

Examine the Causes and Consequences of the changing balance of power between the federal and state governments since 1980

In the years preceding 1980 the balance of power between the federal and state governments had been evolving and changing. This was due to both the changing times in America and the differing philosophies of those men in the famous oval office who had different ideas about how little or large a role the federal government should play. This role has been basically decreasing since 1980 with recent US president's adhering to Nixon's idea of 'new federalism' although the federal government still does have a lot of the power that it gained in the years leading up to 1980 as a result of revered president's such as Franklin Roosevelt increasing this power.

Those presidents who took the view that the powers of the federal government should widen mainly did so because decisive federal action was needed at the time to ease America's problems. Since 1980 (with the possible exception of September 11th) America hasn't faced such difficulties, which has meant that the Federal government hasn't had to do so much and therefore its powers have decreased. For example in the early 1930s when the USA was ruined by the great depression and the laissez-faire politics advocated by the republican president Herbert Hoover a new approach was needed. Roosevelt supplied this approach with his New Deal programme, which involved a lot of federal government intervention in areas such as housing and employment. To do this the federal government had to increase its power and so therefore this happened with the idea of 'CO-operative federalism' being introduced. Similar shifts in the balance of power can be seen with Johnson's administration in the 1960s as American faced problems such as widespread racism, poverty and the Vietnam War. Since 1980 the US has seen its economic position strengthen along with its position as a world superpower and as a result, the federal government has seen its role reduced. This in-turn has seen the power of the federal government reduce and this is clear from the number of supreme court rulings which have enhanced the power of the states by going against the federal government. For example the Garcia ruling in 1985 and also the Webster V Planned Parenthood case in 1989 on the availability of abortion. It is clear that when America is in crisis people turn to the federal government and this can be seen from the fallout of September 11th. Since this atrocity Bush's administration has gained more power in areas such as homeland security and following a congress ruling the federal government will be in charge of airline security for the next two years. Therefore it is clear that as America's problems decrease and its prosperity increases, state governments gain more power from their federal counterparts while an increase in problems will result in the reverse.

The change in the balance of power since 1980 has also been affected by the attitudes and actions of the executive who have been less inclined to use grant-in aid programmes which has weakened the stranglehold of the federal government on the states. This point is backed up by the fact that in 1995 federal aid accounted for 22.2% of state and local outlays compared to 26.3% in 1980. This money is usually given by the federal government with strings attached and a proviso that the states will agree with a certain area of federal government policy to receive aid. For example when the federal government wanted to raise the national drinking age to 21 they offered all of the states a

huge grant for road building and this was money that the states needed. Therefore all of the states decided to tow the federal governments line, enforce the change in the law and receive their grant. This clearly shows how the federal government can use grants to increase their power by making states agree to their proposals and therefore increase the balance of power in favour of the federal government. The fact that state governments are no longer relying so heavily on these grants is an important reason why the balance of power has shifted away from the federal government since 1980.

It is therefore clear that by decreasing state dependence on the federal government during an era of relative calm and prosperity, the balance of power has shifted away from the federal government. This has had a number of consequences with the most obvious being that the states have gained more power. Examples of this are the 1995 Mandates reform Act and the 1996 Welfare reform Act which have both resulted in an increase in state power. The Mandates reform Act ensured that any federal regulation costing \$50 million or more had to be funded by congress with the congressional office now having the right to asses every law as to judge its impact on the states and this means that the federal government now has much less fiscal power when trying to influence states. The 1996 Welfare reform Act handed decision making to the states with popular opinion being anti-big government. The consequence of an increase in state power since 1980 can be seen from the examples of Wisconsin and New York with the former introducing new education policies such as 'parental choice' schemes and the latter reintroducing the death penalty.

Another major consequence of the shift in power away from the federal government has been that US presidents have found it a lot harder to push through reforms even if they had campaigned on these reforms. An example of this is Clinton's failure to revolutionise America's health system, as congress wouldn't pass the necessary legislation even though the US public had voted Clinton on the promise of health reform. This can be starkly contrasted to the presidency of Johnson in the 1960s when the balance of power was firmly with the federal government. Johnson was voted in on the promise of achieving a 'Greater Society' and he was able to pass numerous Acts such as Medicaid, which meant that he was carrying out what he had promised the voters. Therefore it can be said that since 1980 US president's have not been able to carry out reforms even if they have a popular mandate to do so. This due to a shift in power towards the states who now have much more control over issues such as healthcare.

Even though the recent atrocity in New York has raised question marks over whether or not more power should be in the hands of the states, it is clear that since 1980 the trend has been for states to gain an increase in this power. While this is the case it is evident that a lot of power still resides in the hands of a federal government who try to maintain the USA as a centralised nation and it is clear that in times of crisis, this is what American's want.