

# **Unintended Consequences: Republican Strategy and Winning and Losing Voters**

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Prepared for the 2009 State of the Parties Conference, the University of Akron, October

“McCain’s losing to Obama among college graduates and voters who have attended some college underscores how much the GOP franchise is in trouble. My hunch is that the Republican Party’s focus on social, cultural, and religious issues – most notably, fights over embryonic stem-cell research and Terri Schiavo – cost its candidates dearly among upscale voters.”<sup>1</sup>

“Suggestions that we abandon social conservatism, including our pro-life agenda, should be ignored. These values are often more popular than the GOP itself.”<sup>2</sup>

The struggle of the Republican Party in the late 1900s to become the majority party was lengthy, but by 2000 it was finally successful. In the 1994 elections Republicans won control of the House of Representatives for the first time since 1952. In the 1990s the percentage of Americans identifying as Republican twice surpassed the Democratic percentage, a rare occurrence in the last 50 years. In 2000 George W. Bush won the presidency and identification with the Republican Party once again equaled that for Democrats (Pew Research Center, 2008). Following 9/11 President George W. Bush had remarkably high approval ratings (Jacobson, 2006) and in the 2002 elections Republicans increased their number of seats in the House. They also held the Senate (Jeffers?) George Bush won re-election in 2004. After decades of largely being the majority party Republicans appeared to be on a steady rise within American politics.

Since then the party has experienced an abrupt reversal of fortunes. They lost the House in the 2006 elections and lost even more seats in 2008. By 2009 Republicans were down to 178 House seats, the Senate had only 40 Republicans, and Democrat Barack

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<sup>1</sup> Charlie Cook, “Learn or Languish: The GOP’s focus on social, cultural, and religious Issues Cost Its Candidates Dearly Among Upscale Voters,” *NationalJournal.com*, November 15, 2008.

<sup>2</sup> Karl Rove, “A Way Out of the Wilderness,” *Newsweek*, November 24, 2008, 43.

Obama was president. A *New York Times* poll indicated that only 28 percent of respondents had a favorable impression of the party, the lowest level ever in one of their polls (Zeleny and Sussman, 2009: A4).

The issue facing the party, and our concern, is what explains this decline? Two broad explanations have dominated discussions. One is that a factors – Iraq, Katrina, reactions to George Bush, and an abrupt economic decline in mid-2008 – hurt the party but these factors are likely to fade in impact over time. Another is that the strategy the party pursued to expand its electoral base has had the unintended consequence of driving away voters the party presumed it would hold. Particularly important has been the argument that pursuing social conservatives has cost the party other voters. In this view, the problem the party faces is long term. It has created an identity that is driving away voters and it may be pursuing an electorate that is shrinking in size. Our concern is to assess the second thesis. What strategy has the party has pursued in recent decades, what effects were expected, and what does the evidence indicate about who was gained and who was lost?

### **Differing Interpretations of Demise**

Two broad interpretations of the recent Republican decline have been proposed. The first centers on short-term factors and the other on the long-term effects of GOP strategic decisions beginning in the 1980s. In brief, the argument about the importance of short-term factors is based on the logic of retrospective voting. Americans concerned with the Iraq War, the managerial failings of Hurricane Katrina, and poor economic conditions stemming from the subprime mortgage crisis and the ensuing recession

concluded that a Republican president and a Republican majority in Congress from 2001-2005 had done little to ameliorate – or, even worse, had caused – the problems facing the nation (Harwood 2008; Rosen 2008). Voters anxious about a deepening recession and disliking of the leadership style of George W. Bush sought a new direction and they turned to the Democratic Party and in Barack Obama as an alternative.

There is no doubt that the short-term factors resulted in many voters wishing for change, contributing to recent Republican defeats. What is equally interesting, however, is the hypothesis that at the core of these losses were deeper problems, namely the long-term effects of the party's pursuit of social conservatives when this group was actually on the decline. Emphasizing their support for social conservatism, Republicans have framed the issue as Democratic liberal elites dismissing traditional values while presenting the Republican Party as a populist supporter of enduring moral values (Frank 2004; Kazin 1995). By increasingly emphasizing and taking a decidedly conservative stance on social issues such as gay rights and abortion, the Republican Party has employed the classic tactic of utilizing wedge issues in order to attract cross-pressured voters, or "persuadable voters" (Hillygus and Shields 2008), and thereby to add to its existing base. This strategy began in 1980 with the involvement of the "moral majority" in Ronald Reagan's campaign for president; culminated in 2004 with Karl Rove's design to attract social conservatives by emphasizing Bush's positions on gay marriage, abortion, and stem cell research; and continued with John McCain's 2008 election campaign for president. McCain's choice of Sarah Palin, a "hockey mom" who judged abortion to be an "atrocious," as a running mate brought to the campaign an emphasis on social conservatism and populism.

### **Attracting New Voters with Wedge Issues**

If a candidate cannot win an election solely with his or her partisan base, there is a powerful incentive to try to attract voters away from the other party. The challenge is to emphasize issues which create conflict for voters identifying with the other party. These are issues on which voters from the opposing party disagree with their party and the voters regard the issues as important. These issues are called wedge issues, or cross-pressuring issues, and refer to policy concerns that may divide the voter bloc of the opposing party (Hillygus and Shields 2008, 36). A party in the minority has a particular motivation to pursue a strategy of using wedge issues so that it may build a coalition large enough to regain control.

Both Democrats and Republicans have used wedge issues to pull voters away from the other party. The most notable example involves race. Democratic President Lyndon B. Johnson sought to attract Northern black voters in order to provide safe margins in some states so he could win those electoral votes. This effort provided support for the passing of the Civil Rights Act in 1964 and the Voting Rights Act of 1965. With these enactments, the Democrats significantly altered their policy on race, moving from a policy stance that accepted segregation in the South to a new platform that secured rights for black Americans. With this shift, the Democrats realized significant gains in electoral support among Northern blacks (Carmines and Stimson 1989).

While Democrats were making gains among Northern blacks and liberals, the Republicans recognized that conservative white Democrats in the South would disagree with their party's position on the issue of race. In his 1964 presidential campaign Barry Goldwater opposed the civil rights bill of 1964 and supported states' rights, producing

significant gains in the South. In his 1968 presidential campaign, Richard Nixon actively sought Southern Democrats by campaigning on the theme of restoring “law and order.” This strategy of deemphasizing racial policy stood in stark contrast to Nixon’s 1960 bid for the presidency in which Nixon committed the Republican Party to the promotion of civil rights. By changing their rhetoric on race, Nixon and the Republicans successfully attracted a constituency long associated with the Democratic Party (Eldersveld and Walton 2000). Voters who had been Democrats but did not like the party’s evolving position on race issues were pulled away from the party.

