

SCREW THE RHETORIC, DIG THE NUMBERS

By Michael Ventura

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The gab doesn't jibe with the numbers. The numbers don't say, "Democrats lost on moral values." The numbers say, "Democrats were out-organized and didn't play hard enough to their base – yet still almost won."

Scan the results and imagine the possibilities (stats are from Nov. 7's *New York Times* unless otherwise noted):

- Moral values and the religious right? *The Christian Science Monitor* (Nov. 15) reported that 16% of Americans want to ban all abortions, and yet 22% of *them* voted for Kerry. A hefty number. If Democrats would talk *to* these people, instead of dissing and/or talking down to them, the number could have been heftier. (We must never go soft on choice. But we must recognize that we have anti-choice constituents, then find out why they voted for Kerry, then use that information to reach out for more.) In 2000 and 2004, Democrats won 39% of people who attend church at least once a week. Republicans won 59% in 2000, 61% in 2004 – their mere 2% rise did not account for the election. In fact, Democrats won 40% of all Protestants in 2000 and 2004; Republicans won 58% in 2000, 59% in 2004. A piddling 1% rise. It wasn't the religious right that won this election for George W. Bush.
- Gay marriage. Sixty percent of Americans say they support either gay marriage (25%) or civil unions (35%). Those numbers didn't lose the election.
- Red states and counties – the rural vote. Not much change. Republicans won 59% in 2000 and 59% in 2004. They played to their base and held it, but didn't gain. Democrats won 37% in 2000 and 40% in 2004, actually increasing rurally. Again: If Democrats would talk *to* these people, instead of dissing and/or talking down to them, the numbers would have been better.

Since the election I've heard a lot of Democrats spew a lot of whiney, simplistic nonsense about "the red states" – ignoring that in those states millions voted their way. (Stats are from CNN.com.) Texas: 4,519,023 for Bush – 2,827,756 for Kerry. Do we just write off nearly 3 million Texans? Mississippi: 671,027 for Bush – 445,596 for Kerry. Do we just forget nearly half a million Mississippians? Kansas: 717,507 for Bush – 420,846 for Kerry. Alabama: 1,174,348 for Bush – 691,993 for Kerry. Virginia: 1,662,484 for Bush – 1,396,269 for Kerry. Georgia: 1,889,832 for Bush – 1,345,198 for Kerry. Wyoming, Dick Cheney's state: 167,127 for Bush – 70,620 for Kerry (nearly one out of three). About the same percentage for Nebraska: 485,766 for Bush – 234,236 for Kerry. These are states that Democrats, and their oh-so-bourgeois helpers (MoveOn.org., etc.), utterly ignored. If we hadn't, the numbers would be better.

In smaller cities and towns (population 10,000 to 50,000) Republicans went *down* a whopping 9% of the vote, from 59% in 2000 to 50% in 2004. Democrats increased 10% – 38% in 2000, 48% in 2004. We came within 3% of winning these areas, and might have

won more if we hadn't all but ignored them. Again, we shouldn't soften our positions; but we need to communicate more widely, more directly, and in terms these areas relate to.

You might say, "What's the point of playing to the red states; we still wouldn't have won them?" Two reasons: Our general vote total would have increased – instead of losing the popular vote by 3% we might have lost by 2% or less. Which might mean that elected Democrats would be a little less timid. But more important: Red state Democrats would have felt supported instead of isolated; might have felt inspired instead of ignored; and they might now feel more reason to organize and fight for next time. Instead, most feel lost and mocked. Surrounded, without help.

To discount them is to desert them. You can't build a grassroots base by ignoring people who agree with you. This country is seriously divided, but the numbers prove the divide isn't as bad as the talking heads would have us believe. And the numbers prove something more: The divide is not irreversible. But it will be, if Democrats don't take *all* their constituents seriously.

- Suburbs. Democrats didn't gain: 47% in 2000, 47% in 2004. Republicans gained by exactly their winning margin: 3% – 49% in 2000, 52% in 2004. But 3% ain't much, and ain't solid. The suburbs will be hardest hit if, for instance, gas prices rise or the housing and/or credit bubbles burst. Grassroots organizing in the suburbs is crucial, or Democrats won't be in position to take advantage of this administration's mistakes and reversals. One big lesson of 2004: Begin organizing, intensely, more than 10 months before an election. Now would be good.

- Midsize cities and towns with populations between 50,000 and 500,000. Here the Democrats slipped badly: 57% in 2000, 49% in 2004. Republicans gained splendidly: 40% in 2000, 49% in 2004. Note that the final total is an even split. Again, the divide isn't irreversible, but Republicans have the momentum. To fight back, serious activists need research, not rhetoric. Town by town. Street by street. Discover who changed their vote and why, and what would be needed to get them back.

- The youth. Not enough showed up. But soon there will be a draft. They'll come next time.

- Hispanics. How did a Catholic candidate blow the Hispanic vote so badly? Democrats dropped from 67% in 2000 to 56% in 2004, while Republicans went from 31% to 43%. Yes, abortion and gay marriage had something to do with it, as did the overt campaigning of many Catholic clergy. But again, these people were not addressed, not taken sufficiently seriously. You rarely heard a damn thing about them from any prominent Democrat. (Here I must apologize to my brother Vinnie, who said eight months ago that Kerry needed to pick Gov. Richardson of New Mexico, a Hispanic, for vice-president. "He picks Richardson and he's in," said Vinnie. I told him Richardson was too light-weight. But John Edwards carried no weight – not even his own state, which went for Bush. If Hispanics had their first national candidate, their vote would have made the difference. Take it from a son of immigrants: Immigrants vote nationality. Vinnie remembered his roots; I forgot.)

The Democrats forgot their roots, too. And that, without question, is what lost it for Kerry. The numbers are as irrefutable as they are stunning:

- Big cities. In cities of 500,000 or more, the Democrats slipped from 71% in 2000 to 60% in 2004. That 11-point slide cost the election – while Republicans, on the other hand, rose 13 points, from 26% to 39%. Look at what that meant in the megalopolis of South Florida (*USA Today*, Nov. 4). Palm Beach County turnout was 70% in 2000, but only 62% in 2004. In Miami-Dade, turnout was 72% in 2000, 67% in 2004. *That's* what lost Florida, not voting machines. Nationally, Democrats lost 2% of African-American voters; Republicans gained 3%. Many of the urban poor (black, brown, and white) didn't even try to vote. And why should they? The last thing the Democrats did for the urban poor (under Bill Clinton) was cut welfare, cut school lunches, cut cut cut. Bush cut more, and the Democrats didn't fight him hard. The urban poor have less reason to believe in Democrats than any other group. Also: They don't have many computers, so the bourgeois Net campaign didn't reach them. Nor were enough activists knocking on their doors and campaigning face to face. The election ignored them, so many of them ignored the election. Promises won't win them back, but fighting for them might. Lesson: If you can energize the urban poor, you can win next time; if you won't fight for them, the next election is yours to lose again.

For the next four years Democrats in Congress are probably going to run scared. Many terrible things will come of that. But Democrats *on the ground* had better run tough. Organize. Educate. Lead. Be ready – ready to take advantage of the certain disasters that await us. The numbers don't lie: Our country is divided, but it's not as black and white (or red and blue) as the pundits say. It will be if we don't act, if we don't reach out to all our constituencies, if we don't learn to talk plainly and with respect to people who are different culturally, or are uneducated, left out, left behind. Organize. Educate. Lead. On the very street where you live. And on the street where you work. And on the streets where you're most needed. There is no other ground for the future.

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