

HOW CONSERVATIVES CAN WIN MINORITY SUPPORT

by
Thomas H. Kean

My topic for today is winning minority votes. Specifically, it is how a Republican, running on Republican principles of government, could win a majority of minority votes in a traditionally Democratic northeastern state.

The most important strategy that we used to attract minority votes in November's elections was not a "black or Hispanic strategy." In fact, it was the same strategy we used to attract all voters. Built on a number of often simple but substantive proposals, it was designed to offer people, all people, the opportunity for a better future.

I would like to center my talk around the failings of the conventional wisdom in politics. And I can think of no more appropriate forum for this topic than The Heritage Foundation.

Fifteen years ago, the conventional wisdom was that there was no place for a conservative think tank in Washington. Most people thought you could not raise enough money to pay the rent on a small office. Even if you could, you could not find anyone to fill it--to research and write reports. As the old joke goes, a phone booth would have been big enough. Fifteen years ago, the conventional wisdom was that conservatism was a fringe movement--just as Ronald Reagan was a fringe candidate.

Well, Ed Feulner and Paul Weyrich took a chance that the conventional wisdom was wrong. And we can see today that they were right to take the chance. This magnificent building is testimony to the ascendancy of the conservative movement in this country--and of The Heritage Foundation in particular. Hardly a week goes by that a Heritage report does not cross my desk in Trenton. And I know that within the Beltway your influence is even greater. You provide ideas for the Administration. You provide ammunition for congressional debate. The Heritage Foundation mans the frontlines in the war of ideas in Washington today.

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Governor Kean spoke at The Heritage Foundation on December 11, 1985.

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Well, another piece of conventional wisdom was that the Republican Party had devolved into a narrow party. One that could not appeal to "traditionally Democratic voters"--blue collar voters, union members, minorities--and therefore one that should write them off. More important, one that could not--because of the Party's own principles--appeal to the great mass of voters in my part of the country.

Frankly, that wisdom was confirmed for some years in the tendency to automatically cede certain blocs of voters to the Democratic column. Republicans, in that view, were the party of white suburbanites. The theory had it that we should try to maximize their turnout--and hold down the turnout of everyone else. That we should hope for flight to the suburbs as a way to strengthen our numbers. And that our best hope for winning a majority--for winning statewide races for governor or senator--was to split off enough middle class voters to isolate the other sectors of the electorate.

That mindset causes some to practice an invidious brand of politics--what I call the "politics of polarization." That brand of politics says that you have to play segments of the electorate off against each other in order to win elections: blacks against Jews, union members against white collar voters, suburbanites against city dwellers.

Meanwhile, the Democrats had been practicing their own brand of the politics of polarization. Their theory of coalition building--or, I should say, of maintaining the old coalition--was to appeal to the special interests of individual groups. They appealed to blacks through social welfare programs. They came to defend all spending. They were soft on crime--because a tough stand would offend their special group.

There is a basic flaw in that thinking, of course. A dangerous flaw. That flaw is that the Democratic strategy assumes, wrongly, that the special interests of blacks and other minorities are different from those of everybody else.

The fact is that the key issues in the black and Hispanic community are the same as those in the white community. The fact is that black and Hispanic voters care just as deeply about creating jobs, improving the schools, and fighting crime as everybody else. And that they care more about those issues than about any special program.

To suggest otherwise is, frankly, racist.

Four years ago, we made a conscious effort to end the "politics of polarization"; to end the traditional methods used by both parties to build a winning coalition.

I confess that my motivation was selfish. I come from a state where registered Democrats have outnumbered registered Republicans by two to one. I was elected by 1,700 votes out of 2.5 million cast. For me, it was either expand our appeal or join a history in which no Republican governor has been reelected since the adoption of our constitution in 1947.

We threw out the conventional wisdom, and we set about to build our coalition by stressing issues that everyone could agree on--the need to create jobs, the need to improve the schools, the need to fight crime, and the need to clean up and protect our environment--and then by winning the war of ideas on those issues.

That is why I thought The Heritage Foundation would be a particularly good place to talk about the lessons of my election. You specialize in ideas. And I would submit that the key to future elections is not whether we can appeal to special groups with specialized programs, but rather whether we can offer quality and common sense ideas on the central issues of our time and pursue them with enough grit and competence to make them work.

In New Jersey, we did that.

In our state, the test scores of our students had been going down for over a decade. Our schools needed to be shaken up. We implemented tougher standards and new tests for teachers and students. We adopted an alternative certification route to allow talent from other fields into the teaching profession. We fought for some form of financial recognition for our best teachers. And not only did our test scores go up for the first time in a dozen years, they went up faster than the national average. Improved education as the key to future opportunity became a major thrust of our administration.

