

## Democrats' Lament in 1998: "We Coulda Been Contenders"

By Guy Molyneux

At the beginning of this year, it appeared that 1998 might be a reasonably good election year for Democrats. Candidate recruitment was going well and the party was articulating a popular issue agenda. Most experts were forecasting a status quo election with minimal losses in both chambers while granting a genuine chance for Democrats to retake the House. Not a great year, to be sure, but for the sixth year of a Democratic presidency (when congressional seats are traditionally lost) it sounded good.

Ten months later, the outlook from the Democratic side is considerably darker. At this writing (the first week of October), a good election outcome for Democrats seems increasingly remote. The more plausible scenarios now are the "bad"—serious but not catastrophic losses in both the House (10-12 seats) and Senate (2-3 seats)—and the "ugly"—a 1994-style wipeout. What passes for good news among Democrats today is that the former scenario seems much more likely.

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What intervened, of course, was the Clinton-Lewinsky scandal. The significance of the scandal is substantial but often misunderstood. The problem it poses for Democrats is not that they are tarnished by association with their President's sex scandal—so far, at least, that does not appear to be a major factor. The impact is more indirect: by dominating media attention and the national political discussion for the entire year, it precluded the national issues debate that Democrats needed to make a strong run. It is the election we *aren't* having—one contested on the terrain of HMO reform, Social Security, and education—that concerns Democrats most. If 1998 results in significant congressional losses for Democrats, it will be all the more painful knowing it could have been different, that a real opportunity was lost.

### The Democrats' Issue Advantage

The most anomalous aspect of this election year is the degree to which voters bring an issue agenda to the table that is favorable for Democrats, even as Democratic candidates struggle. The Democratic issue advantage is apparent on three levels: issue priority, party confidence, and specific legislative battles.

A typical issue priority ranking is reflected in Table 1. While the results to such questions depend on the responses offered, most surveys suggest that the top two voting issues are Social Security and education—both traditional Democratic strengths. If political strategists had been told a year ago that this would be the issue hierarchy

in September, most would have confidently predicted a strong Democratic showing. Just as important as the emphasis on Social Security and education is the relatively weak showing for taxes. The tax issue is generally the most powerful GOP weapon today, but economically satisfied voters are placing relatively low priority on tax relief.

Moreover, when voters compare the two parties on issues, Democrats generally enjoy a strong position today. A September ABC News/*Washington Post* survey found the public trusting Democrats over Republicans by a 49% to 38% margin to “do a better job in coping with the main problems the nation faces over the next few years.” This is slightly better than recorded in 1996 (a 45% to 38% Democratic edge), and much stronger than in 1994 (a tie at 43% each).

A review of specific issue areas also provides mainly good news for Democrats who enjoy commanding leads on such key issues as protecting patients' rights (32 points), Social Security (27), and education (21) (see Table 2). On crime and taxes, the Democrats have achieved parity with the GOP.

Finally, the policy and legislative battles of 1998 in the areas voters say are important have generally developed favorably for Democrats. Americans strongly favor an increase in the minimum wage, for example, which was recently rejected by the Republican majority in the Senate (wisely, the House Republicans elected not to go on the record on this issue). When we look at the key fights over patients' rights and education, Democrats appear to have the upper hand. A September NBC/*Wall Street Journal* survey conducted by Hart-Teeter offered respondents a choice between hypo-

**Table 1: Social Security and Education Top Vote Decision Criteria**

**Question:** Please tell me which one or two of the following issues will be most important to you in deciding how to vote in this year's elections for US Senator and Congress...

Top Congressional Voting Issues	
Guaranteeing the future of Social Security	44%
Improving public education	42%
Reducing taxes	22%
Passing HMO reform	18%
Dealing with declining moral values	15%
Dealing with the budget surplus	14%
The investigation of President Clinton	4%

**Source:** Survey by NBC News/Wall Street Journal, September 10-13, 1998.

thetical candidates, with the Democratic approach winning handily in both cases, as the following summary indicates.

*Education:*

Candidate A favors spending available education funds on providing vouchers to people who want to choose different schools (25% support).

Candidate B favors spending available education funds on such needs as building more classrooms and hiring new teachers (72% support).

*HMO Patients' Rights:*

Candidate A favors a patients' rights bill that guarantees the right to sue HMOs for improper care but might result in higher premiums (71% support).

Candidate B favors a patients' rights bill that does not permit the right to sue HMOs for improper care but might hold down fees (20% support).

Perhaps the most important policy dispute in Washington concerns the federal budget surplus. House Republicans (and few Senate Republicans) want to use some of it for tax breaks and the remainder for Social Security, while most Democrats oppose tax breaks until Social Security's long-term funding is secure. Once again, Democrats enjoy the high

ground in this debate, with a commanding 69% majority saying that Social Security is the higher priority at this time (NBC/Wall Street Journal survey, July 1998). Proprietary candidate surveys also show public rejection of using the surplus for tax cuts by about two-to-one margins.

