

Democratic, republican presidents have had similar economic records, says political scientist

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In his recent book "Unequal Democracy," noted Princeton political scientist Larry Bartels reaches the controversial conclusion that Democratic presidents have generally done a better job in handling the economy.

According to Bartels, economic growth has been greater, unemployment has been lower and income-inequality has been slightly reduced under Democratic presidents. As he sees it, Democrats have had a better record across the board.

But James Campbell, a University at Buffalo professor of political science and widely published author on American politics, says Bartels is incorrect.

In "A Refutation of 'Unequal Democracy,'" a paper he recently presented at the Northeastern Political Science Meeting, Campbell concludes, after reexamining the economic data, that there have been no significant differences in the economic records of the two presidential parties over the past 60 years.

Both Campbell and Bartels obtained the data for their studies from the Bureau of Economic Analysis, the Bureau of Labor Statistics and the U.S. Census Bureau.

"The problem with Bartels' analysis of the economic records of the two parties," says Campbell, "is that it does not take into account the state of the [economy](#) inherited by the new president. Bartels' finding of a partisan difference depends entirely on the way in which he treats transition periods from one party to the other.

"In reviewing the economic history of the past six decades," Campbell says, "I found that whenever the country was moving from a Democratic to a Republican presidency, the economy was weak and often slipping into recession."

"Truman left Eisenhower, Johnson left Nixon and Carter left Reagan with economies that were going into recession as they left office and, while the economy was not technically in recession when Bill Clinton turned the keys to the White House over to George W. Bush," Campbell says, "the dot-com bubble was bursting and the economy was on the brink of a recession.

"In blaming Republican presidents for the economic problems inherited from the previous Democratic presidents, Bartels has unfortunately added insult to injury."

Based on his reading of the historical economic data, Campbell finds that, "From 1948 to 2005, Republican presidents were quite consistently left with an economic mess by their Democratic predecessor. This had not been the case for incoming Democratic presidents -- until now.

"While there can and should be much debate over what caused the current recession, it obviously started 'on the watch' of Republican President Bush," Campbell says.

"However, unlike the earlier transition recessions, the current recession began early enough that it should not consume President Obama's term,

unless his policies end up stalling the economic recovery.

"The key difference between Bartels' analysis and mine," he says, "is that I examined the effects of the lagged quarterly change in the economy on the following year's economy. Once you take into account the impact of the two quarters leading into a year, the party differences that Bartels found in economic growth, unemployment and income-inequality wash out."

Campbell notes that the two political parties are different in many significant ways, "and may even have important long-term economic differences between them, but they do not differ with respect to the performances of the economy during their administrations.

"Republican presidents were no more responsible for the economic downturns early in their terms," he says, "than Franklin Roosevelt was responsible for the Depression in the early '30s or than Barack Obama was responsible for the recession in the early quarters of his administration."

Provided by University at Buffalo

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