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Allard: Independent for Independence

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A few months after I turned 17, I dragged my mom with me to the crowded Harlem Department of Motor Vehicles in New York City. After three hours of waiting and a disturbingly easy test — think, “What does a red octagonal street sign mean?” — we made it to the front of the line, where I received my learner’s permit. Since I was to turn 18 before the end of that calendar year, the DMV employee recommended that I register to vote while I was there. I considered myself liberal and my parents were Democrats, so without much deliberation or discussion, I became a registered member of the Democratic Party in New York.

In the time since I registered to vote in early 2016, what it means to be a Democrat or a Republican has been turned on its head. According to a New York Times piece from 2015, Trump’s strongest supporters at the time were not Republicans, but registered Democrats who had begun to lean right. The same blue-collar workers who had been the Democratic Party’s poster children for so many years were voting en masse for a Republican.

This is certainly not the first time that this country’s two parties have changed course, overlapped or flip-flopped completely. In U.S. History courses, students are taught that Lincoln-era Republicans looked a lot like modern Democrats, and that the Democrats of the time looked more like Republicans. Political parties, then, do not represent two different schools of thought with clear boundaries that transcend cultural changes. They are well-funded organizations that push candidates forward. Sometimes their ideas are coherent, and sometimes they aren’t.

I did not register as a Democrat because I felt that the party’s platform aligned with all of my beliefs, but because I had the general sense that I was a liberal and that liberals were usually Democrats. In fact, I probably couldn’t have told you much about what the Democratic Party’s platform was, other than big government.

Being a Democrat was a crutch. It meant that I didn’t have to think too hard about current issues. Sure, there were the few issues that I cared about and invested time and energy into researching, but on other issues, I just claimed to think what Democratic politicians said I should think. Being a member of a political party allowed me not to think critically.

These labels, Democrat and Republican, do not come close to capturing the nuanced ideological beliefs held by Americans. They boil down complex, interesting ideas to a “big government” vs.

“small government” issue, which does a disservice to all Americans. As Arianna Huffington put it, the labels have “made us ... look at every political problem through that obsolete prism of right versus left.” Not only that, but these labels are often entirely inaccurate. The country’s Republican president unveiled a plan to dramatically increase infrastructure spending — a move that would traditionally be associated with the Democratic Party. George Will, a conservative commentator and writer for the Cato Institute, a Republican think tank, recommended that the U.S. withdraw from Afghanistan, when doing so was considered a Democratic move.

Some may say that being a member of a party does not require support for everything that party says or does, which is certainly true. But in a country as polarized as the U.S., the two-party system creates an us vs. them dichotomy between Democrats and Republicans. I may not have known exactly what I thought about social security or the Keystone Pipeline, but I knew that I didn’t want to be associated with Republicans. So rather than looking at those issues with an open mind, I went into all conversations with the assumption that I would agree with Democrats and disagree with Republicans. My critical thinking and intellect suffered.

Polarizing the country into Democrat and Republican, us and them, makes conversation and compromise much harder than it should be. Each side looks at the other as though they are on rival teams — often unnecessarily suspicious of the other and unreasonably trusting of one’s own.

In a letter to Jonathan Jackson in 1780, John Adams wrote, “There is nothing I dread So much, as a Division of the Republick into two great Parties, each arranged under its Leader, and concerting Measures in opposition to each other. This, in my humble Apprehension is to be dreaded as the greatest political Evil, under our Constitution.” I suspect John Adams would be quite disappointed in today’s state of affairs.