

# ONE

## Introduction

In 1954 a brash and brilliant twenty-eight-year-old began planning a bold literary venture. As the future editor and initial publisher of *National Review*, William F. Buckley, Jr., worked tirelessly to secure financing and assemble a talented group of writers. The inaugural issue dated November 19, 1955, showcased the magazine as a forum where conservative ideas would be explained, refined, and applied to problems and politics at home and abroad. In Buckley's first "Publisher's Statement" describing purposes and goals, the budding intellectual icon noted that *National Review* "stands athwart history, yelling Stop, at a time when no one is inclined to do so, or to have much patience with those who so urge it."<sup>1</sup> Buckley left no doubt that he felt profound regret and even despair over America's recent past and distasteful present.

Having seen the political ground shift underneath them during the two previous decades, conservatives of the 1950s could point to a long list of grievances. To begin, the international power and prestige of the Soviet Union seemed to be rising rather than falling. The USSR had gained the enmity of a wide range of Americans, with conservatives at the front of the line, by failing to respect private property, prohibiting the exercise of civil liberties, centralizing all political authority in the state, and spreading communism to other nations. The Communist grip on Eastern Europe tightened after Soviet tanks crushed a nascent rebellion in Hungary in 1956. Pursued by both Democratic and Republican

## 2 • Chapter One

administrations, the American foreign policy featuring containment over confrontation looked morally weak and geopolitically ineffective to the intellectuals collected under *National Review's* masthead.

Politics in America had also witnessed a revolution on matters of domestic policy. Whereas business owners and managers once enjoyed a high degree of insulation from the federal government, now they faced many forms of intervention. Government agencies, most of them created during the Depression, regulated prices and restricted competition in industries such as banking, insurance, airlines, trucking, and radio and television broadcasting. With workers demanding a seat at the bargaining table, managerial autonomy also eroded due to internal challenges. Boosted by formal recognition from the federal government and the establishment of fair labor-management practices, union membership nearly tripled from only 12% of the workforce in 1930 to 33% by the time *National Review* first hit the newsstands.<sup>2</sup>

The entrenchment of unions as a seemingly permanent fixture on the industrial landscape coincided with a major growth in the welfare state. Moving slowly but systematically, policymakers enacted and expanded programs to provide benefits to an ever-growing body of citizens. Social Security, which initially reached only a minority of the labor force, broadened as lawmakers regularly absorbed new categories of workers into the system and on several occasions voted to increase benefit levels. At roughly the same time that Buckley criticized “the intransigence of the Liberals, who run this country,” Congress added disability coverage to the retirement system. Unemployment insurance, which just a few decades earlier was a patchwork network that did not exist at all in many states, had recently attained permanence and stability, and public housing—though only a modest program in budgetary terms—was following the same upward trajectory. The various components of the welfare state received financing from payroll taxes, corporation taxes, and excise taxes, but the most rapidly increasing source of revenue in the postwar years was the steeply progressive federal income

tax. Although few people paid at the top marginal rate, the tax symbolized a concrete government commitment to equality that threatened cherished conservative values.

Perhaps worst of all from the perspective of conservatives, who saw the danger of not just a string of painful defeats but the prospect of unconditional surrender, the scope of the national debate had narrowed when important leaders from the Republican party sought to accommodate the New Deal rather than overturn it. The moderate Dwight Eisenhower prevailed at the 1952 Republican convention, disappointing backers of Robert Taft who hoped that the Ohio senator would be the standard-bearer for turning back the clock. Buckley's opening issue of *National Review* signaled a last-ditch stand and even foreshadowed a counterattack by praising the independence and free thinking of the "conservatives who have not made their peace with the New Deal." After promising from the outset that the magazine would offer principled criticism of Eisenhower's policies and programs, *National Review* later declined to endorse the president's reelection bid in 1956.<sup>3</sup> Not until Barry Goldwater's candidacy in 1964 could the conservative journal give an enthusiastic endorsement to a presidential nominee.<sup>4</sup>

