



The Fairness Issue

With one carefully planned speech and one offhand remark, two candidates defined the most powerful theme in the coming presidential campaign: fairness.

President Obama captured the issue when he said in Osawatimie, Kansas, on December 6, "In America, we are greater together when everyone engages in fair play, everyone gets a fair shot, everyone does their fair share."

Mitt Romney defined the issue in a negative way during the December 10 Iowa debate. Romney held out his hand and challenged Rick Perry to a bet over whether Romney had changed his health care position. "Ten thousand bucks? Ten thousand dollar bet?" Romney said. "I'm not in the bettin' business," Perry responded.

Ten thousand dollars is what most middle class families make in three months. Not since George H.W. Bush looked at his watch during a 1992 town hall debate has one gesture so clearly defined a candidate as out of touch with ordinary Americans. It defined Romney as Mr. One%.

Fairness doesn't always work as a campaign issue. It didn't work for Walter Mondale in 1984. The fairness theme came out of the 1982 recession when unemployment peaked at 10.8%—still the highest level since the Great Depression. When the economy is bad, middle class Americans say, "I'm an honest, hard-working person. If people like me are struggling to make ends meet, there must be something wrong with the system. It isn't fair."

By 1984, however, the economy was on the rebound. The unemployment rate had dropped below 8%, and inflation had been subdued. The Reagan campaign called it "Morning in America." When the economy is improving, middle class Americans say, "I'm doing O.K., and so are people like me. The system is working. If there are some

people out there who aren't doing well, maybe it's their own fault." The fairness issue falls flat—as it did for Mondale in 1984.

So far, 2012 is looking more like 1982 than 1984. That's why Obama has embraced the fairness issue.

Fairness is a populist theme. It draws on popular resentment of elites—in this case, the "1%" rich who have grown wealthier at the expense of ordinary working Americans. In his Kansas speech, President Obama condemned "the breathtaking greed of a few."

"In the last few decades," Obama said, "the average income of the top 1% has gone up by more than 250%, to \$1.2 million per year. . . And yet, over the last decade, the incomes of most Americans have actually fallen by about 6%." In other words, it isn't fair.

The fairness issue helps insulate Obama from the charge of elitism that weakened him in 2008 and wounded him in 2010. There are two kinds of elitism in American politics. One is the elitism of wealth—"country club conservatism," which has always found a home in the Republican Party. (William Jennings Bryan once said the Republican Party represents "nothing but an organized appetite.") The other is the elitism of education—"limousine liberalism," which finds a home in the Democratic Party.

Both political parties are cross-class coalitions. Republicans include country club conservatives like Romney and "values voters" like Sarah Palin (It is unlikely that Palin's family would be invited to join any country club in Greenwich, Connecticut). Democrats include "limousine liberals" and economic populists. Limousine liberals are defined not so much by wealth as by elite education—like Barack Obama. Remember Obama's disdainful

characterization of hard-pressed small town voters in 2008? He said they get “bitter” and “cling to guns or religion” out of economic frustration.

In 2008, Obama was the progressive Democrat who drew strong support from younger, better educated, and more prosperous voters. Call them “NPR Democrats,” after their favorite news medium. Hillary Clinton was the economic populist. She swept the white working class vote in places like Pennsylvania, Ohio, and Kentucky.

Obama narrowly defeated Clinton by pulling together a coalition that had never been seen in Democratic primaries—NPR Democrats and African-Americans. In 2010, white working class voters—Clinton voters—abandoned the Democratic Party in droves because of Obama’s failure to deliver on the economy. President Obama is struggling to win them back.

Hence, the full-throated economic populism of his Kansas speech. He’s preparing to hurl the elitism charge back at Republicans. In his Kansas speech, Obama charged, “Most of the Republicans in Washington have refused, under any circumstances, to ask the wealthiest Americans to pay the same tax rates they were paying when Bill Clinton was President.” Romney would make an especially juicy target.

Obama is moving from progressivism to populism. It was the same thing Theodore Roosevelt did when he delivered his “New Nationalism” speech in Osawatomie, Kansas, in 1910. The progressivism of the early 20th century was a middle-class reform movement aimed at curbing the power of corporate monopolies and political machines. In his Kansas speech, Roosevelt embraced a more radical vision: “Ruin in its worst form is inevitable if our national life brings us nothing better than swollen fortunes for the few and the triumph in both politics and business of a sordid and selfish materialism.”

Newt Gingrich once described himself as a “Theodore Roosevelt Republican.” In a recent radio interview, Gingrich explained that he identified with the early Roosevelt, not the later candidate who, Gingrich said, had become “a big-government centralized-power advocate running as a third-party candidate.”

Roosevelt pledged in 1910, “We must drive the special interests out of politics.” In 2011, Obama criticized economic inequality that “gives

an outsized voice to the few . . . and runs the risk of selling out our democracy to the highest bidder.”

