

The Dog That Didn't Bark: The GOP Loses Ground Among the Affluent

By Jim Norman

It was the year Republicans couldn't take the rich for granted. The stereotype of the rich Republican stretches back to the dawn of scientific polling when George Gallup made his reputation by correctly surmising that rich folks would vote Republican in the 1936 presidential election. And, based on recent election patterns, there was no reason to expect anything different in 1998.

But an extraordinary year for politics produced a far-from-ordinary mid-term House election. After a campaign in which virtually everyone from beginning to end predicted that the Republicans would gain seats in the House, the GOP wound up losing five. The results were universally seen as a defeat for the GOP and led to the resignation of House Speaker Newt Gingrich.

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Analyzing the reasons for the loss was not an easy task. Not only had the Republicans lost just a handful of seats, they had actually done slightly better than in 1996 in the popular vote. This left election analysts with the challenge of showing reasons for Republican losses when the GOP had not lost any popular support. For the most part, this involved trying to find “the dog that didn't bark”—the lack of gains that the Republicans might have been expected to make.

There was one area, however, where the Republicans clearly lost ground. Affluent voters—those with annual household incomes of \$75,000 or more—clearly backed off from their typically strong support for GOP House candidates. In 1992, when the Voter Research and Surveys exit poll showed only 46% of the electorate voted Republican, 56% of the \$75,000 and over crowd voted for the GOP. In 1994, the Voter News Service (VNS) exit poll showed 52% of the electorate voting Republican, but 61% of affluent voters doing so. And in 1996 the pattern was repeated: 49% GOP overall, 59% of affluent voters.

But 1998 brought a much different story. While about 50% of all votes went to the GOP, only a slightly higher percentage of the affluent voters—52%—cast ballots for Republicans. (A major caveat here. While the Republicans lost support among affluent voters, they didn't lose votes overall, picking up support among those earning less than \$75,000 annually and especially among those earning less than \$15,000—traditionally a Democratic bulwark.)

A shift so significant, occurring among a group that votes in high numbers and is growing rapidly, raises important questions for Republicans and Democrats alike. Who were the affluent voters in 1998? Were they a different set of voters from the

\$75,000-and-above earners who voted in the previous mid-term election? Were they different from those who cast ballots in the presidential year of 1996? And why did they go against all the trends of recent years and show no particular favoritism for Republicans?

Who Are They?

First, some basic facts about those with annual household incomes of \$75,000 or more. Obviously, inflation has caused their ranks to grow some, even in these times of low inflation. Seventy-five thousand dollars today would be worth \$71,215 in 1996 dollars and \$67,523 in 1994 dollars. But the inflation factor doesn't come close to accounting for the surge in the percentage of American households that fall into the \$75,000-and-above category.

According to the Census Bureau's most recent *Money and Income in the United States* report, 75K+ earners accounted for 18.4% of all households in 1997. That's up from 14.8% in 1995 and 12.5% in 1993. With the sharp rise in such households—almost a 50% increase in four years—it's no surprise that the percentage of \$75K+ voters has risen steadily and strongly over the past four House elections. In 1992, they accounted for 13% of voters, in 1994 for 16%, in 1996 for 18%, and in 1998 for 24%—almost doubling within six years.

As the \$75K+ group expanded in 1994 and 1996, its demographic makeup stayed about the same. But this year's exit polls showed affluent voters differing in two significant ways from those of the past two elections: they were less likely to identify themselves as Republicans, and they were less likely to have some postgraduate education. The dropoff in Republi-

cans—they were 46% of all \$75K+ voters in 1994 and 45% in 1996, but only 39% in 1998—was especially important because those Republicans who did vote continued to show almost total support for GOP candidates (90% of their votes, exactly the same as in 1996 and 1994). Meanwhile, the Democratic share grew slightly, obviously benefitting Democratic candidates, and the independent vote shifted from strong support for Republicans in 1994 and 1996 to a virtual dead heat in 1998.

When Did Support Shift?

Whatever shifts in support might have occurred between 1996 and 1998, there is strong evidence that the final movement of affluent voters out of the GOP ranks occurred in the last months of the campaign. A look at *USA Today/CNN/Gallup* polls through the fall shows how those with annual household incomes of \$75,000 and above slid away from solid Republican support in the upcoming House election:

	Republican	Democrat
• September 9-12	69%	24%
• September 14-15	64	31
• September 23-24	64	32
• October 9-12	56	42
• October 23-25	53	45
• October 29-November 1	51	46

The final poll mirrored almost exactly the VNS exit poll results: Republican 52%, Democrat 45%.

Why Did It Shift?

In the final *USA Today/CNN/Gallup* pre-election poll, likely voters were asked a pair of questions Gallup has been asking since 1992. The answers from those in the \$75K+ bracket provide a strong indication that the Clinton impeachment issue might have pulled them away from the GOP while the low visibility of more traditional Republican issues failed to keep them firmly within the GOP ranks.

Respondents first were asked which came closer to their view: “The government is trying to do too many things that should be left to individuals and businesses,” or “Government should do more to solve our country’s problems.” Sixty-two percent of affluent voters said “trying to do too many things,” which put them much closer to the Republican camp, with 68% agreeing, than to the Democrats, with 36% agreeing.

