

Though Both Parties Are Unable to Inspire Voters, the Political Setting Favors the GOP

By David Hill

Good times do not necessarily make for good elections. Good elections—elections about meaningful choices—occur when people want deliverance from bad times. When times are troubled, someone has failed and created opportunities for challengers and the party out of power. The “outs” promise to turn things around and fix what the “in crowd” has broken. As in director Robert Altman’s cynical film “Nashville,” bad times create a demand for the “Replacement Party.”

By these standards, the forthcoming mid-term election, the last of this millennium, is shaping up as a bad election. Real choices are far and few between. Deliverance seems downright unnecessary. A two-decade trend toward blurring ideological differences between the two major parties seems to be reaching fulfillment. Wily consultants armed with polling data have seen to that. And a strong economy means that there are not enough things broken for this year’s crop of challengers to fix. So it would seem groundless to expect much deviation from the status quo, in Congress or elsewhere. As usual, most incumbents will be reelected; a handful of incompetent officeholders will be turned out.

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Turnout Will Shape the Election

But the wild card that could upset this comfortable scenario is turnout. The perpetuation of the electoral status quo hinges on turnout being normal. In this case, “normal” means several things. First, turnout will be less in the off-year than in presidential years; that probability seems indisputable. Second, turnout will decline slightly even for off-year elections, in line with the 30-year slide for virtually all elections. That, too, seems likely given the trends observed in primary elections held earlier this year. Third, normal turnout would mean that the ratio of Republican and Democratic turnout rates remains comparable. This third assumption is the one that may not come to pass.

At this writing, the nation’s psyche is manipulated and massaged daily by the latest Clinton headlines, so one can never be quite sure where this will all end up, but I am betting on a Republican edge in turnout. I do not anticipate the results being of 1994 proportions, but I do expect that Republicans will win more than their share of close races and upsets.

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a message that attracts voter support. This is surprising because the party of Andy Jackson and Dick Morris has under Clinton done a superb job of cultivating popular support. In the 1996 elections, Democrats did better than would normally be expected, even below the presidential level, because they convinced voters that Democrats “care more about people like me.” Republicans, by comparison, seemed not to know what to do or say in 1996. Some wanted to reprise the themes of 1994; others wanted to hide from the hard edge stropped by Gingrich and his cronies.

Parties Share Credit for the Economy

Since 1996, things have improved, especially the economy. The political landscape has presented few opportunities for “message development,” as the spinmeisters would say. The only message that has mattered said, “Don’t screw this up.” But this is not inherently a partisan message that helps Democrats alone. Clinton does not necessarily get all the credit. Many Republican governors and member of Congress have done a decent job of earning credit for a strong economy. In Michigan, for example, a prototypical Midwestern industrial state, Governor John Engler gets as much credit as Clinton for the state’s surging economic fortunes. So Democrats cannot say, and most are not saying, vote for us to keep the economy strong. And as voters look beyond the Clinton presidency, I suspect that most Americans who care more about preserving the economic boom than other issues will feel more comfortable with GOP leadership in economic matters. But at this point, neither party has a lock on prosperity in the voters’ minds. Because there is no sure-fire economic payoff for electing either party, why vote based on that issue alone?

The other issues are not particularly enticing either. Democrats have toyed with issues that curry favor with two of their most courted and captive special interest groups, teachers and unions, but to little avail. For example, Democrats have paid lip service to education issues as a payback for teacher union support, but few voters seem to care, especially when it comes to federal elections. Democrats have also tried, with union urging, to gain momentum with HMO reform. But polls show that the issue just is not taking off. Democrats have not even galvanized their supporters against Republicans on Social Security or Medicare this time around. And, of course, for months now the leading Democratic issue has been the crucifixion of Kenneth Starr. While polls may show that Starr is unpopular and that Democrats get some points for bashing some of his alleged excesses, it is equally clear that no Americans get the feeling that Democrats show they "care about me" by berating Ken Starr.

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Republicans have been equally uninspiring at times, promising small tax cuts that no one outside the Republican core really wants. A few Republicans have been reduced to showing they care about people by trying to curb ATM fees. Others have rallied Republicans around the so-called "free speech" issue opposing campaign finance reform. Exotic savings account systems, flex-time schemes and other wonk-inspired policy innovations that most on Main Street cannot understand have become the staple of many GOP leaders. The proliferation of these small, uninspiring and even unintelligible issues suggests that Republicans, like Democrats, are clueless about what inspires loyalty, excitement and turnout among mass publics. No wonder turnout drops and drops and drops.

The GOP Has the Edge

With the expectation that polls and policies, even perceived self-interest, aren't going to drive turnout, what does? I am betting that turnout hinges on personal and demographic characteristics that distinguish individual voters. And here is

where the Republican advantage comes in. When faced with uncertainty, I return to the basics; here is what the basics say about 1998.

- The likelihood of voting in a mid-term election is increased by participation in the last election of the same kind, namely 1994. That means that Republicans should benefit in 1998 from their surge in 1994.
- The likelihood of voting in a mid-term election is increased by church attendance. Church attendees vote and they are not amused by Clinton's antics. Even devout Catholic voters, traditionally Democratic, are showing more interest in Republicans this time.
- The likelihood of voting in a mid-term election is increased by higher social status, especially education and income. Proportionately more high status voters participating in a low-turnout election benefits Republicans.
- The likelihood of voting in a mid-term election increases with age. Because the Democrats have not nailed down the Social Security issue, they have failed to take advantage of this traditional base.

In reality, African-Americans are the only reliable turnout group the Democrats have left. And even this group shows signs of decline. In Indiana, for example, statistics show that black turnout is falling faster than white turnout. Hispanics, unionists, and other blocs of Democrats have become unreliable partners in the Democratic coalition. In primary elections, this year, union-backed candidates lost as often as they won. Labor leaders just cannot get the vote out like they used to.

In the end, the prospects for turnout come down to a simple question, "Why vote?" Besides rallying for Clinton against Starr, the Democrats do not really have an answer this time. Republicans have not done much better. So the main reasons for voting in 1998 will be habit, training, and social and civic obligation. On those grounds, I like Republican chances. It will not be a pretty victory, but a victory nonetheless.



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