

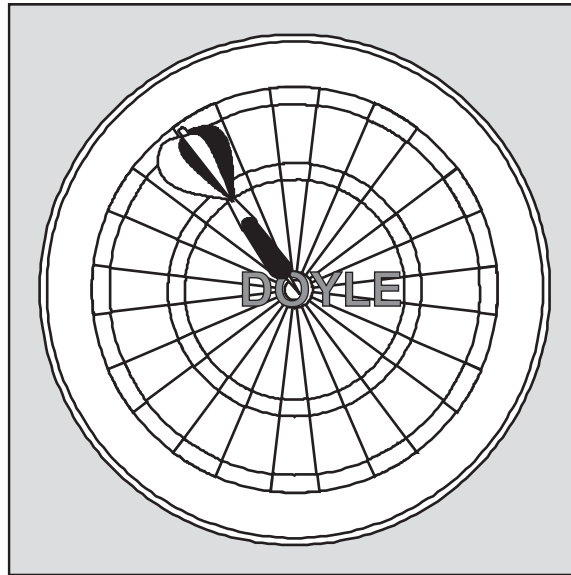
WHO ELECTED JIM DOYLE? AND PRESERVED CONSERVATIVE CONSTITUTIONAL IDEAS

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The November elections in Wisconsin are long over. Jim Doyle won; Mark Green lost. The analysis of the race, done right after the election, indicated that somehow Doyle was not that strong a candidate because the constitutional amendment to ban gay marriage had passed, and that somehow Green had been a very weak candidate because he had not made it a close race. Simply put, both those opinions are wrong.

Jim Doyle's reelection and the margin of his victory appeared to be totally unexpected throughout Wisconsin by the media and the pundits. However, the professionals, especially those running the Doyle and Green campaigns, knew long before November 7 that Jim Doyle was going to win comfortably. In fact, there is data that indicates that the election may very well have been over several months before the election day.

The reason for this is the obsession that the media and pundits have for polling results compared to what really goes on in political races. To try to make some sense out of this I have put together data that we have collected for twenty years in Wisconsin combined with exit polls from the night of the election. When



you look at this data, a very different story can be told about what happened in Wisconsin on election day—nothing close to what we have been told in the media.

Doyle underrated

It had been gospel in Wisconsin since 2002 that Jim Doyle was an unpopular politician who had only gotten 45% of the vote in his first gubernatorial

race and was extremely vulnerable. True, there were polls, including the Wisconsin Citizen Survey going back to 1991, that showed that Jim Doyle had never reached a 50% favorable rating. It was certainly true that he had only gotten 45% of the vote in 2002. The problem before, during, and strangely enough after the election, was that no one bothered to focus on the Republicans. In 2002 only 41% of the voters in the state had voted for the Republican, Scott McCallum. In 2006 that number had risen to 46% and resulted in a large loss. The question was why.

Two conclusions emerge from the gubernatorial election. The first is that Jim Doyle has been underrated by his supporters and oppo-

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nents for a long time. He is the quintessential politician, who had never lost a statewide election. No analyst seemed to understand better than Jim Doyle that his popularity was never going to reach the heights of Tommy Thompson or Herb Kohl. In fact, beginning in 2006, Doyle and his campaign ran a textbook professional campaign, based on the assumption that winning was much more important than being loved by an adoring public.

Defining Mark Green

Mark Green on the other hand came into the race as an unknown, ran a competent campaign, and discovered that it was the wrong time and the wrong place to be running for governor in Wisconsin. The case can be made that Green ran as well as he could have. Starting in early June 2006 Green was absolutely savaged by the Doyle campaign, and more importantly by independent groups, called 527s. Combined, they ran millions of dollars of paid negative television advertising pounding Mark Green. In October 2005, the first time we ever asked Wisconsin residents their views of Mark Green, he had a favorable image of 24%, with a 10% unfavorable. More important, 66% of the people in the state either didn't know him, or didn't have an opinion of him. Nine months later in June 2006 this began to change. By that point, 26% of Wisconsinites had a favorable view of Mark Green, 19% had an unfavorable opinion, while 55% had no opinion of him. Three months later, as the campaign began to really kick in, much of this had changed. Only 33% of the voters had a favorable opinion of Mark Green, while 33% had an unfavorable opinion, and 34% either didn't know him or have any opinion of him.

