

THE NEW POLITICS OF CULTURAL VALUES

By Michael Barone

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The gender gap was only one example of the cultural divides which shaped political attitudes and preferences around the year 1981. When Times Mirror (the parent company of the *Los Angeles Times*) and the Gallup organization went about dividing up the electorate into eleven groups for purposes of analyzing the 1988 campaign, most of the questions they used to define those groups were about cultural issues, such as degree of religious faith and belief in America's superiority to other nations, rather than economic issues. They developed the new methodology because it was plain that the old categories—income groups, ethnic groups, even voters grouped by party identification—were not catching important differences of and changes in opinion. It has been asserted that the 1980 and 1984 Reagan elections divided Americans more sharply along lines of economic class than had any other presidential election in recent decades. But these assertions are misleading since they depend on comparisons with atypical years (1984 with 1956, when Adlai Stevenson ran worse than most Democrats of his era among blue-collar and Catholic voters), because they ignore the obvious cultural chasms which are apparent from the exit poll data, and because they brush over the considerable extent to which cultural attitudes (willingness to divorce, for example, or valuation placed on money making in choice of career) had come to determine economic status in an economically affluent and culturally diverse country. Only in the South in the 1980s was presidential voting clearly along economic lines, and even there the low-income support for the Democrats was largely the product of their culturally based near-unanimous support from blacks. In the East and in some midwestern states, there was no pattern at all along income lines, an absence which is understandable when voters are analyzed according to education. Those with grade school educations were heavily Democratic, but most were either elderly or black or both. Those who had graduated from college and gone no further voted heavily Republican, but those who had gone to graduate or professional school—a group that includes all doctors and lawyers and most teachers and social workers, but not so many salesmen and engineers—tended to vote much more often for the Democrats. The difference between these groups, between businessmen and engineers on the one hand and lawyers, doctors, and professors on the other, was not so much in economic status as in cultural attitudes, with the former being more culturally conservative and the latter

more liberal. But the final proof of the importance of culture over class appeared in the results. The Democrats won precious few elections in the late 1970s and the 1980s by appealing for economic redistribution. The Republicans won many elections by campaigning on shared cultural values.

But what is most striking about the cultural gaps which explain American politics around 1981 is the comparative lack of bitterness between the different groups. In the late 1960s and early 1970s, when one cultural segment of America was fighting a war which another segment believed it should lose, when there were riots breaking out on campuses and in ghettos and when the length of a haircut could split a family, cultural divisions cut deep. Americans then were used to a culturally uniform society, and each segment seemed desperately trying not only to prevent its own life style from being suppressed but also to make it prevail generally. In the late 1970s and early 1980s, when economic circumstances were bleaker and American power seemed on the defensive abroad, these problems absorbed people's attention and cultural divisions seemed more bearable. Americans had discovered that they now had a culturally diverse society in which they were mostly free to live and let live, and they brought their cultural agendas into politics only when they felt their personal space was somehow being infringed on (as proponents of legalized abortion did in 1968-73 and opponents did after 1973 when they felt that widespread abortion amounted to mass murder).

Ronald Reagan and his Republicans did indeed trim back the growth of America's makeshift welfare state, and they did inaugurate new economic and foreign policies—all in significant departure from the 1970s. But most of the dire consequences predicted for these changes failed to occur; and positive consequences, some expected and some not, in time began to appear. Culturally, the changes in the 1980s were more subtle. But that subtlety was what one might have expected under an administration headed by Reagan, who despite his cheery appeals to traditional values was also a divorced man who had made his living in show business for three decades and who remained as personally tolerant and unbigoted as when he had been in his own phrase, a "bleeding-heart Roosevelt-Truman liberal" in the 1940s. Finally, the country turned out to be in not as bad shape as the Americans of 1981 supposed. The Iran hostage crisis proved readily soluble. Underneath surface difficulties, the American economy and American military power remained massive and strong. In the 1980s Americans found that their country was stronger and more resilient than most of them had thought....

