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Campaign Stops

Is Rush Limbaugh's Country Gone?

By THOMAS B. EDSALL

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The morning after the re-election of President Obama, Rush Limbaugh told his listeners:

I went to bed last night thinking we're outnumbered. I went to bed last night thinking all this discussion we'd had about this election being the election that will tell us whether or not we've lost the country. I went to bed last night thinking we've lost the country. I don't know how else you look at this.

The conservative talk show host, who had been an upbeat, if initially doubtful, Romney supporter throughout the campaign, was on a post-election downer:

In a country of children where the option is Santa Claus or work, what wins? And say what you want, but Romney did offer a vision of traditional America. In his way, he put forth a great vision of traditional America, and it was rejected. It was rejected in favor of a guy who thinks that those who are working aren't doing enough to help those who aren't. And that resonated.

Limbaugh echoed a Republican theme that was voiced before and after the election: Barack Obama has unleashed a coalition of Americans "who are dependent upon government, who believe that they are victims, who believe the government has a responsibility to care for them, who believe that they are entitled to health care, to food, to housing, to you-name-it — that that's an entitlement. And the government should give it to them" — as Mitt Romney put it in his notorious commentary on the 47 percent.

You can find this message almost everywhere on the right side of the spectrum. The Heritage Foundation, for example, annually calculates an "Index of Dependence on Government," which grows every year:

Today, more people than ever before depend on the federal government for housing, food, income, student aid, or other assistance once considered to be the responsibility of individuals, families, neighborhoods, churches, and other civil society institutions. The United States reached another milestone in 2010: For the first time in history, half the population pays no federal income taxes. It is the conjunction of these two trends—higher spending on dependence-creating programs, and an ever-shrinking number of taxpayers who pay for these programs—that concerns those interested in the fate of the American form of government.

William Bennett, conservative stalwart, television commentator and secretary of education under President Reagan, complained on the CNN Web site that Democrats have been successful in setting

the parameters and focus of the national and political dialogue as predominantly about gender, race, ethnicity and class. This is the paradigm, the template through which many Americans, probably a majority, more or less view the world, our country, and the election. It is a divisive strategy and Democrats have targeted and exploited those divides. How else can we explain that more young people now favor socialism to capitalism?

In fact, the 2011 Pew Research Center poll Bennett cites demonstrates that in many respects conservatives are right to be worried:

Not only does a plurality (49-43) of young people hold a favorable view of socialism — and, by a tiny margin (47-46), a negative view of capitalism — so do liberal Democrats, who view socialism positively by a solid 59-33; and African Americans,

55-36. Hispanics are modestly opposed, 49-44, to socialism, but they hold decisively negative attitudes toward capitalism, 55-32.

Much of the focus in the media in recent years has been on the growing hard-line stance of the Republican Party. At the same time, there are significant developments taking place as a new left alliance forms to underpin the Democratic Party. John Judis and Ruy Teixeira originally described this alliance in 2002 as the emerging Democratic majority in a pioneering book of the same name. More recently, the pollster Stan Greenberg and a group of liberal activists have described it as the “rising American electorate.”

Celinda Lake, a Democratic pollster who has devoted much of her work to analyzing the changing shape of the liberal and conservative coalitions, said in an e-mail that the rising American electorate

will have profound implications because the R.A.E. has a very different approach to the role for government, very different views on race and tolerance, different views on gender roles, and very different views on economic opportunity and security. These are some of the biggest divides in our culture.

Robert Borosage, co-director of the liberal-left Campaign for America's Future, put it more bluntly in a blog post:

In our Gilded Age of extreme inequality, with a middle class that increasingly understands the rules are rigged against them, this was the first election in what is likely to be an era of growing class warfare.

Two post-election polls – one released Nov. 14 by the Democracy Corps (founded by Stan Greenberg and James Carville), the other released Nov. 16 by the Public Religion Research Institute – reveal the decisively liberal views of the core constituencies within the rising American electorate and its support for government activism, especially measures to help the disadvantaged.

The findings from the P.R.R.I. survey are very illuminating:

*When voters were asked whether cutting taxes or investing in education and infrastructure is the better policy to promote economic growth, the constituencies of the new liberal electorate consistently chose education and infrastructure by margins ranging from 2-1 to 3-2 – African Americans by 62-33, Hispanics by 61-37, never-married men by 56-38, never-married women by 64-30, voters under 30 by 63-34, and those with post-graduate education by 60-33.

Conservative constituencies generally chose lowering taxes by strong margins – whites by 52-42, married men by 59-34, married women by 51-44, all men by 52-41; older voters between the ages of 50 and 65 by 54-42.

