



Why Conflicted Voters Will Go for Bush

Americans Don't Elect Sitting Legislators President

Commentary

By TERRY MICHAEL

Oct. 26, 2004 - Forget the tracking polls and micro-analysis of a handful of targeted states. Our political history provides a pretty clear clue as to why conflicted voters will break for Bush in the closing days of the 2004 campaign.

Americans almost never choose a sitting legislator as leader of the free world.

We've done it just three times: James A. Garfield in 1880, Warren G. Harding in 1920 and John F. Kennedy in 1960. They all died in office and combined served only five of 216 years of the presidency.

Three out of 43 is no historical fluke. But Washington insiders, both politicians and the press, never seem to get it.

A Myopic Vision

Every four years, several legislators announce for commander in chief, despite the historically bleak prospects. Establishment media tout them as front-runners, citing the same myopic vision of "electability" as their political counterparts: federal experience, national stature (read that, "men we often quote"), and the ability to show big numbers on Federal Election Commission reports.

Those who get it a little usually cite "long voting records" as a liability for congressmen, or that "they only vote, they don't run anything." Both are part of the electability problem. But the main reason sitting legislators need not apply for commander in chief is deeper.

Every day in those few square blocks of surreality known as Capitol Hill, legislators are turning verbal somersaults to convince the National Association of This and the American Council of That they're on both their sides. Staking out a clear-cut position pays no dividends for legislators, whose constitutional job is Madisonian compromise.

Members of Congress don't have beliefs. They have positions -- finely tuned positions.

They live in the transactional world of legislation, poorly preparing them for the transformational aspirations of presidential leadership.

Legislators like John Kerry don't know how to speak in simple, declarative sentences. They know how to talk to organized interests. Governors, who we usually elect, have to know how to talk to people, to build public support for governing agendas.

The impulse of congressmen is to build deniability not just into every speech, but every syllable. Listen to five minutes of John Kerry, and you know he's never met a nuance he didn't like.

After the GOP convention, I asked my 85-year-old mother if she had watched President Bush. "No," she nearly admonished me, "I can't stand to lay eyes on him."

Well, how about Kerry? Without hesitation, she said: "I guess he'd be better than Bush ... [but] I can see right through him."

Keeping It Simple

When Republicans started using the have-it-both-ways attack last spring, they didn't have to be any smarter than chimps to come up with that strategy, nor was it necessary for voters like my mother to be sophisticated political analysts for it to resonate.

As I tell my students in explaining successful political communication, "You can only reach voters where they're capable of believing." You can't make up big charges out of whole cloth.

Persuadable voters and other non-haters of President Bush were easily able to comprehend the GOP line, because it fit hand in glove with the largely biographical campaign Kerry himself was waging: "For the war in Vietnam. Against the war in Vietnam."

Every time Kerry campaigned on his Vietnam past, and every time he responded to charges about what he did or didn't do three decades ago, undecided voters were reminded of an undecided man. The power of the "Swift Boat" non-issue was not to plant doubts about whether Kerry deserved his medals. It was to remind voters to wonder how decisive he would be in running the country in time of war.

Kerry is likely to join scores of history's other presidential wannabes who failed to cleanse themselves of their congressional-ness before seeking the White House.

Recall that Bob Dole tried to do it on the cheap in 1996, by resigning his Senate seat just five months before the general election.

Republican strategists took the man out of the Senate. But they couldn't take the Senate out of the man.

Director of the Washington Center for Politics & Journalism and its semester-in-Washington program for college journalists the past 16 years, Terry Michael is a former Democratic National Committee, congressional and presidential campaign press secretary.

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