Goodbye, Reagan Democrats

By STANLEY B. GREENBERG  NOV. 10, 2008

I’m finished with the Reagan Democrats of Macomb County in suburban Detroit after making a career of spotlighting their middle-class anger and frustrations about race and Democratic politicians. Bill Clinton wrote in his autobiography that my “extensive research on the so-called Reagan Democrats and what it would take to bring them home” was the reason he hired me as his pollster for his presidential campaign.

For more than 20 years, the non-college-educated white voters in Macomb County have been considered a “national political barometer,” as Ronald Brownstein of National Journal described them during the Democratic convention in August. After Ronald Reagan won the county by a 2-to-1 margin in 1984, Mr. Brownstein noted, I conducted focus groups that “found that these working-class whites interpreted Democratic calls for economic fairness as code for transfer payments to African-Americans.” So what do we think when Barack Obama, an African-American Democrat, wins Macomb County by eight points?

I conducted a survey of 750 Macomb County residents who voted Tuesday, and their responses put their votes in context. Before the Democratic convention, barely 40 percent of Macomb County voters were “comfortable” with the idea of Mr. Obama as president, far below the number who were comfortable with a nameless Democrat. But on Election Day, nearly 60 percent said they were “comfortable” with Mr. Obama. About the same number said Mr. Obama “shares your values” and “has what it takes to be president.”
Given Macomb’s history, this story helps illustrate America’s evolving relationship with race. These voters, like voters elsewhere, watched Mr. Obama intently and became confident he would work for all Americans and be the steady leader the times required. But focusing on the ways that Macomb County has become normal and uninteresting misses the extraordinary changes taking place next door in Oakland County — a place that played a bigger role in Mr. Obama’s success and perhaps in an emerging national Democratic ascendancy.

While Macomb County is home to the white middle class that America’s auto industry made possible, Oakland County is home to the affluent, business-oriented suburbanites of Birmingham and Bloomfield Hills, some of the richest townships in America. Just a quarter of Macomb County residents have college degrees, but more than 40 percent do in Oakland.

Oakland County has formed part of the Republican heartland in Michigan and the country. From 1972 to 1988, Democratic presidential candidates in their best years lost the county by 20 points. From Bill Clinton to John Kerry, however, Democrats began to settle for a draw. Over the past two decades, Oakland County began to change, as an influx of teachers, lawyers and high-tech professionals began to outnumber the county’s business owners and managers. Macomb has been slow to welcome racial diversity, but almost a quarter of Oakland’s residents are members of various racial minorities.

These changes have produced a more tolerant and culturally liberal population, uncomfortable with today’s Republican Party. When we conducted our poll of 600 voters in Oakland County on election night, they were a lot more open than voters in Macomb to gay marriage and affirmative action. We asked those who voted for Mr. Obama why they made that choice. At the top of the list was his promise to withdraw troops from Iraq, followed by his support for tax cuts for the middle class and affordable health care for all, and the idea that he will bring people together, end the old politics and get things done.

On Tuesday, Oakland County voters gave Mr. Obama a 57 percent to 42 percent victory over John McCain — those 15 points translated into an astonishing 96,000-vote margin. That helped form one of the most important new national changes in
the electorate: Mr. Obama built up striking dominance in the country’s growing, more diverse and well-educated suburbs.

So, good riddance, my Macomb barometer. Four years from now, I trust we will see the candidates rush from their conventions to Oakland County, to see the new America.

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