One doesn't have to be a statistician to know that Green was heading in the wrong direction. Nothing is truer in politics than when you are running for major office, your first impression becomes the lasting impression. While the media focused on Doyle's inability to reach a 50% favorable rating, the real story was Mark Green's unfavorable ratings. By the election, some of the polls had Green at close to 50% unfavorables. Simply

put, no new candidate running for governor could be elected when approximately half the people in the state had an unfavorable opinion of him. There was very little Mark Green could do about this, though he certainly tried.

For Jim Doyle it was different. Doyle's campaign focused on Mark Green. Their view, clearly from the beginning of 2006, was that the election was to be won in November regardless of Doyle's popularity with the average voter. In addition, independent groups, called 527s, helped Doyle mightily by continually pounding Mark Green with millions of dollars of negative advertising. One observation of this race was that Doyle's campaign was more professional and experienced than Green's, and the independent groups supporting Doyle were much more professional and experienced than the independent groups that would later support Green. Equally important, the independent expenditures for Doyle came early and were right on the mark.

One wonders, for example, what would have happened if the 527s that supported Green late had taken their money and had presented a positive profile of Mark Green. They could have introduced him to the state early in 2006, rather than waiting until his negatives were so strong there was little that could be done to change the views of the average voter in Wisconsin.

Doyle's strategy of making Green the focus of the election, rather than himself, was one of the major factors in his victory. But still, in this election year, it was very difficult, if not impossible, for any Republican to win in Wisconsin. For those who question how well Green ran, consider this. In Michigan and Illinois two incumbent Democrats running for reelection for the first time were in much more trouble than Jim Doyle and yet they scored larger victories than Doyle. In a *Wall Street Journal* poll in Michigan in mid-October only 20% of the voters thought the state was going in the right direction; 67% thought it was going in the wrong direction. To think that any governor could win with those numbers is astounding and yet Jennifer Granholm, facing

a Republican opponent who spent approximately \$30 million, won easily. In Illinois it was much the same: a *Chicago Tribune* poll in mid-October showed that only 31% thought that Governor Rod Blagojevich could clean up political corruption in Illinois state government. More to the point, only 35% of the voters in the state had a favorable opinion of this Democratic incumbent, and yet he also won by a larger margin than Jim Doyle. The one trait seen in all three states was that the Democratic Party, with help from independent groups, took millions of dollars and through negative advertising made their Republican opponents unelectable.

Targeting senior voters

This turned out to be Mark Green's major problem. Elections have pivotal points and usually no one recognizes it at the time. The gubernatorial election in Wisconsin was clearly defined in the first debate. Mark Green came across as a very likeable and intelligent candidate. He correctly made the point that the only voters who should support him were those who thought the state wasn't going in the right direction and thought we were over-taxed. It was the only strategy that he could use. He used it rather effectively and kept on that message for the rest of the campaign.

Doyle, on the other hand, did something important that was totally missed by the media. He addressed one key component of the vote, as he had previously, but no one knew it. Doyle went out of his way to make a direct appeal to voters by age—specifically seniors who were 65-years-of-age or older. While the media—before, during, and after the election—touted the impact of young voters, it was senior citizens who decided who was elected governor in Wisconsin, and more importantly how their state constitution would

change. During his first debate Doyle went out of his way time after time to tie Mark Green to George Bush and the Republican-controlled Congress. In addition, the only tax cut that Doyle talked about in the first debate was his ending the state tax on Social Security. Finally, in his brief summation at the end, Jim Doyle had one skillfully crafted line—that he was the adult running in the race.

After the first debate, we ran a poll of 600 likely voters. It was truly impressive to see just how on the mark Jim Doyle had been. Among likely voters in the November election, we had asked about Jim Doyle's favorability. Among all voters it had been 41% favorable to 41%

unfavorable. Among senior voters 65 or older, however, he was 47% favorable to 38% unfavorable. We asked the same question about Mark Green. His favorables were 33% with 33% unfavorable, but among senior voters 65 or older, his favorability was only 29% and his unfavorable was 42%. We then followed up with a horse-race question where Doyle had a lead of 45% to 40% over Mark Green.

However, among senior citizens that lead was 48% for Doyle; 37% for Green. That was helped by the ability of Doyle to tie Bush and Congress around Green's neck and paint him as an over-the-top, right-wing extremist.

