

# Nine Thoughts for Campaign 1996

by John Brennan and Patrick Reddy

Reporters love to cover the “horse race” aspects of campaigns. It gives the voter a sense of excitement and turns presidential politics into another sporting event—the Super Bowl of elections, if you will. But there is more to life than polls. Personality-driven coverage of elections often can obscure fundamental changes in society. So, without further ado, here are nine trends and/or factors that will influence America in 1996 and beyond.

**1. It isn't always “the economy, stupid.”** While economic issues usually decide elections, other factors have often come into play. Social issues, including foreign policy, are quite capable of trumping economic issues. For example, the unemployment rate was less than 3% in 1952, but the Republicans swept the country using “Korea, Communism and Corruption” as their slogan. The years 1967 and 1968 were the most productive ever for the US economy, but it did the Democrats little good when faced with Vietnam and race riots: Their incumbent, Lyndon Johnson, was driven from office in the primaries and his chosen candidate Hubert Humphrey had to stage a 15-point rally in October of 1968 in order to just barely crack 40% of the vote. The immigration issue swung the California governor's race back to the GOP in 1994, and an anti-affirmative action referendum could cost President Clinton the Golden State this year. Another key example: The South has the lowest per capita income of any section of the country but now is the most heavily Republican.

**2. The West Coast now has veto power over Democratic nominees.** With the South turning so decisively Republican in the last decade, Democratic presidential nominees can only win the necessary 270 electoral votes by carrying the big industrial states of the Northeast and Midwest plus the West Coast. In particular, no Democrat can get to 270 without California's 54 votes (20% of

an electoral majority). A Democratic revival in the South is highly unlikely: Democrats are just too liberal on social issues. And since the Pacific states are all growing faster than the national average, with California, Washington and Oregon slated to gain House seats after the next Census, their influence can only get stronger in the next century.

**3. Turnout is an overrated problem for Democrats.** When Democrats lose (which has been often lately), they frequently point to low turnout figures as

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the culprit. They do have a point: A bigger vote from minorities and non-Southern low income whites will almost invariably help Democrats. But aside from the question of whether Democrats themselves are at fault for not inspiring people to vote, the fact is turnout rates have had almost no bearing on 20th century elections. Almost every GOP presidential victory since 1901 has been by margins of at least 8 points and a majority have had margins of over 15 points. A 100% turnout would not have reversed those results. There have been two exceptions to this rule: One was 1960, when a massive turnout in the cities helped elect John Kennedy. The other was 1968 when Humphrey lost by less than one percent, while he carried the black, Hispanic and white labor vote handily. Had turnout among any one of

those three groups matched the national average, Humphrey would have been president.

**4. Democrats will retake the House soon, and the Senate will stay Republican for at least a decade.** Since they only need to gain 3-4% of all seats, the House could revert back to Democratic control in either 1996 or 1998. If Clinton wins re-election, his party will probably gain enough seats to erase the relatively narrow GOP margin in the House. On the other hand, if he loses, Democrats will likely only need to make historically average gains of 15 to 20 seats in the 1998 mid-term elections to retake the House. The Democrats will almost certainly win back the House in the first mid-term election after they lose the presidency. But the Senate may see a normal GOP majority forming based on the South. For much of the time since 1945, Southern Democrats kept the Senate in Democratic hands, even if they often voted like Republicans on social issues. At the presidential level, the South was lost for Democrats after 1965. Now three decades later, Senate races are following the same trend, as the GOP has a majority of Southern senators for the first time since Reconstruction ended in 1877. And the retirements of strong Democratic incumbents in Alabama, Arkansas, Georgia, and Louisiana make it likely that the GOP will have a huge edge in Southern seats after 1996. Add that to normally Republican seats in the Farm Belt and Mountain states and you have makings of a semi-permanent GOP majority. Democrats will only win the Senate in landslide years.

