

REPUBLICANS VS. DEMOCRATS

By

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As I watch the U.S. election lurch towards the finish line, I have been trying to decipher the single most significant philosophical difference between the Republicans and the Democrats in the fog of the current campaigns.

Obviously, there is no simple answer. Nothing in either parties' campaign platforms can be defined in black and white. Often, the differences cannot even be described in shades of grey. Also, within each party, there are extreme factions which muddy the waters even further.

That being said, some things are clear. For example, the traditional labels which are used to differentiate political philosophies frequently do not apply in the current political environment. Terminology such as conservative vs. liberal, left vs. right, capitalist vs. socialist, free trade vs. protectionism, for instance, are for the most part no longer particularly meaningful in the context of the current campaigns and can often even be misleading.

Both parties, to a greater or lesser extent, have platforms which embody concepts of capitalism, socialism, protectionism, free trade, universal medical care, tax reform, and bureaucratic reform, to name a few examples. Often, it is more a matter of degree, and, as a practical matter, the differences can be hard to define and articulate let alone explain to the voting public.

So, the question remains. Is there any significant or overriding factor which defines the major difference? In my opinion there is such a factor and in this paper I will try to explain this difference, the reasons for this difference and, if my theory has merit, the eventual ramifications which could follow.

It is my view that staunch Republicans, primarily poorly educated white Americans, desperately want to turn the clock back to reflect an earlier time and, in their view, a simpler time in their country's history. The Democrats, on the other hand, accept the reality that today's world is a different place since the American Revolution and its aftermath and needs to be governed differently. They understand that old remedies do not necessarily fix new problems.

There are several signs which support my conclusion.

First of all, Donald Trump's slogan to "Make America Great Again" is itself looking back and attempting to recapture something undefined in America's past which he wants voters to believe is much better than what they have today. This slogan also implies that unless he is in charge there is little in America's future that will be any better. Indeed, it will be horribly worse off and this is all the more reason he says we must turn the clock back as quickly as possible.

Next, the furor over the future makeup of the U.S. Supreme Court is a case in point. Again, the die-hard Republicans want to turn the clock back to an earlier time. They desperately want to fill the vacancy and future vacancies on the Court with justices who adhere to the judicial philosophy of the late Justice Scalia. He was termed an "originalist" because he felt strongly that the U.S. Constitution must be interpreted according to the meaning of the words as they were understood to mean when they were written in 1789 or at the time of the subsequent 27 amendments. In other words, the meaning of these words should not take into account the changes in the social and economic fabric of the country since the time they were written. The moderate members of the Court accept that the world is different and they are willing to modify, albeit slowly, previous jurisprudence to accommodate this vastly different world.

Lastly, the role of the Tea Party certainly has to be considered in any analysis. The Tea Party, of course, is not a political party and is only a disparate and loosely connected group mostly comprised of active conservatives. While currently not a major player in the national political arena or in the election, their adherents do have an impact on the thinking and behaviour of many Republicans including the Republican members of Congress. And they usually vote as Republicans.

Much of their thinking also advocates a return to the past. Among other things, they advocate a national economy operating with minimal oversight much as it did in the aftermath of the American Revolution. They also strongly support Justice Scalia's philosophy of originalist constitutional interpretation.

So, all in all, I think there is considerable evidence to support my conclusion that a major thrust of the current Republican campaign is indeed to convince the voters to turn the clock back to some earlier time.

This represents a major divide between the Republicans and the Democrats.

If my conclusion has merit, it raises three important questions.

1. Why do so many staunch Republicans, particularly white Americans, want to turn the clock back?
2. Depending on the results of the election, what will happen next?
3. What will be the future of the Republican Party?

I think the answer to the first question is fairly obvious.

In the decades following the American Revolution, the white population dominated society in the U.S. People of other races or other colour were required to do the bidding of the white class. Further, the economy was primarily agricultural and rewarded individualism. The urban populations were a much smaller part of the landscape. The law of the gun had meaning and often replaced the law of the land. Economic regulations were few and far between. Foreign competitors posed no significant threats.

