sup> As a result, the Republicans formed, originally as an anti-slavery party in the North, they won the Presidential election of 1860 with Abraham Lincoln as their leader. In response to the election, eleven southern slave states left the Union and formed their own confederacy, known as the “Confederate States of America”. After a long four years of fighting mostly within the Southern states, the Confederacy surrendered and slavery was abolished everywhere in the nation. The defeat in the South was somewhat a political humiliation for the Democratic Party, as they saw, out of 12 presidential elections; the Democrats won only twice, the Republicans reigned supreme. As America became industrialised, expanded westwards and grew through immigration, they became the party of the North.<sup>3</sup>

The fact that the Republican Party was created in order to oppose the views of the Democrats who wanted to expand slavery and that their efforts to do so ultimately amounted to a Civil War, shows us the extent of which the two political parties opposed each other’s views and ideology. Now that the issue has been dealt with, it is safe to say that in the 21<sup>st</sup> century, the two political parties have overlapped in their ideologies and views regarding slavery. As times have changed, the word “slavery” is now a profanity in any political campaign! That’s a given.

### **The Economy**

In the decade preceding World War II, the world witnessed a severe economic depression. It was the longest, most widespread and deepest depression of the 20<sup>th</sup> century, rightly given its name “The Great Depression”. Each country handled the problem differently. In America, the Republicans who were the party of big businesses ultimately went into a “bust”, the 1920s were an era dominated by Republican presidents Warren Harding, Calvin Coolidge and Herbert Hoover, under the economic philosophy of *laissez-faire* (leave it alone). In essence, markets were allowed to operate without government interference. As Hoover and the Republicans failed to grasp the full

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<sup>1</sup> Anthony J. Bennet, *US Government & Politics* (Oxfordshire: Hodder Education, 2009), p. 117.

<sup>2</sup> All American Blogger. 2008. *The Democrat Party: Slavery, Secession, Segregation And Socialism* [Online]. Available at: [www.allamericanblogger.com/4050/the-democrat-party-slavery-secession-segregation-and-socialism](http://www.allamericanblogger.com/4050/the-democrat-party-slavery-secession-segregation-and-socialism) [Accessed 21 September 11]

<sup>3</sup> Anthony J. Bennet, *op.cit.* p. 118

magnitude of the depression, their policy was to give it time, expecting that the market would recover.<sup>4</sup> But instead, taxes and regulation were slashed dramatically, monopolies were formed, and inequality of wealth and income reach record levels<sup>5</sup>, these were just a few problems America's economy witnessed. Franklin Roosevelt had a different approach; he was willing to reject the old models in favour of pragmatic and immediate solutions.<sup>6</sup> Their policies were completely different. The 1932 election saw Franklin Roosevelt rise as President along with his promise of a "new deal for the American people". The "New Deal" was a series of economic programmes that focused on relief, recovery and reform. Relief for the unemployed and poor, recovery of the economy to its norms, and reform of the financial system to prevent a repeated depression. Consequently the Democrats gained the support of a variety of backgrounds, this was known as the "New Deal Coalition" consisting of southern white conservatives and northern-eastern liberals, of city-dwellers, blue-collar workers, Catholics, Jews and ethnic minorities. Whilst the Republicans got their support from a more homogeneous group made up of those living in the more rural Midwest and Plain states, of WASPS (white, Anglo-Saxon Protestants) and white-collar workers.<sup>7</sup> The Democrats, the party that had sought after a decentralised government, now became the party of a federal government.

In spite of this, the two major parties ideologies have moved seemingly close in recent times. Although both parties have their own way of "fixing" and "preserving" the economy, their approaches are all similar, it is but "bureaucratic" detail. For instance, tax cuts. It may well be that the Democrats favour the Keynesian theory, which seeks to manage the economy by keeping it on an even keel and avoiding fluctuations in the business cycle by getting money into the hands of consumers so that they will begin buying.<sup>8</sup> Or that the Republicans are in favour of the Supply Side Theory, which puts emphasis on getting an economy moving by focusing on increasing supply rather than demand.<sup>9</sup> The theories may be dissimilar, opposite even, one may administer tax cuts to businesses, another to the middle class... but they are nevertheless tax cuts. Another example is unemployment. Both parties are initiating different ways to tackle the problem of unemployment, the Republicans claim that providing tax cuts to corporations would then proceed for them to hire more people. The Democrats believe in creating jobs by providing tax cuts to the middle class.<sup>10</sup> Although both have different ways of opposing the issue, they are both tackling it. They are in turn an internal coalition, standing for the same values.