While the usual concern with wedge issues is who is targeted to be attracted, the strategy is likely to come with a cost. As Key (1964, 464) noted, “the contrivance of a group strategy involves the hazard that gains by an appeal to one group may be offset by losses from another group antagonistic to the first.” Considerable attention has been given to this dynamic with regard to race (e.g., Edsall and Edsall 1989), focusing on how the Democratic Party alienated conservative Southerners in the party’s pursuit of black voters in the North.

Estimating the cost of shifting policy positions is not easy. The historical evidence suggests that both parties have underestimated the losses that would come from changing positions. In the late 1940s President Harry Truman was becoming more supportive of civil rights legislation. He was motivated by moral concerns about discrimination (Gardner, 2003) and a sense that attracting black votes in the North could help him win some of those states in the 1948 presidential contest. His advisor, Clifford Case, in a memo of November 17, 1947, in assessing the risk of losing the South by supporting civil rights, wrote: “As always, the South can be considered safely

Democratic, and in formulating policy, it can be safely ignored,” (Sitkoff, 1971: 597). It proved to be a very inaccurate assessment, as Strom Thurmond lead the South away from being solidly Democratic, never to return.

Likewise, as conservatives within the Republican Party in the early 1960s began to argue in earnest for a Southern Strategy to attract disaffected southern Democrats angry about civil rights, William Rusher concluded

“Certainly there is not a shred of evidence that any large bloc of votes now sustaining Republican dominance in any northern or western state will bolt to the party of Kennedy (and Eastland and Ellender [two pro-segregation Southern Senators]) because the GOP chooses to bid vigorously for the support of the new middle class of a changing south” (Rusher, 1963: 112).

That assessment proved to be equally inaccurate. As the party pursued the South they steadily alienated its historical base of the Northeast, eventually losing the region to Democrats (Reiter and Stonecash, 2010).

As Republicans have pursued social conservatives over the last several decades, the analysis of the negative effects of appealing to social conservatives has been limited. That may be because it is assumed that the party would be successful in retaining its existing base – the more affluent – by continuing to emphasize promises of tax cuts. As Frank summarized it in *What's the Matter with Kansas*, Republicans had figured out that raising issues like abortion and gay rights agitated working class whites, pulling them to the party and reducing the discussion of class issues at a time of growing inequality, giving the party the leeway to enact tax cuts for the rich (Frank, 2004). The strategy had attracted more voters, expanded their base, while allowing the party to stress issues of

limited government and provide direct benefits for a constituency that returned the favor in the form of campaign donations (Bartels, 2008).

The empirical issue is whether the party may have miscalculated in its ability to retain its historical core of those with higher incomes or more education. As Hillygus and Shields (2008) document, partisans are more likely to disagree with their party's position on social issues than on economic issues. That creates the potential for strong stands in favor of social conservatism to drive away some voters (Cook 2008). As Layman suggests, "conservative cultural stances may lessen the GOP's appeal to its traditional supporters, as better-educated, more affluent individuals tend to be less traditionally religious and more culturally liberal than lower-status citizens" (2001, 14). Layman further posits that the Republicans may lose even more votes due to the "steady increase in the number of nonreligious individuals and with the growing moral permissiveness of the larger culture" (2001, 14). Bibby and Schaffner also suggest this thesis, noting, "those with advanced degrees – especially well-educated women – seem to reject the Republican emphasis in recent campaigns on traditional values" (2008, 237-9).

There are at least three plausible explanations for why the Republican Party may have alienated the more educated and more affluent with its emphasis on social conservatism. First, the more educated never was all that conservative on social issues, and it has become more tolerant over time on some. The more educated are less authoritarian and more accepting of ambiguity of moral codes (Hetherington, 2009). Many college-educated voters may have found that the Republican Party threatened their more tolerant values and turned to the Democratic Party (Frum 2008).



Second, rhetoric on social conservatism laced with populism – including the ubiquitous references to Joe the Plumber during the 2008 election campaign – likely alienated the more affluent, who generally have more education. Because voters with more education tend to value science over religion, to hold a view of an interconnected global world, and to favor pragmatism over ideology (Penn 2008), populist, emotional appeals may resonate less with these voters than do pragmatically grounded platforms. Prominent Republican strategists and politicians have warned of the downfalls of the party’s use of populism, noting that it is too costly for the Republicans to be seen as an “angry white men’s party” (Cooper 2008). By branding itself as a populist party, the GOP has alienated the more affluent; its actions have told the more educated “to go away” (Brooks 2008).

Third, there are reasons to wonder whether the party’s strategy of large tax cuts for the affluent and deregulation has attracted the lower income whites who hold positions on social issues opposed to the more liberal positions of the Democratic Party. While it is widely assumed (Frank 2004) that less-affluent whites have moved away from the Democratic Party, the evidence does not suggest that has happened (Stonecash and Ortiz, 2000, 2008). Critics of the party argue that many voters concerned primarily with economic issues – not social issues – and that the Republican Party failed to attract these voters by neglecting to develop policies that ameliorated economic conditions (Brooks 2008; Frum, 2008a).

For various reasons, Republican positions may have cost the party some voters. Our concern is who the party has lost as it has pursued social conservatives. If it has lost voters, do the losses have relevance for the most recent decline facing the party?

## **The Evolving Republican Situation**

Parties pursue new voters when their electoral base is inadequate to provide a majority. That was the situation the Republican Party faced in the early 1950s. Democrats won the presidency five consecutive times from 1932 – 1948. Dwight Eisenhower won in 1952 and 1956 but there was concern that he won only because he was a war hero and Democrats ran a weak candidate in Adlai Stevenson. Their base had been the Northeast, but support within that region had slipped beginning in 1932 and it did not appear that support was likely to return to prior levels. Their biggest losses were in northern urban areas and it seemed unlikely the party would regain that electorate. For most of the years since 1932 the party had been in the minority in the Congress. There was also considerable frustration within the party that they were not serving as a conservative alternative to Democrats. The combination of activism by conservatives and the desire by presidential candidates to seek votes in the South to attain more Electoral College votes in 1964 - 1972 eventually transformed the party's base (Reiter and Stonecash, 2010). The logic was that the party could appeal to conservatives within the Democratic Party who were unhappy, or cross-pressured. The evidence indicated the strategy was working. Compared to their situation in 1956, by 1972 Richard Nixon was able to dramatically shift their relative success by region of the nation. Their electoral support within the Northeast declined and that within the South increased such that the party was now drawing its highest level of support there (Brewer and Stonecash, 2008, 2009).

