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This Too Shall Pass: Reflections on the Repositioning of Political Parties

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INTRODUCTION



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Amid the perennial lament about partisan “gridlock” and “dysfunction” in Washington, a casual observer might conclude that the postures of the Democrats and Republicans are permanent fixtures. Year in and year out, the two sides, it is easy to infer, look hopelessly set in their ways.

But the inference is shortsighted. Repeatedly in American history, the leading political parties have changed their policy positions, sometimes startlingly. Consider these examples.

For a time, during the earliest years of the republic, the so-called Republicans (not to be confused with today’s party bearing the same name) resisted practically every facet of the Federalist agenda, which featured a larger role for a central government as advocated by Alexander Hamilton. By 1815, however, the Republican Party had pivoted. Led by James Madison, it suddenly embraced just about every one of Hamilton’s main prescriptions.

Born in 1854, another Republican party—the one built by Lincoln—became the champion of greater racial equality. It continued to enjoy that reputation well into the 20th century. (A little known fact: As late as 1932, black voters were still casting the great majority of their ballots for the Republican presidential candidate.) On the race issue, the Democrats were the reactionary party. That shameful distinction began to fade in the course of the 1930s and 1940s. By 1964 it was a Democratic president and his party’s large majorities in Congress that indisputably took the lead in advancing civil rights for blacks.

From their inception, through roughly the first half of the 20th century, the Republicans were more protectionist than the Democrats. On those rare occasions when import duties were lowered, it was Democratic control of the legislative and executive branches that enabled tariffs to be liberalized. By the middle of the 20th century, this partisan divide over trade policy had diminished. Then, in the 1970s and 1980s, a difference re-emerged—but now with the roles reversed: Republicans had morphed into the more fervent free traders, while the Democrats, especially in Congress, grew agitated about allegedly “unfair” competition from the country’s trading partners.¹

First under Woodrow Wilson, then eventually Franklin D. Roosevelt, the Democratic Party tilted toward interventionism in international affairs. The Republicans were an isolationist party in the 1930s, an orientation they suspended during the Second World War and then wholly discontinued with the advent of the Eisenhower administration. In the next couple of decades, however, following their Vietnam debacle, it was the Democrats that became more often the introspective doves in foreign policy, preoccupied primarily with a perceived American decline in economic “competitiveness,” while hawkish proponents of a global “freedom agenda” increasingly flocked to the Republican camp.² That contrast has only recently become less pronounced; President Obama, like Clinton, succeeded in blurring it to some degree. These days, neo-isolationist murmurs are becoming audible again from other voices within both parties, and they may grow louder.

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At the start of the 1970s, there was little appreciable daylight between the parties on so-called social or cultural questions; neither was especially preoccupied with them, nor voiced firm views. As the decade wore on, that consensus began to fall apart. Over the ensuing years, the Republican Party hardened its stance on one issue after another—abortion, gun control, gay marriage, and intermittently, immigration. Democrats mostly leaned in the opposite direction.

The GOP also underwent a series of transformations on fiscal matters. Balanced budgets were a Republican article of faith through the first two-thirds of the last century. In practice,

1. See Pietro S. Nivola, *Regulating Unfair Trade* (Brookings, 1993).

2. See Pietro S. Nivola, “Commercializing Foreign Affairs? American Trade Policy After the Cold War,” in Randeall B. Ripley and James M. Lindsay, eds., *U.S. Foreign Policy After the Cold War* (University of Pittsburgh Press, 1997), especially pp. 248-251.

though, budgetary balance during Republican administrations gradually became more an aspiration than a reality. President Eisenhower attained it in three of his eight years in office—and by 1972, Richard Nixon, would declare that he, too, was “now a Keynesian,” meaning that deficit-spending could now be commonplace, even in Republican hands.

Then, with Ronald Reagan’s campaign in 1980, the Republican fiscal philosophy took an additional twist: supply-side economics made its debut. In essence, the novel notion was that tax reductions would more than pay for themselves, by generating economic growth, hence a bonanza of revenue. So, it was conjectured, the resulting added cash would duly close budgetary gaps. When instead the gaps persisted, the supply-siders were not especially perturbed; deficits now had ceased to be a pressing vexation.

In practice, Reagan himself dialed down that insouciance at times, and it certainly did not carry over to Reagan’s successor, George H.W. Bush, who had earlier dismissed the supply-side thesis as “voodoo economics.” But under a second Bush presidency (2001 to 2009) deficit-spending took off. It has only been in the past few years that the GOP, shaken by a fiscally conservative insurgency at the party’s base, has renewed the hunt for sharp deficit reduction—though without abandoning an expectation that further tax relief would raise, not lower, revenue.

At present the Republican fiscal program is a work in progress. Most Republicans no longer subscribe to the “we are all Keynesians” characterization—except when it comes to tax cuts, which Republicans continue to deem optimally suited for counter-cyclical purposes. As with the Republicans of yore, the deficit and national debt *are* again central preoccupations of the party. But whether that concern is so keen as to trump the party’s resistance to a realistic solution—pairing spending cuts with new taxes—remains to be seen. If the GOP somehow manages more fully to wriggle out of its tax-policy straitjacket, the party will have shifted full-circle, back to its mid-20th century fiscal paradigm.

The purpose of the following essay is to examine more closely each of these cases of partisan repositioning, and to learn from them the circumstances that induce a party to alter its course.

The About-Face in 1815

A couple of centuries ago, two venerable parties dominated American politics: Federalists and “Republicans.” The Federalists held the presidency and majorities in Congress through 1800. In 1801, however, a Republican—Thomas Jefferson—became president, and his party proceeded to control the executive and legislative branches for the ensuing quarter-century (arguably considerably long, if one thinks of Andrew Jackson and Martin Van Buren as direct heirs of the Jeffersonian tradition).

The success of the Republicans was in some ways surprising. From 1807 through 1814, the Republican administrations of Jefferson and then James Madison, along with their partisans in Congress, had sometimes made a hash of foreign policy—first by imposing a self-defeating trade embargo on commerce with the warring European powers of the era, and then by taking up arms again against one of them, Great Britain, in 1812.

The War of 1812 was strictly a Republican project, one unanimously opposed by the Federalists. It was waged with woefully inadequate military preparation and little financial capacity, for the governing party had remained ideologically hostile to a standing army, a national bank, and a viable system of federal taxation. Instead, the Republicans, in large part, put their faith in state militias and a miniscule navy, supplemented by a flotilla of privateers. That the nation, so early in its infancy and vastly outgunned, ultimately emerged from this existential crisis intact was something of a miracle.

Much as its Federalists critics had predicted, Mr. Madison’s war (as the conflict came to be called) had come close to being a calamity for the United States. Folklore has it that America’s armed forces ultimately fought Britain, the 19th century’s superpower, to a draw. True, David did hurl some stones at Goliath. The tiny U.S. Navy performed storied feats in several single-ship duels on the high seas, and scored heroic victories in engagements on Lake Erie and Lake Champlain. On land, the Americans successfully defended Baltimore and then New Orleans.

But more fundamental to the end-game was the fact that the British—though they had long deemed it necessary to commandeer American sailors to support what was at the time a titanic world-wide struggle against Napoleonic France—had not really wanted to pick a fight with America in the first place. By 1815, having finally defeated the French, Britain no longer felt a need to interfere with the maritime rights of third parties such as the United States. Cooler heads in London then prevailed on their government to settle the unwanted long-distance brawl in North America. The peace treaty that was finally

ratified in 1815 did not prove “ruinous,” as the Federalist naysayers had anticipated, but remarkably benign.

In these fortunate circumstances, the Republicans lucked out. Quickly forgotten was the fact that six months before the war finally wound down, the republic had been on the ropes. British troops had occupied Maine. The Royal Navy had effectively disabled America’s few sizeable warships. The economy had been dealt a severe setback, and the government was broke. The heart of the nation’s capital was a smoldering wreck. And the union’s fate had hung in the balance, as key New England states threatened secession.

Madison and the Republican Party in general managed to escape lasting discredit for their mismanagement of the war effort, while the Federalists, whose skepticism had been eminently sound at the outset, wound up with the stigma of having behaved as unpatriotic prophets of doom. Not even a severe financial panic that burst in 1819 (resulting from rampant land speculation in new territories that the war had put in play, and that brought five years of deepening debt, deflation and hard times) shook Republican supremacy.

As if that script were not sufficiently improbable, to it would be added this: almost overnight, the party jettisoned a good deal of its old dogma. For, while the conclusion of the War of 1812 had redounded to the benefit of the Republicans, it also exposed the inherent shortcomings of their public philosophy: specifically, an inordinate distaste for centralized power—in the form of permanent armed forces, an executive bureaucracy, a viable banking facility, and federal taxes—and a bias for agriculture over manufacturing and commerce.

In his final message to Congress in December of 1815 Madison all but laid those traditional tenets of his party’s creed to rest. He startled the country by advocating a broad national program that now included adequate military strength, a dependable bank, a system of direct internal taxation, and a protective tariff. The Republican president seemed to take a page from an early Federalist playbook—Hamilton’s report on credit and manufactures—even calling for a “comprehensive system of roads and canals” and the establishment of a national university in Washington.

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Republicanism, in sum, was transforming into Hamiltonian nationalism.³ The convergence promptly contributed to relieving the partisan disputes that had accompanied the altercation of 1812. In their place arrived what came to be known as an “era of good feelings,” and considerable consensus in the 1820s on an agenda that the Republican House speaker Henry Clay christened “the American system”—that is, policies of protection and internal improvements basically reminiscent of Hamilton’s. The rebranding of the Republicans beginning in 1815 helped keep them (or, more accurately, their up-dated heirs) in power for years.

