The presidential election of 1984 pointed to the polarisation of the American electorate on class, gender and racial lines. Middle class, protestant, white men were either satisfied under Reagan or were alienated by Democrat Walter Mondale's identification with the poor, unions, blacks and women.

The old patterns which have held since Franklin Roosevelt continued: the white affluent voted Republican; a majority of the poor, the black, Jews, Hispanics, unionists and intelligentsia voted for Mondale. But a critical element of the old Democratic coalition — the white south — did not. Moreover, for the presidency, the Republican Party had a carefully constructed southern and western base.

Luckily for the Democrats the conditions which led to a Republican victory in 1984 do not hold in 1988. There is no highly popular incumbent president to defeat: the Republican candidate, George Bush, is fairly colourless; and the Democratic candidate, Michael Dukakis, while equally colourless is at least not seen to be on the far left of the political spectrum. 1988 provides the Democrats with the best opportunity for winning the presidency in a long while. The Democrats, buoyed by their congressional successes in 1986, are determined to pick up larger congressional successes in 1986. They are determined to return to the party when voting at presidential level. The job ahead for the Democrats is to break up the Republican voting inclinations in the south and west. That task is not impossible. These Reagan voters form the least ideological, least sophisticated sector of the community, and their attachments to the Republicans are not achieved by strong ideological views of the world. They can be influenced.

Despite the current optimism surrounding Dukakis' chances of winning the presidency, the odds must still lie with Bush. For the last decade the Democrats have had serious internal problems, highlighted by their inability to provide vision and coherence even in symbolic terms. The effects of unemployment and inflation during the Carter years have been that fewer voters trust the Democratic Party to deal with economic issues. Analysis of 1986 poll data found that voters have strikingly different evaluations of each party.

The Republicans are seen as more likely to produce prosperity (by 10 to 18 percentage points), to cut inflation (14 to 22 points), and by a five point margin, to deal with the “most important problems facing the country”.

For the Democrats, the most damaging finding is that the party has lost its status in the minds of the voters as the party of prosperity and of high levels of employment. According to the polls, the major strength of the Democratic Party is that it is seen as caring about and protecting individuals and groups — women, minorities, the elderly. But its very strength in these areas is seen in a negative light by the white, male, lower middle class of middle America.

On the positive side of the Democratic ledger, the 1988 party convention, unlike the last two, at least showed the Democrats all pulling in the same direction. The troika of left, center and centrist supported the old Democratic coalition and created a short, clear platform of sufficient ambiguity to make it a very hard target for the Republicans. In the past the Democrats have, in their platform, attempted to satisfy every possible minority group to whom they could appeal. The result was the Republicans could find something in that platform to alienate everyone else! In 1984, for example, they successfully portrayed Mondale as the candidate of the “special interests”. This time the Democrats have not made the same mistake.

For the presidency, the South is the key region. Indeed, it is the only significant region in which any real party realignment has taken place, particularly at the presidential level. Basically, the Republicans have been able to succeed nationally and win the presidency because the South ceased being Democratic and the white South consistently votes for them. Even in the Carter election a majority of white Southerners voted Republican.

The South presents particular problems for the Democrats because it is more politically conservative (on both economic and social issues) and more likely to be attracted by a conservative style presidential candidate. The South remains the least urban: 38 percent of Southerners are rural compared to 22 percent of the rest. And Southerners are poorer and less well-educated than the rest of the country. Moreover, the South experienced
Dukakis shows a rare smile, pressing the flesh in New Hampshire.

sharp rise in fundamentalist and evangelical church membership and a stagnation or decline in membership of mainstream protestant denominations. The social conservatism shows up in polls where, for example, only 41 percent of Southerners approved of couples living together without marriage as opposed to 52 percent of non-Southerners. The question for 1988 becomes: can Dukakis portray himself as sufficiently attractive to the white South to win large numbers of white votes?

The Economy

Because polls have shown, over a long period, that people will reject the party in the presidency if they feel that "times are bad", the Reagan administration has consistently attempted to sell the economy as a booming, healthy one. On the campaign trail in 1986, for example, Ronald Reagan had commented "it looks as if our four year economic recovery is going to turn into a second boom". On the same day, Reagan's budget director, James Miller, announced a record budget deficit of $221 billion for fiscal 1986, and claimed a victory of sorts because it was $9 billion less than the summer forecast. What Miller conveniently forgot to say, and few papers reported, was that the forecast just over a year before had been for a deficit of only $172 billion. The actual result was a bigger deficit by almost $50 billion, reflecting a weaker economy than anticipated. The Reagan tendency to paint a rosy scenario is nothing new — over the entire period of his administration, Reagan and his aides were consistently over-optimistic in forecasts and projections. America has, under Reagan, gone from a net creditor nation to a net debtor — and the trade deficit is still growing. GDP under Reagan stagnated during the 1981-86 period at a 2.3 percent gain, compared with 3.4 percent from the end of World War II through, and including, the Carter years. The budget deficit has averaged about $200 billion a year.

