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The Arena

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Driving the Conversation: **Is Jeb Bush right about the GOP?**

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Jeb Bush's remarks about the Republican Party represent the views of some members of a party that, like the Democratic Party, has become more sharply defined than it was under his father's or brother's presidencies. Looking at the longer and deeper view, however, that's not surprising, because the Bush presidencies were more anomalous than indicative of the party.

For much of the post-War period the Republican Party, especially under the eastern establishment, was little but "Democrat-lite." That began to change with Barry Goldwater in 1964, suffered a setback under Nixon and Ford, but nonetheless continued under Governor and then President Reagan, who brought a fair measure of ideological discipline to the Party - affecting the Democratic Party in the process. (Compare the ideological opposition to Reagan to that of Ford, for example.) Despite the two Bushes thereafter, the intellectual and activist institutions that had underpinned the Reagan revolution continued to grow, especially as the Democratic Party itself became more polarized, and those forces increasingly influenced the Republican Party, encouraging it to stand for something, unlike the earlier "always-in-the-minority" party -- the party Democrats remembered fondly as the "reasonable" Republicans.

There were plenty of counterexamples to those developments, of course - the collapse of the Gingrich bubble late in 1995, the rise of the Tom DeLay opportunists, and the spending of Bush II. And there were issues that continued, and continue even now, to deeply divide members, like immigration and the drug war. But increasingly the two parties have become more sharply defined - "polarized," if you prefer - as the 2010 mid-term elections made especially clear. And contrary to the Washington establishment, that's not a bad thing, because voters now have a real choice, not just a choice between two parties, both of which stand for essentially the same things, their respective candidates seeking simply to stay in power. Today, in the main, Republicans stand for the private sector and limited government, Democrats for the public sector and government services. We'll soon see which course the American people want to take.