In our state, crime had been going up for years, ever since they started keeping an index. We got tough on crime. Adopted tougher sentences, started trying violent juveniles as adults. Built thousands of prison beds so that--unlike other states--we would never be forced to turn criminals loose for lack of space. Stressed the rights of victims. Adopted a death penalty. And tried the most simple but effective solution of all to crime--more police on the streets. I put enough money in the state budget to add over 2,500 uniformed policemen on city streets. And crime not only went down for three years in a row, it went down by far more than the national average.

In our state, the cities had been deteriorating for two decades. In the 1960s and 1970s, there was a mass exodus. Poor schools, high crime, and high taxes drove people out. So we went to work creating jobs in the cities.

And that was perhaps the most important piece of all.

Why? For those same decades, the Democrats' most consistent voting bloc has been black urban voters.

In New Jersey and throughout the Northeast, black voters in the cities have paid that ~~party unwavering allegiance~~. In election after election, Democrats could automatically count on over 90 percent of the black vote. Even Ronald Reagan, who carried New Jersey by 60 percent to 40 percent, won only about 10 percent of the black vote.

And yet, it had not always been that way. We tend to forget that between 1860 and 1930 the Republican Party was the black people's party. The party of Abraham Lincoln, Thaddeus Stevens, Charles Sumner, and Teddy Roosevelt appealed to black voters for two basic reasons: economic opportunity and civil rights, the right to pursue that opportunity.

After the 1930s, Republicans lost the key to economic opportunity. We became the party of limited growth and austerity. That presaged the massive and seemingly permanent shift of black voters to the Democratic Party.

I am an historian by training, and that is where I looked to find the right message.

An important part of my strategy, then, was to abandon the politics of sacrifice, the politics that said that New Jersey's best days had passed and we just had to tighten our belts and make do with what we had. Instead, I focused on proving that opportunity did exist in our cities; on building pride in those communities; and on making sure that the obstacles to growth were removed.

I reject the old notion--held, unfortunately, by some Republicans--that black voters want to hear only about ways to redistribute the economic pie, not about ways to make the pie bigger. And I am not alone in that. Jesse Jackson told the Democratic National Convention last year that "Democracy guarantees opportunity, not success." And he is right.

Undoubtedly, the national economic recovery engineered by President Reagan helped make New Jersey's pie bigger. But we managed to take it beyond that. In the 1970s, New Jersey lagged behind other states in most economic indicators. Our unemployment rate was higher than the national average. Our rate of personal income growth was lower.

The situation is now totally reversed. In the last four years, we have created jobs twice as fast as the rest of the nation. We have added over 350,000 new jobs since the recovery began--more new jobs in

one small state than in all of Western Europe combined. Our unemployment rate is far below the national average. Last summer, it hit its lowest level in 15 years. Personal income is growing faster than in the nation--and we now rank third nationally in that category.

But most important, where is the growth coming? Of that high rate of job growth, employment for whites went up by 7.4 percent; employment for minorities went up by 19 percent. We cut the black unemployment rate by five full points.

How did we do it? Well, we stopped scaring away business. In four years, we totally eliminated the corporate net worth tax. We are phasing out the inheritance tax. I signed a small business tax cut. And this year, I signed the first income tax cut in New Jersey history.

We reached a consensus on reform of our unemployment insurance system--which was so cumbersome that it was the factor most often cited in a survey when I took office of businesses who chose not to locate in New Jersey. That consensus was a good example. It restored fiscal health to the unemployment insurance system. It actually increased the average benefit. And it got rid of cheaters from the system.

When I took office our U.I. system was over \$600 million in debt. This year, we paid back the last dollar of that debt to the federal government. Now we are several hundred million in the black--and the federal surtax on our businesses has been repealed.

We used a classic consensus approach. U.I. reform had always been anathema to labor, to working people, and to beneficiaries before. But they do not like cheaters any more than business does. We pursued a conservative issue, and still appealed to traditional Democrats. And the result will help create jobs--for everybody.

But as I said, a major part of our job creation strategy was focused on the cities. And here, unquestionably our most effective tool has been the urban enterprise zone program.

New Jersey, like a lot of other states, got tired of waiting for the federal government to pass an urban enterprise zone bill--so we passed our own. Here, we owe a great debt to this organization. As I have sung the praises of urban enterprise zones across the country, I have repeatedly come across the name of your head of domestic policy, Stuart Butler. I have heard Stuart called "the father of urban enterprise zones." Like any proud parent, I am sure that Stuart will be pleased to know that his offspring is alive and well.

We established our first enterprise zones two years ago in Newark and Camden. They proved so successful, and the competition for

designation was so intense, that we have since expanded the program into 10 urban areas. And we will add some more next year.

