
Asymmetric Politics

*Ideological Republicans and Group
Interest Democrats*



Matt Grossmann

*Director, Institute for Public Policy and Social Research
Associate Professor of Political Science
Michigan State University*

David A. Hopkins

*Assistant Professor of Political Science
Boston College*

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CONTENTS

Acknowledgments *ix*

1. Introduction: Two Different Kinds of Parties 1
2. How Democrats and Republicans Think About Politics 21
3. An Ideological Movement Versus a Social Group Coalition 70
4. The Not-So-Great Debate 129
5. Campaigning in Poetry and Prose 198
6. Policymaking in Red and Blue 250
7. Conclusion: American Politics Out of Balance 315

Notes 333

References 361

Index 377

CHAPTER 1



Introduction

Two Different Kinds of Parties

In April 2015, former First Lady and Secretary of State Hillary Rodham Clinton confirmed widespread expectations that she would seek the Democratic presidential nomination in 2016, announcing her candidacy by releasing a two-minute Internet video entitled “Getting Started.” The slickly produced film presented a succession of Americans speaking with anticipation about approaching milestones in their lives, such as graduating from college, buying a house, starting a business, having a child, and entering retirement. Clinton herself did not appear on camera until well over halfway through the video, noting that she, too, was embarking on a new challenge by running for president (albeit for the second time). While Clinton’s brief remarks did not offer any specific philosophical or substantive rationale for her campaign, her vow that “everyday Americans need a champion, and I want to be that champion” implied that she would advocate policies benefiting the kinds of people pictured in the video in ways that would help them pursue their various personal endeavors.¹

The conspicuous variety of racial, sexual, and generational identities among the “everyday Americans” included in the Clinton video attracted substantial notice in the political press. John Dickerson of *Slate* described the production as containing “superbly shot images of attractive, striving Americans” of “all ages and ethnicities,” concluding that “all the voters she hopes to stitch into her coalition [saw] a version of themselves.”² Susan Page of *USA Today* similarly noted the video’s “carefully diverse collection of Americans,” summarizing its intended message to voters as “It’s not about me; it’s about you.”³ Democratic supporters in the

CHAPTER 2



How Democrats and Republicans Think About Politics

The congressional midterm elections of 1994 resulted in a historic national landslide for the Republican Party. Benefiting from the mediocre job approval ratings of Democratic president Bill Clinton and a highly energized base of supporters, Republicans gained 8 seats in the Senate and 52 seats in the House of Representatives, winning majority control of both chambers and ending a 40-year span of uninterrupted Democratic rule of the House. No incumbent Republican member of Congress lost a reelection bid, while the plethora of Democratic electoral casualties included House Speaker Tom Foley of Washington, the first sitting Speaker since 1862 to be removed from office by his own constituents.

Victorious Republicans interpreted the results as a popular endorsement of their ideological agenda, promising a "Republican Revolution" once they took office the following January. "If this is not a mandate to move in a particular direction, I would like somebody to explain to me what a mandate would look like," crowed House Speaker-in-waiting Newt Gingrich of Georgia on the night of the election. According to Gingrich and his Republican colleagues, the American people had registered a decisive preference for their party's platform of small-government conservatism. "I believe that, starting today, the train is going to pull out of the station, and it is going to be a train that is bound for less government and more freedom," remarked Texas senator Phil Gramm the following morning.¹ Jon Christensen of Nebraska, one of many newly elected Republican "citizen legislators" who had never previously held political office, similarly argued, "The American people sent a clear message to us. . . . They

CHAPTER 3



An Ideological Movement Versus a Social Group Coalition

The Conservative Political Action Conference (CPAC), a four-day annual event near Washington, D.C., has evolved over its 40-year history into a popular site for the congregation of the American conservative movement—and therefore a central, though ostensibly unofficial, venue for Republican politicking. Each year, a large troupe of politicians attends CPAC in order to impress an attentive audience of ideological activists, interest group leaders, and news media personalities who represent the base of the Republican Party. Candidates routinely use appearances at CPAC to emphasize their commitment to conservatism both as a personal identity and as a manual for governing, portraying their past and future political career as unerringly guided by ideological principles.

In the midst of his successful campaign for the Republican presidential nomination in 2012, Mitt Romney took a detour from personally courting voters in states with impending primary elections in order to deliver a well-publicized address at CPAC. Romney attempted in his speech to rally activist support by describing his candidacy in strongly ideological terms. “As conservatives, we are united by a set of core commitments,” he argued, most notably the belief that “the principles embodied in the Constitution and the Declaration of Independence are uniquely powerful, foundational, and defining. . . . Conservatives all agree that departing from these founding principles is a departure from the greatness of America.” Romney maintained that “history will record the Obama presidency as the last gasp of liberalism’s great failure and a turning point for a new conservative era” and described the approaching presidential

CHAPTER 4



The Not-So-Great Debate

As Barack Obama became the likely Democratic nominee for president in early 2008, national reporters began scrutinizing his past associations—with significant help from conservative media figures. Republicans (as well as Hillary Clinton supporters) sought to publicize Obama's ties to William Ayers, a founding member of the Weathermen (later Weather Underground), a radical leftist organization that planted bombs in government buildings in the early 1970s. After he avoided legal prosecution for his actions, Ayers abandoned violence but not left-wing politics. He became an education professor in Chicago, where he and Obama served overlapping terms on the board of directors of a charitable organization. Ayers contributed financially to Obama's 1996 state Senate campaign and hosted an fundraising event for Obama at his home.