There were, of course, other important factors behind the Republican ascent. On its way to a metamorphosis, the party of Jefferson and Madison appropriated the central virtues of the Federalist legacy, but had been careful not to emulate the vices. So, for instance, although Madison had often blundered during the 1812 war, he had exercised unique judgment in steadfastly refusing to approve executive orders or legislation reinstating sedition laws. Consequently, for all its faults going forward, his party at least did not carry the moral and political taint of trampling on civil liberties in wartime, as had the punitive Federalists in 1798.

And that turned out to be but one example of consequential, and advantageous, partisan differentiation. The rise of the Republicans and decline of the Federalists had much to do with the fact that, at bottom, aspects of the latter’s governing philosophy increasingly had fallen out of step with the potent egalitarian currents of American democracy—a longer story, that would take us far afield to address here. For present purposes, the salient question remains: *How* did the Republican Party, so partial to small government and minimal taxes until 1815, manage to reassess its long-standing credo and try a different path?

The school of hard knocks (lessons learned during the 1812 ordeal) and the vagaries of history (strokes of fortune at the end of the day) were a big part of the explanation, but in addition there was simply a basic difference between political parties of the early 19th century and those of the present day. Back then, party leaders exerted greater

3. See Pietro S. Nivola, “The ‘Party War’ of 1812: Yesterday’s Lessons for Today’s Partisan Politics,” in Pietro S. Nivola and Peter J. Kastor, eds., *What So Proudly We Hailed: Essays on the Contemporary Meaning of the War of 1812* (Brookings, 2012), especially pp. 21-24.

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influence. A party's cast of mind could reflect, for the most part, the inclinations of its establishment—an acknowledged elite. Although the Republicans of 1815 were a fractious lot, they were duly led by James Madison. A consummate pragmatist at most of the critical junctures in his career, Madison had been chastened by the 1812 experience. He pivoted accordingly—and many of his partisans followed.

Today's parties, by contrast, are driven from the bottom up. Established leaders, to the extent they exist, have limited control. Instead, through their grip on party primaries and caucuses, grass-roots activists dictate not only the choice of candidates for office but their policy orientations. Redirecting a party's stance, therefore, may well require altering its base, not merely counting on a different management style at the top. Overhauling the base is not impossible, but it takes longer.

From Racist to Rights Advocate

The modern Democratic Party has been so zealous in affirming equal rights, not only for African Americans but for many other minorities, it may be hard to imagine a time when most of the party—in the North, not just the South—stood for the perpetuation of slavery and subsequently for racial apartheid.

Northern Democrats in the Senate voted 14 to 4 for the infamous Kansas-Nebraska Act of 1854, which annulled the Missouri Compromise of 1820 and opened the possibility of adding the Kansas and Nebraska territories to the slave-holding region. The onset of the Civil War scarcely converted the party, even deep in Yankee territory. “Slavery as an institution should not be disturbed in the prosecution of the war,” declared the New Hampshire Democratic platform in 1862.⁴ On the four crucial questions that Congress had to decide regarding slavery during that fateful year—prohibiting the return of fugitives, emancipating slaves in the District of Columbia, banning the barbaric practice in new territories, and confiscating, then setting free, the “property” of slaveholders—99 percent of the Republicans voted “aye,” while 96 percent of the Democrats opposed the measures.⁵ When Lincoln issued the Emancipation Proclamation, the Democratic

4. Quoted in James L. Sundquist, *Dynamics of the Party System: Alignment and Realignment of Political Parties in the United States*, revised ed. (Brookings, 1983), p. 100.

5. James M. McPherson, *Battle Cry of Freedom: The Civil War Era* (New York: Ballantine Books, 1988) pp. 506, 560, 839.

platform of New York denounced it as no less than “a proposal for the butchery of [white] women and children.” And when Congress took up the 13th amendment, which outlawed slavery throughout the country, the Democratic Party called it “unwise, impolitic, cruel, and unworthy of support of civilized people.”

The racist disposition of the party persisted through the rest of the 19th century and into the 20th. One of the most enlightened Democratic presidents, Woodrow Wilson, took office in 1913. Wilson’s accomplishments were legendary. On the issue of race, however, his administration’s record was a disgrace. His political appointees were permitted to re-impose segregation in federal offices such as the Postal Service.⁶ Worse, lynchings were common during this era (55 of them reported between 1911 and 1920). The Democrats and their progressive president did next to nothing to combat these atrocities—in contrast to Warren Harding and Republican lawmakers, who sought to advance a strong anti-lynching measure in 1922.

In the presidential election ten years later, the Republicans were still easily carrying the black vote; more than two-thirds went to Herbert Hoover. Black districts in Cleveland voted 82 percent for Hoover, in Chicago 75 percent, in Philadelphia 71 percent, in Detroit 67 percent.⁷ But after that, the alignment began to change; blacks increasingly joined the New Deal coalition. By 1936, about three-quarters of the African American electorate cast its ballots for FDR. That share inched up to 77 percent for Harry Truman in 1948, when for the first time a majority of blacks no longer appeared to identify as Republicans.

What accounted for the shift? The answer boils down to three factors: (1) the wrenching impact of the Great Depression, coupled with (2) a growing electoral presence of blacks where they could make a political difference—in the North—and (3) erosion of the solidly Democratic stronghold in the South.

The disastrous economy of the 1930s, and Roosevelt’s concerted efforts to confront it, cut millions of voters loose from their old moorings. Although it marked no breakthrough in race relations (indeed, blacks were often short-changed in key programs, and racial discrimination continued in various government agencies), the New Deal nonetheless clearly conferred more benefits on the poorest of the poor than had the status quo ante; blacks did receive a notable share of relief jobs and of federal housing units, for

6. John Milton Cooper, Jr., *Woodrow Wilson* (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 2009), p. 205.

7. Nancy J. Weiss, *Farewell to the Party of Lincoln: Black Politics in the Age of FDR* (Princeton University Press, 1983), p. 30.

example.⁸ Amid the dire economic crisis, a helping hand, however uneven, started to scramble partisan allegiances among many groups, not least African Americans.

Mobilizations for the two world wars induced migrations of blacks from the rural south, where they were systematically disenfranchised, to the industrial north, where they could vote. Between the two world wars, more than a million had moved north. Acute wartime labor shortages between 1941 and 1945 drew from the Deep South an even bigger influx of migrants; almost 1.5 million African Americans relocated to northern cities and to metropolitan areas on the West Coast in the 1940s.⁹ It was only a matter of time before demographic changes of such magnitude would catch the attention of both political parties and eventually stir the Democrats to vie for the votes of the newcomers.

Harry Truman accordingly took a bold leap in the run-up to the presidential election of 1948, albeit at the cost of antagonizing his party's traditional southern base. Mindful of the potential appeal for black voters of the third-party candidacy of Henry Wallace, the president called for enactment of a package of civil rights reforms. At the insistence of northern liberals, Truman ran on a Democratic platform plank that incorporated most of this agenda.

Truman's gamble may have been ahead of its time. It is not entirely clear whether he won the election because of, or despite, his civil rights advocacy. Four ordinarily dependable Democratic states—Louisiana, Mississippi, Alabama, and South Carolina—defected, swinging their appreciable bloc of electoral votes to an insurgent, the “Dixiecrat” Strom Thurmond. On the other hand, an up-tick in black support may have helped Truman secure some key states elsewhere.

Whatever the case, over the ensuing couple of decades, the writing was on the wall. Seizing opportunities to cement the votes of African Americans increasingly made political sense for the Democrats. For as James L. Sundquist of the Brookings Institution had perceptively observed, thanks to the postwar period's incipient demographic and economic diversification in parts of the South, that once-solid Democratic region was becoming less politically monolithic, hence less reliable, even *before* the ground began to shake amid the party's civil rights rift in 1948, let alone the seismic shock that wholly upended regional party politics with passage of the Civil Rights Act of 1964. Between

8. But see Stephen Thernstrom and Abigail Thernstrom, *America in Black and White: One Nation Indivisible* (New York: Simon and Schuster, 1997), pp. 62-65.

9. See James N. Gregory, “The Second Great Migration: A Historical Overview,” in Kenneth L. Kusmer and Joe W. Trotter, eds., *African American Urban History since World War II* (University of Chicago Press, 2009), p. 21.

1940 and 1944, the Republican Party had gained strength in nine of the eleven southern states at a rate higher than the national average, an indication that the South was in the process of realigning well before the civil rights issue emerged in full force.¹⁰ Thus, by 1952, Dwight D. Eisenhower was able to carry four southern states: Virginia, Florida, Tennessee, and Texas. For the Democrats, entering the 1960s, parts of the South were already showing signs of slipping away. Meanwhile, if systematically courted, the black constituency in the rest of the country loomed increasingly as a potential mainstay of the Democratic coalition.

So it was that the party moved in 1964 and again in 1965 (the Voting Rights Act) to take the lead on legislation that was radically transformative, and thereby put the finishing touches on an historic partisan metamorphosis.

The change had come about gradually (overall, it required roughly a century and a half). Why did it take so long? Part of the explanation is that the underlying forces were slow to gain traction. (Until World War II three-quarters of the black population still resided south of the Mason-Dixon line, where much of it was effectively prevented from voting.) An additional consideration, however, may have to do with a distinctive feature of the American political system: its uniquely frequent elections.

