

# The Moral Fallout of the '98 Elections

Now that the November elections have passed, it is time to apply a little 20/20 hindsight to the results. An initial observation is that even the experts were surprised by the outcome, as Democrats gained five seats against the Republican majority in the House, while drawing even in the Senate. Less than a month before the elections, the political director of the Democratic National Committee stated that losing less than twenty-six House seats and less than six Senate seats would be a victory for Democrats. Even moderate political analysts believed that Republicans would secure net gains of eight House seats, three Senate seats, and three governorships. Yet, this election was the first one since the presidency of FDR in which the party of the president did not lose seats in a congressional election. It would seem that these elections deserve special consideration.

The reason why so many had expected poor election results for the Democrats was obviously the scandal that has enveloped the Clinton presidency in the last year. Many Republican leaders seemed to regard the election as a referendum on the President, discounting polls which suggested otherwise. The question is, How could so many "experts" have so misread this election?

Perhaps one of the most significant aspects of this year's results has to do with the vote of religious conservatives. By comparing this year's vote with the elections of 1994, when Republicans regained control of the House after years of a Democratic majority, we notice a major shift in the voting activity of the so-called "religious right." In 1994, 67 percent of self-described religious conservatives voted Republican for Congress, while only 20 percent voted for Democrats. In the 1998 elections, however, 54 percent of religious conservatives voted Republican, and 31 percent voted for Democrats, a significant 24 percent swing.

This, in itself, helps explain the strong showing of Democrats, but prompts the question, Why did religious conservatives have such a dramatic shift in voting patterns? Several attempts will be made here to answer this question.

Earlier this year, James Dobson of *Focus on the Family* issued a kind of ultimatum to the Republican Party leadership. Expressing frustration at the failure of Republicans to pass significant legislation in areas such as abortion, he threatened to take as many of his radio listeners as he could away from the Republican Party if they did not make more of an effort to focus on social issues important to evangelicals. Immediately after that threat, there was a sudden emphasis by Republican leaders on abortion and homosexuality, and once again the ban on partial-birth abortions was brought to a vote. However, it was again vetoed by President Clinton. Even though, in that respect, Republicans have made an effort to reflect the social concerns of evangelical Christians, their failure to make any progress even with a majority may have left many supporters alienated.

Another factor may have been the failure of Republicans to stand up to President Clinton in the last-minute budget negotiations in October. Instead of pressing for their own agenda months earlier, when Mr. Clinton was at his weakest, Republicans were pressed into a corner by the threat of another government shutdown. Their failure to acknowledge that their constituents were concerned with more than just President Clinton's behavior ultimately seems to have backfired. The main message this year was that conservatives themselves sent a message to Republicans that they can no longer be counted on to simply vote anti-Democrat. As Steve Forbes has said, "A party that loses sight of its values and principles loses its base."

## **Presidential Scandal and the '98 Elections**

Republicans and Democrats alike had anticipated major gains for the Republicans in the House, mainly because of the scandal involving President Clinton. House Speaker Newt Gingrich had predicted a gain of as many as thirty seats. Yet when the votes were tallied, Democrats had actually gained five seats, and Newt Gingrich has now resigned his position as Speaker of the House. Does this mean that voters rejected an agenda favorable to religious conservatives?

Many Christians have been dismayed by the apparent lack of voters who were willing to punish Mr. Clinton for his actions. Of course, Mr. Clinton himself was not running for office, but it was thought that, by voting against Democrats, voters would signal their disapproval of President Clinton's behavior. Instead, it appears that voters voted for candidates on their own merits; it would seem that voters were in most respects voting *for* candidates and issues, not just *against* Mr. Clinton.

Some, associating the Democratic Party with the Lewinski scandal, have suggested that the positive gains of Democrats indicates that Americans are less and less concerned about the morality of their political leaders. Several factors have to be considered before making that judgment. In the first place, no single party has a monopoly on morality. This became especially evident when it was revealed in recent months that several prominent Republicans had been involved in sexual affairs in the past. And even though the current legal issue against Mr. Clinton is all about perjury under oath and suborning of perjury, as well as possible obstruction of justice, it is impossible to separate these issues from President Clinton's involvement with Ms. Lewinski. Consequently, the emphasis in the press on the sexual nature of the scandal has led many to conclude that Mr. Clinton's behavior is not unique.

