

# POLITICO

## Dems must woo white men to win

By: **David Paul Kuhn**

October 3, 2007 07:40 PM EST

The 2008 election offers the most diverse array of presidential candidates in history. But this rainbow campaign will hinge on the most durable reality of American politics: White men matter most.

Every election cycle, a new slice of the electorate — suburban mothers, churchgoing Hispanics, bicycling Norwegians — comes into vogue as reporters and analysts study the polls and try to divine new secrets about who wins and why in American politics.

The truth is that the most important factor shaping the 2008 election will almost certainly be the same one that has been the most important in presidential elections for the past 40 years: the flight of white male voters away from the Democratic Party.

The hostility of this group to Democrats and their perceived values is so pervasive that even many people who make their living in politics scarcely remark on it. But it is the main reason the election 13 months from now is virtually certain to be close — even though on issues from the war to health care, Democrats likely will be competing with more favorable tail winds than they have enjoyed for years.



The “gender gap” has been a fixture in discussions about American politics since the early Reagan years. But it is usually cast as a matter of women being turned off by Republicans. By far the greater part of this gap, however, comes from the high number of white men — who make up about 36 percent of the electorate — who refuse to even consider voting Democratic.

In 2000, exit polling showed white women backed George W. Bush over Al Gore by 3 percentage points, but white men backed him by 27 percentage points. Four years later, with John F. Kerry carrying the Democratic banner, the margin was 26 points.

The Bush years have echoed with what-if questions: What if the votes in Florida had been counted differently in 2000, if Ralph Nader had not run or if Gore had been able to carry his home state? What if Kerry had responded more deftly to the Swift Boat Veterans in 2004?

A more powerful what-if is to imagine that Democratic nominees had succeeded in narrowing the [white male gap](#) to even the low 20s instead of the mid-20s. Both Kerry and

Gore would have won easily.

In 2008, Democrats are assembling behind a front-runner, Hillary Rodham Clinton, with singular problems among white males. Polls show her support among this group is approaching the record lows scored by Democrats during the peak of Ronald Reagan's popularity in the 1980s. Some recent hypothetical matchups — which are highly fluid at this stage of a contest — showed Clinton winning roughly a third of white males in a race against Republican Rudy Giuliani.

In the past three decades, the only two Democrats to win the presidency, Jimmy Carter and Bill Clinton, were politicians who organized campaigns around rhetorical and ideological pitches that were designed to reassure voters skeptical of liberal values — an attitude that dominates among white males. Even these victories, however, took place amid special circumstances, with the Watergate backlash of 1976 and the Ross Perot independent boom undermining Republicans in 1992.

Despite this history, so far none of the Democratic candidates has fashioned a program or message that seems calculated to reverse the flow of white males away from the party. One of the party's politicians who has thought most about the problem chose not to make the race in 2008.

Over the past two generations, said former Virginia Gov. Mark Warner, “there was a morphing of the Democratic Party from a sense of a common good or a common commitment to each other as fellow citizens to being an advocate for groups. And I think that Democrats were advocates for every other group except for white males.”

The problem with this approach is that it leaves virtually no margin for error. To win national elections, Democrats need to win nearly all of the African-American vote, a substantial majority of Hispanics and at least come close to winning half of white women. (Democrats have not actually commanded a majority of white women since 1964.)

One of the Democrats' top experts on political demography, Mark Gersh, has pondered how this math affects the most fought-over prize of recent elections, the 20 electoral votes in Ohio. “Gore got 90 percent of the black vote; you are not going to do better than that,” Gersh said. He adds that Kerry earned 88 percent, as well. “So how are you going to win? I have this theory that the only way he could win the state was by really jumping the numbers up in Democratic performance in blue-collar northeastern Ohio.”

### **“Concern for the common man”**

Easy enough to say. But actually achieving this feat in Ohio and elsewhere for Democrats requires reckoning with political attitudes that have had several decades to take root — and are twisted not simply around policies but also deep cultural and economic shifts.

