

US-1 'The two American political parties are dominated by internal coalitions.' Discuss.

By Darren O'Rourke

Introduction

The US Political system is a two party system much like that of the UK's it essentially consists of two major parties dominating during elections; these are the Democrats and the Republicans. The Republicans are seen as right of the political spectrum whereas the Democrats are considered more left of the political spectrum, however the extent to which these parties disagree on issues is narrowing. This essay will discuss whether the two major parties are dominated by internal coalitions.

How is an internal coalition possible?

To discuss whether the Republicans and Democrats are dominated by internal coalitions we must first outline how this is possible. The answer to this questions lies within another; what is a faction? According to the Oxford dictionary of politics a faction is an organized group within a political party, especially in a country where they have semi-permanent existence, such as Japan or Italy¹. For example the Half Breeds were a small group within the Republican Party, who were in main conflict with the Stalwarts, fighting more for civil service reform and a merit system as oppose to the Stalwarts favouring spoils system-style patronage and political machines². Therefore the Half Breeds were considered a faction. Now that it is possible to see that there are factions within the major parties one can begin to understand how there could be internal coalitions. Due to the fact that there are many factions within the major parties, we can see how some of their views may coincide with that of the oppositions, it would be hard for people to be strictly Republican or strictly Democrats as there are many issues on which they disagree so even the politicians may agree with the opposing party in some circumstances/ on certain issues. The very fact that this occurs so often has led to the founding of a political term- a Wedge Issue. A wedge issue is when politicians agree on how to deal with numerous issues but disagree on one particular issue. This demonstrates how it is possible to have an internal coalition as not all Republicans or all Democrats will agree with their party on every single issue. Throughout this essay I will be using examples of both wedge-issues and factions that overlap to enhance my points.

An Internal Coalition (George W. Bush)

Now that it has been established that an internal coalition can be formed, it is possible to show how the two major parties are dominated by them. To begin with I will be using George W. Bush as an example of a faction within the Republican Party. Bush managed to be both a supporter of the Democratic Party and the Republican Party; he at heart was a Republican displayed through the fact that he was a Republican president. However, he also embraced the Democratic form of government, being more sympathetic when it came to policies regarding welfare, education and healthcare. It can also be seen that Bush agreed with some Democratic principles with his strong connections with the British government, Tony Blair and the UK's government – which is a democratic one. These ties suggest that Bush while at heart may have been a true Republican he could also appreciate and even side with democracy on certain particular issues. The creation of a new type of Republicanism, now known as Compassionate Conservatism, was born as a result of Bush agreeing with some of the Democratic principles³. This demonstrates that although one could be a Republican they can also have views that concur with that of a Democrat, showing that if even the leader

¹ The Concise Oxford Dictionary of Politics, Oxford University Press, 2010 (Page 190/191)

² Half-Breeds, New International Encyclopaedia, 1905

³ Anthony J Bennett, A2 US Government and Politics, 3rd Edition, 2009 (Page 123)

(President) of a party doesn't wholly agree with its ideology then other members may not too. This does not mean that there would be such division within a party that other members lose faith in the leader and their willingness to embrace the opposing party's views. Instead it acknowledges that simply because of the vastness of principles each party holds, one may find it impossible to fully support every view and prefer instead to agree with the opposing party's belief, which seems more appropriate perhaps. The possibility that a party leader, and its members, do not completely agree with the party ideology gives credence to the statement made in the title that one of the major parties is being dominated by an internal coalition because even the president of the party (the dominant figure of the party) ideology is one of a coalition between the Democrats and the Republicans. Although the above example only shows how a Republican can also be Democratic, it doesn't mean there are not examples of the opposite occurring, just to validate this point John Kerry (Senator for the Democrat Party from 1985-Present) tended to favour the Republican form of government despite being a Democrat, now in each of these cases the politician could have been adopting the policies of the opposing party in order to become a broad church (catch-all) party and gain the votes of US citizens that would traditionally not vote for their party⁴. Although the fact that Bush not only advocated that he would make changes and actually implemented change shows that he may not have just been trying to gain votes, he actually supported the claims he was making⁵. Bush was quoted as saying "We need to fix the foundations," meaning the way that the Democrats had dealt with welfare wasn't efficient, so he would use different methods in order to achieve the same goal as the Democrats⁶. Defending the No Child Left Behind Act ensured that he was seen as both empathetic towards schooling and employment, this was because he defended the legislation in such a way as to show that better education leads to being more employable and therefore increases employment.

