
The Rise of Conservatives: More Conservatives or More Organized Conservatives?

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A Changing Society?

By many accounts, America has become a more conservative nation in recent decades.¹ Republicans, long in the minority in the House, took over with a conservative anti-government agenda in 1994. Welfare as an entitlement was dramatically changed in 1996. George W. Bush advocated for and was able to obtain the enactment of large tax cuts in 2001, 2002, 2003, with most of the benefits going to the most affluent. He cut environmental regulations, worker safety inspections, and regulations imposed on business.² He opposed same-sex marriages and sought to further limit abortion rights. Perhaps most important, while pursuing this conservative agenda, Bush was able to secure reelection. It is not difficult to conclude that the country has drifted more conservative.

While that conclusion is plausible, it remains asserted more than examined. Further, another explanation is equally plausible. It may well be that the apparent increase in support for conservative policies reflects no increase in their presence, but in their “organization” and framing of issues. Over the last several decades conservatives have increasingly moved to identify with the Republican Party, making them a significant and dominant presence within the party. The conservative electoral base that was split between two parties became much more unified within one party. That created a cohesive ideological group within that party and provided a basis for a more forceful argument for conservative views. As V.O. Key argued in [Southern Politics](#), the crucial matter in politics is whether those advocating a set of positions can create a coherent coalition along with continuity of an electoral base and consistent positions to create pressure on opponents. It may well be that the important matter is the mobilization of conservatives into a party to create a more unified voice for their concerns that is important.

While this cohesion was developing, the party was also the beneficiary of the development of a concerted effort by conservative scholars and think tanks to represent the argument for less government. These efforts helped the party frame issues in way more conducive to American political culture with its emphasis on individualism. The combination of a more coherent conservative base and a more aggressive critique of liberalism focused the conservative argument and gave it more force within the political process. Voices scattered across the political landscape became organized and focused and more prominent within the process.

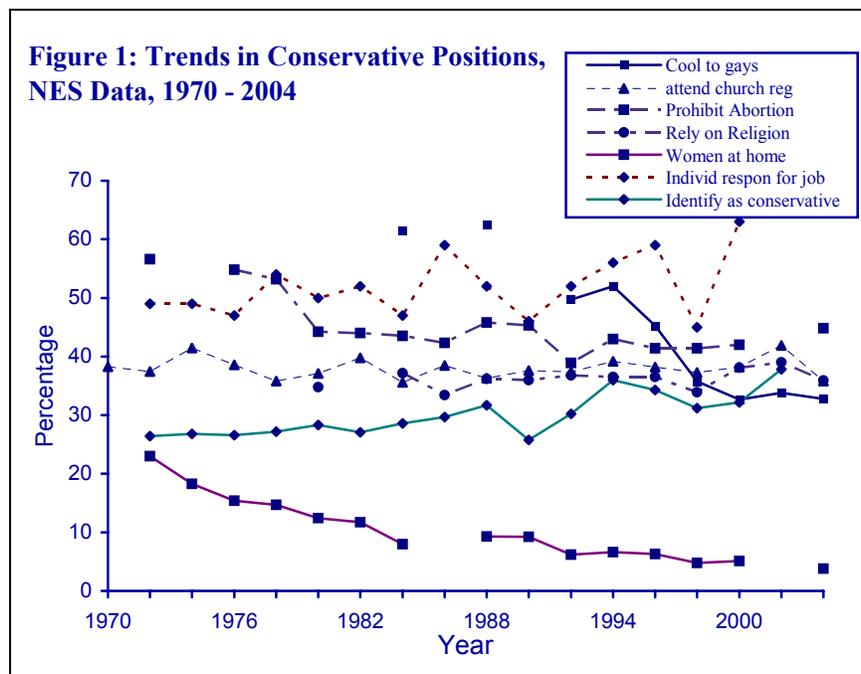
This analysis will explore these alternative explanations. First, the general trends in public opinion over the last several decades will be reviewed to assess whether there has been an increase in support for conservative positions. Then the mobilization of conservatives into the Republican Party in recent decades will be examined, using both individual and aggregate level results.

