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Republicans Hold Onto the Base

Republicans Hold Onto the Base, Learn They Can't Win Without the Center

By WILL LESTER

WASHINGTON Nov 9, 2006 (AP)— The Republican Party ceded the center of American politics and its many groups of swing voters to the Democratic Party in the 2006 midterm elections with predictable results.

The GOP lost the House and the Senate.

Republicans lost badly among independent voters, suburbanites, white Catholics, the middle class and Hispanics groups it had been courting successfully in recent years, exit polls found.

"The one thing that is so frustrating is when you hear the Karl Roves and Ken Mehlmans talking about focusing on the base because there are no swing voters," said GOP pollster Tony Fabrizio, who says there are still plenty of swing voters.

A fourth of voters this year were independents, according to exit polls, and they voted heavily for Democratic candidates.

Fabrizio was referring to Rove, top White House political strategist, and Mehlman, chairman of the Republican National Committee. Mehlman's spokeswoman, Tracey Schmitt, countered that the RNC chairman has been working hard for the last couple of years to expand the party "to expand the number of swing voters who call themselves Republicans."

Using a playbook that has served them well over the past few elections, the administration and GOP strategists turned out Republicans and conservatives at the usual levels.

"The Republican base turned out and held," said Whit Ayres, a GOP strategist. "To generate a Republican turnout in this climate was

remarkable. ... But for the first time in a decade, independents preferred Democratic over Republican House candidates, this time by 18 points."

Anger at the Bush administration and its war in Iraq drove part of this shift toward Democrats, exit polls found.

The evaporation of the political center had Republican strategists searching for answers. Many acknowledged that the party is not likely to regain ground with swing voters as long as the war in Iraq drags on. The exit polls found heavy opposition to the war from voters who cast their ballots for Democrats.

Republicans are going to have to look at how to rebuild this coalition," said GOP strategist David Winston.

Some Republicans didn't want to acknowledge publicly that the midterm losses and loss of the political center to the Democrats are very large political problems.

"It comes from mistakenly believing you can own an issue forever terrorism," Fabrizio said. "It's mistaking voters going along with you on a single issue with a political realignment."

More than two-thirds of voters said terrorism was very important in their vote on Tuesday, and they divided their support between Democrats and Republicans.

Among the swing groups that tilted heavily toward Democrats:

Independents backed Democrats by 57-39 after voting for the GOP by 48-45 in 2002.

Moderates backed Democrats by 60-38 after voting Democratic 53-45 in 2002.

Suburbanites backed Democrats by 50-48 after voting for the GOP 57-40 in 2002.

Those in the middle class those who make more than \$30,000 a year but less than \$75,000 a year backed Democrats 52-45 after more than half supported the GOP in 2002.

Hispanics backed Democrats 69-30 after backing Democrats 61-37 in 2002.

The 2006 results come from a national exit poll of 13,208 voters conducted for The Associated Press and television networks by Edison Media Research and Mitofsky International.

Results for the full sample were subject to sampling error of plus or minus 1 percentage point, higher for subgroups.

The loss of the swing voters and the political center may be only a temporary setback for the GOP.

"It wouldn't surprise me to see them come back and vote for a Republican for president in 2008," said Ayres. "That depends on who's nominated and whether things change in Iraq."

AP polling director Mike Mokrzycki, AP manager of news surveys Trevor Tompson and AP news survey specialist Dennis Junius contributed to this story.

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