

2000 and Beyond—Lessons for the GOP

by Bruce Blakeman

With the GOP running two unsuccessful presidential campaigns in succession, it is clear that a revitalized strategy for recapturing the White House is needed. The emergent question is how the Republican Party can build a winning coalition in 2000? To start, a successful Republican campaign strategy must take a more sophisticated look at the American electorate. An electorate viewed simply in terms of conservative versus liberal or male versus female or young versus old will no longer suffice. Failure to recognize the complexity of the electorate will only hinder efforts to strengthen GOP support.

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Using the Wirthlin Worldwide 1996 post-election survey and some additional longitudinal studies we have been conducting since 1980, we have identified six segments of the electorate for the GOP to consider for developing a winning strategy in 2000.¹ Essentially, we examine what the next GOP candidate needs to do.

1. Lock in the Republican base of voters

Partisanship remains highly correlated with an individual's vote on election day. In our national post-election survey, the Dole ticket received 77% of self-described Republicans and the Clinton ticket received 86% of Democrats and 11% of Republicans.

With Bob Dole getting less than eight out of ten GOP votes, 23% of Republicans did not support their party's presidential candidate. With approximately 40% of the 1996 electorate declaring they are Republican or leaning Republican, clearly Dole missed an easy opportunity to make the race more competitive. If he had drawn the same percentage of Republicans as Clinton did Democrats, Dole's total vote would have increased by almost 4 percentage points.

2. The Republican candidate must be competitive with Independent voters

One of the most striking differences in the Reagan coalitions and the 1992 and 1996 Republican campaigns is how they

fared with independents. In all four presidential elections, independents gave a plurality of their votes to the eventual winner. For example, Reagan garnered 50% of independents in 1980 and increased that margin to 68% in 1984. In 1996, Bill Clinton won 49% of independents, with Dole receiving just 27%.

3. The GOP needs a higher percentage of both moderates and conservatives

The Republican Party is *the* conservative party. Dole, however, did not reap the electoral benefits of being the conservative candidate. Bill Clinton was able to build a coalition that consisted of, to a large degree, liberals and moderates, but he also convinced a significant segment of conservatives to vote for him.

On election day, Dole received only 58% of the self-described conservative vote, 28% from the moderates, and 10% from the liberals. Clinton, on the other hand, won a majority of liberals (82%) and moderates (58%) while garnering about a third of the conservative vote (27%). Granted, the Clinton campaign's expressed strategy was to position him in the middle of the ideological spectrum, but that begs the question: Why did Clinton do so well with liberals and still get a third of the conservative vote?

A new Republican approach must include engaging conservatives while not alienating most moderates. The Republican strategy must have both voter groups in place or they will see a repeat of 1992 and 1996 where they won a majority of conservatives, but did not receive the margin they needed from moderates.

4. The GOP presidential candidate needs a message that is personally relevant to voters

One reason Dole failed to get a healthier margin from the conservatives and Republicans is that his message never resonated with them. When we asked voters if they agreed or disagreed with the statement, "Bob Dole never gave me a good reason to vote for him," 56% agreed. Even within his base voter groups of Republicans and conservatives, a large segment of these cohorts also agreed that the Dole message was not an adequate reason to support him. Specifically, 29% of Republicans, 42% of conservatives, and 61% of moderates all said the Dole message fell flat.

5. The GOP candidate needs to do better among both women and men

The lesson here is two-fold. First, the Dole campaign's win-coalition strategy obviously underperformed with men.

Election '96

Future Republican campaigns must increase their advantage with this group. Second, Dole was soundly defeated among women voters. The GOP candidate does not have to win a majority of women, but s/he cannot afford to lose the support of women voters by a double-digit margin.

Another phenomenon in recent voter behavior is the gender gap. The gender gap was first identified by Richard Wirthlin, then a Reagan strategist and pollster, prior to the 1980 presidential campaign. The trend continues to this day where men are significantly more likely to consider themselves Republican and a plurality of women identify themselves as Democrats. Our 1996 post-election study shows both groups' voting behaviors reflect their partisan leanings.

In addition, our post-election findings reconfirmed what had been widely reported in the media: While men were evenly split between Dole and Clinton, women favored Clinton by a nineteen-point margin (55% to 36%).

Compared to both of the Reagan campaigns, Bob Dole was lackluster with men voters. In the last tracking survey of the 1980 campaign, Reagan garnered 50% of male voters and he collected 62% of this group in 1984. In both instances, however, Reagan did significantly better with men than women—receiving 40% of the female vote in 1980 and 54% in 1984.

Men are a large segment of any Republican win coalition. Of the men who voted in 1996, 65% described themselves as conservative and 44% cited they are Republican; clearly, men can provide the margin of victory for a GOP presidential candidate. However, only 41% of male voters supported Dole in this election.

The GOP's predicament with women voters is entirely another story. The gender gap is a force in the current political environment that GOP candidates must successfully negotiate to win an election.

In May 1992, partisanship nationwide showed a nine-point Democratic edge over the Republicans (45% versus 36%). Among men, 39% considered themselves Republicans and 42% Democrats—only a three-point margin. Women, however, were much more likely to identify as Democrats (47%) than as Republicans (32%)—a fifteen-point margin.

Our 1996 post-election study still finds women significantly more likely to describe themselves as Democrats than men. Forty-nine percent of women say they are Democrats and 39% are Republican. Men, however, are more Republican today, with 44% saying they are Republican and just 34% identifying as Democrats.