Trends in the Presence of Conservative Views

If the nation has become more conservative, than one source of such a change might be an increase in the percentage of those who hold conservative views or say they are conservative. Figure 1 presents an array of time series of the percentages of respondents to the NES surveys reporting that they hold conservative views. The questions included involve:

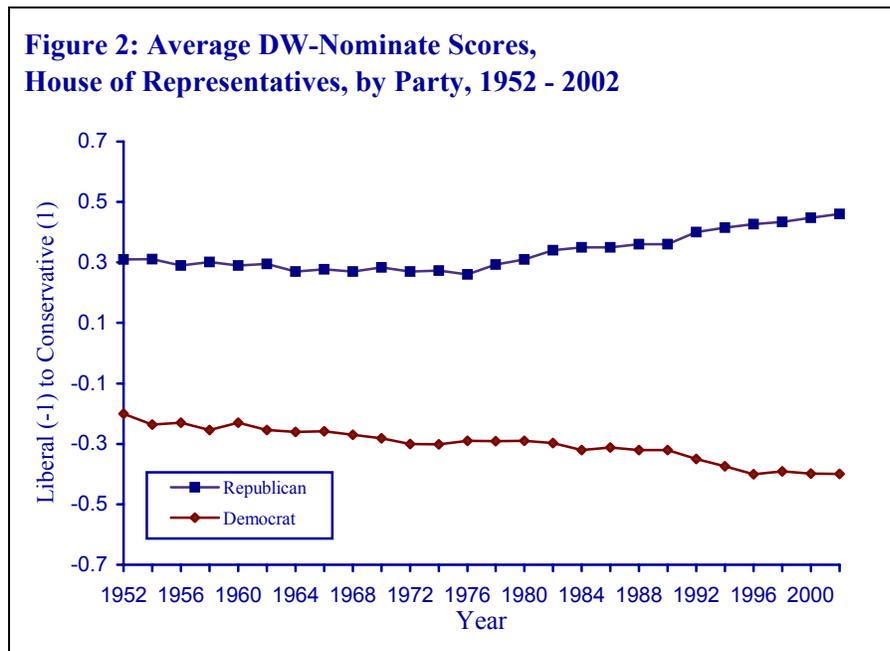
- The place of women is in the home
- The individual relies heavily on religion in their daily life
- The person attends church weekly or more
- The individual is cool to gays (the thermometer question; below 50)
- Respondent believes abortion should be prohibited
- Respondent believes individuals are responsible for finding a job rather than government
- Respondent identifies as a conservative.

The trends do not suggest any sort of consistent drift toward conservative views being more prevalent over the last 30 years. The percentage cool to gays has declined, as has opposition to abortion, reliance on religion in daily life, and endorsement of the idea that women should be at home. On the other hand, the percentage who identify as a conservative has increased from about 26 % to the mid-30s over 30 years, and there is an erratic increase in support for the idea that individuals should be responsible for jobs. These trends indicate that we might accept the idea that some indicators suggest a more conservative society, while others do not. Perhaps most interesting is that the ones often presented as defining current politics, cultural issues, do not follow a pattern of becoming more prevalent. While some indicators could be selectively pointed to, these data do not provide strong support for the idea that America is moving more conservative.

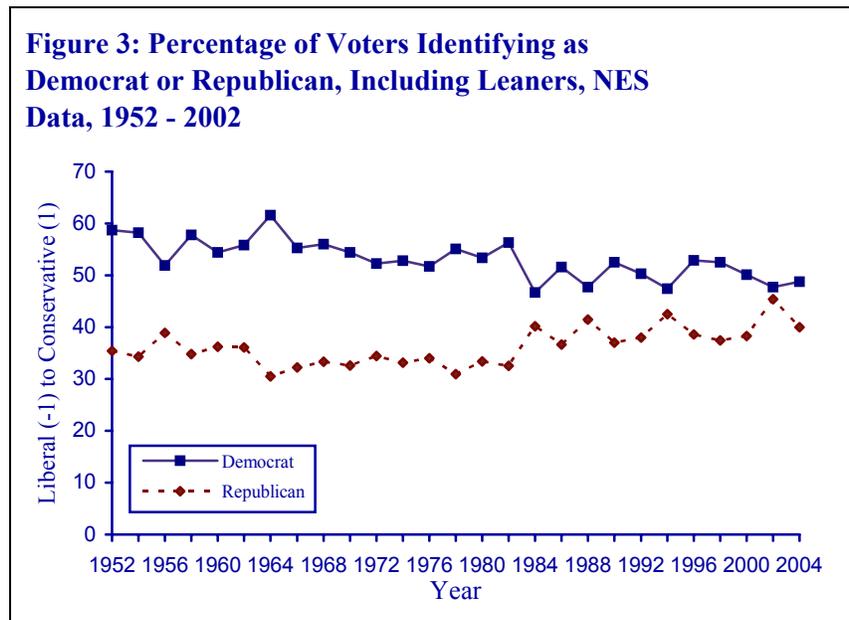


Greater Support for Republicans

While there is not much evidence that the electorate as a whole has become more conservative, there is clear evidence that the Republican Party has developed a more conservative record, that a higher percentage of the electorate now identifies with the Republican Party, and that fewer identify with a Democratic Party that is becoming more liberal. The drift in party positions is evident from the voting record of members of Congress. Figure 2 presents the average DW-Nominate scores for House votes since 1952.³ Scores range from 1 (conservative) to -1 (liberal). Since the 1970s there has been a steady drift of Republicans to more conservative positions and a steady drift of Democrats to more liberal positions. The difference between the parties is now greater than at any time in the last fifty years and growing steadily.



