

Getting All Their Frogs in the Wheelbarrow...



Like of lot of folks I know, I was glad to finally have the 2012 election in the rear view mirror. Certainly the so-called battleground states, especially Ohio, a wonderful place I called home in the 80's, must have let out a giant sigh of relief. Especially, one supposes, if their candidates won.

But in fact, my relief has morphed into missing the drama and the hammering and yammering of the entire process: the ads, the polls, blogs, debates, pundits, 24/7 news coverage.

Now that most of the dust has settled, the social scientist in me is trying to sift through the potential gems and the wreckage and look for lessons learned. No doubt many people have their own list, and maybe mine squares with some of that. Or not, which is also reasonable. So here goes.

1. The shifting demographics in America are now undeniable. Our country, the one I grew up in during the 1950's, is now far more diverse. Good thing. A related reality is that trying to sell a hard right social agenda per rape, birth control, maybe gay marriage, etc. is dead on arrival in a general election. While these are important social issues and affect the very fabric of our society, it's hard to see how they have a proper place in electoral politics. Private matters are just that. Private. Both parties need a big tent and a panoramic view of their potential

supporters.

2. My view of the media is that it makes sense to bend over backwards if necessary (and it usually isn't) to get one's news from multiple sources. You can't just stick with Fox, for example, although millions do and therefore get a very conservative slant. Likewise for lefties who stay glued to MSNBC or Current TV and think that's a fair accounting of what's happening. It isn't. As for the talk radio crowd, let's remember that they are primarily in business for ratings and profits. Showbiz bloviators like Rush, Hannity and Beck may be entertaining, but they often foment anger and resentment more than they shed accurate light on the news. The same is true with the hard left wing guys like Bill Press, Al Sharpton, Stephanie Miller, Ed Schultz, etc. They have every right to play to their audiences but like alcohol, they are all best consumed in moderation.

2a. We are all well advised to recall social science studies going back decades which show how most of us, when confronted with a decision making task, tend to search for material which will confirm the goodness of the decision we already made. We're not hard wired to be open minded. This similarly accounts for why many people mostly seek out the company of those who are similar to themselves. Not *necessarily* a bad thing, but it can be a trap.

3. For those who doubted the polls, they all should have learned a useful lesson. Golly, it turns out that in AGGREGATE, polls have been and are reasonably accurate. Political strategist Dick Morris and others who predicted a Republican "landslide" in the presidential race might want to reconsider their political calculus. When a political party conducts its own polls and makes dubious assumptions wildly in their favor about who's going to get out and vote, they are often drinking their own bath water as we used to say at work. In contrast, New York Times blogger Nate Silver got all 50 states right this time in the presidential race (49 of 50 in 2008), and he only missed one senate race (in North Dakota, wherever that is).

Silver is an interesting fellow. I saw him on TV one night and was impressed with his dispassionate focus on integrating the massive amounts of polling data. Looking him up on Google revealed that he was a real data geek, a statistician from my alma mater, The University of Chicago. Finally, someone to cut through the clutter and synthesize all the data that was out there. A genuine low key whiz kid vs. an avalanche of baloney. To wit, by election morning, his calculation showed the President with a 91.6% chance of winning reelection, up from 75% two

weeks earlier.

4. Romney's 47% comments to donors in Boca Raton were a marketing gift to the Obama team in Chicago and a reminder that in today's times, candidates rarely get to make remarks in private. His excellent debate performances, especially in the first one from Denver, seemed to prove he really did have his head screwed on straight and was a credible alternative to the incumbent. His concession speech on election night was gracious if not elegant. But his "extraordinary gifts" comments a few weeks later made it seem as if the Boca remarks did indeed come from his heart. It was interesting to see Republican leaders like Bobby Jindal, Haley Barbour, Rick Scott and Newt Gingrich let Mr. Romney have it over the gift remarks, which interestingly were again directed at his donors. Major ones this time. His base.

5. No, you can't really buy an election. The \$2 billion or so spent by both sides combined is an abomination and a revelation. Given that 115 million people voted in 2012, that works out to about \$17.50 per voter. Wow. Turns out that many people, especially in those darned battleground states, just got saturated and began to tune the ads out. There is the additional lesson of not spending hard fought money on ads that are patently false, e.g., the Jeep one. Voters have a way of picking up on these messages and rejecting them. Thank heavens.

6. Wise Democrats should hope that the Republican leadership will learn and improve based on the outcomes in 2012. We need a strong two party system, we need to integrate and build upon the best ideas that each side has to offer. Maybe we should even stop calling them "sides." When you get right down to those brass tacks, we are All on the same side when it comes to living in the best country on earth.

Speaker of the House John Boehner wryly noted, when asked about the challenge of controlling

Election Reflections

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his Republican team, "I've never been shy about leading. But you know, leaders need followers... We've got a pretty disparate caucus ... And it's hard to keep 218 frogs in a wheelbarrow long enough to get a bill passed."

My take is that maybe, *maybe*, we just need a much bigger wheelbarrow, one large enough for all of us frogs.