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THE CRACKING OF THE COALITION

Potential candidates are already jockeying for positions on the 1982 ballots for Governors, Senators, Congressmen, and State Legislators. The state reapportionment maps are taking shape, and filing dates for the 1982 races begin in December of this year.

The big question is, will Reagan's popularity sweep in more Reaganauts next year? Or will his November 1980 landslide prove to be merely a flash in the pan?

President Reagan is certainly immensely popular. He's high on the crest of his two big victories on the tax cuts and the budget cuts. So it's hard to be a Cassandra who sees black clouds on the horizon.

But what's happened to Prime Minister Margaret Thatcher is a good lesson to keep before us. High interest rates, high unemployment, and high inflation could dump on Reagan the same economic and political decline that has beset Mrs. Thatcher.

It's instructive to remember how Reagan was elected in Illinois, a typical heartland Middle America bellwether state, and then see where the essential elements are today. Are we building on the Reagan victory, or is it disintegrating?

The Reagan victory in Illinois in 1980 was not a Republican victory; Republicans simply didn't have enough votes. The Republican candidate for the U.S. Senate, Lt. Gov. Dave O'Neal, failed by a large margin. Republicans made no gains in their Congressional delegation. Republicans managed to squeak through to a one-vote margin in the Illinois House, but the Democrats maintained their control of the Illinois Senate.

Reagan certainly doesn't owe any part of his victory to the liberal Republicans. They voted for their darling native son, John Anderson, the third-party candidate. (Incidentally, Illinois Republicans have now lost the 1981 reapportionment battle.)

Reagan's Illinois victory was laced together by a coalition of conservative Republicans, regular Republicans, independents, new voters, conservative Democrats, and, mirabile dictu, by regular and even Party-oriented Democrats. Thousands of Democratic-Party-type Democrats (men and women who are tied to the Party by a lifetime of loyalty)

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went behind the curtain in November 1980 and pulled the lever for Ronald Reagan.

Economic issues could not have caused those crossovers because, in their hearts, those Democrats still believe the campaign propaganda that the Republican Party is the party of the rich and the employers while the Democratic Party is the party of the working people. Only the moral issues, articulated by the bipartisan, pro-family, pro-life coalition, had the emotional appeal sufficient to overcome a lifetime of loyalty to the Democratic Party.

In the fall of 1980, when Democratic Party officials realized what was happening, they sent campaign workers through the union halls, gatherings of senior citizens, and nursing homes to predict, "Reagan will take away your Social Security." Reagan campaigners loudly denounced this as a smear because Reagan had "promised" he would never do that.

The pre-election pollsters misread the surveys showing that Reagan had significantly less support among women than men. Pollsters blamed that on those synthetic feminist issues which some reporters like to make visible through "media events."

The disaffection among significant numbers of female voters was caused by a deep-seated fear of losing Social Security benefits. It is most unfortunate that neither the men around Reagan nor his poll-takers understand the tremendous political power of the Social Security issue at the grassroots level.

The so-called Reagan Social Security proposals, which were politically-unrealistic in content, were prematurely leaked and then mishandled in Congress, constitute a tactical blunder of the first magnitude. They went like a knife through the coalition that elected Reagan. The Democrats who predicted this would happen are saying, "I told you so."

The Sandra O'Connor nomination has dealt the Reagan coalition a double whammy. Typical of those Democrats who feel betrayed by Reagan is Marie Craven, the pro-life leader who wrote the letter to Reagan that he (most unfortunately) answered by accusing his critics of being "vindictive."

To those who care about what kind of candidates win the 1982 elections, all this isn't a matter of who serves on the Supreme Court or how Social Security solves its financial problems. It's a matter of Ronald Reagan's credibility. Unfortunately, the coalition that elected him is crumbling now.

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