While the party has grown more conservative (and the Democrats more liberal), there has been a general drift toward greater, if erratic, identification with the Republican Party. Figure 3 presents the percentage of respondents who say they identify with either party (either as a strong or weak identifier, or as someone who leans toward the party). Democrats fluctuated around the 55 % level for much of the 1960s and 1970s and since then have varied around 50 %. Republicans varied around the 35 % level during the 1960s and 1970s and have fluctuated between 40 – 45 % since then.



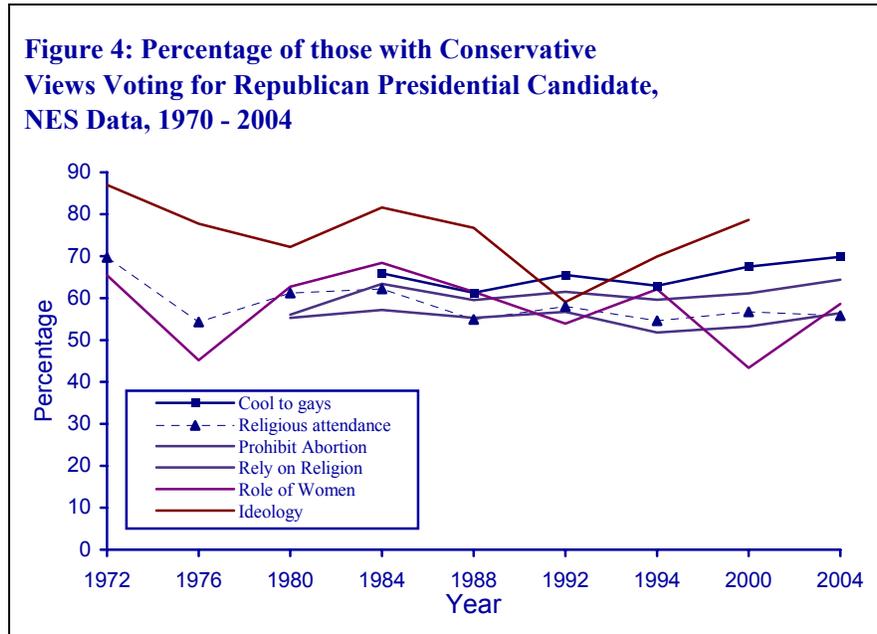
The trends present an important puzzle. The Republican Party has gained seats in Congress and held those seats. The party has compiled more of a conservative voting record in Congress, and as that has happened, identification with the party has increased, while identification with the Democratic Party has declined. Yet, a review of the question

responses available in the NES data set does not provide any clear indication that the electorate has become more conservative. While the country does not appear to have become more conservative, the Republican Party has become more conservative, attracted more supporters, and maintained its majority status.

Explaining the Rise of Republicans: Mobilizing Conservatives

How have Republicans been able to emerge as the majority party, even while becoming more conservative in a country that is not becoming more conservative? The answer is secular realignment. For much of the last fifty years, conservatives (both fiscal and social) were distributed, if unevenly, between the two parties. Beginning in the 1960s, conservatives began a steady effort to mobilize conservatives and bring them to the Republican Party. The presence of conservatives has not increased, but they have been mobilized into the Republican Party. As they have become a larger portion of the party, they have become a more forceful presence in American politics. The first matter to be documented here is the mobilization of conservatives into the Republican Party. Then their role as articulators of the conservative cause will be addressed.

The process of Republicans attracting conservatives has gone in phases. Presidential elections often lead change in American politics and that appears to have occurred in the attraction of conservatives to the Republican Party. As Figure 4 indicates, as early as the 1970s conservatives were strongly supporting Republican presidential candidates. This can be seen in The NES national survey does not ask many questions about ideological or policy positioning, but that which exists shows that those who hold conservative positions were voting for the Republican presidential candidates at least as far back as the early 1970s. For whatever question responses are used as an indicator of conservatives, Republican presidential candidates were attracting high percentages by the early 1970s.



