

Why the Right Went Wrong

Conservatism - From Goldwater to the Tea Party and Beyond

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What Happened to Conservatism?

For half a century conservative politicians have made promises to their supporters that - in a large, market driven economy, they could not keep. Americans like the idea of a small government, but also require services that are unsupportable with that small government. Additionally, most Americans - particularly the young - do not want to go back to any perceived simpler time, where all the advantages of technical change are no longer available. This is the conundrum of conservative promises that date back to the time of Barry Goldwater. It was at this time that the Republican Party began rejecting its more liberal members and demanding a more-and-more pure vision of their conservative ideology.

NOTE: The preponderance of rural states in the Senate and the gerrymandering of House district boundaries insure that far right Republicans will remain a force in the Legislative branch of government - really answerable only to their extreme constituencies. Because of this and the right's inbred communication structure, failure on the national stage is even more mystifying/frustrating and results in perceiving conspiracies and betrayal in what they see as their natural rights. This polarization is asymmetric, in that the Democratic Party has not undergone a similar move to the left. The result is the far right increasingly has less and less interest in making government work and demands increasingly more extreme solutions of its elected officials.

The contradictions between anti-government libertarians, old value traditionalists, and military hardliners has always been there, but was fused in the early 60's to combat American liberalism and communism {considered the same thing by many on the right}. Moving forward to the time of Richard Nixon, conservative politics expanded to include ardent segregationists, conspiracy-minded groups, and religious interests - creating a potentially toxic stew of varied interests, held together by a dislike of liberal politics.

Goldwater's manifesto:

- Don't streamline government, reduce its size
- Extend freedom, don't promote welfare
- Repeal laws, don't pass more of them
- Cancel old programs, don't create new ones

Things Goldwater put forth that the vast majority of Americans didn't want.

- The importance of liberty taking precedence over the value of life
- A flat tax
- End of grant-in-aid to states
- End of the farm program
- Steep and regular budget cuts
- Limited use of tactical nuclear weapons

During this time a conservative communication structure emerged, separate from the mainstream media, consisting of radio programs, books (often funded through private publishing houses), and conservative magazines and papers.

Ronald Reagan's 1964 Goldwater speech "A Time for Choosing" probably didn't change many votes - it was aimed more at the conservative faithful - but it did present the conservative vision in an easily digestible style and announced Reagan as the next leader of the conservative movement. His facts were not always correct, but they sounded right and agreed with far right goals.

What both Richard Nixon and Ronald Reagan learned from Goldwater's defeat was that they had to cater to far right demands to get elected, but they couldn't govern in a fashion that would satisfy far right demands - Nixon, because he learned his Republicanism under Eisenhower, - Reagan, because he understood the differences between campaigning and governing.

Libertarianism (limiting the government to the military, monetary management, and enforcing contracts), the elimination of social programs (New Deal introductions into American government), and a theocratic approach to governing, were not ideas that most Americans even considered relevant, but they were hard core principles for many far right conservatives - each of the fused Republican Party groups had as its mantra, one of these precepts.

Ronald Reagan's most lasting legacy may very well be convincing the public that 'the government is the problem' rather than part of the solution to problems, thus separating New Deal concepts from American voters. However, he understood that programs introduced could not now be terminated and he ceased trying to attack Social Security and Medicare.

The End of the Reagan Majority

With first Reagan, then George H.W. Bush, the conservatives felt they were on the brink of a new age, but Bill Clinton completely frustrated their plans. The fact that he co-opted many of their ideas and acted more like an Eisenhower Republican infuriated them even more. They began the process of attacking the President personally, claiming him illegitimate, then trying to remove him.

The 1994 elections marked the definitive alignment of partisan and ideological voting. Ultimately, in 2008, this meant more pressure not to negotiate with the Democrats, but to endure gridlock until the next election.

