

Return of the Republicans

Why they're unlike any political party America has ever seen.

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IN 1960, THE POLITICAL SCIENTIST Clinton Rossiter began his classic text, *Parties and Politics in America*, with the following memorable words: “No America without democracy, no democracy without politics, no parties without compromise and moderation.” Rossiter saw U.S. parties as “creatures of compromise, coalitions of interest in which principle is muted and often even silenced.” For Rossiter and several generations of political scientists, this was the genius of America’s party system. It was what made it possible for the United States—in contrast to Europe or Latin America, where parties tended to be ideologically pure—to endure the wrenching change of war or depression without violence and revolution.

Today, the Democratic Party remains this kind of party. (For example, twelve Senate Democrats voted for George W. Bush’s tax cut in 2001, and, more recently, 27 House Democrats voted against Barack Obama’s financial-services reform bill.) But the Republican Party has become a very different creature. From 1995 to 2001, when the GOP controlled Congress and Democrats controlled the White House, the Republicans shut down the government, ambushed the president and his Cabinet with intrusive investigations into corruption—many of them mind-bogglingly trivial—and eventually tried to impeach President Bill Clinton on the most frivolous of grounds. In the last four years, faced with a Democratic majority in Congress and then with a Democrat in the White House, the Republicans have generally voted as a bloc and have used the filibuster—once reserved for rare situations—to require Senate Democrats to gain super-majorities for all sorts of legislation. The GOP’s strategy during these years disrupted the normal working of Congress and threatened not simply the president, but the power and prestige of the presidency.

In short, for the first time since the Civil War, the United States has a political party that is ideologically cohesive, disciplined, and determined to take power, even at the cost of disrupting the political system. What accounts for this remarkable transformation? And how likely it is that the Republican Party will continue to act this way during the next two years?

THE STORY OF the Republican Party’s evolution into the type of party that Rossiter feared—something out of a previous era in Europe or Latin America—has its roots in the 1930s. In four elections from 1930 through 1936, the GOP was decimated, losing 182 House seats and 40 Senate seats. What remained in Congress after 1936 were primarily “Old Guard” conservative Republicans from rural and small-town districts in upstate New York, Pennsylvania, the Midwest, and the Prairies. (They were supplemented by a smattering of Eastern establishment Republicans with names like Brewster and Lodge, and by the Western progressives who hadn’t yet bolted to the Democrats.) The “Old Guard” Republicans took their cues from small businesses back home in their districts and from business associations like the National Association of Manufacturers, which, by 1934, were up in arms against Franklin Delano

Roosevelt and the New Deal. These Republicans could do little by themselves to halt New Deal legislation. But, by joining forces with conservative Democrats, primarily from the South, they were able to frustrate Roosevelt and his liberal majority.

The Republicans and the business groups charged that the New Deal—by expanding the power of government and backing unionization—was insidiously introducing communism or fascism to the United States. Roosevelt’s Brain Trusters, upstate New York Representative Hamilton Fish argued, “take all their principles and doctrines from Karl Marx just as the communists do.” Michigan Senator Arthur Vandenberg saw the New Deal as a “march toward a totalitarian state.” Along with the American Liberty League, the National Committee to Uphold Constitutional Government, and other business groups, they claimed they were defending what Henry Fletcher, the chairman of the GOP, called “constitutional government.”

While there were pro-New Deal liberal Democrats in the South (like Florida Senator Claude Pepper), most Southern Democrats were conservatives who represented rural districts, had acquired close ties with business (like Virginia Senator Carter Glass, the chairman of the Appropriations Committee), were eager to prevent the entry of labor unions into the South, and opposed any legislation that they thought might empower African Americans. “The catering by our National Party to the Negro vote,” North Carolina Senator Josiah Bailey wrote, “is not only extremely distasteful to me, but very alarming to me.”

Indeed, these Democrats—heirs to John Calhoun and the Confederacy—saw almost every New Deal initiative through the prism of race. They feared Roosevelt’s proposal to add Supreme Court justices would allow him to appoint judges who would challenge Jim Crow laws. They claimed that relief programs, including the Works Progress Administration and the Fair Labor Standards Act, would deprive Southern farmers of cheap African American farm labor. They feared that the new industrial unions would promote racial integration.