While Republican presidential candidates have been attracting conservatives for several decades, the ability of the rest of the party to attract them has taken longer. Figures 5 and 6 track the patterns, using the same conservative indicators, for congressional candidates and party identification. While there have been erratic movements, the general pattern is of a gradual movement of conservatives to broader support for the Republican Party. Presidential candidates may have been able to initially connect with conservatives, but it has taken longer for congressional candidates and the party as a whole to develop the same support. It is likely that the multitude of congressional candidates, and the gradual transition that occurs with incumbents in office, delayed the development of conservative support for Republicans, but it has gradually occurred.

Figure 5: Percentage of those with Conservative Views Voting for Republican House Candidates, NES Data, 1970 - 2004

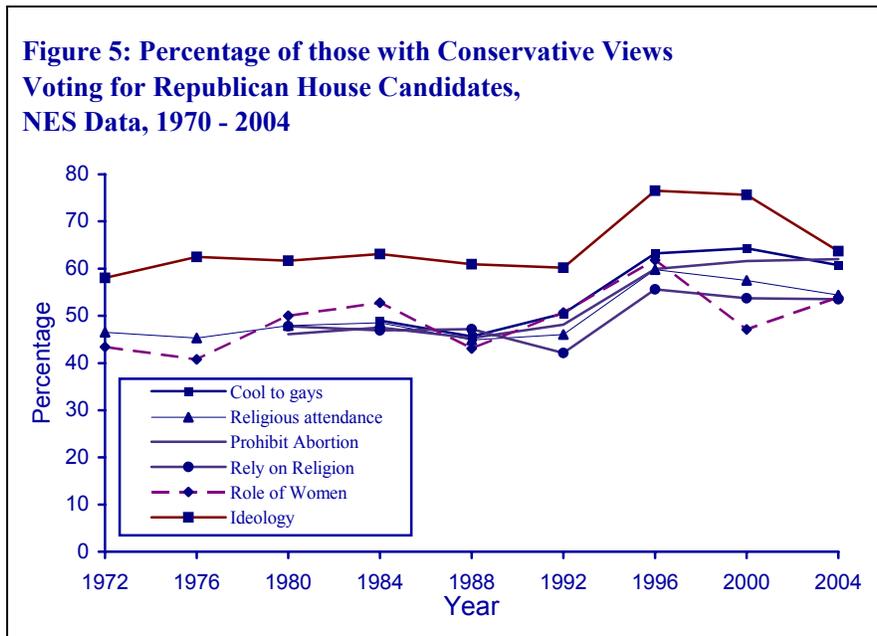
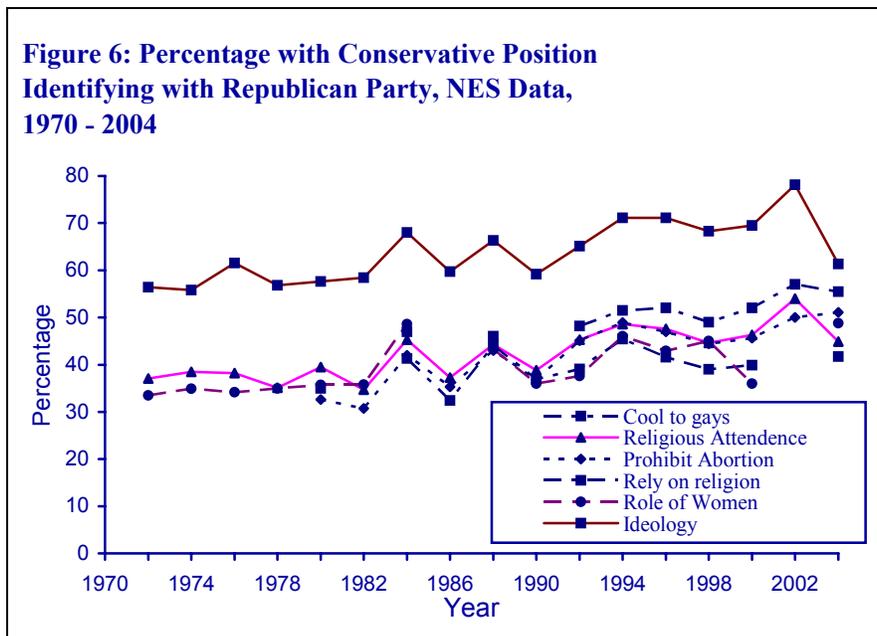
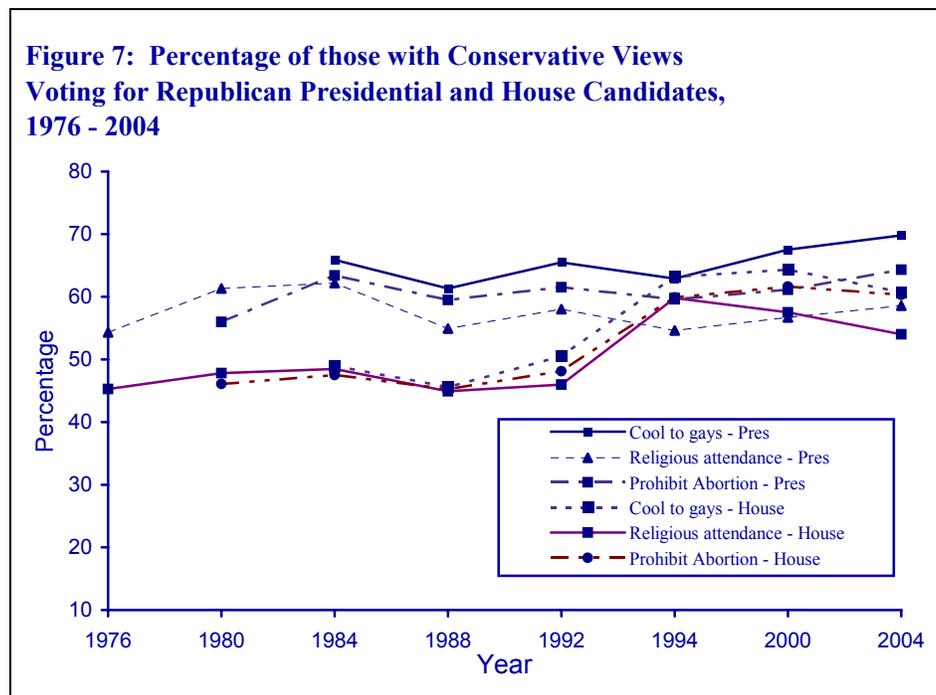


