

THE PRESIDENT AND THE PARTIES AFTER THE GULF WAR

By Jeffrey Alderman

If the 1992 election had been held this past March, President Bush would have won a landslide victory with coattails long and broad enough to have retaken the Senate and put a major dent in the Democratic majority in the House.

The reason: The war has made Bush one of the most popular president's in modern history. His approval rating, in early March, was higher than any president from FDR forward. Though it has now fallen off somewhat, the President's standing remains exceptionally strong (see figure 1). And Bush's popularity has rubbed off on the Republican party which now has at least as many adherents as the Democratic party. Recent ABC/Washington Post polling suggests the 1992 election might even produce a major political realignment if Bush and the GOP are able to hang on to their gains for 18 months and find some credible congressional candidates in the meanwhile.

Luckily for the Democrats, a year and a half is an eternity in politics. The recession, other items on the domestic agenda, and the inertia of incumbency could turn things around for them. But the current Republican numbers are very strong, and if the Democrats rely solely on random events and the power of incumbency to pull their political assets out of the fire, they could lose a lot more than the presidency on November 3, 1992.

They are not merely confronted with a popular president: They face a popular president whose ratings may be accelerating a trend toward his party that has, in fits and starts, been growing at least since Ronald Reagan's first term. Right now the Democrats face a public which not only wants to re-elect a popular Republican president, but one which is also thinking about giving him a more Republican Congress. And they're thinking that way in the middle of a recession in which the Republicans control the White House. Imagine their inclinations if better economic times return.

Party Loyalties

The numbers beyond the war-glow-driven presidential ratings look more auspicious for the Republicans than they have in a very long while. In fact, when it comes to party affiliation, there are about as many Republicans as Democrats out there. When asked March 1-4 which party they favored, 31% of the adult public said the Democrats and 31%, the Republicans. When the 37% who preferred the term "independent" were asked which party they lean

toward, 15% picked the Democrats, while 17% went for the GOP. This strong Republican showing is partially, but not totally, a phenomenon of the President's extraordinary rise in the polls. Even without such high presidential numbers, the average Democratic point advantage in party identification over the Republicans has steadily declined over the last dozen years—from over 20 points in the late seventies to near parity today (see figure 2). Before that decline began, the Democrats had maintained a 15 or 20 point edge in party identification for nearly 50 years. This change within the general population has been reflected in the party identification of voters in every election tracked by exit polls since 1980. It hasn't been a straight line decline for the Democrats, nor has it been precipitous. But it has been substantial enough to reach the point where the Democrats can no longer claim to be the majority party. Of course the GOP, though it has increased its share of the affiliation pie by about 10 percentage points in the past 12 years, cannot claim a majority either. And ABC polling in mid-spring showed the GOP's gains in identification dropping back a bit along with Bush's popularity.

The Demographics of Today's Alignment

The demographics of party identification in the more politically detailed March poll show that the groups which support the Democratic party at the highest rates are older, poorer and less educated than most Americans. In looking at "leaned" party identification—including those who first call themselves independents, but on a follow-up question indicate they lean either Democratic or Republican—the list of groups in which a majority favor the Democrats comprises: blacks, liberals, the elderly, high school dropouts, union members, the poor, and Catholics. Meanwhile, on the more upscale Republican majority list are: whites, conservatives, the young, college graduates, the middle class, the rich and white Protestants.

At first glance, there aren't too many surprises on either list, but a few calculations reveal that, in terms of voting impact, the Republican list is far more powerful. It's more powerful because Republicans are winning more large groups than are the Democrats. Example: 75% of blacks favor the Democrats, while just 51% of whites favor the Republicans. But those black Democrats represent just 8% of the total population, while the white Republicans are 41% of it. Table 1 shows the parties' best groups and the *share of the population* each group represents. Simply put: The larger demographic groups tend to be Republican and the smaller ones tend to be Democratic.

Regional strengths

The Democrats have only one section of the country where a bare majority favor their party, the East, which

The Parties, Looking to 1992/Alderman/continued

Table 1
Groups Where an Absolute Majority
(Leaners Included) Identify as Repub-
lican or Democratic; and the Group's
Population Share

Democratic...	
Blacks	8%
Liberals	15
61 or older	12
Less than HS education	13
Union members	10
Earn less than \$12,000	9
Catholics	15
Republican...	
Whites	41%
Conservatives	22
18-30 years old	14
College graduates	21
Middle class	23
Earn \$50,000 or more	12
White Protestants	28

accounts for 20% of the country. And the region is losing electoral votes following the 1990 Census. The Republicans counter with 52% favoring them in the West—19% of the country. They also have a 49/39 edge over the Democrats in the Midwest—where 24% of the country lives.