Trying to understand this history is what led to [“The Neglected Voter: White Men and the Democratic](#)

**Dilemma.**” The idea for the book began during the 2004 election, when I was traveling the country for CBS News. Many of these men, even three years ago, had lost their patience for the Iraq war. Often they had obvious reservations about George W. Bush. But it was made clear in conversations the contempt they felt for Democrats — and felt in return from Democrats. For these voters, it was an election with no real competition for their votes.

As I later learned, this was precisely the circumstance that some Republican strategists had vividly anticipated a quarter-century earlier.

Early in Ronald Reagan’s 1980 campaign, his pollster Richard Wirthlin wrote a book-length campaign plan — never previously obtained — detailing a strategy expressly designed to “break up” the Democratic coalition. To “target the populist voter,” the campaign would work toward the “development of the aspiring American populist theme of ‘anti-bigness — big government, big business, big labor.’” The media messages were to be “simple, direct and optimistic.” They were to focus on “blue collar” voters utilizing “principal themes” that “project a realization that these voters are no longer solely motivated by economic concerns but by larger social issues, as well.”

It was an idea that informed not simply the 1980 campaign but also the next 25 years of GOP strategy. It was to “position [Reagan] as a doer, a man of action,” the “decisive leader capable of making tough decisions.” But above all, Reagan was to “solidify a public impression” that he “has concern for the common man and understands the problems facing voters in their daily lives.”

It was Wirthlin who first coined the term “gender gap.” But once “the press ran with the idea — the question they always asked was, ‘Why is Reagan doing so poorly among women?’ But that’s only one blade of the scissors. The question I was always interested in was, ‘Why was Reagan doing so well among men?’” he says. “It’s been a mystery to me for 25 years why that wasn’t recognized.”

From 1980 on, Democrats never won more than 38 of every 100 white men who voted. Soon Republicans seemed to own masculinity itself.

There has been much discussion about the GOP’s ability to reach poor and working-class whites. But the phenomenon was overwhelmingly a story of men.

Between 1948 and 2004, for the poorest third of Americans, white women’s support for Democrats hardly shifted. For white working-class men, there was a 25 percent decline. Within the middle class of white America, the Democratic Party lost the support of 15 percent of white women. But white men left Democrats at twice that rate: 29 percent.

The white backlash against liberalism, of course, predated the 1980 election. It was

Lyndon Johnson, 16 years earlier, hours after signing the Civil Rights Act of 1964, who turned to Bill Moyers and said, “I think we have just delivered the South to the Republican Party for a long time to come.”

Racial animus may have been part of the problem for Democrats. At least Democrats could feel good about themselves while losing elections. But it was one of Johnson’s own confidants, Harry McPherson, who later concluded that the problem with white male voters was far more complex — not confined to the South or racial politics.

“Democratic primaries and conventions often rocked with the language of rebuke,” McPherson wrote in a 1972 memoir. “Very like, it has occurred to me, the language many wives use in speaking to their husbands, particularly toward the end of marriages. You never think of the children, or of my mother, or of me; only of yourself. Substitute the ignored disadvantaged, the homeless, people trapped downtown. The reaction among husbands, for whom read ‘white male voters,’ is what is normally provoked by attempts to burden people with a sense of guilt.”

As portrayed by the new breed of liberalism, the white man held all the cards, and everyone else’s bad deal was his fault. The problem was that the bulk of white men did not feel like dealers or players. They felt like pieces on someone else’s table, and their livelihood, their family’s very stability, was in richer men’s hands, as well. Increasingly, as Reagan assumed the presidency, many white men, particularly those in industrial trades, found their lives marked by instability. This was true in the home, as cultural changes refashioned the role of women and the place of sex in popular culture. And it was especially true in the workplace, as many once-secure union jobs disappeared.

Between 1979 and 1983 alone, more than 9 million Americans were added to the poverty rolls and more than half were from white, male-headed families. In 2004, white men still constituted the vast majority of leading CEOs. Yet many more white men still live the hardscrabble life. About 21 percent of white men and 22 percent of white women who voted in 2004 made \$30,000 to \$45,000 in household income.