In a regime where the House of Representatives is elected biennially, and where presidential terms last only four years, it may often be harder for political parties to discard customary habits straightaway in order to enhance long-range prospects. That is, with the next election always just months away, parties may calculate that, for now, little fundamental recalibration is essential, and that sticking with the status quo—essentially “more of the same”—poses less near-term risk. Thus, at most, mere tactical tweaks and tokenism, not a makeover, may often seem to suffice for most electoral cycles.

Where, as in British politics, electoral intervals tend to be considerably longer, a party surveying the political landscape of the future—and intending to be competitive therein—may have greater incentive not to procrastinate with the difficult process of reassessment. The differing incentives and lags may partly explain why, for instance, Tony Blair’s Labour Party or David Cameron’s Tories managed to cast aside key biases more readily than America’s parties sometimes have over the course of their long histories.

10. Sundquist, *Dynamics of the Party System*, p. 284.

From Protectionists to Free Traders

Towering tariffs used to be standard issue for Republicans. As with its dim view of slavery, the GOP's proclivity again reflected preferences in the party's regional base—the industrializing North—where succor for “infant” industries was deemed imperative (and where, later on, mature manufacturers had learned to lobby their partisan benefactors for perpetual protection). Tariffs were only lowered, as in 1894 and 1913, on those rare occasions in the late 19th and early 20th centuries when the Democrats won the presidency and majorities in Congress. With almost robotic regularity, every time the Republicans regained and held power, back up would go the duties—in 1897, 1909, 1922, and most infamously, 1930.

The Democrats' quest for open trade was driven by *their* own dominant sectional interests—chiefly, the South's dependence on commodity exports, principally of cotton. These roots harked far back into the 1800s. (In 1828 South Carolina had threatened to secede over what it called “the tariff of abominations,” a system of import duties that favored Northern manufacturers at the expense of Southern planters). Not surprisingly, major efforts to facilitate freer trade were typically the work of Southern Democrats. Oscar Underwood of Alabama, who chaired the House Ways and Means Committee in 1913, wrote the major tariff revision enacted that year. When the Democrats finally regained control of the government two years after the Smoot-Hawley debacle in 1930, the most distinguished Southerner in FDR's cabinet, Cordell Hull of Tennessee, masterminded a game-changing reform: the Reciprocal Trade Agreements Act (RTAA) of 1934, which for the first time empowered the president to take the lead in negotiating bilateral tariff reductions.

Aside from slavery and segregation, no question had polarized the political parties more than did the trade issue. Consider the House roll calls on the two momentous trade measures of the 1930s. Fully 92 percent of Republicans voted for the Smoot-Hawley bill; 91 percent of Democrats voted against it.¹¹ Republicans opposed the trade-liberalizing RTAA almost unanimously (99 to 2), whereas Democrats backed it 269 to 11.¹²

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11. Douglas A. Irwin, “From Smoot-Hawley to Reciprocal Trade Agreements: Changing the Course of U.S. Trade Policy in the 1930s,” in Michael D. Bordo, Claudia Goldin and Eugene N. White, eds., *The Defining Moment: The Great Depression and the American Economy in the Twentieth Century* (University of Chicago Press, 1998), p. 334.

12. Robert S. Pastor, *Congress and the Politics of U.S. Foreign Economic Policy* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1980), p. 97.

After World War II, however, this pattern began to weaken.¹³ However grudgingly at first, the GOP gradually softened its position. The Republican-controlled 80th Congress elected in 1946 did not derail the international conference scheduled for 1947 to negotiate further tariff cuts (the first round of the General Agreements on Tariffs and Trade, or GATT), and the party modified its lock-step objection to renewing the RTAA. Now at least serial one-year extensions became admissible.

Meanwhile, on the other side of the aisle, Democrats began showing signs of qualifying their old free trade orientation. The changing economies of some traditionally Democratic areas had started to restructure their politics. In 1955, Democratic senators were evenly split (21 to 21) on whether to attach restrictive provisions to the pending reauthorization of the RTAA. Bowing to demands from Congress—now including ones voiced by some Democrats in the *South* and *Southwest*—President Eisenhower found it expedient to set import controls on textiles and petroleum in 1958.¹⁴ As had been true of virtually all Democratic presidencies to date, the return of a Democratic administration in 1961 brought a new series of expansive trade initiatives (the Kennedy Round of tariff revisions). Yet, even on Kennedy's watch, significant exceptions were granted. Kennedy extended Eisenhower's import restraints on oil and textiles and added some new ones—for the lumber and glass industries, for instance.

By the end of the 1960s, the critics of unfettered trade were more often Democrats than Republicans. The clear turning point came in 1970, when legislation stuffed with protectionist provisions *that had been introduced by the Democrats* cleared the House of Representatives. In the tell-tale roll call, Democratic members rose to defend their project 133 to 84.¹⁵ This time, at long last breaking with tradition, the effort to scuttle the unsound bill was led by a majority (albeit narrow) of the Republicans, 88 to 74. (Ultimately, only a Senate filibuster stalled the bill's momentum.)

In the ensuing years, more key players in the Democratic coalition continued to drift away from the party's past staunch support for a liberal trading regime. Prodded by organized labor (the AFL-CIO had gone from championing free trade earlier in the postwar period to having second thoughts), a majority of House Democrats tried to shelve a GOP-backed

13. For a more complete discussion of the partisan repositioning on trade, on which the following two paragraphs are drawn, see Pietro S. Nivola, "The New Protectionism: U.S. Trade Policy in Historical Perspective," *Political Science Quarterly*, no. 4 (1986), especially pp. 586-594.

14. Ralph Yarborough, a Democratic senator from Texas, for example, insisted that oil import quotas were "critically needed." Quoted in *Congressional Quarterly Almanac 1958*, p. 168.

15. The litmus test, as is so often the case, came on a motion to recommit. *Congressional Quarterly, Almanac 1970*, vote 204, p. 72-H.

plan aimed at broadly expanding trade (the omnibus Trade Act of 1974). The revealing roll call here came on adoption of a rule permitting floor consideration of the bill. The Democrats attempted to reject the rule, 123 to 94. GOP lawmakers salvaged it, 136 to 24.

The opposing trends of the parties intensified through the 1980s. When the House adopted domestic content requirements for automobile manufacturers in 1982, the enthusiasts were chiefly Democrats, 171 to 58, and the skeptics primarily Republicans, 130 to 44. During the decade, ballooning bilateral trade deficits, most conspicuously with Japan, evoked much consternation about presumed “unfair” foreign commercial practices.¹⁶ In the words of the chairman of the Democratic Congressional Campaign Committee gearing up for the 1986 midterm election, trade had become “a Democratic macho issue.”¹⁷

The era’s boisterous Japan bashing and preoccupation with supposed American economic decline culminated in a partisan showdown over an extraordinarily controversial scheme, sponsored by the House Democratic majority leader, Richard A. Gephardt. His bill would have mandated sanctions against countries that ran “excessive” trade surpluses with the United States.¹⁸ Facing a sure veto from President Reagan, the “Gephardt amendment” was ultimately stripped from a big trade bill enacted in 1988, but before succumbing, proponents of Gephardt’s blunt instrument had pushed it far. In the House, an earlier desperate attempt by the Republican minority to spike the Gephardt provision had failed. The GOP voted 154 to 19 to kill the amendment, but fell far short. Democrats opted overwhelmingly—249 to 2—to persevere with it.

It oversimplifies, of course, to depict the parties as having switched their respective roles diametrically in the age-old debate over free trade. Neither party had flipped a complete 180 degrees. In the 1980s, there were still a few GOP notables (most visibly in the Senate) who, like their predecessors decades earlier, deemed the “playing field” of global trade too often slanted against U.S. interests. Even Ronald Reagan, under congressional pressure, resorted to limiting imports of foreign carbon steel products and Japanese autos. On the other side, in the 1990s some leading Democrats bucked the neo-protectionist drift of their party—Bill Clinton naturally comes to mind. Against the prevalent current in Democratic circles, Clinton pressed Congress to ratify the far-reaching North American Free Trade Agreement. And he managed to convince 27 fellow Democrats in the Senate and 102 in the House not to embarrass him.

16. See, Pietro S. Nivola, *Regulating Unfair Trade* (Brookings, 1993).

17. Representative Tony Coelho, quoted in *Congressional Quarterly Almanac* 1985, p. 253.

18. See *Congressional Quarterly Almanac* 1988, p. 216 and *Congressional Quarterly Almanac* 1987, pp. 640, and 24-14, vote 77.

Still, the stark fact remains that even in this remarkable instance—where the stature of a Democratic presidency was at stake—it was Republican votes that carried the day for free trade. Clinton’s entreaties notwithstanding, most Democratic legislators (nearly 60 percent) remained unreconciled to NAFTA, whereas more than 75 percent of the GOP crossed over to join the president.

What accounted historically for the general reconfiguration of partisan attitudes toward trade policy?

The disastrous experience of the Smoot-Hawley tariff law, which contributed to the Depression, may have had a sobering effect on at least a few Republican politicians in the 1930s, but of greater political consequence, was the state of the world in the immediate post-World War II years. In the face of the growing Communist threat, a consensus soon formed on the pressing need to rebuild the battered market economies of Europe and Japan. A vibrant international trading system was considered an integral part of that project; security interests clearly dictated it. Moreover, America had little to fear from commercial competitors at the time, since the country had emerged from the war as the free world’s unrivaled economic superpower. Most Republicans and Democrats alike came to be seized by these realities.

But there is more to the story. For, in the 20th century’s later decades, the Cold War abated, U.S. economic hegemony waned, and much of the Democratic Party became less comfortable with the pursuit of new trade treaties—while, more surprisingly, the GOP now quite consistently favored such accords with few reservations.