### **Civil Rights**

Almost a century after the Civil War concerning slavery, the issue of civil rights came up again, crucially shaping America's political parties. At this moment in time, schools were segregated in the South but not only that, segregation applied to activities such as eating in a restaurant, drinking from a water fountain and even using a public toilet. In 1954 in *Brown v Board of Education of Topeka* the Supreme Court declared that segregated schools

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<sup>4</sup> Michael Streich. 2009. *Coming of the Great Depression in 1929* [Online]. Available at: [www.michael-streich.suite101.com/coming-of-the-great-depression-in-1929-a100487](http://www.michael-streich.suite101.com/coming-of-the-great-depression-in-1929-a100487) [Accessed 21 September 11]

<sup>5</sup> Huppi. n.d. *Causes of the Great Depression* [Online]. Available at: [www.huppi.com/kangaroo/Causes.htm](http://www.huppi.com/kangaroo/Causes.htm) [Accessed 21 September 11]

<sup>6</sup> Michael Streich. 2009. *Coming of the Great Depression in 1929* [Online]. Available at: [www.michael-streich.suite101.com/coming-of-the-great-depression-in-1929-a100487](http://www.michael-streich.suite101.com/coming-of-the-great-depression-in-1929-a100487) [Accessed 21 September 11]

<sup>7</sup> Anthony J. Bennet, *op.cit.* p. 119

<sup>8</sup> HubPages. n.d. *Democrat vs Republican Tax Cuts* [Online]. Available at: [www.chuck.hubpages.com/hub/Democrat\\_vs\\_Republican\\_Tax\\_Cuts](http://www.chuck.hubpages.com/hub/Democrat_vs_Republican_Tax_Cuts) [Accessed 21 September 11]

<sup>9</sup> HubPages. n.d. *Democrat vs Republican Tax Cuts* [Online]. Available at: [www.chuck.hubpages.com/hub/Democrat\\_vs\\_Republican\\_Tax\\_Cuts](http://www.chuck.hubpages.com/hub/Democrat_vs_Republican_Tax_Cuts) [Accessed 21 September 11]

<sup>10</sup> CityData. 2007. *The Economic Crisis: Democrat vs Republican solution* [Online]. Available at: [www.city-data.com/forum/politics-other-controversies/550400-economic-crisis-democrat-vs-republican-solution.html](http://www.city-data.com/forum/politics-other-controversies/550400-economic-crisis-democrat-vs-republican-solution.html) [Accessed 21 September 11]

was unconstitutional and that states should desegregate their schools “with all deliberate speed”.<sup>11</sup> If anything has been learnt through history it is that the Democrats would fight this. They did, and their decision to, both ended the 100 year manifestation of the “solid South” and destroyed the “New Deal coalition”. The Ku Klux Klan was formed by radical Democrats who opposed equality for blacks, but of course we cannot pin that on the party. The party did however defeat a Bill supported and put forward by the Republicans; the Anti-Lynching Bill in 1935.<sup>12</sup> The Republicans in turn, passed the Civil Rights Act of 1957 sending troops to desegregated schools. President Harry Truman issued an Executive Order in 1948 to desegregate the army. It was President Richard Nixon who used this abuse to his advantage for his “Southern Strategy” which began in the 1970s. It was an effort by Nixon to get like-minded individuals in the South to stop voting for Democrats who did not share their ideologies and were discriminating against blacks; this inevitably broke the 100 year manifestation of the “solid south”. It was evident that at this moment in history the two parties’ ideologies were completely different.<sup>13</sup>

The issue of civil rights remained an important issue in American politics throughout the second half of the 20<sup>th</sup> century, as time progressed; the Democrats became in favour of civil rights and consequently opposed racism, as did the general public; demonstrating a shift in their ideology, to a more similar position as the Republicans. The Democrats favoured and promoted affirmative action programmes in education, housing and employment. And it was the Democrats that pushed their legislation ahead and appointed judges who would make decisions which permitted affirmative action programmes to withstand judicial scrutiny. The Democrats made a major improvement to their stance on racism. The Republicans took a different approach. They believed that policies should be “colour blind”<sup>14</sup>, the notion that equality of opportunity should be the aim rather than equality of results and that parties should not discriminate positively or negatively. It can therefore be said that towards the 21<sup>st</sup> century there has been a big change in the Democrats Party ideology. They are now in favour of civil rights and oppose racism, taking steps to challenge the problem. This shows us that the two parties are internal coalitions, as their ideologies regarding civil rights overlap.

