



Politically Speaking

By Howard L. Reiter

Closing the Education Gap

Was it all Bush's doing?

Since George W. Bush came upon the national scene, there has been a decline in the perception that the Democrats are the party best able to handle education policy. As long ago as September 1945, the Gallup Organization found that 36% of Americans preferred the Democrats on education, while only 15% deemed the Republicans better. But in November 2002, according to a Democracy Corps Poll conducted by Greenberg Quinlan Rosner Research, 37% of voters chose the Democrats and 37% favored the Republicans.

Commentators have usually credited Bush with overcoming this traditional Democratic advantage. Even the harshest critics of his governorship in Texas concede that he made education a priority, which he carried into the 2000 presidential campaign by co-opting the Children's Defense Fund slogan, "Leave no child behind." A CBS News/*New York Times* survey taken immediately after the Republican national convention found 42% favoring the Republicans on education, while only 34% preferred the Democrats.

Later in the month, after the Democrats' convention, the balance shifted back to their party. As Bush was about to take office in January 2001, a Pew Research Center poll conducted by Princeton Survey Research Associates found the public equally divided between the parties on education. The passage in early 2001 of

the No Child Left Behind Act helped perpetuate Bush's image as the education president.

But is that the whole story? Did Bush single-handedly reverse decades of Democratic advantage?

In the 1996 presidential campaign, Bill Clinton famously made education one of the four policy pillars of his campaign. That October, Gallup discovered a 29-point Democratic advantage over the Republicans on education, and an NBC News/*Wall Street Journal* survey gave the Democrats a 23-point edge.

After that campaign, however, the Democratic advantage declined through Clinton's second term. NBC News/*Wall Street Journal*, who asked about education as many as seven times between October 1996 and December 1999, found that by April 1999, the 23-point Democratic edge had been halved, to 12% (it rose one point in December).

Most other survey organizations reflected the shrinking Democratic advantage as well. According to ABC News/*Washington Post* and Fox News, it fell by nearly 1% a month as the 2000 campaign approached.

It is unclear why the Democrats lost ground to the Republicans on education during Clinton's second term,

a time when his performance ratings remained high despite scandal. Perhaps it was simply a return to normal from the campaign-induced highs of 1996, or perhaps congressional Republicans' more accommodating style on matters of policy helped refurbish their party's image.

The important question here is, did the trend accelerate with Bush's campaign? The CBS News/*New York Times* and NBC News/*Wall Street Journal* surveys found the answer to be yes: the narrowing of the gap through 1999 was more gradual than from 1999 to early 2001. Bush was apparently able to take advantage of a trend in progress and give it greater momentum.

One other question remains: was this trend peculiar to education, or did Bush's "compassionate conservatism" reduce Democratic advantages on domestic issues more generally? During Clinton's second term, poll results were mixed. The ABC News/*Washington Post* and NBC News/*Wall Street Journal* polls found that the Democratic advantage on Social Security, traditionally an Achilles' heel for the GOP, rose, contrary to the education trend. The CBS News/*New York Times* survey, which was conducted over a shorter time span, discovered the Social Security edge shrinking.

Where all three surveys converged, along with polls from Gallup and Greenberg Quinlan Rosner, was in the trend since early 2000: Americans perceived a far greater Democratic advantage on Social Security than on education. Before 2000, all five surveys found the Democrats enjoying roughly equal edges on education and Social Security; after 2000, the Social Security advantage was around ten points higher than that of education. This strongly suggests that Bush's positions had an ongoing effect on people's preference on education, but not on all domestic issues.

Bush can take some of the credit, but not all of it, for the shrinkage in one of the Democrats' traditional advantages over Republicans. ●

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