

Saving the 100 watt bulb seems to be a high priority for the House GOP. This issue is revealing about the political dynamics now at work on larger issues like the debt ceiling. Economically, the light bulb ban is a win for consumers: CFLs have a higher initial cost but more than pay for themselves in reduced power bills. The economic analysis seems to have little significance for Republicans. Moreover, the American industry is on the other side of this issue. Having invested heavily in producing CFLs, they are unenthusiastic about legislation that would benefit mostly foreign firms that are still producing a lot of incandescent bulbs. This illustrates the emerging split between the traditional business supporters of the GOP and the tea party. It's also notable that the GOP is taking a firm stand for a century-old technology rather than embracing technological progress.

You might wonder why the GOP is devoting so much attention to this issue. The bill was first brought to the floor using an extraordinary legislative procedure. After that failed, it was immediately brought back under normal procedures. You'd think it was addressing some urgent crisis. The incandescent bulb has somehow become a symbol of freedom of choice (or at least, freedom of choice over everything except whether to give birth and who to marry). Thus, the GOP is intent on repealing efficiency standards for bulbs, while ignoring the host of other existing energy efficiency standards for household appliances and fuel efficiency standards for vehicles. It's just that this particular efficiency measure seems to have gotten the attention of one segment of the public and acquired symbolic significance. So far as I'm aware, there's no reason to think that the Senate would pass similar legislation, so the bill is also symbolic in the sense that no one really expects it to become law.

Thus, we see two important, related developments in the party's politics. The first is a relative lack of interest in normal policy analysis of costs and benefits. The second is an emphasis on political symbolism as opposed to governance.

It's probably no surprise that the GOP Representatives who feel most passionately about the God-given right to waste electricity with incandescent bulbs are also the ones who don't think a U.S. debt default is anything to worry about.