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Campaign Stops

The Culture War and the Jobs Crisis

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Struggling to remain optimistic the day after the election, the anti-abortion activist Charles A. Donovan, president of the Charlotte Lozier Institute, argued that the moral collapse he sees in the re-election of President Obama and in Democratic Senate victories is only a temporary setback.

On the National Review web site, Donovan declared:

We may be on the verge of a new Babylonian captivity for religious conservatives. As we know, the story does not end there.

Actually, Donovan and his fellow right-wingers can expect to be living in a Babylonian captivity for quite some time. The right has lost the culture war.

On Nov. 6, voters in three states (Maine, Maryland and Washington) approved same-sex marriage; two states (Colorado and Washington) passed ballot initiatives allowing the recreational use of marijuana; Wisconsin elected the first openly gay Senator, Tammy Baldwin; and Florida voters rejected a ballot initiative prohibiting the use of public funds for abortions by ten points.

In the next Congress, women and minorities will hold a majority of the Democratic Party's House seats — white men, in other words, for the first time in history, will not make up a majority of a party's delegation to the House. Every member of the House and Senate from New Hampshire will be a woman and the total number of female senators will jump from 15 to 20 in 2013.

To the dismay of the conservative movement, on virtually every burning issue that preoccupies the right, the country has moved steadily leftward. Election Day exit polling found, by a margin of 49 to 46, that a plurality of voters supported same-sex marriage. The same survey found that 59 percent of voters believe abortion should be legal in all (29 percent) or most (30 percent) cases, while only 36 percent believe it should be illegal in most (23 percent) or all (13 percent) cases.

The chart, Fig. 1, from Gallup on the “morality” of same-sex “relations” reflects the leftward cultural trend with the percentage of respondents saying that homosexual relations are morally acceptable growing from 40 percent in 2001 to 54 percent in 2012:

Fig. 1. [CLICK TO ENLARGE](#)

Similarly, researchers at American National Election Studies have found continuing growth, Fig. 2, in the level of support for the equality of women:

Fig. 2.

Republicans and conservatives are clearly struggling to come to terms with the changing character of the nation.

From the hard right, Erick Erickson calls for purging the Republican party of moderates in order to achieve ideological purity:

We must lay the groundwork now with fresh ideas

embedded with timeless principles sold by voices who understand people forget and must be reminded why America is great and why conservatism helped make it that way. We must continue, as a conservative movement, challenging and ending the political careers of Republicans who carry the banner of conservatism while selling it out.

It is unlikely, however, that bloodletting within the Republican Party will solve its current problems. The roots of the party's dilemma run deeper, with two parallel and mutually reinforcing developments structuring political change

The first is the coalescing of "issue clusters" – particularly on the left.

Throughout much of the period of conservative domination of presidential elections from 1968 to 1988 — and in terms of Congressional power from 1994 to 2006 — the Republican Party had a major election-day edge: there was far more ideological cohesion and less divisive conflict on the right than on the left. Conservatives, from white evangelicals to corporate C.E.O.s, found common ground in their support for an aggressive national defense and in their opposition to what they saw as a coercive, redistributive tax collecting and intrusively regulatory domestic government.

The left was often split: between environmentalists and pro-development unions; between proponents and opponents of affirmative action; between law-and-order whites and liberal advocates of criminal defendants' rights. As a result, the Democratic Party was vulnerable to Republican wedge issue strategies that produced such famous political commercials as Jesse Helms's "Hands" — a.k.a. "White Hands" — and Ronald Reagan's "Bear"

More recently, there has been a steady diminution of conflict and a growing consensus on the left culminating in the 2008 and 2012 election

victories. Issues now linked – clustered — in the minds of many Democratic voters include not only traditional socio-cultural, moral and racial issues like women's, minority and gay rights, abortion and contraception, non-marital child-bearing, and the obligation of government to provide a safety net, but also to matters pertaining to the overarching role of government in generating greater social justice.

In this view, the achievement of a just society requires a government active in pursuing a progressive distribution of income (through the tax code, for example), and the reduction of armed conflict, as well as the active regulation of matters as diverse as sustainable development, environmental protection and consumer-friendly reform of the finance and banking sectors.

Essentially, the new core of the party – minorities, unmarried men and women, young voters and whites with advanced degrees – is in general agreement on this broader spectrum of issues, forming a coalition of shared ideas.

The aggregation of a broad set of issues in forming a left or right political orientation marks a major change in American politics. Philip Converse, of the University of Michigan, studied data from the 1956 and 1960 elections and found that only a small minority of highly educated and well-informed voters viewed politics through what might be called an ideological lens.

