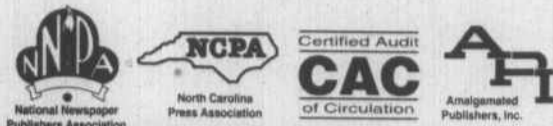


OPINION

THE CHRONICLE

The Choice for African-American News

ERNEST H. PITT Publisher/Co-Founder
ELAINE PITT Business Manager
ERICKA ASBURY Office Manager
T. KEVIN WALKER Managing Editor
KAY STULTZ Production Supervisor



James Thompson inserts his ballot after voting at the 14th Street Recreation Center last week.

Lesser of two evils?

Political analysts are partly blaming apathy on the part of African-American voters in the South for last week's embarrassing election results for Democrats. Apparently, since blacks decided to stay home, Democratic incumbent governors in South Carolina and Georgia were upset, and Florida Gov. Jeb Bush cruised in a race that was supposed to be tight. Lower than expected black voter turnout is also being credited with helping the Republicans regain control of the Senate.

This newspaper has been a constant advocate for black folks going to the polls. The right to vote is a right that black folks fought and died for and, therefore, is one we should cherish just as much as our freedom. But no one should be scratching his or her head trying to figure out why blacks stayed away.

In one corner is the Democratic Party, which is so used to getting support from black folks that it doesn't even come and ask for it anymore. In the other corner is the Republican Party, which is big on talking about compassion and inclusiveness, but bad at practicing them. What is a black voter to do? Be taken for granted or be treated like he or she doesn't even exist in the first place?

The Democratic Party has managed to hold onto its black base for the time being. About 80 percent of blacks were expected to cast votes for Democrats last week. But it is becoming clear that the party will not be able to simply count on blacks supporting Democrats at the polls without good reasons. The Democrats have become experts at dangling carrots. The party has used key words in black circles, words like affirmative action and inclusiveness. And most of the time that is enough to generate support.

But blacks are waking up and smelling the coffee. They are seeing that they are not getting their votes' worth. Their neighborhoods are getting worse, they are having to stretch their dollars a lot further, and their children are still lagging behind their white classmates and are more likely to go to prison than to college.

Some blacks are getting frustrated with the Democrats and switching over to the Republicans. But that will not be a path that many blacks will follow.

Even Madison Avenue would be hard pressed to fix the public relations problem that the Republicans have among blacks. The party has cheered on and immortalized outright bigots such as Jesse Helms and seems to have no qualms with the fact that the party is nearly lily white. Elizabeth Dole wanted to show so badly that her campaign was inclusive that she had to bus in her own black folks for a rally held for her recently at Salem College (no blacks showed up on their own). J.C. Watts Jr., the only black Republican in Congress, chose not to run for another term. In his soon-to-be released book, he too is critical of his party.

Black America is in a political Catch-22, so it should not be a shock if African-Americans choose to voice their dissatisfaction by simply staying home, although the community may pay in the long run for this apathy.



It's the issues, dummy



Armstrong Williams
 Guest Columnist

The Republicans won nine of the 12 close Senate races Nov. 5. That didn't happen by accident.

Those contests swung in the Republicans' favor because the president spent the last two weeks in a campaign flurry. Everywhere he stumped, the local news ran an endless political loop. He generated excitement and attention. His very presence added kick to state politics. It shocked people into paying close attention.

Privately, some handlers worried that the president was taking an unnecessary risk by stumping so visibly. They worried that he would lose credibility if the Republicans ended up whiffing in the Senate. They worried that significant losses could expose Bush's 60 percent approval rating as nothing more than hangover from Sept. 11.

Then a funny thing happened on Election Day. For the first time since 1934, the president's party picked up seats in the House and Senate during the midterms. And they did so because the president's ideas on taxes, his doctrines on Iraq and homeland security carried the day.

