



BLOCK THAT PUNDIT!¹

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After every election, the pundits and spinners come out to play. They interpret the election results, often based on a cursory look at the vote totals and/or exit polls. Winners tend to discern a mandate for the policies they prefer; losers announce that their party could have won had they proudly proclaimed what the pundit just happens to advocate. Since many of these elucidations are intended as spin, rather than as serious analysis, it hardly seems sporting to test them against a closer reading of the data available. But—just for fun—let’s do it anyway.

At a press conference after the election, President Bush was asked how he could have been so hopeful of Republican wins in the face of polls predicting losses. The President said he had thought “the American people would have understood the importance of taxes and the importance of security” (*The New York Times*, November 9, 2006). Actually, the national exit poll (N= 13,208) showed that about 70% said that terrorism (72%) and the war in Iraq (68%) were “extremely” or “very” important in determining their vote. Republicans got just over half of the votes of those who thought terrorism important, but only 45% of those who saw Iraq as important. The exit poll

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didn't ask about taxes, but a Pew Center poll taken just prior to the election (N=2,369) showed less than a third believing that all of the Bush tax cuts should be made permanent (www.people-press.org).

If anyone could have been expected to understand the importance of taxes and security, it would be the best educated segment of the electorate—those with some postgraduate education—especially since members of this group are likely to have higher incomes and pay more taxes than the average voter. But 59% of these postgrads told exit pollsters they had voted for Democratic House candidates—more than any other educational grouping except the small percentage (3%) who hadn't completed high school. And Democrats' biggest gains over their 2002 congressional election performance came from this grouping.

John Podesta, a former chief of staff of President Bill Clinton, characterized the election as “the end of the grand conservative experiment” (*The New York Times*, November 12, 2006, Section 4). Maybe it was—for beltway operatives. But the voters never asked for a grand conservative experiment in the first place. Mr. Bush ran in 2000 as a moderate—a uniter, not a divider, who would pursue a more humble foreign policy. According to the 2000 exit poll, less than a fourth of Mr. Bush's votes came from self-identified conservatives—and he lost the popular vote by more than 550,000. It took the electoral college, a butterfly ballot and the U.S. Supreme Court to usher in the “grand conservative experiment.” Even in his 2004 victory, Mr. Bush received less than 30% of his votes from self-described conservatives. In 2006, Republican House candidates received a fourth of their votes from this grouping. What's more, we know from half a century of voting studies that the swing voters who tend to decide elections are among the least ideological in the electorate. The 2006 voters didn't reject conservatism—many of them couldn't *define* it with any accuracy.

Rush Limbaugh, on the other hand, saw a conservative victory! “Conservatism won when it ran as a Democrat. . . . Re-

publican-in-name-only Republicans, country-club blue blood Republicans, this non-partisan Republican identity, that's what went down in flames" (*Chicago Tribune*, November 12, 2006, Section 2). How helpful is this theory in explaining why Conrad Burns, Rick Santorum and George Allen lost Senate seats in Montana, Pennsylvania and Virginia, respectively, and Chris Chocola lost his House seat in Indiana, while Olympia Snowe cruised home with 74% of the vote in Maine? Burns, Santorum, Allen and Chocola each received ratings between 90% and 100% from the National Right to Life Committee and the U.S. Chamber of Commerce and 0-10% from Americans for Democratic Action. Ms. Snowe received a 27% right to life rating, a 78% Chamber of Commerce rating and a 65% rating from Americans for Democratic Action (Project Vote Smart, *2006 Voter's Self-Defense Manual*).

Two *New York Times* columnists had different takes on the election. Frank Rich (November 12, 2006, Section 4) saw this as ". . . the year that Americans finally said a decisive no to the politics of 'macaca' . . .," despite Harold Ford's failure to win a Senate seat in Tennessee. Rich highlights the rejection of George Allen in Virginia, but Allen lost by only 7,000 votes out of 2 1/3 million, and the Virginia exit poll showed him receiving 58% of the white vote even though, as Rich notes, "He used to display a Confederate flag in his living room and, bizarrely enough, a noose in his office for sentimental reasons." After the election, Senate Republicans chose as their new whip Trent Lott, who had been forced to step down as majority leader after saying that we could have avoided a lot of problems if segregationist candidate Strom Thurmond had won the presidency in 1948. Clearly, Michael Richards and Mel Gibson are not the only Americans with ethnic prejudices hidden perhaps even from themselves. (A Gallup poll (N=1003) taken ten days after the Richards incident found 41% of whites viewing him favorably to 36% unfavorably) (www.gallup.com).

John Tierney, in his farewell op-ed column for the *Times*, claimed that Americans voted for gridlock: Except for finding a way out of Iraq and mopping up Republican messes, "They

gave Congress a Seinfeld mandate to do nothing” (November 14, 2006). Maybe so, but in the exit poll a slender majority characterized the national economy as “not so good” or “poor;” and 40% expected the next generation of Americans to have lives worse than our own. More than two-thirds of these voted for Democrats. The Pew Center pre-election poll found 35% citing “health care” as one of the two most important issues influencing their congressional vote and disproportionately favoring the Democrats on this issue. Is it likely that their preference was to have the government maintain the *status quo*? What of the 23% who cited immigration as a key issue and favored Republicans? Do they want nothing done? And, as noted earlier, only 30% thought all the Bush tax cuts should be extended, while 56% said they wanted at least the tax cuts for the wealthy to be repealed.

Finally, the election is widely seen as a call to get out of Iraq. Well, yes—but a qualified yes. It’s true that a clear majority of voters (56%) disapproved of the war—40% strongly—and want to withdraw at least some troops. Yet only 29% want to withdraw all troops, and according to the Pew Center poll Americans are split about whether the decision to use military force against Iraq was right (45%) or wrong (48%). What they agree on (59% to 37%) is that the war is not going well. Commentators who called the election a rejection of Republican *performance*, rather than policies or ideology, seem to be the ones who got it right.