

Tide is running against McCain

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As the US presidential campaign enters its last weeks, it is clear than John McCain's campaign needs a dramatic turnaround to win this election. There is plenty of advice from the pundits; pleas to let the "real" McCain shine through, calls to take the gloves off, demands for more or different policies, and regrets that Obama's advertising spend can't be matched.

But increasingly it appears that the real flaw is not McCain or his policies. It's the Republican Party itself, what it now stands for, and the potential voters who have been increasingly ignored and alienated over the past two decades.

The Party of Lincoln has fallen a long way from the party that took the lead on abolishing slavery. Today the Republican right treats Americans of colour with contempt. It isn't just because Barack Obama is the son of a black Kenyan father that he is expected to get around 96 per cent of the African American vote.

J.C. Watts, a former Republican congressman and once one of the most prominent African-Americans in the Republican Party, said recently that his party's relationship with African-Americans is poor, with no representation at the Republican National Committee and on a raft of other political committees.

It's not just black America that is deserting the Republican Party. Registered Hispanic voters support Obama over McCain by 66 per cent to 23 per cent. Only 7 per cent of Hispanics, who make up 10 per cent of the voting population, think that the Republican Party has more concern for them, and their support will likely help Obama win in Colorado, Nevada, New Mexico and Florida.

Republican disdain for minorities extends even to the homeless, with protests about efforts to sign up them up to vote, as if losing a home was the same as losing citizenship.

And ironically, those voters most likely to vote Republican, the white, blue-collar workers in hardscrabble areas of states such as Ohio, Virginia and Missouri, are rethinking their prejudices as they assess the impact of McCain's policies on their lives.

Initially McCain promised the possibility of a new Republican approach, building on his reputation as a maverick. After a bitter primary fight against George W. Bush and Karl Rove in 2000, McCain set out as a centrist to become a new force in American politics.

He went against his party on issues like campaign finance reform (a battle waged to assuage his sins over the Keating Five banking scandal) and the environment and took on the Bush Administration on torture.

But he was hauled back from this "new way" by political exigencies and the selection of Sarah Palin as his running mate. He went for Palin, or she was forced upon him after the Republican gurus vetoed his first choice of Joe Lieberman, because she re-energised the religious right which is now the Republican base.

It was arguably a poor choice for all sorts of reasons, not least because while it got him hockey moms, moose hunters, oil drillers, Joe Six-Pack and possibly Joe the Plumber, all conservative Republicans who might stay home on November 4 rather than vote for McCain and who were never going to vote for Obama, it lost him a lot of other potential voters.

Sarah Plain has been described as a pure Rovian Republican. She embraces a populism that casts a good education, experience and prudence as elitism, or worse, liberalism. So along with all the other groups, McCain and Palin have now alienated progressive Republicans, to such an extent that there is a website for "Rockefeller" Republicans for Obama.

There are not many possibilities still open to McCain to recoup this political race in the timeframe available. More civility and less dogma on the campaign trail, along with an indication that he ranks the concerns of working families over those of big business, might help with his legacy if not his votes.

But it may be too late, and McCain's political obituary could well be his own words, from his 2002 memoir *Worth the Fighting For*, "Often my haste is a mistake but I live with the consequences without complaint".

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