In large part, the impetus for many Republicans has had to do with the latter-day political geography—that is, an electoral map of “red” states well-populated with influential export interests (much of the farm-belt, for instance) and right-to-work jurisdictions (less receptive to workers’ time-tested “pauper labor” case for protection), in contrast to “blue” states in which the skeptics of trade are more vocal. (Whence, for example, stronger unions complain about competition from imports, environmental groups protest adverse impacts, and human rights activists cite exploitation and depredations by trading partners.) Widening the gulf between the two camps is the way the global interests of multinational corporations, and the influence of groups like the Chamber of Commerce and the Business Roundtable, resonate less with the core of the Democratic Party than in the GOP.

And at bottom there is this: As the Grand Old Party became increasingly orthodox in its free-market convictions over recent decades, it achieved greater ideological consistency

on the need, in essence, to deregulate commercial activities not only *inside* the border but *across* borders. It is almost a canonical principle today for most Republican policymakers to regard open trade as a potential engine of growth and job creation. Most Democrats, it is safe to say, are no longer so sure.

It is almost a canonical principle today for most Republican policymakers to regard open trade as a potential engine of growth and job creation.

In January 2013, somewhat unexpectedly, President Obama announced an intention to seek deeper liberalization of trade between the United States and the European Union. It remains to be seen whether this significant presidential action could beget yet another alteration among congressional Democrats—a possible reversion to the partisan form of a bygone era—or just a reprise of something like the internal party strife that took place over NAFTA.

Isolationism versus Internationalism

In November of 1918 the American electorate delivered a rebuke to Woodrow Wilson, whose ambitious foreign policy demanded extensive U.S. engagement in international affairs. The Republicans won control of both houses of Congress. Wilson's loss of the Senate was particularly consequential, for it placed Henry Cabot Lodge of Massachusetts in the chair of the pivotal Senate Foreign Relations Committee. Lodge, like Theodore Roosevelt, had expressed grave doubts about the centerpiece of Wilson's postwar plans: an association of nations that would (presumably) prevent a repetition of the calamity of 1914-1918.

What Lodge feared most was that, unless extensively hedged, U.S. participation in the international organization Wilson envisioned would entail a loss of sovereignty. Leading the principled opposition—but also simply keen to cut the Democratic president's legacy down to size—Lodge and a bloc of likeminded Republican reservationists demanded that significant conditions be attached to Wilson's visionary project. That, and Wilson's own stubborn unwillingness to entertain even the mildest adjustments, brought it to grief.

The Senate's failure to ratify the Versailles Treaty, which thereby left the United States without a seat at the League of Nations, is often regarded not only as a poster-child of American isolationism in the 20th century but also as an act of spiteful partisanship. It is true that support for the League of Nations initially appeared to break along party

Unease with foreign entanglements extended to both parties, albeit unequally, over the ensuing two decades.

lines; of the 47 Democrats in the Senate in 1919 only 4 were outright objectors.¹⁹ Yet, the treaty might have garnered greater support among Republicans if their reservations had been accommodated. And in the end, plenty of Democratic senators, too, had qualms; indeed 23 eventually abandoned the president.

Unease with foreign entanglements extended to both parties, albeit unequally, over the ensuing two decades. The underlying reason was quite simple: the public had plainly had enough.

Revulsion with the pointless carnage of the First World War (which slew 5.7 million Allied soldiers, including 116,708 Americans in just the few months that U.S. forces saw action), continuing doubts that America's involvement had been wise, and a growing sense that the senseless sacrifice had been by no means the war that would end all wars—these regrets, and more, would not be readily erased. In 1934, when the Senate at last opened a thorough inquiry into the facts of The Great War, the investigating committee concluded that America's entry did less to render the world safe for democracy, or to affirm the national interest, than to line the pockets of financiers and armament manufacturers.²⁰ The dark assessment seemed to confirm what much of the country had suspected.

Pacifism, delusional but understandable, became the prevalent mood. In the mid-1930s, Roosevelt himself sometimes seemed resigned to it. In one of his less memorable speeches, during the summer of 1936, the president offered this placid picture of U.S. policy:

We shun political commitments which might entangle us in foreign wars; we avoid connection with the political activities of the League of Nations; but I am glad to say that we have cooperated whole-heartedly in the social and humanitarian work at Geneva. Thus we are part of the world effort to control traffic in narcotics, to improve international health, to help child welfare, to eliminate double taxation and to better working conditions and laboring hours throughout the world.²¹

19. Samuel Eliot Morison, Henry Steele Commager, and William E. Leuchtenburg, *A Concise History of the American Republic*, vol. 2 (Oxford University Press, 1977), p. 561.

20. Morison, et al., *Concise History*, p. 621.

21. Franklin D. Roosevelt, "'I Have Seen War.... I Hate War'—Address at Chautauqua, NY, August 14, 1936," *The Public Papers of Franklin D. Roosevelt*, vol. 5 (New York: Random House, 1938). P. 288.

These sounded like ruminations from an alternate universe. A year earlier Mussolini had seized Abyssinia, and Hitler had marched into the Rhineland. The following year, both Fascist powers were actively aiding Franco in the Spanish Civil War, and Japan had invaded China. And the year after that, Germany annexed Austria.

The reaction in Washington (as in London and Paris) was to sit passively on the sideline. As late as 1939, after Czechoslovakia had been dismembered and Poland blitzed, it still took six weeks of heated debate before the Democratic majorities in Congress managed to adopt the most elementary precaution: a modification of the 1937 Neutrality Act's indiscriminate arms embargo that prevented any American war materiel from reaching Britain and France.

Although isolationist sentiment could touch a bipartisan chord, Republicans were more transfixed. Republican senators Arthur H. Vandenberg (Michigan), William Edgar Borah (Idaho), and Gerald P. Nye (North Dakota) were decidedly among the most outspoken non-interventionists. (In 1934 the passionate critique of America's part in World War I had been the work of a panel headed by Nye.) During the Senate's tense confrontation over whether to loosen the restrictive Neutrality Act, most Republicans voted to put off a decision whereas a large majority of Democrats at least were not quite so willing to punt.²² Even in 1940, after the fall of France, FDR's proposed lend-lease scheme (providing Britain with desperately needed supplies) met Republican resistance. Democrats in the House backed the president's loan 238 to 25, while the GOP voted 135 to 24 against it.

Nonetheless, Republican unity, at least outside the House of Representatives, had frayed by 1940. In the lend-lease decision, for example, more than a third of Republican senators ended up voting to support the president's position. Facing an election with especially high stakes that fall, the party ultimately overcame its inward-looking faction and instead settled on Wendell Willkie, a firm proponent of aid to the Allies, as its nominee. Whatever differences could still be discerned between the foreign policies of the Democratic and Republican campaigns in 1940, debate came to a halt on the 7th of December 1941. Pearl Harbor effectively dealt the coup de grace to what was left of old-fashioned Republican isolationism.

Yes, faint ghosts of it would resurface from time to time in the postwar period. Contending

22. On the question of whether to recommit the amended act to committee (October 10, 1939), 15 Republicans but only 9 Democrats voted "aye." Fifty-seven Democrats and 7 Republicans were finally unwilling to shelve the matter.

as a possible GOP presidential candidate in 1948, for instance, Senator Robert A. Taft of Ohio spoke out against Truman's plan to rescue the devastated economies of Europe. But such cases were now increasingly outside the mainstream. The Senate ratified the United Nations Charter almost unanimously in 1945. Owing in no small part to the exertions of Senator Vandenberg (a convert to internationalism), the Marshall Plan was adopted by lopsided majorities in the Republican-controlled 80th Congress. The internationalist wing of the party was ascendant. With the nomination of Dwight D. Eisenhower as its standard-bearer in 1952, it could fairly be said that the party's world-view in foreign affairs now bore few vestiges of the dominant bent during the prewar years.

Partisanship, in large part, stopped at the water's edge during the mid-20th century. But less so as the century progressed. For the nation was to be shaken by another debacle—the Vietnam War—and that trauma would leave differing imprints on the political parties. In one sense Vietnam was for the Democrats what World War II had been for the Republicans: a grave jolt that drove many partisans out of their established molds. As the Vietnam crisis dragged on, the anti-war backlash among Democratic Party activists had driven Lyndon B. Johnson not to seek re-election, and, by the early 1970s, had swelled into a generalized partisan protest against perceived American militarism. The Democratic presidential nominee in 1972, we may recall, proposed slashing the U.S. defense budget by one-third. The next year the Democratic majority leader in the Senate was the author of a legislative proposal calling for drastic reductions of U.S. forces in Europe.

Manifestations in a similar vein did not stop there. In 1985, while the Reagan administration was determined to deploy Pershing missiles on the European continent to counterbalance a new deployment of Soviet intermediate-range missiles, Democratic majorities in the House of Representatives were adopting resolutions supporting a nuclear freeze. As late as 1990, when Iraq's conquests in the Persian Gulf threatened to sever the world's oil lifeline, Democratic members of Congress were, for the most part, opposed to authorizing the use of force against the aggressor.

Under a pragmatic president, Bill Clinton, matters gradually edged back to the center. A series of terrorist assaults on American interests (including the bombings of two U.S. embassies in Africa) went unpunished in the 1990s, but at least the Clinton administration eventually intervened to roll back Serbia's campaign of ethnic cleansing in the Balkans. And, of course, September 11, 2001 was the big wake-up call for U.S. policymakers across the spectrum. Although a harsh critic of his predecessor's muscular policies—especially the invasion of Iraq—Obama stepped up certain counter-terrorist activities, most notably drone strikes, elsewhere.

