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Cultural and economic crises set the stage for GOP success

by Ralph Z. Hallow; THE WASHINGTON TIMES

Driving Republicans' dramatic gains yesterday were deep concerns with ideology and values as well as with the power and arrogance of government, top campaign analysts in both parties said.

"The volcanic eruption of voter anger today has reshaped the political landscape and that anger resulted from the meeting of a cultural crisis, economic crisis and political crisis in this country," said Democratic campaign strategist Mark Mellman.

"This Republican landslide wasn't so much a repudiation of [President] Clinton's policies as of Clinton himself," said GOP consultant Brad O'Leary. "He gave all the issues the other side needed to beat him with - morality, values, freedom to have arms for self-protection."

"Values were below the surface in everything in today's elections and will play even more of a role in '96," said Democratic pollster Celinda Lake.

"When the candidates talked about crime, deteriorating schools and families that can't keep up, that was values."

But economics played a role in further agitating an already irritated electorate. Despite a steady stream of supposedly good economic news from the Clinton administration going into the election, at least half the voters said they were no better off than two years ago, according to exit polls by the four TV networks

and the Associated Press.

The exit polls also showed that about a quarter of the voters said they feel they are worse off.

The finding seems to vindicate many nongovernment economists who have been saying the administration's economic figures do not match reality and explain why the electorate is not more upbeat.

"The economy is not as strong as the government and press are characterizing it," said Wall Street analyst Phillip Braverman, senior vice president and chief economist at DKB Securities Corp. Just as they had going into the elections, most Republicans last night insisted that voters would be expressing an ideological preference for GOP conservatism.

Most Democrats insisted that voters were not being ideological but simply anti-incumbent.

"Lots of Republicans are saying this was ideological, but as you look through the campaign ads and handouts, you don't see too many ideological matters being debated," said Mr. Mellman.

"Republicans claim the electorate wanted small government over big government," he said. "But how many ads focused on the size of government as a critical issue? Most focused on the foibles of individual candidates and on whether they cast a bad vote or good

vote for the district's or state's voters." GOP campaign pollster and strategist Tony Fabrizio looked at the same election returns and observed that "across the country, the losers were liberal Democrats." He added that the Republicans who beat them were, or claimed to be, their opposites ideologically.

"It was a clear choice between Bill Clinton and bigger government on the one hand, and real change and smaller government on the other," said GOP pollster and campaign strategist Glen Bolger.

Ms. Lake said it "was more anti-incumbent than ideological in that the sentiment was anti-Washington; Clinton and the Democrats happened to be in control of Washington."

To buttress his claim the election was ideological, GOP consultant Craig Shirley said that throughout the South and West, "virtually no conservative Republican incumbent was even at risk - unless he had ethical problems."

The electoral earthquake felt round the nation clearly didn't take its toll equally among GOP and Democratic incumbents. Far more of the former survived, and far more GOP nonincumbents running on conservative issues triumphed over Democratic non-incumbents.

Mr. Bolger argued that there is a difference between incumbents in general losing and what happened yesterday, which is that Democrats lost a bigger percentage of incumbents than Republicans. "If this were an anti-incumbent election, you would have seen more Republican incumbents lose," he said.

Political professionals found surprising agreement on the values question that until recently both parties had been

running away from.

"Values played a role in helping define Clinton, which helped define the Democratic Party," said Mr. Fabrizio. "However, values on an individual basis really were decisive or immaterial on a campaign by campaign basis."

"The candidates who talked about family values such as reforming education did well in this election," Mr. Shirley said. A dissent from the view held by most Republican campaign professionals came from GOP campaign operative Roland Gunn. "Economics was more important than values in understanding tonight's results," he said.

"If voters were looking primarily at values issues, then there shouldn't be a pattern of people who supported Clinton's tax bill going down the tubes, as happened today," Mr. Gunn argued. There was wide disagreement among pollsters on which other issues did or did not play as big as expected in the election.

"Clinton's personal morality didn't play at all," said Ms. Lake. Many Republicans and some Democrats had expected it would.

Another surprise: The GOP expected foreign policy to work to its advantage. "Instead, it worked to the Democrats' advantage," said Ms. Lake. Also, trade issues didn't matter even though they were a major thrust of the Clinton administration, she said.

As for health care, the centerpiece of the Clinton legislative agenda, Mr. Bolger said: "I can think of only three or four campaigns that actually mentioned health care in their advertising.

Democrats checked which way the wind was blowing and backed away from accusing the Republicans of blocking health reform."

Ms. Lake thought Mr. Bolger must have been assessing a different election. "Health care played big," she said. "The

Republicans used it against a lot of our Democrats in terms of being for big government and big tax increases."