The gains the party was making were not enough, however. The party lost the 1976 presidential election and continued to be stuck in the minority in the House, while

occasionally gaining a majority in the Senate. They needed to attract a broader segment of the public. Ronald Reagan won the presidency in 1980 with a conservative message, but the party needed to solidify its support among conservatives and extend it to congressional candidates. It was during this time that social conservatives became more prominent, expressing their frustration with various social trends such as banning school prayer, the legalization of abortion, and increasing availability of sexual materials (Hunter, 1992; Layman, 2001; Brewer and Stonecash, 2006). Many of these voters were in the Democratic Party, but unhappy with the party's acceptance of these trends and its unwillingness to take a firm stand against social disorder (Edsall and Edsall, 1991). The situation presented an opportunity for the party to use a wedge issue. They were still the minority party in America, the party was moving more conservative, and there were unhappy social conservatives in the Democratic Party. There was compatibility of interests and a possibility of adding voters and becoming the majority party.

### **The Emergence of Cultural Issues**

Prior to the late 1970s, there existed a quiet consensus regarding social behavior among the public. Throughout the 1950s and into the 1960s, social behavior was relatively homogenous: children prayed in schools in which they were not taught sex education; women did not work outside the home; divorce was rare; and there was minimal sexual content on television (Brewer and Stonecash 2007). Before *Roe v. Wade* in 1973, a legal abortion was available in only a few states, and even in these states, it was very difficult to obtain. With the issue of gay rights, in the 1970s, Americans held attitudes towards gays and lesbians that were overwhelmingly negative (Yang 1997;

Bowman and Foster 2006), considering homosexuality to be “less than normal, if not outright wrong” (Brewer and Stonecash 2007).

The emergence of cultural issues in American politics has its roots in the reactions of social conservative activists to societal changes and public policy decisions that began in the 1960s. Progressive policies on social issues began with the 1962 decision by the Supreme Court to ban prayer in public schools, followed by the sexual revolution and emergence of a reenergized women’s movement. To some conservatives, these developments were the first signs of a society heading in a direction that stood in opposition with their worldview. According to these individuals, the recent turn of events threatened – and in some cases disregarded – traditional values and morals, leading to a decaying American culture (Glazer 1997; Nehaus 1987; Oldfield 1996; Reichley 1987).

When the Court legalized abortion nationwide with the *Roe* decision in 1973, many social conservatives, a great number of whom were evangelical Christians, decided the time had come to act politically (Kohut et al. 2000; Oldfield 1996; Reichley 2002; Wald 2003). While evangelicals had played prominent roles in many major political issues and events throughout the 19<sup>th</sup> century and beginning of the 20<sup>th</sup> century (Marsden 1980; Smith 1998; Wald 2003), they retreated to the sidelines with the advent of scientific discoveries and advances, the division of American Protestantism into mainline and evangelical camps, and the public ridicule brought about by the Scopes trial in 1925. Fearing a society based on immoral social behavior, these activists re-entered the political fray with intensity, constructing impressive communication networks and organizational structures in which membership steadily grew (Fowler et al. 2004; Hunter 1983; Oldfield

1996; Smith 1998). With the continuation of the sexual revolution, new efforts to ensure gay rights, greater protection of obscenity and pornography by the courts, and more explicit sex education in schools, cultural issues became increasingly important, bringing questions of values to the forefront of the political agenda (citation needed).

The success of conservative activists in getting abortion and other social issues on the political agenda brought to an end the public's quiet consensus regarding social behavior. Once social issues became salient to the electorate, social conservative voters – like the activists – became concerned about the direction that society was heading. Cultural issues that first appeared in national discourse in the early 1960s dominated American politics by the early 1990s (Hunter 1991, 1994). As Hunter observed, “America is in the midst of a culture war that has and will continue to have reverberations not only within public policy, but within the lives of ordinary Americans everywhere” (Hunter 1991, 34). Numerous studies provide empirical support for the existence of an increasing division in the electorate based on social issues (e.g., Evans 2003; Layman 1999, 2001; Legge 2002; McConkey 2001).

The origins of individuals' differing attitudes toward social issues are still being investigated. Many attribute these differences to the influence of religion. For example, Wuthnow (1988, 1999) finds that the emergence of social issues divided Americans into the religiously liberal – who tended to be more tolerant toward gays, abortion rights, and sexual content in the media, as well as more supportive of the removal of prayer from public schools – and the religiously conservative – who wanted prayer back in schools, and had little tolerance for abortion, homosexuality, or permissiveness on sexual content in the media.

Others hint that the origins of attitudes on social issues are much broader than religious divisions. Hunter (1991) posits that the core of political disagreement can be attributed to conceptions of moral authority, which is highly correlated with religiosity. Moral authority is defined as “the basis by which people determine whether something is good or bad, right or wrong, acceptable or unacceptable” (Hunter 1991, 42). At the extremes, there exist two views on moral authority: orthodox and progressive. Those who possess a more orthodox view of society tend to be “adherents to an external, definable, and transcendent authority,” while those who possess a more progressive view tend to believe that moral authority is “defined by the spirit of the modern age, a spirit of rationalism and subjectivism” (Hunter 1991, 44). According to this take, conceptions of right and wrong translate directly into one’s view of the proper ordering of society. Others echo this view (e.g., Layman 2001; Legge 2002).

Most recently, Hetherington (2009) suggests that public opinion is structured around authoritarianism – a worldview in which emphasis is placed on order and minimization of ambiguity. Individuals who are more authoritarian tend to be social conformists and to expect others to behave according to an established social code. Hetherington demonstrates that even when controlling for religion and religiosity, as well as numerous other factors, authoritarianism is a robust predictor of individuals’ attitudes toward gay rights.

