

1984: When Liberal Became a Dirty Word

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For over a hundred years, the Republican Party used the word “liberal” positively in its platforms and proudly wore the liberal mantle. That may surprise you, but it is true. The finding comes from analyzing words used in all 40 Republican Party presidential year platforms from the party’s origin in 1856 to its 2012 election campaign. In contrast, the 44 Democratic Party platforms staunchly—but not consistently—embraced the liberal label since its first real platform in 1840. Concerning “conservative,” neither party mentioned it either frequently or prominently in any of its party platforms.

Ordinary citizens may not care much about party platforms and the words they use, but party activists care a lot. The wording of a platform plank often means the difference between victory and defeat to intraparty factions, and new phrasing may foretell new party emphases. Party platforms tell a lot about party politics at the time and over time.

For over a hundred years, neither party rephrased “liberal” in any significantly different way, so there was no story to tell about new party emphases. From 1960 to 1980, however, both recast “liberal” into “liberalizing” and “liberalization”—themselves both positive economic terms. Then in 1984, the Republican Party’s rhetoric dramatically and darkly switched, and liberal became a dirty word.

The story of how both parties used the term over time is described with frequent illustrations from both parties’ platforms. We begin with the Republican Party in 1860.

1860-1960: When Republicans Thought Liberal Was Lovely

The Republican Party’s three-page platform in 1856 made no mention of “liberal” or “conservative.” Its first usage came in 1860, when Abraham Lincoln ran on a Republican platform that supported “liberal wages” to workingmen. In both 1864 and 1868, the Party twice resolved to foster “a liberal and just policy” of immigration. Again in both 1904 and 1908, it called for “liberal administration” of pension laws. For more than fifty years after the Republican Party’s founding, its platforms proudly cited its liberal policies. By explicitly opposing slavery in their pre-Civil War platforms while the Democratic Party defended the institution in theirs, Republicans can justifiably claim to be the liberals of their time, opposing conservative Democrats.

What did liberal mean then? In the 19th century—and for decades into the 1900s—politicians used “liberal” in one or more of its various dictionary meanings. The 1937 edition of the *Oxford Universal English Dictionary* listed five relevant senses for liberal: (1) modifying education to indicate general education, not narrowly technical or professional; (2) free in giving; generous, open-hearted; (3) free from restraint; free in speech or action; (4) free from narrow prejudice; open-minded; and (5) favorable to democratic changes and reforms—hence the opposite of conservative [sic]. Republican platforms then and for some time afterward appeared to use liberal in sense number 2, generous and open-hearted.

The 1912 Republican platform endorsed not only “a more liberal scale of compensation for injury and death” of government employees, but also “a liberal and systematic policy for the improvement of our rivers and harbors,” and “a liberal policy” toward development of Alaska. The Party’s 1916 platform favored “liberal compensation” for ships carrying mail; and its 1920

platform backed “a liberal and generous foreign policy,” “liberal appropriations” to states for highways, and “liberal legislation” for the disabled and infirm.

In 1956, the Republican Platform quoted President Eisenhower’s counsel: “In all those things which deal with people, be liberal, be human;” and it praised the “forces of liberalism” within the Soviet Bloc that challenged communism. The party’s 1960 platform even touted “progressive” Republican policies that resulted in “liberal pay” for postal workers and “liberalization” of social security benefits, and its enlightened legislation “to liberalize” restrictions on naturalization of immigrants from communist countries.

1964-1980: When “Liberal” Meant “Liberalize”

To paraphrase Sherlock Holmes, the Republican platform of 1964 constitutes “the curious incident of the dog in the night-time.” Told that the dog did not bark in the night, Holmes replied that’s what was curious. The 1964 Republican presidential candidate was Barry Goldwater, widely regarded as Mr. Conservative. Neither Goldwater’s acceptance speech in receiving the nomination nor the party platform in 1964 mentioned any form of the word “liberal” (nor “conservative,” for that matter). The dog didn’t bark.

That was curious because by 1992 the *Oxford English Dictionary* had already recognized that liberal was used in politics in a new sense: “favouring social reform and a degree of state intervention in matters of economics and social justice; left-wing.” However, Republican activists for some reason had not yet decided to employ liberal as a fighting word in their party’s platform.

When the 1960 Republican platform promised “to liberalize” immigration restrictions, it signaled a return to the past. By recasting the term to sense 3—free from restraint—the party reverted to the term’s historical usage. Classical liberalism referred to individual freedom from government restrictions. As expressed in the 17th century writings of the English philosopher, John Locke, liberalism encouraged the state to grant citizens liberty to follow their individual pursuits.