The resounding failure of Goldwater's candidacy and the steady stream of policies abhorrent to the right forced *National Review* and its ideological brethren to continue their defensive posture. The most prominent political movements of the 1950s and 1960s, the struggles for civil rights and voting rights, overcame opposition from traditional bases of conservatism: southern legislators and adherents of states' rights elsewhere in the nation. Despite their former opposition to the Supreme Court's 1954 decision in *Brown v. Board of Education*, Buckley and other conservatives eventually looked back with approval on federal involvement in overturning Jim Crow laws.<sup>5</sup> On other matters, however, many of the policy legacies of the 1960s remained controversial into the twenty-first century. Federal court decisions protected the rights of the accused, required a higher wall of separation between church and state, and enforced a one-person, one-vote rule for the drawing of district boundaries. A hard-fought political

#### 4 • Chapter One

battle ended in 1965 when Congress passed legislation creating Medicare and Medicaid, positioning the federal government as a major player in the financing of health care. More generally, the Great Society called for a War on Poverty that would be won through job training programs and community development initiatives.

At the same time, government activities directly affecting business proliferated, and the era of largely unregulated capitalism receded further into the past. The issue of environmental protection burst onto the national scene, sparking laws covering air pollution, water pollution, waste disposal, land use, pesticide control, wilderness set-asides, and the treatment of endangered species. Consumer protection also became a prominent issue and led to government efforts regulating pharmaceuticals, automobile safety, lending practices, and coal mines. Parallel legislation brought worker health and safety, overseen by the Occupational Safety and Health Administration, under the umbrella of federal regulation. By the early 1970s regulatory agencies were intervening in the day-to-day affairs of business to a degree never before seen in peacetime. Nearly two decades after *National Review's* inception, public policy had become considerably less aligned with conservative principles and Buckley was still largely reduced to “yelling Stop.” Unknown at the time, however, the nadir had been reached, and conservatives would soon move from reacting to unpalatable political developments to creating favorable ones.

### **The Right Turn in American Politics**

By comparison with the period spanning the New Deal through the Great Society, the country moved sharply to the right in the decades after the mid-1970s. One indicator of the political success of the right has been the amount of scholarly and journalistic attention it has attracted. After stimulating only a limited set of book-length treatments in the 1980s, the right saw the list expand dramatically in the following two decades.<sup>6</sup> Writers carefully, sys-

tematically, and in many cases sympathetically probed the roots of modern conservatism in the organizations, issues, leaders, and intellectual currents of the 1950s and 1960s.<sup>7</sup> Other informative books traced conservatism as a political force over long periods of up to a half-century.<sup>8</sup> Some well-researched works focused primarily on the strategies, institutions, and politicians of relatively recent times.<sup>9</sup>

The academic and popular writers investigated the nation's new political alignments, beginning with campaigns and elections. The Republican party grew more reliably conservative as its liberal and progressive wing that once included figures such as Earl Warren, Robert La Follette, Nelson Rockefeller, and William Scranton virtually vanished. In the ultimate barometer of a party's effectiveness, the more ideologically cohesive Republicans increased their vote totals. The GOP had stood as the clear minority party from 1932 to 1979, winning only four of the twelve presidential elections. Republicans of that era controlled on average only 39% and 38% of the seats in the House of Representatives and the Senate, respectively.<sup>10</sup> From 1980 to 2005, by contrast, Republicans prevailed in five of the seven presidential races and attained majorities in the House for twelve years and the Senate for eighteen years. Even after the decisive midterm elections of 2006, which gave Democrats narrow majorities of 53% in the House and 51% in the Senate, the GOP remained in a far stronger position than it had been a few decades earlier. In 2007 Republicans held thirty-one more seats in the House and eleven more seats in the Senate than they averaged from 1932 to 1979.