Today, lowly educated white people are very much aware that this way of life is gone or has changed dramatically and they feel threatened. They believe all the significant changes in the social and economic fabric of their country have worked to their disadvantage. Also, they realize the shifts in demographics are working against them and fast. They are fearful and, understandably, are responding positively to Trump's campaign rhetoric.

The Democrats are being forced to deal with a much more complicated menu of issues.

They accept that the world is much different these days. They realize that several world depressions and recessions, two world wars and numerous regional wars, together with the threat of nuclear warfare have made our world much more complicated and interconnected. They also understand that the mind boggling advances in such fields as data processing, communications and medical science together with the phenomena of social media have dramatically changed the needs and social behaviour of society.

However, these are difficult subjects to address politically because in the political world voters usually opt for simplistic solutions if offered to them.

Therefore, it is easy to understand why voters, particularly lowly educated voters or fearful voters, buy into Trump's snake oil proposals which, unfortunately, have a very simplistic appeal.

Next, what will happen in the aftermath of the upcoming election?

I am concerned that whoever wins the Presidency, there will be a major upheaval in the political stability of the United States.

If Trump wins, it will quickly become apparent that he cannot deliver on virtually all the outlandish promises he has made and a major segment of the population will quickly become disenchanted and this could lead to major discontent. To the extent he can deliver, he will certainly create much economic and international chaos. As well, because of the different factions within the party it is more than likely there will be major paralysis in the Congress as the different factions fight among themselves and try to restore their credibility and their power. The situation will be even more chaotic if the Democrats should regain the Senate. Moreover, if, by some stretch of the imagination the Democrats should win both the Senate and the House of Representatives the situation, to use Trump's favourite expression, would be a total disaster.

Even if Trump loses and especially if at the same time the Democrats regain the Senate, the political stability will also be badly shaken. However, in this eventually, the major warfare will take place within the Republican Party. Almost immediately, the different factions which have been somewhat muted during the current campaign, will take up arms against each other. They will quickly disavow Trump's brand of Republicanism and try to distant themselves from the ruling cadre. The likely post mortem will be brutal and will reveal schisms that probably can't be repaired. They will become virtually ineffective as an opposition party and if they continue with their obstructionist tactics they will incur the wrath of many, many voters.

It will not be a pretty picture and this leads me to my final question, namely, what will be the future of the Republican Party?

It is my view that ever since Mr. Trump's entry onto the political stage, the life expectancy of the Republican Party has suddenly become much shorter.

Any party which chooses to continually deny the impact of history or the reality of changing demographics or which continues to be obstructionist for any length of time cannot survive in today's environment.

For certain, there will be heroic efforts to save the Grand Old Party. There is, however, a high probability that these efforts will not succeed. The political environment has, largely due to the behaviour of the Republicans themselves, become so toxic that it will be most difficult to arrange even a cease fire let alone total peace within the party. Party devotees have become bitter enemies of each other. Many old school Republicans feel that Trump has already hijacked the party and will certainly fight to totally reject his brand of Republican politics. It is quite likely that the Tea Party will find its voice again. The rivalry between the different factions in the party will probably become even more public and so each faction will publically be fighting to protect its own turf. There will be ugly battles over party leadership. Sitting members will struggle to speak with a common voice and to be respected in Committees and on the floor of the Senate and House. Major donors could shy away as they see a party in total disarray. In desperation, the party could become even more obstructionist and the animosity between the Republicans and the Democrats could become irreparable. And, the list goes on.

Eventually, the voting public would react and show its displeasure.

Given these circumstances, it would be most unlikely that the party could hold itself together. The likely outcome is that some bloc or maybe even more than one bloc will break away and form a third party which will, of course, dramatically change the political landscape in the United States. If that happens, the United States could end up with a system of government more akin to the European models. But that is the subject for another day.

For sure, whatever the outcome of the election, there is going to be a rough road ahead.