

POST ELECTION ANALYSIS – LESSONS LEARNED?

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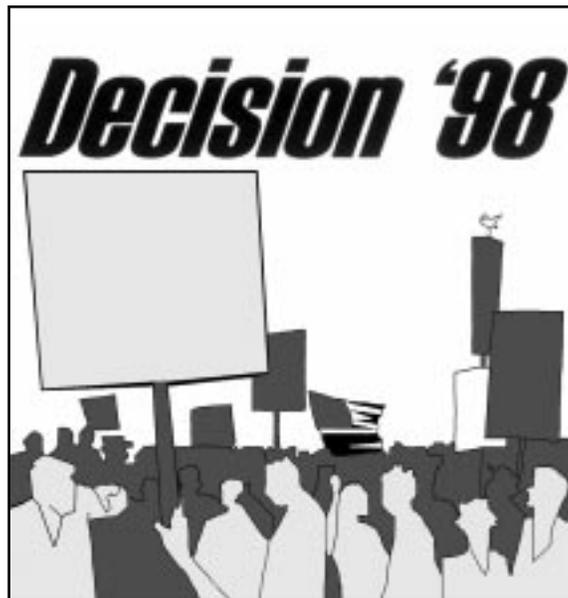
The hand-wringing continues among Republicans these days as they ponder what exactly happened to them Nov. 3, the worst showing by the president's opposing party in a non-presidential election year since 1934.

House Speaker Newt Gingrich, the philosophical leader of the conservative movement in Congress that helped elect Ronald Reagan in 1980, has resigned. And what passed for adequate political spin the day after the election is now the source of fundamental soul searching by the Republican Party.

At the same time in Wisconsin, few Republicans are doing much soul searching – or they seem convinced that the problems presented by the Nov. 3 election can be easily cured by some minor fine-tuning of policies, politics and personnel.

They may be dangerously wrong – and their analysis of the problem may present Democrats with some real opportunities in the next election.

Sure, Wisconsin Republicans have good reasons not to read too much into the election. That's because they probably did better here than anywhere in the country. State Rep. Mark Green, R-Green Bay, beat the only



incumbent House Democrat in the nation – and the GOP held its own in congressional seats with Paul Ryan's victory in the 1st District, and Green's victory in the 8th over U.S. Rep. Jay Johnson. Gov. Tommy Thompson still holds the nation's most powerful veto pen. And the Wisconsin Assembly picked up seats for the fourth election in a row and now hold the most seats

they've had since 1960.

A caveat here is also essential: Bemoaning the status of the Republican Party is a little like weeping over Japan's economy. Sure, they're both struggling. But Japan remains a wealthy, motivated country – the world's largest exporting nation with a population about the size of California's. Likewise, the GOP today is still strong, despite this setback. It controls 31 governorships, has a firm grip on both houses of Congress, and controls both legislative houses in 18 states. Wisconsin's Republican Party still has a deep bench of talent and is still offering the state some of the biggest new ideas.

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But something clearly happened November 3. And any way the post-game analysis is run, the Republican Party's powerful offensive machine is sputtering. The lessons of Nov. 3 are difficult and sometimes elusive – but they're real. And Republicans are going to have to dig deep to learn from them. To be sure, Democrats are already analyzing the results for their next run, which includes keeping the White House in their hands.

First, for Republicans, it is a mistake to underestimate what transpired at the polls – though they're trying. The day after the election, Gingrich was in full spin, boasting that the loss of five seats was, in fact, a victory with Republicans still firmly in control of both houses of Congress. Assembly Speaker Scott Jensen is still in full positive spin mode, noting that the revolution against big government he helped create four years ago is still in full swing in Wisconsin.

Gov. Tommy Thompson, one of the best political minds in the state, has a different view, dismissing the election results as a stay-the-course election with incumbents winning almost everywhere. Only in the open seats were the Democrats making any headway, he said.