Many policy changes followed from the Republicans' thirty-plus years of ascent from the minority party into a status of being competitive with, and sometimes stronger than, Democrats. Revisions to policy were especially noteworthy in the area of taxation. During the recent period of Republican dominance at the presidential level, the top marginal income-tax bracket dropped drastically from 70% in 1980 to 35% in 2006. Other taxes disproportionately paid by high earners, such as levies on capital gains, dividends, and estates, have either fallen significantly or stand ready to be eliminated entirely. Meanwhile, taxes with a greater

## 6 • Chapter One

incidence at the bottom and the middle of the income spectrum, particularly payroll taxes, sales taxes, property taxes, and excise taxes, have increased over time. When federal, state, and local taxes are put together, the progressivity that formerly characterized the tax system has been vastly weakened.<sup>11</sup>

The transformations achieved in regulatory policies were equally dramatic. Aided in some instances by coalitions drawn from several places in the ideological spectrum, deregulation of prices and entry conditions swept across the industries of airlines, banking, utilities, natural gas, telecommunications, financial services, and broadcast media. Consumer and environmental regulation remains robust, but the resources allocated to enforcing the laws have generally declined. Inspections of food processing plants, for example, fell sharply in the 1980s and 1990s.<sup>12</sup> Even though President George W. Bush led few successful legislative cutbacks of environmental protection, his two administrations used executive orders and agency discretion to implement a variety of rollbacks, exemptions, and reductions in enforcement.<sup>13</sup> Meanwhile, attempts failed in the 1990s and 2000s to enact new regulations to address global warming and repetitive-stress injuries in the workplace.

Labor regulations, too, have moved in a conservative direction. Administrative rulings and appointments to the National Labor Relations Board have combined to impose additional hurdles on union organizing and maintenance. Corrected for inflation, the minimum wage shrank by nearly 40% in real terms from 1968 to the end of George W. Bush's first administration. In 2004 the Labor Department initiated procedures to exempt the employers of eight million workers, by one estimate, from the requirement of time-and-a-half pay for overtime.<sup>14</sup> Despite the important exception of the Americans with Disabilities Act, an expensive effort to require accommodations for the disabled, the hand of the federal government now touches business much more lightly than was the case in the 1970s.

The welfare state has also retrenched in some areas even though its cutbacks were not as extensive as those covering government regulation. In the mid-1970, workers who lost their jobs were eligible for up to fifteen months of benefits from unem-

ployment insurance; thirty years later the figure stood at six months even as the average monthly benefits, adjusted for inflation, had dropped by 10%.<sup>15</sup> An important government priority in the 1970s, job training now receives only a fraction of the spending levels previously allocated and reaches far fewer beneficiaries.<sup>16</sup> Many programs affecting low-income Americans, such as food stamps and public housing, have seen similar restrictions on the scope and generosity of coverage. The real value of average benefits from Aid to Families with Dependent Children fell by more than half from the mid-1970s to 1996, when Congress terminated the program as a federal entitlement.<sup>17</sup> The newer state-run programs under Temporary Aid for Needy Families include lifetime limits, strictly enforced work provisions, and other requirements.

Other conservative attempts to dismantle the welfare state have been less successful. After some changes in 1983, Social Security persisted in its previous form. George W. Bush advocated the partial or full privatization of Social Security during his presidential campaigns in 2000 and 2004, but when he revisited the issue in 2005 he faced the immense challenge of selling the public on the concept of personal accounts instead of guaranteed benefits. In a political environment where most programs targeted at the poor have shrunk, the Earned Income Tax Credit—a wage subsidy for low-income workers—greatly increased through legislation enacted in 1990 and 1993. Spending and programs for special education grew dramatically in recent decades, and states expanded the scope of Medicaid throughout the 1990s. Medicare added a prescription drug benefit in 2006, provided by private insurers working outside of Medicare, that initially attracted opposition from hard-core liberals and conservatives alike, albeit for different reasons. Overall, one can say that several parts of the welfare state moved rightward, a few elements moved leftward, and other components either remained roughly stable or else changed in directions difficult to categorize.

