

Pay Attention—It Was About Something

By Richard Benedetto

Many pundits glibly referred to the 1998 mid-term elections as the Seinfeld elections, chortling in that all-knowing way of theirs that this year's voting was about nothing. But nothing could be farther from reality.

These elections were about a lot of things. Of course, they were about electing governors, US senators, members of the House of Representatives, state legislators, judges, and local officials. But they were also about spending money for schools and roads, paying taxes to build stadiums, borrowing money to buy parks and wetlands, setting aside the federal surplus to fix Social Security, initiating new rules governing HMOs, parental notification on abortions, and many other issues too numerous to list in this limited space. And yes, they were about the Clinton-Lewinsky matter, too.

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Despite all the wailing and crying about record-low turnout—fewer than four in 10 eligible voters showed up at the polls on November 3—more than 72 million Americans actually voted. That's right, 72 million—nothing to scoff at. And their reasons for voting, exit polls showed, were as diverse as they were.

Moreover, despite all the name-calling and record-bashing we heard in this year's unprecedented tidal wave of hard-hitting TV ads, all kinds of real issues were debated by the candidates and their backers and opponents relating to the hundreds of questions, amendments, referenda, and initiatives on ballots across the country.

Those who complained that they didn't know what the issues were or where the candidates stood just weren't paying attention. So to excuse their lack of interest, they took to parroting the pundit line that the elections were about nothing. Or worse, they dismissed the candidates as bums, a favorite pastime among the so-called elites that has trickled down to the masses.

Issues on the Voters' Minds

But the 72 million who voted were thinking and weighing, picking and choosing, accepting and rejecting. In short, they were deciding how to vote. According to Voter News Service exit polls among those voting in the US House races:

- One in five said education was uppermost in their minds. They overwhelmingly chose Democrats over Republicans, 66 to 32%.
- Another 14% said the economy and jobs were important. They, too, broke more heavily to the Democrats, 63 to 34%.
- Among the 13% who said taxes were their top issue, Republicans got the bulk of the votes, 28 to 68%.
- But among the 12% who said they were worried about Social Security, Democrats again got the edge, 57 to 39%.

- An additional 6% listed health care as chief vote motivator. They also leaned heavily to the Democrats, 68 to 30%.

Thus, you don't have to be a political expert to figure out why Democrats were able to defy history and gain a net five seats in the House in an election year when the party that controls the White House traditionally loses ground. On the issues that mattered to voters most, the Democratic position was preferred over the GOP stand, which many believed was nonexistent or at least poorly communicated.

“In the final weeks we didn't have a clear enough message,” said a penitent Republican National Committee Chairman Jim Nicholson, whose job is now on the line thanks to the GOP's disappointing showing.

But exit polls also show that the media's rush to dismiss the Lewinsky matter as a factor in the voting was incorrect. Only 5% of the voters in the House elections said Clinton-Lewinsky influenced their vote. And they broke 55 to 44% to the Republicans. However, nearly one in five (18%) said morals and ethics were important in their vote. They broke overwhelmingly to the Republicans, 81 to 15%.

Thus, with nearly one-fourth of the House electorate saying either Lewinsky or morals was their key issue, Republicans clearly received a heavy boost. Without it their losses might have been massive. Democrats outpolled them on four of the other five top issues. Would the GOP have been better off if they had played down Lewinsky and focused on other voter concerns? Perhaps.

Elements of GOP Support

But it would not be a leap to conclude that Clinton-Lewinsky, the issue many considered the GOP's nemesis,

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may have actually saved their House majority. Voters apparently perceived the Republicans had little else to offer in the way of concrete issues. But in the end, it was erosion among three groups that voted mostly Republican in the mid-presidential term election of 1994—white males, conservatives and middle-agers, 45-59—which fueled the Democratic resurgence.

By failing to pass tax cuts and giving in to Clinton on numerous spending issues, the GOP was unable to energize conservatives and members of the religious right as strongly as they had in the last two elections. While both groups voted strongly Republican, as expected, their turnout was down: a reduction from 17% in 1994 to 13% for the religious right, and a slip from 37 to 31% for conservatives.

Perhaps even more damaging, moderates turned out in greater numbers this time and voted Democratic, 54 to 43%. In 1994, moderates went 52% Republican.

The heavy white-male vote, which broke strongly Republican in 1994 and was credited with handing control of Congress to the GOP for the first time in 40 years, was partially picked off by the Democrats in 1998.

Exit polls in 1994 showed 63% of white males voted Republican in House races. In 1998, that figure fell to 57%.

Nicholson's explanation for the loss of white-male support is that the good economy has provided those men, many so-called blue-collar Democrats, with stable jobs and reason to vote for the status quo. The exit polls also showed that the Democrats were getting more credit for the good economy than

the Republicans. A post-election *USA Today/CNN/Gallup* poll showed the Republican Party has an image problem. It suggests that the GOP will need more unity, moderation, and effectiveness in its leadership to retain control of Congress and win back the White House in 2000.

A 43% plurality still believes policies proposed by the GOP would take the country in the right direction. But in November 1994, shortly after the Republicans took control of Congress, 55% said their policies were right for the country. Continued deterioration of that magnitude in public confidence could lead to a loss of House control in 2000.

“Big Government” Might Save the GOP

If there's anything to cheer up the GOP in approaching its winter of discontent, it should be the finding in an early December *USA Today/CNN/Gallup* poll that shows the American public still sees big government as a villain. Asked which would be the biggest threat to the country's future—big business, big labor or big government—64% said big government. That's no change from 1994, when the Republicans won congressional control. So their message to reduce the size of government still resonates. How they propose to do it remains the trick.

The 1998 elections were indeed about a lot of things. A lot of important things. And those who vote are paying attention. Politicians who ignore them or take them for granted do so at their own peril, as the results last November show.

So those who say these last elections were about nothing are clueless, to use another glib word of the day.

Outcome Doesn't Suggest a Need For GOP Policy Moderation

By Fred Steeper

Contrary to interpretations that last November was a disaster for Republicans, 1998 impressively continues an ideological polarization of the electorate that has produced a near stand-off in the partisan balance in the country—a development that has not been seen since the nineteenth century. The historic swing in the 1994 election has now been maintained for two successive elections.

At the core of this change in voting behavior is that conservative voters are voting overwhelmingly for Republican congressional candidates while liberal voters are voting overwhelmingly for Democratic congressional candidates. With conservative voters outnumbering liberal voters by roughly a 3 to 2 ratio, this new polarization has produced more electoral successes for the Republican party.¹ Behind the new polariza-

tion is the perceived willingness of the GOP to represent cultural as well as economic conservatism. Admonitions that the Republican party should moderate its policy proposals because of its small loss of congressional seats in 1998 are entirely contrary to the electoral changes from which it has benefited.

Misleading Congressional Expectations: No Surge, No Decline

The expectation of Republican gains for Congress in 1998 was a myopic reading of an historical pattern holding that the party controlling the White House loses an average of 27 House seats and four Senate seats in mid-term elections. That pattern presumes the party winning the White House wins a