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OpEd

Republicans play dirty because Republican policies are unpopular

Monica Prasad

*Monica Prasad's areas of interest are political sociology, economic sociology, and comparative historical sociology. Her new book *Starving the beast* asks why Republican politicians have focused so relentlessly on cutting taxes over the last several decades – whether the economy is booming or in recession, whether the federal budget is in surplus or deficit, and even though total taxes in the U.S. are already lower than in other developed countries. Drawing on archival documents that have never before been seen, Prasad traces the history of the famous 1981 “supply side” tax cut which became the cornerstone for the next several decades of Republican domestic economic policy. She argues that the main forces behind tax cuts are not business group pressure, racial animus, or a belief that tax cuts will pay for themselves. Rather, the tax cut movement arose because in America – unlike in the rest of the advanced industrial world – progressive policies are not embedded within a larger political economy that is favorable to business, a situation whose origins she explored in a prior book (*The Land of Too Much*). Prasad's scholarship has won several grants and awards, including the Fulbright award, the National Science Foundation Early Career Development Grant, The Guggenheim Fellowship, and several book and article awards. m-prasad@northwestern.edu*

For some years now Republicans at state and national level have been playing what some scholars have called “constitutional hardball,” implementing strategies that, while technically legal, undermine the spirit of the laws: stealing a Supreme Court seat, tricking Democrats into being absent for crucial votes, suppressing votes. Harvard scholars Steven Levitsky and Daniel Ziblatt (2019) suggest that this is because the Republican Party's base of white voters is shrinking, and Republicans would lose in a fair electoral contest. The long-term solution, they argue, is for the party to diversify.

But the problem is deeper than that. The real problem for the Republicans is that their basic creed, that government should not intervene in the economy, is unpopular with Americans. For all that they complain about government, Americans love every spe-

cific thing that government does. This has been true as far back as we have consistent polling data. In April, the Pew Research Center asked Americans, as it does periodically, which programs should see increases or decreases in government spending. As usual, 90 percent wanted to keep spending the same, or increase it, on education, 94 percent on veterans' benefits, 89 percent on rebuilding highways and bridges, 89 percent on Medicare, 85 percent on environmental protection, 80 percent on health care, and on down a long list. Not a single policy saw more than one-third of Americans wanting a cut. The least popular program was “assistance to needy in the world,” with 28 percent wanting to decrease spending on it – and this may be because Americans vastly overstate the amount of the budget devoted to foreign aid (Rutsch 2015).

Republican Party history over the past century can be read as a struggle with this basic fact, that Americans love government. This structure of opinion means that when Franklin Roosevelt re-founded the Democratic Party on the basis of a muscular role for government, he sidelined Republicans for a generation. Between 1933 and 1974 Republicans controlled Congress for only four years. The situation was so extreme that many thought Democrats were the “natural” party of government. A popular pollster's formulation was that the Democrats were the “sun party,” around which the entire political system revolved, and the Republicans were the “moon party,” a small forgotten satellite. For those 40 years Republicans desperately tried to figure out how to get back into power – move to the middle, or move to the extreme? Emphasize anti-communism, or boost

organizational efforts? Better leaders, or better communication strategies?

Eventually, the Republicans discovered two major exceptions to the unpopularity of Republican policies. The first is tax cuts. In the 1970s Republicans discovered that everyone loves tax cuts, as long as you can convince them that those tax cuts aren't going to lead to spending cuts. Deficit spending was born, and the discovery that deficits could be financed with foreign money reoriented American political economy. Republicans made an art of fomenting the belief that taxes could be cut without cutting spending, by getting rid of "government waste." Public estimates of how much money government wastes skyrocketed, without really any basis for it. Even those stories you hear of hundred-dollar hammers at the Pentagon are wild myths (Freedberg 1998), a result of accounting procedures that distribute the cost of overhead to individual items. Factually based or not, these stories helped to raise cynicism about government waste, and to raise support for tax cuts.

The problem for Republicans is that of late, the tax-cut magic has been weakening. Republicans have cut taxes so much that opposition to taxes is at its lowest levels since polling on this question began.

This has led them to the second major exception about the unpopularity of Republican policies: racism. In retrospect, the past forty years can be seen as Republicans flirting with – as Democrats slowly moved away from – the dangerous appeal of inciting xenophobia for votes. Tax cuts have often stood in opposition to xenophobia as a Republican electoral strategy. Ronald Reagan talked about a welfare queen when he ran in 1976, but by the time he campaigned in 1980 the welfare queen had been left behind and he was focused on the sunny, optimistic promise of tax cuts. It

was George H.W. Bush, who had called tax cuts voodoo economics, who felt it necessary to play the race card in 1992. Richard Nixon did not have a tax cut strategy, focusing instead on racial appeals, vice versa for George W. Bush.

This is another way the arrival of Donald Trump signals something different: Trump was elected partly based on racist appeals, and then implemented tax cuts. Because tax cuts alone cannot sustain an electoral strategy any longer, the new strategy is to knit together racist appeals to the base with tax cuts for business, and add in abortion restrictions for social conservatives. It's a perilous strategy, because it offends as many people as it attracts. And thus the Republicans find themselves needing to do things such as steal Supreme Court seats in order to keep that fractious coalition together.

If the underlying problem is that the Republican approach to government has been proven an electoral failure over a century, the solution is not just for Republicans to become more ethnically diverse. Rather, a new Republican party needs to be founded on the truth that government intervention is necessary to a growing economy, and on a strategy of discovering *which interventions* are helpful and which are harmful (Lindsey 2018; Hammond 2018).

A Republican, investment-oriented program of government intervention is not implausible. There are three policies Republicans could adopt today that would adhere to Republican principles of focusing on economic growth as the best solution to poverty, and that would actually help economic growth: a much stronger commitment to vocational training, which would outfit workers who don't go to college with the skills needed to survive the transformation of the glob-

al economy; paid parental leave, which can help to increase both male and female labor force participation rates because parents do not lose their jobs when they need to care for a child; and "flexicurity," a policy of allowing firms to hire and fire at will, but stepping in with intensive retraining efforts for fired workers, which brings flexibility to firms and yet security to workers. All of these are market-oriented and business-friendly policies. They have been shown to be remarkably successful at generating economic growth and ensuring that all citizens participate in that growth (Prasad 2018). They can be the seeds for a Republican strategy of rebuilding America.

For any Republicans despairing about the state of their party, there is a way out. It does not require abandoning traditional Republican beliefs. It just means redirecting attention onto a new path, a path that can reclaim the soul of the party of Lincoln.

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