Conservatives' desires for changes on cultural and social issues have not fared as well. Outside of crime control, where sentencing laws are stronger, law enforcement receives larger shares of government budgets, and prisons lock up many more people,

## 8 • Chapter One

the policies pushed by significant segments of the conservative coalition have failed to advance very far. Affirmative action, for example, has been curtailed but continues in public and private institutions. Christian fundamentalists and evangelicals, the most important constituency for a cultural politics of the right, have relatively little to show for a thirty-year political mobilization that included a well-known allegiance to the Republican party. Despite the enactment of some restrictions, for example, abortions remain legal nationwide in the early and middle parts of a pregnancy. Reinstating organized group prayer in public schools, a central component of the Christian right's agenda in the 1970s, is barely mentioned anymore; nor are once-prominent calls for restoring traditional gender roles in society. The public has become more accepting of homosexuality, not less, a development reflected in the passage of nondiscrimination laws and the provision of same-sex benefits by many employers.

To the extent that summarizing across disparate areas is possible, from taxation to abortion, from the welfare state to school prayer, conservatives made major strides in translating electoral power into policymaking power, but the process remains far from complete. Thus, *turning right* is an appropriate metaphor to describe what has happened in the last three decades. Certain policy areas did undergo remarkable upheavals, and yet a thoroughgoing and comprehensive transformation has not yet occurred. If a young conservative writer were to launch a journal of opinion in the early part of the twenty-first century and assess the political terrain, she would express a vastly different charge to her followers than did William F. Buckley, Jr. Today she might write that the magazine would “stand atop history, yelling Go, at a time when so many are inclined to do so.”

### **Education and the Economy**

A puzzling question of the period from the mid-1970s forward is why conservative swings in policy materialized only in certain

areas. When an electoral majority passes and implements many of its preferred policies but fails to win across-the-board changes, one wonders what accounts for the differences. Some leverage for understanding the seemingly irregular pattern of the right's policy victories can be gained from what appears at first to be an unlikely source: the relationships among education, money, and employment. An examination of these linkages in the minds of young people and policymakers will provide clues to the broader landscape of American politics that this book seeks to explain. Indeed, to comprehend the forces that caused an extensive albeit incomplete shift to the right in public policy, there is no better place to begin than the widespread recasting of education to emphasize its economic consequences.

A long-running survey of college freshmen documents the heightening of economic motivations by inquiring about, among other things, students' attachments to different objectives. Responses to the vast majority of goals, ranging from "raising a family" to "becoming accomplished in one of the performing arts" to "becoming an authority in my field," have fluctuated by no more than a few percentage points over the life of the survey. One goal stands out, however, because of its increasing prominence. A life where one is "very well off financially" has been deemed "essential" or "very important" by a growing proportion of students. After remaining flat from 1966 to 1972 at about 40%, the relevant figure jumped to 63% by 1980 and 73% by 2000.<sup>18</sup> While this question certainly measures materialist and consumerist desires, answers to it also reflect the economic futures young adults believe they will encounter. In a world of uncertain job prospects and overwhelming debt for much of the population, it makes good sense to give more importance to money.<sup>19</sup>

The motivations of money and employment emerge well before entry into higher education and, in fact, represent driving rationales for many young men and women to attend college in the first place. At the dawn of the twenty-first century, *Frontline* broadcast a program about the SAT and its centrality to college admissions. The show profiled several students from when they prepared to take the test to waiting anxiously afterward for the

results. Most of the students and parents simply assumed the desirability of a college education without stating any concrete reasons. Nevertheless, insights into the underpinnings of contemporary American politics can be gleaned from those who did discuss their intentions, which were always defined in terms of upward mobility, job opportunities, and financial success. An earnest and forthright high school senior said flatly, "I feel that if I went to Berkeley, then, you know, I'd probably have a better chance of getting a good job so I can lead a decent life." One father stated that he wanted "something better for my son, to use his brain in a career that he would do better than what I have right now." Another parent expressed the common sentiment that "you can either work your tail off in high school and college, or you can spend your life in a series of jobs that involve name tags, hairnets, and the phrase, 'Would you like fries with that.'"<sup>20</sup>

