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A major political omen

Washington

New York's financial crisis is producing a significant political omen bearing on next year's presidential election.

What has happened is that the liberal center of the United States — New York City and New York State — has been shocked by the evidence that its policies of uncontrolled spending have brought the biggest city in the nation to near bankruptcy.

The omen to which I am referring is the fact that the Democratic liberal leaders in both the city and the state are sharply and suddenly turning to the conservative economics of Gerald Ford, Ronald Reagan, and the maverick Democratic Governor of California, Jerry Brown.

Says City Council president Paul O'Dwyer, one of the most liberal Democrats in the state, and first in the line of succession to be the next mayor: "I don't see any difference between a hard-nosed reactionary and myself on how you run the City of New York."

Says Democratic state chairman Patrick J. Cunningham: "I'm afraid that has to be the thrust for the future. We can't have gimmick budgets any longer."

As a consequence of the city's financial plight, it is evident that the Democratic Party and its liberal supporters are rushing to embrace fiscal conservatism — perhaps too late.

It is evident that in taking the necessary steps to rescue the city from collapse, including dismissing thousands of employees, imposing a wage freeze, and raising subway fares, the Democratic leaders are straining to the breaking point their long-time alliances with the labor unions and minority ethnic groups.

But this is not the most important political consequence. What makes this development politically significant is not that New York Democratic leaders are turning conservative but that New York's democratically oriented voters are turning away from liberal Democratic candidates. Apparently they have serious doubts that this after-the-calamity conversion is for real or likely to be very lasting.

The evidence that New York voters are not putting their faith in the "reformed" liberals, who now proclaim how conservative they are, but in a really hard-core conservative, emerges from a poll taken only a few days ago for the Democratic state committee.

It's startling, it's stunning, and to true-blue conservatives, it's delicious. It reveals that New York Sen. James L. Buckley, who often criticizes President Ford on the ground that he is too liberal, defeats all five of the leading Democratic senatorial prospects.

Even in the once strongly Democratic city precincts, Senator Buckley runs ahead of all the old-line Democrats, including such well-known figures as Ramsey Clark, John Lindsay, Bella Abzug, and Robert F. Wagner Jr. Only Bess Myerson, former City Consumer Affairs Commissioner, ran slightly ahead of Buckley in New York City but lost to Buckley in the statewide poll.

Is this rejection of the political liberals under the hammer of financial crisis an isolated phenomenon? When you consider that a recent national Gallup poll showed that 59 percent of the voters would support a conservative over a liberal party — if they had that choice — what is now happening in New York may point to the shape of things to come.