Mitt Romney was born to wealth and privilege. That’s a problem for Republicans. They don’t usually nominate well-born candidates because it confirms the most damaging stereotype of their party, that it is the party of wealth and privilege. Democrats can get away with nominating a Franklin Roosevelt or a John Kennedy. They’re Democrats and therefore traitors to their class. Republicans usually prefer candidates from more humble origins, like Dwight Eisenhower or Richard Nixon or Ronald Reagan. Both Bushes came from wealth and privilege, and they both ended up paying a price for it when the economy turned bad.

That’s one reason why Newt Gingrich looks attractive to many Republicans. Gingrich was not born to wealth, but he certainly made it his business to acquire it. In Gingrich’s case, it’s not so much his background but his behavior that Democrats can use against him—the influence peddling, the flacking for Freddie Mac, the spending at Tiffany’s.

There are times when cultural populism throws Democrats on the defensive. 1988 was one of those times, when a wealthy and privileged George H.W. Bush managed to depict Democrat Michael Dukakis as the elitist because of Dukakis’s out-of-the-mainstream values. But there are other times—hard times—when voters are sensitive to economic unfairness and Democrats can throw the elitist charge back at Republicans. President Obama is betting that this is one of those times. ■



The Iowa Playbill

Over the past year, the Iowa Republican audience has watched 16 televised debates, each an out-of-town preview leading up to opening night 2012. Polls of Iowa Republicans so far reveal a play in five acts:



ACT I (Jan - June)

The Reign of Romney



Mitt Romney led the field in Iowa for the first half of the year (six Iowa polls). Republicans were reverting to their usual habit of nominating someone who has run before. Until...

ACT II (July)

The Bachmann Breakthrough



In the 6/13 debate in New Hampshire, Michele Bachmann made a strong impression. She moved into the lead in four Iowa polls between late June and early August. Until...

ACT III (Aug)

The Perry Period



Rick Perry got in the race on August 13. He led in three Iowa polls taken shortly after that. But then Perry appeared in his first debate, and his candidacy started to sink.

ACT IV (Oct - Nov)

The Cain Mutiny



Herman Cain was a sensation in five debates. Cain led in 10 of 11 Iowa polls during that period, and benefitted when Perry crashed and burned in the Michigan debate ("Oops!").

ACT V (Nov - Dec)

Gingrich's Grand Finale



When Cain folded under pressure from a scandal, Gingrich came back to life, leading in all eight Iowa Republican polls taken since November 15.

The final preview performance was the debate last night in Sioux City. Next up... Opening Night: the Iowa caucuses, January 3. Curtain up!

Off With Their Heads! (Again?)

Everybody talks about an "anti-incumbent" election, but we rarely see one. It could happen this year. According to the Gallup poll, more than three quarters of Americans now believe "most Members of Congress" do not deserve to be re-elected. That's the highest number since at least 1992.

We're used to elections where one party gains support and the other party loses support (Democratic gains in 2006 and 2008, Republican gains in 2010). Have we ever had an election where both parties lose support? Yes. The 1990 midterm.

The economy was in recession in 1990. The first President Bush broke his "no new taxes" pledge. 1990 was the only election in recent decades in which both Republicans and Democrats, on the average, lost support. To whom? Mostly to independents and third-party candidates.