Careers and vocations, it should be noted, have always been central to considerations of college specifically and education generally. Still, over the centuries worldwide and even in the more limited span of American history, education has been valued for other reasons. Thomas Jefferson believed that freedom and democracy could not exist without well-informed citizens who understood the historical, philosophical, and practical foundations of their system of government and the issues it faced. Contemporary theorists working in a Jeffersonian spirit see schools as places where students can learn the democratic norms of civility, tolerance for dissenting views, and the importance of public participation in the political life of local and national communities.<sup>21</sup> Besides this civic justification, widely expressed goals for schools have often included the value of knowledge for its own sake, the transmission of a nation's culture, and the personal development and self-fulfillment of students.<sup>22</sup>

Although these other aspirations persist in the minds of many teachers and administrators, public discussion on the purposes of education focuses on preparing graduates for the workforce—a fact that helps explain the nationwide growth of policies based on testing and accountability. The initiation, development, and maturation of high-stakes testing was the most noteworthy

reform in education policy since 1980. In the 1980s and 1990s, most states implemented testing procedures intended to measure student learning in a core group of subjects. The No Child Left Behind Act of 2001 intensified these trends, requiring elaborate standardized tests whose results determine rewards and punishments. Aggregated by individual classrooms and schools, scores on the tests attract wide publicity and increasingly guide the funding and curriculum decisions of federal, state, and local policymakers.

Controversy continues about the desirability of these methods of measurement and assessment, with a backlash from many teachers and parents emerging in the first decade of the twenty-first century. In one respect, though, debates over whether standardized tests facilitate student learning represent second-order questions that rest on a prior assumption. The reasons why we should care about educational achievement are the first-order questions, for which the answers are often simply assumed but sometimes spelled out. When the policymakers who create, oversee, and enforce the testing regimes explain why educational achievement must be demanded and expected, the reasons usually relate to jobs and the economy. The relevance of standardized testing for this book, then, lies not in whether it shifts policy to the left or the right—liberals and conservatives can be found on all sides of the debate—but in the broadly shared assumption that the education system, however it is designed, should meet the economic needs of students and the nation.

## **The Economic Side of Political Struggles**

The recasting of political discussions and students' behavior around the economic impact of education is merely the tip of the political iceberg. Immensely important in their own right, public perceptions of the purposes of education also illustrate a widespread trend in American politics. This book will document that for many domestic policies, the attention paid to financial con-

sequences has increased substantially. The same criteria used for understanding education were applied outside the schoolhouse door; from the welfare state to taxation, from transportation to regulation, political debates revolve more heavily around implications for employment, wages, and growth than was the case just a few decades ago. To be sure, other concerns regularly rise on the national agenda and spark news coverage, political conflicts, and the interest of citizens. During the 2006 midterm elections, for example, voters expressed their dissatisfaction with the continuing war in Iraq, congressional corruption tied to lobbyist Jack Abramoff, and Representative Mark Foley's email entreaties to young male pages in the House of Representatives. The fact that other matters galvanize the nation at various times notwithstanding, this book will show that parties and politicians in recent times have devoted widespread and enduring attention to the economic dimensions of many different issues.

With economic considerations becoming the coin of the realm in a range of debates over public policy, we now take them for granted. Few people pause to reflect when presidents, governors, state legislators, and school board members announce that the primary mission of schools is to prepare graduates for the workforce of the twenty-first century, and nothing seems unusual when similar economic arguments are marshaled in other policy areas. Rather than being natural and inevitable, however, these ways of thinking and speaking reflect specific processes that unfolded at a particular time in American political history. In responding to the information and opportunities available to them, a variety of participants in politics and public affairs elevated the economic basis over other potential criteria for decision making. Stressing this factor seemed to be just common sense to both citizens and political leaders, but alternative touchstones could have been envisioned.