The South (37% of the population) finds the parties dead even—with 47% favoring Democratic affiliation and 47%, Republican. If ever a figure showed the old Democratic presidential coalition of East and South dead and buried, it's this one. The huge edge the Democrats enjoyed in the South through most of US history is gone.

Catholic Voters

One of the biggest reasons the Democrats still have the party ID lead in the East is that white Catholic ethnic groups continue to think of themselves as Democrats, in part out of family tradition. But for a long while Catholics have been attracted to the Republicans at presidential voting time, and now they may be thinking of trying them out at the House level, too.

The March 1-4 ABC News/Washington Post poll showed that a clear majority of all Catholics still preferred a Democratic party ID, but were divided on which party is better able to handle the country's overall problems and divided on which can better with the economy. Right now, 70% of Catholics say they would vote for Bush for president. More important, perhaps, they are evenly split in their likely House vote in 1992. This means that Catholics, the single largest stalwart group of Democratic

adherents—who constitute nearly 3-in-10 voters—are thinking about leaving the fold at the grass roots level.

Other strong Democratic groups all plan to vote Democratic for House in 1992, but as the chart of 1988 presidential voters shows, they do not have much company (see table 2). When it comes to hypothetical '92 presidential voting, all core Democratic groups—including blacks—desert their partisan home for Bush.

Democratic Strengths

The Democrats, a demoralized bunch at the moment, are not without hope of regaining ground lost to the GOP, and that hope does not require a prolonged, deep recession (though it would help). Essentially the Democrats are tied with the Republicans in party identification, and these loyalties bounce around a good deal depending on circumstances. It's too soon to know how much of recent the Republican gains will prove lasting. And it's certainly too soon to be predicting Democratic declines in the House and Senate, or even a Bush presidential victory in 1992.

The public does not have a clear idea of where Bush is leading the nation domestically. Just 22% of Americans say they have a good idea where he wants to lead the nation in the next two years. Thirty-seven percent have "just some idea" and 40% "not much of an idea."

Perhaps Democrats can give the public a better idea of where they would like to see the nation go. There are plenty of domestic problems beyond the recession on which they could call the administration to task. The public feels not enough progress is being made on a long list—from drugs and crime, to education and environment.

The Democratic party has done a good job of painting the GOP as the party of the rich, and itself as the party of the poor. Of course, it's the people in the middle that have the most votes, and by a narrow margin more people say the Democrats better represent the middle class than do the Republicans (by 44 to 37%). When asked which party is better able to "help the middle class," the Democrats get a clearer 48 to 34% victory. That's a base to build a constituency on.

Unfortunately for the Democrats, self-described members of the middle class are planning to vote Republican for House by 54 to 35% and for Bush by 72 to 16%. If the Democrats continue to let the president and his party set the national agenda, that could be the way it turns out in the next election.

