

# LESSONS LEARNED II

CHARLES J. SYKES

**M**ichael Flaherty is right. Something clearly happened on November 3 and lessons must be learned. But the lessons apply to both parties, not simply the Republicans.

Of course, the November 3 election was a major disappointment for congressional Republicans, and its leadership at the national level has already paid the ultimate political price. But the situation in Wisconsin was

somewhat different. Incumbent Senator Russ Feingold was re-elected, Democrats once again seized control of the State Senate and Madison liberals partied long into the night to celebrate the victory of Congresswoman-elect Tammy Baldwin.

But amid all of the Madison-centered euphoria it's important to maintain some perspective.

With the re-election of Tommy Thompson, Republicans have won the governor's office four straight times. Republicans still dominate the nation's governorships, including such major states as New York, Texas, Florida, Illinois, and Michigan.

They increased their majority in the State Assembly.

They won two out of three closely con-



tested congressional elections and added two rising stars to their congressional delegation.

And they came within 35,000 votes of ousting a popular incumbent U.S. Senator.

Given all of that Republicans need to keep the panic – as well as the champagne – on ice.

A short syllabus of lessons for both parties:

**Madison matters:** The extraordinary

turnout of voters in Dane County provided the margin of victory statewide for Russ Feingold and propelled Tammy Baldwin into Congress. Long derided as political dinosaurs, the Madison left had a romp on November 3. They only looked dead.

**But Madison is still just Madison:** The election results may have restored the Madisonian conviction that they are at the center of the political universe, but the reality is that the polarities of the political compass did

---

*Charles J. Sykes is the editor of [WI: Wisconsin Interest](#) and a senior fellow of the Wisconsin Policy Research Institute. He also hosts a talk-radio show on AM 620 WTMJ in Milwaukee. His most recent of four books is [Dumbing Down Our Kids: Why American Children Feel Good About Themselves, But Can't Read, Write, or Add](#), published by St. Martin's Press.*

not reverse themselves. With a left-of-center Madisonian at the top of the ticket, Democrats have been blown out of four consecutive gubernatorial elections. Even so, Democrats now emerge from the election more Madison-centered than ever. A party that sees Chuck Chvala as a rising star is in serious trouble.

Just as Republicans misread the 1994 election results as license to tack hard to the right, Wisconsin Democrats now face the opposite temptation. Madison's brightest star, Tammy Baldwin, ran a splendid campaign. But she does not represent the kind of centrist politics that would play well in the rest of the state. To the extent that that Democrats fail to recognize this, they run the risk of repeating the mistakes that have kept them out of power for more than a decade and a half.

**Leadership matters:** Scott Jensen is not Newt Gingrich. Under Jensen's brief speakership, Republicans have grown their majority, not lost it. In contrast, Senate Republican Leader Mike Ellis has now lost control of the state senate not once, but twice. So why does Flaherty bait Jensen, while ignoring the election's biggest loser, Mike Ellis? The answer is that Jensen is a target precisely because he is formidable. No one would accuse Ellis of being a heavyweight in the same class, which may be one reason the Democrats have 17 senate seats and the Republicans only 16.

**There is a difference between campaigning and governing:** Gingrich was the architect of the 1994 Republican takeover of Congress, but the combative skills that won the campaign, lost him the speakership. Gingrich not only lacked discipline and consistency, but his wild swings on both substance and style left him with no place to fall back onto when the polls went south. Again, Jensen has proven a disciplined speaker.

But Republicans also need to recognize that campaign promises are worthless unless they are credible, and the election should have served as a warning that the GOP's believability on the tax issue is getting threadbare. Unless Republicans actually cut state spending and taxes more deeply, they risk losing the edge on their two core issues. So far they have been practitioners of tofu politics. It only looks real.

**Personality matters:** Pundits may focus on issues, but the voters still like likeable candidates. At the national level, it's not simply a matter of ideology that Bill Clinton continues to soar in the polls, while Gingrich was buried. In Wisconsin, Mark Green, Paul Ryan, and Tammy Baldwin are all agreeable, amiable candidates and Tommy Thompson is the ultimate "hail-fellow well met" of state politics. They all won. Candidates with prickly personalities – Jo Musser, Lydia Spottswood, and Ed Garvey – fared less well. Indeed, the worst campaign in the state was run not by a Republican, but by Democrat Lydia Spottswood, who lost a congressional race that was hers for the taking. She was beaten by a political newcomer who was 28 years old. Folks in Madison should take note.

