

ARMCHAIR QUARTERBACKING AND SLOPPY ARM TACKLING

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There is a natural urge in human nature to simplify; to take complex things and make them graspable and understandable to our own intellect. Nowhere is the urge more evident than in the armchair quarterbacking that inevitably follows an election.

The media, which both shapes and feeds this urge, want clear winners and losers. They want to reduce the voting

patterns of millions of citizens down to easily digestible clichés. Unfortunately, too often what results are simplistic answers that ignore reality, history, and complexity.

In the wake of Election 1998, the analysts tell us that, "the election was a disaster for Republicans."

We are told this despite the fact that Republicans continue to hold the majorities in both houses of Congress and hold 31 of the nation's governorships.

We are told this because Tammy Baldwin won the traditionally Democrat open 2nd Congressional seat - never mind that Mark Green defeated a sitting incumbent Democrat for Congress in the 8th District and Republican Paul Ryan won the vacant 1st Congressional seat.



We are told this because the Governor "only" received 60% of the vote - never mind that in the 1998 election more Wisconsinites voted for him than in any of his previous elections.

We are even told the election was a disaster because Assembly Republicans "only" gained two new seats, even though this gives them the largest Assembly Republican majority since 1960. Oddly, Democrat leader Shirley Krug,

who regaled the press and the lobby corps with boasts of winning back the Assembly majority, was never asked what "disaster" caused them to underperform their predictions by 6 seats. Instead, credence is given to her claims that Democrats were as close to taking back the majority as the Republicans were to expanding theirs. In fact, while the switch of 609 votes in tightly contested districts would have increased Republican gains from two seats to five, the Democrats would have had to pick up a daunting 3240 votes in their most narrow losses to regain the majority.

The fact is, if you want to see the key to most pundits' post-election analysis, you

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need only to look at their pre-election biases. The media's retrospective myths almost identically match their prospective musings.

Myth #1 - This Election Was a Mandate for Campaign Finance Reform.

No idol is more firmly clutched by the popular press today than "campaign finance reform." This phenomenon is fully understandable. Money enables candidates and interest groups to deliver their political message to the voters in a variety of ways and on their own terms. When citizens have access to a variety of political information sources it reduces the clout of the major mainstream media.

Nowhere was the media's unconditional love for "campaign finance reform" more evident than in the nationwide rush to proclaim Russ Feingold's 50% to 48% victory a "mandate for campaign finance reform." Never mind that just a couple of months ago most of the same members of the media gave Mark Neumann little or no chance of winning this Senatorial race. Never mind that exit polling in this race consistently ranked abortion and social security as the top issues of concern among voters. And never mind the fact that for all of Russ Feingold's posturing on "soft money," his campaign was the recipient of hundreds of thousands of dollars of it. None of these facts fit the prevailing media bias. In short, Feingold's razor thin victory was a "mandate for campaign finance reform" because that's what the media pundits wanted it to be.

Myth #2 - This Election is an Affirmation of Bill Clinton.

The same media that decided months ago that America was tired of the Lewinsky affair and that impeachment

is far too aggressive a step, used Republican losses this fall to reaffirm their preconceptions and to parrot the Clinton Doctrine of "everybody does it so it can't be punished."

But everybody does not perjure themselves, use the office of the presidency to obstruct justice, or "do it" in the workplace. Unfortunately, the media has consistently rushed to downplay the impeachable offenses for which the president is under investigation and instead has chosen to focus solely on sex. To suggest that the election was an affirmation of the President's behavior and a repudiation of Republicans for investigating it is another preconceived conclusion flailing for supporting facts. In fact, exit polls showed that the public did not approve of the president's behavior and that most Americans believe he should be punished but not impeached.

Myth #3 - This Election Shows That "Extreme" Republicans Cannot Win.

Of course, by "extreme" the mass media pundits mean Christians and pro-life Republicans. They tell us the "religious right" cost the GOP this election but fail to account for the fact that the victory by 100% pro-life and pro-gun Democrat Jim Baumgart from Sheboygan was the reason that Democrat re-took the majority in the State Senate. They also fail to account for the defeat of "moderate" Republican Jo Musser in 2nd Congressional District. Ironically, while Republicans like Mark Green and Paul Ryan were winning congressional seats with platforms that were decidedly in line with the "religious right," Jo Musser was winning points with the media but losing her election by being "moderate" and rejecting much of the Republican agenda.