*The constituencies that make up the rising American electorate are firmly in favor of government action to reduce the gap between rich and poor, by 85-15 among blacks, 74-26 for Hispanics; 70-30 never-married men; 83-15 never-married women; and 76-24 among voters under 30. Conservative groups range from lukewarm to opposed: 53-47 for men; 53-47 among voters 50-65; 46-54 among married men; 52-47 among all whites.

*One of the clearest divides between the rising American electorate and the rest of the country is in responses to the statement “Government is providing too many social services that should be left to religious groups and private charities. Black *disagree* 67-32; Hispanics *disagree* 57-40; never-married women 70-27; never-married men, 59-41; young voters, 66-34; and post-grad, 65-34. Conversely, whites *agree* with the statement 54-45; married men agree, 60-39; married women, 55-44; all men, 55-43.

The Democracy Corps survey specifically broke out the collective views of the liberal alliance and contrasted them with the views of those on the right. Some findings:

*By a margin of 60-13, voters on the left side of the spectrum favor raising taxes on incomes above \$1 million, while voters outside of the left are much less supportive, 39-25. In the case of raising the minimum wage, the left backs a hike by an overwhelming 64-6 margin, while those on the right are far less supportive, 32-18. The rising American electorate backs raising the minimum wage by 64-6, while the people outside it back a hike by just 32-18. The left coalition supports a carbon tax or fee by 43-14 while right-leaning voters are opposed, 37-24.

Policies supported by the rising American electorate – which closely overlaps with the Obama coalition – provoke intense opposition from the right. In the aftermath of the election, Romney blamed his defeat on the “gifts” Obama handed out to “the

African-American community, the Hispanic community and young people.”

In fact, the rising American electorate represents a direct threat to the striking array of government benefits for the affluent that the conservative movement has won over the past 40 years. These include the reduction of the top income tax rate from 50 percent in 1986 to 35 percent; the 15 percent tax rate on dividend and capital gains income, which was 39.9 percent in 1977; the lowering of the top estate tax rate from 70 percent in 1981, with just \$175,000 exempted from taxation, to a top rate of 35 percent this year with \$5.1 million exempted from taxation.

At the same time, the Pew survey cited above shows the high levels of skepticism and hostility toward capitalism on the part of the emerging Democratic majority. Insofar as the liberal coalition succeeds in electing senators and representatives who share those views, the business community will have increasing difficulty in winning approval of its deregulated market and free trade agenda.

As Obama negotiates with Republican House and Senate leaders to prevent a dive over the “fiscal cliff,” he will be under strong pressure from his reinvigorated liberal supporters to take a tough stand in support of tax hikes on the well-to-do and to more firmly limit spending cuts.

“Looking ahead to their post-election agenda, this is not a group looking for ‘austerity,’ ” the Democracy Corps wrote in a report accompanying its post-election survey. “Indeed, their issues are explicitly progressive and investment-oriented,” in terms of human capital. The report went on:

The rising American electorate’s most important priority for the president and the Congress is “investing in education,” followed by “protecting Social Security and Medicare.”

In effect, the 21st century version of class conflict sets the stage for an exceptionally bitter face-off between the left and the right in Congress. The national government is facing the prospect of forced austerity, weighing such zero-sum choices as raising capital gains taxes or cutting food stamps, slashing defense spending or restricting unemployment benefits, establishing a 15 cents-a-gallon gasoline tax or pushing citizens off the Medicaid rolls, pushing central bank policy favorable to the financial services industry or curtailing Medicare eligibility.

In broader terms, the political confrontation pits taxpayers, who now form the core of the center-right coalition, against tax consumers who form the core of the center-left. According to the Tax Policy Center, 46.4 percent of all tax filers had no federal income tax liability in 2011 (although most people pay a combination of state, sales, excise, property and other levies). There are clear exceptions to this dichotomy, as many Social Security and Medicare beneficiaries (tax recipients) vote Republican, and many college-educated upper-income citizens of all races and ethnicities (tax payers) vote Democratic. Nonetheless, the overarching division remains, and the battle lines are drawn over how to distribute the costs of the looming fiscal crisis. The outcome of this policy fight will determine whether Limbaugh is correct to fear that his side has “lost the country.”

Thomas B. Edsall, a professor of journalism at Columbia University, is the author of the book “The Age of Austerity: How Scarcity Will Remake American Politics,” which was published earlier this year.

This is the last column in the 2012 edition of Campaign Stops. We began on a Sunday a year before the election with a piece by T In between we have published hundreds of pieces – by feminist political scientists, conservative historians, demographically ori Campaign Stops also published more than 95,000 comments from its passionate readers, some of whom could be columnists themselves

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