Does the increased attention paid to the economic aspects of issues help explain the rightward turn in public policy? On first glance, it might seem that anxiety about job stability and financial security would push policy to the left rather than the right,

for that was the result when similar conditions emerged in previous eras. Most notably, the industrial and agricultural collapse during the Depression forced conservatives to the sidelines of the nation's politics. While controversy has long raged about whether the New Deal represented a social democratic push or else saved capitalism from itself, there can be no question that it overturned the noninterventionist, small-government sentiment prevalent in the 1920s. During the Depression, it was the liberals who controlled the terms of political debate and the conservatives who appeared bereft of ideas.

Then and into the succeeding decades, conservative thinkers and politicians often tried to move the spotlight away from economic matters and toward other values and goals. Russell Kirk, one of the most prominent conservative intellectuals of the 1950s and 1960s, later wrote: "The great line of division in modern politics . . . lies between all those who believe in some sort of transcendent moral order, on one side, and on the other side all those who take this ephemeral existence of ours for the be-all and end-all—to be devoted chiefly to producing and consuming."<sup>23</sup> The eternal moral questions, Kirk believed, should be exalted over transient struggles regarding employment and acquisition. Barry Goldwater expressed similar sentiments in chiding his adversaries:

The root difference between the Conservatives and the Liberals of today is that Conservatives take account of the *whole* man, while the Liberals tend to look only at the material side of man's nature. The Conservative believes that man is, in part, an economic, an animal creature; but that he is also a spiritual creature with spiritual needs and spiritual desires. What is more, these needs and desires reflect the *superior* side of man's nature, and thus take precedence over his economic wants.<sup>24</sup>

One of the cardinal rules of politics is that the losing side attempts to realign the bases on which decisions rest, seeking different means of assessing issues that will lead participants to revise their positions.<sup>25</sup> Goldwater sensed, accurately, that the nation's concentration on the economic dimensions of issues during

and after the Depression placed the right at a disadvantage. Popular support for the traditional prescription of low taxes, minimal regulation of business, and as few social programs as possible had sunk alongside Herbert Hoover's once-sterling reputation. With conservatives from the 1930s to the 1960s failing to gain much traction on claims that their policies would deliver prosperity, a shrewd observer could easily conclude that their proposals would not be implemented unless and until other criteria were brought into play. Thus Goldwater was well served in striving to move the national dialogue beyond economic subjects.

The patterns surprisingly reversed themselves beginning in the 1970s as conservatives began triumphing on bread-and-butter matters involving taxes, government regulation, and certain social programs. Conservative revisions to laws and executive actions in the last quarter-century occurred disproportionately on issues associated with the economy. These policy changes were intertwined with a new style of communication: Instead of attempting to move the national agenda away from economic priorities, the evidence in this book reveals, the right's leading spokespersons did just the opposite. In speeches, party platforms, campaign advertisements, and journals of opinion, the economy attracted a far higher profile from the 1970s forward. On issues such as taxation, labor, regulation, energy, education, the environment, government spending, and international trade, conservatives consistently stated that their policies would lead the country to prosperity.

The trend whereby conservatives emphasize the economic effects they expect from their policy initiatives does not easily square with a common interpretation of contemporary American politics. Articulated and publicized most thoroughly by Thomas Frank's *What's the Matter with Kansas*, this perspective holds that Republicans have continually played a game of bait and switch.<sup>26</sup> Over several election cycles, the party's candidates supposedly constructed their campaign themes mainly around social and cultural issues such as abortion, homosexuality, crime, drugs, permissive sexual behavior, and religious expression in public life. The GOP's stands on moral traditionalism are believed to have yielded a harvest of voters acting against their economic self-

interest, who would have chosen Democrats had the campaign environment not made culture its centerpiece. The Democrats, meanwhile, failed to redirect people's attention to the economic concerns on which the party has consistently held a clear advantage in the electorate. After winning office, the narrative continues, conservative politicians implemented a policy agenda that differed greatly from what they had promised the electorate. With the public's gaze diverted elsewhere, the GOP made far-reaching legislative and administrative decisions on the very economic issues it downplayed during campaigns.

