WHAT’S BEHIND THE CHANGING NUMBER OF “MODERATES” AND “INDEPENDENTS” WITHIN THE REPUBLICAN COALITION BETWEEN 2006 AND 2010?

BY ANDREW LEVISON
A TDS STRATEGY MEMO: What’s behind the changing number of “moderates” and “independents” within the Republican coalition between 2006 and 2010?

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In his latest analysis of the 2010 polling Ruy Teixeira¹ points out that the shifts in the numbers of “independents” and “moderates” between 2006 and 2010 is actually an internal process occurring within the Republican coalition. As he says:

“We’re shifting Republicans around between straight identifiers and leaners and both straight Republican identifiers and leaners have become more conservative over time… there is no big ideological shift here viewed across registered voters as a whole. It’s overwhelmingly an intra-Republican story.”

Both of these intra-Republican groups identified in Ruy Teixeira’s latest analysis – the increasing number of conservatives who now call themselves “independents” rather than Republicans and the increasing number of Republicans who now call themselves “conservatives” rather than moderates -- are actually familiar to journalists and other social scientists who do ethnographic field research and actively and systematically listen to what people say in everyday conversation. Let’s look at these two groups in turn.

1. A significant group of conservative Republicans has stopped calling themselves Republicans and started calling themselves independents instead.

Six or eight years ago avid conservatives to a large degree defined themselves by their avid support and indeed fawning admiration for Bush and Cheney. Asked about their party affiliation six years ago, many conservative Republicans would have indignantly replied: “Of course I’m a Republican. What the hell else would I be – a god-damn Democrat for crying out loud? Jees, don’t be stupid”. As both domestic and foreign disasters accumulated, however, many grass-roots Republicans became alienated from the party. “I’m a conservative” they began saying “and I think that in a lot of ways the Republicans are as bad as the Democrats. I just don’t trust either one of them any more”. As a result, when asked on opinion surveys for their partisan affiliation, increasing numbers began to choose “independent’ rather than “Republican” to reflect their frustration.

2. A significant group of moderate Republicans has begun calling themselves “conservative” rather than “moderate” on surveys.

During the early, pre-9/11 era, not all of George W Bush’s supporters considered themselves conservatives. Many considered themselves moderates. They would express this by saying things like “I usually vote Republican but I consider myself a political moderate and not a hard-core conservative. In 1992 I supported Bush senior, in 1996 I supported Bob Dole and in 2000 I supported George W. Bush because he seemed like a moderate too”.

¹http://www.thedemocraticstrategist.org/strategist/2010/11/is_the_electorate_moving_to_th.php
Since Obama’s election, however, as the political debate has become deeply polarized with charges of socialism and fascism leveled against Obama, these same people can no longer accurately express their feelings about politics by calling themselves “moderate Republicans”. They are now more likely to use the word conservative to describe themselves rather than moderate because the latter term does not adequately convey a clear rejection of Obama’s agenda. In actual conversation this “moderate Republican now turned conservative” view is expressed in phrases like “Oh, I’m not a tea party person but I’m really a pretty conservative person in a lot of ways, you know, and I just don’t support a lot of those things Obama’s doing.”

In fact, their political preference for Bob Dole/George Herbert Walker Bush moderate Republicanism has not significantly changed; they are expressing the same preference in a more polarized political environment.

It is these two internal changes in how both conservative and moderate Republicans define themselves that explains the trends Ruy Teixeira detected and analyzed among “independents” and “moderates”. Not only his analysis but practical ethnographic research as well confirms that the notion of a separate, moderate, independent third force that turned against Obama in 2010 is simply – as James Vega puts it² – a mirage.

²http://www.thedemocraticstrategist.org/strategist/2010/11/independent_voters_are_the_pol.php#more