

especially those with children, have very different attitudes and voting behaviors from their single cohorts.

One subgroup that received unusual attention this election cycle was the so-called "soccer mom." This new political-speak is shorthand for white, married women who have children at home. This segment of the American voting population was the subject of several national news broadcasts and frequent political pundit speculation. It was widely supposed that soccer moms held the key to the presidential election and would vote for Bill Clinton.

Our research over the past three election cycles, including 1996, refutes this theory. In fact, soccer moms are an integral part of the Republican-base coalition.

We first identified this attitudinal difference in "soccer moms" in a 1992 study for *Reader's Digest*. The findings were verified in our 1996 post-election study. In both cases, we found that married women identified equally between Republicans and Democrats. A majority of single women, on the other hand, considered themselves Democrats.

A Populist Perspective on the 1996 Elections

by Brad Bannon

If you poll for Democrats and labor unions as I do, there is much about the 1996 elections to be thankful for and much to mourn. *Investor's Business Daily* probably put it best, saying, "Republicans didn't get knocked out Tuesday, but they were knocked back."¹ Bill Clinton was the first Democratic president since Franklin Roosevelt to be reelected after serving a full term, and the size of the Republican advantage over Democrats in the House of Representatives was cut in half.

The AFL-CIO's voter education campaign exerted considerable influence on both the legislative and the political process in 1996. Legislatively, the AFL-CIO effort rendered the Contract with America null and void, resulting in the passage of legislation that raised the minimum wage and increased funding for education and environmental protection. Politically, the AFL-CIO's voter education campaign increased turnout by union members and their families and led to the defeat of 17 incumbent Republican House members.

But let's face reality, as ugly as it might be for the Democrats. Newt Gingrich, Dick Armey, Henry Hyde or Sonny Bono, and not Dick Gephardt, will be wielding

The most significant differences among women are marital and child status. Our research shows that single women are one of the most Democratic subgroups in the country. Married women, especially those with children in the home, tend to be much more Republican than their single sisters.

Only one-in-five single females (19%) consider themselves Republican compared to 67% of single women who say they are Democrats.

Married females, on the other hand, are almost evenly split between those who consider themselves Republican (41%) versus those who are Democrats (43%). Soccer moms, again, are evenly split between the political parties (42% GOP, 41% Democrat).

In this year's presidential election single women overwhelmingly supported Clinton, with 73% voting to reelect the President and only 23% voting for Dole. However, Dole was much more competitive with married women. Our research shows he lost married women by only 5 percentage points (43% to 48%).

Further, Dole's support among white females between the ages of 25 and 54 with children (soccer moms) was relatively strong. Here, Dole managed to shrink Clinton's advantage to a slim two-percentage points (45% versus 43%).

The lesson for Republicans is they can win enough of the female vote to be successful. The next Republican presidential candidate needs to garner at least 43% of women voters. The women the GOP candidate must target are white, married, both working and non-working, conservative to moderate, and most likely have children living at home.

Endnote:

¹ The sample for the post-election study consisted of 1,030 telephone interviews with voters. All other data presented below are from nationally representative samples of 1,000 or more registered voters.



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the Speaker's gavel come January; so it is important for Democrats to take stock and figure out what went wrong and what it is that they can do better. Hind-sight may be 20-20, but today's hind-sight is tomorrow's foresight into Campaign 1998. In this spirit, I offer these lessons from the 1996 campaign for your consideration.

Lesson One

Democrats win elections when Americans vote vertically from top to bottom, and Republicans win when people vote horizontally from left to right.

Politics is bewildering to people, pundits, politicians, professionals and press alike. To make sense of it, we create classifications. The most common classification we use to simplify politics is ideology. Voters, candidates

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and parties are liberal, moderate or conservative. The problem is that using ideology as a classification is like trying to fit the proverbial square peg into a round hole. Where do we put the pro-choice budget balancers or the gun-loving budget busters?