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Figure 1

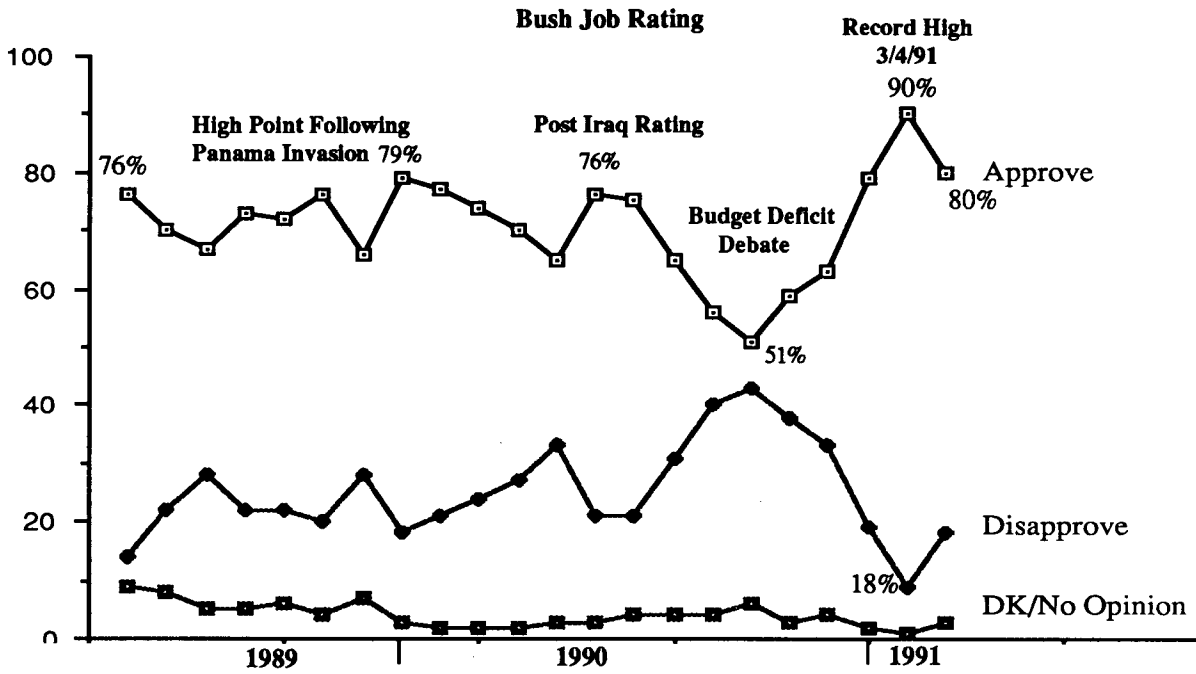


Figure 2

Democrats' Average Lead Over the Republicans in Party Identification (Without "Leaners") (Percentage Points)

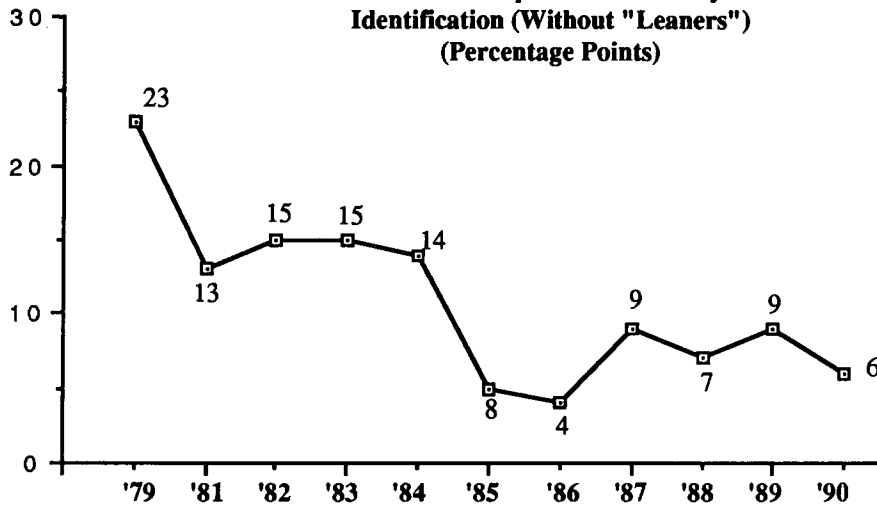


Table 2

1988 VOTERS AND THEIR PLANNED 1992 CONGRESSIONAL VOTE

	Congress 1992	
	Dem.	GOP
Republican (without "leaners")	7%	87%
Conservative	28	63
Age: 18-30	32	61
\$50,000 +	30	59
White Protestant	33	56
College	33	54
Middle Class	35	54
White	37	52
Age: 31-44	36	51
South	41	51
1988 Voters	40	50
Male	40	50
Female	41	50
HS Grad	41	50
Midwest	39	50
East	42	49
West	39	49
Age: 45-60	41	48
Less than \$12,000	44	48
Working Class	45	46
Independent	36	46
Moderate	42	46
Catholic	43	46
Age: 61+	50	44
Less than HS	56	41
Union	50	38
Liberal	56	37
Leaned Ind.	32	34
Black	67	28
Democratic (without "leaners")	82	15

Source: Survey by ABC News/Washington Post, March 1-4, 1991.