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POLITICS



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WHICH PARTY DO PET OWNERS PREFER?

Dog's Politics

by Michael Currie Schaffer

Only at TNR Online | Post date 11.27.06

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Future students of American culture of the early twenty-first century could find worse things to study than how we treat our pets. Foreign entanglements and domestic culture wars may be discussed with more bombast, but a close look at the statistics suggest at least one thing has stayed constant even as Clinton gave way to Bush, and successive tech and real estate bubbles burst: a vast spending spree on domestic animals. According to numbers from the American Pet Products Manufacturers Association, Americans will spend \$38.4 billion on their pets by the end of the year, nearly double the total from a decade earlier. We're in the age of puppy yoga, kitty acupuncture, and veterinary cardiologists--a time when aging dogs get hip replacements and depressed pets take home antidepressant prescriptions. Always suckers for that doggy in the window, we seem to have tumbled past love into a last-days-of-Rome type of obsession: Millions of American humans may lack health insurance, but increasing numbers of our pampered dogs and cats now have policies of their own.

So perhaps it's no surprise that this month saw the release of what may be the first professional political poll of American dogs. In a telephone survey of 600 dog owners nationwide, D.C.-based pollster Michael D. Cohen found that, although the owners favored John McCain over Hillary Rodham Clinton by 38.5 percent to 31.3 percent in a hypothetical match-up, they averred (by a smaller margin) that their dogs would likely paw the lever for Clinton. Cohen says the questions--appended to an otherwise nonpolitical marketing survey for a soon-to-be-released pet product--were meant as a lark. If Nascar Dads and Soccer Moms could be invented and then pandered to by political consultants in previous election cycles, he reasoned, why not dog owners?

But the survey results--notably the differing preferences between humans and the animals for whom they buy increasingly pricey baubles--raise as many questions as they answer. And statistics from elsewhere in America's pet kingdom suggest both parties have a lot of work to do before they can claim ownership of the Purina Parent demographic.

At first glance, of course, Cohen's survey seems to confirm preexisting

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ideas about Democrats and Republicans. For example, it's a natural that dog owners would lean to the right, since they're more likely to live in big exurban houses with room for Fido to romp in the yard--and less likely to have ideological qualms about using swats with a rolled-up newspaper (as opposed to touchy-feely ideas about positive nurturing) to enforce their no-peeing-on-the-floor policies. Likewise, it stands to reason that they'd see their pets picking Clinton: What else could you expect from creatures whose main daily goals are getting more free food scraps or a chance to bark at the mailman with impunity.

Take a closer look at the way our dogs live now, though, and it seems both Clinton and McCain--or whoever their parties nominate--have some opportunity to gain traction.

For instance, there's health care: We spend \$9.4 billion a year on vet care, a figure that grows by about 10 percent a year as the profession evolves from spaying puppies to performing four-legged versions of advanced human medicine. The number of veterinarians certified in specialty care more than doubled in 15 years as whole new disciplines ("veterinary cardiology") have come into being. A true pandering Democratic pol would figure out a way to solve this problem for the roughly 70 million U.S. households with a pet.

On the other hand, there's land use. Battles over unleashed dogs in public parks have been a commonplace in largely childless cities like San Francisco, where the canines compete for space against children--and where the dogs' owners have bumped into government bureaucracies that tend to side against them. A Republican could surely close the deal with America's dog owners by proposing some sort of urban-recreation version of the Gingrich Congress' push against limits on public land grazing.

And then there's regulation--an issue that truly cuts both ways. A scandal in Northern California last summer made international news after a Napa Valley pet cemetery acknowledged it had buried hundreds of animals on land it didn't own, and would have to dig them up. It was just the sort of corporate misdeed that could grab headlines for some Democrat who called for better government oversight. But a free-marketeer could just as easily argue that noise ordinances and other governmental meddling serve only to drive up the price for dog boarding and grooming--already a \$2.7 billion industry.

Even the culture wars have come to America's dog-owning world, after a fashion. In Philadelphia, a Republican city councilman has championed the push to rid the city of "kill shelters"--pounds that euthanize dogs that don't get adopted. Elsewhere, new case law has developed over dogs, as parties in divorce proceedings have argued that it is inappropriate to assign their beloved puppies a value based simply on the cost of getting a dog from a breeder. And the popularity of pet-blessing events at churches on the feast of St. Francis of Assisi demonstrates that organized religion,

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too, has learned that the fastest way to a sinner's soul may be on four legs.

It will take a bit more polling to figure out how best the political class could react to such modern pet-owning challenges. But strategists considering writing off this would-be voting bloc should consider this: In 2002, *American Demographics* reported that 83 percent of American pet owners call themselves their animal's "Mommy" or "Daddy," up from 55 percent in 1995. Now, anyone running for office want to side against Mom and Dad?

MICHAEL CURRIE SCHAFFER is a staff writer at *The Philadelphia Inquirer*.

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