On its face, to “liberalize” has the denotation of “making more liberal,” but its connotation is to “free up”—as to free up restrictions on immigration. Hence, in 1968 the Republican platform supported “liberalization of trade” in non-strategic goods with captive nations; in 1978 the party favored a “liberalized” marital tax deduction and “liberalization” in estate taxes; and in 1980 it backed a “liberalization” of depreciation schedules and pledged to “liberalize” them under Republican congressional leadership. Although the party used the term in two different senses, it consistently used liberal positively.

1984-2012: When Liberals Became Targets

Things changed in 1984. For the first time in more than a century and a quarter, the Republican Platform used liberal negatively. Although praising President Reagan for restoring “the American people’s faith in the principles of liberal democracy,” the platform decried “liberal experimenters” for destroying the sense of community and “destructive patterns of conduct too long tolerated by permissive liberals.” During Reagan’s presidency, the party dramatically escalated its platform rhetoric. Now their opponents were not just Democrats, members of the opposing party, but dirty liberals—ideological enemies. The 1988 platform made nine negative references to these liberal Democratic foes:

- “These **liberals** call America’s prosperity an illusion.”
- “That is the **liberals'** way of replacing collective bargaining with congressional edicts about what's good for employees.”
- “Despite opposition from **liberals** in the Congress, we have at least slowed the expansion of federal control.”
- “Republicans believe . . . that the God-given rights of the family come before those of government. That separates us from **liberal** Democrats.”
- “In the 1960s and 1970s, the family bore the brunt of **liberal** attacks on everything the American people cherished.”
- “We will not allow **liberal** Democrats to imperil the other gains the elderly have made during the Reagan-Bush Administration.”
- “Homelessness demonstrates the failure of **liberalism**.”
- “Despite opposition from **liberal** Democrats, we've made a start.”
- “It was fueled by the **liberal** attitudes of the 1960s and 1970s that tolerated drug usage.”

Perhaps the expanded and escalated rhetorical offensive in the 1988 Republican platform contributed to George H.W. Bush’s election. In any event, the Party’s 1992 platform ratcheted up the invective, advancing seventeen negative statements:

- “Yet, in 1992, when the self-governing individual has overcome the paternalistic state, **liberals** here at home simply do not get it.”
- “For more than three decades, the **liberal** philosophy has assaulted the family on every side.”
- “That is why today's **liberal** Democrats are hostile toward any institution government cannot control, like private childcare or religious schools.”
- “Over the last several decades, **liberal** Democrats have increasingly shifted economic burdens onto the American family.”
- “Indeed, the **liberal** Democrat tax-and-spend policies have forced millions of women into the workplace just to make ends meet.”
- “We also believe that powerful unions and **liberal** special interest groups should not be the driving force in education reform.”
- “Decades of **liberalism** have left us with two economies.”
- “That is why **liberal** Democrats have fought us every step of the way, refusing congressional action on Enterprise Zones until Los Angeles burned—and then mocking the expectations of the poor by gutting that critical proposal.”
- “This is the legacy of a **liberalism** that elevates criminals' fights above victims' rights, that justifies soft-on-crime judges' approving early-release prison programs, and that leaves law enforcement officers powerless to deter crime with the threat of certain punishment.”
- “We note that those who seek to disarm citizens in their homes are the same **liberals** who tried to disarm our Nation during the Cold War and are today seeking to cut our national defense below safe levels.”
- “But **liberal** Democrats still control a rigged machine that keeps on spending the public's money.”
- “We stand with farmers against attempts by **liberal** Democrats to repeal the laws of economics by dictating price levels and restricting production.”
- “We oppose any attempt to impose a carbon tax as proposed by **liberal** Democrats.”
- “**Liberal** Democrats think people are the problem.”
- “Although the average family of four now pays \$1,000 a year for environmental controls, **liberal** Democrats want to tighten the squeeze.”
- “Rather than admit their mistakes of the past, the same **liberal** Democrats who sought to disarm America against the Soviet threat now compound their errors with a new campaign—half audacity, half mendacity—to leave the Nation unprotected in a still dangerous world.”
- “However, we oppose **liberal** Democrat attempts to place women in combat positions just to make an ideological point.”