After taking others to task for sloppy attempts to draw conclusions from elections, it is perhaps dangerous for me to offer my own observations. Nonetheless, I believe there are some lessons that can be learned from this year's results, albeit few of them as simplistic as much of the prevailing media wisdom.

Lesson #1 - More Battles are Won on the Ground Than in the Air

While the media loves to focus on the TV wars most races are won in the trenches. The ability of Democrats to avoid a Republican landslide this fall began with some incredibly successful efforts to turn out voters. Here in Wisconsin, the Democratic National Committee did an enviable job of turning out the African-American community in the cities of Milwaukee, Racine and Beloit. These turn out efforts included paid media, community rallies with Jesse Jackson and calls featuring taped messages by President and Mrs. Clinton. In several other key districts labor and local Democrat organizations did an outstanding job of cranking up their votes. In Rock County, Dane County, and far Northwestern Wisconsin, incredible turnout efforts led to strong Democrat showings. Republicans would be foolish not to study these Democrat successes.

It is too often forgotten that for all the lofty rhetoric and grand strategies, campaigning still comes down to simple mechanics. Some candidates won because they simply worked harder. Some candidates lost because they could not get their people to the polls.

Grand, simplistic analyses are more attractive as post-election silver bullets than painstaking, individualized, race-by-race breakdowns of campaign mechanics, but they are seldom as accurate. Republicans must take the time to do this work, eschew easy answers, recognize the individual nature of each campaign and see what we can learn positive or negative from them.

Lesson #2 - Issues Still Matter, and The Bolder the Better

For all of the beating the "conventional wisdom" gives political boldness, a bold agenda is a winner with voters in the long term. Congressional Republicans lost more electoral steam from settling for a porked up budget with no tax cut, than they did from any "extreme" measure they passed. For all the talk of the Assembly Republicans moving too fast, being too aggressive, and too extreme, Republicans in the Assembly have picked up seats for four straight elections now while political control of the more "reasonable" State Senate has switched back and forth four times.

Governor Thompson was blasted as "extreme" for proposing to "end welfare as we know it." Today, however, even the most strident liberals only talk of "fine-tuning" W-2 and most of them include welfare reform among their accomplishments during campaign season. Only two Democrats in the entire Legislature voted for the bold \$1.2 billion property tax relief bill of 1995. Yet this fall, the Democrats couldn't jump on the property tax

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relief bandwagon quick enough. Last spring, Assembly GOP proposals to give back the surplus in the form of tax cuts were derided by Democrats and editorialists around the state as being rash and irresponsible. Yet this fall, the only complaint anyone heard from the political left or the press was, "why couldn't we have cut a little more?"

Ironically, while newspaper editorialists continually spend their campaign seasons decrying bland, issueless campaigns, newspaper reporters ignore most candidates' issue statements or attempts to be bold. Since 1992, Representative Duff and I have proposed over half a billion dollars in specific government program cuts and savings and the press has yawned. Just this summer, Governor Tommy Thompson announced the complete elimination of 54 different state boards and commissions and the press ignored it. After the Assembly Republican tax cuts were adopted this spring, the Legislative Fiscal Bureau showed a net tax reduction of \$264 million even after fee hikes, after inflation, after new spending! But you'd have needed to hire a private detective to find any mention of this in the media.

The press seldom rewards boldness, but the voters often do. Boldness drives the political agenda, and candidates and parties who appear to have an agenda outperform those who don't. The Assembly Republicans, and the Governor had clear, bold records and agendas. They won. The more moderate Senate Republicans and Congressional Republicans played it safe and lost. Bold is beautiful.

The 1998 elections were a political junkie's dream. They had something for everyone to be happy about and something for everyone to be sad about in this fascinating

year. While theories will continue to abound about what worked and why in 1998, several things are clear. Organizational mechanics and the traditional aspects of a political ground game continue to be the single most indispensable factor to successful campaigns. Issues do matter, and despite the modern media's propensity to reduce politics to 30-second sound bites or three column-inch election briefs, the voters respond to bold agendas and candidates who are able to articulate a vision. Parties and candidates who are not willing to do the hard work involved in these two areas and instead look for simplistic solutions and gimmicky shortcuts to political success do so at their own peril.