Figure 6: Percentage with Conservative Position Identifying with Republican Party, NES Data, 1970 - 2004

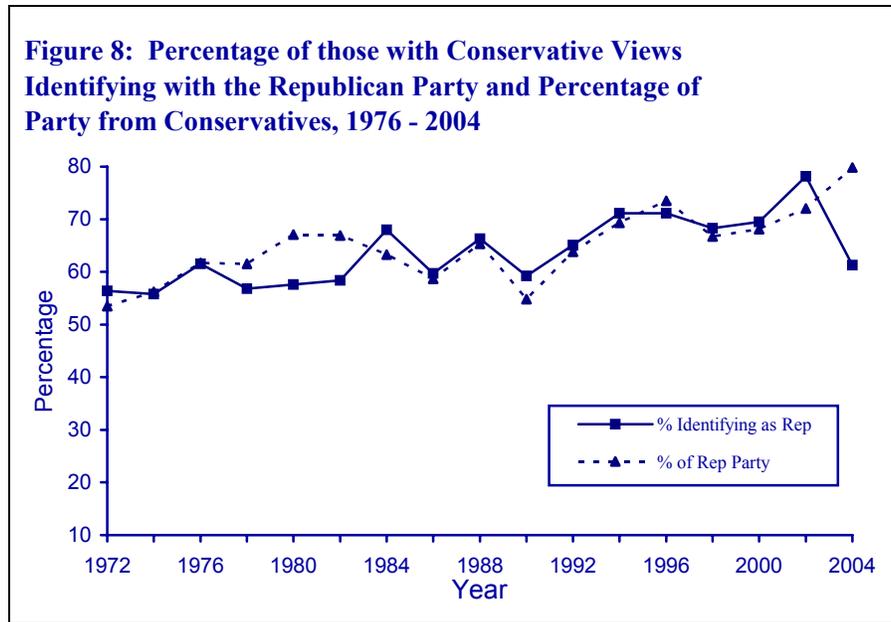


The consequence of this development is that now Republican House and presidential candidates and the party have similar and consistently high levels of support from those with conservative views. Thirty years ago only presidential candidates received such support, but it is now more consistent across the party. Over time the Republican Party has been able to mobilize existing conservatives to support their party.