Further, the Democratic party is at a disadvantage using ideology to assess and attract voters because there are simply more conservatives than liberals. According to the 1996 Voter News Service (VNS) election day exit poll, a third (34%) of the people who voted said they were conservatives, while only a fifth of voters (20%) called themselves liberals, and almost half (47%) of the electorate put themselves into the all-purpose moderate category.

The conservatives, predictably, voted for Republican House candidates, and the liberals voted for Democrats. It was good for the Democrats that three-fifths (57%) of the moderates voted for Democratic House candidates, but that's not good enough when there are so many more conservatives than liberals.

1996 was the year in which Republicans successfully made ideology an issue and Democrats helped them do it. The GOP charged Democrats with being liberal, too liberal, embarrassingly liberal and probably criminally liberal. Republican media consultant Alex Castellanos described the process to a *Newsweek* reporter: "It's out of the old playbook. It's like what we did to Jim Hunt. First, we call him a liberal. And when he says, 'No, I'm not,' great. Now you're a lying liberal, and we call him a liberal and a liar."²

Well, that's pretty much how the campaign for the House and the Senate played out. The Republicans attacked the Democrats for being liberals, and the Democrats fell into the ideological trap by saying, "No," and calling the Republicans extremists.

Predictably, the GOP got the better end of this exchange.

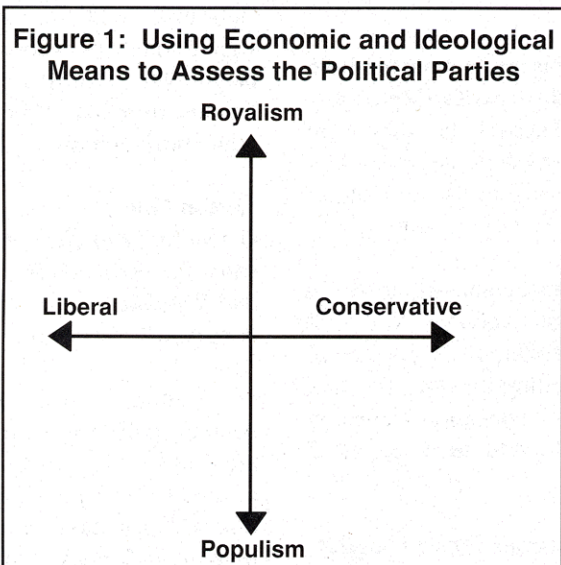
Voters split down the middle on whether a Democratic Congress would be too liberal. However, a majority of voters disagreed with the notion that a Republican Congress would be too conservative (see Figure 2).

The fact that Americans thought that the Democrats were more liberal than the Republicans were conservative after the excesses of the Gingrich House indicates that Democrats will have to change the dialogue for 1998. Ideological labels may not fit voters well and they may not find the labels comfortable, but having them is better than going outside into the political storm without anything to wear. In order to win back Congress, the Democratic party will have to give Americans a different suit of clothes to wear.

One thing that becomes clear in looking at the 1996 VNS poll is that, for most voters, no Newt would be good Newt. There were almost two Americans who had an unfavorable opinion of the Speaker for every voter who liked him. Based on the polling that Bannon Research conducted for the AFL-CIO in competitive congressional districts, it was clear that the widespread dislike of Newt Gingrich and the Republican incumbents who controlled Congress was a function of voter concerns in two issue areas.

First, there were the good, old-fashioned populist claims that the Republicans cut Medicare by 270 billion dollars while giving a tax break to the wealthy, and that the GOP Congress voted for a tax bill that would allow wealthy Americans to evade income taxes by renouncing their American citizenship.

After the populist arguments came the quality of life discussions concerning education and the environment. Large numbers of Americans found it disturbing that Republican incumbents voted to cut federal funding for education and to make it easier for polluters to release waste into waterways.



The saliency of these issues was remarkably consistent from one congressional district to another. Based on these concerns, Americans were poised to cast a vote of no confidence in what they saw as Republican attempts to use their control of Congress to favor wealthy special interests and to undermine further the quality of life of middle-class Americans. This was not an argument for liberalism or against conservatism; it was an argument for populism and against economic royalism (see Figure 1).