**The grass-roots still matters:** With all the focus on the huge cost of political campaigns and the omnipresent television ad campaigns, it was easy to overlook the fact that some elections turned on old-fashioned grass-roots campaigning and unglamorous voter turnout efforts. In both areas, the Republicans weakness was evident. Despite the big money that the business community was able to pump into Republican campaigns, it did not come close to matching the ability of organized labor to mobilize its foot soldiers. Despite years of power, the GOP lacks the kind of permanent infrastructure that groups like WEAC offer the Democrats.

**Fear motivates:** While we would like to imagine that we vote our hopes not our anxieties, the reality is that nothing focuses the mind or inspires turnout like fear. That is one of the dirty little secrets of American politics and explains why everybody hates negative ads, but everyone uses them.

History is on the side of the Anxious Voter Theory: In 1964, Lyndon Johnson won a landslide because voters were afraid that Barry Goldwater might start a nuclear war; fear of disorder and defeat propelled the election of Richard Nixon. Throughout the 1970s and 1980s, Republicans won elections because voters were concerned about threats from crime, the Soviet Union, high taxes, and bloated bureaucracies. Bill Clinton upset George Bush

because people feared for their economic futures. And voters threw out the Democratic Congress because they feared the government would take over their health care and deny them the chance to pick their own doctors.

What happened in 1998?

Democrats learned long ago that they could not win elections if the voters were afraid of them. Unlike 1994, when the government's attempted takeover of health care was still fresh in the public's mind, this time the Democrats ran by emphasizing what they would do *for* people, not what they would do *to* them. Republicans, on the other hand, chose to play the prevent defense and came to the electorate empty handed.

They were largely successful in countering the attempts by the Democrats to frighten elderly voters into believing that Republicans would slash their Social Security or Medicare benefits. But a sizeable portion of the electorate was still frightened by the GOP, enough to mobilize and turn out in impressive numbers.

The evidence suggests -whether fairly or not - that the Republican's rhetoric on social issues created a backlash among voters who felt that they were somehow threatened by the GOP agenda. Although, the issue of partial birth abortion undoubtedly helped Neumann inspire the social conservative voting base, it also seems to have energized a heavy turnout by the pro-choice base as well. Without the issue, Neumann probably would not have come so close to beating Feingold, but it may also have provided his margin of defeat. The lesson for prolife Republicans is genuinely disturbing: partial birth abortion represents the most potent, most effective issue they have ever had. Mark Neumann exploited it as effectively as any candidate in the country did. And he still lost.

Abortion, however, was not the only problem.

Criticism of gays by prominent Republicans also may have drawn some conservative voters to the polls, but the results in Dane County would indicate that they also provided a huge motive for supporters of gay rights to turn out at the polls. The overtly anti-gay candidacy of Madison firefighter Ron Greer, the speech to the state Assembly by Reggie White, and the murder of a gay Wyoming college student seem to have convinced the gay community and its supporters that Republican election victories posed a real threat to their rights and security.

In Milwaukee, African American voters also turned out in large numbers and voted overwhelmingly for Democratic candidates. While the abortion issue may have played a factor, it seems more likely that anxieties about welfare reform and prison construction may have played a somewhat greater role. Moreover, as Flaherty points out, the tone of self-righteous moralizing from national Republicans played even worse in the central city than its did in the sub-

---

*A posture of moral rectitude may be good for raising a family, or forming a church. But it makes for very bad politics*

---

urbs, especially given the lack of any positive message to counter-balance the vague aura of threat. What people saw was a party that was banking on its moral righteousness to cover its lack of a record or program.

Here, Flaherty is more than half right. A posture of moral rectitude may be good for raising a family, or forming a church. But it makes for very bad politics.

All of us are, of course, in favor of righteousness. But, in general, we prefer our own righteousness, not our neighbor's. Even if we are churchgoers, we don't want our lives to be judged by the people in the church down the street, much less by people in government. And in politics this makes a huge difference.

