

Public Grows More Receptive

1/31/96
Fourth in a series

By Thomas B. Edsall
Washington Post Staff Writer

On the surface, Gregory M. Higgins would seem to be an ideal recruit for the Democratic Party. Last April, Corporate America responded to his 14 years of loyalty and hard work with a pink slip.

Higgins, who conducts title searches, was caught in a downsizing that resulted in layoffs for 30 percent of the company's

employees. He and his wife and son were forced to move from their house in suburban Cleveland to a mobile home. He's been able to find another job searching titles, but he's taken a pay cut of about one-third his old salary.

"Before I got downsized, I was saying to myself, 'Well, I'll retire with this company.' Now, I'm looking ahead, [and wondering] if I make it 10 years where I am, and I'm going to be pushing 50," said Higgins, who is 38.

Higgins, however, is anything but a Democrat. "You can almost see the black and

to Anti-Government Message

white between the Democrats and the Republicans," he said. "John Glenn [the Democratic senator from Ohio], he's a heathen; [Rep. Louis] Stokes, he's a heathen." President Clinton, in turn, is "blasphemous."

Higgins is a Christian conservative, a part of perhaps the fastest growing constituency in American politics.

But more than that, Higgins is a part of a new political profile, whose demographic and attitudinal characteristics are reshaping the partisan and ideological tilt of the American electorate.

Married, white, male, middle-aged and religious, Higgins is the personification of the new Republican. Attitudinally, Higgins's mistrust—he does not send his son to public school and he did not want the community he lives in identified in this article—reflects a wariness that a new Washington Post poll found to be a dominant characteristic of the electorate.

Higgins is a part of a public that appears to be highly receptive to conservative, anti-government messages, and inclined to

See TRUST, A5, Col. 2

be hostile to liberal, pro-government themes. One of the key findings of the study of Americans' mistrust of government and politicians, conducted in cooperation with the Henry J. Kaiser Family Foundation and Harvard University, is that the Republican Party has gained a built-in advantage: the public is increasingly sympathetic to the GOP's anti-government themes and ready to believe that raising taxes to pay for federal programs is a wasteful strategy that may do more harm than good.

"The public sees the quality of life deteriorating or not improving from the 1960s, with family breakup, increased violence, a failure to produce better jobs, and, in addition, with the Cold War over, they don't see any real reduction in the risks of the possibility of a third world war. All this occurs at a time when taxes have been increasing," said Robert J. Blendon, a professor at Harvard's School of Public Health and the Kennedy School of Government who was one of the leaders of The Post/Kaiser/Harvard study. "The small government, low tax environment creates a real opportunity for Republicans. . . . The general force of this sense of no progress is to favor the more conservative party."

"The distrust absolutely benefits the Republicans because it makes it easy to knock anything [associated with government] as guilty until proven innocent," said Samuel Popkin, a political scientist at the University of California at San Diego, who has conducted his own research on trust. "The Democrats are in the position of having to prove [whenever they try to defend a government program, or to propose new spending] that this one is an exception" to the general rule of waste and inefficiency.

The survey showed that Americans generally are becoming more distrustful of each other. More than 60 percent of the 1,514 adults interviewed last November and December agreed with the statement that "you can't be too careful in dealing with people," while 35 percent agreed that "most people can be trusted." Half of those surveyed believe "most people would try to take advantage of you if they got a chance," as opposed to believing that most people "would try to be fair."

This distrust, in turn, is inherently more damaging to the Democratic Party than to the Republican Party.

Dependent for survival on winning decisive majorities of African American and Hispanic voters, Democrats need to build coalitions crossing racial and ethnic boundaries, coalitions for which trust is a crucial ingredient. But on an overall measure of trust in human nature, 40 percent of self-described Democrats were found to have low levels of trust, compared to 31 percent of Republicans. Only 24 percent of Democrats had a high level of trust in human nature, compared to 32 percent of Republicans.

The undermining of a pro-government Dem-

ocratic Party is taking place on a number of fronts:

■ Substantial segments of the public believe the federal government has hurt the economy and society in general. Nearly half said the government worsened "the difference in income between wealthy and middle-class Americans"; 37 percent said it increased the "chances that children will grow up in single-parent families"; 34 percent said federal programs worsened "the rate of violent crime." On all three of these key issues, only about 10 percent said the federal government "helped make things better."

Even for those programs for which there is substantial evidence that federal initiatives have succeeded—programs that Democrats should be able to cite to boost their case in support of other federal efforts—there is not a majority consensus recognizing these achievements.

Only 23 percent of those surveyed said federal programs have reduced the share of Americans over 65 who live in poverty, compared to 32 percent who contend the programs have "made things worse," and 39 percent who say the programs have "not had much effect either way." Similarly, in the case of the "quality of the air we breathe," only 44 percent said environmental programs have "helped make things better," while 15 percent said they made things worse, and 38 percent said there has been no change.

There is, in other words, a pervasive suspicion of the effectiveness of government spending, creating a barrier that must be surmounted every time a Democrat wants to make the case for a federal expenditure, while facilitating Republican critiques of the central government.

■ The glue that held together the core constituencies of the traditional Democratic coalition—blue-collar workers and union members, blacks, urban political machines based in working class neighborhoods—was a commonality of economic interest, a shared sense of unity in the face of a Republican adversary aligned with business and corporate management. Those traditional divisions are collapsing in the face of new splits among voters.