Appeals based on social issues were, and are to this day, so powerful because they tap individuals’ conceptions of how the world is – or how the world ought to be. This logic applies to the mass public and activists. The issues of school prayer, abortion, and the like became extraordinarily important to a group of social conservatives because

individuals considered these issues to jeopardize their worldview. Whether one's religion or conception of moral authority is more responsible for attitudes toward social issues, the important point is that if parties can prime a voter's worldview, which encompasses deeply held values and convictions, the party will have a powerful appeal with which to win that voter's support.

### **The Republican Strategy and Results**

The social trends of the 1960s-1980s drew strong negative reactions from conservatives, who felt that the changes threatened the moral values that people should live by. Their concern prompted them to get organized and to seek to influence public policy to restore proper moral behavior (McGirr, 2001). Organizations like the Moral Majority were created to work to pursue changes such as banning abortion, eliminating welfare for women having illegitimate children, and having stricter standards about the appearance of sex on television.

The emergence of these organized efforts provided an opportunity for Republicans. Many within the party were themselves troubled by the social trends developing. The western and southern wings of the party were particularly sympathetic. The party was undergoing a transition, with the conservatives making a concerted effort to improve their success in the South, which was generally seen as populated by more social conservatives. The logic was that the party could combine an appeal about limited government and fiscal restraint with a commitment to traditional morals and with government playing the role of enacting policy to support such values (Dionne, 1995). Cultural issues could serve as a wedge issue to pull many of the conservatives, and

particularly those in the South, to the Republican Party (Hillygus and Shield, 2008). The challenge was to create a coalition of those wanting less government with those wanting government to play an active role in encouraging certain values.

The result was that the party began a gradual movement toward expressing clear concern about moral values. Ronald Reagan spoke of a “culture of life,” a signal to those opposed to abortion that he was sympathetic. He denounced crime and moral decay. George H.W. Bush, his successor as president, was much less comfortable with social conservatives but was willing to speak forcefully against crime and social decay. Party platforms began to contain more material expressing support for prayer in schools and the traditional family, and opposition to abortion and sexual content on television. The congressional parties also sponsored more legislation to restore traditional values, from opposing the ERA and abortion, seeking welfare reform in the sense of limiting access to it, seeking to establish the right to prayer in schools, and limiting gay rights (Brewer and Stonecash, 2006). Once George Bush became president and the party controlled both houses, the party was able to go farther, banning partial-birth abortions, and drawing great attention to their efforts to prevent the courts from allowing the removal of a feeding tube from Terri Schiavo in 2005. The Bush administration also banned the use of U.S. aid within any country for the purposes of abortion.

The efforts were successful in drawing more of those supporting traditional values to the party (Hetherington, 2009). Those who attend church regularly moved steadily to vote Republican (Olson, 2010), as did those opposed to abortion. Conservatives in general steadily moved toward the party and became a larger percentage of those identifying with the party (Brewer and Stonecash, 2006). By the 1990s the party was



pulling even with Democrats in terms of those identifying with the party. They took both houses of Congress and in 2000 they won the presidency. As noted earlier, it appeared the strategy had worked and brought the party an expanded electoral base.

### **Refining the Argument**

Indeed, not only had the strategy worked, but to critics it was a brilliant (and frustrating) exploitation of trends to expand the party base and repress the role of class in American politics. Beginning in the 1970s some academics had developed the argument that material concerns were declining in relevance as the general affluence of society increased (Inglehart, 1971). This was followed by analyses arguing that class divisions had become inverted as the Democratic Party was taken over by elitists who were more concerned about the effects of social conditions and individual liberty. This led to an emphasis on being sympathetic to blacks (and rationalizing any crimes they committed) and supporting individual rights such as abortion and gay rights. The argument was that in pursuing these positions Democrats were increasing their support among the higher educated and alienating the working class which had more traditional values (Ladd, 1975).

The result was out-of-touch liberal elitists pushing tolerance for diverse values and working class whites angry about lack of respect for the traditional values they had lived by (Edsall and Edsall, 1991). Republicans had recognized this tension and stressed traditional values as a way to pull working class whites away from the Republican Party. They knew that the white-working class tends to be relatively more supportive of traditionalist values (Hunter, 1992: 63; Carmines and Layman, 1997: 297; Hetherington,

2009). Promoting the "cultural wars" would then pull lower-income voters away from the Democratic Party and toward the Republican Party and reduce the role of economic issues in voting (Carmines and Layman, 1997: 284, 296; Ladd and Hadley, 1978: 233, 243; Inglehart, 1990: 275; Dionne, 1995).

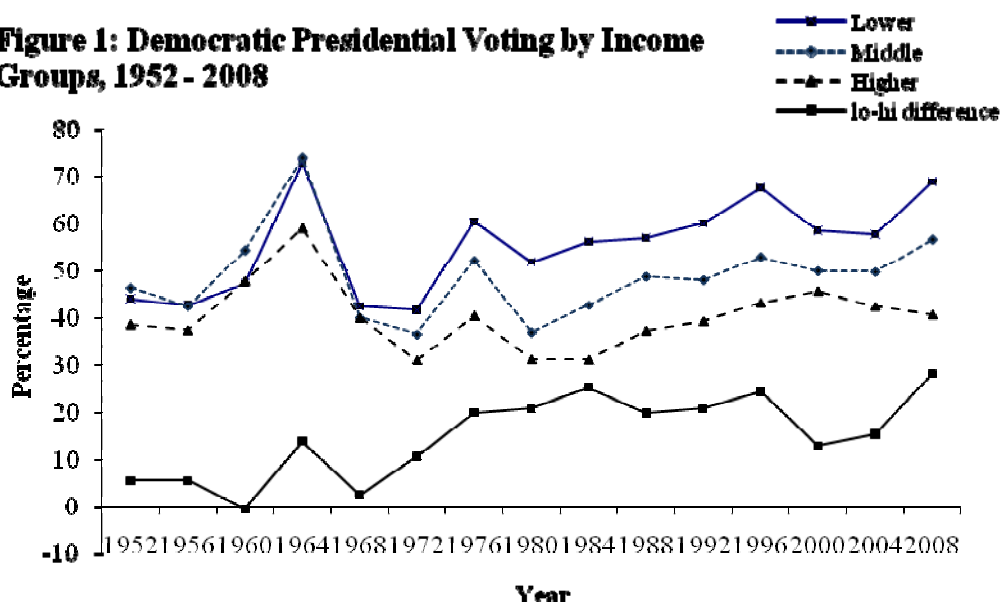
As Frank summarized it in *What's the Matter with Kansas*, Republicans had figured out that raising issues like abortion and gay rights agitated working class whites, pulling them to the party and reducing the discussion of class issues at a time of growing inequality, giving the party the leeway to enact tax cuts for the rich (Frank, 2004). The strategy had attracted more voters, expanded their base, while allowing the party to stress issues of limited government and provide direct benefits for a constituency that returned the favor in the form of campaign donations (Bartels, 2008).

