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# Emerging Democrats

In 2000 America was a 50:50 nation. But the long-term economic and cultural trends favour the Democrats.

By Ruy Teixeira

In 2000, Al Gore and George W Bush divided the popular vote almost evenly (Gore led by a scant half percentage point) and Bush gained the presidency only after some controversial intervention by the supreme court. The Senate was divided 50:50 (until the defection of Jim Jeffords from the Republicans in 2001). And the House of Representatives was divided between 221 Republicans (50.8 per cent) and 212 Democrats plus 2 independents (49.2 per cent).

After the election, John Judis and I argued in our book The Emerging Democratic Majority that, despite currently being a 50:50 nation, America was changing in ways that were likely to produce a Democratic majority within a decade. Here are the trends we thought were leading in that direction.

**Professionals** Professionals are college-educated white-collar workers who produce ideas and services. They worry about the quality of their product and service, rather than simply whether it produces a profit, and tend to be socially liberal. They include doctors and nurses, software programmers, actors, teachers, engineers and fashion designers. In the 1950s, professionals made up 7 per cent of the working population and were the most Republican of all occupational groups. But as the U.S. economy has changed—as the production of ideas and services has displaced the production of things—professionals in the workforce have more than doubled to 16 per cent. They are even more heavily represented among voters, comprising about a fifth of the electorate nationally; more in some northeastern and far western states. And a majority of them are now Democrats. In the past four presidential elections, professionals on average voted Democrat 52 to 40 per cent.

**Women** Women used to vote Republican more often than men. But in 1964, for the first time, more women than men voted Democrat; in 1980, this gender gap widened, and soon after an absolute majority of women began to vote Democratic. What made the difference was more women in the workforce and the Republican identification with the religious right's view of women and the family. Democrats are strongest among working, single and well educated women, all growing proportions of women voters.

**Minorities** Blacks did not always support Democrats. As late as 1960, Richard Nixon, the Republican presidential candidate, received a third of the black vote. But after the Republicans nominated Barry Goldwater in 1964, blacks abandoned the Republicans, and now support Democrats by nine to one. Hispanics (except for Cubans), Japanese-Americans and Filipinos have been Democrats since the New Deal. Chinese-Americans began voting Democratic in the 1990s following Republican opposition to immigration. In 1972, the combined minority vote accounted for about 10 per cent of the electorate. In 2000, minorities made up almost a fifth of the vote, of which 75 per cent was cast for the Democrats. By 2010, they could make up as much as a quarter.

Professionals, women and minorities have transformed the Democratic electorate. New Deal Democrats were the party of southern whites, urban ethnics and midwestern blue-collar workers. Now Democrats are the party of teachers, nurses and janitors.

**Ideopolises** The change in the Democrats does not end with its constituents. New Deal Democrats were based primarily in the deep south and in the urban north; the new Democratic party's greatest strength is in post-industrial metropolitan areas, or "ideopolises," where 44 per cent of the nation's voters now live. These new communities were spawned in the shift to post-industrial capitalism. They specialise in the production of ideas and services. Their workforces are dominated by professionals and lower-level service workers, many of whom are from minorities.

Many older industrial cities, such as Los Angeles, Chicago and Philadelphia, have become ideopolises. In 1983, LA had three times as many aerospace workers as workers in the movie industry. By 2000, the proportions were reversed. Many of these areas, like Silicon Valley in California and Bergen County in New Jersey, used to be solidly Republican but are now Democrat. They are concentrated in the northeast, upper midwest, and far west, but they are also found in North Carolina's research triangle and Colorado's Denver-Boulder area. In 2000, Gore won these areas by 55 to 41 per cent.

These are the long-run trends that we believed were reshaping U.S. politics. In the short run, however, things have turned out differently. In the 2002 elections, the Republicans did very well (especially given that the president's party usually loses seats in the first election of his term), gaining two seats to take back control of the Senate, and six House seats to bolster their majority there. And of course, George W Bush's presence in the White House gave them unified control of the government—something they had not achieved even during the Reagan conservative revolution.

