

Progressively Irrelevant

How John Edwards proved that the old Democratic coalition is dead

By Michael Brendan Dougherty

ON JOHN EDWARDS'S last trip to South Carolina before the Iowa caucuses, his campaign planned a typical "unscheduled" stop in downtown Charleston at Jack's Cafe. His volunteers assured reporters that they were building momentum, but even they didn't believe this. In the hour before his visit, co-eds wearing flip flops and referring to themselves as "progressives" put up their welcome signs on the burger joint's orange walls. They carried copies of left-wing magazines and portrayed their man as the only choice for intellectual liberals. Obama was too vague and Hillary too calculating. The following week, the popular liberal blogger Matthew Yglesias would write, "Edwards' willingness to embrace progressives and the progressive movement deserves to be rewarded."

The problem for Edwards was that progressives and only progressives embraced him. The crowd at Jack's was mostly young white college kids registered to vote in other states. Only a half dozen were from his desired audience, the working class. Five minutes before he arrived, a car pulled up and delivered the only four black people who would attend this event. These stood in their Sunday best between the camera crews and the flip-flop brigade. But they couldn't hide what was obvious to everyone there: the candidate of the progressive intelligentsia had nothing like a progressive coalition of voters.

In 2004, Edwards won the South Carolina primary, capturing half the white vote and over a third of the black vote—

the highest of any candidate that year, even beating Al Sharpton, who took just 17 percent. Edwards won strong pluralities across every income group, doing as well with people who make under \$30,000 per year as he did with those earning over \$100,000.

This cycle, he won just 2 percent of South Carolina's black vote and came in third among voters earning less than \$50,000 a year—the targets of his rhetorical appeal. Voters who decided in the final days broke his way, but the media has largely attributed this to the nastiness of the campaign between Clinton and Obama, not to Edwards's merits.

He had tougher electoral terrain to scale this time. Sharpton isn't nearly as credible as Obama, and the 2004 front-runner, John Kerry, was little known in the South, whereas Hillary Clinton has been a fixture in national politics for over 15 years. His rivals have also out-raised and outspent him nearly five to one.

Edwards himself has also changed. His election to the Senate in 1998 occasioned comparisons to Bill Clinton. Both were charming, centrist, and southern. But what had been a generally optimistic campaign in 2004, in which Edwards sought to bring together "two Americas," became "the fight of our lives" in his urgent new cadence. In the past, Edwards used his "son of a mill-worker" image to inspire. This round he told audiences the shockingly sad story of Natalie Sarkisian, a 17-year old who died waiting for her health insurer to

approve a liver transplant. Christopher Hayes of *The Nation* noted that the Edwards stump speech, though righteous, is never a crowd pleaser, saying that it's "a bit like attending a funeral for the American dream."

Under the influence of former Dean adviser and progressive guru, Joe Trippi, Edwards made his 2008 campaign about naming enemies: the Bush administration, corporate lobbyists, and insurance companies. But "the people" he cast as fighting moneyed interests never lined up behind him. Why did his populist appeal fail so spectacularly?

Facile explanations blame the candidate himself, saying that a man with a \$400 haircut cannot lead the party of the working class. But Roosevelt wore a top hat and white gloves while campaigning on behalf of the "ill-clothed, ill-housed, and ill-fed." Edwards lost because the Democratic coalition he sought to capture has changed dramatically from the time of the New Deal and cannot be reconstituted.

Edwards campaigned as if he could restore Reagan Democrats to their ancestral party. But the old liberal alliance that consisted of rural whites, trade unionists, immigrants (European), and recently enfranchised blacks is no longer the Democratic coalition. Today, where the party is white, it is less working class. Where it is working class, it is less organized and more divided into competing racial categories. Where it is unionized, it is not private-sector and is thus less insecure about its economic future.

The decline of Democratic allegiance among white men is well documented. Roughly half voted for John F. Kennedy, but not even a third of them voted for Ronald Reagan just 20 years later, and only 36 percent voted for John Kerry in 2004. And not just the racial composition of the party has changed. As Thomas Edsall has pointed out, since 1960, the Democratic share of voters employed in the professions “has doubled from 18 to 35 percent, whereas the share of the Democratic vote made up of lower-income skilled and non-skilled workers has dropped from 50 percent to 35 percent.”

Edwards’s campaign has highlighted the electoral decline of organized labor. After his 2004 bid, Edwards threw himself into every labor dispute he could find. As Jason Zengerele documented in *The New Republic*, the millworker’s son visited Teamsters in Connecticut, hotel-workers in Honolulu, janitors in Florida.

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He eventually won the endorsements of the Iowa and New Hampshire chapters of the SEIU. Little good it did him. In 1960, 37 percent of the private-sector workforce was union-organized. Men like Teamster leader Jimmy Hoffa and United Mine Workers’ John Lewis were political kingmakers. By 2003, just over 8 percent of private-sector workers were unionized. Edwards’s support among organized labor didn’t win him much more than credibility among self-conscious progressives. And when labor endorsements were electorally significant (like those from service workers in Michigan and Nevada), they went to the more competitive candidate, Barack Obama.

Public-sector unions now make up half of organized labor. These voters, drawn from the ranks of teachers, police, fireman, and government bureaucracies, have guaranteed pensions, usually indexed to rise with the cost of living. Appeals to economic insecurity rarely stir them except in large cities where housing costs have risen exponentially. Whereas the old power of organized labor appealed to an American sense of fairness in sharing wealth, the new public-sector-dominated unions seek only to expand their benefits and insulate themselves from private competition. For instance, school teachers who oppose vouchers.