The Republican party was smart enough to realize that they were losing the economic debate. And in the same way that Republicans fought off Democratic surges in the late 19th century by raising the bloody flag and calling Democrats the party of rum, Romanism and rebellion, the GOP moved the campaign from a vertical axis to a horizontal axis by beating up Democrats for being too liberal. Rather than trying to keep the campaign on a vertical axis which would have been to their advantage, Democrats responded horizontally by calling Republicans extremists rather than economic royalists.

Lesson Two

If the exit polls are any indication, reports of the economy's recovery are greatly exaggerated.

There is a country music song called "I've Been Down So Long, This Looks Up to Me" that captures the tone of the public on the condition of the economy. In the VNS exit poll, a third of the voters (33%) said that their family's financial situation was better than it was four years ago, one in five voters said it had gotten worse (20%), and half indicated that their financial situation had stayed the same (45%). These voters were just a little more optimistic than Americans who voted in 1994 (1994 responses: better [24%], same [49%], worse [22%]). With a recovery like this, who needs a recession?

If the VNS results are any indication, the Democratic party needs to do much better in its appeal to the large number of voters who have not seen much change in their economic status.

Republican House candidates won majority support from voters who had college educations and who lived in households where the total yearly income was \$50,000 or more. Democrats received more than half the vote from people who had only a high school education or less and from voters who came from households where the annual income was less than \$30,000. The single largest group of Americans are the people

who live somewhere in the middle of this range.

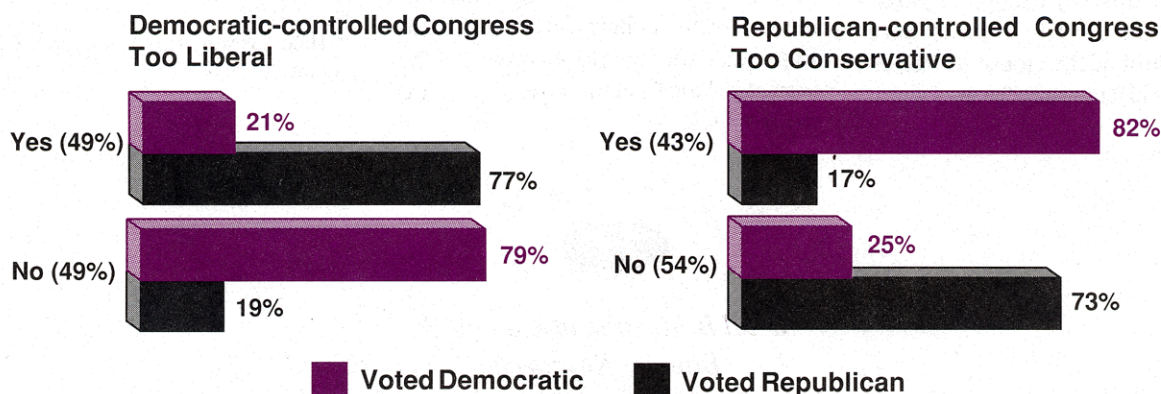
According to the VNS exit poll, these marginal economic voters split evenly between Democratic and Republican House candidates. For Democrats, this is better than in 1994, when Republicans won a clear majority of the vote in this group, but it's still not anything to write home, or to the White House, about.

Rather than attacking the voters for not knowing how good they have it, the Democratic party should abandon its delusion that the economy is getting better and concentrate instead on solving the problem. When political scientists construct equations to explain voting behavior, they find that the most powerful measure is not the rate of inflation or unemployment, nor the GNP or GDP, nor manufacturing orders, wheat futures or housing starts. It is the change in real (inflation-adjusted), after-tax income for the year before the election. "Real disposable income" has been declining for almost 20 years. And the decline since 1991 has been particularly steep.