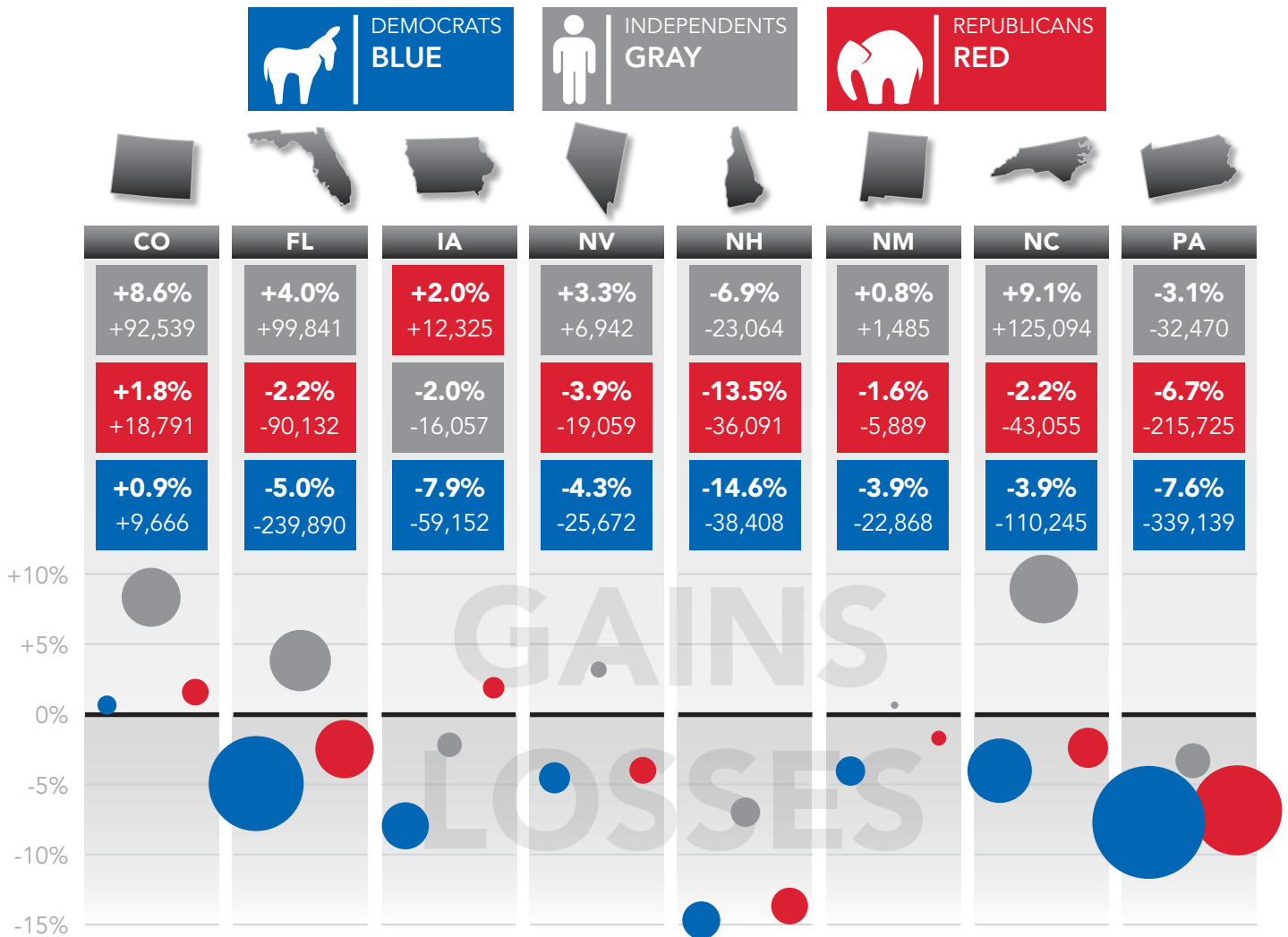
The wave of anti-incumbent sentiment was widely unnoticed at the time because most incumbents got re-elected—but with smaller margins. Newt Gingrich certainly remembers 1990. He barely survived his bid for re-election to Congress, winning by only 974 votes.

1990 was a warning. Two years later, President Bush was ousted after one term and Ross Perot got nearly 20% of the presidential vote.

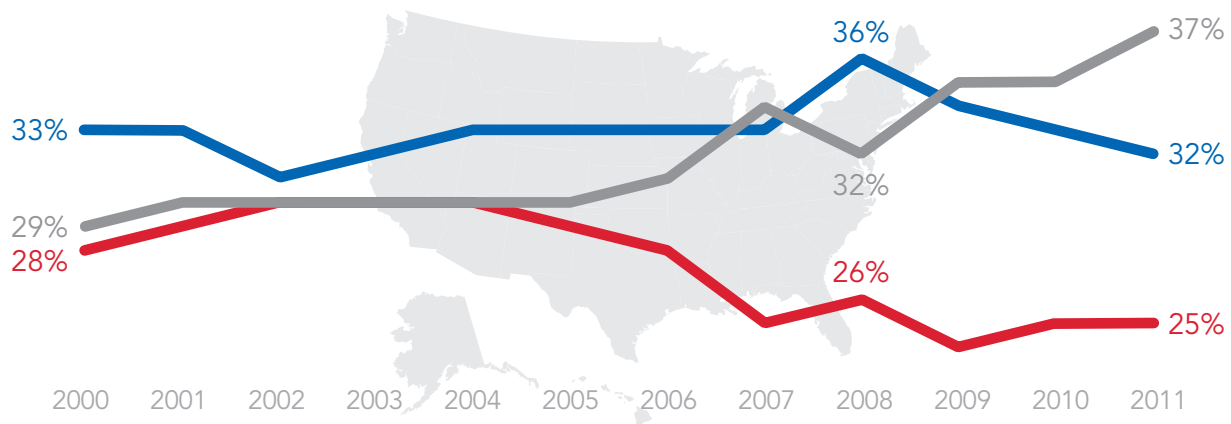
Could we see a similar upheaval in 2012? Possibly. Republicans could lose their majority in the House of Representatives while Democrats could lose their majority in the Senate. The message from voters? "Off with their heads!"

INDEPENDENTS DAY 2012

Voter Registration in 8 Battleground States: % and Actual Change Since 2008*



National Partisan Self-Identification



* The eight states represented are the only battleground states for which partisan voter registration is available (Michigan, Ohio, Virginia, and Wisconsin do not have partisan voter registration). Data compiled from secretaries of state office records.

Based on data from the Third Way report "Independents Day 2012," available at: <http://www.thirdway.org/publications/470>.

National electorate party self-identification data from Pew Research Center, May 4, 2011.

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 Data visualization by Bill Rapp.



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