As much as voters may admire character and rectitude, they do not want to be hectorred and nagged about it by politicians, even by politicians with whom they might agree on other issues.

Voters who want their congressman to vote for the flat tax do not necessarily want him to regulate their sex lives. It is time to recognize that while the social agenda motivates some of the conservative that it also annoys much of the rest of the electorate, including crucial swing voters.

**This doesn't mean they should abandon the social issues:** Republicans would be wrong to overreact by scrapping their non-economic agenda. Many voters continue to care deeply about such issues, especially the sanctity of life. But William Safire had it about right when he suggested that if Republicans want to win elections, the social conservatives would have to move to the back seat. That does not mean they are kicked out of the car, they just will not be steering it.

**If moralism makes for bad politics, so does libertinism:** As uncomfortable as voters might be with the politics of moralizing, they are hardly embracing the politics of perjury. Consider this: a decade from now, how many how many politicians will be proud of their role in arguing that lying under oath was all right, as long as it "about sex"? The bad news is that, eventually, Democrats will have to face a reckoning for their "everybody does it" defense of Bill Clinton's perjuries and obstructions, if not sooner than later. Their election celebration has tended to obscure the fact that the president's ethics will continue to haunt the party and his ideological movement for years to come. Feminists are already the first ideological road-kill: who can possibly ever take them serious again on the issue of sexual harassment? But there are other casualties as well. How long will be before a Democrat can run for president promising moral leadership, without blushing? Democrats are making a grave error if they think that a single election has gotten them off the hook.

Another caveat for the Democrats: if you thought the right-wing social agenda backfired on Republicans, it was nothing compared to the backlash you'd face if you push a

left-wing social agenda. It has taken three decades for the party to recover from the last time it made that mistake.

**Republicans can't ignore minority voters:** If Hispanic, black, and gay voters continue to see the Republican Party as a hostile entity that threatens their future, the party is destined to a permanent minority status nationally. Despite the setback in the election, Republicans should not give up on these communities. They might want to dust off the Jack Kemp agenda for an "opportunity society" that was so unceremoniously scrapped when the party chose to emphasize a social rather than economic agenda.

**The GOP needs new issues:** Part of the Republican dilemma is that they have won so much of their agenda, from welfare reform, and tough-on-crime legislation, to the Cold War. What's left - issues like the right to life and flag burning - are important, but by themselves won't win elections.

Ironically, some of the most provocative advice for Republicans comes from disgraced Clinton adviser Dick Morris, who suggests that Republicans do to Democratic issues, what the Democrats have done with Republican issues. Specifically, he says that Republicans need to find a way to outflank the Democrats and retake the initiative on education, the environment, drugs, and the voluntary sector.

There is no excuse for Republicans to continue to lose the education issue to the Democrats. American schools are in trouble, the public knows it, and the Democrats are absolutely married to the status quo. Republicans might exploit this vulnerability by pushing a campaign to improve teacher quality as way of making the schools better. They could out-manuever the Democrats because the teachers unions would never allow the Democrats to follow suit in any meaningful way.

Similarly, on the issue of drugs, Republicans could seize the same sort of initiative that the Clinton Administration took on teen smoking.

Rather than concede the issue of the environment to the Democrats, Republicans should push their own market-oriented solu-

tions, in contrast to remedies that rely on government bureaucracies. The GOP could also highlight the Democrat's continued allegiance to government-oriented solutions by aggressively adopting the "voluntary sector," as an alternative to bureaucracy-based compassion. Proposals to give taxpayers credits rather than deductions for contributions to charity might capture the public imagination as a way to reinvigorate community-based institutions.

Republicans should also begin to reconnect with voters by addressing issues like personal privacy, in particular the government's threat to medical privacy through mandates like the universal patient identifier number.

And finally,

**The voters reward parties that deliver:** There is a reason that Republican governors have done so well across the country. The nation's GOP governors are activist, innovative conservatives. The contrast with the do-little Congress could not be more striking. Republicans can't survive on rhetoric. They need to deliver. That means cutting spending, shrinking government, lowering taxes, and hanging tough on criminal justice issues.

Finally, they should remind themselves that the only ones who think the sky is falling are chickens and pundits.