

B435. "The Message - Not the Messenger - is Democrats' Problem" The Christian Science Monitor (October 21, 2003) p. 9.

It is very difficult these days for friends and foes alike to find out what the Democratic Party stands for. Although there is one less voice in the cacophony of the Democratic presidential race - following the withdrawal of Sen. Bob Graham - confusion still is high indeed.

Is the party for or against the war in Iraq? Opposed to all tax cuts or only some of them? Which healthcare or drug- benefits plan does it favor? How do the Democrats figure on saving Medicare?

One major reason the Democrats' collective voice is so muffled is that they've bought into a comforting illusion that the problem is not the message but the messenger.

Democratic leaders hold that if they just had their own Fox TV network, a liberal Rush Limbaugh, or a pollster as talented as Frank Luntz, then their message would take the country by storm. Al Gore is trying to launch a liberal cable TV news network, and various fat cats, including Jon Sinton, CEO of AnShell Media, are reported to be raising money for one liberal network or another. Al Franken's new book blames the Democrats' election losses on the media, which he claims have been taken over by conservatives.

But it is the Democratic message, not the voice, that is the problem. Mario Cuomo, an outstanding orator, and Jerry Brown - no slouch, either, in the speaking department - each had a radio show that petered out. Nor is Al Sharpton exactly inarticulate. Those liberals who remain on the air - for instance, the highly subsidized Bill Moyers and lesser-known personae such as Neil Rogers and Alan Colmes - fail to catch on because of what they say, not because there is no place for them to say it.

The reason liberal messages are not resonating isn't because they're unheard, but because they're out of touch with the majority of Americans. In 2000, the proportion of Americans who identified themselves as liberals - including those who see themselves as "slightly liberal" - amounted to only 1 in 5. And that was no fluke. Since 1972, National Elections Studies polls show Americans labeling themselves liberal have never topped 23 percent.

So how did the Democrats get elected? By running on a centrist - not liberal - message, as Bill Clinton did in 1991. He took the Democratic party toward the political center, drawing heavily on ideas formulated by centrist "New" Democrats. Responsibility and community have been among their core themes, not traditional liberal buzzwords such as inequality and racism. (The current President Bush won in part because he did the same for Republicans: He moved them toward the center.)

One would think that the formula for a winning message for the Democrats is clear: anything but liberal. Yet many left liberals - including the same Democrats who voted for Ralph Nader, thus helping to defeat Mr. Gore - have become particularly influential in the party since 2000. They're still smarting from what they consider to be the usurpation of a presidency that was theirs. They're furious with many of the policies that the Republicans are pursuing overseas and at home. And, as a minority that cannot get traction, they're becoming ever more frustrated, vociferous - and extreme.

Whoever the Democratic candidate finally is, that candidate cannot win without embracing a centrist message - unless Iraq continues to look like Vietnam, or the economy is failing. In

other words: The only way Bush can be defeated is if Bush defeats himself - a sad way for a great party to win the presidency.

* Amitai Etzioni's most recent book is "My Brother's Keeper: A Memoir and a Message."