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The Enduring Mommy-Daddy Political Divide

By David Paul Kuhn

Tufts University psychologists showed people headshots of white Democrats and Republicans. Participants guessed the political affiliation significantly above chance, about 55 to 60 percent. That's better than the house advantage in blackjack. The key difference? The study, published this January, found that Democrats projected "warmth" and Republicans projected "power."

This contrast between "warmth" and "power" characterizes our politics. The health care debate appears mired in innumerable details. But it has always concerned a far deeper debate over two competing ideas of government – to nurture or to safeguard. The dynamic is so intimately familiar to us because it is conventionally familial. The health care clash, like American politics, remains rooted in our mommy and daddy parties.

In January, the Pew Research Center asked Americans to prioritize 21 issues. Americans were most concerned about the economy. But the greatest partisan gap, like the year before, was over "providing health insurance to the uninsured." It was a "top priority" to one quarter of Republicans. It was a "top priority" to three quarters of Democrats.

Democrats' five most partisan issues: health care, the environment, aiding the poor, education and securing Medicare. In short, maternal.

Republicans' five most partisan issues: strengthening the military, illegal immigration, influence of lobbyists, terrorism and the moral breakdown. In short, paternal.

This mother and father schema came to define our politics in the sixties. Debates over culture, crime, race and war began to re-sort the electorate. The political right stressed law and order. The political left stressed societal welfare. And not much has changed since.

Today, the daddy party views government as a force for order. Government exists to prevent harm, whether to life or way of life. Washington is to structure politics, not improve society. But this more minimal state, like the stereotypical detached father, can also feel callously indifferent.

The mommy party views government as a means to feel safe. Washington provides a freedom from jeopardy to nurture citizens. Government is both safety net and springboard. But this active government, like the stereotypical overbearing mother, can also feel oppressive and invasive.

The dominance of the daddy state, and it was a distant father then, slowly faded between Lincoln, the Roosevelts and Wilson. Washington found a softer side. In the words of historian H.W. Brands, government would not only prevent bad but also promote good.

This is active-state liberalism. What we call big government. In six decades Washington began to inspect meat, curtail child labor, offer the elderly security, assure civil rights and even declare "war on poverty." For the mommy party, universal healthcare was a logical next step.

"This is what happens as nations grow wealthier; they use money to buy civilization," David Brooks insightfully wrote last year, in an important column on values and the health care debate.

But by the mid-sixties, Americans increasingly saw this "civilization" as too costly. The nation was affluent and assured. The Great Depression was a generation past. And the role of government was still changing.



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Johnson shifted liberal governance from direct-relief programs to direct-benefit programs. Groups were targeted instead of needs. Government could now not only protect its people and provide relief in hard times. It could also make our society "great." It was the maternal party on steroids. Within a couple years, the Great Society lost majority support.

Big government was once middle class centered: New Deal jobs, the Home Owners Loan Corporation, the GI Bill. By the mid-sixties it connoted the welfare state. Doris Kearns Goodwin once wrote that Johnson regarded the Great Society "in the way overly fond parents look at their children." Conservatives "nanny state" critique was soon to catch on.

Active-state liberalism always depended upon self-interest. By LBJ's day, partly due to post-war prosperity, many Americans had less need for safety nets. They also saw their government less interested in them. The working class felt welfare provided a nearly equivalent lifestyle. People began to ask the price of all this "warmth." A majority of whites, significantly more men than women, started to oppose big government. They viewed it as more synonymous with cost and less beneficial to them. And as I wrote in my 2007 book about whites, men and Democrats lost majority, "in time, the mandate of liberalism narrowed as liberals narrowed the beneficiaries of their mandate."

Liberalism still talked about the middle class. But its emphasis was increasingly on the underprivileged. The Nixon-Reagan majority stepped in as the firm father. It promised law, order and to refocus Washington on the "silent majority."

But even Nixon expanded the government still more. Reagan's declaration that "government is the problem" never materialized to big cuts to the nurturing state. At construction, the right resisted progressive entitlements like Social Security. But once built, both parties balked at the hard-choices required to maintain the maternal state. Yet there were exceptions. The moderate Democrat Bill Clinton, amid strong resistance from his party, worked with Republicans to cut the welfare state. That legislation was so controversial it required the Senate maneuver called reconciliation. Still, for all its difficulties, welfare reform was indicative of the more conservative era.

That Nixon-Reagan era finally fell on September 15, 2008. After the crash, according to Gallup tracking, Barack Obama sustained majority support for the first time. The Great Recession reminded many Americans of hard times. The center of the electorate was not converted to mommy's view. But minds were open.

Americans resembled the twenty something moving back home. Daddy's free market felt cold. Personal safety nets were torn, as home values and retirement savings plummeted. Many people were willing to live with mom for a bit. She would now have a bigger role in their lives. But it might help.

Democrats soon went too far. From Hurricane Katrina to the war in Iraq, Democrats saw an absent father who made a mess of the nation. The responsible mother was to take charge and make everything all right (or left). That's how it went in sitcoms. Why not politics?

But America is not Hollywood. Democrats proceeded as if voters moved in with mom for good. They sought a broad social service bill instead of a pure jobs bill. They acted as if the historical tension between Americans and active government was gone. So they pushed to expand entitlements, ineptly at that, before financial reform. Soon Obama was seen as for big government and big business. He was seen as nurturing Wall Street and turning a cold shoulder to Main Street. The president now personified the worst stereotypes of the mommy and daddy parties.

The American Mind never changes as fast as its president. When Obama took office, there was plenty of evidence that he had not changed the political landscape and that Americans remained skeptical of government. The president overestimated his mandate. The media bought and sold the hype. And many prominent Democrats believed that hype. It was Obama's great mistake, accounting for nearly every mistake.

Democrats compounded their problems by ignoring the lesson of the last liberal era. Obama practiced LBJ's liberalism instead of FDR's. The jobs portion of Democrats stimulus bill focused on securing welfare state employees instead of blue-collar workers. But blue-collar workers account for more than two-thirds of all jobs lost in the recession, as of the close of 2009. Health care reform initially centered on securing the uninsured, one in 10 adults, rather than the broader issue of costs. It was governance for the least among us. In stereotypical terms, it was received as excessively maternal.

For the majority of Americans, government once more connotes the "nanny state." It's why big government has become less popular in the past year. About six in 10 adults prefer a smaller government with fewer services to a larger government with more services. The ABC/Washington Post poll finds that 15 percent of Republicans, 35 percent of independents

and 63 percent of Democrats support big government. Last week, along similar partisan lines, a CNN poll found that 56 percent of Americans believe the "federal government has become so large and powerful that it poses an immediate threat to the rights and freedoms of ordinary citizens." And more Americans have reached this stark conclusion than at any point since 1995, when the question was first asked.

Antagonism toward the state has returned to the fore of the American Mind. In the popular perception, the cost of "warmth" again outweighs its potential benefit. Mommy governance is unpopular again. And suddenly, daddy does not look so bad.

Preferences shift, not the nature of the debate. Do more or spend less. Peace through peace or peace through strength. Cut defense. Cut entitlements. The mother and father keep arguing. The issues appear isolated. But the spats betray the deeper fight.

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