

Is moderate republicanism gone?

Business



Political scientists of the 1970s were concerned with the declining importance of parties within the system of the United States. Denis Brogan described the two major parties as ‘two bottles with different labels, both empty.’ The debate between those who believe in party revival or further decline continues, and so does the accusation that the Democratic and Republican Parties have become such vast broad-churches and patchwork coalitions that one cannot easily distinguish between their members. However, in the era of the impressive number of Tea Party Republicans in Congress and the ever growing amount of politicians running on Donald Trump’s ticket, are the two major parties truly undistinguishable? And has the moderate wing of the Grand Old Party been all but wiped out? To begin with, the Republican Party has, since its post-civil war creation, been seen as the party of big businesses, supporting private property and capitalism. This fiscal conservatism, especially in recent years, went in pair with the rather right-wing stance on social issues – the party being pro-life, proposing amendments for flag desecration, and generally being opposed to same-sex marriage.

The Democrats, on the other hand, can be described as right-of-centre on economic compass while liberal on social issues, portraying themselves as the protectors of the downtrodden. A variety of states with a Democratic legislature had legalised LGBTQ+ marriage prior to the Obergefell v Hodges ruling in 2015, like California. Before the Supreme Court case, gay marriage was banned in Louisiana – controlled by Republicans. Hence, there is a clear cut between the parties on certain social issues of the 21st century.

This century has also seen a shift of the share of vote in the parties. The Democrats have a ‘ religion problem’ with Christians – so the GOP is attempting to lure these voters in; successfully, as it turns out. “ For most Latinos, not only Hispanic evangelicals, family values are important, social values are important,” said Pastor Mario Bramnick. This would explain the Republican’s 30% of the Latino vote share in 2016 elections, an increase from the years of George Bush’s benevolent conservatism. Even non-religious Latinos tend to be more socially conservative, due to their upbringing, so voting behaviour specialists equate them with Christians on these matters.

In total, Christians are over 15 p. p. more likely to vote Republican, so the party depends on this group, as it accounts for over 70% of the population. Hence, as the core supporters tend to be more conservative, the party has to adapt to retain their support. It can be compared to the Labour Party in the United Kingdom trying to reinvent itself to the middle-aged group after the New Labour experiment of Tony Blair. The party experienced a vast shift of support from the 30-40s to much younger core supporters group, hence pushing the party even more to the left due to grassroots activity.

Though in this case, the change was organic and only coincided with the Conservatives failure to appeal to young voters. It was not the sheer disregard of the other party for the group, as with Democrats and Christians. What needs to be considered next is the importance, or the lack of it, of Rockefeller Republicans. They are more commonly referred to as moderate Republicans. The declined vitality was especially evident during the 2010

mid-term elections, when over a 100 candidates were supported by the radical Tea Party movement.

The overzealously conservative candidates had a rate of success of 32% according to NBC and unseated a myriad of moderate Republicans, like Utah Senator Bob Bennett. The movement had significant less success in any elections after 2010. Nevertheless, the reaction to the tsunami of right wing agenda forced the party furthest to the right it might have ever been. For example, the recent tax cut proposed by the House Republicans is targeted at big business, subsequently, though indirectly, putting more pressure on the middle class. The legislation is viewed as a reaction to the 'Taxed Enough Already' slogan of the Tea Party movement. The congressmen and women from the GOP voted it through the House almost unanimously, reinforcing the claim that the Tea Party still holds a tight grip of the Republicans.

This is not to say that moderate Republicans have been removed from the party altogether. The bill is facing a backlash in the Senate from the likes of Bob Croker of Tennessee, a self-declared moderate. Though not big in numbers, the scarce mainstreamers can be a thorn in the eye of the ever more conservative mainstream GOP leaders, like Paul Ryan. The same RINOs (Republicans In Name Only) blocked the repeal of Obamacare earlier on this year, to force the party to reconsider the proposal. Some senior party figures, like Speaker of the House Paul Ryan, have been trying to distance themselves from Donald Trump in the first months of his presidency.

Other party members, however, have been trying to enjoy a coattail effect from the president. During the Virginia gubernatorial election this November the Republican candidate, Ed Gillespie was running on platform mitigating that of the president. Gillespie stood for reducing immigration, curbing taxes, expenses, and healthcare, simultaneously opposing same-sex marriage. His bid for governorship was not successful, resulting in some political commentators in *The Guardian US* and *The Washington Post* suggesting that 2016 was the peak of right wing success in the Republican Party; though it will be verified in the Alabama special election in December. Roy Moore, a rock-hard conservative is running for Senate; his defeat would point towards voters being fed up with the stance of the party, and political editors from *Huffington Post* argue that it could be a sign of a humiliating defeat for his like-minded Republicans next year.

Summing up, the parties in the 21st century are easily differentiated on the level of social issues. The shift to the right of the GOP can be accounted to the Tea Party movement's momentum and the reactionaries, like P. Ryan and the party platform in 2016, as well as the shift of core party supporters and their ability to adapt to the Christian attitudes of pro-life, anti-LGBTQ+ etc. The moderates are not a force to be reckoned with at the moment, after the wave of Tea Party Republicans, but it is not to say they cannot upset the party's struggle to pass a bill. The mid-term elections of 2018 will be the final test of the Tea Party Republicans and the GOP's right-wing attitudes as a whole. Hence, a total turnover and reinvention of the party will occur, or the hard-line conservatism shall be set in stone for at least another two years.