

NATIONAL POLITICS | By Charlie Cook, December 27, 2016

What Happens When Parties Move to Extremes



This story was originally published on nationaljournal.com on December 23, 2016

Business, and indeed the whole economy, appreciate and prosper with stability and predictability. Wild pendulum swings in policy, whether from left to right or from right to left, are disruptive, but they are becoming increasingly common. Republicans had a free hand to do what they wanted in 2005 and 2006 when they had the White House as well as Senate and House majorities. The same was true for Democrats in 2009 and 2010.

Note that each party paid a price in midterm elections after they governed as they pleased. The aggressive use of executive and regulatory powers in recent years means that even a party just holding the White House can drive policy very strongly in its ideological direction. Rules promulgated by the Environmental Protection Agency and the National Labor Relations Board are good examples of that. Now we can expect those policies to be reversed, with the pendulum swinging as far or further in the opposite direction.

This trend is becoming more advanced than in the past because of two things that are happening simultaneously. First, our elections are getting increasingly more parliamentary in nature. Ticket splitting is getting rarer, with straight-party voting becoming the norm. Every Senate race this year was won by the same party that carried that state in the presidential race. According to figures compiled by Cook Political Report House Editor David Wasserman, the House had a pattern that was fairly similar. Only about 24 Republicans will be sitting in districts carried by Hillary Clinton, only about 12 Democrats will be in Donald Trump districts, and only about 32 (7 percent) of House members won election by less than 10 percent (presidential results by congressional district won't be made final until early next year). This means that few House members have any real reelection concerns as long as their district boundaries remain the same. They can vote with their party as much as they want without facing serious challenge from the opposition party.

The ballast that kept each party from lurching to one extreme or the other is now almost nonexistent. In the not-so-distant past, moderate-to-conservative Democrats in Congress, often from Southern or rural areas or small towns, would bolt from their party on measures perceived as too liberal. In similar fashion, moderate-to-liberal Republicans, often from the Northeast or from urban or close-in suburban districts, frequently sided with Democrats on issues seen as inimical to their constituents. In party primaries, the dynamic has changed as well. Candidates can go to ideological extremes without paying a penalty at the polls because of their politically monochromatic states and districts.

Both parties are more ideologically cohesive than ever before. Little holds Democrats back from moving left or Republicans from shifting to the right. The center of the Democratic Party is moving increasingly to the left, closer to Bernie Sanders or Elizabeth Warren than to Hillary Clinton or Joe Biden. It is unlikely that Democrats will nominate a presidential candidate as relatively centrist as Clinton anytime soon.

Simultaneously, the Republican Party is getting more and more conservative. If the unpredictable Donald Trump had not won the GOP nomination, Ted Cruz almost certainly would have. More moderate contenders, in retrospect, never had a chance. Both parties experienced a surge in populist feeling, as illustrated by the success of Trump, Warren, and Sanders.

Each party is convinced, not necessarily wrongly, that their first priority upon taking power is to reverse everything that was done on the other side's watch. Each party wants to push the envelope as far as they can while they're in power. Assume for a moment that the Affordable Care Act is largely repealed, and executive orders and regulations are undone: What will Democrats have to show for their years in the White House other than losing majorities in the Senate and House, as well as a passel of governorships and state legislative seats across the country? Would a more moderate approach have had a better chance of creating lasting policy, perhaps without the political backlash that seems to have occurred in 2010, 2014, and 2016? Will President-elect Trump learn from the painful experience of the Democrats? Probably not.

What we are seeing is the end of balance and ideological predictability. The day is gone when Democrats generally pursued center-left policies and Republicans preferred center-right policies. Shifts in party control certainly brought changes in policy, but generally not radical changes. It's unlikely that pollsters in either party will be advising their clients who are facing contested primaries to advocate balanced, pragmatic solutions.

We are going through a markedly unstable and volatile period in our politics and policy, with wild and often extreme gyrations. This can't be healthy for the country, but it is the new political reality. Politicians follow their convictions as long as it means winning election.