The result is that a much larger percentage of the Republican Party is now comprised of those with conservative views. Figure 8 indicates the percentage of self-identified conservatives that say they identify with the Republican Party and the percentage of the party comprised of conservatives. Over the last 30 years conservatives have gradually come to align themselves more with the Republican Party and less with the Democratic Party. This transition has made them more dominant within the party. In 1972, the first year the question

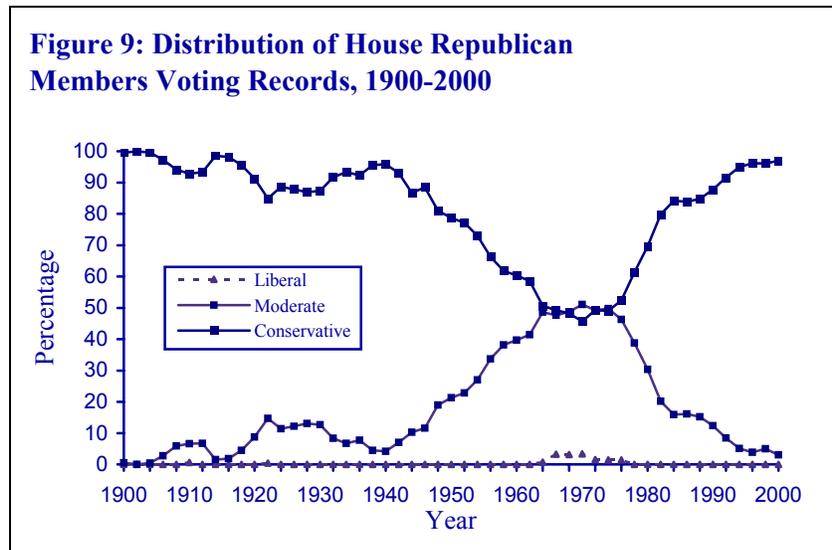
about self-defined ideology was asked, 53 % of the Republican Party was conservative, 33 % were moderates, and 13 % were liberals. In 2002-04, averaging the two years, 76 % were conservative, 13 % were moderate and 11 % were liberal.



The Congressional Shift

While the party was attracting more conservatives at the individual level, it was also experiencing a change in the composition of its congressional party. The DW-Nominate scores provide a means to assess how the party's composition has changed. The scores can be (somewhat arbitrarily) grouped as follows: liberals are -1 to less than -.2; moderates are -.2 to .2, and conservatives are those with scores greater than .2 up to 1.0. As Figure 9 indicates, the Republican Party, conservative for much of the early part of the century, experienced a rise in the presence of moderates in the 1950s – 1970s. The party then began

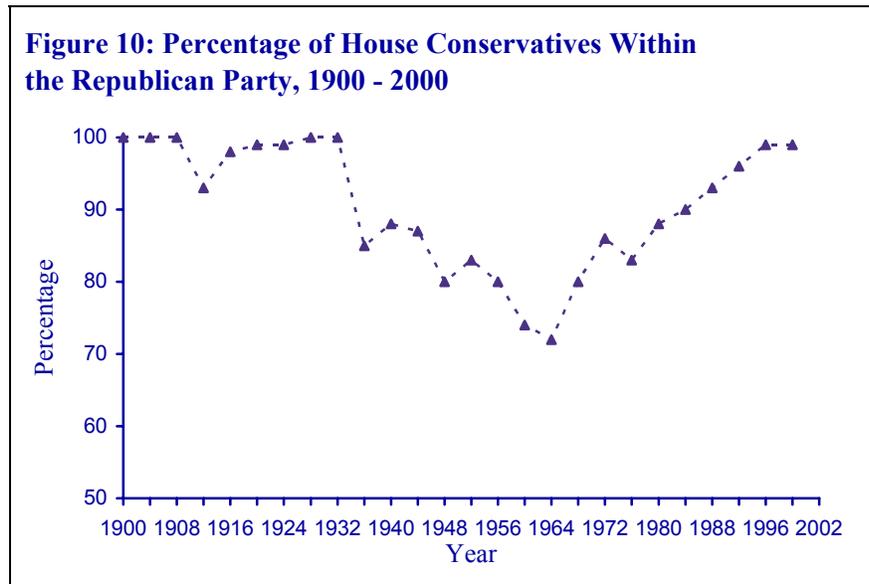
to again attract more conservatives, and by the 1990s conservatives once again dominated the party.



