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Obstructionism: Will It Have Worked?

Michael Sean Winters | Oct. 31, 2012 Distinctly Catholic

Ezra Klein?s article this morning [1] focuses on an issue that has been bothering me for some time: The fact that GOP obstructionism these past four years appears to be working. Citing a string of newspapers endorsing Governor Romney on the hope that he will be able to work with Congress across party lines, Klein rightly wonders if the logic of these arguments will not actually embolden the intransigents in both parties. Refuse to work with the president, no matter who it is, and then blame him for failing to heal the partisan divisions in Washington. It is no surprise that Gov. Romney is running ads that tout his ability to work with a Democratic legislature in Massachusetts, although, of course, that was Mitt Romney 2.0, Mitt the moderate, back then.

President Obama deserves some of the blame for this situation. All candidates promise to bring healing to our nation?s political life ? the line tests well with focus groups of unaffiliated voters ? but he made it a real centerpiece of his campaign and his biography: After all, if a black man with a funny name could be elected president, surely he could overcome partisanship? At key moments of his presidency he has failed to do the necessary political spadework of stroking political opponents. And, he has failed to effectively use the bully pulpit of the presidency to defend important achievements like the Affordable Care Act. Just the other day, Michael Gerson faulted Obama [2]for the way he pushed the ACA through Congress on a party-line vote. But, really, does Gerson think there is anything Obama could have done to garner GOP votes for the ACA?

We all know Mitch McConnell?s famous claim that his number one objective was not fixing the nation?s debt crisis, nor putting people back to work, but making Obama a one-term president. It was shameful. But, it was not defining. Most Americans can?t tell you the name of the Senate minority leader. Washington remained broken, the President lives in the White House, the White House is in Washington, Obama must be to blame.

There are good reasons to vote for Mr. Obama. And there are good reasons to vote for Mr. Romney. But, there is no good reason to vote for members of Congress whose defining characteristic is their willingness to play the role of obstructionist.

Yesterday, of course, we saw something different. The man who delivered the keynote address at this summer?s Republican National Convention, Gov. Chris Christie of New Jersey, sounded like an Obama surrogate, not a Romney one, in praising the president for his handling of the federal response to Superstorm Sandy. Even better, when a Fox News anchor asked Christie if Romney should come to New Jersey, Christie dipped into his seemingly endless stock of derisive resentment and castigated the reporter for trying to interject politics into the situation. Those moments will be reinforced today when Mr. Obama travels to New Jersey to tour the devastation with Gov. Christie. The pictures that emerge should terrify the Romney campaign, stamping all over their closing argument.

I have been highly critical of President Obama?s inability to make a compelling narrative throughout his tenure in office, so here is an easy one. If you win, Mr. President, point out to the American people that you are glad Mr. Romney and Mr. Ryan helped focus the nation?s attention on the federal budget, and for highlighting the

moral implications of delaying agreement on the budget, the jobs not created today because of uncertainty, the tax bill left to future generations, etc. If the debt crisis is as morally urgent as the Republicans say it is, why can?t they come to the table with the same disposition as Gov. Christie showed? The storm and the damage it created were, as Christie insisted, more important than politics. Could not the same be said of the federal debt? Haven?t the GOP running mates spent the last few months telling us that the country?s fiscal crisis requires everyone to work together? Or does that requirement only hold when there is a Republican in the White House?

Both sides are to blame for the lack of cooperation in Washington. Both sides have turned over their political careers to a posse of campaign consultants who are not paid to fix debt problems, they are paid to elect candidates to office. Both sides connive at gerrymandering districts so that few members of Congress face a real challenge in a general election, but must always be worried that any break with party orthodoxy could bring on a primary challenge, funded by interest groups that have no interest in comity and every interest in ideological purity. And neither candidate will undo these trends in the next four years.

Is there hope? If members of Congress see that winning over the Tea Party or NARAL may not help you in November, yes. If Joe Donnelly is sent to the Senate from Indiana, giving the Democrats a seat they would not have had a prayer at winning if Sen. Richard Lugar had won his party?s primary, maybe some will notice that the ideological agenda is not a path to victory. If some prominent zelanti of both the left and the right get tossed to the curb, there is hope. If some incumbents in California get turned out because of the way redistricting has worked, that will help. Mostly, however, voters have to become more discriminating, and more engaged after the polls close, holding the feet of those they elect to the fire. The message should be simple ? work with the other side, or we will turn you out of office. I am not betting that a round of Kumbaya will break out next January. But if the looming fiscal cliff, which is to economics what Sandy was to the weather, does not awaken the urge to set partisanship aside, then it is difficult to see how the nation will move forward.

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