The Republicans

As opposed to being a coalition between the two main parties within the two main parties there is a coalition within the Republican Party, between the moderate-conservatives and the conservatives. According to David Pail Kuhn, there is a war within the party between the 'nerds' and the 'Sarah Palin' types⁷. The 'nerds' are fiscal conservatives, so are anti-tax whereas the 'Sarah Palin' conservatives are the social conservatives, who appear to be doing vastly better as they have dominated the party for years⁸. This here demonstrates how the Republican party is torn in two; the 'nerds' (essentially a new tea party) half and the 'Sarah Palin' republicans half, however it does not show that the party is dominated by an internal coalition, as it appears that the dominant faction/group within the party is most certainly the 'Sarah Palin' Republicans, therefore showing that the party is not be dominated by an internal coalition, but the fact that an internal coalition exists within the party could result in the less dominant group becoming more successful and may begin to work alongside the other creating a party dominated by an internal coalition. This is more than likely to eventually occur as the policies/ideology (fiscal conservatism) that the 'nerds' believe in, coincides with the views of most American citizens⁹.

The Mid to Late 1900's

⁴ <http://www.politics1.com/kerry.htm>

⁵ http://www.ontheissues.org/celeb/George_W_Bush_Welfare_Poverty.htm

⁶ http://www.issues2000.org/celeb/George_W_Bush_Welfare_Poverty.htm

⁷ http://www.realclearpolitics.com/articles/2010/03/04/revenge_of_the_gop_nerd_104647.html

⁸ http://www.realclearpolitics.com/articles/2010/03/04/revenge_of_the_gop_nerd_104647.html

⁹ Politics Review, Volume 20, Number 1, September 2010. *'The Republicans, Where do they go from here?'*

During the mid 1900's there was very little dividing the two major parties, as neither had strong ideological differences, this led to many divisions within parties on certain issues. For example, the Civil Rights Act 1964, which outlined major reforms by which the African American people lived, was a key piece of legislation overcoming the large obstacle that stood in the way of a world where unity and equality between all races was accustom. The Republicans voted on the bill and won with a 138 to 34 majority, what is unusual is that when the Democrats voted on the same bill and the result was peculiar, the Democrats were also for it, with a 152 to 96 majority, we can therefore deduce from these figures that groups (possibly factions) within each party voted differently and in the case of the Democrats the division was quite significant (40% against and 60% for)¹⁰. This demonstrates once again that the two major US political parties are dominated by internal coalitions, as there is not 100% agreement within each party on certain issues meaning there must be a coalition between those who are for certain issues and those who are against said issues.

Party Unity Votes in Congress 1955-70 (Democrats opposing Republicans)¹¹

| Year | House of Representatives | Senate |
|------|--------------------------|--------|
| 1955 | 41 | 30 |
| 1960 | 53 | 37 |
| 1965 | 52 | 42 |
| 1970 | 27 | 35 |

If we look at party unity scores (from 1955-1970); the percentage of the votes that a member casts with his or her party on those roll call votes in a session that resulted in a majority of one party opposing a majority of the other party¹² (a high number indicates strong unity within the party and a low one indicates weak unity within the party) we can see that there were relatively low levels of party unity, therefore there were obviously significant fractures within the party¹³, validating the statement in the title that the US major political parties, in this case the Democrats are dominated by internal coalitions as the party cannot seem to agree (unite) enough when opposing the Republican party, their so called opposition.