But, following the lead of their antebellum ancestors, they framed their opposition to the New Deal as a principled defense of the Constitution and of states’ rights—in this case, against the threat of European-style fascism or socialism. Glass described himself as “a relic of constitutional government. . . . I entertain the notion that the Constitution of the United States, as it existed in the time of Grover Cleveland, is the same Constitution that exists today.” And he described the New Deal as “an utterly dangerous effort of the federal government to transplant Hitlerism to every corner of the nation.” In their public rhetoric and in their opposition to specific programs, the Southern Democrats took exactly the same position as the Northern “Old Guard” Republicans.

In 1937, these Democrats and Republicans began working together, and some of them produced a “Conservative Manifesto” drafted by Bailey. It called for balancing the budget but also tax cuts—thus putting the entire burden of balancing the budget on reductions in social spending.

At the time, this conservative coalition accounted for only

about one-third of senators and one-fourth of House members. To block initiatives, they needed additional supporters. They got them because of two mistakes Roosevelt made that year. First, in response to the Supreme Court throwing out parts of the New Deal, Roosevelt proposed his court-packing plan, which offended some liberals as well as conservatives. It was rejected and put Roosevelt on the defensive for the first time. Second, Roosevelt, heeding the advice of Secretary of the Treasury Henry Morgenthau, cut social spending in 1937 in order to reduce the deficit. These cuts, combined with the introduction of Social Security taxes, precipitated a sharp downturn in an economy that had been growing since 1933.

Conservative Republicans and Democrats charged that the New Deal itself had caused the “Roosevelt recession.” Declared upstate New York Republican Representative Bertrand Snell, “Four years ago, we had an emergency. Now we have progressed—yes, we have progressed from an emergency to a crisis. That is the outcome of four years of New Deal effort.”

In the 1938 elections, voters, responding to the downturn, abandoned Roosevelt and the Democrats. Republicans won eight new seats in the Senate and 81 in the House, primarily at the expense of liberal Northern Democrats. These gains gave the conservative coalition the votes to stymie Roosevelt’s initiatives. If the coalition couldn’t block a bill outright, it was able to bottle it up in the Rules Committee, where conservatives enjoyed a majority. From 1937 to 1940, the conservative coalition was able to kill the court plan; repeatedly block and then force modification in the Fair Labor Standards bill; cut spending on relief, housing, and public works; and eliminate the tax on undistributed business profits.

But the conservative coalition didn’t stop at parliamentary maneuvering. It adopted a strategy of using congressional investigations to discredit the New Deal. Congress, of course, had been conducting investigations since 1792, but the bulk of those investigations were directed at public scandals and obvious malfeasance, such as Teapot Dome in 1924, or they were aimed at finding explanations and scapegoats for financial panics. Now, the conservative coalition did something else: It used Congress’s investigatory power to back up its charge that the New Deal was the product of a foreign ideology.

In 1934, Congress had established a Special Committee on Un-American Activities to investigate fascist conspiracies from abroad. In 1938, the committee was taken over by rural Texas Representative

Martin Dies and renamed the House Un-American Activities Committee, or HUAC. Dies turned the committee’s attention from fascism to communism and from foreign infiltrators to native communists within New Deal agencies. His committee undertook investigations of the Works Progress Administration—a target of other committees as well—the Federal Theater Project, and the Federal Writers’ Project in the hope of tying the New Deal to communism.

After the 1938 election, the conservative coalition also won support for a special committee, chaired by rural Virginia Representative Howard W. Smith, to investigate labor and the National Labor Relations Board (NLRB), which had been created in 1935 to oversee union elections. Along with the Dies committee, the Smith committee heard testimony linking revolutionaries and communists to the NLRB. Smith ultimately succeeded in forcing Roosevelt to reorganize the

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board and to replace several members that the committee had targeted.

