

House admitted to adultery this year. All were re-elected.

Granted, not all sexual practices are forgiven by the voters, although most of those cases involve sex that breaks the law in some way. But the message embedded in this year's

polls and election returns appears to be that the public is dismissive of—if not openly hostile to—“gotcha” politics. Does that mean dishing dirt on political opponents will fade away? Hardly. But maybe some candidates will think twice before doing so in the future.

## Remembering Old Lessons

By Neil Newhouse

Voters tend to look forward, not backward. Despite the tendency of many campaigns and politicians to campaign in the rearview mirror, telling voters of their achievements and their opponents' missteps, voters are more interested in the future. They more or less understand what's happened in the past (after all, they lived through it), but they want to know what's at stake in the future and how the candidates will address those issues. The most effective campaigns link candidates' past achievements with their goals for the future.

Americans are eternally optimistic and believe that their leaders should continue plugging ahead to address the problems facing the country. Just because the economy is doing well, for instance, doesn't mean that politicians can rest on

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their laurels. Voters' priorities change, and politicians should not misinterpret voter satisfaction in one key area (such as the economy) as evidence of a sanguine electorate—it simply means their issues have become re-prioritized.

### Voters Dictate the Issues

One old lesson that had to be relearned in 1998 was that the top issues are what the voters say they are. Certainly politicians can shape the agenda, but in the end, it's what voters believe is important that carries the day. And the priorities for voters are those issues they believe affect them personally. For example, education has been a significant and pressing concern on the state level for years, and has only recently surged as an issue voters want addressed on the federal level. They simply won't be satisfied with politicians whose first response is to try to hand it back to the states.

Conversely, once voters tire of hearing about an issue, it loses its traction. Medicare in '96. Monica in '98. By Election Day, voters had had it with those issues. They'd been discussed, debated and demagogued by candidates to such an extent that they ceased being effective. Voters were weary and no longer moved by what were thought early on to be *the* issues of the cycle. Put simply, they wanted politicians to address the issues they themselves were most concerned about.

This speaks to the complacency demonstrated by the Democrats in '96 and the GOP in '98. Believing that voter concern over issues such as Medicare and Monica would bear fruit on Election Day, politicians found instead that both had limited staying power, and repeated incantations and exhortations did little to bring them back to life in the absence of a strong agenda.

The Democrats, specifically labor unions and African Americans, did a terrific job motivating their voters to go to the polls in November—an effort that Republicans could not match. But these “get-out-the-vote” operations were not simply tactical victories; such efforts were more often than not driven by compelling messages targeted to specific voter groups. Tactics only helped implement the ground game; it was the message that made it effective.

Another old lesson reinforced by the 1998 elections was that what voters hear at the end of the campaign is often more important than what they hear at the beginning. Average voters tend to pay more attention to political campaigns when they perceive themselves as being actively in the market to make a voting decision (the last two weeks of a campaign). In essence, while the '98 campaigns believed they'd been talking to voters for months, it was only during the last few weeks that the voters were actually listening.

### Going Negative

How the campaigns did their talking was very nearly as important as what they talked about and when. Recently, voters have become more passionate about their disdain for negative campaigns in principle, but they are still easily moved by them in practice. Focus group participants across the country have agreed that negative campaigns are bad, and they share their

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scorn for a candidate who goes negative. Nonetheless, our polling data and election results demonstrate quite readily that voters in '98 were moved by campaigns that focused on reasons voters should not support one's opponent.

Effective negative campaigns do not delve into personal lifestyle comparisons; rather, they stick to the public records of the candidates. These contrasts are just as effective now as they've ever been.

### A Changing Electorate

Finally, 1998 saw campaigns trying to cope with the ongoing changes in the electorate wrought by the "Information Revolution." While candidates were spending huge sums of

money trying to communicate with voters, their target audience was becoming ever more fragmented and difficult to reach. As Americans increasingly logged on and channel surfed for diverse types of information, they were more likely to tune out politics and campaigns. The result of this fragmentation was the simplification of an already oversimplified campaign message.

### Bottom Line

There were few *new* lessons to be learned about voters in this election—mostly old lessons to be relearned or reinforced. Voters want their leaders to address the future, not the past. There is never an issue-less electorate, just an agenda-less campaign, administration, or political leadership.

## Moderates Dictated the Election Outcome

By Mark J. Penn

In the 1998 elections, American voters repudiated the politics of division and chose progress over partisanship, and issues over investigations. They rejected what our polling shows as the extreme stands of the Republican party in favor of the moderate and unified positions of Democrats.

The Democrats were able to post unprecedented gains for a second-term, mid-term election by pressing a quartet of issues that resonated with voters: saving Social Security, reforming and modernizing education, passing a Patients' Bill of Rights, and ending the impeachment hearings. Democrats won the 341 contested House races (55 Republicans and 39 Democrats ran unopposed) by a total of 2%, garnering 26.9 million votes to the Republicans' 26.1 million.

Key trends for the Democrats included keeping their foothold in the suburbs. Democrats held onto the gains made in 1996 with suburban voters, and most of the new seats they won were also in the "burbs."

In addition, Democrats benefited from an end to the politics of class warfare. The party no longer runs ads talking about raising taxes on the wealthy, and for good reason. Democrats gained among voters earning over \$50,000, and came within four points of winning the \$75,000 to \$100,000 households. This is a 14-point turnaround since 1994 and is due in large part to a shift in public perceptions of the Democrats on fiscal and economic issues. Public polls show that Democrats now beat Republicans by seven points on handling the economy, and seven points on balancing the budget. The old "tax and spend" moniker of the Democrats no longer applies.

In seeking to explain the Republican debacle, many pundits have erroneously focused on turnout and the makeup of the 1998 electorate. In the first days following the 1998 vote,

analysts said that increased turnout was the key to the Democrats' strong showing, but when the votes were counted, turnout was estimated at 36%—the lowest since 1942. So that was not the key.

Then, pundits ascribed the Democrats' success to their ability to turn out their base, a key factor in mid-term elections where the conventional wisdom holds that the electorate is composed mostly of diehards from both parties. Again, they were incorrect because exit polls indicated that there were more independents this year.

If 1994 was the Republican Revolution, the 1998 election might go down in history as the "moderate counter-revolution." With a noteworthy increase in voters calling themselves moderates instead of liberals (19%) or conservatives (31%), these "middle-roaders" now make up 50% of the electorate. In 1998, they voted for Democrats 54 to 43%.

### The Party of Moderation

In the 1998 campaign Bill Clinton made "Progress over Partisanship" his major theme and allowed the Democrats to focus their attention on occupying the political center. The Republicans, alternatively, made the impeachment of the President, which Americans strongly opposed, their core issue. This left the political center unchallenged and allowed the Democratic party to position itself as the party of moderation in 1998.

The ideological fissures within the Republican party were exposed in 1998, and these intra-party divisions have left the GOP vulnerable to the pandering, special-interest politics that characterized the Democrats over much of the past two to three decades. By contrast, the Democratic party is becoming a modern, moderate-center party with an opportunity to realign the electorate in the year 2000.