Chapter 4

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.

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-
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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 the 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. Eight of the country’s ten most populous states have Republican governors. Sixty-two percent of Americans live in states with GOP executives. (See pages 19-21 for complete 1998 results in governors’ races and data on the big shift in the parties’ positions over time.)

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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-