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Election Time: TX-Governor

Michael Sean Winters | Sep. 27, 2010 Distinctly Catholic

It is strange to me that the GOP has not been able to put the Texas governor?s race into the win column with only six weeks out. Texas has been an overwhelmingly Republican state. Not only did favorite son candidate George W. Bush win the state resoundingly, but John McCain beat Barack Obama in Texas by a huge margin of 55 percent to 44 percent. Both of the state?s U.S. senators are Republicans and twenty of the state?s 32 Representatives are Republicans. The GOP controls both houses of the state legislature. States don?t get much more red than Texas.

Still, RealClear Politics only has the gubernatorial contest as ?Lean Republican,? and even that is a bit of a reach. The RealClearPolitics average of six polls, all conducted in August or September, shows incumbent Governor Rick Perry with a 5.8 percent lead over Democratic challenger Bill White. One of the six polls, done by a GOP firm, had Perry ahead by twelve points. The other five range between giving Perry a 7 point advantage or a 1 point advantage. The Cook Political Report, which had the race as ?Lean Republican? earlier in the year, now rates it as a ?Toss-up.?

Who lives in the Texas Governor?s mansion is important for a variety of reasons but none more than the fact that Texas is likely to pick up three new congressional districts after the results for the 2010 census come in. If the GOP continues to control both houses of the state legislature and the Governorship, they can greatly impact the way the new distict lines are drawn. Is that important? In 2004, after Tom DeLay?s mid-decade redistricting, the Republicans captured two-thirds of the state?s congressional delegation although they only received 58 percent of the vote statewide. When Democrats controlled the redistricting process after the 1990 census, they captured 70 percent of the state?s congressional delegation in the next election in 1992, even though they only captured 50 percent of the vote. So, excessively partisan re-districting has been a bipartisan crime in the Lone Star state and if one party has control of all the levers, they can significantly improve their party?s chance of winning additional seats in Congress.

The other reason the Texas governor?s race should matter is because the incumbent Republican Gov. Rick Perry is, how to put this politely, fond of dabbling in kookie-talk. In April, Perry attended a Tea Party rally [1]that had an abundance of signs calling for Texas to secede from the Union. After the rally reporters asked Gov. Perry about the secession calls. ?We've got a great union. There's absolutely no reason to dissolve it,? Perry said. ?But if Washington continues to thumb their nose at the American people, you know, who knows what might come out of that. But Texas is a very unique place, and we're a pretty independent lot to boot.? Of course, this Yankee was tempted to say, ?Go!? but the fact is we don?t even joke about the issue that brought on America?s greatest national failure, the Civil War.

Perry is also ambivalent about comprhensive immigration reform, a phrase that does not appear under the ?Issues? section of his website, although ?Border Security? does. And, when you go to the Spanish-language section [2]of the website, there are a series of articles critical of Perry?s opponent. Like most websites, there is a teaser and a link. When you click on ?Seguir leyenda? or ?To Continue Reading? you get sent to a page asking for contributions.

The Democratic challenger is former Houston Mayor Bill White [3]. The contest for mayor is nonpartisan, but that only partly explains his extraordinary electoral success. After winning his first term with 63 percent of the vote in 2005, he won re-election in 2007 with 91 percent of all votes, and in 2009 with 86 percent. He won the ?Profiles in Courage? award for his leading role in helping Houston provide for refugees from New Orleans after Hurricane Katrina. He taught Sunday school at St. Luke?s United Methodist Church for many years, and has the smarts to mention that fact on the biography on his website. And, he ordered police in his city not to inquire about the immigration status of those they interview or arrest, earning him strong criticism for turning Houston into a ?sanctuary city.?

The issue of how the nation will treat immigrants consistently ranks lower than the economy and health care among the most pressing concerns. Even in the border states such as Texas and Arizona. But, the immigration issue is at the top of the list among immigrants for obvious, existential, reasons. And, the GOP has thoroughly burned its bridges here which is why Texas is going to turn more and more purple in the next few elections and finally become blue. Look at a map [4]of which counties voted for Obama in 2008. Apart from a few urban areas such as Houston and Austin, all the other Democratic counties are along the border. Looking at the map in, say, Rome, one would say the dioceses of Brownsville, Corpus Christi and El Paso lean Dem as the rest of the state does not.

The hard part about analyzing polling is that the models they use tend to assume that new voters will turn out at the same rate as other new voters no matter what demographic they fit. And, I am guessing that some young Anglo voters might, if history is a guide, not show up for a midterm even if they voted in the presidential election. For Latinos, however, the ugly racism that has accompanied the passage of the Arizona law that permits police to demand the ?papers? of those they suspect of being illegal has riled up these new Latino voters. They are not going to stay home. If the polls are right and Gov. Perry is only holding a three or four point lead, that may not be enough if Latinos turn out in overwhelming numbers. They need to or else their representation in Congress will be adversely affected for a decade.

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