As is often the case, the conventional wisdom contains elements of truth. A thorough and systematic investigation would probably find the Republicans' cultural stands to have attracted some voters while repelling others but, in the net total, to have strengthened the party's electoral appeal over the last three decades. I argue in this book, however, that the rest of the bait-and-switch account completely misses the tidal waves that have crashed over American politics. Contradicting the usual story, intellectuals and politicians on the right have not bypassed the material dimensions of public life during campaigns and policy debates. Far from concealing their economic plans for fear of voters' disapproval, Republicans repeatedly highlighted that program on the expectation that a jobs-and-growth message would resonate with the electorate. Furthermore, I will demonstrate, Democrats did not cede the economic terrain but instead paralleled Republicans in shifting the discussion of jobs, incomes, and growth to the forefront of their rhetoric. Although certain presidential elections revolved around different themes, especially terrorism and Iraq in 2004 and crime, race, and patriotism in 1988, this was the typical pattern from the early 1970s to the present. The same phenomenon occurred during the equally important intervals between elections; when mobilizing support from colleagues and constituents to pass legislation, political leaders increasingly pointed to the potential economic benefits of their policies. In the day-to-day course of governing, American politics became more, not less, oriented around the economy and the issues that define it.

Besides misunderstanding the emphases of campaigns and

legislative deliberations, prevailing interpretations of American politics err in determining who held the advantage. Contrary to the standard belief, economic issues normally provided an electoral asset to the Republicans, not the Democrats. The election of 1992, commonly remembered as proving that Democrats would win if only the public focused on the economy, was the exception rather than the rule. In six of the eight presidential elections from 1976 to 2004, Republicans benefited from public perceptions on which party would be better for the economy. The GOP's triumphs carried far beyond elections and into policymaking. Republican ideas were frequently enacted into policy in the last quarter-century, at least in areas defined and debated in economic terms.

Of course, previous scholars have explored in depth the most important reason why Republicans expanded their electoral support over a period of several decades.<sup>27</sup> The issue of race burst onto national politics in the 1950s and 1960s, splintering the Democratic party and eventually bringing white southerners into the Republican fold. As late as 1960, Republicans won only 6% of the seats in the House of Representatives from the states of the former Confederacy; by 2006 the corresponding figure was dramatically higher at 59%. In the 1990s and 2000s, the South provided most of the GOP leadership at the national level, including Newt Gingrich, Trent Lott, Tom Delay, Bill Frist, and George W. Bush. A strong base of white southerners almost guarantees Republicans a significant number of electoral votes in every presidential election.

Because close observers of American politics already appreciate the long-term effects of race on the electoral fortunes of the two parties, little could be gained by rehashing old storylines in this book. In a later chapter I present data indicating that economic concerns added to the electoral appeal of the GOP over a thirty-year period, but my primary analyses focus on rhetoric and policy rather than voting. The typical beliefs of scholars and journalists notwithstanding, economic questions in the last few decades have expanded, not retracted, in their amount of space on the public agenda. As illustrated by the issue of education, cam-

paings and legislative deliberations have continually stressed the economic facets of many political controversies. In addition to tracing the impact on the parties and domestic policies, I will explain the emergence and persistence of this economically based rhetoric.

This book, then, undertakes the challenge of explaining *how, why, and with what effects American politics became reoriented around economic interpretations of issues*. Even the biggest revolutions can begin with an initial spark, and the story told here is no different. The impetus for political change came from a climate of economic insecurity that spread across the population in the early 1970s and intensified in the succeeding decades. Much broader than the conventional connotation of a “weak economy” and lasting long after the oil crises subsided, economic insecurity in the 1980s, 1990s, and 2000s included such matters as downsizing, international competition, slow wage growth, personal debt and bankruptcy, and weakened health and pension coverage. Under the different context for politics created by economic insecurity, new policy directions resulted from the interaction of political rhetoric, the programs advocated by the two major parties, and the public’s reaction to the options and arguments offered to it. Following the rise of economic insecurity, conservative intellectuals revived old ideas such as supply-side economics and opposition to government regulation. Publicized through a recently created network of intellectual institutions, those ideas soon commanded widespread attention.

