

# [The positions of the two parties have not](https://assignbuster.com/the-positions-of-the-two-parties-have-not/)

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The GOP, like its opposition, has responded toideological, demographic and social changes by hardening some of its positionsand adopting entirely new planks, all part of an effort to create a coalitioncapable of winning national elections.

In the Republicans’ case, that meantadapting and appealing to a new base in the South from the 1970s forward, becoming the dominant party of white suburbia, and finding ways to marry itstraditional pro-business foundation with less affluent, more sociallyconservative voters. Although its foundersrefused to recognize the right of states and territories to practice slavery, the modern Republican Party supports states’ rightsagainst the power of the federal government in most cases, and it opposes thefederal regulation of traditionally state and local matters, such as policingand education. Because the party is highly decentralized (as is the DemocraticParty), it encompasses a wide variety of opinion on certain issues, though itis ideologically more unified at the national level than the Democratic Partyis. The Republicans advocate reduced taxes as a means of stimulating theeconomy and advancing individual economic freedom. They tend to opposeextensive government regulation of the economy, government-funded socialprograms, affirmative action, and policies aimed at strengthening the rights ofworkers. Many Republicans, though not all, favor increased governmentregulation of the private, noneconomic lives of citizens in some areas, such asabortion, though most Republicans also strongly oppose gun-control legislation.

Republicans are more likely than Democrats to support organized prayer inpublic schools and to oppose the legal recognition of equal rights for gays andlesbians. Regarding foreign policy, the Republican Party traditionally hassupported a strong national defense and the aggressive pursuit of U. S. nationalsecurity interests, even when it entails acting unilaterally or in oppositionto the views of the international community. Perhaps it’s the parties, not the voters, who have shifted.

The parties have indeed flipped on racialissues, corresponding to the movement of southern whites from the Democratic tothe Republican party.  On issues ofeconomic policy and income redistribution, however, the relative positions ofthe two parties have not changed so much. Liberal Republicans have disappearedand conservative Democrats have diminished in number, but even back in 1896 itwas the Republican party that was more economically right-leaning in 1896.

Then, as now, the Republican Party supported big business and Democrats tookthe side of labor. The major economic policy difference compared to that oftoday may be trade: Republicans have traditionally favored tariffs, with theDemocrats supporting free trade. Franklin Roosevelt lowered tariffs during hispresidency. But by 1993, when Bill Clinton pushed for the ratification of theNorth American Free Trade Agreement, it was against the opposition of organizedlabor and a majority of the Democrats in Congress, and free trade is now morestrongly associated with the Republicans. Then and now, however, it has beenRepublicans who are more supportive of, and more supported by, business, andDemocrats with more liberal policies. There isn’t any poll datafrom 100 years ago, but my impression from reading the political historyof that period is that there have been some changes in the issues that seemmost important. Racial politics were extremely important in the late 1800s(especially in the South) and remain important today—but the two parties haveswitched sides.

Then it was the Republicans, now it is the Democrats, who havethe support of African Americans. Beyond this, though, we suspect that economicissues were as important then as now. Bill Clinton campaigned on “ the economy, stupid,” and at the close of the 1800s political debates centered on the goldstandard, tariffs, and other aspects of economic policy. Another puzzling aspect of the Great AmericanReversal is the reappearance of nearly tied elections. Here is a list of allthe U.

S. presidential elections, from my research, that were decided by lessthan 1% of the popular vote: 1880, 1884, 1888, 1960, 1968, 2000. The otherclosest elections were 1844 (decided by 1. 5% of the vote), 1876 (3%), 1916(3%), 1976 (2%), and 2004 (2. 5%). Four straight close elections in the1870s–1880s, five close elections since 1960, and almost none at any othertime. From the standpoint of political theory, we wouldexpect elections to generally be close: each party has an electoral incentiveto move toward the center to capture wavering votes. But over long stretches ofAmerican history, close presidential elections have not been the norm.

One possible explanation is that after the 1880s the Democrats were largely satisfiedwith control over the south, along with the political machines of New York andother large cities; national politics were less important in that period exceptas a way of brokering regional disputes. Since the New Deal, however, federalpolicy and dollars have been important enough for both parties to seriouslycontest national elections whenever possible. Politics today is centered onnational media and polling, whereas a hundred years ago voters were reachedlocally. Bring in the Civil Rights Act.  While Democrats struggled with their party’sinternal contradictions on the issue—deferring far too frequently to thedemands of Southern segregationists who held powerful committee chairs in theHouse and Senate, and who commanded machines that delivered needed electoralvotes—Republicans demanded action. “ When President John F.

Kennedy failed tosubmit a promised civil rights bill, three Republicans (Representatives WilliamMcCulloch of Ohio, John Lindsay of New York and Charles Mathias of Maryland) introducedone of their own,” noted The New York Times in recalling the greatstruggles of the era. “ This inspired Mr. Kennedy to deliver on his promise, andit built Republican support for what became the Civil Rights Act of 1964.

”  When the key votes in the House and theSenate came fifty years ago, Republicans were significantly more supportive ofthe Civil Rights Act than were Democrats. The measure passed the House on a290-130 vote, with support from 61 percent of House Democrats (152 in favor, ninety-six opposed). But Republican lawmakers gave it 80 percent backing (138in support, just thirty-four against). Unfortunately, the Republican Party that has spent much of its energy inrecent years promoting restrictive Voter ID laws and that is currently entertaininga telling debate about Mississippi Senator Thad Cochran’s outreach toAfrican-American voters in last month’s runoff election fight, often findsitself at odds with the legacies of Lincoln and the Republicans who championedcivil rights in the mid-1960s.  The voterbase of the GOP has been changing in directions opposite from national trends. It has become older and less Hispanic or Asian than the general population.

Jackie Calmes has reported a dramatic shift in the power base of the party, asit moves away from the Northeast and Pacific States and toward small-townAmerica in the South and West. During the 2016 presidential election, theRepublicans also gained significant support in the Midwest. It has become morepopulist in its distrust of large corporations and of state and federalgovernments. In a shift over a half-century, the party base has beentransplanted from the industrial Northeast and urban centers to become rootedin the South and West, in towns and rural areas.

In turn, Republicans areelecting more populist, antitax and antigovernment conservatives who are lesssupportive—and even suspicious—of appeals from big business. Big business, manyRepublicans believe, is often complicit with big government on taxes, spendingand even regulations, to protect industry tax breaks and subsidies—’corporatewelfare,’ in their view.  I highly doubtmany former Republicans would even recognize their own party if they werearound today to see it such as, Ronald Reagan or Dwight Eisenhower.