NATIONAL CATHOLIC REPORTER
Published on *National Catholic Reporter* (http://ncronline.org)

The Morning After

Michael Sean Winters | Nov. 3, 2010 Distinctly Catholic

The Republican wave stretched from the mountains of New Hampshire through the Alleghenies in Pennsylvania, across the Midwest, and throughout the South last night. The Republicans gained control of the House with a sizable majority and fell just short in the Senate. The results were a disaster for the Democrats and for the President. What happened?

According to exit polls, 50 percent of the electorate yesterday said they were ?Very worried? about the direction of the economy in the next year and another 36 percent were ?Somewhat worried.? This was the central dynamic in the election no doubt: When the economy is in the tank, voters take their frustration out on the party in power.

But Democrats did not do themselves any favors. When voters wanted Congress to be focused on jobs, Congress was debating, seemingly endlessly, health care reform. It turns out that health care reform was necessary to ensure the long-term economic solvency of the government, to begin the painful process of reducing health care costs, and to achieve a more just society. But most of the reforms do not take effect until 2014 and they did nothing to contribute to stimulating the economy today. It is not that the voters rejected ?Obamacare,? although some on the right will try and paint the results that way. It is that voters rejected Congress and the President focusing on something, anything, other than the immediate need to fix the broken economy.

It is possible that some in the GOP intend to make the same mistake the Democrats just made. Calls for the repeal of ?Obamacare? were front and center and served as the best applause line for Republican candidates. But only 18 percent of voters yesterday said health care was the most important issue. And with the Senate still in Democratic hands, efforts to repeal health care reform will be still-born. The more Republicans complain about it, the more they will be failing to address the core economic issues that have voters so upset. If there is some truth to the charge that Obama over-interpreted his mandate two years ago, there is some truth to the concern that Republicans will do the same now.

The other outstanding achievement of the previous Congress, financial regulatory reform, suffered from the same political liabilities as health care. The reforms were necessary for the long-term, but had a short-term negative effect as businesses and investors sort through the legislation and hold off from making the kinds of decisions that would lower the unemployment rate. And like health care reform, the utter complexity of the

financial reform effort left voters cold. It may have been good legislation, it may have been bad, but it was primarily unintelligible to the average voter.

The really bad joke is on the voters. If they want the government to do something about the economy, they picked the wrong horses. The GOP campaigned on a commitment to less government at a time when we need more government spending to help stimulate the economy, not less. If the GOP looks to the Conservative government in Britain for guidance, and pursues any kind of austerity program, they will risk the already fragile recovery.

It goes without saying that a host of Catholic concerns will be ignored for the next two years. Anti-poverty efforts are off the table. Any movement on confronting climate change is out the window. Any push for a more pacific foreign policy received a strong check.

No group suffered heavier losses last night than pro-life Democrats. Jim Oberstar in Minnesota, Steve Driehaus and John Boccieri in Ohio; and Chris Carney, Kathy Dahlkemper and Paul Kanjorski in Pennsylvania all went down to defeat. They were attacked by some pro-life groups because of their votes in favor of health care reform, but the abortion issue was not decisive. Almost by definition, a pro-life Democrat represents a moderate to conservative district where Democrats were likely to lose if the GOP wave was strong enough, and it was.

Indeed, one of the most disconcerting dynamics of last night?s results is that the in-coming Republican majority is more conservative and the Democrats who survived are more liberal. Compromise will be even harder to achieve in the House next year. The Republican leaders will be disinclined to pursue any legislation that is not supported by a majority of their caucus, all of whom are looking over their shoulder at the prospect of a Tea Party challenge in the 2012 primaries. And some liberals will misinterpret the results, saying that moderate Democrats lost because of their moderation. The central message the electorate wanted to send, that they want both parties to work together for the good of the country, is a message more likely to be encumbered by last night?s results.

The most interesting, and frightening, development this year was the rise of the Tea Party. A combination of corporate cash and genuine grassroots anger, the movement yielded mixed results. Their candidates lost Senate races in Nevada, Delaware and, apparently, Alaska. If Mike Castle had been the GOP nominee in Delaware instead of Christine O?Donnell, and Sue Lowden had been the Republican candidate in Nevada instead of Sharron Angle, the GOP would have taken the Senate as well. But Tea Party victories in the Senate races in Kentucky, Utah and Florida guarantee that the group?s concerns will have a voice in the new Senate. More than that, an individual Senator has enormous power to gum up the legislative process.

The President will hold a press conference this afternoon and the first order of business is to publicly eat his humble pie. It is an unpleasant task under any circumstances, and President Obama does not have Bill Clinton?s slickness to help him swallow it whole. But, swallow it he must. The time for blaming voters for not understanding how good his policies are is over. He must honor the verdict the electorate rendered last night and reach out to Republicans. He must try and find policies that will achieve the kinds of compromise Clinton achieved with his Republican Congress after the 1994 elections. He won?t like it, but the quickest way to guarantee that his is a one-term presidency is to appear to equivocate about the results and what they mean.

People and pundits look to elections for clarification. Some things are clear from last night?s results while other things are murky. Sorting through voter intent will require both parties to exercise a degree of self-examination and thoughtfulness that was in short supply in this election. People want more than soundbites and anger is not a philosophical guidepost. We all want the new Congress and the President to rise to the occasion, but it is far from obvious that either has the skills to do so.

[Michael Sean Winters writes about the interplay of politics and religion every day on his **Distinctly Catholic blog**

[1] on NCRonline.org.]

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