The problem for the Democrats is that the economic pain is very unevenly spread. In current American jargon, "Joe and Jane Six-
pack" (lower middle class whites from the non-rural mid-west) are A-OK. For them, inflation is down, interest rates remain very low and they can get work. For them, the 1984 Reagan campaign promise that "it's morning again in America" came true. For others, it is still midnight. Employment has increased but the new jobs are part-time, non-unionised and with very low pay. They have been gamed at the expense of wages and conditions.

Moreover, the gap between rich and poor; employed and unemployed; black and white, has increased. Seventy-five percent of inner city black youth are unemployed and never will work. Sixty percent of blacks enrolled in college now drop out because of the Reagan cuts in student aid. Indications are that the move from working to middle class by blacks has been stopped, and that there will be no blacks to replace the current generation of black professionals. An average of one child in five lives in poverty. Again, the burden is disproportionately spread: among blacks, one child in two is poor and, among Hispanics, two in five are poor. Poverty in general has increased and the government safety net has been seriously slashed. Even by official government definitions, the percentage of people living in poverty rose from 11.9 percent in 1979 to 14.4 percent in 1984. The much trumpeted "trickle down" just didn't.

On the other hand, the top one percent increased the amount of total net personal wealth controlled by them by roughly 25 percent over the past 20 years; their share is now approximately 40 percent and their average net personal worth is more than $5 million per household. The wealthiest one percent own three-fifths of all corporate stock. Despite celebrations of "people's capitalism" through diffuse stock ownership, the percentage of American households owning at least one share of stock fell from 25 percent in 1977 to 19 percent in 1983.

The vast majority of households, meanwhile — those in the bottom 80 percent — barely earn enough to get by. These 70 million households, with median annual earnings of about $18,000 command, on average, no net personal worth.

Unions

Workers' protection against supervisory harassment has been eroding. Union membership is down from 30 percent of non-farm labour force in the 1960s to less than 19 percent in 1988. But that is only part of the picture. The nature of union contracts has been changing, with a shrinking percentage of workers having the right to complain about or speak back to supervisors. Protection has declined, and the industrial accident rate has increased correspondingly — by roughly 50 percent from the early 1960s to the early 1980s. Politically, there has been a decrease in the importance of unionism and a decline in the relative size and importance of industrial labour among the working class. Labour has lost its organisational solidarity. Hence, the single most important base for left, welfare politics has been weakened greatly.

Women

The gap in income between females and males has been narrowing, but very slowly. Over the past six years, the median annual income for females working full time has increased from 60 percent of male income to 64.6 percent. After all other factors have been factored out, the gap in income is a result of the fact that females work in very poorly-paid service jobs. Three-quarters women who work, do so full-time. It is a myth that women really want part-time jobs. Census data reveals that, while 14.3 million people work part time, six million of these would like to have full-time jobs. With 53 million women now in the paid workforce, women are in the labour market to stay. Two-thirds of the new entrants to the labour force will be female.

While large numbers of women have always been in the paid workforce, the big change has been that females are now working through the child-raising years. Sixty-three percent of mothers in the labour force have children under 18 and more than 50 percent have children under three years. Indeed, 50 percent of females with babies less than one year old are in workforce, as are 60 percent of females with 3-5 year olds. Four in ten women will, at some stage, be single parents, and there are eight million single parent women, of whom one-third live in poverty. Moreover, six in ten children, according to the US census, will, at some stage, live in a single parent situation for at least one year. These changing work and family patterns mean that "child care" is an economic, not a "women's" issue, and one which the Democrats should be able to capitalise on.

Of even more interest to the Democrats is the importance to them of the female vote. While the 1986 election was seen as issue-less, a gender gap showed up in eleven states. At least four Democrats won Senate seats because women voters provided the margin of victory. Indeed, it has been argued that the overall Senate victory for the Democrats was gained on the female vote. Polls stress that the gender gap has existed since 1980: men supported Reagan in substantially larger numbers than women. That gender gap in attitudes to Reagan did not "disappear" in 1984 but was hidden because many women did not like Mondale. According to Roper polls in 1986, the gender gap also existed with respect to the parties. Men favoured the Republicans by 49% to women's 35 percent, while women favoured the Democrats 47% to men's 33%.

The Women's Vote Analysis conducted for the Democratic Party found that women were more likely to see interconnections and trade-offs and were more willing to have government involvement. They see the need for doing things collectively. Even when men and women agree on issues, they differ on approach. Both expressed anxiety about toxic waste, for example, but women talked more about health and genetics; men about property rights. For the Democrats, the problem lies in how best to profit.
from women's support while attempting to attract men over from their support of the Republicans.3

The Democratic Party

Despite the apparent unity shown at the convention, the Democratic Party is far from united. Moreover, it still lacks a sense of ideological direction. The first of these problems is not new for the Democrats who have always been a very diverse and divisive bunch. "I belong to no party; I'm a Democrat", goes a saying. Ideologically, the party has, historically, been able to stretch from rightwing Southern racists such as George Wallace, to leftwing intellectuals such as Eugene McCarthy. However, the party at national level and, in particular, at presidential level, had from the New Deal until the middle 1960s, a clear sense of ideological direction. In international politics, there was a commitment for internationalist involvement against communism; domestically the broad agenda was one of moderate Keynesian economics with limited welfare spending, funded by a healthy growing economy.

