The Mindset of the Republican Electorate

by James Barnes

So, what was the Republican presidential nominating contest all about this year? Did a mob of pitchfork-totin' right wingers, bent on banning trade, abortion and maybe even a few moderates, really hijack the party?

The nation's two premier news weeklies seemed to capture this zeitgeist with campaign cover stories earlier this year. *Time* pictured conservative commentator Patrick J. Buchanan in blue-collar work clothes. Behind his hardened expression stood the other candidates, as if waiting to follow his lead. A week later, *Newsweek*'s cover also featured Pat, but sans hard hat. This time he was eerily back-lit, hands clasped together and grimacing out over the headline, "Preaching Fear: Why America is Listening."

Listening to Buchanan? Yes. Voting for him? No. All the makings for an entertaining chapter, but the Republican story in 1996 is far more complex and interesting than just that. It's useful to look closer at the exit polls for Republican primary voters conducted by Voter News Service (VNS), the media exit poll cooperative, to get beyond some of the campaign season's caricatures.

Conservatism's Big Tent

Despite the fact that a pragmatic Washington power broker like Dole captured the Republican Party's big prize over candidates who were running to his right, it wasn't hard to come away from this year's competition with the feeling that the conservatives were continuing to take over the party. After all, even Dole professed his fealty to many of the Republican Right's causes. He bashed Hollywood. He signed the no-new-taxes pledge that he had spurned when he sought the GOP nod in 1988. He even told a gathering of Republican National Committee officials that he would be the second coming of Ronald Reagan if that's what they wanted.

Some of the VNS primary exit polls seemed to indicate a rightward drift in the party as well. For instance, in 1992, when George Bush squared off against Buchanan in New Hampshire, 52% of the people who voted in the Republican presidential primary described themselves as conservatives. In 1996, 55% called themselves conservative. In Florida, 56% of the presidential primary voters identified themselves as conservatives, compared to 51% who did so in 1992. In Illinois, 50% of the 1996 Republican primary goers were self-described conservatives, while only 43% were four years ago.

Looking a little closer at the exit polls, one finds that conservatism in the Republican party can be a big tent. The VNS primary surveys asked voters to describe their ideological standing on a five-point scale: very liberal, somewhat liberal, moderate, somewhat conservative and very conservative. In most states, the rough average of Republican primary voters who described themselves as one form of a liberal was about 10%. Moderates averaged from about one-fifth to a little more than one-third of the GOP primary electorate. Conservatives made up the rest.

Interestingly, on many key issues there were distinct differences between the views of Republicans who described themselves as "somewhat conservative" and those who proudly wore the label of "very conservative." More often than not, Republicans who called themselves somewhat conservative sounded far more like self-described moderates than their high-octane brethren.

For starters, "somewhat conservative" Republicans vote the same way as moderate Republicans. The VNS exit polls of the GOP primaries in the four Midwestern states on March 19 (Illinois, Michigan, Ohio and Wisconsin) found that self-described moderates backed Dole over Buchanan 64% to 22%. Similarly, voters who called themselves somewhat conservative voted for Dole 66% to 24% over Buchanan. However, very conservative Republicans split their votes; 42% for Buchanan, 45% for Dole. In New Hampshire, moderates and somewhat conservative voters had a skeptical opinion of the Religious Right, while very conservative voters had a decidedly positive view of that political movement.

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On many key points the "somewhats" were squarely in the middle: 46% of this group in the Midwest said that they favored having a plank in the party platform calling for a ban on abortion, compared to 33% of the liberals and 70% of the very conservative Republican primary voters.

In most cases (not all), somewhat conservative Republicans leaned more towards the center and agreed with GOP moderates, in regions as diverse as the Midwest, the South, and New York State, on everything from Buchanan's extremism to the qualities that are important to them in a presidential candidate.

Ultimately, Dole won the GOP nomination because he was able to win not only the support of the Republican moderates, but also conservative voters across the spectrum. His candidacy appears to have unified most of the party.

Abortion, Again

Ever since the 1980s, when opponents of abortion rights were able to secure a plank in the party platform calling for a constitutional amendment to protect the life of the unborn, the issue has divided Republicans. Efforts to change the GOP platform's restrictive stance on abortion have been futile. In 1992, pro-choice forces at the Republican national convention were unable to gain even the modest number of delegate signatures required just to bring the issue up for a debate.

