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Election Time: Turnout

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Distinctly Catholic

Yesterday, on our way home from Mass, four young people stood by the side of the road holding up enormous signs. One was hand-painted on a sheet and said "Vote Today." Maryland has early voting at select areas. The other sign was professionally imprinted and there were two more identical signs at the next intersection. "We Got Your Back President Obama!" those signs read.

Prince George's County is a majority-minority county, and when you drive around on Sunday at midday, you see a lot of black folk and a lot of Latinos coming home from church. These signs were on this road, and at that intersection, by design. In the event, there are very few contested seats in Prince George's County. Sen. Barbara Mikulski is going to win in a walk, Congressman Steny Hoyer does not face serious opposition and, according to a new poll out this morning, incumbent Gov. Martin O'Malley is opening up a wide lead in his race for re-election.

The sign waving happened in my neighborhood yesterday because the Democrats have begun activating the ground game that carried them to victory in 2008. People who signed up to volunteer two years ago have been contacted and asked to do what they did then. Democrats may not need a huge turnout in Prince George's County, but if the same thing happens in southside Virginia where Cong. Tom Perriello is in a tough re-election fight, or in the African-American neighborhoods in Philadelphia, where Cong. Joe Sestak needs high turnout to win that Senate seat, then the black community may carry the day for embattled Democrats. In a race like Nevada's, where the race is exceedingly close, there may not be an historically African-American community or neighborhood as there are in Philly or southside Virginia, but there are predominantly black churches and stores and barbershops where a culture exists that is opaque to white folk. And there the word is out: The GOP is trying to "punk the president" and African-Americans are mobilizing to stop them. We will see if it is enough.

Young people are more difficult to encourage, as an article in Politico illustrates, even if they are just as easy to reach. Their culture exists around college campuses where even non-students go to hang out, buy stuff, and chill. All reports are that this year there is not the excitement of two years ago. When I traveled to the University of Virginia's campus two weeks ago, I found that lack of excitement obvious. What to say? 2008 really was an historic election. Young people were engaged in doing what young people must like to do, breaking a barrier, and breaking a barrier that, no matter what one thought about candidate Obama, almost everyone agreed it was good to break. Sending Steny Hoyer back for his sixteenth term lacks the *je ne sais quoi* of 2008.

But, the Democrats must double down on younger voters. If, as all polls indicate, the unaffiliated or independent voters are breaking to the GOP, young voters ? who are the most likely to be independent ? are vital to the Democrats this year. They can offset the GOP-tilt of their elders. And, it is not like the Democrats need all the young people to turnout. We forget that President Obama won big in 2008, 53% to 46%, and the Democrats have some cushion to work with. Perriello and Reid and Sestak don't need to win big, they just need to win.

Every prognosticator this year says two things. First it is going to be a big year for the GOP: There is not a pundit in the country who thinks the Democrats will hold the House and most think the GOP has at least an outside chance of taking the Senate. The second thing prognosticators all agree on is that they are not sure the polling models work. How do you project voter turnout for 2010? Normally, you would start with the previous midterm, in 2006, but that was before Obama won in 2008, changing the relationship of African-American voters to the election franchise. Blacks may not turn out as they did in 2008, but will they surpass their numbers in 2006? Statisticians make such determinations to come up with their models, but these turnout models are a huge, repeat huge, caveat over the predictions. The GOP could win 45 seats, it could win 60 seats, it could win only 35. But, the decisive votes may come from those who see the signs that read "We Got Your Back President Obama?" and do something they have not done in a long time, vote in a midterm election.

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