

Somber Democrats must celebrate their own virtues

Democrats are a somber lot these days, and with good reason. They have little chance of breaking the Republican grip on national politics.

The thriving economy of the 1980s and the apparent success of their policy of peace through strength has given Republicans good reason to cheer. Most important, the GOP has translated its success into enduring popularity by mastering the art of politics as celebration.

In recent years, the Republican Party has avoided presenting its political policies primarily as items on a platform or as a series of points for debate. Instead, it has practiced its politics as an opportunity to celebrate its vision of America — to celebrate national pride, the benefits of free enterprise and the virtues of voluntarism and traditional values.

Republicans seem to have a monopoly on the drama and broad appeal of national celebratory politics. They hold out the promise of ever-increasing prosperity through the genius of business, while Democrats warn of the dangers of debts and deficits.

Republicans inspire many Americans — especially young people — with the glamor of a strong defense and the glory of maintaining stiff resistance to Soviet power. The Democrats scold that more money should be spent on social programs.



My Word

PAUL JEROME CROCE

The Democrats are the nation's long-faced schoolmarm. The Republicans are the high school football coach. No wonder the Democrats seem somber and relatively unappealing.

But for all their current skill at the art of celebration, the Republicans are newcomers to the field. Only a generation ago, a very different group invented the politics of celebration in its modern form.

In the 1960s, radical youth organizers and civil rights leaders seized on the importance of making political issues simple, personal and dramatic. Woodstock and countless anti-war and civil rights rallies provided a platform for

discussion and debate on the policies of the Vietnam War and Southern segregation.

But the rallies were most effective as theatrical events to display the righteousness of the cause and to envelop the participant and viewer in an atmosphere of conviction and uncritical endorsement.

Republicans learned from this style of politics even though it was alien to their values. We saw this in Ronald Reagan's campaign commercials showing horses on the Western prairie. We saw it in George Bush's righteous call for a constitutional amendment to prohibit desecration of the flag.

Surely Democrats can learn more effective and appealing ways to present their policy agendas. But they must find ways to celebrate from within their own traditions of social concern, environmentalism, integrity in business and government and ethnic diversity.

When Democrats wave flags, trying to prove their patriotism, they just mimic their opponents and reinforce the virtues of the Republicans in many American minds.

After all, when Republicans run against Republicans, the Republicans win every time.

Paul Jerome Croce is professor of American studies at Stetson University in DeLand.