

# Parent Trap

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It was, perhaps, appropriate that Democrats held their convention this summer in Boston--a charming old city of declining population and fewer and fewer families. The Democrats, after all, may like to think of themselves as the party of working families; but in reality, the exit polls and demographic trends suggest that they are increasingly the party of family dysfunction. To date, analysts have mostly blamed Kerry's loss on a failure to connect with religious voters or to reassure Americans that he would be tough on national security. But in their rush to focus on religion and war, pundits have overlooked what may have been the single most important predictor of the GOP's victory--not Bibles or bullets, but diapers.

This wouldn't be a problem for Democrats if demographic trends in the U.S. mirrored those in much of the rest of the industrialized world. But they don't. Unlike Europe, as well as some advanced Asian countries like South Korea and Japan, the U.S. is a relatively fertile society. Indeed, the U.S. is one of the only industrialized countries to enjoy an increase in its fertility rate since the 1970s. (Average births per woman have increased about 15 percent during that time.) Other signs--rising marriage rates, declining divorce rates, and an overall increase in the number of child-bearing families--all point to a strengthening of the American nuclear family. These are welcome developments for our society. But they could spell doom for the Democratic Party. And until progressives develop a more family-friendly voice, they are likely to spend many more lonely nights in November wondering what went wrong.

Last month, Democrats swept the largely childless cities--true blue locales like San Francisco, Portland, Seattle, Boston, and Manhattan have the lowest percentages of children in the nation--but generally had poor showings in those places where families are settling down, notably in the sunbelt cities, exurbs, and outer suburbs of older metropolitan areas. Exit poll data, which is, to be sure, not perfect, suggest that Bush won heavy majorities among married people, who constitute roughly 63 percent of the electorate, and those with children, who represent about 40 percent of voters. In contrast, Kerry fared far better among singles, particularly gay voters and those who never had children. (Two caveats here: Many single people and couples without children are future parents, while the category of single people also includes divorced parents.)

But the problem for Democrats isn't that they are losing among families now. The real problem is that the electoral importance of both nuclear families and the communities

where they are congregating is only growing. According to Phillip Longman, a demographer at the New America Foundation, Bush states had a 13 percent higher fertility rate than their blue counterparts, whose base, as he puts it, is essentially "non-replicating."

Over the past 30 years, the bastions of the Democratic Party have been losing people. Some places such as St. Louis, Cleveland, Philadelphia, Pittsburgh, and Detroit have continued to shrink in good times and bad. Since 2000, some of the bright spots among blue cities--such as Minneapolis, Chicago, Boston, and San Francisco--have begun once again to lose population.

Republican regions, by contrast, have continued to grow, in large part because they have become more attractive to families. These include places like Douglas County, Colorado, the nation's fastest growing county, which also has the fourth highest concentration of white children as a percentage of the population of any county in the nation. Located in the Denver suburbs, the county voted two to one for Bush. The same phenomenon can be seen in other fast-growing suburban counties--also mostly white--near Minneapolis (Scott), Dallas (Rockwall, Collin), Washington, D.C. (Loudon), Atlanta (Forsyth), and Columbus, Ohio (Delaware). All have growing populations and all went between 56 and 83 percent for Bush.

(On a side note, the idea that Democrats do best where the college-educated congregate--the so-called "creative class" thesis--is badly damaged by the fact that all these counties have a high proportion of well-educated folks. In fact, Bush and Kerry basically split the votes of college graduates. A big edge with the Harvard faculty is not the same thing as support from educated people--particularly once those educated people have children.)

Assuming that blacks remain stalwart in their affiliation with Democrats, the largest contestable group besides whites is the Latino population--which tends to be more family-oriented than any other group in society. Latinos, for example, are far more likely to have a "traditional" family--that is a mother-father-child household--than whites, blacks, or Asian-Americans.

On the surface these voters--poorer, less educated, minorities--are often assumed to be a natural base for the Democrats, but the 2004 results reveal cause for concern. Places with large concentrations of first generation and poorer Latinos, such as the Rio Grande Valley, Los Angeles County, and the Bronx, voted overwhelmingly for Kerry. But Latino voters in areas with more upwardly mobile voters, and with higher rates of homeownership, such as Maricopa County, Arizona, broke more evenly between the parties.

In fact, across the country, areas with high levels of homeownership tended to vote more heavily for Bush than areas dominated by renters, according to economist Susanne Trimboth. If Latino voters continue to move into the middle class, buy houses, and relocate to more conservative areas--in other words, if they replicate the patterns of white

nuclear families who are leaving behind the childless city-centers--Democrats may have a hard time holding on to them.

Given all this, what do Democrats need to do? The unimaginative answer is to say that they should moderate their positions on issues, such as abortion and gay marriage, where the most liberal stance tends to turn off married parents with children. And perhaps they should. But far more important is for Democrats to return to a worldview centered around the baby-making electorate. Historically, Democrats appealed to families by stressing the need to expand home ownership--the GI bill, for example--and by emphasizing the importance of government in providing basic services, such as roads, libraries, and water and power systems, to suburban communities. They were also advocates for educating the middle class, which in the 1950s and '60s moved into suburbia. Today, Democrats too often seem preoccupied with either top universities--home of their much-beloved creative class--or inner-city schools. Improving suburban education needs to be once again placed front and center on the Democrats' agenda.

Perhaps more than anything else, Democrats need a change in style. Democratic legislators too often seem hostile to suburban concerns, and indifferent to the aspirations of those who would like to buy a home and a small green place to call their own. In Albuquerque, for example, planners working for the local Democratic regime advocated banning backyards, an essential part of the middle-class family lifestyle. One even told a local developer that his having four children made him "immoral." A small--and probably extreme--example? Undoubtedly. But it speaks to a stereotype that Democrats have been battling for years now: that they disdain suburbia and the families who live there. It is long past time for Democrats to start undoing that perception.

Finally, Democrats might want to consider a change of venue for their next convention. They have held their last four gatherings in four of America's most liberal cities--New York, Chicago, Los Angeles, and Boston. Maybe next time, they should hold their convention in Houston, Orlando, or Phoenix, where families are growing, people are moving, and the future of this remarkably fertile nation is being nurtured. It's worth a try, because, after all, Democrats have little choice. Demographics will not save them. On the contrary, the Democrats' task now is to try to save themselves from demographics.