A Divided Nation and Government

Due to the very nature of the US being very vast in size and also extremely diverse, there is no wonder that US politics is too. In the UK there is the obvious difference between the parties, this is because they were rooted from socialism, Conservatism, Catholicism and Nationalism, the US doesn't have this history, and its parties adopt a more catch-all approach. During the great depression the Democrats were based around, what became known as the 'New Deal Coalition' they attempted to grab votes from groups with completely different political interests therefore this could be seen as a root of the internal coalition as those campaigning on one issue (to gain the vote of more right wing voter) would have had different view to those gaining the votes from the traditional left wing voters, the politicians had to compromise in order to keep the votes of the electorate, because they had conflicting interests^{11b}. This catch-all politics approach could explain why the US is dominated by internal coalitions as in order to gain enough votes politicians within parties must compromise or adopt a different approach to win seats in certain area's

¹⁰ Votes- <http://www.congresslink.org/civilrights/1964.htm>

¹¹ (Recreation of) Vital Statistics on American Politics, CQ Press, H.W.Stanley and R.G.Niemi 2000

¹² <http://www.laits.utexas.edu/gov310/CO/glossary.html>

^{13ab} Politics Review, September 2009, Edward Ashbee, 'US Political Parties, More differences within than between'

resulting in internal coalitions. Furthermore the US is not only a divided nation, it is a divided government due to the federal system, therefore in order to pass a bill easily the President must have the support of Congress, which unlike in the UK can have a different party in power, therefore a coalition (in a way) is founded between Congress and the President despite the fact that they may sometimes be from different political parties, however this is often not seen in practice. For example despite having a Democratic majority in both chambers Clinton was unsuccessful in passing Health reform¹⁴, this shows that even though both Chambers agree with the policy in their ideology in practice they did not displaying that the Democrats have an internal coalition as some may not agree with the healthcare issue (a policy seen to be associated with the Democrats).

Conclusion

In conclusion, the Democrats and the Republican parties appear to have internal coalitions for a myriad of reasons, however the main reason is due to the fact that the parties decide to take a catch-all approach to politics and therefore have to compromise some parts of their ideology in order to gain votes. Furthermore when the leader (president) of a party has split ideological preferences; like George W Bush did, it is possible to see how people can view parties as being dominated by internal coalitions as if the leader has split preferences then naturally the electorate would perceive that the party is dominated by them as well.

Bibliography

Votes- <http://www.congresslink.org/civilrights/1964.htm>

(Recreation of) Vital Statistics on American Politics, CQ Press, H.W.Stanley and R.G.Niemi 2000

<http://www.laits.utexas.edu/gov310/CO/glossary.html>

Politics Review, September 2009, Edward Ashbee, 'US Political Parties, More differences within than between'

<http://www.politics1.com/kerry.htm>

http://www.ontheissues.org/celeb/George_W_Bush_Welfare_+_Poverty.htm

http://www.issues2000.org/celeb/George_W_Bush_Welfare_+_Poverty.htm

http://www.realclearpolitics.com/articles/2010/03/04/revenge_of_the_gop_nerd_104647.html

http://www.realclearpolitics.com/articles/2010/03/04/revenge_of_the_gop_nerd_104647.html

Politics Review, Volume 20, Number 1, September 2010. 'The Republicans, Where do they go from here?'

The Concise Oxford Dictionary of Politics, Oxford University Press, 2010 (Page 190/191)

Half-Breeds, New International Encyclopaedia, 1905

Anthony J Bennett, A2 US Government and Politics, 3rd Edition, 2009 (Page 123)

<http://www.lawsblog.co.uk>

Canwell, Diane. *OCR A2 US Government and Politics Student Book*. 1st Edition. 2009

Harris, Colleen. *AQA A2 Government and Politics: Unit 3A*. 2009

¹⁴ Politics Review, September 2009, Edward Ashbee, 'US Political Parties, More differences within than between'

Plan

Intro

- Two party system-like UK
- Do they disagree still
- This essay will...

How it's possible

- Many Factions- obviously disagreements will emerge
- example e.g Halfbreeds
- Wedge issue

George W. Bush & Kerry

- Compassionate conservatism
- If leader has split ideology (battles an internal coalition) then party will follow (President dominates)
- Possibly broad church politics- counterargument he implemented legislation e.g No Child Left Behind Act

Republican Party

- Two types according to Kuhn, Sarah Palin and Nerds.
- Internal coalition due to the two types
- Palin type has dominated in elections

Divided Nation

- Catch all approach to politics

To conclude

- internal coalitions appear due to catch all approach taken
- Also George W Bush dominating party with mixed ideology