

If this is what it is to be a Democrat, why bother?



By [Harry Lambert](#), Managing Director (2012/13)

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Photo credit: Matt Artega

Last week Kent Conrad, the Senate Budget Committee Chairman, seemingly introduced a budget. But the bill he marked up will not be brought to the floor of the Senate – doing so would be pointless in the partisan environment he now operates in.

With no one party controlling all the institutions of government, one might expect legislative gridlock. But divided government has not always led to such inaction. For all but two of the 28 years Republican Presidents Eisenhower, Nixon, Ford, Reagan and Bush Sr. were President, Democrats were in charge of at least the House. And yet those Presidents managed to govern.

As David Mayhew has shown, divided government has not led to the introduction of fewer innovative policies. And while the innovativeness of policies is contestable, what is undeniable is that a spirit of bipartisanship that once existed no longer does.

Olympia Snowe's recent decision to not seek re-election attests to this. A long-serving moderate Republican Senator, she highlighted Reagan's 1986 tax reforms, which passed through a Democratic House, as an example of this new reality. As Snowe said, "there's no longer a reward for consensus building".

Why is this intractability so acute now? It has a great deal to do with the rise of the Tea Party. This rise of the Republican Party's less moderate and more evangelical wing has enforced an ideological unanimity and deterred Republican policy-makers from compromising. As this publication noted in August, moderates feel far less able to make a deal with Democrats when the threat of a primary challenge from the Right hangs over them.

Those that do, face the prospect of being ousted, as three-term incumbent Senator and moderate Bob Bennett was in 2010. The Republican Senator Orrin Hatch only survived a recent Tea Party challenge

because he moved to the right over the past two years.

The power of this wing of the Party has helped leadership whip their members into an uncompromising block. One might expect this would marginalise the GOP, but quite the opposite has happened: Republicans have managed to drag politics to the right. The only way for Democrats to pass anything now is to capitulate to the absolutist position Republican leadership sets down.

The GOP's refusal to countenance tax rises during the August debt ceiling crisis led to a deal made up solely of spending cuts. The recently passed Jumpstart Our Business Startups (JOBS) Act forced Democrats to gut investor safeguards in a bid to get any legislation on jobs – a deal which even *Bloomberg* thought inadvisable. As Paul Krugman has said, bipartisanship in Washington now really means a compromise between the centre-right and the hard-right.

Part of the problem for centre-left Democrats is that there is no equivalent ideological force discouraging moderates in the Party from compromising. But, even if there was, that would not come without its disadvantages. When Democrats took back the House in 2006 they did so largely because they chose centrist candidates to compete in Republican districts. This 'big tent' approach gave them majorities in both Houses two years later, but meant they had a large number of Democrats In Name Only when they attempted to enact the leadership's agenda following Obama's election.

Many of these DINO's, or Blue Dogs, were voted out in 2010, but forcing those who remain to follow the party line Democrats would imperil their colleagues' re-election chances. The consequence of the big tent approach is that you are the party who compromises. Democrats in traditionally Republican states have to keep winning over their local electorate.

But if the price of accommodating moderates is capitulation, for what purpose are you accommodating them? If doing so does not help Democrats achieve what they ran for office to do, perhaps they should try adopting the uncompromising absolutism that has served Republicans so well.



4 comments

Dividist

2 May '12 at 8:18 pm

"... it is undeniable is that a spirit of bipartisanship existed then and no longer does."

Actually it is perfectly deniable. In this recent incarnation of divided government, we have seen bills passed on a bipartisan basis and bills defeated on a bipartisan basis. I was glad to see you correctly cite Mayhew's finding that legislative productivity does not correlate with periods of united vs. divided government. However, you apparently missed Mayhew's contention that legislative action occurs when there is pervasive public demand for change. The jury is still out on this congress. There is still reason to believe that this Congress will address the unsustainable debt and spending in Washington DC by the end of the year. It probably won't happen until the lame duck session, but if and when it is addressed, it will be addressed in a bipartisan manner, and you probably will not be happy with it. Such is the nature of bipartisan compromise.

Anyway, enjoyed the read and thought I'd leave this comment to let you know your post was included in my latest edition of the [Carnival of Divided Government](#) – a periodic compilation of articles, posts, and great thoughts (or not) on the subject of divided government.

<http://www.dividist.com/2012/05/carnival-of-divided-government-lliii.html>

Report

Harry Lambert

2 May '12 at 8:38 pm

Dividist – thanks for the comment, and for putting me on there. I think the point I was trying to make is that, when you talk of bipartisanship there, you are saying that if Democrats and Republicans both support a bill it is bipartisan. And what I'm saying is that while this is correct (in terms of bipartisanship's technical definition), we need to highlight what this actually means now – capitulation by Democrats to the GOP position (e.g. Jobs act, deficit deal, as cited).

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Matt Sharp

2 May '12 at 11:30 pm

Interesting article, Harry.

If you compare the psychology of American liberals and conservatives, liberals score much more highly on a trait called 'openness to experience'. There is some evidence that one's political positions are influenced to some extent by one's genetics. Obviously the environment and education of one's upbringing still plays a really big role too, but it implies certain conservatives are biologically inclined to adopt 'uncompromising absolutism', whereas liberals are not, so are perhaps more inclined to 'capitulation' (and compromise?).

See, for example, Jonathan Haidt's TED talk on the subject:

http://www.ted.com/talks/jonathan_haidt_on_the_moral_mind.html

There's also a recent book by Chris Mooney called 'The Republican Brain'. I've not read it yet, but it's on the same subject.

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Harry Lambert

4 May '12 at 3:03 pm

Matt, thanks for the comment, and for the link to Haidt. I watched the video – interesting stuff. In the Righteous Mind I believe he has some stuff on how Congress became more adversarial when the Contract with America Republicans (the precursor to the Tea Party?) arrived in the mid-'90s.

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