### **Expectations and Evidence**

If the Republican strategy to attract new voters and expand their base has been effective, then we should see some very specific effects. The effect of effort to attract those socially conservative involves several relationships. It should pull those who are socially conservative to the party. If social conservatism is greater among those who have less education and income, then it should move relatively more of those in these two categories. The effect should be to reduce Democratic voting among those with less income and education. At the other end of the education and income spectrum, if the party emphasis on less government and lower taxes has been helpful in retaining support among these groups, then there should be no change in their partisan vote. In short, the party strategy should have pulled in some less affluent and not lost any of the more affluent.

The first matter to assess is whether the broad trends that the strategy should have created have actually occurred. Figure 1 provides evidence on the matter of how different income groups have behaved.<sup>3</sup> It tracks the percentage voting for Democratic presidential candidates from 1952 – 2008. The last several elections have produced considerable fluctuations, but three matters are clear. First, among the bottom third, voting for the Democratic Party has not declined. Indeed, excluding the 1964 election, lower income voting for Democrats is higher now than for the years 1952-60. Even among the middle income groups support for Democratic candidates has not declined.

**Figure 1: Democratic Presidential Voting by Income Groups, 1952 - 2008**

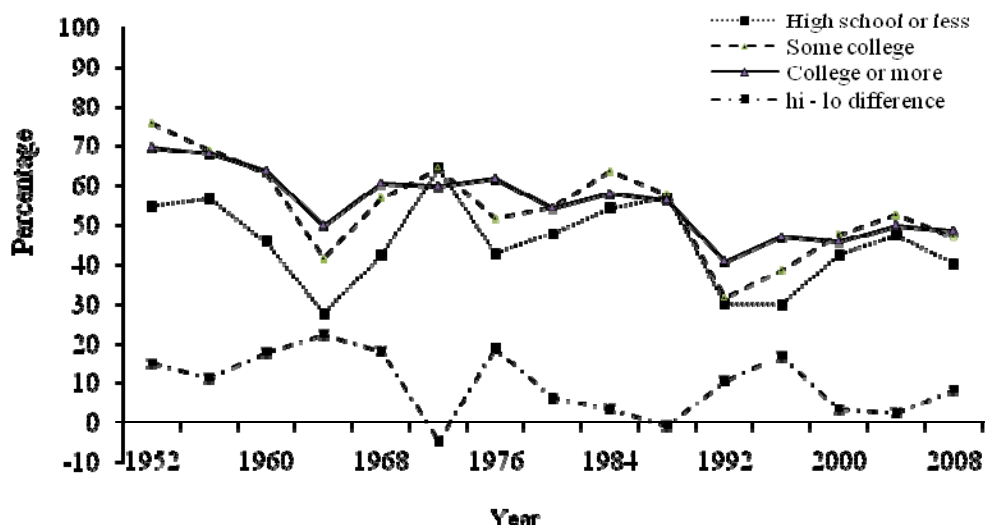


<sup>3</sup> Numbers are the percentage indicating they voted for the Democratic presidential candidate (vcf0705). They are actual percentages, not the percentage of the two-party vote. The data are taken from the National Election Studies files for 1948-2004, The National Election Studies, [American National Election Studies Cumulative Data File, 1948 – 2004](#), 12<sup>th</sup> ICPSR version. The income categories of lower and higher thirds are derived from grouping the reported family income for each year. Those in the 0-33 percentile were in the bottom third, and those in the 66-100 percentile were coded as top third.

Second, among the more affluent (top one-third) support for the Democratic Party is now higher than in the 1980s, when the cultural wars began. Third, the difference between lower and higher income groups in voting Democratic has not declined over time, but it has increased. The evidence does not fit the expected pattern that Republicans have retained the more affluent, attracted the working class or less affluent, and diminished class voting.

Figure 2 indicates voting for Republican presidential candidates by education levels. Three matters are important. First, from 1952 through 1976 (with the exception of 1972) Republicans received a relatively high percentage among those with higher education, winning between 60 and 70 percent of the vote among that group. Second, they also did relatively better among those with college or more, with an average difference of 14 percentage points between the college or more and high school groups for 1952-1976. Then from 1980 through 1988 that advantage diminished to almost nothing as the party increased its support among those with a high school education or less. Third, in 1992 support for Republican presidential candidates dropped among all groups (partially due to the presence of Perot in 1992 and 1996). Perhaps most interesting is that support among those with a college degree or more has not returned to its prior levels. In the last two elections the party has struggled to achieve 50 percent among those with a college degree or more. The thesis of some regarding the cultural wars is that Republicans have used it to attract those with less education, while presumably retaining those with more education. Support among those with less education is no higher for the last five elections compared to prior years. Support among those with a college degree or more is now less.