Source: Election results compiled by the author; DW-Nominate scores taken from the web page of Keith Poole

Over the last 40 years the Republican Party has increasingly become comprised of conservatives. As this process has evolved, the Republican Party has developed more of a concentration of conservative Members of Congress. As Figure 10 indicates, the result has been the concentration of conservatives within the Republican Party. As the transition in party bases occurred beginning in the 1930s (Stonecash, 2005), conservatives were present in both parties. By the 1960s, 30 % of all conservative House members were in the Democratic Party. The increase in the conservatism of the Republican Party is in many ways a resurgence of their role within the party. If we adopt a longer time frame, the last several decades are a return to a prior situation. Nonetheless, it is clear that it is correct to see the Republican Party as becoming more conservative over the last several decades. The party

has become more of clear and coherent representative of conservative views that have been with us for some time.



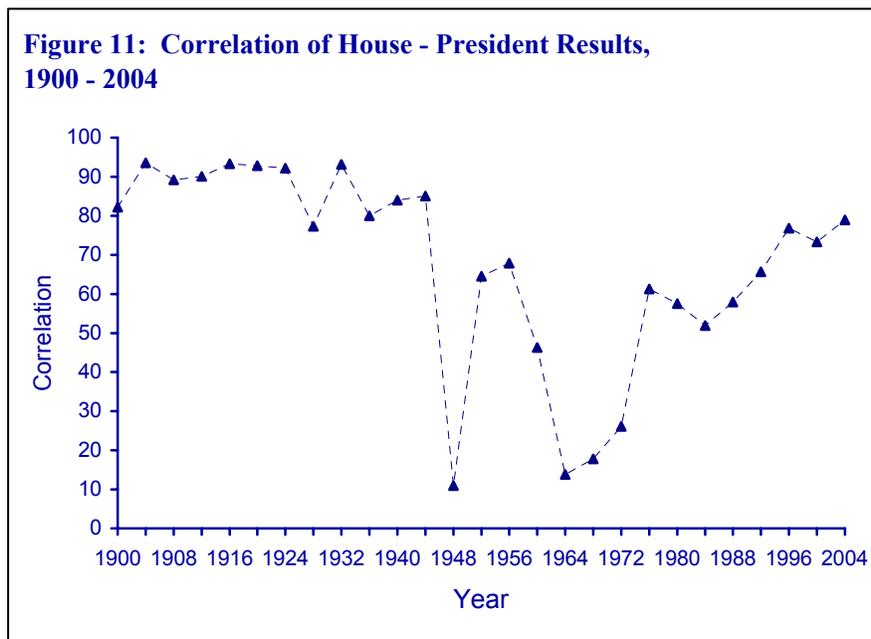
Concentration and Clarity of Argument

The result of all these changes has been a much more coherently conservative Republican Party. The party encompasses more and more of the conservatives in the nation and this greater – though not complete – uniformity within the party provides the basis to make a more sustained and aggressive presentation of conservative principles. A set of views that was previously distributed between two parties is now concentrated in one.

The consequence is a twist on the V.O. Key argument that the less affluent fare better when there is a cohesive party based on the less affluent (1949). His argument was that a party that mobilized and consistently derived its electoral base from the less affluent was able to more effectively make its case in the political arena. This was particularly likely if party

leaders were in agreement on policy concerns within and across elections and were able to present a sustained argument for their cause. If these conditions prevailed, then it is possible for a group advocating a set of positions to create a coherent argument to create pressure on opponents to respond.

That situation has developed for Republicans. They drive essentially the same vote for House and presidential results across House districts. Figure 11 presents this correlation for the last century. Since 1964, the low point for this association, this correlation has steadily increased, and in 1996 - 2004 reached its highest levels since the 1940s. This consistency of results means that the presidential and congressional (at least as represented by the House) wings of the party have the same base. At the individual level the association between party id, and presidential and House voting has also increased (Bartels, 2000). This provides greater cohesion to make an argument.



Reassembling a conservative electoral coalition within the Republican Party might be enough by itself to increase the articulation, presence, and forcefulness of the conservative argument in American political debate. The intensity of the conservative argument has also been intensified by their sense that there are real and troubling trends suggesting serious problems in American society. In the last thirty years there have been increases in the number of people on welfare (until welfare reform of 1996), divorce, the percentage of births that are illegitimate, single-parent families, sex on television, and the availability of pornography on the internet, among other trends (Brewer and Stonecash, 2006). The income tax burden is increasingly derived from the top 10-20 % of income earners, which conservatives think stifles entrepreneurial energies and rewards. Conservatives see a strong need not just to reassert conservative positions to make sure such views are considered. They also see a society heading in the wrong direction and see an urgent need to restore appropriate values and reduce the fiscal size of government and taxes on those more successful.

