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Opinion

Revenge of the white men

Victims of the 'he-cession' are turning against the Democrats, and that could sway the November elections.

March 22, 2010 | By David Paul Kuhn

Millions of white men who voted for Barack Obama are walking away from the Democratic Party, and it appears increasingly likely that they'll take the election in November with them. Their departure could well lead to a GOP landslide on a scale not seen since 1994.

For more than three decades before the 2008 election, no Democratic president had won a majority of the electorate. In part, that was because of low support -- never more than 38% -- among white male voters. Things changed with Obama, who not only won a majority of all people voting but also pulled in 41% of white male voters. Suddenly, there were millions more white men voting the Democratic ticket.

Polling suggests that the shift was not because of Obama but rather because of the financial meltdown that preceded the election. It was only after the economic collapse that Obama's white male support climbed above the 38% ceiling. It was also at that point that Obama first sustained a clear majority among all registered voters, according to the Gallup tracking poll.

It looked for a moment as though Democrats had finally reached the men of Bruce Springsteen's music, bringing them around to the progressive values Springsteen himself has long endorsed. But liberal analysts failed to understand that these new Democrats were still firmly rooted in American moderation.

Pollsters regularly ask voters whether they would rather see a Democrat or Republican win their district. By February, support for Democrats among white people (male and female) was three points lower than in February 1994, the year of the last Republican landslide.

Today, among whites, only 35% of men and 43% of women say they will back Democrats in the fall election. Women's preferences have remained steady since July 2009. But over that same period, white men's support for a Democratic Congress has fallen eight points, according to Gallup.

White men have moved away from Obama as well. The same proportion of white women approve of him -- 46%, according to Gallup -- as voted for him in 2008. But only 38% of white men approve of the president, which means that millions of white men who voted for Obama have now lost faith in him.

The migration of white men from the Democratic Party was evident in the election of Republican Scott Brown in Massachusetts. His opponent won 52% of white women. But white men favored Brown by a 60%-to-38% margin, according to Fabrizio, McLaughlin & Associates polling. Once again, Democrats could not win enough other votes to compensate for the white male gap.

It's no accident that the flight of white males from the Democratic Party has come as the government has assumed a bigger role, including in banking and healthcare. Among whites, 71% of men and 56% of women favor a smaller government with fewer services over a larger government with more services, according to ABC/Washington Post polling.

Obama's brand of liberalism is exactly the sort likely to drive such voters away. More like LBJ's than FDR's, Obama-style liberalism favors benefits over relief, a safety net over direct job programs, healthcare and environmental reform over financial reform and a stimulus package that has focused more on social service jobs -- healthcare work, teaching and the like -- rather than the areas where a majority of job losses occurred: construction, manufacturing and related sectors.

This recession remains disproportionately a "he-cession." Men account for at least 7 of 10 workers who lost jobs, according to the latest Bureau of Labor Statistics data. Blue-collar men have suffered 57% of the job losses. And blue-collar white men, who make up only 11% of the workforce, constitute 36% of those who have lost jobs. In total, nearly half of the recession's casualties are white men, having held 46% of all jobs lost.

In 1994, liberals tried to explain their thinning ranks by casting aspersions on the white men who were fleeing, and the media took up the cry. The term "angry white male" or "angry white men" was mentioned 37 times in English-language news media contained in the Nexis database between 1980 and the 1994 election. In the following year, the phrases appear 2,306 times.

Tarnishing their opponents as merely "angry" was poor politics for the Democrats. Liberals know what it's like to have their views -- most recently on the war in Iraq or George W. Bush -- caricatured as merely irrational anger. Most voters vote their interests. And many white men by the 1980s had decided the Democrats were no longer interested in them.

Think about the average working man. He has already witnessed financial bailouts for the rich folks above him. Now he sees a healthcare bailout for the poor folks below him. Big government represents lots of costs and little gain. Meanwhile, like many women, these men are simply trying to push ahead without being pushed under. Some of them once believed in Obama. Now they feel forgotten.

Government can only do so much. But recall the Depression. FDR's focus on the economy was single-minded and relentless. Hard times continued, but men never doubted that FDR was trying to do right by them. Democrats should think about why they aren't given that same benefit of the doubt today.

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