

Friday, November 7, 2003

Democrats' demise

In a week where the Rock the Vote debate and President Bush's signature on a dramatic but largely symbolic anti-abortion bill were likely on the politically oriented college student's mind, the real political news is that Democrats are in trouble.

In Tuesday's elections, Republican Rep. Ernie Fletcher defeated Democratic state Attorney General Ben Chandler in the Kentucky gubernatorial race, bringing the state's top office to the Republican Party for the first time in some 30 years. Meanwhile, Mississippi Gov. Ronnie Musgrove lost to Republican challenger Haley Barbour — former chairman of the Republican National Committee — and became the fifth Democratic governor toppled in the last year, including Gov. Gray Davis' loss in October's California recall election.

Coupled with the first drop in Democratic seats in the Senate and the House in a midterm election under a Republican president in decades, the Republican Party now enjoys not only a command over 29 state governorships, but also control of the presidency and both houses of Congress.

This trend draws my concern not because of any formal political attachments (I'm registered as an independent), but because of informal ones. Sheer figures speak to how Republican policies are resonating with many Americans. But, as a moderate, I worry when the success of one party (or possibly in this case, the follies of another) might presage unhealthily partisan politics that, by virtue of numerical power alone, could eclipse important debate.

Even after the 2002 election that disappointed Democrats, some found room for optimism. In remarks made shortly after the election (as transcribed on <http://www.democrats.org>), Democratic National Committee Chairman Terry McAuliffe boasted that Democrats captured nine previously Republican governorships — including those in swing states like Michigan and Tennessee — helping form a base that would tip the scales back in Democrats' favor.

A day later, an unnamed source close to a candidate then considering a Democratic presidential nomination bid agreed, telling CNN, "(Republican successes in the 2002 election are) only

good news for the '04 field (of Democratic presidential nomination candidates). Bush now has an unchecked government. That means voters will hold only one party responsible for the state of play, in particular the head of that party."

But recent polls suggest that McAuliffe's optimism was likely unjustified, and that voters as a whole aren't displeased with said state of play. According to "The 2004 Political Landscape," a survey released Wednesday by the Pew Research Center, the Democrats' lead in party identification dropped by 5 percentage points from a 33-27 lead to a 31-30 lead between the 1997-2000 period and the post-Sept. 11 period. The change



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was consistent among most of the delineated demographic groups (only blacks showed an increase in support for the Democratic Party, and even then by only 1 percentage point for the total category).

The Republicans made some dramatic inroads even in states where McAuliffe predicted Democratic gains: Between the same periods as above, the Republican lead swelled by 7 percentage points in Tennessee and by 9 points in Michigan. Republicans made even stronger gains in traditionally right-friendly states: That number increased by 12 points in Texas, and by a remarkable 19 points in Idaho.

What, then, is America's opposition party doing wrong?

Part of the problem is voters jaded about Beltway goings-on. In recent years, Washington has remained mostly out of favor with Democratic voters. In 2003, 76 percent of Democrats agreed that now is "time for Washington politicians to

step aside and make room for new leaders," according to the Pew survey. This evidently isn't due largely to dissatisfaction with Bush's performance, though: That same figure has always been at least 62 percent since 1987. Meanwhile, Republican voters are presently very satisfied by comparison. In 2003, only 42 percent of them were dissatisfied with Washington's status quo.

But the Democrats' real problem is largely one of identity crisis: Certain de facto Republican policies, such as tax cuts and military hawkishness, have helped solidify that party's message, while the party has managed to appease party members on both sides of divisive issues like abortion.

Meanwhile, during the last few years, Democrats have mostly agreed that the education system was underfunded and that Bush's land use policies aren't green enough. But they've been largely divided on economic, war and terrorism policies — the very three issues that voters see as the most important facing America today, according to a CBS/New York Times poll taken in September and October.

The problem doesn't lie with partisan voters who reject openness to a wide range of ideas, either. The Clinton administration showed that ideological breadth need not preclude political depth or success. But whether through overextending their rhetorical umbrella or simply because of disorganization, the Democratic Party has devolved from a lean, inclusive network under former President Clinton into an immiscible ideological diaspora.

"Since Bill Clinton left, we don't know who we are," Democratic consultant Dane Strother told CNN in the days following the 2002 elections.

To be fair, this platform schizophrenia is partly the fault of circumstance: The intense patriotic fervor following the Sept. 11 terrorist attacks made it politically costly on both sides of the aisle to oppose terrorism-related legislation — even if those bills curtailed important civil liberties. (To wit, the Patriot Act.) Cooler heads have since prevailed in both parties — good news for said liberties — but Republicans have come out of the fray with a clear position. Democrats have not.

As the months toward the 2004 presidential

primaries wind down, it becomes more and more critical for the Dems to reformulate their game plan if they want to make any gains for the 2005-07 biennium. Making action all the more urgent, four Democratic senators — John Edwards, N.C.; Bob Graham, Fla.; Ernest "Fritz" Hollings, S.C. and Zell Miller, Ga. — have announced their intentions to retire from the Senate after their current terms. This could prove especially dangerous for the party, as President Bush already enjoys a 48-40 lead in voting intentions in the polls against an unnamed Democrat in the South.

Time is short for the Democrats, but if they want to make any gains in '04, they should do two things. First, they must establish a clearer platform; giving the electorate a better notion of what an official would do in office is better for candidates (in whom voters would invest more confidence) and voters (who are in general better served by more information) alike. Democrats should also select a moderate candidate for president if they want a chance at the White House. Since President Lyndon Johnson left office in 1969, the only liberal Democrats in the Oval Office have been on television (Martin Sheen) and in movies (Michael Douglas). And for good reason, too: Far leftist candidates alienate moderates — myself included. Despite Bush's popularity, his conservative social policies might mean that a centrist candidate could capture enough of the political middle to secure a victory. Matching a far left candidate against someone with Bush's popularity would give the sitting president a landslide.

My advice to the Republican Party, unsurprisingly, is: Keep your policy focused, but work to attract centrist voters. Meanwhile, responsibly use the power you enjoy now for the next year, and voters may reward you accordingly.

And finally, my advice to the American citizen is this: Stay informed, participate in the political debate, and most importantly, vote.

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LETTER TO THE EDITOR

Recent complaints revolve around foreign policy, not Tenet

It is awesome that people can complain about the fact that they were not informed about a private meeting. The issue here most likely has nothing to do with CIA Director George Tenet's presence, but the general discontent around this school with our nation's foreign policy and the CIA. Many high-ranking officials, both former and current, hold conferences and give private speeches, and since privacy is a liberty we at the university understand so virtuously, it's amazing how quickly we expect that to go away when it's to one's benefit.

If his coming to this university were for answering questions or to hold a public forum, the students would have been made aware. However, as a closed-door meeting with University officials, alerting the students to his presence would only serve the purpose for those who would wish to harass him, likely causing the reaction that University is so well-known for: protest. It is not the University's job to alert the students every time a person is in town, especially when it's private. The point is that as a university, we are going to have important people here and not every single meeting is public, even if this is a public institution. Maybe it was his request that his presence not be made public; you would too if you were head of an organization, meeting with officials from a university whose students have the audacity to turn a private visit into a public berating, even after you leave.

As to the rumor of \$10,000 spent to spruce up campus for Tenet's visit — if it was even spent — his arrival coincided with the beginning of the major possible student campus visits. So who do you think the money was really spent for: one guy or the future payer of salaries for the University?

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