A Bad Year for Some Good Lessons

December 28, 2010

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It may be an ill wind that blows no good, but it’s a positively rotten political year that presents no teachable moments. By that standard, 2010 was a great year. Here are eight enduring political lessons that we learned or relearned this year.

1. **New presidents get in trouble by forgetting why they were elected.** Early on, Obama contracted a near-fatal strain of “mandateitis.” Elected primarily to fix the economy, not to reform America, he failed at the former while pursuing the latter much too vigorously for the electorate. Along the way, we all relearned two hoary old maxims: incumbent presidents get the credit or the blame for the health of the economy, and when the economy is bad, that’s all most voters care about.

2. **Both political moderates and political moderation are playing a lesser role in modern American politics.** Few moderates remain standing in either chamber of Congress. Moreover, the increasing polarization of American politics has left little room for either politicians or voters who cling to the middle of the political spectrum. On a wide spectrum of issues the American people are more divided than at any time since the 1930s, leaving centrist politicians virtually an endangered species. Barring a minor miracle, the 112th Congress will be more polarized than any since the latter days of the New Deal.

3. **Virtually every president loses House seats in the midterm election of his first term.** The real issues become how bad it will be and what an incumbent president can do about it. It’s axiomatic that the party that controls the presidency will lose the midterm election. It has now happened in 15 of 17 elections since World War II. However, these losses don’t invariably forecast the next presidential election. Reagan (1982) and Clinton (1994) lost 26 and 54 seats, respectively, but won reelection handily. Carter is the modern example of the converse. He lost the midterm election of 1978 and then lost reelection in 1980.

4. **A political party is never more alive than when most are declaring it dead.** The new Obama coalition was supposed to govern America for 40 years, but it disintegrated in a political heartbeat. Meanwhile, the supposedly near-extinct Republicans rose like the proverbial phoenix in the wake of the Democratic collapse. This yin and yang of the American two-party system is as reliable a generalization as can be made about American politics. Its rhythms have resounded across American history from at least the Civil War period.

5. **The “six-year term” looks better and better.** This year we witnessed more and more governors falter in their final two years in office. In Pennsylvania, for some half century, no party has held the governorship more than two consecutive four-year terms. Voters’ patience always expires long before the second term does. But the phenomenon is widespread and includes the presidency. Indeed, since Truman in the 1940s few two-term presidents have escaped the “six-year jinx,” ultimately condemning voters to suffer the final two years along with the hexed incumbent.

6. **Most old generals do just fade away; it’s old politicians that never die.** Ulysses Grant and Dwight Eisenhower excepted, most old generals make artful exits when their time has run. But defeated politicians often remain in the limelight. In Pennsylvania, both former Governor Robert Casey and retiring U.S Senator Arlen Specter suffered repeated losses before winning high office. Currently, former U.S. Senator
Rick Santorum is visiting early presidential delegate selection states, providing continuing testimony to the truism: defeated politicians rarely just fade away.

7. **All politics is local—except when it isn’t.** Tip O’Neil’s famous aphorism that all politics is local has accumulated a permanent asterisk. O’Neil’s remark notwithstanding, the last three elections have been thoroughly nationalized. Local issues and even the personalities and backgrounds of the candidates have been less important than national issues in determining congressional winners and losers. It is not clear that the nationalizing of congressional elections has passed from the exception to the rule. But there is little doubt that future congressional elections will be fought out for some time on more than just local concerns.

8. **It’s still better to be an incumbent running for reelection, but it’s no longer the slam-dunk it once was.** Competition may be returning to congressional contests after decades during which incumbent candidates were all but impossible to defeat. In 2010, at least a quarter of congressional elections were competitive (i.e., decided by less that 10 points). The dismal state of the economy, historically low approval ratings for Congress, and growing partisanship explain some of the increasing competition, but not all of it. The return of real competition to congressional elections, if it occurs, could bring more and faster change to American politics than any trend in the past 30 years.

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