

ROLL CALL

All Politics Is Local? Maybe Once, but Not Any More

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The late Speaker Tip O'Neill (D-Mass.) is credited with the old political maxim that "all politics is local." Once upon a time, he may have been right — back in an era when politics, as O'Neill knew it, boiled down to a simple equation, Candidate A vs. Candidate B. But this no longer exists. Instead, campaign politics have morphed into a new reality where "all politics has become, in fact, national."



For the past 30 years, and maybe longer, the outcome of Congressional elections in non-presidential years has, with one lone exception, been determined by a focus on national, not local, issues.

In 1974, it was Watergate that did in Republicans. By 1978, President Jimmy Carter's "malaise" had brought high gas prices and even higher interest rates; Democrats lost. In 1982, 10 percent unemployment swamped Republicans. Four years later, in 1986, Democrats dragged out their old standby — Social Security — with stinging national attack ads, nationalizing the campaign and costing Republicans control of the Senate.

When President George H.W. Bush reneged on his "no new taxes" pledge in 1990, he took away his ability to nationalize the fall Congressional elections and also lost the confidence of much of his party. This was the one exception to national issues driving an off-year election since 1974.

1994 was a referendum on President Bill Clinton's first two years in office, especially "Hillary care," which, coupled with then-Rep. Newt Gingrich's "Contract With America" nationalized the elections. Republicans were back in control of Congress.

In 1998, Republicans nationalized the elections by telling voters "Don't reward Bill Clinton's behavior" by voting for Democratic House and Senate candidates. What they didn't understand was that the majority of Americans were uncomfortable with the GOP push for impeachment, and the plan backfired.

Finally, in 2002, it was Democratic obstructionism — particularly their delaying tactics on the creation of the Homeland Security Department — combined with the president's strong post-Sept. 11 support that framed the issues.

So, will 2006 follow the pattern of the past 30 years? If the national right track/wrong numbers were 55 percent to 35 percent instead of the reverse, would we even be asking if the House and Senate were in play? If politics truly were local, wouldn't national numbers such as the right track/wrong track or presidential job approval be irrelevant?

Some argue that every race, in the end, is a singular battle between two candidates, with each shaping their campaigns at the local level in such a way that national issues become secondary.

Then, the discussion usually turns to such variables as the political makeup of the district, the quality of the campaigns or candidates, and the ability to raise money.

Clearly, those elements of a campaign always play a role in the final outcome of any election. And in every election cycle, there are races in which the personalities of the candidates play a significant role, such as the current race between incumbent Sen. Rick Santorum (R) and Democrat Bob Casey Jr. in Pennsylvania. There is also a rare phenomenon of a candidate who manages to overcome a negative national tide, as Republican Bill Gradison did in his 1974 win over Rep. Tom Luken (D-Ohio).

But usually, unless a candidate has a "scandal problem" or a unique story like Lynn Swann, also in Pennsylvania, keeping things local today is virtually impossible in an age of cable news, Web logs and talk radio. When was the last time Rush Limbaugh talked about local issues?

When O'Neill was Speaker, most Americans got their political news from the networks and their local newspaper. Today, cable television news has moved ahead of network television, with 38 percent of Americans saying they regularly watch cable, while only 35 percent watch the networks for campaign news (according to a Pew poll from January 2004). And they watch it differently.

Most have abandoned "appointment viewing" and instead "graze" for news all day long on 24/7 cable channels. The Pew poll also found an increase in the number of people going online for news, at 13 percent, while daily newspaper readership has slipped to only 31 percent. Today, millions of viewer-voters see their news through a national prism in a way they never could in O'Neill's day.

So when Judge Samuel Alito was nominated to the Supreme Court, thanks to cable news and the other "new" media, his name ID went from near zero to 72 percent in just one week; Harriet Miers' jumped to a remarkable 78 percent in 12 days. This could not have happened even 10 years ago.

From a pollster's point of view, those remarkable numbers tell me that we've got a national campaign environment and probably a permanent one.

For the two national parties, it should tell them that running campaigns in the future will be a little like managing a marketing campaign for Coke. To sell its products, Coke may rely on local and regional sales strategies that reflect local consumer preferences or specific cultures — but the company's bottom line ultimately depends on the effectiveness of its national message, which establishes its national brand.

The fall Congressional elections will likely be no different. Democrats have spent the past year trying to ensure that this will be a national election. With issues including the war in Iraq, rising gas prices, immigration, health care, the economy and taxes driving the current right track/wrong track numbers and the president's job approval, they likely will get what they want.

That doesn't mean Republicans can't hold the House and Senate. This isn't 1982 or 1994. The Bush economy is in good shape, inflation and unemployment are low, and Democrats have offered no viable policy vision.

If the right track/wrong track went back to even, all the seats we now view as marginally Republican quickly would become safe seats once again.

But the first step toward winning in November for Republicans is to acknowledge the reality of the situation: We are going to play in a national arena this fall, not a local sandlot.

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