This greater intensity of concern about social trends has been supported by a significant increase in the presence of conservative think tanks that generate studies and position papers to bolster conservative arguments. Conservative think tanks have been able to develop analyses of disturbing trends, provide explanations of what has gone wrong, commission focus groups and polls to help frame and focus arguments in appealing ways, and then provide lobbying support to present all this to Members of Congress (Micklethwait and Woolridge, 2004; and Graetz and Shapiro, 2005). All this has helped increase the impact of conservative arguments within the political process.

The framing of conservative critiques has been particularly important. Welfare has been opposed on the grounds that it reduces individual accountability and responsibility and ultimately encourages behavioral patterns that prevent people from succeeding and being

independent (Murray, 1984). It has not been opposed on the grounds that welfare recipients are just lazy and undeserving. This Republicans framing appeals to American notions of individualism and responsibility. Abortion has been opposed as morally wrong and as killing children and not as taking away the right of women to choose. That argument has some appeal because many people are pro-choice but still uneasy about supporting this activity. The estate tax is labeled the “death tax” and opposed on the grounds that it taxes people at death, is double taxation, and penalizes those who have worked hard and achieved. Each of these frames appeals to pervasive views in the electorate and makes the conservative argument more compelling.

Summary

The argument of this analysis is that the major change in recent decades has been the mobilization of conservatives to the Republican Party. There is no evidence that there has been a significant national shift toward conservative positions. Rather, conservative views have now been mobilized into one party allowing a coherent and consistent argument. It is this consistency that has made conservative views more central to American politics. Their presence in the society is not necessarily greater, but their forcefulness certainly is.

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Endnotes

¹ The argument that the nation has become more conservative has been made in numerous ways. The most common approach appears to be that the nation has become more conservative, and the challenge is to explain how that happened. Examples of that approach are: Godfrey Hodgson, [The World Turned Right Side Up: A History of the Conservative Ascendancy in America](#), (Boston: Houghton Mifflin, 1996), John Micklethwait and Adrian Woolridge, [The Right Nation: Conservative Power in America](#), (New York: Penguin, 2004); and, Thomas Frank, [What's the Matter With Kansas: How Conservatives Won the Heart of America](#), (New York: Metropolitan Books, 2004).

² See, for example, Joel Brinkley, "Out of Spotlight, Bush Overhauls U.S. Regulations," [New York Times](#), August 14, 2004.

³ These data have been developed by Keith Poole. The data are available at: <http://voteview.com/dwnl.htm>. The method is explained in Poole, Keith T., and Howard Rosenthal, [Congress: A Political-Economic History of Roll Call Voting](#). (New York: Oxford University Press, 1997)

And while many socially conservative intellectuals will acknowledge the tension between Republican economic orthodoxy and their own communitarian ideals, the chasm between their stated ambition (to make it possible for working-class families to get by on a single breadwinner's salary) and their proposed solutions (Let them eat slightly more generous child tax credits) casts doubt on their sincerity. On that agenda: What would your ideal, conservative-friendly system of organized labor look like? On the right of center, I do think there is a genuinely shifting focus from the rising tides lift all boats; as long as we're for business, everybody will come out ahead idea to a realization that something is going to have to be done to make the economy work better for the typical worker. Economic conservatives favor less government regulation, lower taxes and weaker labor unions while social conservatives focus on moral issues and neoconservatives focus on democracy worldwide. Although conservatism has much older roots in American history, the modern movement began to gel in the mid-1930s when intellectuals and politicians collaborated with businessmen to oppose the liberalism of the New Deal led by President Franklin D. Roosevelt, newly energized labor unions and big city Democratic machines. The Conservatives were the beneficiaries of Labour's decline. Cameron sought to shed his party's right-wing image, which had dented its popularity for the previous 10 years. In contrast to his three predecessors, he emphasized that cutting taxes would not be a priority for the next Conservative government; economic stability and strong public services would come first. He also sought to put his party at the heart of the debates about civil liberties and climate change causes previously more associated with politicians to the left of centre. Many observers figured a Conservative revival in 2010 would wipe away many of the Lib Dems' gains, but others also believed that the party might offset that by making some gains in Labour-held seats. As the conservative movement began organizing in the 1950s, an antecedent to today's social conservatism came in the form of an intellectual movement led most notably by Russell Kirk. Self-consciously Burkean, Kirk's anti-utopian movement emphasized the role of tradition, property, decentralization, and religion in a properly ordered society—that is, a society that aimed for the promotion of virtue. The other two strands were economic conservatism (or, as many of its proponents preferred, classical liberalism) and anti-communism. Barry Goldwater's 1964 campaign marked the rise of the conservative movement to power within the Republican Party and laid the foundation for Ronald Reagan's victory 16 years later.