**5. Democratic, women, and black candidates poll better than they run.** Pre-election polls (and often exit polls) almost invariably overstate support for female candidates, or black candidates, or Democratic candidates for citywide, statewide and national office. The reasons are that pollsters usually overesti-

mate turnout rates among the strongest Democratic groups, minorities and low-income whites. Also, in races by blacks or women for executive office like governor or mayor, older white voters (particularly men) will lie to pollsters by saying they will support the black or female Democratic candidate and then vote against them in the privacy of the voting booth. Former Gallup pollster Larry Hugick goes so far as to say "unless a black candidate has at least an 8-point lead, they have no lead at all." (The same is also probably true for women candidates, but on a lesser scale). A subset of this trend since Humphrey's late rally in 1968, is that almost every Democratic nominee has polled higher in the summer than he finished in November. The main reason for this is that until recently, most Southerners considered themselves Democrats and reported this to pollsters in the early surveys. However, they would then turn sharply against the more liberal Democratic candidates in November. Any Democratic lead in the polls before October should be accordingly discounted.

**6. Race fatally divides the Democrats.** From 1953 to 1964, blacks were 28 percentage points more likely to vote Democratic than white voters. Since 1965, this gap has doubled. This followed a decade of racial turmoil. When Humphrey lost the 1968 election because of white Democratic defections, it was assumed that Vietnam was the cause. But the war ended in 1973 and racially-polarized voting has persisted. Democrats have a precarious coalition of working class whites and minorities. Since

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polls show that racial liberalism increases proportionally with education levels, any flare-ups of the race issue can destroy their extremely delicate coalition. Hence, the Republicans search for racial "wedge" issues to divide white working class Democrats from minorities. In the last 30 years, the GOP has used crime, school busing and welfare. Affirmative action and immigration from the Third World look to be next. With the exception of 1976, racial issues have had a major, perhaps decisive, impact on our politics over the last 30 years (Carter in 1976 was the only Democrat to win over 45% of the white vote in the last 3 decades). Since 1945, Democrats have only carried the white electorate once (in 1964) and have not won a majority of white Southerners since 1952.

**7. Religion may do the same for Republicans.** According to CNN Political Analyst William Schneider, the only flaw in the new Republican coalition of suburbia, the South and the West is a potential breakdown over women's issues. Republicans generally do best among well-educated voters. If the Southern Christian fundamentalists who dominate the Southern wing of the GOP take over the national party and become too rigid on some social issues, moderate Republicans in the Northern and Western suburbs could bolt, thereby handing the election to the Democrats. This scenario is possible, though not highly likely.

**8. Suburbanization may be the most important social variable.** An important milestone was marked in 1994 as the Census Bureau reported that the suburbs cast over 50% of the national vote for the first time ever. A long-term study of Congressional voting by University of Houston Professor Richard Murray showed that from the 1940's to the 1980's, regional and class considerations shaped voting for Congress. Most Southern seats were won by Democrats. Outside the South, economic class was the key: High-income areas (even in big cities) were Republican seats; low-income areas went Democratic. Now virtually all central city districts vote for

Congressional Democrats, while suburban and rural areas all across the nation lean to the GOP. Since the cities now have only about a third of the population, Republicans have a big starting advantage in Congressional races (and especially in presidential campaigns). Over the last two generations, Republican nominees have averaged over 60% in suburbia. With the suburbs now casting a majority of the national vote, this pattern will give any Republican a ten million vote edge, which may be awfully hard for President Clinton to overcome. Simply put, Republican votes in suburbia will cancel out Democratic margins in the cities and allow the GOP to win by virtue of its normal rural majorities.

**9. Movements ride historical trends; individual candidates depend on chance.** When looking at historical voting trends, one is struck by how a shift of a few points here or there could have changed history and greatly impacted the careers of our most famous statesman. To take a most obvious case, Warren Harding defeated Herbert Hoover for the 1920 GOP nomination. If the honest, capable and moderate Hoover had presided for the first eight years of the "Roaring Twenties", he probably would have gone down as one of our greatest presidents. Instead, the GOP bosses chose the genial but weak Harding, whose cronies tried to steal everything that wasn't nailed down. And Hoover did become president in 1928, just in time to get blamed for the worst depression in history. Another example: It was inevitable that the Republicans would eventually recover from the Depression. The only question was whether they would be led by moderates like Dewey and Eisenhower or conservatives like Taft, Goldwater or Reagan. It was also probably inevitable given California's astounding growth after World War II that the Golden State would become a national power and Californians would appear on national tickets. So accordingly, Thomas Dewey chose California Gov. Earl Warren for his running mate in 1948. Had Dewey