



The Free Congress Commentary

The Next Conservatism #43: What Might the Fall Elections Say About the Next Conservatism?

By Paul M. Weyrich

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Obviously, the next conservatism will not be on the ballot this fall. But the fall elections may nonetheless offer some indications about the prospects for a conservatism somewhat different from what now governs in Washington (if that can be called “conservatism” at all).

One measure of whether the public wants something different will be how “mavericks” fare in the fall. Here, two contests are of special interest, the Senate campaigns in Virginia and Pennsylvania. In both cases, the Democrats have nominated candidates who are in some respects conservatives, and who are also political outsiders. In Virginia, James Webb, who until recently was a Republican, is running an anti-establishment, unconventional campaign against incumbent Republican George Allen, who is something of a Bush clone. Webb is wrong on most of the cultural issues, but as a genuine Vietnam War hero he is a credible critic of the Iraq war, and he is a strong advocate for poor whites, who get shafted by affirmative action. In Pennsylvania, the Democrats are running a pro-lifer, Bob Casey, Jr., against Republican incumbent Rick Santorum. If both Casey and Webb win, it would tell both parties that the public is tiring of their usual offerings. A Webb victory in Virginia would send shock waves through the Republican Party, which sees Allen as a possible Presidential nominee.

Looking at the fall elections as a whole, low turnout would clearly signal a desire for something different. Low turnout among conservatives could mean a Republican bloodbath, and it would certainly imply a desire at the grass roots for a different conservatism. A possible parallel would be the 1974 elections, when Republicans got their clocks cleaned because of what President Reagan's pollster Dick Wirthlin called "embarrassed Republicans" who stayed home. This time it would be "embarrassed conservatives," and the obvious reasons for their embarrassment would be the Iraq war, immigration and federal government over-spending. The next conservatism takes different positions on all those issues from what the Bush White House represents.

In fact, we are already seeing an indicator on those issues, in that a growing number of Republicans who are up this fall are distancing themselves from the White House. House Republicans are distancing themselves from the Republican Senate as well, especially on immigration. Clearly, Republican Members of the House think their political survival is threatened by a "conservatism" that has departed from what conservatives have long stood for on many issues.

Low turnouts, especially among conservatives, and victories by mavericks, if they occur, will point to an electorate that senses what almost everyone in Washington has sensed for some time, namely a political vacuum. This is as true on the Left as on the Right. No one who has any interests beyond power and money can get excited about what they see coming from either political party. No one seems to have an agenda. No one is offering a vision of our country's future that has any real content.

It is exactly this vacuum that the next conservatism needs to fill. To do so, it must offer real ideas, not just slogans. It must come to grips with our country's problems, not just wish them away. It must

challenge Washington office-holders, regardless of party, whose main interest is staying in office and enjoying the personal benefits that brings. A conservative movement that is just a vehicle for professional politicians isn't worth keeping around.

These columns are an attempt to offer at least a beginning of such a next conservatism. So far, while they have gotten a strong reception from the grass roots, they have not interested anyone holding office in Washington. If Dick Wirthlin's analogy to 1974 holds this fall, that could change among those Republicans who survive.

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