How did this happen? Start with this: if the elections had been held not in November 2002, but on 10th September 2001, the Democrats would have made impressive gains, increasing their one-seat advantage in the Senate and perhaps winning back the House. At the time, Bush was seen as a weak and ineffective leader, who was most comfortable reading The Very Hungry Caterpillar to schoolchildren. His approval ratings, as low as 51 per cent in some polls, were poor for a president in his first year. In addition, the Clinton boom had given way to an economic slowdown. Combine these factors with popular support for Democratic positions on social security, healthcare, the environment and the economy, and you had all the elements for a Republican disaster.

Instead, 11th September happened. Bush res-ponded by abandoning his indifference to world affairs. His initial performance, leading to the ousting of the Taleban regime in December 2001, strongly enhanced his reputation. Bush's approval rating hit 90 per cent in late September and did not fall below 80 per cent until March 2002. The rising approval of Bush, along with the importance attached to national security, increased support for the Republicans. In August 2001, a Harris poll had found only 37 per cent of voters thought the Republicans in congress were doing an excellent or pretty good job; by mid-October, that number had soared to 67 per cent.

The new-found Republican support after 11th September was concentrated among white middle-class—particularly upper middle-class—voters who had probably backed Ronald Reagan in 1980 and 1984, but then switched to Clinton and Gore. New GOP support also included some suburban professionals and managers who had turned away from the Republicans because of the party's identification with the religious right. Even so, by the late summer of 2002, as concern with terrorism began to abate, the Democratic advantage that had been growing in the 1990s began to reappear. As voters became more concerned about the economy and a spate of corporate corruption scandals, Democrats began pulling ahead of the Republicans in generic congressional polls and in the individual state races. An August Gallup poll found voters preferring Democratic congressional candidates by 50 to 42 per cent.

To shift the focus from social and economic issues to the war on terror and national security, the Republicans, guided by Bush's political adviser Karl Rove, launched a debate on whether to go to war with Iraq. The Bush administration had already decided to oust Saddam Hussein. But the White House staged the congressional debate over the

war during the height of the election campaign, rather than before or after it. Rather than remove the issue of war from political partisanship—as Bush's father had done in 1990 by postponing the debate on whether to oust Iraq from Kuwait until after the mid-term elections—the Bush White House sought to use the issue for political ends.

Bush presented the Iraqi threat as imminent and cataclysmic. He and administration officials warned that Saddam would soon have nuclear weapons that he could use against U.S. cities. The administration's warnings either ignored intelligence about Iraq or grossly exaggerated what was known, but they had a dramatic effect. By November, 59 per cent of Americans favoured an invasion of Iraq; only 35 per cent were opposed. Even more thought Saddam was acquiring nuclear weapons and had links to al Qaeda. An astonishing 69 per cent believed that it was "very or somewhat likely" that Saddam was involved in the 11th September attacks, despite the fact that the intelligence agencies had failed to find any evidence of it.

The administration also used the anniversary of 11th September to heighten fears of a terrorist attack. The justice department raised the terror alert that week, explaining later that it was justified because of what the FBI had learned of an al Qaeda "sleeper cell" in Lackawanna, New York. Six Yemeni-Americans were arrested, but the administration had no evidence that they had been organising a terrorist plot, and none surfaced over the next year. The six had attended an al Qaeda camp in Afghanistan in June 2001, but since returning home, had not engaged in plotting or conspiracy or even proselytising.

The administration coupled the terror alerts about sleeper cells with an attack on the Democrats for blocking passage of the homeland security bill. Democrats had initially proposed the new department, and the passage of the measure had actually been held up by Republicans, who insisted that it contain a measure to prevent labour unions from organising department workers, a proposal the Democrats refused to include. The resulting charge of Democratic obstruction, reinforced by terror alerts and exaggerated or false claims about the Iraqi threat, worked to the party's advantage. In the months before the election, Americans became more fearful of attack, and looked to Republicans to protect them. In one October poll, voters who saw terrorism as the biggest election issue favoured Republicans over Democrats by a 72 to 17 per cent margin.