A characteristic of the American public is that they are ideologically conservative, but operationally liberal - i.e. 'keep the government's hands off my Medicare'???. Because of this, conservatives have always felt in the majority and can't understand why their viewpoints don't succeed in general elections. It is why governing often means keeping liberal ideas alive, even if it frustrates the conservative base. This is a key reason far right conservatives are so fed up with establishment Republicans. Another is that a powerful part of the Republican Party is large business and this segment has no commitment to most far right issues, other than tax and regulatory relief.

Ever since the rise of 'supply side economics', conservatives have found it impossible to deliver on promises.

- Drastically cut taxes, but retain social services and increase military spending
- Substantially reduce the size of government, but be sure to help cities when a crisis strikes, react quickly to an environmental disaster, protect the public from unsafe products and disease

The government shutdown in 1995-96 perfectly illustrated conservative Republicans lack of understanding that the American public wasn't willing to give up public services for their ideology. President Clinton, however, exactly understood the American public's mood and his triangulation of Republicans, the general public, and his policy goals is another reason he is so hated on the right.

A Compassionate Face

Compassionate conservatism was an attempt to temper the hard edges of ideology with a public not always able to take care of itself. Charity and religion were supposed to take the place of any government safety net and the government could then release this responsibility. This all sounds positive, until you realize that Herbert Hoover tried to say much the same thing in the middle of the Great Depression. The fundamental beliefs of modern Republican conservatism would seem to be antithetical to the concept of any kind of social safety net or concern with real inequality of opportunity or pay.

The base belief is that individuals will rise by their own hand and must be given freedom to either succeed or fail on their own. Short shrift is given to any institutional or social biases that may arise in the process.

To understand why conservatism and the Republican Party radicalized in the Obama years it is necessary to understand the George W. Bush presidency. George W. Bush and Karl Rove tried to appeal to the hard right and the more moderate center to gain a voting edge. However, analysis of the 2000 election, where Bush did not win the general popular vote, revealed that the moderate center simply was too small to offset losses on the hard right. To win re-election they needed to polarize the right, insuring their presence at the voting booth in every election. The concept of compassionate conservatism George W. Bush believed in also meant he tried to implement an education program for children, a drug program for the elderly, and farm subsidies for farmers. These programs infuriated the far right and his 'trickle down economics' tax cuts infuriated the liberal left. When the economic disaster in 2008 struck, both sides felt his policies were to blame and the solution was to move closer to their core beliefs, not to any kind of consensus center. Finally, Republicans used any objection to Bush's military ideas after 9/11 as evidence of Democrats being weak on terror, or 'not fully American'. This not only enraged Democrats, but gave conservatives an 'anti-patriotic' reason to argue against any cooperation.

Rise of the Tea Party

The Tea Party was Goldwaterism and, in some cases, Birchism on steroids and new forms of conservative media was essential to their rise. With the end of the Fairness doctrine during the Reagan administration, radio and television stations were freed from providing alternate viewpoints. It is no accident that conservatism's steady movement back to the ideological purity of the Goldwater years parallels the rise of conservative radio. Conservative on-air minutes now outnumber liberal minutes by over 10-to-1.

Fox broadcasting network's role in not only reporting, but guiding Republican viewpoints cannot be over emphasized. Fox is the primary source of news for Republicans. Their brand of "tell them what they want to hear" journalism has not only resulted in a repeated mischaracterization of facts, but also led audiences to think Mitt Romney was defeating Barack Obama in the 2012 presidential election. This resulted in many conservatives feeling the election had been stolen by the liberals. In some ways conservative media is shaping the Republican Party's agenda such that are impeding the party's ability to govern and to win presidential elections.

Another key component to the Tea Party revolt is the proliferation and radicalization of conservative money. In Goldwater's time, business had frequently made peace with New Deal programs and cooperated to make them as business-friendly as possible. However, as business turned against more government regulations and funded their own organizations - like the Chamber of Commerce - they became more dedicated to the complete deregulation of business. With the financial meltdown, wealthy business people felt even more threatened by the public and the government.