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In June 1982, as the maneuvering on the tax bill continued, a jury in the District of Columbia found the man who had shot President Reagan not guilty by reason of

insanity. An almost universal torrent of criticism followed. After President Kennedy was murdered, much articulate comment in those days when the civil rights revolution had been on every television screen had pondered the question of why America was a peculiarly violent nation (Arthur Schlesinger, Jr., even wrote a book on the subject), as though the assassin's act was statistically meaningful. Now the focus was on a would-be murderer who was excused from criminal guilt by rational operation of an insanity defense Americans had long been familiar with and accepted. Instead of seeking to blame their society, Americans were eager to blame—and punish—an individual. In many states the insanity defense, which had been stretched to its farthest limits in the District of Columbia by the Durham rule in 1954, was attacked and weakened.

These changes reflected broader attitudes toward crime and criminals—and a general toughening of attitudes on other issues as well. In 1960, America's prison population had been 212,000, a figure which had declined to the 187,000-199,000 level from 1965 to the early 1970s and risen only to 240,000 in 1975 despite sharply rising crime rates. This refusal to put more people in prisons cannot be explained as the work of a few liberal theorists; it represents the widely decentralized decisions of thousands of prosecutors, judges, jurors, legislators, and voters. Nor can it be explained on racial grounds; about half the prisoners were black, but the large majority of the decision-makers in these years, even in central cities, were white. Then in the middle 1970s, the prison population started to rise sharply, to 294,000 in 1978, 315,000 in 1980, 394,000 in 1982, 445,000 in 1984, 522,000 in 1986, and over 600,000 in 1988. Even though the rise in crime in the dozen years after 1976 was much lower than in the dozen years before (in some years crime actually declined), the prison population *nearly tripled* in this period, again as a result of widely decentralized decision-making, except that by that time many of the decision-makers in the central cities were black.

This change is strong evidence of a swing away from the cultural liberalism of the 1970s. Just as belief in the efficacy of most government programs was growing weaker, so was belief in toleration of criminal behavior. The feeling that society could not legitimately punish a criminal who might have suffered from poverty or discrimination was vanishing, and so was much of the feeling that society owed some positive recompense to people who continued to suffer from poverty and discrimination: these were strong ideas in years of alienation, weak ideas in years of resilience. The trend started before Ronald Reagan came to office, and by no means depended on his acts. He may have strengthened it, but more likely the effect worked the other way around: the trend of feeling among millions of Americans, produced by their view of the world around them and not just by this sound bite or that visual, gave political strength to a politician who had stood for some time where most voters were

going. For the first time since the middle 1960s, a president seemed to be in tune rather than out of tune with his times.

CONVENTIONAL WOMEN AND MEN

Question wordings for the data that follow on the next four pages

Q. 85: For each item tell me whether it is very satisfying to you, somewhat satisfying, not too satisfying, or not at all satisfying to you. If it doesn't apply, just say so. Q. 84: ...Please look down [this] list and call off the letters of the two or three things that would make your life better. Q. 90: Tell me for each item if this is something that you personally do quite often, sometimes, or very rarely when you want to reduce stress at the end of a tough day? Q. 49: Thinking about working women who have new babies, in an ideal situation, how long is it particularly important for a woman to stay home? Q. 31: Considering the possibilities for combining or not combining marriage, children and a career, and assuming you had a choice, which one of these possibilities do you think would offer you the most satisfying and interesting life?... Q. 27: If you were free to do either, would you prefer to have a job outside the home, or would you prefer to stay home and take care of a house and family?... Q. 87: .Thinking back on any major decision or turning point in your life, which one or two people come to mind as someone who has had the biggest effect on you?... Q. 34a.: Suppose both a husband and wife work at good and interesting jobs, and the wife is offered a very good job in another city. Assuming they have no children, which one of these solutions do you think they should seriously consider? a. The wife should turn down the job and stay where they are so the husband can continue with his job, b. The husband should quit his job, relocate with his wife and try to get another job in the new place, c. The wife should take the new job and move there, the husband should keep his job and stay where he is and they should get together whenever they can on weekends, holidays and vacations....Q. 34b. Suppose both a husband and wife work at good and interesting jobs, and the husband is offered a very good job in another city. [Respondents are offered options similar to those in Q. 34a, with genders reversed.] Q. 66: Are you working primarily to support yourself, to support your family, to bring in some extra money, or for something interesting to do?