IF THE conservative coalition’s aims and tactics sound awfully familiar to us now, that’s because the conservative coalition of the 1930s *was* the Republican Party of today. Like the contemporary GOP, it described the threat from liberalism in alien terms—as the product of communism or fascism that had been imported from Europe; it was obsessed with strict fealty to an anachronistic reading of the Constitution; it wielded Congress’s investigatory power in order to frustrate the administration; it simultaneously advocated balanced budgets and tax cuts (then, as now, a maddeningly illogical position); and it used an economic downturn to argue against government spending, even though that downturn was caused by Roosevelt’s decision to cut spending, not his New Deal programs.

But there was one crucial difference between the conservative coalition and contemporary Republicans: The former was not a political party, and this imposed limits on what it could do. It had to operate informally on specific issues rather than in pursuit of general, shared objectives. Before the 1938 election,

Democrats were wary of being identified with Republicans, whom the public still blamed for the Depression. After the election, Republicans, hoping to rebound, didn’t want to be subordinate to Democrats. Even conservative Democrats were reluctant to focus their attacks on Roosevelt; and Republicans were not always ready to embrace the Southern Democrats’ racial agenda—or their use of the filibuster. And so, the coalition limited itself to using the Rules Committee to tie up New Deal legislation.

It was not until the Democratic Party began to come apart over Jim Crow in the 1960s, and Barry Goldwater seized the opportunity to attract white Southern Democrats by taking up the mantle of states’ rights, that the coalition began to migrate into the GOP. By 1994, the coalition had become the Republican Party. That year—partly as a reaction to a Democratic president who had proved to be more liberal than Southern and partly as a result of a bizarre redistricting deal between Republicans and liberal African Americans to sacrifice Democratic seats in order to guarantee some majority-black districts—the Republicans took 19 House seats and three Senate seats from the remaining Democrats in the South.

United within a party, the conservative coalition lost the inhibitions that had previously prevented it from trying to destroy its Democratic opposition and to dismantle the New Deal itself. After taking control of Congress in 1995, the Republicans advanced a maximalist program of eliminating Cabinet departments and eviscerating regulatory agencies—a program that would have reduced the federal government to a pre-New Deal caretaker of business interests had it gone through. The GOP was now following the provocative script of a counterrevolutionary party, seeking to embarrass and cripple the party in power by advancing measures that it knew would not be countenanced—eliminating the Department of Commerce!—and by shutting down the government when it didn’t get its way. When the Republicans lost rather than gained support from these tactics and when they were partially repudiated in the 1996 election, they resorted to the conservative coalition’s investigatory strategy—but, in this case, they aimed directly at the president, whom they proceeded to impeach.

After the 2006 election, the Republicans lost control of Congress and, after 2008, of the White House as well. Forced to operate as a minority, they continued to act as conservatives had in the 1930s. They used parliamentary maneuvers to

The Conservative Galaxy There was a time when conservatism in Washington consisted of George Will, Paul Weyrich, the Heritage Foundation, and a few sharp operators in suburban Virginia. Today, conservatives can claim much of the prime real estate in the capital. As a new Republican House, led by John Boehner, and an enlarged Senate Republican minority, led by Mitch McConnell, prepare to challenge the Obama administration, we spent a month interviewing conservatives to find out who has clout and who doesn't.

The **Republican Governors Association**, now led by **Rick Perry**, spent \$129 million in the last election and should top that in 2012.



Tom Donohue has made the **U.S. Chamber of Commerce** the most powerful lobby in Washington.



David Frum's website, **FrumForum**, is the gathering place for conservatives who still believe the Earth is round.



If the decentralized Tea Party has a lobby in Washington, it's **Dick Armey's FreedomWorks**. A wild card in conservative politics.

The Supreme Court's *Citizens United* decision has made **Karl Rove's American Crossroads** the preferred destination for big GOP donors.



It's standing room only for **Grover Norquist's** Wednesday meeting of conservative activists at **Americans for Tax Reform**.



Heritage Foundation staffers provided the talking points for Republican opponents of the New START treaty.



Many of the **American Enterprise Institute's** heavyweights are gone, but its president's anti-statist polemics are popular with the GOP.