Even though women overall tend to be more Democratic, some cohorts within this group tend to be more Republican.

One common theory is that younger women lean towards the Democrats. Age, however, is not correlated with partisanship among women. In examining younger, middle aged, and senior women, there is no statistical difference in their partisan leanings. This was true in May 1992 and continues to be true today (see Table 1).

The same trend exists in voting behavior among the different female age cohorts in the 1996 presidential election. There was no statistical difference between younger and older

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women in their support for Bill Clinton. Specifically, Clinton received 53% of 18-34 and 35-54 year olds. His margin with women age 55 and above was 58%.

The lesson for Republicans is that they do not need a majority of women to vote for them to win the presidency. If a Republican presidential candidate can sustain a majority of men (at least 56%), that candidate only needs 43% of women to get 49% of the overall vote. Assuming a national election with a third party garnering five to ten percentage points, 49% will be enough to win the election.

The problem now focuses on how a Republican presidential candidate segments women to get 43% of their vote when most women are more closely associated with the Democrats and significantly more likely to be self-described liberals.

Table 1
Across Age Groups Women Are Consistently More Democratic

Women by age	Party ID			
	Republican		Democrat	
	1992	1996	1992	1996
18-34	30%	40%	41%	49%
35-54	33%	34%	48%	48%
55+	32%	33%	51%	50%

Note: 1996 results are based on actual voter responses.
Source: Surveys by Wirthlin Worldwide, May 4-6, 1992 and November 5, 1996.

6. The Family Gap

There is hope for Republicans with women voters. What is missed in a surface analysis of the gender gap is that women are not monolithic in their partisanship and their voting behavior. The gender gap is more correctly a “Family Gap.” The trend since the 1980 election cycle shows that married women,

especially those with children, have very different attitudes and voting behaviors from their single cohorts.

One subgroup that received unusual attention this election cycle was the so-called "soccer mom." This new political-speak is shorthand for white, married women who have children at home. This segment of the American voting population was the subject of several national news broadcasts and frequent political pundit speculation. It was widely supposed that soccer moms held the key to the presidential election and would vote for Bill Clinton.

Our research over the past three election cycles, including 1996, refutes this theory. In fact, soccer moms are an integral part of the Republican-base coalition.

We first identified this attitudinal difference in "soccer moms" in a 1992 study for *Reader's Digest*. The findings were verified in our 1996 post-election study. In both cases, we found that married women identified equally between Republicans and Democrats. A majority of single women, on the other hand, considered themselves Democrats.

A Populist Perspective on the 1996 Elections

by Brad Bannon

If you poll for Democrats and labor unions as I do, there is much about the 1996 elections to be thankful for and much to mourn. *Investor's Business Daily* probably put it best, saying, "Republicans didn't get knocked out Tuesday, but they were knocked back."¹ Bill Clinton was the first Democratic president since Franklin Roosevelt to be reelected after serving a full term, and the size of the Republican advantage over Democrats in the House of Representatives was cut in half.

The AFL-CIO's voter education campaign exerted considerable influence on both the legislative and the political process in 1996. Legislatively, the AFL-CIO effort rendered the Contract with America null and void, resulting in the passage of legislation that raised the minimum wage and increased funding for education and environmental protection. Politically, the AFL-CIO's voter education campaign increased turnout by union members and their families and led to the defeat of 17 incumbent Republican House members.

But let's face reality, as ugly as it might be for the Democrats. Newt Gingrich, Dick Armey, Henry Hyde or Sonny Bono, and not Dick Gephardt, will be wielding

The most significant differences among women are marital and child status. Our research shows that single women are one of the most Democratic subgroups in the country. Married women, especially those with children in the home, tend to be much more Republican than their single sisters.

Only one-in-five single females (19%) consider themselves Republican compared to 67% of single women who say they are Democrats.

Married females, on the other hand, are almost evenly split between those who consider themselves Republican (41%) versus those who are Democrats (43%). Soccer moms, again, are evenly split between the political parties (42% GOP, 41% Democrat).

In this year's presidential election single women overwhelmingly supported Clinton, with 73% voting to reelect the President and only 23% voting for Dole. However, Dole was much more competitive with married women. Our research shows he lost married women by only 5 percentage points (43% to 48%).

Further, Dole's support among white females between the ages of 25 and 54 with children (soccer moms) was relatively strong. Here, Dole managed to shrink Clinton's advantage to a slim two-percentage points (45% versus 43%).

The lesson for Republicans is they can win enough of the female vote to be successful. The next Republican presidential candidate needs to garner at least 43% of women voters. The women the GOP candidate must target are white, married, both working and non-working, conservative to moderate, and most likely have children living at home.

Endnote:

¹ The sample for the post-election study consisted of 1,030 telephone interviews with voters. All other data presented below are from nationally representative samples of 1,000 or more registered voters.



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the Speaker's gavel come January; so it is important for Democrats to take stock and figure out what went wrong and what it is that they can do better. Hind-sight may be 20-20, but today's hind-sight is tomorrow's foresight into Campaign 1998. In this spirit, I offer these lessons from the 1996 campaign for your consideration.

Lesson One

Democrats win elections when Americans vote vertically from top to bottom, and Republicans win when people vote horizontally from left to right.

Politics is bewildering to people, pundits, politicians, professionals and press alike. To make sense of it, we create classifications. The most common classification we use to simplify politics is ideology. Voters, candidates