Taking their cue from the White House, Republican candidates repeatedly charged their Democratic opponents with ignoring the war on terror and national security. In the Georgia Senate race, Republican Saxby Chambliss, who had never served in the military, attacked incumbent Max Cleland, a war hero who lost both legs and an arm in Vietnam, for not supporting the Republican plan for the homeland security department. The Republicans even went so far as to run an ad linking Cleland to images of Saddam Hussein and Osama bin Laden.

Nevertheless, with three weeks to go before the election, Democrats were leading in polls and many of the races. It looked as if they would hold or increase their margin in the Senate while winning seats but failing to take back the House. During those last weeks, Bush undertook a whirlwind national tour that highlighted the threat from al Qaeda and Saddam. In the last week alone, Bush made 17 stops in 15 states. At each stop, after briefly trying to allay voters' fears about Republican economic policies, he would launch into a jeremiad about the threat from abroad. As he put it during a stop in Charlotte, North Carolina: "You've just got to understand there's an enemy out there that hates America ... No longer can we assume oceans will protect us ... We must assume that the enemy is coming, and we've got to do everything we can to protect the homeland. That's why I started talking about the issue of Iraq."

Bush's final tour turned a dead heat into victory for the Republicans and generated a pro-Republican surge. Republicans had trailed Democrats by three points in Gallup's poll of likely voters on 21st-22nd October. By election weekend, 12 days later, the Republicans led by six points.

The key question is whether the GOP gains in the 2002 election represent a lasting

move from the 50:50 nation towards GOP domination, or a temporary detour on the road to the Democratic majority that John Judis and I predicted.

To answer this we need to draw a rough portrait of who backed each party in November 2002. The picture recalls that of the Reagan-era presidential elections. Republicans did well among white rural and suburban voters. Because of Bush's leadership in the war on terror, they won back some suburbanites who had become Democrats in the late 1980s and 1990s over education, Medicare, the environment and the Republican identification with the religious right and corporate lobbyists. The Democrats also lost ground in key states among white working-class voters who had once been loyal Democrats but had backed Reagan in 1980 and 1984 and Bush senior in 1988. These voters probably moved back to the Republicans because they felt that Republicans could better handle threats to national security.

The Republicans did very well among white voters, increasing their share of the white vote to 60 per cent up from 56 per cent in 2000. But they failed to break through among new voter groups in 2002, especially among minorities, where they managed only 22 per cent support, several points lower than in 2000. Their failure to make progress among Latinos, the fastest-growing minority group, was particularly galling for the GOP, since it had aggressively targeted that group. They also lost the youth vote 51 per cent to 49 per cent, even as they won the House vote by 53 to 47 per cent.

The other factor in 2002 was turnout. Republican partisans went to the polls at a higher rate than in other mid-term elections. In fact, according to the VNS exit poll, 40 per cent of voters were Republicans, a level higher than at any time in the 1990s or 2000. In contrast, some loyal Democratic voters stayed away. According to the VNS poll, fewer blacks turned out than in 1998 or 2000. County-level voting returns suggest that turnout in Democratic big cities and suburbs, even where it did not decline, did not keep pace with increases in Republican suburbs and rural areas. With higher turnout, especially among blacks, Democrats would have been more competitive in a number of states and might have won close races like the Senate contest in Missouri.

After the election, GOP pollster Matthew Dowd argued that the Republicans had won not because of Bush's response to 11th September, but because voters trusted them more to improve the economy. If that were true, the election might have augured a new political era. But the war on terror completely overshadowed and in the end defined the terms of the campaign. The key factors in the Republicans' success were all traceable to the peculiar post-11th September circumstances of this election.

These factors are no longer so strong and will weaken further, which is why November's election should be very competitive.

Instead of the splendid little war that the president's advisers thought would ensure his re-election, the invasion of Iraq is threatening to turn into a liability for Bush, despite Saddam's capture. Bush's approval ratings have returned to about the level they were before 11th September. Support for the war and Bush's handling of it have dropped sharply.