Cato's libertarianism appeals to some youthful conservatives who are more likely to read *Reason* than *The Weekly Standard*.



Conservatives still take their cues from **The Wall Street Journal's** editorial page.



NATIONAL AFFAIRS

The **Hoover Institution** and the **Hudson Institute** are two conservative think-tanks where thought still occurs. **National Affairs** is the wonky successor to *The Public Interest*.

A bare hint of bipartisan compromise can bring a stiff rebuke from **Rush Limbaugh**, as Representative Darrell Issa recently discovered.



Fox News Chairman **Roger Ailes** and his talking heads set the tone for conservative Washington—and it's pretty nasty.



The House Republicans gave **Rich Lowry's National Review** a first look at their "Pledge to America."



One prominent Republican lobbyist explained **K Street's** influence this way: "Congressmen come in, and they are from East Bumfuck... and their heads are spinning, and you sort of come to the people that brought you."

Thanks to *Citizens United*, **Karl Rove** now overshadows the **Republican National Committee**. **Michael Steele** is probably on his way out, but it won't matter who runs it.



Neoconservatives like **Bill Kristol**, **Richard Perle**, and **Paul Wolfowitz**, have had to stand in the corner since the Iraq War fiasco.



In bad economic times, **James Dobson** and other social conservatives have found that their issues are a low priority for Republicans.



Top cover to bottom, left to right: Armer; Kevin Detsch/UPI; Donohue; Reuters/Joni Kurjawa/Pool; Rove; A/M/PA; Photos; Norquist; Roger L. Wollenberg/UPI; Boehner; Roger L. Wollenberg/UPI; M/C; Connell; Michael Reynolds/EPA; Limbaugh; Alesis; C. Glenn/UPI; Ailes; Dennis Van Tine; Hannity; Emil S. Cyder/UPI; Beck; Chris Keane/Reuters; Steele; Kevin Detsch/UPI; Perle; Michael Kruttschnitt/UPI; Wolfowitz; Yori Gripp; Reuters; Dobson; Katie Falkenberg/The Washington Times; all via London.

block Democratic legislative proposals, but, this time, they went beyond using the Rules Committee and employed the favored tactic of Southern Democrats. From 1917 to 1970, motions to limit debate—to end a filibuster—were introduced only 56 times and most often on civil rights measures that were not partisan in nature. In the 2007–2008 Congress, Democrats had to initiate 127 cloture motions to break Republican filibusters. In the first two years of the Obama administration, there were 134.

Republicans filibustered legislation that they had previously backed but now opposed because the Obama administration supported it. In January 2010, for instance, six Republicans who had *sponsored* a bill to create a binding nonpartisan deficit commission filibustered it when it came to a vote. Senator John McCain, who, in 2003, 2005, and 2007, had sponsored the Dream Act—which would grant citizenship to the children of illegal immigrants who complete two years in college or the armed forces—filibustered it this past December when it came to a vote. Utah Senator Orrin Hatch, who joined the filibuster, had voted for the bill in 2007 and introduced it in 2003. These senators had probably not changed their minds about the merits of the legislation but instead were simply following the party line.

The GOP justified this insurrectionary strategy on the same grounds that the conservative coalition justified its attempt to block the New Deal: Republicans described Obama and the Democrats' proposals as alien to the Constitution. Just after Obama took office, John Boehner, who was then the minority leader, called Obama's stimulus program and budget "all one big down-payment on a new American socialist experiment." Former Speaker of the House Newt Gingrich warned of "a secular socialist model of government dominating and defining life that would be fundamentally alien to historical American experience." By exaggerating differences—by framing the choice as capitalism versus socialism or liberty versus tyranny—Republicans have largely eliminated the possibility of compromise.

And what about the new Republican Congress? Boehner, who is now speaker, and Mitch McConnell, the Senate minority leader, are more cautious than Gingrich or former House Majority Leader Tom DeLay and will be even more so in the wake of Representative Gabrielle Giffords's shooting; but they will be vigorously pushed to the right by a Republican Congress and base that have become more conservative over the last 15 years—and by business lobbies, led by the

U.S. Chamber of Commerce, that, after a very brief flirtation with Obama, are once again solidly in the Republican camp.

