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The Times October 21, 2006

Blue-collar Democrats return to their roots

BY TIM REID IN PITTSBURGH

The cornerstone of Republican success is crumbling after it was built up by Reagan

EVEN in the febrile atmosphere of modern US politics, you can tell a candidate is in really deep trouble when he screams at his opponent during a televised debate: "Quit lying to them Bob! Tell them the truth! You're lazy!"

The man screaming is Rick Santorum, one man Democrats would love to destroy more than any other in next month's midterm elections. Mr Santorum, the third-ranking Republican in the Senate, has become one of the most polarising politicians in the country thanks to his abrasive social conservatism. And he is clearly not going down without a fight.

Mr Santorum is the most senior Republican incumbent being targeted by Senate Democrats this year and has been trailing his challenger, Bob Casey Junior, the son of a beloved former governor, for months. Nearly everyone agrees this is because the people of Pennsylvania just don't like Mr Santorum any more.

But there are greater forces working against him other than his 43 per cent unfavourability rating. Republican analysts believe that Mr Santorum's problems are rooted in the return of white, blue-collar voters to the Democrat fold, a generation after Ronald Reagan wooed them to the Republican cause.

The "Reagan Democrats" have been a cornerstone of Republican electoral success for the past 20 years, especially in the Midwest, still the battleground for presidential contests. By the early 1980s, these traditional Democrat voters — both rural and urban lower middle-class — no longer saw Democrats as their champions. Socially conservative, they were attracted by Mr Reagan's simple message of moral values, fiscal responsibility and national security. Millions fled to the Republicans and stayed.

Mr Santorum has won in Pennsylvania — he was re-elected to a second six-year term in 2000, in part because his conservatism appealed to blue-collar Democrats. In recent years they have been motivated to vote on cultural issues more than economic ones.

Frank Luntz, a Republican pollster and one of the

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strategists behind the party's 1994 takeover of Congress, told *The Times*: "The Santorum race shows that Reagan Democrats are returning to their roots. Economic issues among blue-collar social conservatives are now subsuming concerns about social issues.

"The Republican party has failed them. It didn't cut spending. It wasn't honest. It hasn't controlled immigration. On issue after issue it didn't do what these voters expected." Mr Luntz says that this political remigration of Reagan Democrats — which if realised next month would represent a profound change of the American political landscape — is occurring across the Midwest, where the economy is arguably an even greater issue than Iraq.

Hundreds of factories and car plants have closed, in states such as Michigan, Pennsylvania, Iowa and Wisconsin. Since Mr Santorum first arrived in the Senate at the age of 36, a young Turk riding the conservative wave that swept congressional Democrats from power 12 years ago, he has been an odd fit for the traditionally moderate political terrain of Pennsylvania. Before him, the state had not elected a conservative senator since 1952.

He has voted with Mr Bush 98 per cent of the time, in a state where the President has become very unpopular.

Combined with the tectonic voting shift identified by Mr Luntz, it is little surprise that Mr Santorum has trailed his opponent by 10 points for months.

Mr Casey, an anti-abortion social conservative and trade union economic liberal, is an easy man for a Reagan Democrat to support. Bill Zerbe, 72, a retired salesman, grew up in a conservative Democratic home in south-east Pennsylvania. After voting Democrat, he switched to Ronald Reagan and the Republicans in 1984. "I'm voting Democrat again now," he said. "I'm disappointed in the Republicans. They're dishonest. They talk about morals and principles, but do otherwise. Any Democrat gets my vote now."

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- A typical Reagan Democrat grew up in a heavily unionised, blue collar home, probably in the Midwest. His father and grandfather were diehard Democrat voters
- He is white, religious, married with children, a high school graduate who never went to university, and like his father, a tradesman
- He wears jeans and a baseball cap, drinks beer, eats pizza, hunts, loves American football and watches Nascar, the hugely popular stock car racing.
- He is less well educated than a typical Republican, earns less money but shares the same sense of patriotism and moral direction. In Pennsylvania, many Reagan Democrats are Catholic and oppose abortion.
- By the early 1980s the typical Reagan Democrat was in his 40s, but had become deeply disaffected with the Democratic Party. He saw the party of his father and grandfather now beholden to pressure groups including feminists, African Americans, and the gay rights lobby.
- Ronald Reagan's championing of religion, national

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security and moral patriotism — God, guns and guts — plus his message of economic optimism was far more appealing. Millions of Democrats voted for Reagan's re-election in 1984.



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