**Figure 2: Percent Voting for Republican Presidential Candidates by Education Level, 1952 - 2008, NES Data**



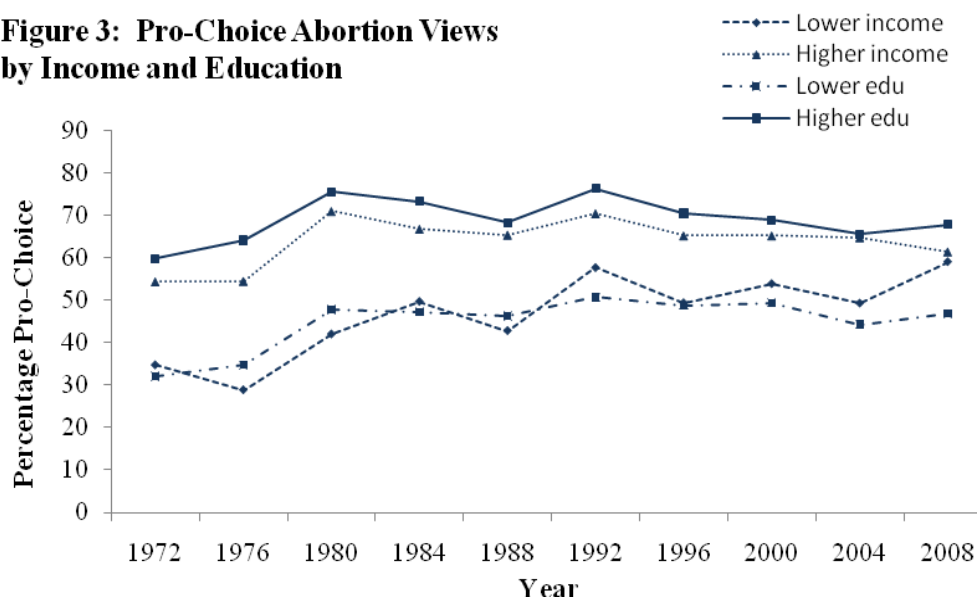
In summary, there are some unexpected trends for Republican presidential candidates. They have not increased their percentage of the vote among the less affluent and support among the more affluent is now less than twenty years ago. Party support among those with more education is now less than was twenty years ago and there is no clear increase in support among those with less education. The issue is whether the cultural wars have played a role in these changes. To assess this we first examine the relationship between education and income and opinions about social conservative issues. We then examine how those opinions have affected the movements of income and education groups over time. Finally, we examine how the distribution of opinion about cultural issues has changed over time how this has affected the situation of Republicans.

### **Income, Education, and Social Conservative Views on Abortion and Gays**

The presumption of the Republican strategy has been that those with less income and education are more troubled by abortion and homosexuality. To the extent that

prevails then Republicans can affirm their commitment to traditional values, create a contrast with the more liberal Democratic Party, and pull these cultural conservatives to the Republican Party. Figure 3 indicates the percentages of lower and higher income individuals who are pro-choice.<sup>4</sup> It also indicates the percentage pro-choice for those with a high school education or less and those with a college degree or more. Those with less income and less education are less likely to be pro-choice and the difference is consistent.<sup>5</sup> The basis exists for appeals to these voters to move them more towards the Republican Party.

**Figure 3: Pro-Choice Abortion Views by Income and Education**



<sup>4</sup> Specifically, those who choose option 1 or 2 for vcf0837 and vcf0838 in the NES cumulative file are treated as pro-life. Those choosing options 3 or 4 are classified as pro-choice.

<sup>5</sup> Other evidence indicates that as income rises, so does support for abortion rights (Legge, 1987: 486). Voters of higher socioeconomic status are more likely to favor legalized abortion than lower SES voters (Abramowitz 1995: 176). As education levels increase, so does tolerance for abortion rights (Legge, 1987: 480; Wang and Buffalo, 2004: 102). Education exposes individuals to alternative worldviews and encourages critical thought (Petersen, 2001: 189). In this sense, education has a “liberalizing effect” on abortion views (Himmelstein and McRae, 1988: 500). Higher income voters are thus more likely to embrace a less absolute, modernist view of social issues.

These results also suggest that those with more education and income are more supportive of the pro-choice position. An emphasis by Republicans on a pro-life position may have the effect of alienating voters who are pro-choice. There is a basis for attracting some voters with a policy position, but also a basis for losing some.

**Figure 4: Percentage Positive Regarding Gays by Income and Education Levels**

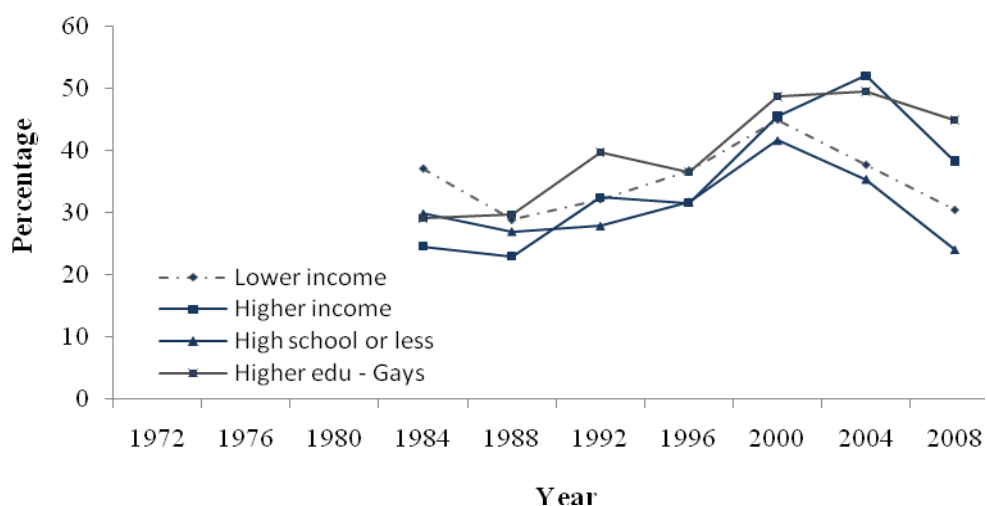


Figure 4 presents similar information regarding positive feelings toward gays. NES surveys since 1984 have asked respondents to give their feelings towards homosexuals on a scale from 0 (cool) to 100 (warm) with 50 being neutral. All those who place themselves at 51 or more regarded as positive. In the 1980s and through most of the 1990s there is no difference between high and low education and income groups. In the late 1990s and the 2000s a difference emerges, with higher education and income groups becoming more positive. By 2008, even with the decline recorded in the NES

results (contrary to other surveys),<sup>6</sup> higher education and income groups are much more positive towards gays than they were 20 years prior. By the 2000s there was a potential basis for appealing to those with less income and education by stressing opposition to gay rights. Just as with the abortion issue, however, there is a basis for alienating those with more education and income.

### **The Evidence on the Impact of Cultural Issues**

For these differences to become the basis of partisan divisions, the parties must also differ. Over the past two decades that has happened, with party positions on abortion and acceptance of gays diverging and these issues have also become more important in affecting voting decisions (Adams, 1997: 723-4; Cook, Jelen and Wilcox, 1993; Brewer and Stonecash, 2006).

More specifically, two questions are important. First, how have opinions about these issues affected those with less income and education? How have Republicans done in pulling voters with joint traits away from the Democratic Party? Second, how has the emergence of these issues affected those with more income (and education), those more liberal about these matters?