The evidence from the Post/Kaiser/Harvard poll, along with data from other sources, suggests that if anything the electorate is breaking up into increasingly complex units, in which fundamental characteristics of one's identity—sex, marital status, depth of religious conviction, race—are shaping partisan allegiance.

Identity politics, as it relates to partisan politics, contrasts married people against single people; the religious against the secular; men against women; and, especially in the South, blacks against whites. For the Democratic Party, which is more heterogeneous than the GOP, managing the coalition becomes increasingly difficult.

Take Juliette Gatto, 32, of Ridgefield, N.J., and George Mercurio, 60, of Paterson, N.J. They see relations between men and women in very different ways, and their politics, in turn, are very different.

"Look at single parents today. I'm one of

them," Gatto said at a focus group session sponsored by The Post. "I don't mean anything against any men in here, but there's like no men out there anymore" who act like a man should. "You know, to go out and support a family or to pull his weight."

Gatto is inclined to support the reelection of Clinton. "He's been a good president, I believe." She views Clinton as sympathetic to the stresses and strains in her life.

Single, working women like Gatto are a crucial base of support for Clinton. Divorced women lean toward the Democratic Party, which has the support of 34 percent in this constituency, while only 23 percent describe themselves as Republicans.

Mercurio, who is also divorced, said in an interview, "If a woman gives me too much nonsense, she is history." At the same focus group that Gatto participated in, Mercurio said "The man has to be a man and the lady has to be a lady. God made them both different. The man is hard with muscles, and the woman is soft. And there is one thing: the father has to be the head of the household, to put it short."

Mercurio has fond memories from his childhood of the grandfather of the Democratic coalition, Franklin Delano Roosevelt. But he holds Clinton in disdain. "He's a do-nothing president. He doesn't make waves, he's not colorful." Mercurio describes himself as nonpartisan, but his sympathies are with conservatives. He contends, for instance, that he would like Bob Grant, a New York talk show host who makes Rush Limbaugh sound moderate, to run for president. "I just idolize him," Mercurio said.

Growing partisan differences based on gender and marital status are creating new ways of looking at the electorate. Just as it traditionally became possible to trace a steady line of increasingly strong Republican leanings and declining support for Democrats as voters moved up the income ladder, a parallel line can be drawn on the basis of marital status and gender.

One of the most Democratic groups among white voters is made up of women who have

never married, among whom Democrats outnumber Republicans by better than 2 to 1. The next most Democratic group is divorced women, 34 percent of whom call themselves Democrats compared to 23 percent who say they are Republicans. Married women split almost evenly between Democrats and Republicans.

Every parallel category of white men, in contrast, leans to the GOP. In ascending order, divorced men are 31 percent Republican, 25 percent Democratic; never married men, 34 percent Republican and 22 percent Democratic; and married men, 40 percent Republican, 25 percent Democratic.

(African American voters are so overwhelmingly Democratic—71 percent to 13 percent Republican—that there is little difference between subgroups. Hispanics, who make up about 9 percent of the population but less of the electorate, are about evenly divided between Republicans and Democrats.)

The degree to which sex and marital status are trumping traditional income divisions is reflected in the following findings from the poll. Married white men with incomes below \$30,000—a largely working class, downscale group that was once reliably Democratic—now are evenly divided between Democrats and Republicans. Conversely, unmarried white women with incomes in excess of \$30,000 are substantially more Democratic than Republican.

The fracturing of the electorate is emerging at another level: a partisan split is emerging among white voters separating the deeply religious of all Christian faiths—including mainline Protestants and Catholics, in addition to evangelical and born-again Christians—from those who are only moderately religious and those who are not religious at all.

"The core groups of the New Deal coalition, namely white Evangelicals and white Catholics, have, to varying extents, deserted the Democratic Party," wrote political scientists Lyman A. Kellstedt, John C. Green, James L. Guth and Corwin E. Smidt in "The Public Perspective." "After years of gradual disintegration, the New Deal religious coalition is now in shambles, and with it the Democratic lock on congressional and state government."

NEXT: Generation divide

1-21-00
W Post

ABOUT THIS SERIES

This survey is the second in a series of polls that The Washington Post, the Henry J. Kaiser Family Foundation and Harvard University are conducting to measure the ways that information shapes how people think and act.

Representatives of the three sponsors worked closely to develop the survey questionnaire and analyze the results on which this series of articles is based. The Post and the Kaiser Family Foundation with Harvard University are publishing independent summaries of the survey findings; each organization bears the sole responsibility for the work that appears under its name. The Kaiser Family Foundation and The Post paid for the survey and related expenses. The survey data will be sent later this year to the Roper Center for Public Opinion Research at the University of Connecticut, where computer tapes of the information will be available. A copy of results from the Post/Kaiser/Harvard survey may be obtained by calling the Kaiser Family Foundation at 1-800-656-4533 and asking for report No. 1110.

A total of 1,514 randomly selected adults were interviewed Nov. 28 to Dec. 4, 1995, for this project. Margin of sampling error for the overall results was plus or minus 3 percentage points and larger when results are based on part of the sample. Sampling error is, however, only one source of error in public opinion polls. Telephone interviewing for this survey was conducted by Princeton Survey Research Associates of Princeton, N.J.

Additional results reported in these articles were based on questions asked on other national surveys with samples of about 1,000 each conducted by ICR Research of Media, Pa.