The argument of the book continues by documenting that both parties converged on one potential response to the new-found context: using the available means of communication to make the economy a higher priority than it had been in the early post–World War II decades. From there, however, the strategies of the parties departed. Drawing on collaborative intellectual and organizational support, Republicans largely maintained their policy positions over time and reframed them by giving an economic cast to stances formerly defended on other grounds. The Democrats instead repositioned by abandoning some of their previous stands and adopting different ones, an evolution capped by

the embrace of deficit reduction as the core of the party's economic program. Democrats in earlier eras stood ready and willing to fund new programs, but since the early 1980s the party's presidential candidates have been severely constrained by their commitments to fiscal responsibility.

The flow of American politics in recent decades can thus be summarized by a basic fact: *With some exceptions, Republicans and their ideological allies changed their arguments while Democrats changed their positions.* Disarmingly simple in its essence, this contrast is complex in both its origins and its implications. Besides charting the course of this development, in later chapters I will explain its consequences for policy and elections. When combined with the more effective advocacy of the GOP, the subsequent repositioning of Democrats pushed policy to the right in areas rhetorically linked to the economy. Even if the parties' respective electoral fortunes had remained fixed, policy still would have moved in a conservative direction. Electoral battles did not stay constant, though, and the Republicans' greater success at the ballot box—aided by the public's usually favorable perception of the party on economic matters—multiplied and deepened the policy changes from the 1970s through the opening years of the twenty-first century.

## The Plan of the Book

To guide the rest of the book, chapter 2 elaborates a theoretical model of the role of rhetoric in the processes leading to the formation of policy. By carrying the effects of ideas and interests, rhetoric serves as a unifying concept for the study of politics. The chapter joins together the behavioral study of framing with central principles from the humanistic study of rhetoric, particularly the need to view speakers and writers in relation to their audiences. In articulating the book's contribution to theory building about politics, chapter 2 places rhetoric at the center of analysis. Working with this theoretical framework, chapter 3 then docu-

ments the opportunity beginning in the early 1970s that would stimulate political and rhetorical innovation up to the present. Widespread insecurity made Americans amenable to thinking about issues in economic terms, thereby encouraging political actors to construct their rhetoric in corresponding ways.

Seeing the development of rhetoric to be dependent on congenial ideas that have been clearly and cogently expressed, chapter 4 examines the conservatives' establishment of an intellectual infrastructure in journals of opinion and think tanks. In chapter 5 I follow up by analyzing a half-century's worth of publications by public intellectuals holding a conservative orientation. Accurately perceiving the external context, conservative thinkers and writers altered their rhetoric to accentuate the prosperity they expected their policies to create. Chapter 6 then contrasts the rhetoric of Barry Goldwater and Ronald Reagan, along with Republican governors, in the priorities expressed and reasons given in support of their proposals. For Goldwater and the governors of his era, economic consequences stood relatively low on the stated priority list and did not provide the main justification for conservative policies. President Reagan's rhetorical legacy, borrowed by other political leaders from his party, was to identify economic quantities as the leading criteria by which to judge a range of domestic policies.

Chapter 7 investigates the Democratic party's stances that reacted to—and were constrained by—the actions that the Republicans took. The choice of Republican leaders beginning with Reagan to offer tax cuts, and the response of Democrats in attaching significance to the budget deficit, gave the GOP a straightforward economic message and mitigated the potential for an effective Democratic challenge. With Republicans actively pursuing their goals on taxation, deregulation, and welfare state retrenchment and the Democrats making deficit reduction the central component of their economic program, public policy turned to the right. Chapter 8 documents the corresponding advantages Republicans acquired in the courts of public opinion and election outcomes. A more positive image of Republicans as stewards of the economy, the assembled data reveal, yielded siz-

20 • Chapter One

able dividends in presidential elections. In the concluding chapter I address the present and future of American politics by considering what might happen to redirect current trends. Given the likelihood that economic insecurity will persist or even intensify, American politics will continue to be marked by the widespread use of an economic lens for examining, discussing, and deciding political questions.