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The GOP's Big Comeback

They couldn't have done it without the Democrats

By JAMES TARANTO

Unlike Generalissimo Francisco Franco, the Republican Party is no longer still dead. "Republicans have solidified support among voters who had drifted from the party in recent elections, putting the GOP in position for a strong comeback in November's mid-term campaign, according to a new Wall Street Journal/NBC News poll," the Journal reports:

The findings suggest that public opinion has hardened in advance of the 2010 elections, making it tougher for Democrats to translate their legislative successes, or a tentatively improving U.S. economy, into gains among voters.

Republicans have reassembled their coalition by reconnecting with independents, seniors, blue-collar voters, suburban women and small town and rural voters—all of whom had moved away from the party in the 2006 elections, in which Republicans lost control of the House. Those voter groups now favor GOP control of Congress.

This poll lends support to actual election results, in New Jersey and Virginia last November and Massachusetts this January, in which Republicans were triumphant in states President Obama carried in 2008. Obama's approval rating is 50% (44% disapprove), approximately where it has been since last summer.

Asked if they prefer for Congress to be controlled by Republicans or Democrats, the survey participants split, 44% for each party, with 12% "not sure." Not so bad for the Dems? But here are the results for the same poll (taken in June) for the past three midterm elections:

- 2006: Republican 38%, Democrat 49%
- 2002: Republican 42%, Democrat 41%
- 1998: Republican 39%, Democrat 40%

A roughly even split in 1998 and 2002 was followed by the election of a Republican Congress, whereas the Democrats had an 11-point advantage before their 2006 takeover. To be sure, in the three previous elections the GOP already controlled Congress, but last month we looked at Gallup results that went back to 1994, when the Republicans took over, and found very similar results: The GOP led by one point in 1994, Dems by one in '98, even split in '02, Dems by 16 in '06 and GOP by one in '10.

If past results are predictive, the GOP should take the House in November. (A Senate majority is a possibility but remains unlikely because so many Democratic seats are not up this year.)

How can Republicans be doing so well, when just 18 months ago they were defeated, dispirited and discredited? Much of the credit or blame must go to Barack Obama for reinforcing his party's worst instincts: to spend even more irresponsibly than the GOP did, and to impose grand coercive schemes, most notably the takeover of the medical industry, in the face of fierce public opposition. The Republican Party remains far from popular--only 8% of survey participants have a "very positive" opinion of the party, and only 30% have a positive opinion at all--but apparently it beats the alternative.

It also can't hurt the GOP that George W. Bush has returned to private life. From 2006 until sometime last year, the Democrats benefited from being not-Bush. Now the Republicans benefit from being not-Obama. Even Obama himself has more or less stopped harping on the "mess" he "inherited" from Bush. Up to a point, this was a legitimate argument, if an unseemly one for the president himself to make. But the passage of time combined with the Democrats' legislative and rhetorical hyperactivity have made the mess that remains indisputably Obama's.

One other poll result is telling:

Among all adults, support is high for the new Arizona law that makes it a state crime to be in the country illegally and requires law enforcement officers to question people if they have reasonable suspicions about their immigration status.

Some 64% said they strongly or somewhat supported the law, compared with 34% who strongly or somewhat opposed it.

Commenting on a Pew poll with similar findings, blogress Ann Althouse remarks, "I wonder what those percentages would be if the President and the political elite had not pressured us to think the Arizona law was outrageously racist."

The Journal offers this ethnic breakdown: "Among Hispanic respondents, 70% opposed the law, while 69% of whites in the survey supported it." Our suspicion would be that the "racism" charges have a polarizing effect, influencing Hispanics to oppose the law and whites to support it. Since the law was a GOP initiative, this could be bad news for Republicans in the long run. Racism's putative victims are likely to have longer memories than those to whom racism is imputed.

Nay, Big Spender

If you want to find a pattern in the recent primary elections that have seen incumbents defeated, the Hill advises you look at the membership lists for the House and Senate Appropriations committees:

Sen. Kay Bailey Hutchison (R-Texas) was derisively dubbed "Earmark Queen" by GOP gubernatorial primary winner Gov. Rick Perry's supporters. Sen. Bob Bennett (R-Utah) was ousted last weekend by two earmark hawks. And Rep. Alan Mollohan (D-W.Va.), the chairman of the House Appropriations

Subcommittee on Commerce, Justice and Science, lost to a conservative Democrat who questioned the propriety and impact of Mollohan's earmarks.