When the *Citizens United* decision was handed down by the Supreme Court in 2010, conservative money was made available to further purify and purge the Republican Party of any even moderately liberal Republicans. As the Republicans voting in primaries became more uniformly conservative, the purges became easier to execute.

The Tea Party, while supporting some of the goals of libertarians, is largely a reaction to the alienation felt by the traditional - read largely religious - right; wishing to return American society to their definition of an earlier, more secure, time and to remove elements different from their viewpoint from any participation in the government.

The Logic of Obstruction

Summary of political and social changes since the rise of the Goldwater movement.

- Increasing ideological homogeneity of the Republican Party
- The country's growing racial and ethnic diversity
- Rising cultural fears of older white voters
- The political mobilization of conservative Christians
- The expression of a new conservative media
- Shift of business rightward
- Collapse of restrictions on big money in politics
- Growing influence of the "radical rich"
- Widespread frustration after two long and inconclusive wars and an economic collapse

Any one of these issues would have created problems, but all of them together resulted in a tremendously combustible situation on the conservative right.

With Republican strategies to fight Obama at every turn, the emergence of a radical protest group outside Washington - getting increasing media coverage by indulging in relentless opposition to everything Obama - seemed like a godsend. Many of the Republican 'sponsors', however, were aware this radical Tea Party could just as easily turn on them, as big-government sell-outs.

Mainstream Republicans were refusing to disown obvious Tea Party lies about Obama - they fit all too well with their own plans to separate the President from the American public. Thus, the movement was free to say whatever they wanted, painting the entire Republican Party in a more extreme light.

The first hint of trouble was when town hall meetings started becoming places where lies floated in the media were assumed to be facts and participants weren't there to listen and communicate, but to demand and cajole. When these meetings were followed by respected Republican legislators being voted out in primaries, because their brand of Republicanism wasn't pure or extreme enough, leaders began to realize the Tea Party 'tigers' had begun to turn on their masters and control the reigns of the party.

Republicans won big in 2010 - an election where the young didn't come out to vote and middle class white voters went solidly Republican. The Tea Party gained a great deal of control over the Republican election apparatus.

The lame duck session of the 2010 Congress was one of the most productive in history and progressives had several victories, but the mood was of a nation and president now focused on budget debt and not on improving the country generally. Democrats continued to talk compromise to accomplish things, but the new Republican House majority felt compromise was a form of selling-out and not to be tolerated. Negotiations were destined to be asymmetric.

Tea Party Overreach

When serious discussions on defaulting on the national debt began in 2011, it became clear the impact of a radicalized Republican party was to pull the center of the nation's political conversation far from anything that could be recognized as moderation or problem-solving. The agreed upon solution, a sequester that cut deeply into both domestic and defense spending, was abhorrent to both sides. However, no compromise was possible and this sequester took effect, truly handcuffing the nation and making every side angry - except perhaps the dyed-in-the-wool libertarians. This time was a low point for the president, the Republicans, and the country at-large. It reflected much of what was wrong with the priorities of the political elites and the obsessions of a Republican right that had won itself a kind of veto power over the American government. The world wondered if America could still govern itself.

President Obama seemed to be a passive figure at a time when the world needed a leader. However, the Tea Party Republicans had severely over-played their position in the political world. Obama abandoned his approach of triangulation and appeasement - much to his supporter's delight - and the Tea Party effectively controlled the narrative required for the 2012 Republican presidential candidates. In the Republican Party of 2011 and 2012, liberty could be measured only through a quantitative analysis of government size, not in any real concern for the American people.

It was at this point that the Occupy Wall Street movement captured the public and focused people's attention on the increasing wealth and power of the top one percent of the population - economic inequality became the watchword - rather than the budget process and government size.

President Obama's pivot to a measured progressive model now gave the country a choice between the concept of fairness and the Tea Party focus on liberty with small government, at any cost. Also at this time the cooperation between business conservatives, who financed the Republican Party and wanted low taxes and less regulation, and the working and lower middle-class, who wanted social conservatism, was breaking down under the stress of economic pressures.

