



# The End of “Limbaughism”

By Charles J. Sykes

I’ve been meaning to write this for some time, but I’ve worried that I might be misunderstood. So just to be clear: by “Limbaughism” I do not mean conservative talk radio.

Indeed, Tuesday’s Democratic sweep will actually energize the genre. By both nature and inclination, we are better suited to being on the offense – pouncing on humbug, hypocrisy, and liberal unctiousness – than we are playing defense for the powers-that-be. We don’t take well to domestication. Neither does our audience. After the 2004 elections, many exhausted conservatives were burnt out and, perhaps thinking that the union was in safe hands, tuned out. The malaise that affected the GOP in Washington and Madison was reflected on the airwaves as well.

But the aftermath of the 2006 elections has a very different feel, because the stakes are so high and the uncertainties so varied. With a Nancy Pelosi-led Democratic Congress about to take office and presidential campaign already revving its engines, this is also a target rich environment, with drama, conflict, and Hillary waiting in the wings: all the makings of a perfect storm for talkers.

So what do I mean about the end of “Limbaughism”?

Here I define the term to mean the incessant and smug belief that conservatives are always winning; that the public is always behind us; that the other side is always in a panic; and that public opinion is the measure of all things.

“Limbaughism,” couches arguments not as matters of principle, but as contests of popularity, i.e.: if “most people” reject an idea it is proof of its wrongness; and if “most people” believe something, that is proof of its soundness. The worst put down is to suggest that there will be “no way” the majority will accept such and such an idea. Thus liberalism is not refuted, merely ridiculed for its failure to win elections. Conservatism’s superiority is taken for granted because it is self-evidently a “winning” philosophy. We win, therefore are right. We are right, therefore we win.

The approach is seductive because it is so easy. It is also intellectually lazy, a reduction of all arguments to public opinion. As last Tuesday suggests, it is also politically dangerous, especially for conservatives.

While it is true that the 2006 election was more a defeat for the GOP than for conservative ideas, the reality check should have been clear: we aren’t going to

November 9, 2006

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win every election. There is no fixed conservative majority. All the arguments have not yet been won.

At a deeper level, it exposed the larger flaw of "Limbaughism": Conservatism is not the same as populism.

By its nature conservatism flies in the face of popular ideas and culture; because it has firm, occasionally hard-nosed principles, it battles the fierce headwinds of both fashion and history.

Arguing from economic principles is not always easy. Arguing facts and logics is not as popular as arguing from feelings and emotions. Traditional morality is a far less easy sell than the culture of "whatever."

In education, "most people," may not choose higher standards or rigorous accountability measures over gold stars and happy faces. It is harder to explain why free markets create wealth than it is to pander to workers displaced by global competition. It is an uphill fight to persuade workers that the minimum wage is not in their interest.

Those arguments, of course, can be won, and Ronald Reagan and others showed that they could be embraced by electoral majorities. But the case was made by conservatives who understood the odds against them.

William F. Buckley, Jr. once described the role of the conservative as standing athwart history, yelling "Stop." Rush Limbaugh seemed to believe that conservatives were drum majors leading a triumphant parade.

The truth, of course, is somewhere in the middle.