

## Post-Mortem on the Post-Mortems

Michael Sean Winters | Nov. 12, 2010 Distinctly Catholic

It has been almost two weeks since the voters rendered their verdict, and we in the commentariat are still trying to figure out precisely what that verdict was. Of course, politicians are also trying to figure that out, from Nancy Pelosi's "it was the recession" state of denial to Rand Paul's "We are taking our government back." Here at Distinctly Catholic, we have heard from expert analysts like Professor Steve Schneck of CUA's IPRCS and from those involved in shaping the election like Catholic United's Chris Korzen and NRLC's Douglas Johnson.

Of course, there are grains of truth in almost any perspective. I suspect that the recession was the number one reason for voter discontent, especially among moderate, independent voters who voted for Obama in 2008 when he was pledging to enact health care reform, and voted against his party in 2010 when he had enacted it. Maybe some sliver of these swing voters were just appalled by the health care reform law, but my guess is that they were swayed by the economy more than anything. And, the truth be told, there is precious little the government can do to boost the economy right now that it is not already doing. The political climate will not tolerate another stimulus and that is the only thing that might help. Tax cuts for the super-rich will not stimulate growth. See [Dean Baker's article at TNR yesterday](#) [1], which I do not entirely agree with, but which makes the point that the deficits are not what is restraining the economic recovery, demand is.

The second thing these moderate, swing voters want is for Democrats and Republicans to work together. As a candidate, President Obama promised to be a transformational figure and I think he sincerely believed he could transcend the partisan bickering with the force of his personality. His hopes were misplaced. The GOP has, since Reagan's term, believed they own the White House and they get real nasty when a Democrat lives there. Remember the charges that Bill and Hillary Clinton conspired to murder Vince Foster? Still, by turning the actual drafting of major legislation over to Congress, Obama virtually guaranteed that there would be little in the way of bipartisan cooperation. Now, he has no choice but to deal with the GOP and it remains to be seen if that will produce moderation or gridlock. My guess is that it will produce moderation on some issues and gridlock on others. Already, the President is rightly looking to compromise on tax cuts, but I am reasonably confident that he will dig in his heels on any effort to attack his health care law. My rule of thumb for the President? If you can translate the difference into numbers, shoot for the compromise. So, on tax cuts, liberals want them to cease immediately for the super-rich, and conservatives want them to be eternal, so Obama should compromise at a two year extension.

As for the extreme interpretations coming from the right, I think it should be obvious to everyone that the Tea Party's influence is uneven. They pulled Christine O'Donnell and Sharron Angle and Ken Buck and Joe Miller across the finish lines in the GOP primaries but the first two got shellacked and the latter two lost races they should have won, so the Tea Party seal of approval is not guarantee of electoral success outside a low-turnout GOP primary. If the Republican leaders want to interpret their election success as an endorsement of their entire program, let them do so. However, more intelligent heads seem to be prevailing on that side of the aisle and Republicans are sending all the right signals about having to earn the voters' trust and understanding that they have not received a mandate, only a second chance. Then, there is Dick Armey, hosting his conference to steel the backbones of the incoming GOP class to avoid compromise. Both sides of the aisle have their rejectionists.

One signal of how this will all play out will be determined soon enough when the lame duck session convenes. Apart from housekeeping and issues that cannot wait, such as the Defense Authorization Bill, the lame duck Congress should do what actual lame ducks do: sit tight and do not attempt to fly. I would love to see immigration reform and the Dream Act pass. I would love to see "Don't Ask; Don't Tell" consigned to the dustbin of history. I would love to see a bunch of progressive measures make it across the finish line. But, more than that, I want democracy to function, and democracy cannot function unless those making the decisions are accountable to the electorate in some fashion. By definition, the current Congress is not responsible to the voters any longer. Bad enough that some Democrats do not see that ramming through controversial policies is the equivalent of thumbing their noses at the voters. Such a course undermines the essence of responsible government. Incumbent members of Congress who lost last week should refuse to vote on anything except those emergency pieces of legislation that can't wait.

I am sure that the President is aware his base has misgivings about some of his decisions, but he is absolutely right to seek a compromise on the tax cuts as his first order of post-election business. Obama also can count on the fact that John Boehner and Co. will give the liberal base additional reasons over the next two years to love the President and the Democrats. I am less certain that the incoming GOP leadership has a handle on how to massage their new Tea Party-inspired members into a governing majority. Slogans about smaller government were great, but when those cutbacks target jobs in your home district, they look a lot less appealing. Stay tuned.

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