Using *National Journal* ratings, the political scientist Alan Abramowitz recently demonstrated that, in the Gingrich Congress, there were still more moderates than far-right Republicans; today, the proportions are reversed. Iowa Representative Steve King or Minnesota Representative Michele Bachmann are no longer outliers. In 1995, about 40 self-identified GOP moderates in the House began meeting for a Tuesday lunch. Today, what became known as "the Tuesday Group" numbers less than 25. But, of those 25, almost none are the kind of moderate pro-labor Republicans who used to get elected in the North. Instead, they are social moderates but fiscal conservatives, like New Hampshire's Charlie Bass or Michigan's Fred Upton. Abramowitz estimates that, on the legislation Congress will consider this year, there are only three moderate Republicans left in the House who will weigh in.

It isn't just Republican politicians who have evolved. So have the institutions and organizations that support the GOP. Since 1994, the descendants of the conservative coalition of the 1930s have gradually consolidated control over the apparatus that supports the GOP as well. There were, of course, conservative publications that championed and influenced the Gingrich Congress. *The Wall Street Journal* editorial page was widely read, and Rush Limbaugh was just coming into his own. But today, Limbaugh has a host of comrades on the air, including Glenn Beck and Sean Hannity. Right-wing blogs have proliferated. And a major TV news network has become the voice of the Republican right. These conservative voices speak the language of insurgency and insurrection, and their voices are amplified on the ground by the decentralized Tea Party movement. There was nothing in 1995 that resembled this movement. The Christian Coalition, then the largest right-wing organization, was not powerful or popular enough to threaten an incumbent in a Republican primary.

The world of conservative think-tanks has changed, too. During the Reagan years, these institutions played a large part in drawing up new policies; and some of these policies—like the enterprise zones or universal health care plan championed by the Heritage Foundation's Stuart Butler—attempted to achieve consensus reforms by conservative means. But today, think-tanks like Heritage and the American Enterprise Institute (AEI) are increasingly overshadowed by con-

servative "action-tanks," exemplified by former Representative Dick Armey's FreedomWorks and the Koch brothers' Americans for Prosperity. These groups make no pretense of serious scholarship. They have no compunction, for instance, about denying climate change. Perhaps in response, the older conservative think-tanks have become less thoughtful. Heritage's Butler, who might have been a voice for compromise, was quiet in the discussion of Obama's health care plan. And AEI is today headed by a right-wing propagandist whose latest work, *The Battle*, warns that "many Americans have forgotten the evils of Soviet socialism." This kind of rhetoric merely serves to further inflame a Republican Party that is already highly ideological.

THE GRAVITY OF the current political situation goes beyond party politics or even the threat posed to the functioning of democracy. The United States has not fully recovered from the downturn that began in 2007. Beyond this, it faces heightened economic competition overseas, climate change, and geopolitical challenges in the Middle East, South Asia, and East Asia. To address these challenges, it needs a government that can actually function—a government that can reach the sorts of compromises that traditionally were possible when different segments of ideologically diverse parties created coalitions across the aisle.

But this is not what the Republican counterrevolutionaries have in mind. The Republicans' identification of socialism with spending, and their pledge to cut the budget and fight increases in the debt ceiling, could imperil the country's recovery—or even precipitate, as happened in 1937 and 1938, a double-dip recession. And Republican determination to cut spending on green technology and infrastructure threatens America's future beyond this immediate business cycle. Put that together with a likely revival of the kind of neo-isolationism that characterized the Republicans of the 1990s, and you have a recipe for U.S. decline.

In the end, the Republicans will probably exhaust whatever mandate they think they procured from the 2010 election. The country as a whole doesn't support counterrevolution, and, when it finally sees it in action, it will almost certainly repudiate the GOP at the polls. Whether that happens sooner or later depends on the political skill of Obama and the Democrats. In the meantime, the current Republican Party—a party that would make Clinton Rossiter shudder in his grave—can still do considerable damage. ♦

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