Perhaps that's true in Wisconsin. But Wisconsin is rarely a leading indicator of national political trends. And there was a trend. The national average loss by the party holding the presidency is 28 seats in the House of Representatives. Democrats actually picked up five and held their own in the U.S. Senate. In the sixth year of a presidential term, that's the worst showing by the opposition party since 1822, said Al Hunt of the Wall Street Journal. Solid Republican states such as Iowa suddenly have a Democratic governor for the first time in decades.

It wasn't really a great Republican showing in Wisconsin either. Republicans again lost control of the State Senate, losing all three open seats. Jensen said it would be "a bad night" if Republicans only picked up two seats in the Assembly – and proceeded to pick up exactly two. U.S. Rep. Mark Neumann outspent U.S. Sen. Russ Feingold two to one, and still lost. Thompson was re-elected handily to a

fourth term, but even his own staff was wary of coming to work the next day because Thompson failed to match his two-to-one victory margin over State Sen. Chuck Chvala four years ago. Thompson barely topped 60 percent in this election – and lost 60 percent to 40 percent in Milwaukee — while outspending Democrat Ed Garvey more than seven to one.

Gingrich, of course, belied his spin only three days after the election, noting that the GOP's election failures created crisis in leadership that required his resignation in order for the party to "move forward."

Jensen is still on a roll in the Assembly. But his life just got a lot more complicated – and the promise of his revolution is still only a small flicker on the horizon, which may be only a mirage.

Then there are the failures themselves.

First, the minor failures. It is becoming increasingly clear that the Republican morality assault on Clinton was a disaster — though not the way most Republicans view it. In exit polls, most voters responded that the Clinton scandal, or the Republican's handling of it, didn't affect their vote. But the larger issue isn't the swing votes, it's the impact the scandal had on the image of the Republican Party as intolerant or, worse, misguided. That's far more difficult to measure, and far more difficult to repair.

Throughout the scandal, both Gingrich and Jensen tried to establish the Republican Party as the party of morality. Gingrich more than once said he planned to publicly discuss Clinton's affair at every possible opportunity – and make morality in office a national issue. Jensen repeatedly suggested that any political leader in Wisconsin who is guilty of moral indiscretion should not be allowed to hold public office. The presumption by both leaders was that Republicans hold the higher moral ground than Democrats when it comes to matters of the heart – or the zipper.

Simply put, this is next-to-impossible ground to hold. Much of the public already imagines, rightly or wrongly, that politicians in both parties are morally suspect. Righteous declarations by either party therefore ring hollow – and make voters suspect.

So the extremely long and harsh investigation of Clinton not only diverted Congress and the public away from Republicans' larger issues, it gave rise to a sentiment that Gingrich and the Republican leaders were simply losing touch with the voters with whom they proudly claim to be so close.

On a more practical political note in the morality debate during this election, Republican insistence that abortion take front row in modern political debate also seemed to have its downside – or at least it failed to provide winning margins. All three Republican state Senate candidates, Paul Nus of Kohler, Nancy Mistele of Westport (north of Madison) and Bill Sodemann of Janesville, as well as Neumann were solidly anti-abortion. In fact, the four would ban abortions entirely, including those to protect the health and future fertility of the mother. (Nus was an organizer of the "First Breath Alliance" which attempted a recall vote of Feingold and Democratic Sen. Herb Kohl, for failing to support an override of Clinton's veto of a ban on partial birth abortions.) Again they lost.

How the issue will play out in the future, however, isn't clear. While the state senators lost – in two cases badly, Neumann came within an eyelash of beating an incumbent U.S. senator by focusing a few powerful messages, including partial birth abortion. Exit polls showed that partial birth abortion and Social Security were the two issues they were most concerned about when they entered the polling booths Nov. 3. "Mark Neumann drove the debate," Jensen said.