The first matter is how those with less income have behaved. Figures 5 and 6 present those results. The results indicate how those in the bottom third of the income distribution, grouped by pro-life and pro-choice opinions, have voted for Democratic presidential candidates. From 1972 through 1988 there was no consistent voting difference between those pro-life and those pro-choice. Beginning in the 1992 election their voting patterns

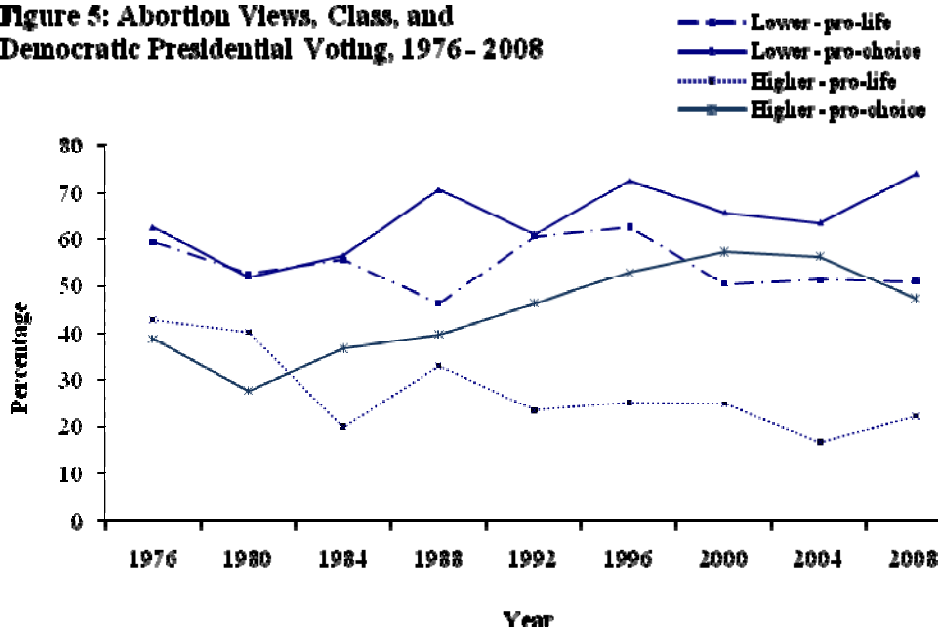
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<sup>6</sup>Gallup News Service, "Tolerance for Gay Rights at High-Water Mark," May 29, 2007, <http://www.gallup.com/poll/27694/Tolerance-Gay-Rights-HighWater-Mark.aspx>



began to diverge, with the pro-choice group moving more Democratic by about 10 percentage points. Those pro-choice dropped from about 59 to 50 percent Democratic. The net effect, with 50 percent of the less affluent pro-choice and less than 50 percent pro-life, has been a net increase in the percentage of the bottom third voting Democratic, regardless of whether the starting comparison point is 1972 or 1980. While abortion opinions affect Democratic voting, and those pro-life are less Democratic, the net effect has not been to move the less affluent away from the Democratic Party.

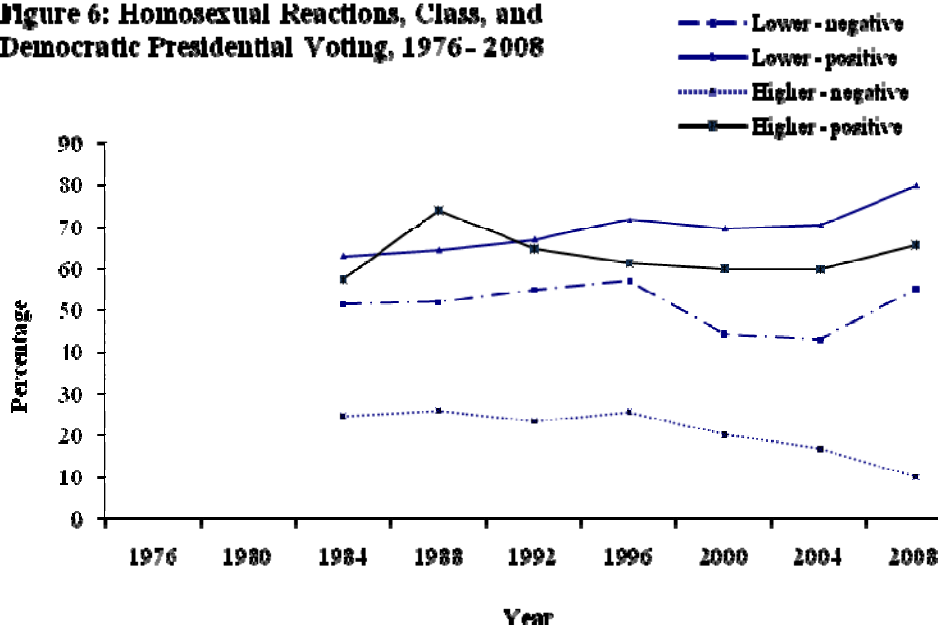
**Figure 5: Abortion Views, Class, and Democratic Presidential Voting, 1976- 2008**



Essentially the same pattern holds for reactions to homosexuals among the less affluent. Beginning in 1992 a consistent difference opened up between those positive and negative about homosexuals, but with more in the positive than negative category over time, the net effect has not been a movement of the less affluent away from the Democratic Party. Republicans have been able to hold down increases (not reduce) in Democratic voting among

the less affluent, but they have also pushed more of those with liberal opinions towards the Democrats. The net effect has not been to attract the less affluent.