But the 1996 exit polls in the GOP primaries indicate that the party rank-and-file tilts towards a less restrictive stance on abortion. To gauge opinion on the issue, VNS asked, "Should the Republican platform support a constitutional amendment to ban abortion?" In every key primary state, Republicans said no—often by a wide margin.

In New Hampshire, opponents of the proposed plank outweighed supporters by a margin of almost 2 to 1. In Florida, the plank was rejected by the same ratio. Even in the cotton South, a region known for its conservative GOP electorate with large numbers of conservative Christian voters, the anti-abortion plank met with disapproval, albeit by a much smaller margin. For instance, in South Carolina, roughly 54% of Republican primary voters opposed the plank, while 43% approved it. In Georgia, 50% of those surveyed said "no" to the plank, and 44% said "yes."

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Choosing a Running Mate

Although Dole has a strong pro-life voting record in Congress, the abortion issue has taken on an added significance this year because of the Buchanan candidacy. The conservative commentator has said that he would fight any efforts to dilute the platform at the convention in San Diego, and he has indicated that he might bolt the party, or at least withhold his support of the GOP ticket, if Dole chose a pro-choice running mate.

Dole said during the campaign that he no longer supports a human life constitutional amendment. Moreover, probably the most attractive potential vice presidential candidate that the party could nominate, retired Army Gen. Colin Powell, is pro-choice.

Would the GOP rank-and-file accept a pro-choice running mate? The VNS exit polls suggest that they would. In the four Midwestern primaries, GOP voters were asked whether Dole should pick a running mate who "supports legal abortion" or one who "opposes legal abortion." A third option was the "VP's position on abortion wouldn't matter."

Overall, the combined survey results found that a plurality, 38%, said that Dole should pick a running mate who opposed abortion. However, 23% said they would like to see him tap a vice-presidential nominee who supports legal abortion and 34% said the veep's abortion views didn't matter.

In these same states, Powell's popularity as a running mate was tested against each of the GOP governors in Illinois, Michigan, Ohio and Wisconsin, the latter three governors being opposed to abortion rights. Only in Michigan did the voters favor their governor, John Engler, over Powell by 53% to 40%. In Ohio, Powell got the nod over incumbent George V. Voinovich, 47% to 44%. In Wisconsin, Powell and incumbent Tommy G. Thompson were tied, 46% each. Ironically, only in Illinois, where Gov. Jim Edgar is an abortion rights supporter, was Powell a clear favorite, winning 50% to 39%.

Just running even with these state-house executives is no small feat. All four won reelection in 1994 by landslide margins. Their job approval ratings remain strong, especially among Republicans.

Other data from VNS suggest that Powell would at least be acceptable to a significant chunk of pro-life voters in these states. The combined exit poll results from the four Midwestern states found that even among those Republican primary voters who said that they wanted to see Dole choose a vice president who "opposes legal abortion," 39% also said that they would prefer to see Powell on Dole's ticket, while 52% favored their incumbent GOP governor.

Those who wanted Dole to choose a pro-choice running mate chose Powell over their home state governor, 52% to 41%. Republican primary-goers in the Midwest who said that the vice presidential nominee's stand on abortion didn't matter also picked Powell by almost an identical 52% to 40% margin.

And what about the Buchanan backers? More than a third of his voters in the four Midwestern primaries, 37%, said they'd like to see Powell run with Dole. Even the third of Buchanan's voters who want Dole to pick a pro-life vice presidential nominee favored Powell as his running mate.

Is it possible that a lot of pro-life Republicans don't know Powell's stand on the abortion issue? Sure, but Powell's pro-choice views have received wide airing in the press and already have drawn barbs from Buchanan. Another explanation of these findings is that while there are many Republicans who indicate one way or another that they oppose abortion rights, they are perhaps willing to be flexible when it comes to winning back the White House.

Of course, all of these points may be moot if Powell follows through with his past public statements and declines to enter the political arena this year. Still, the data from the exit poll may indicate that Dole could have some maneuvering room on the abortion issue.