The Republican Party's verbal assault continued in its 1996 platform, which cast eleven aspersions:

- “For more than half a century, that solemn compact has been scorned by **liberal** Democrats and the judicial activism of the judges they have appointed.”
- “In that process, the American Bar Association will no longer have the right to meddle in a way that distorts a nominee's credentials and advances the **liberal** agenda of litigious lawyers and their allies.”
- “This is, in part the legacy of **liberalism**—in the old Democrat Congress, in the Clinton Department of Justice, and in the courts, where judges appointed by Democrat presidents continue their assault against the rights of law-abiding Americans.”
- “Because **liberal** jurists keep expanding the rights of the accused, Republicans propose a Constitutional amendment to protect victims' rights:”
- “Our country's most experienced and dedicated prosecutors were replaced with Clintonite **liberals**, some of whom have refused to prosecute major drug dealers, foreign narcotics smugglers, and child pornographers.”
- “To this crisis in our schools, Bill Clinton responds with the same **liberal** dogmas that created the mess: more federal control and more spending on all the wrong things.”
- “We know what works in education, and it isn't the **liberal** fads of the last thirty years.”
- “Thirty years ago, the ‘Great Society’ was **liberalism's** greatest hope, its greatest boast.”
- “We will revoke these Clinton administration policies and oppose the **liberal** philosophy that bureaucracy can reform welfare.”
- “We call for the removal of structural impediments which **liberals** throw in the path of poor people: over-regulation of start-up enterprises, excessive licensing requirements, needless restrictions on formation of schools and child-care centers catering to poor families, restrictions on providing public services in fields like transport and sanitation, and rigged franchises that close the opportunity door to all but a favored few.”
- “The Clinton Administration has learned nothing from the collapse of **liberalism**.”

The three Republican platforms of 1988, 1992, and 1996 marked high points for tarring the opposition party with the liberal label. After 1996, the Party eased off on its rhetoric. Its 2000 platform merely referred twice to the “old liberal approach” and the “old left-liberal order,” and its 2004 platform avoided the term entirely but did pledge to advance “trade liberalization,” returning to the term's occasional usage prior to 1984. Although the 2012 Republican platform chastised “liberal elites” for trying to drive out religious beliefs; charged that “outdate liberalism” sought to impose on Americans a Euro style bureaucracy; and blamed Obama's “liberal domestic coalition” for its National Security Strategy, those three mentions paled next to the nine, seventeen, and eleven mentions respectively in the 1988, 1992, and 1996 platforms.

1840-1956: When Democrats Thought Liberal Was Lovely Too

For most of their first hundred years of co-existence our current two-party system, both Republicans and Democrats thought that “liberal” was a lovely term in politics. True, the Democrats were more partial to the term—using it 30 times to the Republicans' 14 times—but five usages appeared in Democratic platforms from 1840 to 1852, prior to the Republican's first platform in 1856. Removing those mentions reduces the discrepancy to 25 to 14, not much of a difference. Moreover, five of the Democratic mentions were in identical text repeated in the 1840, 1844, 1848, 1852, and 1884 platforms:

That the **liberal** principles embodied by Jefferson in the Declaration of Independence, and sanctioned in the Constitution, which makes ours the land of liberty, and the asylum of the oppressed of every nation, have ever been cardinal principles in the Democratic faith

The term liberal in that early passage can fit various definitions in the 1937 *Oxford Dictionary*. It might mean (2) free in giving; generous, open-hearted—concerning giving asylum to the oppressed of every nation—which would also support sense (4) free from narrow prejudice; open-minded. But perhaps a better case can be made for sense (3) free from restraint; free in speech or action; and even (5) favorable to democratic changes and reforms. Later, Democrats used the term differently, more in keeping with Republican usage at the time.

Beginning in 1888, Democratic Party platforms used liberal much as it was used in Republican platforms throughout the 19th century, virtually always in sense (2) free in giving; generous, open-hearted. Democrats, however, continued to use the term that way as well throughout the 20th century and into the 21st. The Democrats advocated “a just and liberal policy” concerning the Territories; and their 1892 platform favored “just and liberal pensions” for Union soldiers and dependents and “liberal appropriations” for schools. Liberal pensions and appropriations were also backed in 1900 and 1904, while the 1912 platform urged adoption of a “liberal and comprehensive plan” for improving waterways and “the broadest liberality” toward settlers in public lands. A list of Democratic platform planks in 1916, 1920, 1924, 1928, 1936, 1940, 1952, and 1956 endorsed more generous government policies for injured government employees, for Americans employed building the Panama Canal, for development of water power, and so on.