**Reasons for Pessimism**

The Democrats' advantages on issues, however, do not appear to be translating into electoral support. When we turn our attention to election polling, Democratic prospects are generally not encouraging. A large caveat is required here: projecting the outcome of congressional races a month out is notoriously difficult. The House generic ballot is a necessarily crude instrument attempting to measure fairly small changes. It is easy to forget that the political earthquake of 1994 represented a shift of only four percentage points in the national vote from 1992—about the margin of error in most national surveys. Nonetheless, there are significant signs of Democratic weakness emerging in national polls.

*The generic ballot.* National media surveys are generally showing modest Democratic leads in the generic House ballot measure. NBC/WSJ gives the Democrats a 2-point edge (36% to 34%, September 10-13), CBS News has it at 3 points (47% to 44%, October 3-4), and ABC/Washington Post at 5 points (49 to 44, September 25-28). Sounds good for the Democrats?

**Table 2: Focusing on the Issues, Democrats Look Solid**

**Question:** Which political party, the Democrats or the Republicans, do you trust to do a better job on:

	Democrats	GOP	Party advantage
Protect patients' rights	61	29	D-32
Social Security/Medicare	59	32	D-27
Help middle class	57	34	D-23
Education	56	35	D-21
Economy	53	40	D-13
Manage budget	49	42	D-7
Foreign Affairs	49	42	D-7
Lewinsky matter	43	38	D-5
Hold down taxes	47	44	D-3
Crime	44	45	R-1
Moral standards	32	50	R-18

**Source:** Survey by ABC News/Washington Post, September 25-28, 1998.

Not really. The generic ballot consistently overstates the eventual Democratic vote, perhaps because many respondents do not know or remember their House candidates and fall back on their own party identification (which favors Democrats). In October 1996, ABC/WP recorded a 10-point Democratic advantage but the race ended up a 50-50 tie; in October 1994 the same poll showed a 4-point Democratic advantage. Unless Democrats are showing a solid lead in late October generic ballot measures, we should anticipate that Republicans will at least run even with Democrats and will perhaps win a majority of the national vote.

*Key groups.* The types of voters who decide close elections appear to be leaning strongly to the GOP at this time. According to the NBC/WSJ survey, Republicans are leading among political independents (11 points), 1996 Perot voters (22 points), and seniors (3 points). Seniors are an important group both because they make up a disproportionate share of the electorate in off-year elections and because they follow the news more closely and tend to "tune in" to the election dynamics earlier.

*Turnout.* A great deal of attention has been paid to the possibility of a mobilized Republican electorate and suppressed Democratic turnout. Most polls show the generic race considerably closer—or even a Republican

lead—among those considered most likely to vote. My guess is that this "spread" between registered voters and likely voters will narrow as Election Day emerges. Still, we cannot rule out the possibility of a significant pro-GOP skew in turnout. At a minimum, it seems safe to say that low turnout helps Republicans on the margins and this looks to be a low-turnout year.

*Senate Races.* Further complicating matters, each Senate race is of course an autonomous election. While much could change over the final month, it now appears that several Democratic incumbents are in danger of losing their seats while comparatively few GOP senators are at risk. In fact, one outcome that increasingly concerns Democrats is that we succeed in holding House losses to a relatively modest level while still losing enough close Senate races to give the Republicans a filibuster-proof, 60-seat margin.

#### Fallout From the Scandal

The major reason Democrats have not been able to capitalize on their issue advantages is of course the Clinton-Lewinsky factor. In truth, it was always going to be difficult for Democrats to engage voters in this debate. For one thing, voters feel good about the economy and the country, and therefore feel a certain complacency despite their genuine concern about issues like HMOs and

education. Secondly, Republican control of the legislative process often allows them to avoid ending up on the "wrong" side of issues, especially in the House. The GOP learned from the experience of 1996; they are moderating not only their rhetoric but also their agenda.

However, it was the scandal that completely shut down efforts to communicate an effective Democratic message. It has made it almost impossible to "break through" and use the media to inform the public about how Democrats and Republicans differ on key issues. What's left is paid media, where Republicans often enjoy a huge advantage in financial resources. And it has denied the Democrats their most important asset: the "bully pulpit" of the presidency. President Clinton's ability to define the agenda and articulate the Democratic case has clearly been compromised.

So, unless current dynamics change, Democrats will be left wondering about the election that might have been. As in 1996, House Democrats will feel that presidential scandal robbed them of a chance to regain the majority. Republicans should be careful in rejoicing, however. Winning an election when you are out of step with the public can be dangerous. If you accept the limits of public opinion, governing is immensely frustrating. But if you ignore those limits (as the party did in 1995), you risk voter retribution in 2000.



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