

POLITICAL SCIENCE 101 FOR EXCHANGE STUDENTS AND ADULTS

Freedom vs. equality by George Will

2004 may be the most nation-shaping election since 1932, not only -- or even primarily -- because of the parties' foreign policy differences. Those differences, about sovereignty, multilateralism, preemptive war and nation-building, concern vital fundamentals. But 2004 may secure the ascendancy of one of two radically different ideas of the proper role of government and the individual's proper relationship to it.

This will be the first election since candidate George W. Bush made explicit in 2000 what had become implicit in conservatives' behavior. As recently as the 1994 congressional elections, Republicans have triumphed by preaching small-government conservatism, vowing to abolish four Cabinet-level departments, including Education.

By 2000 conservatives knew that even Americans rhetorically opposed to "big government" are, when voting, defenders of the welfare state. Social Security and Medicare are the two most popular and biggest components of government (together, a third of federal outlays and rising as the population ages).

Candidate Bush promised to strengthen the New Deal's emblematic achievement (Social Security) and to add a prescription drug entitlement to the Great Society's Medicare. Since 2001 he has increased federal spending 48 percent on education.

Today "strong government conservatism" -- "strong" is not synonymous with "big" -- is the only conservatism palatable to a public that expects government to assuage three of life's largest fears: illness, old age and educational deficits that prevent social mobility. Some conservatives believe government strength is inherently inimical to conservative aspirations. This belief mistakenly assumes that all government action is merely coercive, hence a subtraction from freedom. But government can act strongly to make itself less controlling and intrusive, enacting laws that offer opportunities and incentives for individuals to become more self-sufficient.

Today, as for two centuries, the left-right divide is defined by different valuations of equality and freedom. Liberals favor expanding government controls, shrinking the sphere of freedom of choice, to promote equality -- equal dependence on government-provided education, health and pension entitlements.

Conservatives say this produces a culture of dependency. It diminishes individual competence and dignity and impedes the progress that results from competing social alternatives -- in education, health care and pensions. Conservatives say inequalities of outcomes are manifestations of freedom and prerequisites for progress. Both parties understand the political calculus: People dependent on government tend to vote for liberals promising to enlarge government. Hence the intensity of Democratic resistance to four facets of Bush's strong-government conservatism: school standards and choice; medical savings accounts; choice in investing a portion of Social Security taxes; and cuts in individual income taxes.

Standards that measure schools' performances enable parents, exercising the right to choose, to differentiate education products. Medical savings accounts would empower individuals to pursue preferences and, by making individuals into price-sensitive shoppers, the accounts would serve medical cost-containment. Private investment of Social Security taxes would democratize access to wealth creation, reducing dependence on government-provided retirement security. Low taxes expand each earner's freedom by enlarging discretionary income and focus society's attention on improving well-being through individual creation of wealth rather than government redistribution of it.

Understood as antidotes to the culture of dependency, these four facets of Bush's strong-government conservatism explain a paradox of today's politics: Partisan heat has increased while differences between the parties, as traditionally measured (big versus small government), have narrowed. The traditional measurement misses two new realities.

First, Democrats are now largely a party of providers of government services (public school teachers, government employees) and people dependent on those services. By deepening the culture of dependency, Democrats expand their appeal -- and serve the left's traditional preference for equality of condition over freedom.

Second, Republican strong-government conservatism contracts the dependency culture and expands the sphere of choices, thereby enhancing the individual's competence and responsibility. This validates Republicans' claims to power -- and serves the right's traditional preference for freedom over legislated equality.

So Bush's presidency, which seals his party's coming-to-terms with the need to put strong government in the service of conservative values, is neither a surrender to the liberal agenda nor an armistice in the struggle over whether social policy should emphasize equality or freedom. Rather, it liberates Republicans to adopt reforms in the provision of education, health care and pensions. Such reforms will drive Democrats into reactionary liberalism: defense of the dependency culture and its increasing constriction of individuals' choices.

Republicans plan to sacrifice some equality to promote individualism. Democrats want to limit freedom of choice in order to promote the social solidarity of equal dependence on government provision of services. Nov. 2 may indeed reshape relations between the individual and the federal government that was born after 1932. ©2003 Washington Post Writers Group