

Michigan COMMENTARY

Can the Democrats Survive?

by Gerald A. Faverman, Ph.D., and David L. Kimball

As the "American Century" draws to a close, the political party system in the United States is at grave risk of becoming irrelevant.

Over the last decade, the Republican Party has aggressively cultivated a constituency destined to be the majority of the future. In this same period, the Democrats have become a party unable to mobilize a presidential majority and appear increasingly to be a parochial, regional party representing a minority.

Although Democratic spirits have been giddily revived by Senator Harris Wofford's unanticipated victory over former U.S. Attorney General Richard Thornburgh in Pennsylvania, the fact remains that the Democrats have not been a majority party—aside from 1977 anomaly of Jimmy Carter's victory—since 1968. There is a tendency for the media to overemphasize the Wofford "spike" on the nation's electoral cardiogram for the sake of making the pending national election sound more like a contest than it thus far has shaped up to be.

On the threshold of an anticipated Republican electoral victory of massive proportions in 1992, in which President Bush could carry forty or more states, the Democrats need to ask whether they can recast themselves to become a party of the future or are doomed to be casualties of their own doctrinal inflexibility and the Republicans' mastery of polarization politics.

In a climate of increasing uncertainty and anxiety, the Republicans have skillfully managed to ally themselves with the aspirations of senior citizens, youth, and the middle class. Their strength increases as the policies of presidents as different as Nixon, Reagan, and Bush gain progressively larger sectors of public support. The Democrats increasingly find themselves seeking to protect the interests of a shrinking constituency rather than championing the aspirations of a new society whose members feel less brave and less confident than did their parents or grandparents.

If the Democrats cannot move to the right—closer to the new center—from their historical position on the left, the iron law of politics will see to their demise. They will go the way of the Whigs and the Know-Nothings, and a new party will evolve to challenge Republican primacy in the generation ahead.

Columnist George Will has noted that the Democratic Party appears ready to walk through the most perfunctory presidential election since 1904, when it sent a hapless Alton Parker to be nudged into oblivion by Teddy Roosevelt. Dukakis, McGovern, and Mondale have been more recent sacrificial lambs and, while they fared very poorly, the Democrats were at least trying to field viable candidates. Although it already may be too late for the Democrats, having lost a whole year in their miasma, to be able to mount credible opposition to President Bush in the 1992 election, the urgency of history requires them to recast their agenda or begone.

The Democrats need to look at the issues of the future—education, health, the environment, and employment on the domestic side and security and safety on the international side—and forge credible answers that people will regard as legitimate alternatives to Republican formulations. They need to broaden the dialogue to include more people, and they need to re-recruit the young and the old—two important constituencies that they have lost.

Beguiled by the plethora of change that is assaulting our world society, Republicans appear to have been seduced by the ideology that government is irrelevant, not germane to the future, and can be curtailed or crippled at best or ignored and proactively constrained at least.

Democrats need to propound a philosophical alternative to this vision that demonstrates that government can be a moral force to build a society of justice and equity by reestablishing a social contract that delineates the responsibilities of the rich to the poor and of special interests to one another. In doing so, the Democrats need not be frightened by the prospect of defeat in 1992 but must begin now to build credible intellectual alternatives—nationally and in Michigan—for 1994 and 1996. Thus far they have not done so. If they hope to rise phoenix-like from the all-but-certain ashes of 1992, they first will have to reestablish their political legitimacy.

Having tacitly decided to “pass” on the 1992 election, many Democrats look ahead to taking on Dan Quayle in 1996. They think Quayle will be an easy target. This may be a mistake, for Quayle may be able, like Nixon, to command a majority of a polarized constituency. And at this juncture in our history, both in Michigan and in the nation, it appears that dividing people against each other—“polarization politics”—may offer significant short-term political benefit.

In Michigan, it recently has been fashionable to opine that John Engler is a one-term governor. But even in a state that historically has had a deep need to like its political leaders and currently is disquieted by Engler’s perceived “mean-spiritedness,” the Democrats’ belief that they can wrest the governorship in 1994 and protect a U.S. Senate seat may be overly optimistic.

At the state level, Democrats privately are reconciled to getting beaten by Bush and to losing as many as two seats in congressional elections. In their hearts, they worry that the delegation will move from an 11–7 Democratic majority to a reapportioned 9–7 Republican tilt, and they worry about losing control of the state House to the Republicans. These secret fears are not uttered publicly for fear of frightening the rank and file. So, as they walk past the graveyard whistling in the dark, Michigan Democrats want to believe that although they will be hurt in ’92, they will rebound and win in ’94. But they cannot count on this reincarnation unless they do a lot to court the support that is ebbing away from them.

In politics, success breeds strength and failure fosters division. Historically, after every intramural election conflict, the Republicans have joined together, and the Democrats have departed disgruntled, dissatisfied, and disunited. To succeed in 1994, the Democrats first and foremost will have to unify behind their triumphant primary election candidate who, to succeed, must be a dangerous opponent to John Engler. Engler’s record as a careful, hard-working strategist who has never lost an election demonstrates that he should not be underestimated. Although his image is currently at risk, and although his administration and the state economy have at least 16 more ugly months to get through, by November of 1994 Michigan will have been in the midst of improvement and recovery for nearly 12 months.

Meantime, we face a hard winter of trouble, pain, and hardship. The recession continues, and the short-term outlook for Michigan is grim. Car production, home construction, and retail sales will languish, as will employment and tax revenues. By next February the 1991–92 budget passed with such partisan distress may very well come unglued, a casualty of a \$400 million revenue decline and a \$200 million human services shortfall. Coupled with the \$1 billion structural deficit that already exists, we could face the politically unwelcome requirement of budget cuts, tax increases and, yes, even the reexamination of that most sacred cow of all, tax abatements. But even this scenario of special trouble in an accompanying climate of extraordinary contentiousness will recede in the voters’ memory if the state’s economic strength returns in late 1993 and 1994.

Will events in Michigan unfold in just this way? In a time when nobody knows the answers, Engler and Co. are the only ones currently offering any, and the Republicans command respect for controlling the agenda. If the Democrats continue to act as an intimidated constituency unwilling to take on the governor, or to propose potentially unpopular programs, they will become irrelevant to this state's political future.

The road to that future is uncertain and treacherous. If they are to survive, the Democrats must forge an effective persona that will say to the young and to the old, "Trust us; we can do better." In the ten months that John Engler has been governor, they have not done so.

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