January was the second deadliest month for U.S. troops since combat operations were declared over (November was the worst). And then there was the claim made by David Kay, former chief of the U.S. search for weapons of mass destruction in Iraq, that there were no such weapons in Iraq, either now or before the U.S. attacked.

According to recent polls, the U.S. public believes that Bush does not have a clear plan for handling the Iraq situation and considers the level of casualties to be unacceptable.

They believe strongly that the results of the war have not been worth the costs in lives and dollars. They also strongly oppose the extra $87bn that congress allocated in November for the occupation and are very sceptical that they were told the full truth about Iraq and its WMD before the invasion. Most significantly, the public overwhelmingly believes that the war with Iraq has not made the U.S. safer or reduced the terror

threat, and that capturing Osama bin Laden and crushing al Qaeda should be the main purpose of the war on terror.

While Iraq may become a liability, Bush continues to enjoy high approval ratings for the broader war on terror. Still, the idea that the GOP will enjoy a long-lasting advantage on foreign policy looks less plausible with every passing month. The public now gives Bush rather poor ratings in the umbrella categories of foreign policy or foreign affairs.

Bush's problems do not stop with Iraq. The economy refuses to catch fire, despite a 8.2 per cent growth rate in the third quarter of 2003. While growth should be respectable this year, relatively high unemployment and low levels of job creation, and sluggish wage and income growth, are likely to persist. The Bush administration may wind up presiding over a net loss of jobs (particularly in the manufacturing sector), something that no administration has experienced for 70 years.

In contrast, when Clinton was running for his second term in 1996, the economy was firing on all cylinders: strong growth, low unemployment, high levels of job creation and strong wage and income growth. Bush will not have such a record to run on. That will make it more difficult for him to defend his gigantic tax cuts ($3 trillion over the course of the decade), which were sold on the basis of their economic benefits. The public has never been particularly enthusiastic about these tax cuts, seeing them as having little positive effect on the economy and as benefiting the wealthiest. Those views seem unlikely to change.

Intimately linked to these tax cuts is the ballooning federal budget deficit. The idea that it is out of control is sinking in with the U.S. public, and polls indicate that Bush has lost all credibility on fiscal responsibility. His declaration, made as he presented his budget for fiscal year 2005, that he would cut the half-trillion dollar budget deficit in half while also occupying Iraq, reducing taxes by another trillion dollars, increasing defence and homeland security spending, and travelling to the moon, bordered on the bizarre.

Even the two big domestic achievements of the Bush administration—the No Child Left Behind education reform act in 2002 and the Medicare prescription drug act at the end of last year—are proving to have mixed results. The first act, which mandates continual testing and sanctions against low-performing schools, was supposed to give the GOP a "tough love" image on the issue, without much additional spending. But the inflexible testing-based regime has developed a bad reputation as an "unfunded mandate" that fiscally-strapped states have to find the money for. State legislatures are in open revolt against the act; Republican-controlled Virginia, Utah and Ohio have threatened to opt out of it entirely. As a result, the political advantage that the GOP hoped to open up on schools has vanished; Democrats now run double-digit leads on the issue in public polls.

The prescription drugs act was intended to steal a traditional Democratic issue by providing a new drug benefit for senior citizens through Medicare. The provision of such an expensive new entitlement, GOP strategists believed, would burnish Bush's "compassionate conservative" credentials and immunise him against the charge that he is only willing to spend money on the rich. It hasn't worked out. The act is expensive (an initial estimate of $400bn over ten years has been increased to $540bn), though not because it is particularly generous. A senior citizen with $5,000 in annual drug costs will still pay about $4,000 out of his own pocket. The government declined to use its bargaining power with pharmaceutical companies to reduce drug prices. Not only did the act include no cost containment provisions, it actually makes it more difficult for U.S. citizens to buy drugs from Canada, where prices are substantially lower. Bush's approval ratings on healthcare, Medicare and even prescription drugs for seniors remain abysmal.

The two signature achievements, therefore, have done little to alter the perception that Bush and his administration are out of touch with ordinary Americans and tilted towards the interests of the rich—a sentiment that polls regularly record. This is only reinforced by a legislative and executive record that, apart from these acts, is one long effort to promote business interests through tax breaks, deregulation and rolling back

environmental protections.