The next question was: “Some people think the government should promote traditional values in our society. Others think the government should not favor any particular set of values. Which comes closer to your own view?” Fifty-three percent of affluent voters picked “should promote traditional values.” On this question, with its clear ties to the Clinton

impeachment issue, they were closer to Democrats (49% agreeing) than Republicans (68%).

There are numerous other indicators that the Clinton controversy was not a winner for Republican candidates with \$75K+ voters. The views of affluent voters mirrored those of the overall electorate on whether Clinton should be impeached, on how important moral values are in evaluating a president, and on whether the Lewinsky matter should have been part of the investigation. Most strikingly, the major swing in support away from Republican candidates, according to the *USA Today/CNN/Gallup* polls cited above, occurred between late September and early October. The only major political development during that time was the debate in the House Judiciary Committee that culminated in the vote to consider articles of impeachment—a process that was viewed by much of the public as unfair and partisan.

The generally positive economic mood also dampened support for GOP candidates among affluent voters, who were more likely than the general public to think the economy was in good shape. (For that matter, the affluent were significantly more likely to be satisfied about the way things were going in the country than was the general public.) Two examples of how it hurt the GOP:

- The VNS exit poll showed that among \$75K+ voters, those who listed the economy/jobs as their top issue voted overwhelmingly Democratic: 69% Democrat versus 29% Republican.

- In the VNS poll, 56% of affluent voters said their family financial situation had improved over the previous two years, and they voted Democratic by a 53 to 44% margin, while those who said their situation had worsened or stayed the same voted overwhelmingly for Republicans.

Changes in the importance of issues from 1994 to 1998 also had an impact on the vote. The federal budget deficit—a major issue that worked for Republicans in previous elections—was absent in 1998, and that might have harmed the GOP cause. In 1994, 20% of affluent voters listed the deficit as one of their top issues, and those who said so favored Republican candidates 65 to 33%. Of those affluent voters who listed it as their top issue in the 1996 presidential race, 76% voted for GOP House candidates and 23% voted for Democrats.

Meanwhile, education, not even listed as a top issue in 1994, was the issue most often mentioned in 1998. Affluent voters who picked it voted Democratic, 65 to 34%.

In sum, 1998 House campaigns moved away from GOP issues that resonate with the affluent—taxes, deficit, less government—and toward more Democratic issues—educa-

Table 1: House Vote, By Income Group

	1994		1996		1998	
	D	R	D	R	D	R
Less than \$15,000	60%	37%	61%	36%	57%	39%
\$15,000-\$30,000	50	48	54	43	53	44
\$30,000-\$50,000	44	54	49	49	48	49
\$50,000-\$75,000	45	54	47	52	44	54
\$75,000+	38	61	39	59	45	52

Source: Surveys by Voter News Service.

tion, health care, Social Security. The effect was predictable: a significant shift in support from Republican candidates to Democratic ones. That result creates a dilemma for the GOP as it looks ahead to the next House elections. On the one hand, whatever the causes for the GOP’s loss of support among the affluent, those same causes apparently helped Republicans gain enough ground with non-affluent voters to hold onto a House majority. But the voter bloc of those making \$75,000

or more is growing rapidly and can’t be taken for granted anymore. The GOP must decide what issues will allow it to hold onto the gains made among non-affluent voters while not losing any more ground with the affluent.

The extent to which the Republicans are successful, and the extent to which the Democrats can thwart their strategy, could determine who controls the House in 2000.

Look to the Governors— Federalism Still Lives

By Karlyn H. Bowman

In his 1988 book, *Laboratories of Democracy*, political writer David Osborne urged readers to look beyond Washington to the states for policy innovation. In the intervening decade, the states have continued to be hothouses for new ideas with governors fashioning bold approaches in areas such as welfare reform, education, campaign finance, and even tobacco policy. What has changed in the decade since Osborne’s study is the players. Five of the six crusading governors Osborne profiled were Democrats. Now, Republican governors are creating the buzz. Not only do they dominate the ranks of the nation’s governors, they are also the backbone of the Republican party.

The Line-Up

A quarter century ago, in 1973, Democratic governors presided over 31 statehouses, and Republicans 19. This wasn’t the nadir of Republican fortunes. In the years following Watergate, the ranks of GOP governors were further reduced; by 1977, only 12 were Republican, 37 Democrat. In 1985, just 16 state chief executives were Republicans, 21 in 1990.

It wasn’t until 1995—for the first time since 1970—that the GOP regained the edge in gubernatorial ranks. Today, Republicans hold 31 governorships to the Democrats’ 17, almost a perfect mirror image of their position 25 years ago.

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The recent Republican domination of the gubernatorial landscape doesn’t appear to be a fluke. Big-state Republican governors like George W. Bush in Texas, George Pataki in New York, Tom Ridge in Pennsylvania, and John Engler in Michigan, were easily re-elected despite a strong Democratic base in their states. Three of the four increased their margins over their previous election, and John Engler won an impres-