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The Rise of the Lincoln Democrats

Advertisement

By E. J. Dionne Jr.

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PHILADELPHIA -- The North will rise again.

If Democrats win control of the House of Representatives in November, that inversion of an old slogan is likely to be a central factor in their victory.

Although no one anticipates a Democratic sweep in November on the order of the Republicans' 1994 triumph, the forces that were at work 12 years ago are in play this year -- but in reverse.

One key to the Republican takeover of the House under Newt Gingrich was the completion of a long-term realignment to the GOP in the South. White Southerners started supporting Republican presidential candidates in large numbers as long ago as 1952, but many of them did not bring their congressional voting habits in line with their presidential votes until 1992 and, with a vengeance, 1994.

But a quiet counter-realignment has been under way in the Northeast and Midwest. Post political writer Dan Balz was one of the first to notice after Bill Clinton's 1996 reelection that longtime Republican suburban bastions in Pennsylvania, Illinois, Michigan, Ohio, New York and New Jersey were moving the Democrats' way.

If Democrats take the House this fall, it will be the culmination of this trend. To put it in historical terms, if Democrats have suffered in the states of the Old Confederacy, many of their best opportunities in November are in states carried by the first Republican president, Abraham Lincoln, in the 1860 election.

These include four and possibly five seats in Pennsylvania, four in Ohio, three in Connecticut, two to five seats in New York, three in Indiana, one or two in New Hampshire, and one each in Illinois, Iowa, Minnesota and Wisconsin.

That totals as many as 26 seats and rises to 27 counting a competitive race in New Jersey (a state that divided its 1860 electoral votes between Lincoln and Northern Democrat Stephen Douglas). Democrats need 15 seats to take the House.

That number is at the outside range of Democratic hopes, and Republicans have a few opportunities of their own for Northern pickups. But winning the bulk of these Lincoln-state seats would be the linchpin of any Democratic victory.

In the Senate, where Democrats need a net gain of six seats to win a majority, the most vulnerable Republicans include Pennsylvania's Rick Santorum and Rhode Island's Lincoln Chafee (who faces a tough primary later this month).

The changing regional contours of American politics have been visible in the Southernization of the GOP leadership -- from President Bush of Texas and Gingrich of Georgia to Senate Majority Leader Bill Frist of Tennessee and, earlier, Dick Army and Tom DeLay, both Texans. The rise of the Dixiepublicans and their brand of conservatism has pushed moderates in the North in the Democrats' direction.

But Pennsylvania Gov. Ed Rendell, a Democrat who is seeking a second term this fall, said in an interview here that Republicans are suffering from factors very specific to this political year, including President Bush's unpopularity in this part of the country.

Rendell argues that in the older industrial states, Republicans are being hurt by the trade issue, and he criticizes the Bush administration for filing many fewer unfair-trade complaints against foreign competitors than did the Clinton administration.

Job losses have made voters especially sensitive to the erosion of America's competitive position in the global economy. Rendell says flatly: "In 10 years, we could wind up being a second-rate economic power if we don't improve our competitiveness."

Rendell -- who is well ahead of Republican Lynn Swann in the polls -- offers remedies that include national health insurance in order to remove the burden of health costs from American businesses. He says his party should also push for education reform and major investments in alternative energy. These suggestions have the potential of being both business-friendly and congenial to liberal Democrats.

And then, Rendell said, there is the strong opposition to the Iraq war in his region, which could complicate the Bush administration's new political offensive targeting Democratic critics of its policies.

By pushing the war to the forefront, the president might well increase turnout among core Republican voters, but at the cost of hurting individual Republican candidates in districts where opposition to the war is particularly strong.

The realignment of the South has been more important than any other factor in the rise of the Republican Party to majority status in Congress. It would be one of history's ironies if that majority were imperiled by the reassertion of the Lincoln states.

postchat@aol.com

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