The Big Shift Right

Why America's conservative drift, on a range of issues, has accelerated.

by Liz Marlanes

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Security and Medicare to balance the budget, respondents chose defense, by 54 percent to 22 percent. But between the rising costs of entitlements and an aging population, the nation's finances have grown increasingly dire - and voters place blame on both parties.

Indeed, one of the main forces behind the recent rise in conservative views - particularly on the issue of the size and role of government - is a widespread sense that the political system is fundamentally broken: Politicians on both sides of the aisle are seen as big spenders who are tools of special interests.

As a result, while the nation may be moving right in its attitudes about what government can and should do, it has also been moving away from traditional party loyalties. Many people are identifying themselves as conservatives first and Republicans (and to a lesser extent Democrats) second.

"One of the reasons you're seeing a more conservative attitude among conservatives is a belief that Washington and both parties have ignored their concerns," says Republican pollster Glen Bolger. "The spending continues to go up, the debt continues to go up. I think they're saying, 'Look, we're kind of getting tired of people saying, 'Yeah, we hear you,' and then doing nothing.'"

This sourness about government has led conservative activists to hold even Republican officials to more stringent tests - requiring them, for instance, to sign "no new tax" pledges. And increasingly, they are willing to challenge those politicians who fall short, pushing them further to the right.

In Hatch's case, he has been making notable efforts to shore up his conservative credentials.

THOUSANDS RALLIED on the Boston Common when the Tea Party Express, a California-based group that supports conservative candidates, ended a cross-country bus tour in April in traditionally liberal Massachusetts.

In recent months, he has renewed his push for a balanced budget amendment and introduced a measure that would prevent minors from traveling across state lines to get an abortion without parental consent. During the debate over the debt ceiling, he made a speech on the floor of the Senate arguing that the rich are shouldering an outsized portion of the tax burden: "The poor need jobs, and they also need to share some of the responsibility."

He has reversed his stance on a bill that would allow young illegal immigrants who grew up in the United States to pursue citizenship - a measure he had previously cosponsored with Mr. Kennedy - and he has said publicly that his vote for the financial bailout was a mistake.

"It might be true that Hatch did moderate a little bit - partly because he was in a position of responsibility and leadership that required that he be willing to talk to the other side. But he's certainly dialed back in recent months," says Quin Monson, a political scientist at Brigham Young University. "In some ways, it's disappointing and sad that reaching across the aisle has become anathema to Republicans. It makes you wonder where it ends."

Mr. Russo, whose group, the Tea Party Express, has said it will not challenge Hatch, calls him a "stalwart conservative." "I think there's a 'slash and burn' mentality," he says about efforts on the right to unseat Hatch. "Some people have unreasonable views about how you get things done."

Yet it isn't just Republicans who are becoming more conservative about Washington's role. In its most recent biennial survey of political values and core attitudes, the Pew Research Center found that the most notable shift of late is that independent voters have taken "a turn to the right" on broader economic issues, including views of the social safety net and the government's effectiveness and scope. Pew found that the number of people who believe the government "should help more needy people even if it means going deeper into debt" has fallen to 48 percent overall, while among independents, it's down to 43 percent - a drop of 14 points since 2007.

"There's more concern about the debt, and distrust of government - and an unwillingness to use government to do things," says Andy Kohut, Pew's director. "We don't like the way we're bailing out banks, but we also don't like the way we're bailing out people who've taken out mortgages and can't afford them."

TOUGH ECONOMIC CONDITIONS may be another reason many people's attitudes are hardening about government. Studies, including one in 2010 by Peter Enns of Cornell University and Nathan Kelly of the University of Tennessee, found that when income inequality widens, both rich and poor Americans tend to grow more fiscally conservative.

During the liberal heyday of the 1930s and '40s, income inequality actually narrowed, and then re-
WHICH G.O.P. PRESIDENTIAL CANDIDATE SAID IT?

Excerpts from a campaign brochure:

ON GOVERNMENT BUREAUCRACY
I think that concern for our vanishing freedoms is genuine. I think that the people's uneasiness in the stifling omnipresence of government has turned into something approaching alarm. But bemoaning the evil will not drive it back, and accusing fingers will not shrink government.

ON SOCIAL SECURITY
I favor a sound Social Security system and I want to see it strengthened. I want to see every participant receive all the benefits this system provides. And I want to see these benefits paid in dollars with real purchasing power.

ON LABOR
The labor movement was born out of the threat of the loss of freedom through excesses of overbearing business monopolies. It has served well to bring the pendulum back from the extreme. But the pendulum now swung too far the opposite direction and we are faced, as a people, with the stern obligation to halt a menacing misappropriation of power before it completely engulfs the liberties of labor, management and the general public.

ON FISCAL RESPONSIBILITY
The need for economic growth that we hear so much about these days will be achieved, not by the government harnessing the nation's economic forces, but by emancipating them. By reducing taxes and spending we will not only return to the individual the means with which he can assert his freedom and dignity, but also guarantee to the nation the economic strength that will always be its ultimate defense against foreign foes.

ON CIVIL RIGHTS
No matter how we try, we cannot pass a law that will make you like me or me like you. The key to racial and religious tolerance lies not in laws alone but, ultimately, in the hearts of men.

ON LEADERSHIP AND THE AMERICAN DREAM
I understand what the people of America are saying in this decade. Their message has been heard and understood. The people are now eager for a leader who will restore the Constitutional limitations of government, who will mobilize moral force .. to limit the inequitable concentration of power in any government, organization or economic combine.

(Answer: Barry Goldwater, in 1964)


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remained relatively stable throughout the '50s and '60s. It wasn't until the '70s that it began widening, launching what liberal economist Paul Krugman has famously called "the Great Divergence." In 1976, the richest 1 percent of Americans took home 9 percent of the nation's total income; today, they are taking home 24 percent.

Mr. Enns and Mr. Kelly don't know exactly why lower-income voters tend to grow more fiscally conservative in response to inequality, but they speculate that one factor may be the media. The widening gap since the 1970s has been largely due to massive gains among the wealthy — and media narratives during this time probably emphasized stories of bootstrap "individualism."

In contrast, the decrease in inequality during the decades prior to the '70s was driven by income gains among the poor and may have generated news stories emphasizing the government's role in education and job creation. "This could explain why declining inequality up to the 1970s pushed public opinion in a liberal direction," they write — and why rising inequality in recent decades has shifted voters further to the right.

On other issues, jarring events have helped move the country to the right. The nation's foreign policy has been more hawkish in the wake of 9/11, and even Mr. Obama, who came into office vowing to end the wars in Iraq and Afghanistan, has found it difficult to do so on an aggressive timetable.

The Guantanamo Bay detention facility remains open, and homeland security is still a widespread concern.

"Foreign policy doesn't change that much from one administration to another," notes Professor Brinkley. "It's hard to persuade either the electorate..."

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