

The Ideals Gap

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As the election season kicks off in earnest, here's a key to success: the ideals gap. Winning candidates and parties will appeal to our hearts through their ideals and to our heads by connecting their programs to ideals.

The ideals gap is not the so-called values gap. Remember the values gap? After the last election, pundits argued that the Democrats were on the wrong side of many moral questions that mattered to voters. The values gap refers to hot-button issues such as abortion, prayer in schools, gay marriage, and in some ways illegal immigrants. Some Democrats said that more of their candidates should represent their religious values openly.

The ideals gap is something else. The ideals are all-American secular values of democracy, equality, rights, and compassion. Surprisingly, in recent years the Republicans have replaced the Democrats as the perceived party of idealism. The ideals gap now favors the Republicans.

It used to be Democrats who appealed to our ideals, while Republicans were the realists. When Democrats said women should be equal, it was left to some Republicans to mutter that reality was more complex, that maybe women didn't want to be equal, that the ideal of equality was naïve. The Democrats were advocates for the third world and foreign aid, while Republicans talked about money down a rat hole.

So it used to go, on issues from the War on Poverty to opposing ethnic cleansing in the Balkans. The Democrats appealed to our ideals of equality and human rights. The Republicans, while not exactly spurning those ideals, seemed always to be darkly citing the limitations of human nature, the need for *Realpolitik*.

But today, on many issues the Republicans have staked out idealism and optimism. The Democrats have become the tut-tutters and the finger-waggers. "Not so fast, you're assuming too much, don't forget about culture."

For example, when Republicans propose that ordinary citizens be able to invest some of their social security money, Democrats appear to respond that ordinary citizens are too ignorant to take care of such weighty matters as their futures.

Republicans argue that if schools are held accountable, students from disadvantaged backgrounds will rise to higher standards. Democrats seem to say, "Wait, you can't expect these sorts of students to succeed."

In a complete turnaround from fifteen years ago, it is Republicans who have ushered in the biggest reforms in foreign aid in forty years. Republicans have provided world leadership against HIV/AIDS. It is Republicans who seem to be the champions of small business, local government, and far-reaching reforms in higher education. The Democrats are put in a position of seeming to respond, "It's not that easy, go slower, be realistic."

Of course there's the biggest example: the Republicans assert that democracy is wanted everywhere and can succeed everywhere, while Democrats end up having to say, wait, Arabs or Persians or Afghans are different, don't forget about culture, and so forth. Now the Democrats seem to be the defenders of that view, in ways their predecessors would have abhorred when applied, say, to democracy in South Africa (or to Africa in general).

Daniel P. Moynihan once observed, "The central conservative truth is that it is culture, not politics, that determines the success of a society. The central liberal truth is that politics can change a culture and save it from itself." The roles now seem reversed. Democratic idealism has dissipated. The Republicans have created an idealism gap.

Realism is indispensable. But as the game plan for an election campaign, it can seem wonkish and status quo. If a candidate or a party is on the wrong side of the ideals gap, the antidote is not to play the values game as this is conventionally understood.

The Democrats don't necessarily need more candidates who are evangelical Christians or opponents of gay marriage. We don't need a debate on which candidate believes more in the Afterlife. The Democrats' task—really, the task of all successful candidates—is instead to make clear your ideals, and then to link your platform to those ideals with reasoned argument and evidence. The winners in November will be those on the high side of the ideals gap.

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