On election night, the CNN exit poll had Doyle beating Green among voters 65 or older by a spread of 55% to 44%. This eleven-point margin matched exactly the spread we had in our September poll. Simply put, Jim Doyle had early on targeted senior voters with serious television commercials. You can, in fact, reach voters by age demographics. There was little doubt that Doyle had been using this strategy for several months before the debates and long before the election had really kicked into high gear.

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What was interesting was that the media missed this entire story by focusing on young voters. Yet, it was the senior citizen and older voters who decided the election. Consider the constitutional amendment to ban gay marriage. We had been told early on that this constitutional amendment had a good chance of failing. Many people were shocked at how easily it passed. Again, the reason was that the media had focused almost entirely on young voters and turnout. In fact, according to CNN, the turnout for young voters between the ages of 18 and 29 was 17% of the total vote. Among senior citizens 65 and older, it was 21%. They outvoted younger voters. There was an enormous split between the youngest voters and the oldest voters in this election. Younger voters supported Jim Doyle over Mark Green by 57% to 40%. Among senior citizens however, the spread dropped to 55% to 44%. On the vote on the gay marriage amendment, however, the voting spread was absolutely stunning. Among younger voters, only 40% voted for the constitutional amendment, while 60% voted against it — a 20% spread, which would have been very similar to the spread for Jim Doyle. Among senior citizens over 65, there was a startlingly different vote, where they voted heavily for Doyle, only 29% voted against the amendment, while 71% supported it — a spread of 42 points. This was the major reason that the constitutional amendment passed by a large margin.

The media continued to focus after the election on the turnout of young voters in college towns, but no one bothered to mention that the traditional older voter in Wisconsin simply voted their pocketbooks and for traditional values — issues that had been influencing their voting for decades. Issues that were actually very predictable if one paid attention to what was going on in the campaigns. Jim Doyle went after their votes and got them, but on the gay marriage issue they were not interested in making cultural changes to values they had developed over a lifetime. By the way, they also overwhelmingly supported the death penalty. The point is that those who thought that somehow Doyle was vulnerable

never bothered to examine who exactly was supporting him, and who was opposed to Mark Green.

Issues that weren't

Was this the only reason for Doyle's victory? No, but it was a major component of it. There were three other factors that helped Doyle. In early June, Jim Doyle faced a very serious problem for an incumbent governor. Residents in Wisconsin were extremely upset about rising gasoline prices. In our June poll, 49% of respondents told us that rising gasoline prices were causing a financial hardship on their households. More importantly, 53% of Wisconsinites thought that gas prices would continue to move higher, while only 8% thought they would move lower. By September as gasoline prices were spiraling downward towards \$2 a gallon, the economic concern about the problem had all but dissipated. By September only 2% of likely Wisconsin voters mentioned it as one of the most serious problems in the state, which was certainly a far departure from what we had seen in June. More important was its impact on the voter's view on the state's economy. In June, only 17% of our respondents thought that the state's economy would improve over the next year, while 39% thought it would get worse. Three months later likely voters had a totally different impression: 25% thought the state's economy would improve, but only 26% thought it would get worse. There was little question that as gasoline prices disappeared as an issue, it neutralized the negative feeling over the state's economy and attitudes toward Jim Doyle. To incumbent governors there is no bigger problem than voters angry over an issue that affects their pocketbooks. By September those economic issues had dissipated for Jim Doyle.

If that weren't enough, Jim Doyle would continue to be lucky. His ability to link Mark Green with George Bush and Congress would only become a heavier burden for Green as the election season progressed through October. As Iraq spiraled from a disaster to total chaos, the House of Representatives had a major sex

scandal. Could there have been a worse year to be a Republican Congressman running for any major state office in the country?

Finally, there was another break for Doyle. The Steven Avery trial, which threatened to produce enormous emotional coverage, had been scheduled to begin in mid-October. This case would have certainly raised the issues of crime and the death penalty, much to Doyle's chagrin. When it was moved to late-February another potentially negative issue for Doyle was pulled off the table.

Doyle's strategy worked. The election was not a mandate for Doyle; it was a process to get him a second term as governor. Doyle's ability to raise millions of dollars and use them effectively to destroy any Republican candidate makes the Governor very formidable in the future. If he chooses to run for a third term, Jim Doyle may be Jim Doyle's toughest opponent.