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Countering Spin

Michael Sean Winters | Nov. 2, 2010 Distinctly Catholic

Later tonight, we will see how big the Republican wave is going to be. Every independent prognosticator is predicting that the GOP will take the House and narrow the Democratic margin in the Senate. If it is a big wave, a tsunami even, the GOP has a shot at taking the Senate too. Yesterday, a group of experts offered us a look into their crystal balls, predicting surprises in Pennsylvania?s Senate race, the congressional race that in Virginia-5 that has captured the imagination of main stream pundits, the Oregon governorship and the topsy-turvy Alaska Senate race. I suspect there may be even more surprises, but today I want to float some of the spin we will hear, and refute it.

The Democrats will talk about how history dictates that the party in power loses seats in an off-year election. Of course, the Republicans did pretty well in 2002, and yes, that was in part due to the sense of national purpose occasioned by the response to the terrorist attacks on 9/11. And, the Democrats did pretty well in 1998, even though they were crushed in 1994. So, in the past four midterms, half the time the party in control of the White House did pretty well. If the economy was soaring, I do not think the Democrats would be looking at such enormous losses.

The Republicans will say that the results show a complete rejection of the Obama agenda. This is also not exactly true. In much of the Midwest, swing voters embraced Obama in 2008, hoping for a change from the policies and the politics of George W. Bush. The last two years have been unforgiving to the Democrats as they faced a steeper recession than anticipated and a jobless recovery that is unprecedented. Additionally, polls of Independent voters show that they are not so much angry at Obama as they are angry at Washington. They resent the lack of bipartisan cooperation to solve the nation?s problems, but that fault can be assigned equally and, if the GOP takes control of the House, it will be assigned equally. Right now, anyone wanting to say they are unhappy has little choice but to vote against the Democrats. It remains to be seen if the GOP can earn the confidence of those voters.

Some Democrats will point to the defeat of moderate and conservative Democrats in the South and Midwest as evidence that the main reason for the defeat is that the Obama Administration and Congress were not liberal enough in their first two years. This is utter, self-deceiving nonsense. I do not think the Obama administration?s policies have been overly liberal. I wish the health care reform really did look more like a ?government takeover.? But, in swing districts from Virginia to Ohio to Indiana to Arizona, the Democrats failed to present their policies as cohering with basic American values. The President too often speaks like a policy wonk about cost curves and complicated actuarial projections and the Democrats who voted for it have largely failed to address the subject at all, leaving the GOP to mis-characterize it. The first head to roll after this election should be that of Robert Gibbs and the rest of the White House Communications team. They do a fine job at the podium, but they have demonstrably failed to explain to their boss that he must connect with voters, explain his policies in ways people can understand, and put a human face on the abstract issues he must confront.

Some Republicans will say that the message being sent to Washington is a plea for limited government, lower taxes, less regulation, etc. The message will be far more muddled than that. Voters have now voted three times

in a row for change. What do they want? Some want more limited government to be sure. Others want the two parties to work together and an end to bipartisan rancor. Others wanted Obama and the Democrats in Congress focusing only on the economy and, instead, watched the long, painful, often distasteful congressional process by which the health care reform was passed. Others simply want a better economy and will keeping voting for whichever party they think will give them a shot at the change they seek. If the GOP over-interprets the results as a mandate for their policies, like its predecessor in 1994 and as they accuse the Democrats in the past two years, they too will alienate many moderate, centrist voters. If they reach out to the center to eagerly, they will disaffect their Tea Party base.

There is one message that I am 100 percent will be sent today: The Democrats need new leadership in the House. Speaker Nancy Pelosi has been enormously effective at getting legislation passed, but her particular brand of effectiveness has been unable to provide those members from swing districts with the rationale they need to defend their votes. It has never made sense for me to have as the Chairman of the Democratic Congressional Campaign Committee, a member whose district is, literally, inside the Beltway. Pelosi and Van Hollen should both go, even if by some miracle the Democrats manage to hold on to a slim majority. Current Majority Leader Steny Hoyer is as uninspiring as they come. Congressman John Larson of Connecticut is the only member of the current leadership I would keep. Someone in the leadership of the House needs to actually come from the kind of swing district that is critical to maintaining a majority. Needless to say, if tonight he ekes out a win, Cong. Tom Perriello should be rewarded with a prominent leadership post. Perriello?s ideological moderation could be matched by having a full-blown liberal like Cong. Linda Sanchez of California ascend the leadership ladder.

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