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Iraq, immigration debates underscore political polarization of Washington

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Republican and Democratic presidential candidates are abandoning the middle ground for positions on Iraq and immigration that cater to their parties' fringes the latest example of polarization trumping moderation in Washington.

Democrats are lurching to the left on Iraq. Republicans are moving right on immigration. Neither shift is a surprise; the two-party system encourages presidential candidates to appeal to each side's most fervent voters during the nomination fights.

But two things make this cycle special:

The early start to the 2008 campaign means that White House hopefuls will be listening longer than usual to their parties' "base" voters before having to worry about what the rest of the electorate thinks.

National political leaders are more polarized than they've been in decades.

"It surely doesn't bode well for reconciliation or trying to forge a consensus on these two very important topics," said David L. Epstein, an expert on political polarization at Columbia University. "The worry is that things are just going to become more polarized as times goes on and it's going to be harder and harder for whoever wins to govern."

On Iraq, four of the leading Democratic candidates cast Senate votes in 2002 to give President George W. Bush the authority to wage war. At the time, Bush's approval ratings were high and Democratic consultants warned their clients against looking weak in the war on terror by standing up to the White House.

As the U.S. casualty totals in Iraq climbed, the liberal wing of the party galvanized anti-war sentiment via the Internet and applied pressure on Democratic leaders to defy Bush. To differing degrees, Democratic presidential candidates distanced themselves from their votes and the war most notably the front-runner, Sen. Hillary Rodham Clinton.

In 2002, the New York senator was one of the more hawkish Democrats in Congress. She not only warned that Saddam Hussein was rebuilding his weapons of mass destruction program, but also accused the Iraqi leader of giving "aid, comfort and sanctuary to terrorists, including al-Qaida members, though there is apparently no evidence of his involvement in the terrible events of Sept. 11, 2001."

Like the Republican White House, she was wrong about Saddam's weapons and ties to al-Qaida.

Even as Clinton started to question the president's integrity and competence regarding the war, she often echoed his rhetoric. "Failure is not an option," she said in December 2003 about Iraq and Afghanistan. "We have no option but to stay involved and committed."

Her position became politically untenable when first-term Sen. Barack Obama, a fellow Democrat, entered the race, burnishing his record of opposing the war from the start. Under pressure, Clinton and Obama tacked to the left in recent weeks first opposing deadlines for U.S. troop withdrawal, then reversing course last week to vote against funding the war.

On immigration, the Republican Party's top tier is filled with candidates who previously supported immigrant rights in general or, specifically, backed giving illegal immigrants a route to citizenship: Sen. John McCain, former New York Mayor Rudy Giuliani, former Massachusetts Gov. Mitt Romney and former Sen. Fred Thompson.

Only McCain has stood by his views. The others fell in line behind the anti-immigration Republican base to oppose a compromise bill forged by the White House and Democratic lawmakers.

Thompson went so far as to say the United States is "beset by people who are suicidal maniacs and want to kill countless innocent men, women and children around the world" an inflammatory charge that he didn't even try to substantiate.

The positioning on Iraq and immigration is part of a broader trend toward polarization in Washington, which some experts believe is more pronounced than any time since the late 1800s. The factors contributing to polarization today are similar to those from a century or so ago. They include:

New technologies that democratize communications (the telegraph then, and the Internet now).

Clusters of emotional issues that tend to divide people (trust-busting, civil rights and immigration then; abortion, gay rights and immigration now).

More sophisticated political strategies (peer-to-peer persuasion on the precinct level then; microtargeting and high-tech redistricting now).

"The bases are much more clearly defined from one another than they've been since maybe the turn of the last century," said Marc J. Hetherington, an associate professor of political science at Vanderbilt University who is writing a book on polarization called "Divided We Stand."

Still, the nation's political leaders are generally more divided than the people they represent on Iraq, immigration and other issues.

"It makes it very difficult to govern," Hetherington said. "It makes it really hard to get anything done."

EDITOR'S NOTE Ron Fournier has covered politics for The Associated Press for nearly 20 years.

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