The 2012 presidential election would be waged on class issues and the Republican candidate represented the class with fewer voters. In the one year between 2011 and 2012 the political focus shifted from 'how the government worked' to 'how economic elites had managed the nation's business'. Suddenly extreme conservatives were on the defensive. Defining entrepreneurs as 'makers' and others as 'takers' is not a particularly good strategy for attracting the most votes when 90% of Americans are not entrepreneurs, but work for someone else for their livelihood.

Mitt Romney's comment that 47% of Americans did not take responsibility for their own lives and didn't pay taxes, pretty much disqualified him from the job of President of the United States in many voter's eyes. It also ignored the fact that poor and middle-class Americans often pay a larger share of their income in taxes than do the wealthy, due to the presence of regressive payroll, sales, and property taxes.

Finally, the country was becoming ever more diverse and Tea Party nativism was going to adversely impact any national election.

Why the Republican Party Didn't Learn

The difference in number of voters between presidential years and off-years is between 40-50 million people - mostly young and the less engaged. Since the far right is very good at getting out the vote in all elections, this means there will be considerable conservative gains in off-year elections for the next several cycles. When off-year elections happen in decade years (2010) then redistricting into ever more gerrymandered districts means the party losing that election will pay a heavy price for the next ten years in House races. The result is likely to be more gridlock in Washington until the Republicans moderate, or until one or both parties fully adapt to the new demographic realities. The challenge to Republicans is that they will likely retain a hold on House seats and this could drive them farther to the right, in order to retain their seats in primaries, making the control of the Senate and White House increasingly difficult.

Up from Goldwaterism

"Extremism in defense of liberty is no vice, and moderation in pursuit of justice is no virtue." With this statement Barry Goldwater launched a conservative movement that would brook no compromise with its idea of purity, and view anything less than a complete triumph as failure. In an increasingly diverse society no pure ideal was possible and, therefore, disappointment was inevitable.

The real crime is a conspiracy of silence over the inevitability of a rather large government and the need for regular fine-tuning to a market system that is highly productive, but requires regulation to function well, and adjustments to spread the riches it produces more fairly.

"The idea of transcending partisan differences works only when there is some basic agreement on the ends." Currently there is absolutely no agreement on what those ends should be. However, the strongest incentive for conservatives to change is that the long range population trends favor progressives, if conservatives can't expand their definition of what conservatism is. "In 2012, Mitt Romney carried 59% of the white vote and he carried independents. In 2004, this would have elected him president. In 2000, it would have given him an Electoral College landslide. In 2012, it gave him second place."

Upon stepping down from Speaker of the House duties, John Boehner said, "We have groups here in town, members of the House and Senate who whip people into a frenzy of believing they can accomplish things, that they know are never going to happen." Again, promises that cannot be met will create a frustrated and angry population. Republicans are going to have to 'come clean' with their constituency about what is possible. Social Security and Medicare are now imbedded in the American way of doing things. Perhaps Republicans would be better served trying to make those programs run more efficiently, rather than promising to eliminate them.

Republicans might reach back before Goldwater and consider the Modern Republican dictum of Dwight Eisenhower, ".if a job has to be done to meet the needs of the people, and no one else can do it, then it is the proper function of the federal government." Eisenhower emphasized that a balance between the public and private sectors was required to continue to progress forward. He wasn't in favor of simply trying to minimize the government to an ideological purpose - like libertarianism. This too is conservatism.

Simply trying to take our raucous, pluralistic, multicultural country back to a simpler era is just not possible. Conservatives have to find a way to apply moderation to their cultural issues, while spending less energy advocating tax cuts for the wealthy and regulatory relief for business, in order to broaden their appeal to more Americans. Most of America still wants to travel a somewhat conservative path; they just don't want to discard their public safety nets and regulatory systems in the process.