1960-2012: When Democrats Back Off the Liberal Label

For some reason in 1960, the Democrats began to back off from using “liberal”—as least in its root form—favoring instead “liberalization.” This shift in meaning from generous (sense 2) to free from restraint (sense 3) actually preceded the identical shift in the 1964 Republican platform, four years later. The 1960 Democratic platform did support “a liberal spirit” in immigration policies, but otherwise urged “liberalizing changes in immigration law,” “liberalizing existing credit facilities,” and “liberalizing farm credit facilities.” In 1968 the party advocated “trade liberalization,” and in 1972 it sought to “liberalize the cloture rule” and to “liberalize absentee voting.” While the 1968 platform also endorsed “liberal trade policies” (in two places), “liberal” juxtaposed with “trade” was widely understood to mean “free” and not “generous.” The 1976, 1980, and 1984 Democratic Party platforms continued pounding on the same drum: beating out “liberalization” nine times to two for “liberal”—one of which was to liberal trade.

Perhaps because the Republican platform in 1984 had begun bludgeoning Democrats with the liberal label, Democrats abruptly stopped *all* mentions of “liberal” in any form in Democratic Party platforms from 1988 to 2004. The platform on which Barack Obama won the presidency in 2008 briefly and modestly returned reverted to the old vocabulary, promising “economic liberalization” and defending “liberal democracy. The 2012 Democratic Party platform, however, did not mention liberal in any way, shape, or form.

1856-2012: When Conservatism Was Unheralded

The story about how the Republican and Democratic platforms used the word “conservative” is easy to tell. They rarely mentioned it. Democrats did so merely five times, and Republicans only nine. Like the 1937 *Oxford Universal English Dictionary*’s entry for “liberal,” “conservative” was defined by different meanings, but the three senses offered were closely aligned: (1) characterized by a tendency to preserve or keep intact and unchanged; (2) designation of the English political party, the characteristic principle of which is the maintenance of existing institutions, political and ecclesiastical; and (3) applied to a similar spirit in general politics, theology, business, etc. Unlike its treatment of “liberal,” the 1992 *OED* did not offer a new sense for “conservative” but it did supplement its entry with a “special use” for the British Conservative Party, as generally disposed “to maintain traditional institutions and promote individual enterprise.”

Activists in today’s Democratic Party might be ashamed that their party in 1856 embraced conservatism to maintain that traditional institution, slavery:

Resolved, . . . the only sound and safe solution of the "slavery question" upon which the great national idea of the people of this whole country can repose in its determined **conservatism** of the union—non-interference by congress with slavery in state and territory, or in the District of Columbia.

Although the Democrats did not invoke conservative ideology in their 1860 platform prior to the Civil War, they did “declare our affirmance of the resolutions” previously adopted in 1856 and continued to defend slavery. Democrats then can be viewed as the conservatives of their time and Republicans the liberals. After the Civil War ended, the 1868 Democratic Platform recognized that “the questions of slavery and secession as having been settled for all time to come by the war,” yet it appealed to “all the Conservative elements” to support the Constitution and restore the Union.

Later in the 1800s, Democratic platforms cited conservatism only twice. The 1884 platform urged that legislation “should be cautious and conservative,” and that in 1888 praised the Democrats’ “wise and conservative course” of money management. Nearly a hundred years passed before a Democratic platform alluded to the term again. In 1984, it stated, “Neither a permissive liberalism nor a static conservatism is the answer to reducing crime.” Originally a party that appealed to conservatism to defend slavery, the Democrats mentioned the term only once in 124 years since 1888.

Perhaps not surprisingly, the Republican Party, which began life as the liberal alternative to the conservative Democratic Party on the slavery issue, failed to mention conservative or conservatism in *any* party platform during the 19th century. But it is surprising that Republican Party platforms used the word only nine times since. Its first usage in 1904 said that President McKinley’s “just enforcement of the law is the soundest conservatism.” The Republican Party then waited more than fifty years before using it again. In 1956, the party’s platform statement quoted earlier—“Our great President Dwight D. Eisenhower has counseled us further ‘In all those things which deal with people, be liberal, be human’”—was followed by, “In all those things which deal with people's money, or their economy, or their form of government, be conservative.”