The partisan state of play at present appears to be in flux. Thanks to the passage of time, the so-called Vietnam syndrome no longer afflicts most Democrats quite the way it once did—though traces persist.²³ Arguably some of the Obama administration’s “resets”—not only the decisions to decamp from both Iraq and Afghanistan forthwith but to pull back (or, at best, “lead from behind”) in certain hotspots—revived partisan disputes of yore, at least for a while. The Democratic base may have cheered, but Republican hawks were unsettled.

In summary, then, how can the partisan cycles regarding international relations best be explained? At least three mutually related factors bear emphasis: the lingering legacies of failed missions; the weight of public opinion; and the impact of external shocks.

For decades, the Vietnam quagmire left policymakers in the Democratic Party with an especially debilitating hangover; even today, to a degree, some still perceive a ubiquitous specter of Vietnam when contemplating military actions abroad. Meanwhile, among Republicans (once the party of arch-isolationists so badly blindsided by the country’s forced entry into World War II), a different warning had endured vigorously until very recently : in a word, Munich—that is, the lesson that appeasement emboldens aggressors. It is not too much to say that the military buildup in the 1980s, the Gulf War in 1990, and the interventions in Afghanistan and Iraq launched in 2001 and 2003 were all decisions informed, at least in part, by a determination of Republican presidents not to repeat their party’s mistakes of the past: the cataclysmic 1930s. The consensus during that now remote but still unforgettable age of denial, in turn, had been influenced by an earlier failure; in no small part, reluctance to confront the marauding Axis powers on the eve of the Armageddon could be traced to the still-bitter aftertaste of 1918.

Public opinion, an especially consequential force in the U.S. political system, constrained the options available to politicians in both parties. In early 1938, for example, 70 percent of Americans with an opinion on the subject favored total withdrawal of U.S. personnel from China.²⁴ Little wonder that, notwithstanding the unmistakable designs of Imperial Japan, the proponents of isolationism felt they had the political wind at their back. Later,

23. See David Rothkopf’s recent piece, “Lessons Learned (and Not),” *Foreign Policy*, no. 199 (March/April, 2013), p. 88. Rothkopf writes: “Obama’s foreign-policy leadership team was all hugely influenced by Vietnam....” According to Rothkopf, the “syndrome” helped explain “Obama’s hesitance to get drawn into Libya (except in a very limited way),” and may also have encouraged the administration’s “premature announcements of exits (Iraq and Afghanistan),” as well as “hesitation to intervene where it might serve U.S. national interests or the global good (Syria, possibly Iran, and perhaps even places such as Mali).” These inferences, I suspect, may be too strong. Another explanation for the “hesitance” is simply national fatigue with a decade of arguably inconclusive wars in Afghanistan and Iraq, combined with intense fiscal pressure finally to wind these costly expeditions down and not to muddle into new ones.

24. See Morison, *Concise History*, p. 623.

to be sure, after a lot of other dominoes fell—Poland, Denmark, Norway, Holland, Belgium, and France—public attitudes began changing significantly. And so did the response of the political parties and Congress. Public alarm following the Nazi *Blitzkrieg* in 1940 rendered it imprudent for the Republicans to nominate an isolationist presidential candidate that year—hence the choice of Willkie. By February 1941, a Gallup poll found 54 percent of the public expressing unqualified support for FDR’s lend-lease program.²⁵ The next month, with at least some signs of bipartisanship (particularly in the Senate), lawmakers duly backed the program by sizable margins.

Finally, even the most ardent partisans inevitably took stock of new realities when the latter (quite literally) burst with a big bang. Pacifists on the left were muted by the attacks of 9/11 (at least for a while). Likewise, the GOP’s implacable anti-interventionist bloc could not hold out once the bombs began falling at Pearl Harbor.

Cultural Conservatives

At times, exogenous shocks have suddenly altered customary positions on salient domestic questions as well. In the sphere of social issues, for instance, none drove as abrupt and sharp a wedge between the parties as did the Supreme Court’s *Roe v. Wade* judgment in 1973.

Prior to that momentous decision, the GOP had not waded deeply into the moral conflict over abortion. A glance at party platforms is illuminating. The Republican document in 1972 said nothing whatsoever about the subject. If anything, it was the Democrats who, in rather circuitous language about “family planning services,” asserted a more discernible preference—in their case, pro-choice.²⁶ After 1973, Republican reticence ceased. The 1976 platform protested the Supreme Court’s “intrusion,” and voiced support for efforts to adopt a constitutional amendment protecting “the right to life for unborn children”—an amendment that every subsequent GOP platform would endorse.²⁷ Meanwhile, the Democratic Party ran the other way—first just disfavoring an attempt to overturn *Roe* (1976 platform) and then, tacking further left, affirming “reproductive freedom as a fundamental human right” (the terms used in 1980). Between the two parties, no issue

25. Gallup Poll, February 1941, Survey #229-K, Question #4b. The previous month, fully 85 percent of those polled by Gallup had agreed that England would lose the war if the U.S. stopped sending her war material. Survey #226-K, Question #5.

26. These were the words in the 1972 Democratic platform: “Family planning services, including the education, comprehensive medical and social services necessary to permit individuals freely to determine and achieve the number and spacing of their children, should be available to all....”

27. The phrase for this concept in GOP platforms eventually became the “human life amendment.”

in modern American politics exhibited a contrast more polar than this.

But increasingly, other social questions were also separating the parties. In 1968, neither party had seemed especially interested in debating the meaning of the Second Amendment. From the 1970s on, however, Republican platforms began routinely to affirm a “right to bear arms,” while the Democrats turned receptive to forms of gun control. In 1976 and 1980 the latter’s platform called for “ways” to curtail the availability of handguns. Later, the concern grew more explicit: background checks on buyers at gun shops and a ban on purchases of assault weapons would be in order. By 2008 and again in the past couple of years, extending these restrictions to other kinds of outlets (gun shows and private transactions) became a high-profile goal for many Democrats. Almost every step of the way, most Republicans were disinclined to go along. Even in the wake of the attempted assassination of Ronald Reagan, by a handgun-wielding psychotic, Republican resistance to background-check legislation persisted. (When the roll was called on the so-called Brady Law, GOP members in the House voted against the bill by more than two to one.)

It is sometimes thought that the GOP’s social conservatism grew especially wide-ranging only in very recent years. Not exactly. Glance, for example, at the Republican platform of 1988. It went beyond the usual themes—like invocations of gun rights and constitutional protection of the unborn—and was replete with renewed encouragement of school prayer, the recitation of the Pledge of Allegiance in the public schools of *all* states, efforts to strengthen family values including the “sanctity of marriage,” a categorical imperative to control the nation’s borders, and warnings against officials who “coddle” criminals. Just four years later, some of these particulars would be spelled out more specifically—for example, by voicing unequivocal opposition to “any” state law which legally recognized same-sex marriage.

The latter was a clear example of a relatively new issue on which the Republican Party would dig in. Congressional Republicans introduced a “Defense of Marriage Act” (defining marriage, for purposes of federal law, as the union of one man and one woman) and got it enacted by wide margins in 1996. No Senate Republican opposed the measure, and only one House Republican did. That decisive victory, evidently, was not enough. Ratcheting up a notch, the 2004 party platform recommended further revision of the Constitution, this time an amendment to ensure that traditional marriage would be fully protected as the law of the land.

Yet, on certain other social questions—most notably immigration policy—the GOP’s trajectory was less linear in the past dozen years. Here, reflecting the more moderate

view of George W. Bush, the tone was different for a while—careful to cite the need for “humane” reform that would offer an eventual path to citizenship for undocumented immigrants. But afterward the base of the party seemed to double down again against any policy that smacked of amnesty. That at least was the stern message of the party’s 2012 manifesto.

Some fissures developed in the Republican cultural agenda following the party’s disappointing performance in the 2012 election.

No single factor accounts for the social conservatism of the modern Republican Party—and the cultural liberalism among Democrats—but not the least of the underlying determinants has been the migration of observant religious voters to the right, and of more secular voters to the left. (Strikingly, about 70 percent of those who said they had no religious affiliation voted Democratic in the 2012 election.) Of course, it is not easy to disentangle cause and effect. *Roe v. Wade*, decided by a liberal judicial majority, did much to drive religious voters into the arms of the GOP. (Were it not for *Roe*, one wonders how the party—whose origins lay in halting slavery, the ultra-liberal social cause of the 19th century—might have evolved in recent decades.)²⁸ But signs of partisan sorting partly predated *Roe* (though some of it was undoubtedly abetted by other seminal events, such as the Supreme Court’s decision to strike down official school prayer in the 1962 case of *Engel v. Vitale*).

Where, all told, do things stand at present? Some fissures developed in the Republican cultural agenda following the party’s disappointing performance in the 2012 election. The most conspicuous inflection came on immigration. Suddenly gone was more talk of encouraging “self-deportations” (the ill-chosen phrase of candidate Mitt Romney during the campaign). Prominent GOP politicians, even on the far right, now voiced greater openness to pragmatic accommodation for foreigners already residing in the country without permission, offering an avenue either to naturalization or legal residency.

