

Vilsack has chance to emerge as family-issues candidate

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Gov. Tom Vilsack's quest for the presidential nomination may not be as quixotic as it appears. Vilsack is in an excellent position to influence the next election and possibly emerge as a leader in the domestic policy debate, which is a traditional winner for Democrats.

The November election showed that Republicans have no monopoly on one of their core issues: the family. Democrats who championed positive family policies outflanked Republicans who offered only rhetoric. Bob Casey in Pennsylvania and Jim Webb in Virginia are the most obvious examples.

Vilsack has already gone further in this direction than Casey, Webb or any other Democrat. In 2004, he signed House File 22, a bill that put Iowa on the forefront of divorce-custody reform and showed that Democrats can lead when it comes to the family.

The bill, which encouraged shared parenting in custody cases, was not only a step toward gender equality in family policy. It also represented an alternative approach to dealing

with one of the most intractable and vexatious problems of American society: the continued rise in out-of-wedlock births and fatherless children.

New figures from the National Center for Health Statistics show that, despite 10 years of welfare reform that was supposed to remedy this problem, out-of-wedlock births are at a record high. The Census Bureau also reports that married couples now comprise less than half the nation's households. Such news traditionally helped Republicans.

But the Bush administration's response to the perennial family dilemma has been weak. Questionable programs to "promote fatherhood" and "healthy marriage" have left Republicans ironically open to the charge of promoting big government and "throwing money at the problem."

A simpler and less costly alternative is the measure Vilsack — in cooperation with moderate Republicans — has enacted to keep fathers involved with their children.

Vilsack has also enhanced his appeal among a potential huge voting bloc. Some 20 million parents (about 10 percent are mothers) have lost their children to divorce and separa-

tion. That number doubles if one adds second spouses and grandparents, and the problem touches virtually every family in America. Disproportionately affected are blacks and other minorities, whose traditional loyalty to the Democrats has been strained over family issues.

No political party can ignore a voting bloc this massive. In Massachusetts, 85 percent of voters approved a nonbinding shared parenting referendum in 2004. This year, North Dakota voters narrowly missed enacting a binding referendum only because of massive spending by bar associations.

Republicans are getting hammered hard right now by pro-family groups who feel taken for granted. Few have much enthusiasm for the administration's family psychotherapy programs. It also isn't that long ago that many social conservatives were Democrats or grew up with parents who were Democratic populists with a creative pro-family message have an opportunity right now to regain what was once their constituency.

Hillary Clinton is not likely to capitalize on this. With her base among young singles, and her view that "there is no such

thing as other people's children," she is not likely to energize the heartland as a convincing family-issues candidate.

Vilsack, who can invoke his own childhood in an orphanage and "bouncing between separated parents," could pull it off much more plausibly.

He could even end run Hillary on gender issues. One of the earliest feminist grievances urged fathers to take a more active role in child-rearing. The National Organization for Women once advocated shared parenting, and moderate feminists remain consistent, such as former NOW president Karen DeCrow, who says that "part of ending sexism involves eliminating the inhuman practice of awarding a parent 'visitation' to his or her own child."

As the family and parenting rise to the top of the nation's domestic agenda, Vilsack and Iowa could constructively employ the state's caucus influence to lead this critical debate.

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