But Neumann's harsh attacks also deeply energized Democrats who had their best turnout since 1982. That's also an impact that is hard to measure. What is clear is that abortion itself can no longer carry an election the way it did in the early 1980s when Ronald Reagan led the first Republican revolution.

Another "failure" in the eyes of Republicans was turnout. Neumann explained that his loss was due to outside money and those "liberal voters" in Dane County who conspired to reject him. In fact, he complained loudly, there are now "two Wisconsin" – Dane County and the rest of the state. But for a few thousand votes around the state, Republicans in the Assembly would have picked up five, maybe even six seats, Jensen explained.

Those liberals and outsiders were apparently also at play in the rejection of Sen. Lauch Faircloth, R-North Carolina, and one of President Clinton's chief critics, and in New York where Alfonse D'Amato was finally beaten after years of aggressive Democratic attempts to unseat him.

But those explanations don't, in fact, shed much new light on the election. First, both parties worked hard to build turnout – and both were successful. Black voters turnout was up 41 percent in five largely black aldermanic districts in Milwaukee – a turnout generated by union turnout-the vote efforts, two visits by Rev. Jesse Jackson and aggressive

campaigning by Garvey and his running mate Barbara Lawton. At the same time, Republicans engineered a statewide referendum on guns which helped propel Republicans to the polls. Thompson noted after the election that while his margin was less than four years ago, he still received more votes. Assembly Democrats countered that if a few thousand more votes had been cast their way, they'd be in control of both houses of the Legislature come January. The turnout debate is therefore endless and unfulfilling.

But the major Republican explanation is also the focus of its search for its soul – and the major opportunity for Democrats to seriously engage the GOP in future elections (though that's not likely to happen).

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Spending and taxes.

"Every Republican who stayed on our message of lower taxes and spending won," Jensen explained in his post-election analysis. Those who didn't lost, he said.

"Why should anyone vote to legitimize all this as appropriate Republican policy," moaned the Wall Street Journal editorial page, citing a list of GOP spending increases combined with paltry tax cuts. Without big tax cuts, Republicans deserved to lose, it said. "We are here to move polls, not follow them," complained Rep. J.C. Watts, R-Okla., of his party's waffling on tax and spending cuts.

But "staying on message" wasn't the problem. In Wisconsin, all three state Senate Republican candidates and Neumann were strong advocates of lower taxes and spending. They lost.

The real issue appears to be the Republican message itself: It isn't working. Or at least it isn't working like it used to – and its prospect as a "wedge issue" appears to be fading as Republicans continuously muddle their way in Congress and on the Square.

Part of it is that the GOP is falling victim to the expectations created by its lofty rhetoric. Both Gingrich and Jensen are glib, fascinating theorists about smaller government and lower taxes – and it's been a good sell to voters since Ronald Reagan. Yet despite Reagan, despite a Republican Congress, despite a powerful Republican governor at the helm for 12 years, state and federal government are larger by far than they were in 1980 – and almost everyone's taxes today are higher. True, income tax rates may have come down slightly and taxes may be lower than they would have otherwise been, especially Wisconsin's property taxes. But that's a more difficult sell.

In the last two years, in fact, almost all the debate in both Washington and Madison have been over how to distribute relatively small budget surpluses. That's perhaps progress from the tax-and-spend days of the liberal Democrats. But it's hardly a revolution in government.

And fiscal conservatives can only call it a revolution for so long before voters get wary. Is that what is happening?

Second, and perhaps more troubling, is that Republicans are either losing their political will for budget cuts – or they never really had them in the first place. The federal government grew substantially under Ronald Reagan, for example. State spending has nearly doubled under Tommy Thompson. Through all of this debate, Republican conservatives who preach smaller government have yet to seriously entertain the elimination of one major agency or duty of the state or federal government.

The recent federal budget agreement, in fact, sent conservatives reeling in disgust at the pork-barrel-politics-as-usual masquerading as "revolution" – a disconnect so profound that Gingrich had no choice but to step down. In the end, Gingrich was a great talker, not a great doer.

