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Post-Mortems Abound

Michael Sean Winters | Nov. 12, 2012 Distinctly Catholic

Conservative pundits continue to survey the wreckage from their across-the-board defeats last week, losing seven seats in the House, two in the Senate and failing to defeat President Barack Obama. Already, the tensions are emerging and they are likely to get worse as Speaker John Boehner recognizes that the hand he is holding is considerably weaker than the one he had during the last round of budget negotiations and potential GOP candidates wonder how to approach their future. Does it make more sense to double down and defend the ?no new taxes? pledge or to cut a deal including tax hikes on the wealthy, take the hit early, and hope the economic recovery blossoms forgiving the breach of party orthodoxy?

One issue that went from divisive to ripe in the twinkling of an eye is immigration reform. Even Sean Hannity, Fox News? most vociferous conservative voice, said that his views on the issue had ?evolved.? This is very interesting. I suspect Mr. Hannity?s views on the issue of immigration reform did not evolve so much as his calculation of the political cost to be paid by holding to those views has ?evolved.? And, that is not really an evolution, it is a declaration of defeat. A week before the election, I anticipated an incremental approach to the issue of immigration reform, starting with passage of the DREAM Act. Now, I think the prospects for comprehensive reform are exceedingly bright. A side bar: If you are a Latino with generally conservative views and have ever thought of getting into GOP politics, now is your time!

As part of its effort to reach out to Hispanics, the GOP is well advised to make school choice a more prominent part of its message. To be clear: I do not think public school teachers, or their unions, are the problem. The problem is that we expect our schools to do a lot more than teach core curricula. In today?s schools, and not only inner city schools to be sure, children often arrive without much in the way of parental direction. Parents may or may not have imparted expectations about public behavior to their children. They may or may not have given them a breakfast. Those children may or may not have a male role model in their lives. Liberals are reluctant to discuss the social and cultural sources of poverty in this country: Daniel Patrick Moynihan?s career was one long effort to get them to be more comfortable having that discussion. Here is an opening for conservatives to speak to the real lived circumstances of Latinos: Yes, we want to figure out how to improve our public schools, but in the meantime, your child should not be consigned to a second class education because the other children in the room are so unruly, the poor teacher can only manage the room, not teach the class. Catholics schools rescue children.

As noted last week, some conservatives are recommending soft-peddling social issues like abortion and gay rights, but when pressed, insist that they are not abandoning their position, they just don?t think the GOP should talk about them so much. Then, once they win, they can do what they want. This is exactly wrong. Indeed, I think the pro-life movement would benefit from a commitment to talk more and legislate less. We have not persuaded enough of our fellow citizens of the rightness of our position, so any attempt to sneak across the campaign finish line by avoiding the issue, then ramming trans-vaginal ultrasound laws through a state legislature, such a strategy will backfire. To be clear: There are two reasons to overturn Roe. The first is that it is really bad law. The second is that it will shift the debate about abortion to legislatures where public ambivalence can find expression. We are far from the day when a majority of Americans will agree that

abortion should be illegal. To get to that day, we need to stop feeding the coffers of the pro-choice movement with laws that do not garner general acceptance and hoping a sneaky campaign will nonetheless serve as the basis for changing the culture. It was more than a little telling that last week, on ?The World Over,? George Weigel was asked a question about the future of the pro-life movement and he began his response by discussing the future of the Republican Party.

The negotiations over the misnamed ?fiscal cliff? ? misnamed because returning to the Clinton-era tax rates seems less like a cliff and more like a molehill ? present the Republicans with a dilemma. The only thing that really unites their party today is a commitment to lower taxes. Genuine fiscal conservatives of the Howard Baker and Bob Dole variety are no more. The current leadership of the GOP has all drunk the supply side Kool-Aid Grover Norquist keeps serving. Now, they say that we can?t raise taxes on ?job creators,? because of the anemic economy. When the economy was booming, they said we needed tax cuts because ?it?s our money.? Of course, a small business hires a new employee not when the tax code suggests but when the customer sitting at table 43 has been waiting too long to place an order and the company hires another waiter. Or when the number of boxes unloading items at the hardware store is too great and the store needs another staffer. Democrats have done a lousy job confronting what George H.W. Bush once accurately called ?voodoo economics.?

As mentioned previously, the President must use his bully pulpit during these budget negotiations to remind the nation that income inequality has been growing for thirty years, and that more than higher taxes is needed to address that. We need a higher minimum wage, indeed a minimum wage that could allow a family to support itself. We need protections for 401(k)s if these are to continue to replace pensions. The best thing about having a Democrat in the White House is his ability to appoint new members to the National Labor Relations Board. This country needs to reverse the anti-union trend of recent decades if there is to be any long-term hope for dealing with increased income inequality.

I have to register another concern, and I am sure this will agitate some of my readers, but I really hope that the Catholic Left will not prove to be a cheap date for the president. Whatever you thought of the HHS mandate, it threw a lot of Catholic liberals under the bus. As a matter of principle, it is not the job of the President of the United States to make life difficult for any religious community. As a matter of personal loyalty, it is not the job of the President of the United States to make life more difficult for people like Sr. Carol Keehan without whose support, the Affordable Care Act never would have passed. And, as a matter of politics, it is just dumb to pick a fight with the Catholic Church. We are not the Ballards, this is not the ?I Am? movement, and while I think the issue of religious liberty should have been on the bishops? radar screen a long time ago, and that many of the bishop largely mishandled the issue this year, fighting with bishops is just a really bad optic for a politician. Yes, I know, I know, some bishops were loons and compared the President to Hitler, and I remember the silly anti-FOCA postcard campaign, and the kerfuffle about Notre Dame in 2009. But, it is time for the administration to push the reset button in its relationship with the Church. If the President found a policy solution to the mandate, and that is actually not a hard thing to do, and then worked hand-in-glove with the bishops on immigration reform, and continues to use his Faith-Based office in creative ways to create a culture of cooperation between government and civil society, the future could be a lot less troublesome for the President.

Post-mortems are often as telling as the exit polls. Different people, looking at the exact same data, reach different conclusions. The next six weeks of the lame duck session of Congress may be one of the most fascinating times in modern political history. And, while Republicans clearly have to figure out a different way forward politically, Democrats are well advised to undertake some soul-searching too. 51% of the vote is decisive in any election, but it is not indicative of a future trend.

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