Another key factor in how the American people have reacted to the Lewinski scandal is a simple psychological response to the long period between President Clinton's denial of an affair and his eventual admission of an "inappropriate relationship." In the eight months between those two speeches, most Americans had gradually become convinced that the President lied in his initial denial. Consequently, when President Clinton admitted he had misled the public, the shock factor was absent—many people had already concluded that he wasn't telling the truth. And the constant emphasis in the news about the story eventually led many to conclude that our elected officials were obsessed with the scandal. Though it has been suggested that the reluctance to condemn Mr. Clinton's actions is indicative of a nation that has lost its moral compass, it could be that it also points to a sense of morality that is repulsed by publicly discussing private matters.

Exit polls indicate that over half of all voters did not consider President Clinton an issue in the election. Some candidates and issues which he supported won, and some lost. It seems what was most significant was that Republicans in this session of Congress failed to establish an agenda of their own that emphasized traditional conservatism. As we will see in the next section, it is evident that voters did not reject the social and moral concerns of Christians, but rather the failure of some Republicans to make a principled stand on the issues.

## **Major Victories for Christian Conservatives**

The mainstream press has attempted to portray the lack-luster performance of Republicans at the national level as a major blow to the religious right, yet exit polls indicate that the major difference this year was that it was the religious right itself that shifted its allegiance away from the Republican Party. The clear message is that Republicans cannot expect religious conservatives to slavishly vote Republican every time. Voters seem much more willing to look at each individual candidate on his or her own merit, rather than simply following a party line. It would appear that some of its strongest supporters are attempting to send Republican Party leaders a message.

Christians and other religious conservatives who are concerned that the elections indicate a major shift away from traditional morality may be focusing too strongly on their reaction to the Clinton scandal. Whereas 20 percent of voters went to the voting booth with the clear intent of voting against Mr. Clinton, another 20 percent voted with support of the President in mind. Those two groups thus canceled each other out. The other 60 percent of voters maintained that they voted with no thought of President Clinton. And since many Democrats attempted to distance themselves from President Clinton during their campaigns, it would be a stretch to suggest that those who voted Democrat were voting for the President. And when we consider the issues which were voted on this past November, we can't help but notice that major victories were won in areas important to Christians.

Perhaps one of the most defining moments of these elections was the banning of same-sex marriage in both Hawaii and Alaska. Of course, the silence from the major media has been deafening, especially when it had been suggested just two years ago by gay activists that Hawaii would open the floodgates for same-sex marriage. Even though homosexual activists poured considerable amounts of money and energy into their campaigns, nearly 70 percent of both Alaskan and Hawaiian voters affirmed marriage as being between one man and one woman. In a related issue, Republicans had high hopes that Matt Fong would defeat liberal Senator Barbara Boxer in California, but Fong shocked many conservative supporters late in the campaign by making concessions to the gay and lesbian community. Needless to say, Fong lost, mainly due to his failure to take a principled stand.

Also, another major issue for Christians has been the emphasis on the sanctity of life. In the home state of Jack Kevorkian, Michigan voters defeated doctor-assisted suicide by a wide margin. Colorado voters also placed a limitation on abortion by requiring parental consent for teenagers seeking abortion. Unfortunately, Colorado and Washington both refused to outlaw partial-birth abortions, although the votes were very close.

In sum, while conservatives seem to be laying all their bets on the Republican Party, and because Republicans didn't do as well as expected, there has been a tendency to say conservatism, and especially religious conservatism, was a big loser on election day. But when we look at the results of particular races, we see that only a handful of true conservatives lost at the national level, and many referendums were won. Any attempt to view the elections as an outright rejection of a conservative religious worldview cannot be supported by the facts.

## **Moral Judgment and the Sexual Revolution**

As we have examined the November elections, we have concluded that the attitude of most Americans toward President Clinton was left out of the ballot box. President Clinton was not running for office, and the major shift in voting patterns was demonstrated by religious conservatives, who appear to have punished Republicans for failing to act like the majority in Congress. Probably the best way to gauge how Americans view the President is to recall the polls that have been taken since the Lewinski matter erupted in January of 1998.

Certainly one of the most curious aspects of this political year has been the consistently high job approval ratings the President has enjoyed, while at the same time he is considered a poor role model by a majority. The very fact that people have made a moral judgment of the President is once again a positive indication that American society is not simply concerned with pragmatism. But on the other hand, the majority of Americans seem to be willing to forgive Mr. Clinton and simply want the issue to go away. In this respect, Americans seem perfectly content to ignore the scandal as long as there is peace abroad and economic prosperity at home. Besides, it is the opinion of many that the scandal is "just about sex." If anything, it is that small phrase which should be of concern for society, since it seems to imply that sexuality is of little importance. A biblical worldview is entirely opposed

to such a notion.