True, attitudes on other subjects remained more hidebound. Most Republicans gave no ground, for instance, on whether to enhance firearm restrictions. And the party’s

28. Indicative was the change in political roles of influential evangelical ministers. “Jerry Falwell,” writes E.J. Dionne, Jr., “had once condemned the role of preachers in politics (‘Preachers are not called upon to be politicians but to be soul winners,’ he declared in 1965).” But Falwell wrote in his autobiography that “he began changing his mind on the question of evangelical involvement in politics on January 23, 1973, the day the Supreme Court issued the *Roe v. Wade* decision.” E.J. Dionne, Jr., “Polarized by God? American Politics and the Religious Divide,” in Pietro S. Nivola and David W. Brady, eds., *Red and Blue Nation, Vol. 1: Characteristics and Causes of America’s Polarized Politics* (Brookings 2006), p. 176.

official stand on same-sex marriage had yet to change. That said, there are hints that a tentative course correction may be underway. Conscious of a need to reach out to young voters, Republican strategists duly observed, for example, that lifestyle choices (including, implicitly, those of gays) are “the civil rights issues of our time” for many in this segment of the electorate.²⁹ Significantly, two likely contenders for the next Republican presidential nomination, Senators Marco Rubio of Florida and Rand Paul of Kentucky, have already abandoned their party’s earlier idea of a constitutional ban on gay marriage, and now believe the question should just be left to the states to decide.

All of which brings us back to an elementary baseline: albeit with lags and friction, partisan positions respond to electoral pressures. Sooner or later, setbacks at the polls compel a party to rethink some of its reflexive notions, not just its tactics. In a telling postmortem after last year’s election, the Republican National Committee opened with the following recitation of blunt facts:

Republicans have lost the popular vote in five of the last six presidential elections. States in which our presidential candidates used to win, such as New Mexico, Colorado, Nevada, Iowa, Ohio, New Hampshire, Virginia, and Florida, are increasingly voting Democratic. We are losing in too many places.

It has reached the point where in the past six presidential elections, four have gone to the Democratic nominee, at an average yield of 327 electoral votes to 211 for the Republican.³⁰

The RNC report then goes on to note how demographics have altered the political topography. Exhibit A: Hispanics, who made up 7 percent of the electorate in 2000 but 10 percent in 2012, and are projected to near a third of the population by mid-century. Almost perforce, the GOP’s post-2012 partial reversal on the immigration question logically ensued from this reality-check.

Electoral signals, needless to say, are tied to trends in popular sentiment. In the 1980s and 1990s, traditional Republican messaging on “values issues”—especially an emphasis on strengthening families, encouraging personal responsibility and a work ethic, and securing law and order—struck an especially responsive chord in American society. So responsive, indeed, that many Democrats, too, not only came to pay similar lip service to some of these ideas but embraced several as actual policy (cases in point: the Clinton

29. Republican National Committee, *Growth and Opportunity Project*, p. 22.

30. *Ibid.*, p. 4.

era's welfare reform, tough anti-crime legislation, and bipartisan super-majorities that backed the Defense of Marriage Act).

But that was then, and this is now. With important exceptions (abortion, for instance, and affirmative action, where the battle lines have changed less), public attitudes on various social issues today have turned more liberal. A huge survey, co-sponsored by the Public Religion Research Institute and Brookings Institution in early 2013, found that 63 percent of Americans say the U.S. immigration system should allow aliens currently living in the country illegally to become citizens, provided they meet certain requirements.³¹ Little wonder that the functional equivalent of "amnesty" was losing its pejorative connotation; even among registered Republicans, a majority now also favor an earned pathway to citizenship.

The power of public opinion, to be sure, has limits. Popular support for at least some forms of additional gun regulation rose after 20 schoolchildren were massacred in Newtown, Connecticut on December 14, 2012 (the latest in a series of horrific incidents in recent years). With 83 percent of Americans now reportedly favoring expansion of background checks to include private sales and gun-show purchases, according to a Pew poll taken in mid-February 2013, a partial thaw of the congressional opposition was to be expected. But perhaps because the support was not as intense as it was seemingly elevated, the Senate turned back efforts not only to reinstate a ban on assault weapons and to limit the size of ammunition magazines but even to expand basic background checks. The great majority of Republican senators, along with four Democratic ones, stood fast.

A more transformational evolution appears underway with respect to same-sex marriage. Nine states have legalized gay marriage—including three that did so by popular referendum. This activity at the state level, however selective, may be spurring as well as reflecting a shift in the body politic. In March 2013, a new *Washington Post/ABC News* poll found that fully 58 percent of Americans supported legalizing same-sex marriage—a remarkable turnaround. (Only two years earlier, opponents had outnumbered supporters.) Granted, 57 percent of Republicans were not yet prepared to go that far. On the other hand, much depends on the age of the respondents; among people who tend to vote Republican, those under 50 appeared more comfortable with legalization—a likely harbinger of intensifying debate within the party. The general implication seems plain: a GOP hard-line on gay marriage is unlikely to withstand the test of time.

31. Robert P. Jones and others, *Citizenship, Values & Cultural Concerns: What Americans Want from Immigration Reform* (Public Religion Research Institute and Brookings, 2013), p. 1.

Notice the role played by federalism. Especially in the realm of social issues, what happens at the state level can be significant because these are often the issues that fall quintessentially within the traditional jurisdiction of the states, hence that's where much of the action inevitably centers. As with occasional judicial decisions (the best example being the epic school desegregation case, *Brown v. Board of Education* in 1954), a diffusion of initiatives by the states can play a legitimating role for eventual policy innovation nationwide. The controversy over marital law may be no exception. Although the sub-set of states experimenting with "marriage equality" is still small and rather unrepresentative, neither is it negligible—especially since at least a couple of the places that have accepted same-sex claims, Iowa and New Hampshire, are swing states in presidential elections. The fact has not been lost on the national parties as they ponder their next steps.

From Deficit Hawks to Supply-Siders (and Back?)

There was a time when in Republican quarters the essence of fiscal responsibility meant a concerted effort to hold inflation in check and to control the national debt through a combination of conservative monetary policy and balanced budgets. And securing the latter implied not only limiting the growth of government spending but *also* mostly resisting the siren song of federal tax cuts.

Dwight D. Eisenhower adhered to these principles even at the price of comparatively modest economic growth during his tenure.³² Although the Eisenhower administration technically balanced its budgets in only three of its eight years, the deficits in the interludes remained modest, and the record compared favorably with virtually every subsequent presidency's. Ike succeeded in paring down the federal workforce by ten percent, and in his last budget sharply lowered federal expenditures as a share of GDP, thereby reducing the nation's debt-to-GDP ratio.³³ Remarkably, he refused all along to reduce the era's marginal tax rates, the highest of which was stratospheric. Taxes were not cut even during the 1958 recession. Eisenhower, to be sure, was not averse to lowering tax burdens in principle, but he insisted that any reduction would only be "safe and sound" *after* budget deficits and inflationary pressures were durably subdued.³⁴ In Eisenhower's day, it was liberal Democrats who became the emphatic champions of tax

32. The economy grew at an average of 4.82 percent between 1948 and 1952, but dropped to 3 percent from 1953 to 1960.

33. See John W. Sloan, *Eisenhower and the Management of Prosperity* (Lawrence, Kansas: University Press of Kansas, 1991), pp. 80-81.

34. "The President's News Conference of February 17, 1953," in *Public Papers of the Presidents of the United States: Dwight D. Eisenhower, 1953* (Washington, D.C.: Government Printing Office, 1960), p. 48.

cuts, as part and parcel of their aggressive, growth-oriented “New Economics.”³⁵

Its virtues notwithstanding, Eisenhower’s approach to fiscal and monetary policy proved to be a political liability at the end of his second term. Richard M. Nixon experienced the problem first-hand. In 1958, as the economy sagged, he had been an advocate of pump-priming, favoring lower interest rates, less taxation, and increased military spending.³⁶ But Ike had demurred—and Nixon narrowly lost the 1960 election to John F. Kennedy in part as a result.

That lesson hit home. So did the way tax relief that had been set in train during the Kennedy administration appeared to pay dividends (political as well as economic) in the mid-1960s. Accordingly, once in office, Nixon broke away from old Republican orthodoxies.³⁷ And not too many years later, so did Ronald Reagan (although hardly following Nixon’s particular brand of heterodox economic policies).

Reagan opened a truly novel chapter by slashing marginal tax rates, which had topped out at 70 percent in 1980. Unlike virtually all of his official advisers, Reagan had believed that, by stimulating growth, his big tax cut in 1981 would swiftly swell revenues.³⁸ When that payoff did not unfold as readily as hoped, however, he and later his successor George H. W. Bush acted pragmatically; they accepted various “revenue enhancements” to try to stanch at least some of the red ink. (Sometimes forgotten, for instance, is that only one year after Congress passed Reagan’s storied 1981 tax reduction, he signed into law an appreciable increase, the so-called Tax Equity and Fiscal Reform Act of 1982.)

But exuberant, Republican-led tax-cutting—now accompanied by not even a pretense of spending restraint—resumed in 2001 and 2003. The upshot would be increasingly dire fiscal imbalances as far as the eye could see. Through most of George W. Bush’s presidency, alarm bells did not go off. Vice president Richard Cheney went so far as to assert “Reagan proved deficits don’t matter.”³⁹ Eisenhower-style fiscal austerity, in short,

35. For a good account of the era’s fiscal debates, see Geoffrey Kabaservice “Leading as a True Conservative: Eisenhower and the Politics of Fiscal Responsibility,” paper presented at a conference on Eisenhower Reconsidered, Hunter College, New York, March 8, 2013.

36. Richard M. Nixon, *Six Crises* (Garden City, NY: Doubleday, 1962), pp. 309-310.

37. As is well known, the Nixon administration proceeded to intervene in the economy in a fashion often more reminiscent of Democratic policies, including earlier ones that had since been discredited (such as wage and price controls, which he imposed in 1971).

38. Steven F. Hayward, *The Age of Reagan: The Conservative Counterrevolution, 1980-1989* (New York: Crown-Forum, 2009), p. 70.