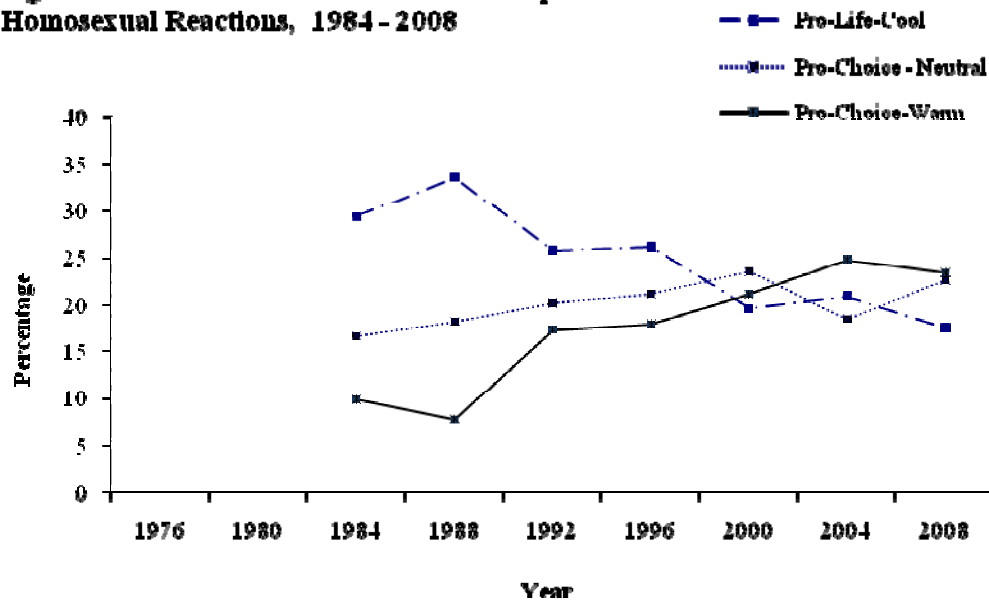
**Figure 6: Homosexual Reactions, Class, and Democratic Presidential Voting, 1976- 2008**



The more interesting group is the more affluent. Those pro-choice have moved strongly toward the Democratic over time, while those pro-life have moved strongly away from the Democratic Party. The more affluent have been consistently more pro-choice than pro-life over time (Figure 3), shifting the weight of the net effect to how pro-choice voters have behaved. In regard to homosexuals, those positive and negative have differed in their Democratic support since 1984 and the difference has grown over time. Over that same time period the more affluent have become much more positive in their reaction. The net effect has been that those more positive comprise a bigger percentage of the more affluent. The net effect is that this group, compared to 1980 and 1984, has become more Democratic in presidential elections (Figure 1).

The problems for the Republican Party go beyond just attracting social conservatives and alienating others. The deeper problem is that the percentage of the electorate that holds the opinions the party has been emphasizing is declining. The NES studies have asked about both abortion and homosexuals since 1984, which allows us to track the joint distribution of opinions on the two issues. Figure 7 indicates three important groups. First, there are those pro-life and cool (0-49 on a 100 point scale) when asked to give their reaction to gays. In 1984 29.4 percent of voters were in that joint category. By 2008 17.5 percent were in that joint category. Then there are those who are pro-choice and either neutral (at 50) or warm (51 +) regarding homosexuals. From 1984 to 2008 the percentage pro-choice and neutral increased from 16.6 to 22.6. Those pro-choice and warm increased from 9.9 to 23.4 percent. Those pro-choice and either neutral or warm towards gays have increased from 26.5 to 46.0 percent of all respondents since 1984. For the last decade the Republican Party has been presenting a message of being pro-life and largely unreceptive to gays while the percentage holding such views has been declining. Given the trends in public opinion, the party is fighting a losing battle.

**Figure 7: Joint Distribution of Abortion Opinions and Homosexual Reactions, 1984 - 2008**



To return to our initial question of what explains the decline of the Republican Party in the 2006 and 2008 elections, the evidence indicates that the party's cultural positions have hurt it. There is no doubt that Iraq, George W. Bush, and the economy played a role in those elections, but it also appears that the party's positions on cultural issues have played a role. Contrary to what many suggest, the party has not succeeded in pulling less affluent voters away from the Republican Party. Perhaps more important, the unstated assumption that they would retain higher income voters, presumably through tax cuts, has not occurred. The probably unintended consequence of their strategy has been to alienate many higher income voters who are primarily pro-choice and more tolerant in their views about gays than the conservative wing of the party has acknowledged. Just as with Democrats from 1948 through the 1960s and Republicans in the 1960s – 1970s, the ability to judge the effects of pursuing some voters and shifting their emphasis has not been great.

### **Why so Long to Develop?**

What explains the lag in voters' shifting allegiances? We surmise that the American electorate reacted gradually to parties' changing or newly emphasized cultural stances because party positions on these issues evolved and the salience of these issues varied. Over time, parties and the media increasingly devoted attention to cultural issues. Hetherington (2009) finds an increase in attention to gay rights and to the involvement of Christian fundamentalists in politics in newspaper coverage from 1988 to 2004. Furthermore, at times the salience of cultural issues diminishes due to the appearance of other pressing issues on the national agenda, such as the War on Terror in the 2004 election and the economic situation in 2008 election.

There is theoretical reason to suspect that party change takes a while to unfold. Key (1959, 199) contends that a secular shift in party attachment "extends over several presidential elections and appears to be independent of the peculiar factors influencing the vote at individual elections." Research demonstrates that individuals shift their partisan attachments in order to accord better with their ideology (Abramowitz 1994; Saunders and Abramowitz 2004) and religious attachment (Layman 1999; 2001). In their decisions to support a party, voters use assessments – or a "running tally" – of parties' issue positions (Fiorina 1981). In this process, voters gradually react to the changing platforms and images of the parties by evaluating the compatibility of their views with those of their party and sorting themselves accordingly (Stonecash 2005).

The role of social conservatism in the party's platform presents a dilemma to the Republican Party. While many argue the party needs to dispense with or at least deemphasize the adherence to traditional values, others remain committed to these norms of behavior. According to Karl Rove, "Culture matters. Suggestions that we abandon

social conservatism, including our pro-life agenda, should be ignored. These values are often more popular than the GOP itself” (Rove 2008). Others including David Frum (2009) disagree, “Republicans need to modulate our social and cultural message.” Governor Charlie Crist of Florida has argued that the party must emphasize economic, rather than social, issues, and calls for the party to invoke a broader appeal, “If you’re going to be successful in this business, you have to win a majority. It’s not just a majority of Republicans...it’s a majority of the people” (Cooper 2008). If Republicans were to deemphasize cultural issues, it is possible that some voters in the social conservative base would feel abandoned by the party and would either abstain or vote for an alternative candidate. Yet, if the Republican Party does not moderate or deemphasize their positions on social issues and continues to employ populist appeals, the party will continue to have difficulty attracting the more affluent and will remain a minority party.

Winning back the more affluent constituency will take time. The Republican Party will need to deemphasize social issues for a while in order to regain this constituency and to become once again a majority party. Just as it took the electorate time to recognize the party brand of social conservatism, it will also take time for voters to assess the party in light of a new image, one in which Republicans place less emphasis on social conservatism and populist rhetoric.

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