In every area reviewed above—including the invasion of Iraq—Bush has overplayed his hand and is out of step with public opinion. He started his presidency acting as though he had won a landslide in a country that was thirsting for a radical anti-government agenda. That misinterpretation of the public mood was fuelled by 9/11 and its aftermath when Bush benefited from the largest and longest "rally effect" the U.S. presidency has ever seen. In effect, Bush took it as a licence to ignore public opinion and pursue the agenda dearest to his heart, the hard-right agenda of the base of the Republican party.

This is a bizarre strategy for a party that wants to build a new majority in the mode of William McKinley and Teddy Roosevelt 100 years ago. Usually, majority-building involves moving towards the centre, not hard right (or left) to pick up moderates and independents. Instead, the Bush team seems intent on firing up its most resolute partisans and assuming that the rest of the voters they need will just follow.

This approach is oddly misguided, given what we know of the leanings of independent voters—the true centre of U.S. politics. Recent opinion data shows clearly that the political views of Democrats and independents (two thirds of the electorate) are converging and pulling away from the Republicans. Democrats and independents are converging in their declining support for an aggressive foreign policy, in their increasingly sceptical attitude towards business and in their increasingly liberal and relatively secular social attitudes. In each case, they hold views much closer to one another than to Republicans.

Some argue that the real divide in the U.S. is cultural. There is modern, secular, socially liberal "blue" America and there is traditional, religious, socially conservative "red" America and that is what political conflict in America is now about. A cultural war has replaced the struggle between economic interests. This is an exaggeration. Conflict around traditional policy issues remains intense. And political divisions by income, occupation and education are still a central part of the political landscape.

However, it is true that cultural divisions are also a key driver of voting behaviour. In the presidential election of 2000, whether a voter owned a gun and how often he or she attended church were good predictors of how that person cast their ballot. According to exit polls, Bush won the support of voters who said they attended church more than weekly by 63 per cent to 36 per cent, and voters who said they attended church weekly by 57 per cent to 40 per cent. These voters made up 43 per cent of the electorate, according to opinion polls.

What makes less sense is the idea that these cultural divisions favour the maintenance of a 50:50 nation or, still less, somehow favour the Republicans. Delving into the church attendance example, start with the point that the exit poll estimate that 43 per cent of U.S. voters attend church weekly or more than weekly is too high, according to more reliable sociological surveys of church attendance. Move on to the fact that the groups in the less observant three fifths of voters in the exit polls—those who said they attended church a few times a month, a few times a year or never—preferred Gore over Bush, with support particularly strong among never-attenders, who gave Gore a 61 to 32 per cent margin.

Most critically, in surveys conducted over the last 30 years, it is the ranks of non-churchgoers that have grown the most. Those who said they never attended church or attended less than once a year grew from 18 per cent in 1972 to 30 per cent in 1998. This group is about twice the size of those who identify themselves as members of the religious right, and tends vigorously to support Democrats.

Much the same story could be told about other cultural divisions separating red and blue America: abortion rights, attitudes towards sexuality, women's rights and feminism, civil rights and ethnic diversity and gay rights. The trend over time is towards more liberal views on all these issues, so the influence of vociferous opponents will wane and

the influence of supporters will increase. Cultural divisions are not a stable basis for a 50:50 nation or a new Republican majority. They signal instead a Democratic majority that accepts and builds on these social changes.

You can see this in the views of political independents and of youth. In every case, independents' views on these social questions are relatively liberal and close to those of Democrats. This includes the currently divisive issue of gay marriage and civil unions, where independents tend to be quite liberal.

As for young people, their views on social issues are notoriously liberal. Young (18-29) Americans even favour allowing gay marriages by 15-20 points. This means that the most powerful demographic force of all—the new generation—is driving the U.S. away from a cultural 50:50 nation towards one dominated by a more liberal, cosmopolitan outlook.