39. Ron Suskind, *The Price of Loyalty: George W. Bush, the White House, and the Education of Paul O’Neil* (New York: Simon & Schuster, 2004), p. 291.

had been relegated to the proverbial dustbin of history.

Then came the Great Recession, declining revenues, and a surge in counter-cyclical government outlays that contributed to record-breaking deficits in Barack Obama's first term. What had appeared to become, for a time, the new normal for both political parties—seeming complacency about vast budgetary shortfalls and about a growing overhang of national debt—fell under sudden and forceful challenge from a fired-up Republican base, particularly the segment that came to be called the Tea Party movement. The 2010 mid-term election swept into the House of Representatives a large new group of passionate GOP debt- and deficit-hawks. Almost overnight, it seemed, contestation over big-government profligacy had returned to center stage.

But with a basic difference: Unlike Eisenhower—or, for that matter, Gerald Ford, the elder Bush, and even Reagan—the new fiscal conservatives countenanced *no* tax rises in their quest to rein in deficits. Ever mindful of budgetary exigencies, Ike had steadfastly refused to lower marginal rates, even temporarily—and even though the top rate towered to a staggering 91 percent in his day. Surely, some sort of middle ground ought to have been reached between tolerating a maximal tax rate so confiscatory and, in more recent times, resisting *any* possible rate increase above 35 percent (the highest between 2003 and 2012), yet the latter approach had become the GOP's *idée fixe*. That intransigence was mostly (though by no means entirely) responsible for an extraordinary showdown between the Republican-controlled House of Representatives and the Obama White House in the summer of 2011.⁴⁰ The Republicans withheld permission to raise the government's debt limit, thereby nearly precipitating a treasury default, to wring new budgetary cuts from the administration. In a curious way (about which more in a moment), they ultimately succeeded.

Was the standoff in 2011 the high-water mark of the Republican tax revolt? In one sense, it plainly was. Several factors conspired to weaken the GOP's hand afterward—chief among them being President Obama's convincing re-election victory in the fall of 2012, coupled with the sobering fact that the Bush-era tax cuts were scheduled to expire at year's end. This time the White House entered into eleventh-hour negotiations with an obvious

40. It is not correct to impute the great debt-limit fiasco (in which the U.S. credit rating was downgraded), and collapse of a supposed fiscal "grand bargain," during the summer of 2011 entirely to recalcitrance in the House Republican caucus. Speaker Boehner had, in fact, offered to find \$800 billion in revenue as part of a compromise, on which the White House first seemed to agree, and then retreated. Whether Boehner would have been able to deliver enough votes from his caucus if the deal had held is a question for which, alas, we will never have an answer. For careful accounts of this whole unsettling episode, see Matt Bai, "Who Killed the Debt Deal?" *New York Times Magazine*, April 1, 2012, especially page 36, and Bob Woodward, *The Price of Politics* (New York: Simon & Schuster, 2012), chap. 28.

tactical edge. Faced with the prospect of a sweeping, automatic tax hike beginning in 2013, 85 House Republicans finally broke ranks and joined 172 Democrats voting for a lesser evil—a version of Obama’s proposed rate-increase limited to high-income households. While this \$600-billion revenue infusion represented less than half of what the administration has continued to demand, it marked nonetheless the first time any Republican lawmakers had voted to boost taxes since 1990.

Whether the breakthrough was a one-off, however, or alternatively perhaps the first of a series of concessions on the revenue side of future budget battles, is at present impossible to predict with certainty. Increasingly, it would seem that the Republicans, even in the hard-hitting House, will settle on a somewhat different equipoise. For reasons I shall return to shortly, the party appears unlikely to acquiesce to any additional taxes, but is also likely to relax its ambitious pursuit of deeper fiscal retrenchment—particularly any that would entail fundamental reform of nondiscretionary health and retirement benefits. Simply put, the party has probably journeyed as far as it can for the immediate future on both the revenue-boosting front and the quest for major spending-restraint. That is only a guess, however. In the years ahead, the partisan politics of fiscal policy could yet take some new unexpected directions.

The interesting question, for purposes of this essay, is how to account for the various twists and turns of the GOP’s doctrines over time. Certainly, a helpful starting point, as has already been noted, is this: the political burden of the form of strict fiscal rectitude associated with the Eisenhower years proved unsustainable. Holding the line against tax cuts (even in bad times, and as rates arguably stood at growth-impairing levels), all in the cause of fiscal discipline, the way Ike basically did, clearly was not a winning formula. It could not last. Not surprisingly, by the time Ronald Reagan took charge, a different, more attractive construct would be offered: supply-side tax policy, which in theory would spur growth, enhance revenue, and thereby shrink the deficit rather painlessly.

It is important to acknowledge that, at its inception, the supply-side solution was not patently implausible. Remember that peak marginal rates of income taxation were still perversely steep when Reagan came to office, and easing the tax burden (albeit if combined with sufficient monetary restraint) offered an imaginable answer to the “stagflation” that had plagued the economy in the 1970s. We do not know the exact intellectual origins of supply-side economics. The theory had almost no early following in mainstream academic departments of economics, or even in conservative think

tanks.⁴¹ By some accounts, the notion had been quite literally sketched on a napkin in the mid-1970s. Reportedly seated at the dinner table were Jude Wanniski, who at the time was an associate editor of the *Wall Street Journal*, White House chief of staff Dick Cheney, defense secretary Donald Rumsfeld, and a young economist named Arthur Laffer, then a little-known professor at the University of Southern California. Others give primary credit to Margaret Thatcher and, on this side of the Atlantic, policy entrepreneurs in Congress, most notably the outspoken New York congressman Jack Kemp and his aides. Whatever the story—and despite its limited academic pedigree—Reaganomics, as it came to be called, was not merely a clever political ploy; it demonstrated the power that a new idea can sometimes wield. Particularly at the outset, its logic was intriguing.

More puzzling, perhaps, is how faith in the economic healing power of sequential reductions in tax rates had grown to be nigh-axiomatic in the Republican Party a decade after Reagan and Bush '41 had left Washington—that is, after taxes had *risen* at times under both of those Republican presidents, and subsequently under Bill Clinton, who then presided over a robust economic expansion in his second term. Although initially supply-side tax-cutting had not been the brainchild of economists laboring in academia or policy institutes, gradually the idea (or something like it) became widely accepted in conservative research centers, as well as a recurring theme in Republican electoral campaigns, and by the late 1990s the GOP's intelligentsia cranked out a steady flow of issue briefs advocating new reductions. At the American Enterprise Institute, for instance, Lawrence Lindsey led the charge. An adamant proponent of lower taxes, Lindsey who had served in the first Bush administration and then as a Federal Reserve governor, took over as George W. Bush's chief economic adviser in 2001.

This zeal, now so prevalent in Republican thought, helped drive the ensuing pair of Bush tax cuts, the first of which commenced that year. In fairness, though, the administration's initiative was informed by a couple of additional immediate concerns. One was a weakening economy, and (ironically) an essentially Keynesian assessment that a counter-cyclical measure was called for. The other, especially in the case of the first round, was the Congressional Budget Office's projections of substantial budget surpluses. In the mix of motives, in other words, was not just a belief that lower taxes hold the key to growth but that the latest reductions were necessary to prevent excess revenues from piling up and, sooner or later, from tempting government to resume over-spending.

41. See Pietro S. Nivola, "Thoughts That Count? The GOP's Woes and the Work of Conservative Think Tanks," in Joel D. Aberbach and Gillian Peele, eds., *Crisis of Conservatism? The Republican Party, the Conservative Movement, and American Politics After Bush* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2011), pp. 223-224.

That the Bush administration itself (again ironically) engineered a significant enlargement of government became a source of considerable disgruntlement in the Republican base, for it now confronted an inconvenient fact: namely, government grows regardless of whether taxes go up or down. Sober fiscal conservatives could no longer point single-mindedly to a vicious cycle of “tax and spend” as the dominant dynamic. Yet, from their perspective, if there was anything at all that could be done to slow the public sector’s unrelenting expansion (a big “if”), at least the first order of business was to pledge not to feed the beast new revenue. And the second was to try to shrink deficits directly—by focusing on the crux of the problem, seemingly inexorable spending, rather than by giving the budget just a minimal trim while, once again, hiking taxes.

It was not hard to understand the general basis of this outlook, from the vantage-point of partisans committed to circumscribing the growth of government. At least as of 2010, the year of the Tea Party’s remarkable electoral uprising, total government spending (federal, state and local) had topped 42 percent of GDP, compared to about 27 percent in 1960.⁴² Federal spending as a percentage of GDP by the end of 2010 had climbed to a postwar peak of more than 25 percent. In 1977, it had stood at 21 percent. Unchecked, a trajectory of this sort would either lead to an eventual train wreck of sovereign debt, or would imply ever-heavier taxation for sustenance.

But persevering with a commitment to correct this situation once and for all would eventually run afoul of the ultimate arbiter of public policy in American democracy: the public’s preferences. As even a neophyte to legislating on the question could not help but see, an upward trend in government spending over the long term is mostly a result of entitlement programs, not just waste in discretionary portions of the federal budget. There is no way around it; downsizing government in the long run would mean trimming entitlements. And there, for better or worse, most Americans parted company with the GOP’s fiscal firebrands.

The stark reality for a political party wishing to remain in contention is that 65 percent of the public prefers traditional Medicare over a change that would give people a specific amount of money to spend on either private or government health insurance.⁴³ Upwards

42. For an excellent primer on the burgeoning scope of government in the United States, see: John J. Dilulio, Jr., “Facing Up to Big Government,” *National Affairs*. No. 11 (Spring 2012), especially pp. 25-26.

