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Disapprove	64.6
Spread -39.6	
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RCP Average	
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November 8, 2010

Jim Webb: Why Reagan Dems Still Matter

By **David Paul Kuhn**

Jim Webb went to the White House last September. The Virginia senator was meeting with the president to discuss Guantanamo detainees. The conversation soon shifted to healthcare. "I told him this was going to be a disaster," Webb recalls. "The president believed it was all going to work out."

Democratic leaders broadly believed it was all going to work out. The stimulus, healthcare, cap and trade. Americans were to come around to the left side.

We're talking about why voters didn't come around. Webb is weighing my report the morning after the election: **Democrats won the smallest share of white voters** in any congressional election since World War II.

"I've been warning them," Webb says, sighing, resting his chin on his hand. "I've been having discussions with our leadership ever since I've been up here. I decided to run as a Democrat because I happen to strongly believe in Jacksonian democracy. There needs to be one party that very clearly represents the interests of working people ... I'm very concerned about the transactional nature of the Democratic Party. Its evolved too strongly into interest groups rather than representing working people, including small business people."

This is a decades-old rebuke, one uttered today by moderate Democrats like Webb. The balkanized coalition never came to recognize the vice of its virtues. Diverse interests sometimes severed it from the majority's interests. That fissure moved political tectonics by the 1980s. And we came to know these migrating voters by the president who won their favor.

Webb is a Reagan Democrat who returned home. He was Ronald Reagan's Navy secretary. Almost two decades later, he was the Democrat who scrapped out a win in Virginia.

Webb seems less at home today. He identifies himself as a Democrat. But he has few Democratic leaders to identify with. He won't say this. His criticism is discernibly girdled. He begins to tell a story about a conversation with a Democratic leader and pulls back. "I don't want to talk about that," he mutters. "I have had my discussions. I've kept them inside the house. I did not want to have them affect this election, quite frankly. I didn't want to position myself in the media as a critic of the administration."

But criticism is in order. Democrats' suffered historical losses from Congress to the state houses last week. It's an apt moment for Webb to step in. He is an atypical politician. Politics is not his alpha or omega. He's authored more than half a dozen books, succeeded as a screenwriter and won an Emmy for his coverage of the U.S. Marines in Beirut. This success outside politics empowers him to be less political. Yet what suits Webb to criticism is not that. It's the political sociology he embodies.

Webb represents an endangered species. It's more than his red state Democratic stature, although that would be reason enough. The moderate House Democratic coalition lost more than half its lawmakers last week. But that Blue Dog set is still more common than Webb.

Webb's one of the last FDR Democrats. An economic populist. A national security hawk. His Democratic politics are less concerned with social groups than social equality (of opportunity, not outcome). His values were predominant in the Democrat Party from FDR to JFK, the period in the twentieth century when Democrats were also dominant.

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Jim Webb

Webb walks to this older Democratic beat. Today's Democrats' are more McGovern than JFK. (Could a John Kennedy win the Democratic nomination today?)

Democrats looked like McGovern on Tuesday. It was that bad historically, for congressional elections. The election's passage has liberated Webb (a little). He's privately raised issues throughout Barack Obama's tenure. Some frustration is tactical. He told Rahm Emanuel last June that the president should provide a "very specific format" for his vision of healthcare reform. It would have offset the, in Webb's words, "complex amorphous leviathan that bubbled up out of five committees."

"A lot of people in this country, when they look up here, they want to see leadership. They want to see credibility. And they are not always the same thing," Webb says. "The healthcare issue really took away a lot of the credibility of the new leadership--Obama particularly--the Reid-Pelosi-Obama trio."

Webb swallowed the bitter pill in the end. He voted for the final healthcare package. He quickly notes that he's open to improving the legislation. These issues will dog Webb two years from now, when his term ends.

But is Webb running again?

"Still sorting that out," he replies. "I'm not saying I'm not."

That is not a rousing assurance that he is, however. And it would be a shame for Democrats if he does not.

"In his [Webb's] book "Born Fighting" you see that he understands what a lot of Democrats don't," said Larry Sabato, director of the University of Virginia Center for Politics. "That is the white working class, long time Americans who never made it, who lost jobs. It's really a problem that has existed since the 1960s. Webb is also exactly the kind of Democrat who ought to be showcased and given more visibility and authority."

There are aspects of Webb that liberals' embrace. Many relished his critique of George W. Bush over the war in [Iraq](#). But that critique could never have succeeded without the fight in this man. It takes a hawk to politically challenge a hawk.

Webb is a hawk in the traditionally conservative sense. He is adverse to "adventurism." And that evokes the wider rub for Webb. The antiwar bloc championed Webb's Iraq fight. But that same bloc, more broadly, has driven hawks like Webb from this dovish, post-[Vietnam](#), Democratic Party. Webb was pushed away himself, after his decorated Vietnam service.

Liberals also admire the populist Webb. The same cannot be said for the Democratic establishment. Webb has pushed for a onetime windfall profits tax on Wall Street's record bonuses. He talks about the "unusual circumstances of the bailout," that the bonuses wouldn't be there without the bailout.

"I couldn't even get a vote," Webb says. "And it wasn't because of the Republicans. I mean they obviously weren't going to vote for it. But I got so much froth from Democrats saying that any vote like that was going to screw up fundraising."

"People look up say, what's the difference between these two parties? Neither of them is really going to take on Wall Street. If they don't have the guts to take them on, and they've got all these other programs that exclude me, well to hell with them. I'm going to vote for the other people who can at least satisfy me on other issues, like abortion. Screw you guys. I understand that mindset."

Liberals don't always favor his tendency to represent that mindset. Earlier this year, writing in *The Wall Street Journal*, Webb argued that diversity programs are wrongly discriminating against working class whites. He supported abolishing the programs or narrowly limiting them to their historic original intent, to mend the "badges of slavery" forced on blacks.

"In an odd historical twist that all Americans see but few can understand, many programs allow recently arrived immigrants to move ahead of similarly situated whites whose families have been in the country for generations," Webb wrote.

"I needed to write that just so people were sure I still believed it," he says today.

Many Democrats were displeased he wrote that. "Things are tough enough without having people you thought were friends do things like this," said Democrat L. Douglas Wilder, Virginia's first black governor, at the time.

But who will raise the hard issues other than friends? This is the same Webb who takes on

prison reform, questioning why this country has the highest incarceration rate in the world. It's an issue important to minority groups. It's also not politically expedient.

Yet liberals often seem to view Webb's breed of Democrat more like frenemies. There was Glenn Greenwald, typical among many liberal writers the morning after the election, explaining why he viewed "last night's Blue Dog losses with happiness." This is par for partisan flanks. We saw it on the right this year, when tea party activists savored the defeat of Delaware moderate Republican Mike Castle, though it cost Republicans a critical Senate seat.

But Democrats' problem remains their proximity to their flank. Last week, independents continued their turn against Democrats since 2008. The results were foreseeable. Independents skepticism of big government has long placed them nearer to Republicans than Democrats. These matters led the majority of independents to tell Gallup pollsters last summer that Democrats are "too liberal."

This independent problem returns Democrats to their white problem. Most non-aligned voters are white. White males constitute the plurality of independents. These are the Reagan Democrats. Webb does not see himself as their spokesman. But he is one of the few Democrats able to speak as one of them.

David Paul Kuhn is the Chief Political Correspondent for RealClearPolitics and the author of [The Neglected Voter: White Men and the Democratic Dilemma](#). He can be reached at david@realclearpolitics.com and his writing followed via [RSS](#).

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