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Election Time: The Lay of the Land

Michael Sean Winters | Oct. 15, 2010 Distinctly Catholic

Sometimes, midterm elections are a big yawn and, sad to say, for most Americans they still are. It is safe to assume that a minority of those able to vote will actually make it to the polls on November 2 to help decide the direction of the nation. It remains one of the most inexcusable facts of our political life that elections are not held on a Sunday, or that Election Day is a holiday, or that the entire nation has not shifted to mail-in voting to increase turnout. It is an even more inexcusable fact of American society that so few Americans see politics as important enough to get interested, get involved and make a difference. But, there it is.

This year?s midterm election is anything but a big yawn. Even the primaries were exhilarating for anyone who cares about the dynamics of and directions in American politics. The political landscape has, in fact, already changed substantially. Two years ago, the Tea Party was something that happened in Boston in 1773. Two years ago, political analysts were wondering the GOP could ever recover from the trouncing they got in 2006 and 2008. Two years ago, Barack Obama was elected President on the basis of his promise of ?change,? a contentless noun that allowed voters of wildly different views to project their own ambitions onto Obama?s promise of change. And, lest we forget, many voters, especially young voters, were excited at the prospect of making history by electing the nation?s first black president and two years ago, we did make history.

But, of all the changes in the past two years, the dominant political fact of 2010 is not a political fact at all, it is an economic one: Two years ago, very few people recognized how deep and how dangerous the looming recession was. We really were at the precipice, but no one in political leadership of either party wanted to admit that fact for fear of further depressing the economy. But, now, President Obama must pay the price for his inability to dig us out of the economic mess more quickly. Perhaps it could not be done no matter what policies were adopted; It is undoubtedly the case that the government?s ability to affect basic economic decisions is far more limited than we suppose, and on any given day, when times are good, politicians who advocate policies that are completely opposed to each other are all capable of taking credit for the good times, and assessing blame for the bad.

President Obama, whose skill at communicating during the campaign wowed us all, turned out to be not so good at communicating his decisions and policies once in office. The Stimulus Bill became a hodgepodge of spending, difficult to explain but easy to mock. Ditto the health care bill. And, in both cases, he turned over the drafting of the bill to the congressional leaders, which turned out to be a dreadful mistake. Speaker Pelosi, brilliant at running the House, cannot in her wildest imagination conceive how the workings of Congress and certain leftie certitudes will play in North Carolina or Indiana. In the Senate, Majority Leader Harry Reid suffered from similar difficulties. The net result was that policies that could scarcely be more necessary ? and throw in the highly successful bailouts which saved the financial system and Detroit and are already paying dividends - became, in the public mind, indefensible. And for reasons I still do not understand, Democrats simply shut up on these issues, leaving Republicans to define them entirely. What most voters know about the health care bill, they have learned from its opponents and that is a recipe for Democratic disaster.

It is astounding to me that none of us knows the name of a child, under the age of six, possessed of a pre-

existing condition, who could not get insurance coverage until the new law made it illegal to deny such coverage. Ever heard of Ryan White? He is the teenager who changed the entire nature of the debate over funding for HIV/AIDS care and research. Why? Because Americans like to ? need to ? put a face on data. They do not warm to technocratic arguments, they want a story, an anecdote. Many contemporaries mocked Ronald Reagan, including many of his aides and congressional allies, because he would not read his briefing books and was often shockingly uninformed about the situations upon which he was called to make decisions. His staff learned that if they brought him a good anecdote or a good story that helped him see a given policy choice the way that aide wanted, he would embrace it. It may not have been the best way to make a good decision, but it did mean that Reagan was always able to communicate his policy decisions in accessible, anecdotal ways, in a way that all voters could understand and appreciate.

One of the trends that is clearly emerging is a growing disaffection among unaffiliated voters with the government of the day, no matter which party is in power. Some unaffiliated voters tend towards one party or the other and are, except in name, partisans, but an increasingly significant number of unaffiliated voters are simply anti-government. They may simply be curmudgeons. They may, as in the case of the Tea Party, cling to esoteric notions about the 17th Amendment. They may be spoiled brats, raised in prosperity and unwilling to accept any of the hardships and sufferings their parents endured. Whatever their motivation, they have seized on the health care reform and the bailouts as evidence of gross government excess. Given their suspicions of government, those of us who believe that government can serve great and important and common purposes have to find new and different ways to convince them; or, we need to campaign in a different country. We may not like it, but it is part of the American DNA to be suspicious of government and the Obama administration has done a miserable job making the alternate case for an activist, energetic government.

This leads me to conclude that Obama?s biggest liability is his inability to understand the value of populism. Indeed, looking back at his speeches since he became President, he seems allergic to anything that has even a whiff of populism. I do not hate ?elitists? and those who decry ?liberal elites? tend to prefer a yahoo culture, resistant to evidence, suspicious of knowledge that challenges, and hostile to differentness. Those who despise ?liberal elites? are as un-American in their way as any American can be: American culture has always been fertile ground for scientists and inventors, it has long cultivated knowledge through its public schools and its great universities, and differentness is actually more American than apple pie. But, sadly, in his aversion to populism, President Obama does seem like an elitist and it is so deep he doesn?t recognize it. The President is a wonk. That is not a bad thing, but it is not a popular thing.

So, this is going to be a bad year for the Dems. They deserve to have a bad year. The degree of their defeat remains to be seen. The possibility of a tsunami exists but it is far from clear to me that one is inevitable. To take only one example, in Virginias Fifth Congressional District, one pollster has consistently had incumbent Democrat Tom Perriello losing by double digits, while every other poll has the race a dead heat. Nonetheless, FiveThirtyEight.com predicts that Perriello has only a 7 percent chance of retaining his seat. When one poll is so consistently at odds with other polls, at some point, you have to not figure their results into the equation. Outliers do not have predictive value.

Stay tuned. Next week, we will post here at NCR an Election Central page where you can find all the analyses of this year?s midterms, with updates of all the races I have selected for examination this year. The upcoming race could see the end of the Tea Party if its candidates all lose; it could also launch the Tea Party into the governing counsels of Congress. The new Congress is likely to be more conservative than the current Congress and just as unable to find bipartisan consensus. But, everything is open to change in the final weeks and it is going to be fun to watch.

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