American conservatives and British newspapers initially raised questions about Obama's association with Ayers, but several media fact checkers investigated and found little connection between the two men. In February 2008, however, *Politico* confirmed Obama's 1995 campaign function at Ayers's residence, attracting more attention from Obama critics. On their Fox News Channel (FNC) program following this revelation, Sean Hannity and Alan Colmes debated its significance with *National Review* writer Jonah Goldberg. "Why," asked Hannity, "would a presidential candidate be friendly with a man who declared war against the United States . . . admits to being involved in the bombing of the Pentagon . . . and that nobody in the mainstream media in this country has asked him that question?"¹ The Obama–Ayers association was then mentioned on at least 60 subsequent episodes of the *Hannity and Colmes* program before the November general election, stimulating additional coverage from

CHAPTER 5



Campaigning in Poetry and Prose

MSNBC political reporter Benjy Sarlin covered the large field of Republican candidates seeking the nomination of their party for a full year before the Iowa caucuses marked the formal start of the 2016 presidential race, while his colleague Alex Seitz-Wald likewise followed the campaign activities of the Democratic contenders over the same period. In an experiment designed to give each reporter a fresh perspective on the campaign, MSNBC asked them to temporarily exchange journalistic beats in January 2016 and describe the differences that they noticed after switching to cover the other party. Sarlin spent a week reporting on the Democratic race in Iowa, while Seitz-Wald attended Republican campaign events in New Hampshire and Massachusetts before heading to Iowa to follow a cross-state bus tour organized by Texas senator Ted Cruz, who ultimately won the state's first-in-the-nation presidential caucus on February 1.

When asked what he had learned by observing the opposite party with fresh eyes, Sarlin responded:

I was caught off guard by how specific and personal Democratic voters' issues tended to be. One woman told me she had lost a job because she had to take care of a sick relative and wanted paid family leave. Another woman told me her insurance stopped covering a certain medication that had grown too expensive and she liked how [Hillary] Clinton and [Bernie] Sanders talked about lowering drug prices. . . . By contrast, Republican voters tend to be excited by more abstract issues: One of the most common answers I get from Cruz voters when I ask about their leading concern is "the Constitution." There are fewer "I have a specific problem in my own life, and I'd like the government to do x about it" responses.

Seitz-Wald agreed that "the two parties are operating in different parallel universes," adding that, in his own experience, Democrats also care

CHAPTER 6



Policymaking in Red and Blue

When John Boehner stepped up to a Capitol Hill podium to address the news media on September 25, 2015, he began his remarks with the same conservative rhetoric that he had employed throughout his turbulent five-year tenure as Speaker of the House of Representatives. “My mission every day,” declared Boehner, “is to fight for a smaller, less costly and more accountable government.” But this was no ordinary press briefing. With a characteristic display of open emotion, Boehner proceeded to announce that he was resigning the Speakership and his Ohio congressional seat to avoid “prolonged leadership turmoil [that] would do irreparable harm to the institution.”¹ Boehner added that he had considered leaving Congress the previous year but had temporarily postponed retirement because his heir apparent, former majority leader Eric Cantor of Virginia, was unexpectedly defeated in a 2014 primary election.

While it is common for congressional leaders to retire in the wake of unfavorable electoral results for their party—Dennis Hastert, the previous Republican Speaker, had left the House immediately after the GOP lost its majority in the 2006 midterms—Boehner’s record in this arena was marked by unmatched success. House Republicans gained 63 seats in 2010 (the biggest net partisan swing in a single election since 1948), firmly regaining control of the chamber after four years in the minority. Further victories in 2014 left the party with a 247–188 advantage over the opposition Democrats. Republicans had not won so many House seats since the election of 1928.

Explaining a Speaker’s sudden departure from the House at the apex of his majority’s electoral dominance—and why the Washington community responded to his announcement with something less than total

CHAPTER 7



Conclusion

American Politics Out of Balance

Human beings tend to regard symmetry as inherently pleasing. Psychological studies confirm, for example, that experimental subjects judge visually symmetrical faces to be more physically attractive than others.¹ This predisposition extends to the intellectual as well as the aesthetic realm. Scholars of politics seek to develop theories of party identification, ideology, media influence, party organizations, legislative politics, interest groups, policymaking, and other subjects that apply equally across party lines—especially in the United States, where only two parties compete for power. For journalists and other political commentators, treating the Democrats and Republicans as mirror-image equivalents not only allows for more parsimonious analysis but guards against potential accusations of subjectivity, as accounts claiming that any characteristic is unevenly distributed on both sides of the partisan divide might be interpreted as conveying a biased view of the political world.

Yet a complete understanding of American politics, past and present, requires acknowledgment of the important differences in composition, objectives, and character separating the Republican Party from its Democratic opposition. For several decades in the mid-20th century, many scholars recognized that the parties maintained distinct forms of organizational structure and governing style while exhibiting unequal levels of internal unity. Some of these specific disparities faded as national circumstances changed, but the relatively group-oriented nature of the Democrats and the ideological orientation of the Republicans