43. See, for instance, NORC, *Americans’ Views on Entitlement Reform and Health Care* (NORC at the University of Chicago, 2013), p. 2. The Pew Research Center’s polls in October of 2012 and in mid-2011 cover some of the same ground, and are pretty much consistent. See Pietro S. Nivola, “To Fathom the Fiscal Fix, Look in the Mirror,” *Brookings Website*, January 7, 2013.

of 57 percent oppose raising the amount Medicare recipients contribute to their health care. Around 60 percent want to keep Social Security in its current form, as opposed to, say, allowing workers to invest its taxes themselves. At least 56 percent disapprove of gradually raising the Social Security retirement age.

Against this backdrop, it is not surprising that now most of the congressional GOP has found it almost impossible to maintain a full measure of courage in its own convictions. Thus, although House Republicans may have flirted with meaningful entitlement reforms (such as increases in eligibility age, further means-testing, altering cost-of-living adjustments, or a system of premium support as repeatedly proposed by House Budget Committee chairman Paul Ryan of Wisconsin), they then proceeded in essence to wait for Obama and the Democrats to buy in first, hoping in vain for bullet-proof political cover. When little such buy-in occurred, the party essentially pocketed what other austerity measures it chanced to obtain, and then—it would seem—decided to pause and change the subject, at least temporarily.

What enabled this tactical retreat was an unexpected event that sucked most of the air of urgency out of the budgetary trial balloons the Republican-controlled House had floated. Specifically, the confrontation that took place in the summer of 2011 had yielded a last-minute compromise called the Budget Control Act, which authorized more than \$900 billion in automatic budget reductions over ten years beginning in 2013. The Obama administration had had a big hand in devising this scheme, calculating that because it would trigger indiscriminate, across-the-board cuts (including deep ones at the Pentagon), Congress, when the time came, would not have the stomach to let this “sequestration” actually happen. Instead, however, the unexpected *did* happen: upon capitulating over the significant tax rise at the end of 2012, the House Republicans simply allowed the sequester to go forward. In sum, although they had been bested in the tax contest, they managed to come away with a pound of flesh from the spending side of the ledger.

This combination of ingredients—a modicum of new revenue, a modicum of additional belt-tightening—scarcely fixes the nation’s finances for the long haul. Barring a recession-proof future and a continuing slowdown in the growth-rate of health care costs (both of which are heroic assumptions), long-range deficits and debt will almost certainly worsen as a function of basic demographics. Still, as the CBO duly reported, the actions to which Congress defaulted at the end of 2012 are predicted to yield appreciable deficit-reduction over the projected ten-year span. Good enough for government work, as the saying goes. And good enough, evidently, not only for most Democratic politicians but *also* for most Republicans eyeing the next electoral cycle or two.

Six General Conclusions

The various stories of party change recounted in these pages offer some lessons for contemporary critics who await, often with considerable frustration, one party or the other to turn a new leaf.

The first is that cases of an abrupt about-face are uncommon in U.S. politics. When they have occurred, typically the cause was a sudden, transformative blow to the status quo. Pearl Harbor offers the clearest illustration; it shattered American isolationism, not least for most Republican adherents. Now and then, something less devastating than, say, a surprise attack by Japanese warplanes can provide potent agency. The Supreme Court's far-reaching abortion decision in 1973 was a bombshell of sorts to many social conservatives; it shook them and energized a new militancy on moral and cultural questions. On rare occasions, a political party has appeared to alter its orientation at the wave of a wand—seemingly as when James Madison and his old “Republicans” changed course in 1815. But even in that apparently exceptional instance, a wrenching crisis—the War of 1812—had recently imparted admonishments that political leaders took to heart.

Because events so jarring are not routine, the evolution of partisan positions ordinarily is a more sluggish process. The Democratic Party took ages to begin blazing the trail of civil rights in part because even the Great Depression and the New Deal—two big interruptions of business as usual—had not been able overnight to dislodge most black voters from their traditional fealty to the Republican Party. Unlike Madison's re-delineation of party philosophy at the end of his presidency (a development that predated the formation of mass parties) partisan change in modern times is seldom simply the product of top-down decisions; core constituencies have to swing around—and that usually happens slowly.

So a second lesson to keep in mind is that, like it or not, patience is required. Whatever a party's posture at any given point in time, eventually it too will pass.

For many onlookers, of course, “eventually” is cold comfort. It is hard to argue with the fact that the Democratic Party took far too long to fully embrace racial equality as a national priority. Today, on a range of issues, more than a few commentators fear that the GOP will remain boxed in by an unyielding ideology. But sometimes the critics seem overly anxious, and perhaps tend to overlook signs of change even when, on closer inspection, the signs may be surfacing. It is true that, as noted above, moving the base of mass parties can be an arduous, indeed sometimes glacial, operation. That is not *invariably* the case, however. Currently, for example, any objective observer cannot help

but be struck by the debate underway in much of the GOP regarding immigration policy. A partial explanation for it is that, in reality, the base of the party is not as monolithic and frozen as is often assumed. Influential factions—leading evangelicals, for instance—may be turning into a force for reform, rather than obstruction.⁴⁴ If that proves true, it would not be the first time. Liberal skeptics would do well to recall that it was often evangelical Christians that had backed reform movements in the past; these religious activists, for instance, pressed abolitionism within the Republican Party in the 19th century.

This, then, is a third lesson: Do not underestimate the mutability, or adaptability, of the parties. They may seem generally ponderous and cumbrous, but peer at them more carefully and at times you may detect surprising political kinetics on at least some particular issues of significance. These tremors should not be shrugged off as minor anomalies amid a larger pattern of partisan stasis. The matter of immigration, as an example, is no mere footnote to the Republican agenda; it is a core concern—and of enormous importance to the country's future.

Electoral considerations were almost always a factor in the narratives I have related. In a few instances, the considerations seemed to register quickly. World events in 1940, and growing odds that an isolationist at the top of the ticket would not fare well in the presidential election that year, suddenly persuaded Republicans to nominate the internationalist Wendell Willkie as their candidate. Much more recently, two consecutive losses of presidential elections, wherein the Democratic candidate garnered lopsided majorities of the Latino vote, were evidently enough to convince leading Republican lawmakers to begin tempering a hard-edged style on immigration.

But more typically, electoral exigencies build over time, often reflecting shifts in sectional politics. The GOP shed its protectionist policies little by little, as the Republicans (mostly for other reasons) gradually displaced the Democratic Party in locations that were traditionally receptive to freer trade. Conversely, many Democrats edged the other way over time, as the party's foothold solidified in states with stronger unions and other influential interest groups who had grown leery of open trade. Long-term erosion of the Democratic Party's southern electoral base—complemented by an opportunity to lock in the votes of millions of blacks who had migrated to parts of the country where they could make a difference at the polls—eventually induced the party to adopt the mantle of civil rights.

The take-away here is straightforward: Whatever else may animate our two political

44. See, Molly Worthen, "Love Thy Stranger As Thyself," *New York Times*. Sunday Review, May 12, 2013, pp. 1, 12.

parties, at the end of the day both are in the business of winning elections. A party that loses sight of that bottom line is in trouble—and hence sooner or later is likely to come to terms with it. There have been plenty of interludes, to be sure, when one party or the other has fallen out of step with the relevant electoral trends and passed up chances to score gains. Still, a reason for the remarkable longevity of America’s major parties since the mid-19th century has been the ability of each to self-correct, if not immediately, in due course.

Whatever else may animate our two political parties, at the end of the day both are in the business of winning elections.

Thus, lesson four is elementary (even though cynics often seem to doubt it): elections matter.

Which brings us to an even more basic point: The results of elections tend to make impressions on the parties because, however imperfectly, the verdicts ultimately express the people’s choices. Indeed, when the public’s inclination on salient issues is reasonably clear and intense, partisans ignore it at their peril. American politicians tend to be keenly aware of this, because more than in other great democracies, elections are always just around the corner.

Intensified signals from the public are commonly at the root of partisan recalibration. That was very much the case, for instance, in the conversion from isolationism to internationalism in the 20th century. Today, newfound moderation on certain social issues (such as immigration and same-sex marriage) can be traced to impressive changes in popular attitudes. What causes such changes is a fascinating question. A shattering historical event (like Pearl Harbor), institutional leadership (emanating, for instance, from federalism’s laboratories of democracy), generational turnover (as in the influence of younger voters regarding gays and lesbians)—these sources and more have played a part.

The lesson? Never underestimate the force of public opinion in American party politics. In the end, it usually rules. All but the most obstinate partisan ideologues understand this fundamental fact of political life.

Finally, there is the role of ideas. Some of the stories of partisan repositioning, as we have seen, had much to do with the introduction of new policy conceptions that reshaped party agendas, or even the broad terms of national debate on central issues. These paradigm

shifts are not necessarily mere exercises in political opportunism—though they often can be that in part. Rather, the powerful new ideas tend to be ones that represent plausible policy innovations (at least at their inception) and that also happen to have political appeal.

The ascent of supply-side economics in the GOP was illustrative. It precipitated a series of mutations in Republican thinking about fiscal management—a revolution that is still playing out. Indeed, the debate about rates of taxation that was joined in 1980, and that has gone on ever since, has moved well beyond Republican ranks; the Democrats as well have moved to effectively rule out higher rates, at least for the vast majority of taxpayers (98 percent of them, to be precise). Clearly the Republicans had stumbled onto an invention that was more than a fleeting fancy. Aspects are anchored in popular consensus. How long this will last is a question for another day.

William Galston, Isabel Sawhill, Darrell West, and Phil Wallach read earlier drafts of this paper.

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