But things have really changed since then.

Alan Abramowitz of Emory University has documented a major shift as voters have made decisions based on a collection of variables that once would have been seen as unrelated. In a study based on 2008 polling, Abramowitz found majorities or solid pluralities of voters formed consistently liberal or conservative views – not centrist positions – on a continuum of issues including gay rights and abortion; off-shore oil

drilling; the Iraq war; health care; financial regulation; climate change and mortgage assistance to low-income homeowners.

In effect, Abramowitz writes, the historical dependence of the Democratic Party on moderate-to-conservative whites

has decreased considerably while the contribution of liberal whites and especially nonwhites has increased. While moderate-to-conservative whites made up a majority of those who voted for Carter, they comprised barely a quarter of those who voted for Obama.

Demographic groups that favor social justice dispute the evenhandedness of the marketplace; they often view business and corporations with suspicion; and they believe that the state has an obligation to provide for those struggling in a free market system. These demographic constituencies have grown in numbers, and today form a relatively robust coalition: the Democratic Party.

Single voters are more amenable than are their married counterparts to a government focused on social justice. Unmarried voters are substantially more vulnerable to economic downturns and the loss of a job; they look more favorably on such safety net programs as unemployment benefits, government-sponsored health insurance, and government initiatives to ensure food security. Married couples, on the other hand, are more focused on minimizing their tax burden.

The share of the electorate made up of single voters has been growing steadily. In 1992, 34 percent of voters were unmarried; in 2012, it was 40 percent. In the population as a whole, 72 percent of adults were married in 1972; in 2010, it was just 51 percent.

On a larger scale, the Pew Research Center has produced an analysis, Fig. 3, that shows that minority voters, who backed Obama by an 8-2

margin, will be an absolute majority of the population in 38 years, growing from 15.1 percent in 1960 to 34 percent in 2011 to 51 percent in 2050. Minority voters hold policy and ideological views very similar to those of unmarried men and women – they are in fact an overlapping population because a much lower percentage of African American (at 31 percent) and Hispanic adults (at 48 percent) are married than whites (at 55 percent). Minority voters are noticeably more supportive of activist government policies than the average white voter.

The contrasting issue priorities of Democrats and Republicans – marital status aside – were evident in the answer to a particular question the 2012 exit polls asked. When voters were prompted to pick the most important issue facing the country – foreign policy, the federal deficit, the economy or health care – only 15 percent chose the deficit, but those who chose the deficit were overwhelmingly Romney voters by a 2-1 margin, 66-32. A slightly higher percentage, 18 percent, chose health care, and these voters supported Obama voters by a 3-1 margin, 75-24.

An illuminating chart that tracks demographic shifts from 2004 to 2008 to 2012, appropriately headlined “Obama Was Not as Strong as in 2008, but Strong Enough,” and a similar graphic presentation by the Washington Post, show that demographic shifts have reached a point at which Democrats have a decisive advantage.

Compared to 2008, Obama’s major gains this year were limited to Hispanics, who went from 67-31 Democratic in 2008 to 71-27 in 2012; and Asian-Americans, who went from 62-35 Democratic to 73-26. Those gains were adequate to produce victory by off-setting enough of the decline in support for Obama from many other groups, including men, who went from 48-49 to 45-52; whites, down from 43-55 to 39-59; voters with incomes above \$100,000, from 49-49 to 44-54; Jewish voters, from 78-21 to 69-30; independents, from 52-44 to 45-50; and young voters below the age of 30, from 66-32 to 60-37.

In a setback to conservatives, the Nov. 6 exit polls gave strong support to liberalized immigration reform, which is likely to become a top priority for the Obama administration, with 65 percent of respondents agreeing that illegal immigrants should be “offered a chance to apply for legal status,” while only 28 percent of those surveyed opposed such reform. Since the election, a number of conservative pundits, including Sean Hannity of Fox News and Charles Krauthammer, a Washington Post columnist, have called on the Republican Party to reevaluate its opposition to comprehensive immigration reform.

Voters gave a more modest boost to the administration’s call to raise taxes on those making over \$250,000, with a 47 percent plurality backing the proposal, another 13 percent supporting raising everyone’s taxes, and 35 percent opposed to any tax hike.