If Dole wants to split the difference on the abortion issue—and the veteran congressional leader is known for his dexterous deal-making abilities—he might opt for a pro-life running mate and at least some cosmetic changes to the Republican platform's abortion plank.

Not surprisingly, roughly eight out of every ten Republican primary voters in the Midwest who said that they wanted Dole to pick a pro-life running mate also favored a platform plank to ban abortion. Likewise, of those who wanted to see a pro-choice vice president on the ticket with Dole, about eight out of ten opposed that plank.

But what about the 34% of the Midwest Republicans who said that the vice presidential nominee's views on abortion didn't matter? Well, to them the platform mattered. Three fourths of these voters said that they opposed a platform plank that banned abortion.

By the same token though, Midwest Republican primary voters who opposed the platform ban had less rigid views when it came to Dole's running mate than those who supported the ban. Among the former group, 35% said that they wanted Dole to select a pro-choice running mate, 12% said they favored a pro-life running mate, and 50% said that the vice president's views didn't matter. The abortion ban supporters, however, had a much more consistent view on Dole's running mate: 73% said they wanted one who opposed abortion, while only 15% said that the veep's views didn't matter and 10% said they would like to see Dole balance the ticket with an abortion rights supporter.

The Populist Panic

After Buchanan punched through the primary calendar with a victory in New Hampshire, many analysts attributed his success to his populist campaign themes which championed the working man and scorned corporate downsizing. Buchanan was calling on his supporters to grab their pitchforks and storm the country club.

This message, which Buchanan called a "new conservatism of the heart," surely tapped some of the economic anxieties that Americans are feeling, but it probably isn't what's propelled his candidacy.

In New Hampshire, where Buchanan scored his only primary victory, VNS asked Republican voters how they felt about their family's financial situation: Was it better than it was four years ago, worse, or about the same? Among Buchanan's New Hampshire voters, about one-quarter said that their finances had improved, another quarter said they had gotten worse and half said they were the same. But voters for Dole, Lamar Alexander and Steve Forbes gave almost an identical response, which would suggest that Buchanan's voters didn't show any more or any less economic anxiety than those of his three main rivals.

By the time the Republican campaign moved into the eight states holding primaries on March 5 (Colorado, Connecticut, Georgia, Maryland, Massachusetts, Maine, Rhode Island and Vermont) the VNS exit poll had added a question which asked voters what concerned them more, "the nation's economic problems" or "the nation's moral problems." In these eight states, only a quarter of Buchanan's voters cited economic problems while almost three-fourths focused on moral problems. Meanwhile, about 40% of Alexander and Dole voters said economic woes were their top concern, and among Forbes's supporters, a slim majority said economic problems were their top concern. Hence, the economy was a greater concern to Dole, Alexander and Forbes voters than it was to Buchanan voters. So much for the media's theories about Buchanan gaining the vast majority of the "economically anxious" vote.

Further, in state after state, when voters were asked to chose the one issue that mattered most in how they decided to vote, a disproportionate share of Buchanan's voters always opted for abortion rather than "economy/jobs."

Finally, the thrust of Buchanan's populist economic pitch was aimed at unfair trading practices of foreign companies and American companies which had moved plants overseas to benefit from cheaper labor. Some observers felt that this message might be feeding the isolationist impulse of Americans.

When the VNS survey asked Republican primary voters if they thought US trade with other countries created, lost or had no effect on jobs in their state, the response was fairly even-handed. In most places roughly 40% of the respondents said foreign trade was a net plus and about 40% said it lost jobs. The rest thought it had no impact. Buchanan voters were more likely to say that foreign trade lost jobs, but it's not at all clear his message has had much impact on the broader structure of Republican opinion on this issue.

For instance, in the 1988 Super Tuesday states in the South, only 15% of the GOP primary voters said that "economic competition from other countries" had helped their communities, while 43% said it has hurt their communities, and 35% said it had not had much impact. In the 1996 primaries in the South, 38% said that foreign trade created jobs, 44% thought jobs were lost, and 12% said trade had no effect on jobs. While the two questions are far from identical, the results seem to argue against a growing hostility toward interaction with foreign economies.

Sometimes it helps to listen to what the voters are saying in these elections, not just the politicians and the press.

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