There are many success stories. In Newark, a small businessman is taking advantage of breaks in the state sales tax to turn an abandoned warehouse into a restaurant. In Camden, a commercial laundry looking to expand turned to that city because of the incentives provided by the zone. Earlier this year, I broke ground for a multi-million dollar hotel and parking garage in downtown Trenton. The developer told me that he would have built in the suburbs if not for the enterprise zone designation.

In all, we have attracted projects that will create 8,500 jobs--making our program the most successful in the country.

The success of the urban enterprise zone program underscores my underlying philosophy that private sector job creation is the best social program of all. And we have tried to nurture the private sector in the black community.

We set up an Office of Minority Business Development to help minority businesses learn about business opportunities, cut through red tape, and become aware of state contracts. We are developing a registry of legitimate minority firms--not fronts--so agencies and private contractors know where to turn. And I set up both a procurement committee to make sure that these firms get their share of state business, and an advisory council to make sure that I am aware of the problems they face.

The number of minority owned firms has increased by 47 percent since I took office. We set up an Urban Development Corporation--not to give out more money, but to coordinate the array of existing state and federal programs. And it is helping develop a targeted, specific strategy for each individual city.

Those are just a few examples of what we did--substantively--to build a coalition on the issues.

They are all what would traditionally be called "conservative" ideas--applied nevertheless to our cities.

In our city schools, we stressed things like attendance, discipline, and standards.

In our city streets, we stressed putting more cops on the beat.

In our city business districts, we stressed lower taxes.

All conservative ideas. All basically Republican ideas. And all ideas that have worked.

So conservative or not, those ideas presented us with a unique opportunity--an opportunity which we seized when it came time for the election.

The opportunity was to go directly to black and Hispanic voters--on the basis of the record--and ask them for their votes.

Republicans had never really done that before. But we did. And we had a pretty powerful case.

After all, as I asked repeatedly on the campaign trail, what have black voters earned after fifty years of loyalty to the Democrats? Precious little, I say. In my state, despite decades of electoral servitude, there are no black members of Congress; and very few black Democratic leaders in the statehouse, in the courthouses, or in the city and town halls.

A senior black statesman, a loyal party member and worker for years, the mayor of the state's largest city, ran for Governor in the primary and was not endorsed by a single white Democrat outside his home town.

I felt that black leaders were beginning to realize that their loyalty to the Democrats was not being rewarded. And we decided to take advantage of that realization. We consciously and aggressively reached out to black leaders. We opened our doors to them in the state house, and we took the Republican campaign to the heart of the cities. Most of all, we listened. Even to the Democrats. And I think many black leaders were pleasantly surprised to learn that we would listen.

We appointed qualified blacks to the cabinet and dozens of other important and high-profile positions. We appointed black judges in record numbers. We recruited black candidates for state and local offices and worked with them on our ticket. We won major endorsements, some from disgruntled Democrats.

For the first time in many years, Republicans appealed directly to black voters in New Jersey for their votes. We ran radio spots targeted to black stations. We printed flyers targeted to the black community. We recruited black field organizers.

And we did all of this without sacrificing one vote from our traditional Republican base, because the kinds of issues we were stressing--more jobs, better schools, less crime--appealed to them just as much.

And as you have read, our strategy worked. I won 70 percent of the vote on election day--and exit polls by various news organizations showed that I had won 60 percent of the black vote. We won urban assembly districts in Hudson County--the county of the legendary

Democratic machine dating back to Frank Hague--that we had not won since the 1920s. Because of districts like that, we won control of the state assembly for the first time in over a decade. We took control of seven freeholder boards, giving us 15 of New Jersey's 21 courthouses--this in a "Democratic" state. In all, we won every major city in the state, including those with majority black populations.

Does the New Jersey election have national implications? I think so.

It shows that the way to build a coalition is to forge as broad a consensus as possible, and not to try to pick off one interest group or voting bloc at a time. And it shows that such a consensus can be built around the concept of opportunity--the chance for a better future. It shows that Republicans can appeal directly to black and Hispanic voters and win their support. And it shows that it is foolish for Republicans to automatically write off 10 percent or more of the electorate.

We are approaching a watershed in our political lifetime. The 1988 election could well determine the nature of the political landscape in this country until the turn of the century. President Reagan has done a masterful job of broadening Republican appeal--especially to blue collar constituencies. He has redefined the issues for all of us--in both parties. But he will be gone in 1988.

The question is, what ideas will fill the vacuum that he creates? Who will provide those ideas? And who will translate them into terms that all sectors of the electorate can identify with?

In these past few years, thanks to groups like The Heritage Foundation, the Republican Party has gained new ground in the war of ideas.

But the largest battles loom ahead.

If we are to become the majority party in the post-Reagan era, we will have to summon forth the best of those ideas that embrace the hopes and dreams of all Americans.

Our new majority will not be won with polarizing politics. It will be won by seizing the high ground on the fundamental issue of opportunity--and by making it clear that all are welcome at the top of our broad mountain.

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