

The positions of the
two parties have not

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

In the Republicans' case, that meant adapting 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 its traditional pro-business foundation with less affluent, more socially conservative voters. Although its founders refused to recognize the right of states and territories to practice slavery, the modern Republican Party supports states' rights against the power of the federal government in most cases, and it opposes the federal regulation of traditionally state and local matters, such as policing and education. Because the party is highly decentralized (as is the Democratic Party), it encompasses a wide variety of opinion on certain issues, though it is ideologically more unified at the national level than the Democratic Party is. The Republicans advocate reduced taxes as a means of stimulating the economy and advancing individual economic freedom. They tend to oppose extensive government regulation of the economy, government-funded social programs, affirmative action, and policies aimed at strengthening the rights of workers. Many Republicans, though not all, favor increased government regulation of the private, noneconomic lives of citizens in some areas, such as abortion, though most Republicans also strongly oppose gun-control legislation.

Republicans are more likely than Democrats to support organized prayer in public schools and to oppose the legal recognition of equal rights for gays

and lesbians. Regarding foreign policy, the Republican Party traditionally has supported a strong national defense and the aggressive pursuit of U. S. national security interests, even when it entails acting unilaterally or in opposition to the views of the international community. Perhaps it's the parties, not the voters, who have shifted.

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

Then, as now, the Republican Party supported big business and Democrats took the side of labor. The major economic policy difference compared to that of today may be trade: Republicans have traditionally favored tariffs, with the Democrats supporting free trade. Franklin Roosevelt lowered tariffs during his presidency. But by 1993, when Bill Clinton pushed for the ratification of the North American Free Trade Agreement, it was against the opposition of organized labor and a majority of the Democrats in Congress, and free trade is now more strongly associated with the Republicans. Then and now, however, it has been Republicans who are more supportive of, and more supported by, business, and Democrats with more liberal policies. There isn't any poll data from 100 years ago, but my impression from reading the political history of that period is that there have been some changes in the

issues that seem most important. Racial politics were extremely important in the late 1800s (especially in the South) and remain important today—but the two parties have switched sides.

Then it was the Republicans, now it is the Democrats, who have the support of African Americans. Beyond this, though, we suspect that economic issues 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 gold standard, tariffs, and other aspects of economic policy. Another puzzling aspect of the Great American Reversal is the reappearance of nearly tied elections. Here is a list of all the U.

S. presidential elections, from my research, that were decided by less than 1% of the popular vote: 1880, 1884, 1888, 1960, 1968, 2000. The other closest 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 the 1870s–1880s, five close elections since 1960, and almost none at any other time. From the standpoint of political theory, we would expect elections to generally be close: each party has an electoral incentive to move toward the center to capture wavering votes. But over long stretches of American history, close presidential elections have not been the norm.

One possible explanation is that after the 1880s the Democrats were largely satisfied with control over the south, along with the political machines of New York and other large cities; national politics were less important in that period except as a way of brokering regional disputes. Since the New Deal, however, federal policy and dollars have been important enough for both parties to

seriously contest national elections whenever possible. Politics today is centered on national media and polling, whereas a hundred years ago voters were reached locally. Bring in the Civil Rights Act. While Democrats struggled with their party's internal contradictions on the issue—deferring far too frequently to the demands of Southern segregationists who held powerful committee chairs in the House and Senate, and who commanded machines that delivered needed electoral votes—Republicans demanded action. “ When President John F.

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

” When the key votes in the House and the Senate came fifty years ago, Republicans were significantly more supportive of the Civil Rights Act than were Democrats. The measure passed the House on a 290-130 vote, with support from 61 percent of House Democrats (152 in favor, ninety-six opposed). But Republican lawmakers gave it 80 percent backing (138 in support, just thirty-four against). Unfortunately, the Republican Party that has spent much of its energy in recent years promoting restrictive Voter ID laws and that is currently entertaining a telling debate about Mississippi Senator Thad Cochran's outreach to African-American voters in last month's runoff election fight, often finds itself at odds with the legacies of Lincoln and

the Republicans who championed civil rights in the mid-1960s. The voter base 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, as it moves away from the Northeast and Pacific States and toward small-town America in the South and West. During the 2016 presidential election, the Republicans also gained significant support in the Midwest. It has become more populist in its distrust of large corporations and of state and federal governments. In a shift over a half-century, the party base has been transplanted from the industrial Northeast and urban centers to become rooted in the South and West, in towns and rural areas.

In turn, Republicans are electing more populist, anti-tax and anti-government conservatives who are less supportive—and even suspicious—of appeals from big business. Big business, many Republicans believe, is often complicit with big government on taxes, spending and even regulations, to protect industry tax breaks and subsidies—'corporate welfare,' in their view. I highly doubt many former Republicans would even recognize their own party if they were around today to see it such as, Ronald Reagan or Dwight Eisenhower.