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WHY REAGAN RANKS HIGH WITH THE VOTERS

The eager Democratic presidential hopefuls have had tens of millions of dollars worth of free publicity, generously given this year by the liberal print and electronic media. From New Hampshire to California, they've had six months of prime-time advertising, building their name I.D., kissing babies, and posing in people-relating situations. In the words of the popular song, "who could ask for anything more?"

But all that free TV coverage adds up to a net negative for the Democratic candidates, individually as well as for their common cause collectively. Ronald Reagan keeps climbing in the polls every week.

That surely isn't what the journalists and the commentators expected, and they don't seem to understand what has happened. It doesn't fit into their preconceived notions of what motivates people and what assures political success.

Liberal ideology preaches that government handouts produce votes, and that the way to rate well with the voters is to support liberal spending programs. The corollary is that any government official who cuts off government spending, by definition, alienates the voters and reduces his chance to be reelected.

Ever since Ronald Reagan went into the White House, the nightly TV newscasts have portrayed in living color an endless series of cases of individuals allegedly harmed (made hungry or homeless) by "Reagan" budget cuts and tax cuts. That, combined with massive favorable nightly publicity about the Democratic presidential candidates promising everything to the voters, should have had Reagan hanging on the ropes by mid-summer.

It didn't happen for two reasons: first, the character of Ronald Reagan, and, second, the temper of the times. The media misread them both.

Ronald Reagan comes across on television as a man of character, and that's what the American people want in a President. Those are two qualities, not one: first, he's a man (that is, he has strong manly attributes), and second he has character (that is, he has moral and ethical attributes).

Reagan expresses the time-honored American values of hard work, thrift, honesty, rugged individualism, where-there's-a-will-there's-a-way, the can-do spirit, patriotism, and an abiding belief in the greatness of the United States of America. He's a man who won't let America be trampled on by our enemies or pushed around by the Soviets.

In the late 1970s, national magazines reported disparagingly on what they called "a growing right-wing movement." The media thought that little pockets of "right-wingers" could be pigeon-holed in neat categories under stereotyped labels and isolated from mainstream politics. But that was a misreading of what was happening.

What was taking place was a movement, all right, but it wasn't "right-wing." It was just traditional Main Street American values reasserting themselves again.

These were the people who didn't want to retreat any further in the face of world Communism or Khomeini's hostage-taking. These are the people who take pride in the Declaration of Independence and in our two centuries of freedom and achievement.

These were the people who didn't want to surrender our Panama Canal to a Latin American dictator and who still, after 25 years, don't want to surrender the Monroe Doctrine to dictator Castro in Cuba. These were the people who resisted Jimmy Carter's signing of the SALT II Treaty and are glad to cheer Ronald Reagan today for speaking what they know is the truth about the Soviet Union.

These Middle Americans are fed up with paying higher and higher taxes for schools that cost more but teach less, for welfare benefits to people who won't take steady jobs even when offered, and for handouts (sometimes disguised as loans) to more than a hundred foreign countries.

These Middle Americans are outraged at the killing of more than a million unborn babies a year, at television shows that air hour after dreary hour of violence and immoral sex, and at the failure of our lawmakers and judges to find a way to stop the rising torrent of smut peddlers, drug pushers and criminals who prowl our streets.

One of President John F. Kennedy's favorite expressions was, "a rising tide lifts all boats." In the late 1970s, the rising tide of respect for the values that built our great country lifted Ronald Reagan into the White House in 1980. This tide of traditional values and pride in America will reelect him in 1984, despite the massive favorable publicity given to his opponents.