What did the Democrats muster in retort? Very little. Fearful of standing against the president on Iraq and of losing Southern voters if they butted



heads on Bush's tax cuts, the Democrats took to the defensive and receded into a black hole from which they never managed to emerge.

This is not a new pattern. When first elected, it was believed that that questions of legitimacy would preclude Bush from taking any bold policy steps. The thinking was straightforward: Congress was so equally divided that no leader could wield bipartisan support. With both sides willing to dig in their heels and simply wait it out for another four years, the best the president could hope for was a few ceremonial victories. Deeply sensitive to poll numbers, many political advisers reasoned that a few ritual victories would surely be better than tethering one to significant losses on key issues.

So the Democrats took

their more controversial issues off the table and went on the defensive. Shockingly, Bush refused to be a toady. He circled the wagons around core issues like a universal missile defense shield, a refusal to entertain the Kyoto Treaty, a Patients Bill of Rights and tax cuts. What is most telling is Bush took definitive stands on controversial issues such as faith-based initiatives and stem cell research.

Whereas the Democrats were busy consulting polls, Bush did something rather astonishing: He displayed genuine leadership. And a funny thing happened. His credibility increased, not decreased — a fact that was perfectly embodied by the midterm election results.

Gone now are the questions about legitimacy. Gone

are the innuendoes of intellectual inferiority. The guy the Democrats painted as bumbling just kicked their butts on every major policy front. He did so by establishing clear doctrines on homeland security, economy and foreign affairs. The Democrats had no such national message. They offered no overarching ideas.

Instead, they simply called Bush names. Most recently, Sen. Hillary Clinton derided him as "President Select." It's the oldest trick in the book: If you can't attack the issue, attack the personality. That is all the Democrats have right now.

And that's why the "bumbling guy" just swept the elections.

Someone really ought to tell the Democrats, "It's the issues, dummy."

www.armstrongwilliams.com

It's 1994 all over again



Val Atkinson
 Jones Street

(Note: Val Atkins wrote this column immediately after the elections Nov. 5.)

On that chilly Tuesday night in November of 1994, I recall standing in the lobby of the North Raleigh Hilton Hotel and watching monitors spew out election results. I couldn't believe my eyes and ears. Republicans were winning everywhere. Republican political unknowns were winning seats in North Carolina's 2nd and 4th Congressional Districts. Republicans were winning local races from county commissioner and school boards to District Court and Superior Court judgeships.

They made tremendous inroads into the statewide judicial races and they won the N.C. House for the first time in memorable history. On the national scene they even



Biggs



Butterfield



Bryant

won the control of the House. This was the first time the Republicans had controlled the U.S. House of Representatives in more than 40 years.

Some of these gains weren't unexpected. Historically, the party in control of the White House usually loses congressional seats. But it's unheard of for a sitting president to see his party gain seats during mid-term elections. This is precisely what happened Nov. 5.

If things stay the way they are, it appears that the Republicans will lose a few governors but will retain control of the U.S. House and take back

control of the U.S. Senate. In North Carolina, Republicans have held their own in the N.C. congressional delegation. They replaced Jesse Helms with another Republican, and Robin Hayes held on to his 8th District seat.

And beyond that, it was a complete victory for the Republicans. First of all they narrowed the Democrats' lead in the state Senate considerably, and it was unsure at the time of this writing whether the Republicans or the Democrats will control the N.C. House.

In the judicial races it was a complete whitewash. Repub-

licans managed to remove the last remaining African-American from the N.C. Supreme Court (G.K. Butterfield), and they removed two very qualified African-American women from the N.C. Court of Appeals: Judge Wanda Bryant and Judge Loretta Biggs.

This is retrogression at its worst. The Democratic Party in general and black Democrats in particular are going to have to start standing up for what they believe in or we'll all be pushed back into the sea of irrelevance. Stay tuned!

Contact Val Atkins at JonesStreet@nc.rr.com



Submit letters and columns to:
 Chronicle Mailbag,
 P.O. Box 1636,
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