

The ideology of the Democrats is liberal whilst that of the Republicans is Conservative. Discuss

'Two glass jars with different labels, both empty'. This has been the traditional opinion of the differences between the parties ever since the federalist/anti-federalist issue was settled. However, in recent decades, we have seen the emergence of distinct ideological identities. That of liberalism - a belief that the federal government should have an active role in protecting the vulnerable & guaranteeing rights, and Conservatism - a belief that government should be restricted in order for the individual to achieve their potential. I will analyse to what extent the Democrats and Republicans adhere to these philosophies.

Primarily, the Democrats have been associated with liberalism ever since FDR's New Deal of the 1930s. In this era, the government utilised Keynesian economics and expanded its reach nationally, helping the unemployed by providing jobs. Though these 'tax and spend' have become unfashionable in recent years, most Democrats would identify themselves as liberals. Recent policies would support this argument. In January 2009, a Democratic President and a Democratic Congress passed a 700 billion dollar economic stimulus package. This is clearly a liberal policy, affirming the state's role in the economy. Moreover, it was the same congress who passed the Patient Protection & Affordable Care Act (Obama-care) heavily regulating the health insurance industry. These are clearly liberal policies as they augment the role of the state and extending healthcare to 20 million of the low-income Americans who almost certainly voted Democrat, reinforces their liberal credentials. From this we can see that the Democrats, certainly in congressional policy, pass liberal legislation.

Similarly, the Republicans have shown much in recent years to call themselves a conservative party. The last Republican president, G.W. Bush, extended tax cuts to millions of high and middle earners. The 'Bush tax cuts' communicates a key belief in conservatism that the federal government should be more limited and taxes reduced. We can therefore see large cleavages between the beliefs held between the parties, the Democrats attempt to pass liberal policies whilst Republicans try to pass conservative ones. In addition, Bush relieved the role of the Federal Government in some public utilities to the voluntary & private sector as part of his Compassionate Conservatism agenda. Again, this is an example of republican conservatism as it reduces the power of the government.

More evidence supporting this can be found within Congress. Though Congress used to be bipartisan with the party line carrying little weight amongst senators and congress people, this is no longer the case. So far in the current congressional session, party unity has been around 92%. As congress lacks the strict whipping system found in the UK parliament, one can argue that the unity is down to the distinct beliefs of the parties - conservatism and liberalism. Not a single Republican in the House voted for Obama's economic stimulus package & very few Democrats were against it, this exemplifies the strong ideological identity of the parties.

Many believe the origins of this polarisation in ideology to stem from the 1960s. With the break up of the Solid South following the Civil Rights Act in 1964, the Democrats lost many of its Dixiecrats - conservative democrats. Similarly, Reagan's right wing presidency lost many moderate Republicans, at least the ones moderate on economic matters. Hence the parties have become more ideologically homogenous. This has clearly been reflected in the increased partisan levels in Congress.

However, a convincing counter argument can be mounted. Despite having had a majority in both chambers, Obama's healthcare reform was severely amended by Blue Dog Democrats that still exist within the party. This wouldn't be reflected in party unity scores as many amend legislation on the congress floor and committees suitably to vote for it. In addition, Obama excluded, recent presidencies have challenged the conventional view of the liberal/conservative debate. Bill Clinton, though initially attempting ambitious healthcare reform, declared the 'era of big government over', balanced the federal budget and passed social security reform. These can be said to be more conservative, even, than liberal. Similarly surprising, although Bush made large tax cuts, he also presided over the largest increase in the federal budget since LBJ's Great Society and he also extended the role of the Federal Government through the No Child Left Behind Act. We can therefore see that recent administrations of would-be liberal/conservative presidents have proved to be a mixed bag - not strictly adhering to either ideology.

It is undeniable that the Democrat Party is liberal and the Republican Party is Conservative. However, the extent of this is far from 'clearly' cut. The nature of the US federal government means that differences will always exist within the parties - though this has been reduced in recent years. In conclusion, I believe that, broadly speaking, the two parties have distinct ideological identities however, there is still evidence to rebuke this and so therefore I agree mostly with the statement.