



11350 Random Hills Road, Suite 800, Fairfax, Virginia 22030 Phone (703) 934-6101 Fax (703) 352-3678

fff@fff.org www.fff.org

One-Party System **by Sheldon Richman**

I can predict the winner of the presidential election even now: the government. In a one-party system, that's how things work. One-party system? Yes. The American political scene makes much more sense if you think of the two parties as two divisions of the *same* party.

Admittedly that is hard to do at first. All American politics is presented as a tooth-and-claw rivalry between Republicans and Democrats. It is certainly true that elections determine who holds office among the parties' candidates, and who holds office determines whose cronies get sinecures and contracts. That does give the appearance of real competition.

Moreover, the major news media are willing participants in the charade that Republicans and Democrats have substantially different ideas about things. Generally, we are asked to believe that Republicans want less government and more war, while the Democrats want more government and less war.

As you may have noticed, that makes no sense. War and government go hand in hand, and both parties want more government. Each side tends to dislike only the wars started by the other side.

Let's look at foreign policy. Republican John McCain is an unabashed supporter of the Iraqi invasion and occupation, though he didn't think the original occupation was brutal enough. His plan is to "win the war" and manage the Middle East, which includes maintaining the option of attacking Iran if American interests require it.

We're supposed to believe that Hillary Clinton and Barack Obama disagree with McCain, and they do a little — just not on the big questions. They don't talk about winning the war, but neither would withdraw all U.S. forces from the Middle East. Obama, who touts his original opposition to the Iraq invasion, says he'll keep enough force there to respond if al-Qaeda in Mesopotamia establishes a base there. Clinton promises to "obliterate" Iran if it attacks Israel. Both, like McCain, think Iran is America's business.

In other words, no less than McCain, the Democrats see the Middle East in imperialist terms. Some peace party.

On domestic issues, there do appear to be differences — but only on the surface. Take trade: Clinton and Obama made anti-NAFTA noises, but it is unlikely that either would pursue a seriously protectionist program. Selected trade barriers are possible, as they are with McCain.

McCain talks like a free trader — usually — but Republicans can never be fully trusted on the issue. Ronald Reagan was the most protectionist president since the horrendous Herbert Hoover. George W. Bush imposed steel tariffs early in his first term, and his “free-trade” agreements always have exceptions for special interests. When McCain was touting free trade recently, he said, “There have been inadequacies, there has been dumping in our markets, and there have been unequal wages.” That is not how a real free trader talks. “Dumping” is a pejorative term for price competition; and if trade is unfair because wages are unequal, how will poor countries trade with the rich West?

On health care, Clinton and Obama want a larger government role. But the government’s role is already large, and McCain doesn’t call for a rollback. Licensing, patents, and other interventions that make medical care expensive would stay in place. At most he talks about manipulating the tax code to create various health-insurance incentives. He calls this a “free-market” solution, which it isn’t.

That is typical. Democrats want to use government directly (insurance mandates and taxpayer subsidies), while Republicans would use it indirectly, by creating tax inducements to get people and companies to do something.

But that difference is far less substantial than it seems because in both cases *politicians* determine the goals to be achieved. Republicans and Democrats only disagree over the way to achieve them.

In a free society government operatives don’t pick objectives for people. People pick them for themselves. A candidate who respected freedom would propose ending governmental involvement in health care entirely and slashing taxes without conditions so that people could make medical decisions for themselves.

The election season would be more interesting if there were more suspense about the outcome.

*Sheldon Richman is senior fellow at The Future of Freedom Foundation, author of **Tethered Citizens: Time to Repeal the Welfare State**, and editor of [The Freeman](#) magazine. Visit his blog “Free Association” at www.sheldonrichman.com.*

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