The Endangered Democrats
April 24, 2001

by Dr. G. Terry Madonna and Dr. Michael Young

These are not the best of times for Pennsylvania’s Democratic Party -- and if they are not the worst of times, they are bad enough. Consider the evidence.

State Democrats have been in an electoral freefall for most of the past decade. Although nominally the majority party in the state--by virtue of a some 450,000 edge in voter registration--the Democrats can’t seem to win an election. In fact, since 1992 only one Democrat has won a statewide non-judicial race.

The scope of the debacle is breathtaking. Democrats now control a single statewide office while Republicans control virtually everything else. The governor and lieutenant governor are Republican. So, too, are the attorney general and the state treasurer. Ditto the state legislature--a slim majority in the state House and an overwhelming majority in the state Senate are Republican. The congressional delegation is now majority Republican, 11 to 10, (pending the outcome of the special May election in the southcentral district formerly held by Bud Shuster) and both U.S. senators are Republican.

Nor are matters likely to improve any time soon. The Republican controlled legislature will use this year’s redistricting to reduce the ranks of the Democrats in Congress by at least two, while the Democrats in the state House will be reduced by three or four members--a consequence of population growth in Republican areas of the state. State environmentalists may soon have a new cause. Elected Democrats are in danger of becoming an endangered species in Pennsylvania.

But none of this is exactly a news bulletin. The Democratic decline has been in progress for some time--and while it has more been described than explained--there have been some attempts to explain it.

Some of these explanations conclude the decline is cyclical and temporary. Today, the Democrats are out of fashion because the party’s big government solutions no longer resonate with voters. But---so the thinking goes--in the not so distant future, it will be the Republicans time to be out of favor with the electorate.

Maybe this will happen, but not since the beginning of two-party competition in the late 1950s has Pennsylvania had this kind of gap between the two parties. In fact, the present imbalance resembles more the post-Civil War decades of GOP dominance then it does a cyclical effect.

Some have seized on this latter observation to argue that Democratic electoral misfortunes are simply a return to normality in Pennsylvania politics. In this view, modern Republicans have merely re-established the one party dominance that characterized Pennsylvania politics from the Civil War to the 1950s.

And there have been still other explanations for the Democrats electoral eclipse. Some argue, for example, that state Republicans are just better at campaigning than are Democrats--raising money, using media, adapting technology, and organizing, a not altogether implausible possibility.
But something is missing in these arguments. The pieces just don’t fit. If Pennsylvania is no longer a competitive two party state, how did that happen? And why—if Pennsylvania is now a Republican state—do almost a half million more people continue to register Democratic than Republican. None of the standard explanations really answer those questions. But fresh national data analyzing voting trends may. And the news is not necessarily good for beleaguered Democrats.

What that data show—culled from exit polls and other sources over the past 10 years and longer—is that voters in the 1990s have less and less voted their pocketbook. Not all voters, of course. But a substantial number of voters now eschew their own long-term financial interests to vote their values, with issues such as the environment, gun control, abortion, gay rights and affirmative action holding sway. These so-called “cultural issues” now determine voting behavior for a greater number of voters.

The data document a progressive weakening of the link between incomes and voting. Increasingly values have supplanted economics, which is a political phenomenon of the first magnitude. And it is transforming political party allegiances—moving working class whites away from the Democrats toward the Republican Party and upscale well-educated professionals away from the Republicans to the Democrats.

Election 2000 data, as reported by the Washington Post, illustrate the pattern. Nine of the ten poorest counties in Kentucky—once an unassailable bastion of Democrat strength—voted strongly for George W. Bush. Meanwhile an overwhelming majority (17 of 25) of the most affluent counties in the country voted for Al Gore.

Similar patterns are found in Pennsylvania voting returns. Heavily Democratic counties (Washington, Westmoreland, Beaver, and Fayette) in western Pennsylvania no longer cast votes for Democratic candidates by margins even close to their voter registration. In the Philadelphia suburbs (Bucks, Montgomery, and Delaware), Democratic statewide candidates often are easy winners, despite overwhelming Republican registration.

For Pennsylvania Democrats, the switch from pocketbook issues to cultural issues is not all bad. Some of the cultural issues, especially abortion rights, the environment, and gun control, work for them in the suburbs. But the price for this gain is exorbitant: a steady erosion of the party’s traditional conservative blue-collar base. That in sum and substance is what has been happening to state Democrats. They have lost that base.

Ironically the economy itself may have brought about the change from voting pocketbook issues to voting values. Government largess and social programs—mainstays of Democratic Party policy—may have become less relevant to voters in good economic times. Government itself may be less relevant.

All of this could change abruptly. The much-ballyhooed economic slide apparently looming could provide a stern test of the permanence of values voting. In economic bad times will voters continue to eschew pocketbook issues? If not, it is likely that the Democrat base vote will once again look to the party for economic relief—providing us with a new political slogan: What’s bad for the country is good for the Democratic Party.

------------------

Politically Uncorrected™ is published twice monthly. Dr. G. Terry Madonna is a Professor of Public Affairs
at Franklin & Marshall College, and Dr. Michael Young is a former Professor of Politics and Public Affairs at Penn State University and Managing Partner at Michael Young Strategic Research. The opinions expressed in this article are solely those of the authors and do not necessarily reflect the opinions of any institution or organization with which they are affiliated. This article may be used in whole or part only with appropriate attribution. Copyright © 2001 Terry Madonna and Michael Young.