Columnist David Broder aptly described the core of the economic frustra-

Figure 2: Assessing Control of Congress—The Public Is Less Concerned About Republicans' Conservatism than Democrats' Liberalism

Question: Are you concerned that a (Democratic-/Republican-) controlled Congress will be too (liberal/conservative)?



Source: Exit poll survey by Voter News Service, November 5, 1996.

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tion that hard-working Americans feel. He wrote, "Even with husband and wife both working, too many Americans are finding that the homes, the vacations, the college education for their kids that once seemed attainable are beyond their reach. Except for those already wealthy and those equipped with excellent economic credentials, most Americans are on an economic treadmill going nowhere."³ The Democratic party will not prosper until it has a message that resonates with these economically insecure voters.

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There was a time, beginning with William Jennings Bryan's Cross of Gold speech through to Franklin Roosevelt's attacks on economic royalists, that the Democratic party was the party of economic populism in this country. Today, the Democratic party is perilously close to losing the mantle of economic populism to the Republican party. In 1996, even Bob Dole flirted with populism, and Pat Buchanan got into bed with a seamy side of it.

Lesson Three

If the North had lost the Civil War, the Democrats would have won back control of the House.

When all is said and done (and recounted), Democrats would have beaten approximately enough Republican incumbents (17) in 1996 to have retaken control of the House of Representatives, had it not been for the Demo-

cratic party's dismal failure in the South. The Democrats lost seven open seats in Dixie, and two border state Democrats, Harold Volkmer of Missouri and Mike Ward of Kentucky, lost to Republican challengers.

An examination of the regional vote in the 1994 and 1996 exit polls is very instructive. In 1994, the GOP won half the House vote in the East and captured a clear majority of the voters in the Midwest, South and West. In 1996, Democratic House candidates won a majority of the vote in the East, Midwest and West, but still lost the South to the Republicans. Not only did the Democrats lose the South this year, but they actually did worse there than they had two years ago.

Currently, the Democrat who holds sway in the South is the Blue Dog Democrat. Blue Dogs are moderate and conservative Democrats. There was a time when the Yellow Dog Democrat stood watch over politics in Dixie. The Yellow Dog was the Southern voter who would vote for any Democratic candidate, even a yellow dog. One of the ways in which the Yellow Dog Democrat held sway in Dixie was to snap at the heels of the third variety of Dixie canine, the Big Dog. The Big Dogs were the corporate and agricultural interests that tried to dominate Southern politics, and often succeeded.

Based on the polling that Bannon Research conducted for the AFL-CIO, there is still considerable resentment towards the Big Dogs among Southern voters. Southern voters, like voters in the rest of the country, were hostile to Republican attempts to gut programs for working Americans in order to reward the Big Dogs.

Typical of this kind of Southern voter is Elizabeth Jones, who spoke to Helen Dewar of *The Washington Post*. According to Dewar, Jones is a North Carolinian who is "a new mother with big hospital bills. Jones holds three part-time jobs, including a teaching post at a college, none of which provides health insurance. She voted for (Jesse) Helms in 1990, but is drawn now to (Harvey) Gantt's ideas, including tax relief for people who pay for their own health insurance." Dewar quotes Jones as saying that, "Senator Helms has come to be more for the rich people and big business rather than the common folks, except of course, the tobacco farmers."⁴

If the Democratic party is to succeed in building the biracial coalition of African-American and economically insecure white voters that it needs to win in the South and other parts of America, it will have to listen to Elizabeth Jones and the millions of voters like her. This means moving the dialogue of American politics away from the horizontal axis of liberal and conservative that is becoming increasingly irrelevant to voters and addressing their concerns on the vertical axis of populism and economic royalism. It is this dimension that Jones is talking about when she identifies a Democrat as the candidate of common folks and a Republican as the candidate of rich people and big business.

Endnotes:

¹ *Investor's Business Daily*, November 8, 1996, p. 2.

² *Newsweek*, Special Election Issue, November 18, 1996, p. 109.

³ David Broder, *The Washington Post*, January 4, 1995.

⁴ Helen Dewar, *The Washington Post*, November 1, 1996.



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