On a more sobering note for Democrats, a slight majority (51 percent) of voters agreed with the statement “Government is doing too many things better left to businesses and individuals” compared to 43 percent saying “Government should do more to solve problems.” This despite the fact that, as The New York Times reported in a Feb. 11, 2012 story, “Even Critics of Safety Net Increasingly Depend on It”:

The government safety net was created to keep Americans from abject poverty, but the poorest households no longer receive a majority of government benefits. A secondary mission has gradually become primary: maintaining the middle class from childhood through retirement. The share of benefits flowing to the least affluent households, the bottom fifth, has declined from 54 percent in 1979 to 36 percent in 2007.

The story points out that many people

say they want to reduce the role of government in their own lives. They are frustrated that they need help, feel guilty for

taking it and resent the government for providing it. They say they want less help for themselves; less help in caring for relatives; less assistance when they reach old age.

In many respects, the growing liberalization of America on social issues has made the culture war an attractive battleground for Democrats – perhaps dangerously attractive. At the moment, in almost every region of the country except the South, the liberal stance is gaining adherents.

Social, cultural and moral issues have become favorable terrain for the Democratic Party, in the way that they once were for the Republicans, but there are economic trends that do not bode so well for core Democratic constituencies, given their disproportionately low income and high-unemployment rates. The issue of mounting salience – unaddressed so far by Democrats and Republicans – is the hollowing out of the job market.

A growing body of evidence demonstrates that jobs that provide mid-range incomes are disappearing, but just as important, the kinds of jobs that have long served as stepping-stones up the ladder of opportunity are disappearing too. One recent contribution to this literature, “Jobless Recoveries and the Disappearance of Routine Occupations” by Henry Siu, an economist at the University of British Columbia, and Nir Jaimovich, an economist at Duke, reports that there is job growth at the top and bottom of the payscale, but declining employment throughout the mid-pay range. The technical term is job polarization:

The fact that polarization is occurring should not surprise anyone who understands the influence of robotics and automation on machinists and machine operators in manufacturing. Indeed, the influence of robotics is increasingly being felt on routine occupations in transportation and warehousing. Of equal importance is the disappearance of routine employment in “white-collar” occupations — think bank

tellers being replaced by ATMs, or secretarial work being replaced by personal computers and Siri, Apple's iPhone-integrated "intelligent personal assistant."

In the authors' view, past trends suggest a worsening future:

Thus, all of the per capita employment growth of the past 30 years has either been in 'non-routine' occupations located at the high-end of the wage distribution, such as software engineers and economists, or in low-paying jobs, such as service occupations like restaurant waiters and janitors. For this last set of occupations, this has been especially true in the past decade.

Siu and Jaimovich find that the decline in routine middle-income jobs that lend themselves to mechanization and automation occurs during recessions, and, most importantly, does not reverse itself in periods of subsequent recovery. This chart, Fig. 4, in which the pink areas represent economic recessions, demonstrates how, starting during the recession of 1991, recoveries do not lead to revived job markets:

The conclusions reached by Siu and Jaimovich are pessimistic:

Automation and the adoption of computing technology are leading to the decline of middle-wage jobs of many stripes, both blue-collar jobs in production and maintenance occupations and white-collar jobs in office and administrative support. It is affecting both male- and female-dominated professions and it is happening broadly across industries –manufacturing, wholesale and retail trade, financial services, and even public administration.

The authors offer scant hope for the future.

The pace of job polarization was greatly accelerated in this

last recession, and the pace of automation and progress in robotics and computing technology is not slowing down either. If the past 30 years is any guide, we should expect future recessions to continue to spur job polarization. Jobless recoveries may be the new norm.

Should it continue, lack of economic opportunity is likely to undermine the workings of American democratic capitalism: the willingness of the have-nots and have-lesses to tolerate high levels of inequality in the belief that everyone has a shot at making it into the middle class.

The forces driving the evisceration of middle-income jobs — global production and automation — threaten the newly acquired rights of recently enfranchised populations. The “perennial gale of creative destruction” may be so powerful and inexorable that the political system cannot provide a remedy. Even so, if the Democrats fail to take on the issue, they will leave their party open to challenge as discontent over employment stagnation mounts.

An alternative strategy would be for Democrats to unilaterally declare victory in the culture war — allowing Republicans to waste time on futile rear guard actions — and to shift the political agenda to the jobs crisis. The question is: Does the new and enlarged Democratic coalition have the capacity to re-engineer capitalism to produce sustained economic growth while working toward social justice?

An earlier version of this column gave the correct figures for the percentage of whites, Hispanics and African-Americans who are married, but by reversing the terms lower and higher and single and married made it sound like the numbers referred to the percentage of singles in those groups.

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