But statewide, things aren't much more revolutionary. Four years ago, for example, Wisconsin Republicans pushed through 5-percent across-the-board budget cuts among agencies. Real jobs were cut. Some agencies, such as the Department of Public Instruction, were deeply slashed. But Assembly Republicans on the cutting edge of the revolution seem satisfied with strangling government with small across-the-board cuts rather than making political decisions about the role of government – the very debate they say they want to have. After four years of Assembly conservative Republican control, is it starting to appear that Jensen, like Gingrich, is a much better talker than doer?

The results of this election pose fundamental questions for Jensen and those who inherit the leadership of Congress: Does the political will exist for deep and real cuts in the state and federal government? In other words, are Gingrich and Jensen's ideas really salable to voters in the end? Or are these just nice-sounding words that attract campaign dollars, but not votes? Are individual constituencies affected by the budget cuts – and the special interests who support them – too strong to overcome in a representative Democracy? Are Gingrich and Jensen, in fact, wrong?

Not only are these difficult questions, they've been muddled even further by Democrats who have diluted the Republican

message. Democrats now also preaching tax cuts of their own – and they say they want to cut government too, only “more compassionately.”

As a result, in Wisconsin’s legislative and governor’s races, the major tax debates in the last elections became extremely narrow. In the U.S. Senate debate, Neumann and Feingold, both deficit hawks, engaged in a preposterously minor and confusing debate over who’s the toughest protector of Social Security. Democrats and Republicans in the Legislature meanwhile were locked in a struggle over whether to use the state budget surplus for property tax or income tax relief. The debates, in short, weren’t much of a debate at all.

Republicans complain, somewhat proudly, that they’re leading the charge and Democrats are simply following by seizing on their ideas. But unfortunately for Republicans, they tend to lose in a narrow debate like this. History shows that, all things being equal, the majority of average Americans may trust Democrats slightly more to run government and represent their interests.

Republican losses and problems, of course, are Democrats’ gains and opportunities. As a result of the election, Democrats have a lot of opportunities for gains in the upcoming two years. On a national level, Clinton appears rejuvenated and Republicans humbled. It is nearly impossible to believe that Rep. Bob Livingston, a Louisiana Republican, will do much to advance the conservative revolution. On the state level, Jensen faces Thompson, a powerful governor who isn’t afraid of government solutions to problems. He has lots of new programs he wants to try, including a quasi state takeover of Milwaukee schools, a new state health insurance program for the working poor, a new state care program for the elderly

and disabled, and more – hardly proposals that will make government much smaller or less intrusive.

If Democrats are smart, they’ll get on board this time instead of fighting his popular reforms such as “Wisconsin Works” and a \$1.2 billion property tax cut. Jensen may simply be outflanked as Democrats, in many ways, are better allies for Thompson than the cut-government Assembly faction led by Jensen.

That’s not to say it’s smooth sailing for Democrats. It is going to be a major stretch in policy and philosophy for Democrats to propose real spending cuts and tax relief while, at the same time, preaching smaller class sizes, higher teachers’ salaries, free education for

welfare mothers, and unlimited amounts of money for the University of Wisconsin System.

But Democrats are the minority party. Republicans are in power nationwide and it’s their game to lose. Jensen and the Republican Congress may want to take government in a new direction with smaller government and less spending. Their plans may be excellent politics – and may be the future of this country and this state.

But so far only their rhetoric has been truly tested. Republicans may want to throw the dice and see whether real and deep budget cuts are, in fact, good politics as they have been in states such as Michigan and countries such as New Zealand.

If they do, Wisconsin and America will benefit from a major political debate and voters will have a true choice in upcoming elections. If they don’t, Democrats will continue to hang close while Republicans talk a game they’re not actually playing. For the Republican Party, that only portends a repeat of Nov. 3 in future elections with Republican losses, some gains, and a lot of muddled excuses in the process.

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