However, these racist Democrats remain Democrats. For example, Democrat Senator Robert Byrd, a survivor from the Civil Rights Movement and a former “Keagle” in the Ku Klux Klan, is still a Democrat. He is a prominent leader in the Democrat-controlled Congress and was a fierce opponent of desegregating the military. He complained in one letter: “I would rather die a thousand times and see old glory trampled in the dirt never to rise again than see this beloved land of ours become degraded by race mongrels, a throwback to the blackest specimen of the wilds.”<sup>15</sup> His stance on civil rights appears prominent; perhaps internally racist Democrats remain and cannot possibly coincide with the ideologies of the Republicans.

### **The Federal Government**

As I have already mentioned, the Founding Fathers were conflicted on the form of government they would implement. The Federalists wanted a centralised form of government, whilst the Anti-Federalists sought for a more decentralised form of government. In essence, they were opposed. In recent times, the Democrats stood by their policy of a federal government, implementing big federal government programmes. For instance, Roosevelt’s “New Deal”, Truman’s “Fair Deal”, Kennedy’s “New Frontiers” and Johnson’s “Great Society”.<sup>16</sup> However, through history

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<sup>11</sup> Anthony J. Bennet, *op.cit.* p. 121

<sup>12</sup> Carnell Knowledge. n.d. *Interesting Facts about Democrats and Republicans* [Online]. Available at: [www.carnellknowledge.com/interesting-facts-about-democrats-and-republicans](http://www.carnellknowledge.com/interesting-facts-about-democrats-and-republicans) [Accessed 21 September 11]

<sup>13</sup> Anthony J. Bennet, *op.cit.* p. 121

<sup>14</sup> Ibid.

<sup>15</sup> Suwanneegop. n.d. *Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr. Was a Republican* [Online]. Available at: [www.suwanneegop.com/NBRA%20Civil%20Rights%20Newsletter-2.pdf](http://www.suwanneegop.com/NBRA%20Civil%20Rights%20Newsletter-2.pdf) [Accessed 21 September 11]

<sup>16</sup> Anthony J. Bennet, *op.cit.* p. 121

we saw a shift in the Republican Party's ideals. From the original desire for a more decentralised government, the Republicans stood for a smaller federal government instead.<sup>17</sup> This in a way shows an overlap in the ideologies of the Democrats and Republicans, advancing the claim of an internal coalition. However, at the end of the 1980s when President Reagan left office, the movement towards decentralisation was brought up; it was given a further boost with the Republican take-over of Congress. Even the Democrat President Bill Clinton admitted that the "era of big government is over". This in essence, suggests through history the parties policy on a federal government had turned full circle. It can be argued, that they aren't internal coalitions as their policies on this matter do not overlap.

### **Conclusion**

Ron Paul said, during a State of Union address: "We do not have a good democratic process... these parties aren't different, they're all the same. The monetary policy stays the same. The welfare system stays the same. The foreign policy stays the same. They get pretty disgusted. There is but one party."<sup>18</sup> Although the two political parties had ideological difference, almost opposite values, they have in light of recent events moved towards the centre of the political spectrum. They may have different methods of achieving their policies; their policies are nevertheless the same. In a coalition, there is always compromise, the two parties do not compromise on which policies to progress but instead how they will do it. This fundamentally advances the notion that the two parties are dominated by internal coalitions.

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<sup>17</sup> Anthony J. Bennet, *op.cit.* p. 121

<sup>18</sup> The Baltimore Sun. 2011. *Ron Paul: Democrats and republicans are the same party* [Online]. Available at: [www.articles.baltimoresun.com/2011-06-06/entertainment/bal-ron-paul-democrats-and-republicans-are-the-same-party-20110606\\_1\\_ron-paul-political-parties-democrats](http://www.articles.baltimoresun.com/2011-06-06/entertainment/bal-ron-paul-democrats-and-republicans-are-the-same-party-20110606_1_ron-paul-political-parties-democrats) [Accessed 21 September 11]

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