The most junior Democrat on the Senate Appropriations Committee is Pennsylvania's Arlen Specter, who faces a tough primary next week against Rep. Joe Sestak, a nonappropriator. And the chairman of the House Appropriations Committee, David Obey, announced his retirement last week in the face of a tough Republican challenge. All of which suggests that the current political wave is in substantial part a rejection of big spending.

He's Keeping the Ring

When a bride-to-be breaks off an engagement, her erstwhile fiancé usually is entitled to get the ring back. By contrast, a federal campaign donation is not considered a "conditional gift" under the law, which is why Florida's Gov. Charlie Crist, as the St. Petersburg Times reports, can get away with this:

Crist told MSNBC's Joe Scarborough on April 30 that he would "probably" give refunds to donors who don't approve of him leaving the GOP. Some donors to his U.S. Senate campaign were told before the switch that they would get their money back or pro-rated refunds.

No more. A couple of hours before Crist officially becomes an NPA [no party affiliation] voter, campaign spokeswoman Michelle Todd said there will be no refunds. Asked whether that amounts to a flip-flop, she said, "We have never made an official statement before. It is now the official statement. They donated to the Charlie Crist for U.S. Senate Campaign, and it's still the Charlie Crist for U.S. Senate Campaign."

While Crist has the legal right to keep the money, such a move seems awfully graceless. Only those who feel betrayed by the party switch would ask for their money back, and his refusal to cough it up can only compound their sense of betrayal. HotAir.com's "Allahpundit" argues that this looks like a sign of desperation: Crist "is already so worried about his money well running dry that he's willing to endure the horrible publicity he'll get from this in order to keep the dough he's got."

Dogged Investigator Bites Mann

Ken Cuccinelli, Virginia's attorney general, is investigating whether Michael Mann, a onetime faculty member at the University of Virginia, violated the state's Fraud Against Taxpayers Act with his research on "global warming." The grounds for suspicion: According to emails publicized by a whistleblower last year, another climate scientist attributed to Mann a "trick" to "hide the decline" in recent temperatures.

Cuccinelli's investigation has prompted a debate over academic freedom, and not only from global-warmist true believers. Writing on the Manhattan Institute's site MindingtheCampus.org, KC Johnson argues that the investigation "should arouse grave concerns, for three reasons":

First, Cuccinelli's [sic] behavior will provide ammunition to academic defenders of the status quo--- from the AAUP's [American Association of University Professors] Cary Nelson on down---in their campaign to portray the sole threat to academic freedom as coming from "right-wing" outsiders.

Second, the inquiry continues a conservative hostility to some types of science professors, which also appeared in efforts of GOP state legislators to use academic bill of rights proposals to mandate the teaching of creationism. Scientists are the natural allies of those contesting groupthink in the humanities and social sciences. Their commitment to the research ideal should be imitated, not scorned.

Finally, and most simply, this type of investigation is wrong. There's no credible evidence of wrongdoing by Mann, and there's considerable evidence of bad faith by Cuccinelli.

Peter Wood of the National Association of Scholars acknowledges that Cuccinelli, who has no scientific background, isn't the "ideal pick for someone to take a serious look" at Mann's research. Nonetheless, he declares himself "cautiously in favor of Cuccinelli's review of Mann's work":

Is it out of line for a state attorney general to launch a search, as the CID [civil investigative demand] puts it, for "data and other materials that Dr. Mann presented in seeking awards/grants funded, in whole or in part, by the Commonwealth of Virginia"? Any researcher confronted with a demand such as this would surely find it irksome, and such irksomeness could indeed rise to a concern about academic freedom if the demand were made lightly or on the basis of political animus towards the researcher's views.

Yet surely Mann's publicly funded research should be subject to some sort of external review. Mann gladly accepted government funding and evidence has continued to mount that not only was some of his scientific work suspect but that the normal checks and balances of peer review were compromised. Moreover, Mann himself appears to have had a hand in fostering those compromises, as in his notorious "trick" to disguise data that didn't match an interpretation he hoped to promote.

It's a bit of a conundrum, but it seems to us that Wood has the better of the argument. As PowerLine's John Hinderaker notes:

It is a remarkable fact that warmists claim the right to keep their data secret and avoid any critical assessment of their work, while at the same time demanding that every country in the world fashion its energy policies on the basis of their alleged findings.

In an ideal world, science would not be politicized. But climate science has already been so corrupted by politics that it's a little late to protest now.