

## Chapter 3

dates.<sup>3</sup> In the last three elections, GOP support among conservatives has jumped to 80%. Depending on turnout, this 80% represents a shift of four to nine percentage points of conservative support from the Democratic column to the Republican column.

Similarly, liberal support for Democrats has reached a historic high. Before 1994, the 17 to 21% of the voters identifying themselves as liberals in the exit polls were averaging 76% support for Democratic congressional candidates. In the last three elections, liberal Democratic support has averaged 83%.

While our congressional elections have often been characterized by ideological polarization, the above results demonstrate that the last three elections have been particularly stark in this regard. In 1998, Republican congressional candidates carried conservative voters by 80 to 17% while Democratic congressional candidates carried liberal voters by 81 to 16%.

As these numbers show, the new polarization has been to the advantage of the Republican party. Both liberals and conservatives are voting more along partisan lines than before, but now Republicans are benefiting from a percentage from conservatives comparable to that which the Democrats receive from liberals. To reach this new polarization, conservative voters had to move the most over the past eight years.

Behind the new polarization is the perceived willingness of the Republican party to represent positions that are culturally and economically conservative. When the Republican party represented only economic conservatism, it was mired in the status of the nation's minority party—the “banker party,” as it were. When the Republicans added stronger conservative positions on welfare reform, crime, and moral standards, in general they attracted additional conservative voters who were lukewarm about the party's fiscal conservatism.

## In Fact, It Was a GOP Victory— But the Party Is At Risk in 2000

*By George C. Edwards III*

If asked a year ago to predict the results of the 1998 House elections, the most reasonable answer would have been, “the Republicans will pick up a few seats.” The strong economy, the small number of competitive seats, and the absence of substantial Democratic gains in the 1996 presidential election indicated that there would not be many vulnerable Democratic seats. Meanwhile, the weight of history and Republican advantages in fundraising pointed toward some losses for the president's party.

History took a holiday, however, as the Republicans lost five seats. In the storm of recrimination and fratricide that followed election night, Republicans bemoaned their unex-

pected “defeat” while Democrats basked in the euphoria of beating the odds and moving closer to winning back the House. But, as is often the case, the extensive public commentary on the election was uninformed. What was especially striking was the absence of rigorous analysis of the election returns and exit polls provided by the Voter News Service. Important questions to ask are, just how bad was the Republicans' performance, and what do the results portend for the future?

Parts of the Republican party's perceived cultural conservatism cross-pressure some of its past supporters, but many more voters have shifted to the Republican party than have been lost—a basic calculation that seems to be overlooked in admonitions that the GOP has become too conservative. Also not appreciated is the fact that the GOP's cultural conservatism reinforces the support of far more voters than are cross-pressured by it, and, therefore, helps motivate these voters to turn out. Indeed, the largest part of the national Republican coalition is made up of voters who are *both* economic and cultural conservatives.<sup>4</sup>

### Endnotes:

This article continues a commentary by the author entitled, “This Swing Is Different: An Analysis of 1994 Election Exit Polls” (January 9, 1995/revised March 14, 1995).

<sup>1</sup> This is the average ratio of conservatives to liberals in the exit polls from 1976 to 1998. Survey measures of voter ideology often show a larger ratio of conservatives to liberals depending on the various question wordings.

<sup>2</sup> Writing from hindsight is always easy. While the national polls did not indicate the Democrats were in trouble, one could still believe that, ultimately, the Lewinsky scandal would cost the Democrats dearly. On this one, the national polls had it right. The surprise was in our minds, not in the poll numbers.

<sup>3</sup> The cited averages before 1994 are for the six elections from 1980 to 1990. The transition year was 1992, which was when the polarization began to take shape. In 1992, conservative support for Republican congressional candidates increased to 72% and liberal support for Democratic congressional candidates rose to 81%.

<sup>4</sup> Based on the author's analysis of the ideological dimensions in each partisan coalition done in 1995 and 1996.

### The GOP Won in 1998

The figures do not support the view of a Republican disaster. First, and most important, the Republicans won the

election with 51% of the two-party vote, their second best showing in decades, exceeded only by the 53% of the vote their House candidates received in 1994. Equally important for gaining perspective on the election, Republicans obtained one percentage point more of the House vote than in 1996. It's difficult to interpret these results as a "defeat" except through the prism of inflated expectations.

It is also useful to ask just how much the out party should reasonably expect to gain in mid-term elections. It is true that, in comparison with 1980, Democrats gained an impressive five percentage points of the vote in 1982 during a severe recession, but in 1986 they gained only one percentage point over their performance in the 1984 Republican landslide, and they actually lost two percentage points in 1990. Thus, the Republicans' expectations of coming anywhere near their extraordinary seven percentage point gain of 1994 was illusory at best.

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Republicans not only won big among members of their own party (90%), but they also won a plurality among independents (48 to 45%). Further, the Republicans retained their strong position among conservatives (80%, a two percentage point increase over 1996) and stayed even with moderates (43%). Republicans also gained or held their own among women, whites, Hispanics, Catholics, and Protestants. They also bettered their vote ratios in the Midwest and West while holding their own in the East and South. Not much evidence of electoral failure here.

In recent years, commentators have often pointed to the gender gap—the difference between the support men and women give to each party—when discussing the problems Republicans face in becoming the majority party. Women have consistently favored the Democrats while men have supported the Republicans. In 1998, this gap continued with 51% of women voting Democratic while only 45% of men did so. Thus, there was a six-percentage point difference between men and women in support for the Democrats.

This figure masks some important differences among both female and male voters, however. White women, who com-

prised 41% of the electorate in 1998, voted Republican by a 53 to 44% margin. White men, also 41% of the electorate, voted Republican by an even larger 57 to 39% margin. Thus, although there was a four-percentage point difference between the support of white males and females for Republicans, both genders favored the GOP by comfortable margins. The key to the Democrats staying competitive in 1998 does not seem to have been gender-based.

### Minority Support is Critical

Although Republicans received the support of 55% of white voters, only 11% of African Americans supported Republican candidates at the polls (down seven percentage points from 1996). Eighty-four percent of African American men, who comprised 4% of the electorate, voted Democratic. But the real story was among African American women, who comprised 6% of the electorate: 92% voted for Democratic House candidates. Thus, nearly one-fifth of the electoral constituency of House Democrats was African American, and nearly two-thirds of this group were female.

Republicans did much better among Hispanic voters, who made up 5% of the electorate. They improved their 1996 results among Hispanics by an impressive 9 percentage points. Interestingly, there was a 13 percentage point gain among Hispanic women and an eight percentage point gain among Hispanic men.

Perhaps the central tenet of the conventional wisdom is that Democrats benefited from the strong economy because most people who felt their standard of living was improving voted Democratic. What is less well understood, however, is that such voters increased their support for Republicans by five percentage points over 1996, and those who felt their standard of living was staying the same gave the Republicans three percentage points more than in 1996. On the other hand, Republican support declined by eight percentage points among the 13% of the electorate who felt their standard of living was getting worse. Ironically, then, Republicans seem to have received both credit and blame for the state of the economy.

In sum, the Republicans won the House elections and made some notable gains over their performance in 1996. However, maintaining and building on these results will be difficult if they insist on increasing the conservative edge to their campaigns in 2000. Successes with women, Hispanics, and moderates are unlikely to be maintained and losses among African Americans are unlikely to be stemmed with proposals to reduce the scope of government. Unless Republicans can exploit a cultural issue to their advantage, a dubious assumption given their experience with the Lewinsky scandal, they are in danger of overreaching and becoming the minority in the House of Representatives once again.