These men are seen as failing to capitalize on “white male privilege.” Those who felt powerless, like so many women and minorities, were told they were indeed powerful. Conservatives came to validate a struggle many liberals had demeaned as merely the anger of the “angry white male.”

“Liberals didn’t realize they had a whole constituency of disenfranchised people without rights who were called standard masculine men,” Harvard University social psychologist William Pollack explains. “I’m not saying that all liberal Democrats saw these men as the enemy, but they didn’t see them as the victim — but these men felt more and more victimized.”

Today, many white men continue to feel disempowered, distant from liberal mores and

unmoored from the stability that their fathers and grandfathers enjoyed. Like others, white men feel controlled by bosses and compelled by fiscal responsibility. They take on thankless work to meet their obligations, and it often creates a sense of compromised manhood. If a white man's salary places him in the upper class, his self-worth is often tied to that wage. For many, the definition of being a man has meant surrendering what one wants to do for what one must do. This has long been true. But modern liberalism no longer saw it that way. The hard life was said to be the easy life if one was born white and male.

Yet many Democrats expected middle- and lower-class whites to ignore their grievances with liberalism and vote Democratic based on tax policy, as if issues like the breakdown of the American family were a superficial concern. This was the worldview behind the 2004 Thomas Frank bestseller, "What's the Matter With Kansas?"

But the voters Democrats lost were not conned by distracting "wedge issues" like abortion or gun control. They quite knowingly voted for their self-interest, but they defined that interest in ways that were deeper than the size of their paychecks.

Even when efforts were made to reach some white men in 2004, it was limited to shallow discussions. The regular white guy was referred to as the "NASCAR dad." Like Republicans' outreach to African-Americans in the 2000 and 2004 general elections, the rhetoric failed because it was accurately perceived by both groups as mostly artifice.

In some sense, Kerry was touted as the war hero to appeal to these men, and their wives, many of whom share similar values. But when it came time to defend his fight in Vietnam against a conservative veterans group, Kerry's senior aides counseled reticence.

It was "my mistake," says the Kerry campaign's chief strategist, Tad Devine, though other senior officials gave similar advice. "Obviously [I was] too much lawyer and not enough soldier," Devine continues. "Not that I'm a soldier. I'm a lawyer. That's my problem. I needed to not be a lawyer. I needed to appeal to the gut in [Kerry]." He adds, "We should have pleaded guilty to being tough and stayed with it, because, really, it was much truer to John."

### **A failed experiment**

Today, many leading liberal intellectuals continue to argue that Democrats should not concern themselves with fundamental weaknesses. Thomas F. Schaller, author of "Whistling Past Dixie," has argued Democrats should ignore their deficit with white men (again, more than a third of voters) as well as the South (which remains the nation's largest region, by a margin of tens of millions of Americans).

In fact, this has been the de facto Democratic strategy for decades. Safe to say the experiment has failed.

The recent midterm elections exhibit the potential for Democrats in closing the white male

gap. Democrats never would have won back the Senate in 2006 without candidates not of the urbane sort winning more white men. In crucial Senate contests, from Montana farmer Jon Tester to Robert P. Casey Jr. in Pennsylvania — whose father was barred from speaking at the 1992 Democratic convention because of his anti-abortion views — the Democrats' victory was, above any other, dependent upon significant improvements with white men, according to exit polls.

Recently, in a conversation with veteran liberal strategist James Carville, I raised the popular belief within the liberal base that Democrats should ignore their weaknesses with white men and the South. Carville scoffed and called it an “idiotic argument.”

Yet that is exactly the argument that has kept Democrats the minority party for decades.

It is, after all, the white working man who once was the backbone of the Roosevelt coalition. America has changed since. But Democrats' need to compete for white men's votes has not.

*This article was adapted from “The Neglected Voter: White Men and the Democratic Dilemma,” published Thursday by Palgrave Macmillan, a division of St. Martin's Press.*