Since the 1960s, the ideological direction of the Democrats grew progressively more and more confused as old alliances broke down, and issues cut across party lines. The old coalitions of voters weakened; the economy found itself unable to fund both Vietnam and domestic welfare spending. By the 1970s, growth ceased and priorities were challenged.

The result of these changes was that the Democrats lost their pre-eminence in setting the ideological frame of reference in which political debate took place. Their last president, Jimmy Carter, proved a failure; while Reagan, articulating a new ideology, challenged Democratic values. Substantial numbers of liberals within the Democratic Party lost their congressional seats in 1978; and in 1980, not only was an incumbent Democrat president rejected at the polls, but the Democrats lost their majority in the Senate, something that had not occurred for 30 years. These traumas were only reinforced in 1984 when the Democrats, running with a liberal candidate, Walter Mondale, were devastatingly defeated in the presidential election.

The party has consistently been trying to redefine itself since then. Indeed, one of the Democrats’ problems was that they have been seen as engaged in endless soul searching; but, in fact, have not recaptured any sense of direction. In that context, the 1986 Congressional elections were very important psychologically. Had Reagan managed to pull it off one more time, Democrats would have been badly dispirited. Their 1986 win and the 1988 convention mean that the Democrats are now ebullient. It should mean that the party activists will work hard for an election win in 1988 rather than fight among themselves for pyrrhic victories.

Ironically, however, if they win in 1988 it will not be because the party has managed to articulate a new vision for America, but because the electorate has rejected Bush and because the Democrats have moved sufficiently towards the centre not to drive voters away. The troika displayed at the 1988 convention and its rejection of Jackson’s suggestions for the platform indicate the success of the moderates and right-wingers. For the left, of course, the platform further underlines the weakness of the left — despite Jackson’s conscience-provoking speech at the convention.

The Republican Party

The Republicans' claim that demography is working in their favour is probably correct. For at least twenty years the Democratic Party has not been the permanent majority party for the presidency. Thus, the two political parties have achieved an equilibrium that is remarkable in American history — neither is a majority or plurality party at presidential level. Reagan’s approval rating has been around sixty-two percent. But it has been a personal following. Voters have not approved either of Reagan’s policies or of the Republican Party. Those who approved of, and voted for
Reagan are not “Republicans” because only 40 percent would vote Republican for Congress. Indeed, 54 percent would vote Democrat. Even the “independents” are shared between the parties. Sixty-five percent of them may have approved of Ronald Reagan, but only 35 percent would vote Republican for Congress. Fifty percent would, routinely, vote Democrat.

All these statistics only serve to underline the fact that party allegiance is very weak in America today. Presidential elections are so susceptible to the style of the individual candidates that it is more than possible for the Democrats to win. They are attempting to reshape their overall image so they can appeal to the same groups forged into a coalition by Reagan: traditional and “new right” republicans, blue collar workers and adults under 45 from various economic levels.

The Left

For the left of American politics, whoever wins, the prospects remain poor. Despite the extraordinary success of Jesse Jackson, the underprivileged lack political weapons. Jackson may make middle America feel guilty, momentarily, about the poor, but he cannot create a winning electoral majority from his rainbow coalition. Dukakis must win conservative, white lower middle class America to gain the presidency, and these voters do not see themselves as belonging to Jackson’s rainbow.

Outside presidential politics, the position of the left is also extremely weak. Despite the fact that the Democrats held a majority in both houses since 1986, at least half of the Democratic leaders in the Senate, for example, have records of providing strong support to the Reagan administration. An examination of the sources of finance for the Democrats also reveals the declining position of the left. Fifteen years ago trade unions were the largest contributors of money to members of Congress with the result that their voice was listened to by Congress. Today, trade unions are vastly outspent by business and corporate organisations. Even Democratic members of Congress received, in 1984, as much financial support from corporate organisations as they did from unions. This pattern of contributions helps to encourage paralysis in legislation. It certainly gives no clear mandate for the sort of welfare spending that the underprivileged need.

The left should also be concerned with the overall alienation of the electorate. The extremely low turnout among the poorer and less well educated ought to be a major concern. Low turnout now seem accompanied not by anger but by indifference, and by an almost eerie disengagement by the voters. Analysts suggest that the way campaigns are now run is directly contributing to this disengagement. There seems little or no concern with the major issues on the part of candidates. Indeed, the Democratic Party’s platform further reinforces the emphasis of style without substance. Electronic campaigning is now the major mechanism of contact with the voters, and even more seriously disassociative is the style of political advertisement favoured. Campaigning is now a multi-million dollar operation. It is big business with computers, flow charts, weekly goals, and financial statements. There is a serious danger that what is being created in the process is a complacent, empty, self-centred vision of the world into which the concerns of the underprivileged cannot be admitted. For the left, it means they are being shut out of the political agenda.

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3. According to Ethel Klein, from Columbia University’s study of the Gender Gap (Dun and Bradstreet, 1986).