

THE PERIODICAL OBSERVER

A review of articles from periodicals and specialized journals here and abroad

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The Shell-Shocked Democrats

A Survey of Recent Articles

It was the most important election of their lives, many Democrats said, and they blew it. So the debate about what went wrong and what to do next has raged since November 2: Were they done in by a perceived weakness on “moral values,” as some exit polls suggested, by a failure to persuade working Americans to vote in their own economic self-interest, or by some other shortcoming? Of course, a shift of 60,000 or so votes in Ohio would have meant that Republicans would be the ones wringing their hands today. Even so, many analysts think that the Democrats are now in a profound political bind.

Winning the presidency “is not the most difficult challenge” for the Democrats, historian Alan Brinkley, the provost of Columbia University, observes in *The American Prospect* (Dec. 2004). After all, Al Gore very nearly won in 2000 (“many believe he actually did”), and he almost certainly would have been reelected in 2004. The bigger challenge is regaining strength in Congress, particularly the Senate, since more than half the states are solidly Republican. (In the new Senate, the GOP has a 55–44 edge, not counting a lone independent, and in the new House, a 232–202 edge, with one independent.) “If the most Democrats can hope for is an occasional Democratic president facing a consistently conservative Republican Congress, the future of progressive or

liberal hopes is grim, indeed.”

Modern conservatism, Brinkley writes, is “a populist phenomenon, drawing heavily from the lower middle class, the working class, and perhaps above all, the once-Democratic South.” To win those voters back, Democrats “need to turn much of their attention away from culture and back toward class.” They must deliver more forcefully “a clear economic message” about such issues as health care, corporate malfeasance, and workers’ rights.

Brinkley’s view wins a good deal of assent from the contributors to a symposium in *The Nation* (Dec. 20, 2004). Theda Skocpol, a Harvard University political scientist, urges Democrats not to “wander off” into fights over Supreme Court nominations and the like but to focus on the defense of the existing Social Security system and other “bread-and-butter” issues. They must “speak in vivid, morally powerful terms to potential majorities of American working people.”

But William A. Galston, a political theorist at the University of Maryland School of Public Affairs and a former adviser to President Bill Clinton, warns against the kind of economic populism embraced to such disastrous effect by Vice President Al Gore in the 2000 election. The growing income gap between rich and poor, he writes in a pre-election edition of *The Public Interest* (Fall 2004), has been caused not by downward mobility but by *upward*

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mobility. The percentage of American families earning \$50,000 or more (in constant dollars) rose from 23 percent to 34 percent between 1968 and 1996; the percentage earning more than \$75,000 more than doubled, reaching 16 percent.

The new class structure is one of the key challenges facing Democrats: “A new Democratic majority requires a coalition between upscale professionals and average workers. The problem is that these two groups do not understand their interests or their values in the same way. In comparison with working-class voters, professionals typically care less about economically activist government and more about fiscal discipline; less about trade protection and more about global markets; less about security and more about opportunity; less about authority and traditional values, and more about ‘self-expression’ and inclusion.”

The party “cannot give contradictory things” to the two groups, Galston writes, and “the terms of a synthesis that is politically as well as intellectually viable are not yet clear.”

What about the anguished cries that blue-collar workers who support the GOP are not voting in their economic self-interest? “That is entirely true—and completely beside the point,” observes Andrei Cherny, a former adviser to John Kerry and a visiting fellow at Harvard University’s Belfer Center for Science and International Affairs. “Americans do not enter the voting booth in the manner of accountants calculating take-home income,” he writes in *The New Republic* (Nov. 22, 2004). “They have historically voted on hopes and resentments . . . that have nothing to do with the bottom line.”

Exit polls on Election Day indicated that more voters (22 percent) cared more about “moral values” than about any other issue. Pundits initially seized on this finding, then backed off after realizing that the phrase was so broad it could refer to the war in Iraq as well as gay marriage. Still, says Cherny, “the fact that voters who selected it as their most important issue went overwhelmingly for Bush (80 to 18 percent) indicates that it was a phrase with much meaning.” Without adopting “the agenda of social conservatives,” Democrats “need to do a better job of speaking to the moral and spiritual yearnings” of Americans.

Values also matter in foreign policy, writes *The New Republic’s* editor, Peter Beinart, in the magazine’s December 13 issue, and, by failing to embrace the war on Islamist totalitarianism, Democrats have committed a terrible moral and political blunder. Early in the Cold War, liberal Democrats overcame opposition within their own party to take up the struggle against communism, but today’s liberals brush off the new threat, staking everything on mere opposition to the Bush administration’s policies.

One manifestation of the “values” divide at home is the growing marriage gap in voting, contends Barbara Dafoe Whitehead, codirector of the National Marriage Project at Rutgers University. Married voters favored Bush over his Democratic rival by 15 percentage points. Unmarried voters, meanwhile, went for Kerry by a margin of 18 points. “Kerry seemed utterly unaware of the concerns of married parents with small children,” she writes in *Commonweal* (Dec. 17, 2004). “While clinging to rhetoric that supposedly addresses the concerns of working families, Democrats have gravitated toward the libertarian values of the urban singles culture.”

Writing in *Commonweal* (Dec. 3, 2004), Galston argues that Democrats should “distance themselves from Hollywood, reduce their reliance on the judiciary as the engine of social change, and temper what appears to many to be intransigence on morally fraught policies. The modern Democratic Party will never turn its back on *Roe v. Wade*, but many Democrats quietly wonder why the party is falling on its sword over partial-birth abortion.”

It may be, says Brinkley, “that many, perhaps most, Americans strongly oppose some of the values in which [progressives] deeply believe.” On issues such as gay rights, abortion, and affirmative action, “there may be room for pragmatic compromise but only up to a point.”

Harkening back to conservative efforts that began after the Goldwater debacle of 1964, Brinkley sees “years, perhaps even decades,” of work ahead to construct the intellectual “infrastructure” of liberal magazines, websites, think tanks, and other organizations needed to help forge a new agenda. “In the meantime, there is the challenge of opposition.”