

BLACK MAN WINS BACK REAGAN DEMOCRATS

Stan Greenberg has noted something we here in MI have been quietly smiling about since last Tuesday: Obama won Macomb County, MI by 8 points, with 53.4% of the vote. This is the county, remember, which Greenberg dubbed the home of the Reagan Democrat after Ronnie won those white, working class, previously loyal Democratic voters with 66% of the vote. Here's how Greenberg described the phenomenon earlier this year.

In 1960, Macomb was the most Democratic suburban county in the country as John F. Kennedy won handily there, garnering 63 percent of the vote. Four years later, Lyndon Johnson increased the Democratic vote share even further, winning 75 percent of Macomb voters. But over the next 20 years, these voters turned on the Democrats, culminating with Ronald Reagan taking 66 percent of the vote in 1984.

What's most remarkable about Obama's win is that he outperformed Clinton in 1992, Gore, and Kerry in the county. This, among voters who, when they first turned against the Democratic Party, named race as one of the reasons.

But this is not 1985 when Macomb voters also shared a deep middle class consciousness, but focused on minorities and government aid for blacks, Welfare and above all and affirmative action as major grievances and part of the squeeze. As Greenberg noted in Middle Class Dreams, the Democratic defectors of 1985 "expressed a profound distaste for black America, a sentiment that pervaded almost everything they thought about government and politics. Blacks constituted the explanation for their

vulnerability and for almost everything that had gone wrong in their lives.”

But this is a very different Macomb and these are very different times. Welfare, crime, reverse discrimination, blacks and Detroit were never mentioned in the discussion of why the country and state are off track, except for some asides about Detroit’s pathetic mayor. That was not what they were angry about or felt had much impact on their lives. Sometimes it is as important to pay attention to what is not said, as to what is.

When we give Macomb voters a choice to explain the current plight of the middle class, over half focus their resentment on global trade, CEOs who “care more about their companies than their country,” and politicians who “support trade agreements backed by corporate special interests,” while fewer than 30 percent focus on “affirmative action for minorities who don’t take responsibility for their lives” and illegal immigrants “getting free government benefits.” They have a clear theory on who is responsible and blacks and other minorities are barely in the line of fire.

How refreshing to see that CEOs are now the scapegoat for economic malaise rather than undocumented workers or African-Americans.

Now, Greenberg has declared that he’s over his fascination with Macomb—that it has become too ordinary—and has turned his focus to Oakland County next door to track that much wealthier county’s increasing cultural tolerance.

So, good riddance, my Macomb barometer. Four years from now, I trust we will see the candidates rush from their conventions to Oakland County, to see

the new America.

Me, I'd prefer Greenberg kept at least one eye on Macomb County. That's not to measure attitudes toward race, but to measure attitudes toward government. The original defection from the Democratic party was just as much due to cynicism about government's ability to solve real problems as it was about race and those attitudes, unlike attitudes toward race, seem to remain to a degree. And this is where I think Obama has the biggest ability to fail or succeed—in his ability to reverse decades of Republican propaganda about the evils of government.

Obama has convinced a lot of voters that he is better suited to fix the problems of our country. But can he—and Democrats in Congress—convince voters that government can be part of the solution, rather than the problem itself?