US Election Notes

6 November 2004

Newly elected Republicans shift Senate further to the right

The new Republican senators represent a further shift to the right within the Republican delegation. Five of the six are from southern states and personify various factions of the ultra-right forces that dominate the Republican Party. They include:

Tom Coburn of Oklahoma: A former congressman who once tried to lead a coup against the Republican House leadership because he regarded Newt Gingrich as too "soft," Coburn has publicly supported the death penalty for abortion providers. He complained of "rampant lesbianism" in Oklahoma middle schools, called a group of state legislators (Republicans from Oklahoma City) "crapheads," and called for cuts in federal assistance to native Americans—in a state with one of the largest American Indian populations. A physician, Coburn was sued during the campaign by a former patient who said he had sterilized her without her permission.

Jim DeMint of South Carolina: A three-term congressman and flat tax enthusiast, DeMint has called for replacing the US income tax with a sales tax, which would have a devastating impact on the population of South Carolina, one of the poorest in the US. During the campaign, DeMint called for the firing of gay teachers in the public schools, and said the same action should be taken against single women teachers who became pregnant.

Richard Burr of North Carolina: The son of a Presbyterian minister, Burr was a small businessman before winning a congressional seat in 1994. A leading supporter of banning abortion, he supported the Partial Birth Abortion Ban Act of 2003 and co-sponsored the Unborn Victims of Violence Act of 2004. His advocacy of the "right to life" did not stop him from doing the bidding of the tobacco companies—among North Carolina's most powerful corporate lobbies—in blocking legislation to begin federal Food and Drug Administration regulation of tobacco as a dangerous drug. Half a million people die of tobacco-related diseases each year in the US, and millions more overseas.

Mel Martinez of Florida: The first Cuban-American to hold a Senate seat, Martinez is from the first wave of exiles who fled the island at the height of the Cuban Revolution. He left in 1962 at age 15, worked his way through college and law school, and became a multi-millionaire trial lawyer. In 1998, he was elected chairman of the county board in Orange County, which includes Orlando, and then became secretary of housing and urban development in the Bush administration. Martinez left the cabinet to run for the Senate at the urging of Bush and Karl Rove, who wanted a Cuban candidate on the Florida ballot to boost the right-wing Cuban vote. In the course of his primary campaign, he denounced his conservative opponent, former congressman and Clinton impeachment manager William McCollum, as a tool of homosexual interests, because he had once voted for legislation against hate crimes.

No account of what might be called the lunatic right would be complete without mentioning Senator Jim Bunning of Kentucky, who won reelection narrowly despite a series of bizarre incidents which led the state's largest newspaper, the *Louisville Courier-Journal*, to publicly question his mental health. Bunning remarked that his Democratic opponent, Daniel Mongiardo, looked like one of Saddam Hussein's sons. He claimed that Mongiardo aides had assaulted his wife at a campaign rally, and demanded federal protection against the prospect of terrorist attacks on his campaign events in rural Kentucky. At one point, the 71-year-old senator revealed that he had not read a newspaper in six weeks and was not aware of the refusal of Army reservists in Iraq to go on a convoy mission. Meanwhile, Bunning supporters circulated rumors that Mongiardo was gay.

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Prostration of the Democrats

It is instructive to supplement a profile of the new Republican senators with an examination of their Democratic opponents—who deserve much of the credit for the Republican gains.

In Florida, for instance, the Democratic candidate was Betty Castor, former state superintendent of schools and former president of the University of South Florida (USF). Castor spent the entire campaign defending herself from criticism by Martinez that she had been too slow in acting against USF Professor Sami al-Arian, a Palestinian activist who is now facing trial on terrorism charges trumped up by the Bush administration.

Castor suspended Arian as a professor at USF while she was president, but could not fire him because of tenure rules. Her response to Martinez's smear campaign was to embrace the witch-hunt and suggest that Bush and Martinez had themselves had relations with Arian. She cited photographs of Arian attending a Bush campaign rally in 2000 and visiting the White House as part of an Arab-American delegation early in the Bush administration's first year.

In Oklahoma, the Democratic opponent of the fascistic Tom Coburn was Brad Carson, a congressman who boasted of his support for the war in Iraq, the cultural agenda of the far right, and his ties to the Bush administration generally. He prominently displayed photographs of himself with Bush.

The campaign of Inez Tenenbaum in South Carolina was equally right-wing. She hailed Bush's invasion of Iraq, backed a constitutional amendment against gay marriage, and supported the death penalty. Tenenbaum distanced herself from Kerry's criticism of Bush's conduct of the war, and declared she was running an "independent campaign," not aligned with the Kerry-Edwards ticket.

One of the two Democrats to take a formerly Republican seat, Ken Salazar of Colorado, ran a law-and-order campaign capitalizing on his role as the state's attorney general. He declared his support for the war in Iraq and favored the death penalty, an issue on which he attacked his opponent, Peter Coors, from the right. (Coors, a conservative multimillionaire, said during a debate that he would oppose executing Osama bin Laden because he was philosophically opposed to capital punishment).

No swing to Republicans in state races

Races for state office belie the claims of a massive swing to the Republican Party. Republicans captured two governorships from the Democrats, in Indiana and Missouri, while Democrats captured two formerly Republican statehouses, in Montana and New Hampshire. The balance of control in the 50 states remained at 28 Republicans and 22 Democrats.

Control of state legislatures was similarly divided, with the main trend being geographical: the Republican Party captured majorities in the Georgia House, the Tennessee Senate, the Oklahoma House, and the Indiana House. Democrats captured the Oregon Senate, the Washington Senate, the Montana Senate, the Vermont House and the Colorado House and Senate.

The net result was a slight shift to the Democrats. Before the election, Republicans controlled both houses in 21 states, Democrats in 17, with 11 states divided (Nebraska has a nominally nonpartisan, unicameral legislature). After the election, the balance was Republicans 20, Democrats 19, 10 divided. Of all state legislative seats nationwide, Republicans had won or were leading in 3,647, Democrats in 3,630.

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