Nearly forty years passed before Republican platforms cited conservative principles again. The rhetorical spigot opened somewhat in 1992, when the platform praised the first President Bush’s willingness to “win a new conservative war on poverty.” In 1996, it touted its presidential candidate Bob Dole’s statement: “When I am president, only conservative judges need apply.” Then in 2000, the Republican platform endorsed candidate George W. Bush’s

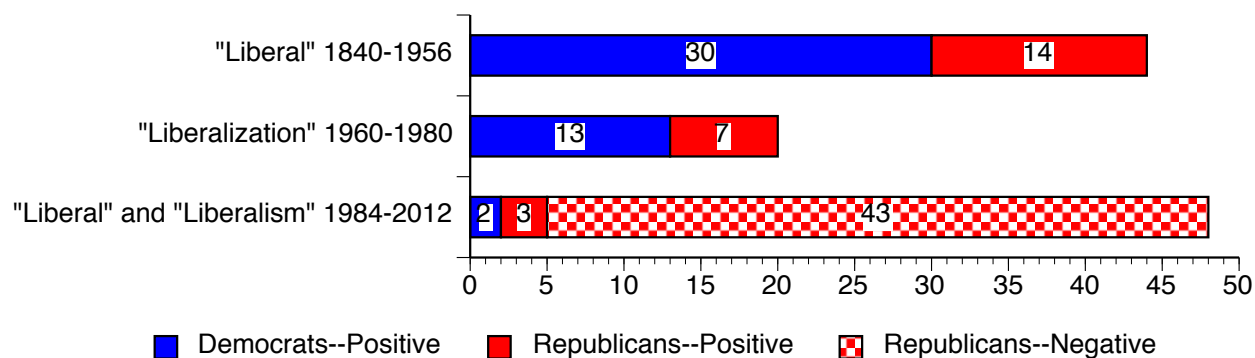
“compassionate conservatism”—an old pioneer concept “in which everyone had responsibility to follow the rules, but no one would be left behind.” The 2000 platform also backed faculty “who are penalized for their conservatism,” and it applauded Bush’s pledge to appoint only judges who “share his conservative beliefs.” The spigot closed in 2004 and 2008, and only one citation trickled out in the 2012 platform, which simply noted, “Conservation is a conservative value.”

Overall, the root word conservative simply did not figure much in the platforms of the two major American political parties since their founding. Together in 84 party platforms (44 Democratic and 40 Republican) over 170 years, the two parties mentioned conservative or conservatism a total of just 14 times. The term never became common in the platform rhetoric of each party.

Conclusion: A Tale of Three Eras

Liberal-conservative rhetoric in the platforms of the Democratic and Republican parties over time can be divided into three eras, as shown in Figure 1. The first era, which extends from the parties’ first platforms to 1956, might be called *A Century of Consensus*. During the 116 years between its first platform in 1840 and its 1956 platform, the Democratic Party mentioned liberal 30 times. During the 100 years from its 1856 to 1956 platforms, the Republican Party mentioned liberal 14 times. Both parties throughout this period virtually always used liberal in a positive way.

Figure 1: Mentions of "Liberal" and Its Forms in Democratic and Republican Party Platforms Respectively Since 1840 and 1856



The second era, which lasted the twenty years from 1960 to 1980, might be deemed *A Period of Adjustment*. During this time, both parties shifted to talking about liberalization instead of liberal. Whereas “liberalization” had previously appeared only once (Democrats, 1952) in 56 party platforms up to 1956, during the twenty years from 1960 to 1980 Democratic platforms mentioned it thirteen times and Republicans seven. Following the Republican Party’s practice during the *Century of Consensus*, not once during the *Period of Adjustment* did a Republican platform use liberal as a dirty word.

The third era, which has lasted more than a quarter century, began in 1984 and has continued to 2012. It might be labeled *The Age of Attack and Avoidance*. For the first time in the history of its platforms, the Republican Party attacked its Democratic opponents for being liberals. Abruptly, Republican Party platforms began to use the term negatively, to deride

Democrats. By word count, Republican platform attacks quadrupled from two to eight in 1988 and then almost doubled to fifteen in 1992. In response, Democrats—who like Republicans had proudly claimed the liberal label before—now avoided it almost entirely in their party platforms, using it only once after 1980. After Republicans began bashing liberal heads, Democrats kept theirs down.

Many people know that GOP is a nickname for the Republican Party. Most probably think that GOP means “Grand Old Party,” but the Party’s official web site says that it stood for “Gallant Old Party” back in 1875. That was when Republicans grandly touted their liberal policies. Given its platform history, people might debate whether it is gallant now for the Party to attack Democrats as liberal rogues—and ideological enemies—rather than electoral opponents.

Yesterday’s truth is that the Republican Party began as the liberal alternative to a conservative Democratic Party that defended the institution of slavery. Ultimately, Republicans employed military force of the national government states to compel southern states to change their institutions. Today’s truth is that the Republican Party now defends states rights against federal intervention. More than a century and a half after the Civil War, the parties have switched ideological sides. Republicans became conservatives, and Democrats became liberals. According to their party platforms, that’s not how they started out.

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