The 35 percent of the liberal alliance that belongs to the professional classes does not vote out of economic interests either. These are values voters, who feel more comfortable in a party that accepts and defends the legacy of the sexual revolution and is less resistant to same-sex

marriage. On the campaign trail, Edwards was reticent about gay rights, saying that he favors civil unions but opposes full marriage rights for same-sex couples because of his upbringing. Edwards’s discomfort with the LGBT community increasingly makes him an oddity in elite Democratic circles.

Even among the parts of the modern Democratic coalition that are analogous to the old liberal constituency, blacks and recent immigrant groups (now Hispanic), there is little unity, and Edwards did terribly among them. Nearly eight in ten black voters in South Carolina voted for Obama. And in the Nevada caucus, Hispanics voted so overwhelmingly against Obama (and for Clinton) that main-

stream media outlets like *Newsweek* fretted about a growing black-brown political divide. At least in the primaries, the shared economic interests of America’s racial minorities mattered little or not at all—much to Edwards’ dismay

This reality of the Democratic coalition may be one reason (besides celebrity and money) that Clinton and Obama have had so much success with candidacies that offer little policy substance compared to Edwards. Whereas Edwards called himself a fighter who will stand up to lobbyists and the forces of greed, Obama deploys rhetoric that skirts past economic distress altogether, saying in a recent speech, “It’s not about rich versus poor; young versus old; black versus white, this election is about past versus future.”

And Edwards found out the hard way that the past is useless to a Democratic nominee. The last successful effort of the old Democratic coalition barely elected Bill Clinton over the damaged patrician, George H.W. Bush, the last representative of Old Guard Republicanism. The long realignment of the South and the Northeast and the migration of the working class to the GOP has transformed both parties. As Andy Stern, the head of the SEIU points out to progressives, “We’re as far today from the New Deal as the New Deal was from the Civil War. I don’t think Franklin Roosevelt looked back to Lincoln to decide what to do.”

It was almost fitting then that John Edwards’s campaign rallies were funereal. His defeat in the primaries signals the end of a long-held progressive hope: that the social and racial politics that began tearing apart the FDR coalition could be overcome and a left-liberal majority could again be built out of the white working class, together with blacks, immigrants, and women. When dropping out, Edwards promised that his rivals would take up his cause. Old dreams die hard. ■

Value Voters

The best indicator of whether a state will swing Red or Blue? The cost of buying a home and raising a family.

By Steve Sailer

NO MATTER WHO wins the 2008 presidential election, pundits will afterwards hypothesize feverishly about why the country is so divided into vast inland expanses of Red (Republican) regions versus thin coastal strips of Blue (Democratic) metropolises. Yet looking at 2000 and 2004, few will stumble upon the engine driving this partisan pattern, even though the statistical correlations are among the highest in the history of the social sciences.

The Republicans lost the popular vote in 2000 while advocating a “humble” foreign policy and won in 2004 while defending a foreign policy that Napoleon might have found bombastic. But all that happened from 2000 to 2004 was that virtually every part of the country moved a few points toward the Republicans. The relative stability of this Red-Blue geographic split suggests that more fundamental forces are at work than just the transient issues of the day.

Neither Jane Austen nor Benjamin Franklin, however, would have found the question of what drives the Red-Blue divide so baffling. Unlike today’s intellectuals, they both thought intensely about the web linking wealth, property, marriage, and children. They would not have been surprised that a state’s voting proclivities are now dominated by the relative presence or absence of affordable family formation.

First-time readers of *Pride and Prejudice* frequently remark that Austen’s romance novels are, by American standards, not

terribly romantic. She possessed a hard-headed understanding of how in traditional English society, wedlock was a luxury that some would never be able to afford, an assumption that often shocks us in our more sentimental 21st century.

Economic historian Gregory Clark’s recent book, *A Farewell to Alms*, quantified the Malthusian reality under the social structure acerbically depicted in Austen’s books. The English in the 1200-1800 era imposed upon themselves the sexual self-restraint that pioneering economist Thomas Malthus famously (but belatedly) suggested they follow in 1798. By practicing population control, the English largely avoided the cycles of rapid growth followed by cataclysmic famines that plagued China, where women married universally and young. The English postponed marriage and children until a man and woman could afford the accouterments suitable for a respectable married couple of their class.

In the six centuries up through Austen’s lifetime, Clark found, English women didn’t marry on average until age 24 to 26, with poor women often having to wait until their 30s to wed. And 10 to 20 percent never married. Judging from the high fertility of married couples, contraceptive practices appear to have been almost unknown in England in this time, but merely three or four percent of all births were illegitimate, demonstrating that rigid premarital self-discipline was the norm.

Remarkably, a half-century before Malthus’s gloomy and Austen’s witty reflections on life and love in crowded

England, Ben Franklin had pointed out that in his lightly populated America, the human condition was more relaxed and happy. In his insightful 1751 essay, “Observations concerning The Increase of Mankind,” Franklin spelled out, with an 18th-century surfeit of capitalization, the first, nonpartisan half of the theory of affordable family formation: “For People increase in Proportion to the Number of Marriages, and that is greater in Proportion to the Ease and Convenience of supporting a Family. When Families can be easily supported, more Persons marry, and earlier in Life.”

He outlined the virtuous cycle connecting the colonies’ limited population, low land prices, high wages, early marriage, and abundant children: “Europe is generally full settled with Husbandmen, Manufacturers, &c. and therefore cannot now much increase in People. ... Land being thus plenty in America, and so cheap as that a labouring Man, that understands Husbandry, can in a short Time save Money enough to purchase a Piece of new Land sufficient for a Plantation, whereon he may subsist a Family; such are not afraid to marry...” Franklin concluded, “Hence Marriages in America are more general, and more generally early, than in Europe.”

The Industrial Revolution broke the tyranny of the Malthusian Trap over food, but the supply of and demand for land never ceased to influence decisions to marry and have children. As America’s coastal regions filled up, affordability of family formation