

Even ascendant, Dems wary of 'liberal' label

By: **David Paul Kuhn**

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Hillary Rodham Clinton was asked this summer if she would describe herself as a “liberal.”

The Democratic front-runner shied away, saying the “word” — noticeably not using the word — has taken on a connotation that “describes big government.

“I prefer the word ‘progressive,’” she said. It has a “real American meaning.”

Then she expanded the term to “modern progressive,” and, finally, clarified that she was a “modern American progressive.”

These are heady days for Democrats. The party is favored by almost all measures in the coming presidential contest.

But while Democrats are emboldened, they remain wary of the term “liberal.”

Republicans, by contrast, are as unpopular in the polls as they have been for at least 15 years.

Nonetheless, the label “conservative” remains in vogue.

At a recent Republican debate, **Rudy Giuliani** referred to himself as a “conservative” four times in roughly the same time span — a minute or so — it took Clinton to reject the word “liberal” and embrace “progressive.”

In seven Republican debates this year the word “conservative” was used 100 times.

In the seven Democratic debates the word “liberal” was used four times — not once by a candidate.



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“Conservative is identified with a sensibility,” Stanford University linguist Geoffrey Nunberg said. “The rejection of the Bush-Cheney policy is very clear. But I don’t think the public identifies it with conservatism.

“You can be as liberal as much as you like, if you are a Democrat, as long as you don’t call yourself a liberal,” Nunberg quipped.

To Nunberg and his fellow liberal — or progressive — Berkeley linguist George Lakoff, the presidential election of 2008 may mark the ascension of the

Democratic Party, but not of “liberalism.”

“They are running from the word liberal as fast as they can because it has been tainted

It's 'bleeding-heart liberal,' 'tax-and-spend liberal,' 'liberal elite,' 'liberal media,'" Lakoff said, who has been a rhetorical consultant for Democrats in the past decade.

The Republican debates bear Lakoff out. Most of the 18 uses of liberal in the GOP forums have been in pejorative terms: Liberal media? Check. Tax-and-spend liberal? Check.

Rep. [Tom Tancredo](#) (R-Colo.) went so far in one debate as to claim that President George W. Bush "ran as a conservative and governed as a liberal."

Of course, there is reason behind the Democratic rhetorical re-branding.

In early autumn, the Gallup Poll found that while 43 percent of Americans identified as Democrats, only 23 percent of voters called themselves liberals.

While 30 percent of Americans considered themselves Republicans, fully 39 percent labeled themselves conservative.

Today seven percent of Americans call themselves "very conservative." But none did two decades ago, according to an analysis of Gallup data.

Meanwhile, though five percent of Americans today consider themselves "very liberal," three times as many did in the summer of 1988.

That was when -- Democrat Michael Dukakis challenged Republican George H.W. Bush for the presidency -- Republicans successfully cast liberal in pejorative terms.

Many Americans accepted the negative implication. Dukakis became a "Massachusetts liberal." Democrats have been fleeing from the word ever since.

The two linguists disagree, however, over the implications of dropping the word liberal in favor of progressive.

In the short term, Lakoff said it may be shrewd for the Democratic candidates to avoid the "L word."

But, he warned, the party will suffer down the road by ceding it to the opposition, calling it "a terrible move.... a disastrous move."

"By not having reconstituted the word liberal over many years, by not defending it, they are forced to give it up," he said.

"But they don't adopt progressive in a serious way because they don't know how to say what progressive means."

A donkey by any other name is still an ass — and Lakoff believes Democrats are acting the ass by ceding "liberal."

"Even if you call yourself a progressive, they'll call you a liberal," as Lakoff put it.

Nunberg once agreed. "I always thought that Democrats would have to bring back the word liberal, in part because it's etched on the split screen of American life," he said.

But Nunberg no longer longs for a revival of the word.

“Democrats have found they can concede the word without conceding the doctrine.

“And Republicans can do everything but concede the word” conservative, he added.

“Conservatism has been a faith that says whatever we are, we are conservatives.”

During the 2006 midterm elections, Nunberg said, Democrats “had no branding at all” except not being Republicans.

That was enough to win back Congress. In 2008, however, Democrats must define progressive and their party, he said.

“How are they going to reconstruct themselves?” he asked, adding that merely not being Republicans “is not going to work this time around.

“The self destruction of Republicans has obviated them to come up with the need for more of a party identity.”

Democrats still have no forward-looking product to peddle, Nunberg said, cracking, “The only difference between ‘liberal’ and ‘progressive’ is that liberals think there is one.”