In short, the cultural class war may play well with the GOP's base, but it does not with the centre of U.S. politics or its future public. It is therefore unlikely to be an effective strategy for Republican hegemony.

Republicans do have two advantages that some argue will keep the Democrats from winning: money and redistricting.

Money is an old Republican advantage that has been made even bigger by a 2002 campaign finance reform bill passed by congress. Historically, Republican voters, who are more concentrated among the wealthy, have been more likely to give individual donations, especially the maximum $1,000 contribution, than Democrats. This gave the GOP a fundraising advantage, but the Democrats were partly able to offset that advantage by collecting unrestricted "soft money" contributions for voter registration and advertising from organisations like labour unions. But the new law bans "soft money" contributions from organisations, while doubling the amount that wealthy individuals can contribute to campaigns. This has allowed official Republican campaign organisations to outraise Democratic ones by even wider margins than previously. That will translate into electoral advantage, especially in close House contests.

But money can be overrated as a determinant of election outcomes. It is most effective in scaring off competition or in pushing one side over the finish line in an otherwise close race. It cannot defeat a candidate who is reasonably well funded and whose politics are clearly more popular than his or her opponent. And even the advantages it bestows can cut two ways in elections. In low turnout congressional elections, it can benefit the big spender in a tight race, but in high visibility elections, like Senate and presidential elections, it can highlight the Republican dependence on wealth and on big business.

Moreover, the Democrats have adapted to the fundraising disadvantage created by the new campaign finance law. There has been a proliferation of Democratic "527s" (the name comes from the section of the tax code under which they fall) created to get around the law's prohibition on soft money. These independent groups will be launching huge turnout drives and arranging massive buys of television advertising to slam Bush and support the Democratic nominee in the 2004 election. Some 40 groups plan to spend more than $300m in such efforts.

In addition, since the Democrats can't just pass the hat among wealthy individuals to get direct support for official campaign organisations, they are likely to employ a new approach. That approach was pioneered by internet group moveon.org and Howard Dean's presidential campaign, which, despite its spectacular demise, was an equally spectacular fundraising success, breaking all previous Democratic presidential fundraising records. Dean's campaign raised $40m in 2003 from 280,000 individuals, making an average contribution of $143. The use of the internet to mobilise small donors in large numbers and with little overhead cost is now an established model, and the Democrats have a potent first-mover advantage they will exploit to the maximum.

Turning to redistricting, a (usually) decennial event tied to the U.S. census and controlled by state legislatures, there is no doubt that the GOP handled the latest round of

redistricting more effectively than the Democrats. Too many Democratic votes, particularly minority votes, are concentrated in House districts with overwhelming Democratic strength, while Republican votes are scattered around more productively. The 2000 redistricting made this pattern worse, as Republicans cagily used the process, wherever they had legislative control, to concentrate minority votes even more heavily in safe Democratic districts, while making other districts "whiter" and more favourable to the GOP. In addition, the Republicans have launched a notorious series of moves to re-redistrict states that were just redistricted only a year or two before to create more House seats favourable to their candidates. That these moves are nakedly political and without precedent has not deterred them. But one such instance, rammed through the Republican-dominated Colorado legislature, has been invalidated by the courts. In the most famous case, though, that of Texas, the re-redistricting passed by the Texas legislature still stands and seems likely to give the Republicans several more House seats.

The Democrats have said they will not take these changes lying down and are likely to use their own control of state legislatures to do some of their own re-redistricting if the GOP does not desist. In the meantime, though, the GOP has gained an advantage in the House from the redistricting process. That means that, even if political trends favour the Democrats over the course of the decade, Democrat strength in the House will be a lagging indicator.

But while redistricting affects House races, it does not affect state-wide races for the Senate or presidential elections. Those will be decided by the trends discussed earlier, most of which are unfavourable to the GOP. In the end, Republican advantages in money and redistricting are important but are unlikely to replace the 50:50 nation with a new Republican majority. Instead, they may help to delay or soften a realignment towards the Democrats that began to occur a decade ago. That is the future of the 50:50 nation. It will take more than creative redistricting and the invocation of 9/11 to stop it.

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