According to Genesis 2, God's desire is that one man and one woman should become "one flesh" in the act of marriage—a euphemism for sexual union. But since the beginning of time, humanity has rejected God's plan, and the consequences have been devastating. In the United States, there has been a concerted effort since the 1960's to overcome any social restrictions against sex outside of marriage, all in the name of personal freedom. But in fact, many of the social pathologies in this country can be traced to a distorted view of sexuality. When men and women reject the sacredness of sexuality and view sex as simply recreational, the natural results are obvious: unwanted pregnancies, abortion, sexually transmitted diseases, AIDS, divorce, single-motherhood, and poverty. Not so obvious is another related issue. When young men grow up without fathers, they typically learn conceptions of manhood from other youth, rather than learning from their fathers. Violent gangs are often the only families that some young men ever identify with. Thus, to speak of sexuality as though it is of little import is a tragic mistake.

Of course, because the sexual revolution has had such a powerful grip on society, it is easy to see why so many are able to separate President Clinton's personal life from his public duties. When any society loosens its attitude toward a particular activity, the members of that society will feel less ashamed for engaging in that activity. As a consequence, those who engage in that activity will be much less likely to condemn anyone who does the same thing, since to do so would necessarily be a condemnation of themselves. More than likely, the willingness for many to simply ignore the Lewinski matter is a residue of a casual view of sexuality. However, the American people must remember that the issue before them is not only a sexual scandal, but a question of the rule of law. That issue has broader implications for us all.

## **The Case for the Common Good**

As we have been considering the recent national elections and the surprising results, we have considered the possible connection between the results and the public's reaction to President Clinton and the Lewinski scandal. We have noted that exit polls indicate that candidates were typically judged on their own merits. Thus, overall results cannot be said to reflect favorably or negatively on Mr. Clinton. We also noted that the sexual revolution has lessened the tendency of Americans to judge anyone for sexual indiscretions. But, what must now be emphasized is that the President's impeachment hearings are based on allegations of perjury and obstruction of justice. That many Americans are willing to dismiss such an offense should be of concern to all of us.

Perhaps the first thing that should be acknowledged by all is that President Clinton is well-liked by many Americans. Consequently, this case is similar to the O.J. Simpson trial, where a well-known and well-liked celebrity won a trial of public opinion. In this situation, millions of Americans are sympathetic toward the President. Unfortunately, many Americans have construed their affection for the President as being admissible as evidence in a court of law. In reality, juries are not simply allowed to determine a person's fate by majority rule. And contrary to what has been stated recently by media friends of President Clinton such as Geraldo Rivera, perjury is a criminal offense. To simply ignore its possibility in this case would be devastating for our legal system.

When we consider that this country's government is founded on an intricate system of checks and balances, we must ultimately recognize that the rule of law is essential to a just society. When people are discriminated against, or granted special favors in the legal system, the result is injustice. President Clinton himself recognizes this, as he is the top law enforcement officer in the land. In addition, the following statement is found in the Justice Department's manual for federal prosecutors: "Because false declarations affect the integrity of the judicial fact-finding process, all offenders should be vigorously prosecuted."

Unfortunately, contemporary society tends to denigrate public service, and place a premium on the comforts of private and family life. Consequently, many people are willing to ignore the legal case against President Clinton since they assume it does not directly concern them. But, as Alexis de Tocqueville reminded us over 150 years ago in his great work *Democracy in America*, one of the dangers of democracy is that it can flatten people's personalities, making them "creatures of mass opinion and enslaving them to the drive for material security, comfort and equality." But if the American people are willing to forfeit the integrity of the law out of a desire for convenience or prosperity, it demonstrates not so much the lack of a moral compass as it indicates that many Americans no longer recognize the concept of the common good.

When a government becomes too powerful, de Toqueville warns, its citizens are willing to sacrifice freedom for comfort. Should contemporary society assume that President Clinton should not have to be held accountable for perjury, it would establish a legal precedent that would call into question the rule of law in our society. To that extent our elected congressional leaders must remember that their first responsibility is to the laws which they as a body have sworn to defend. While the spectacle of impeachment hearings is a sad prospect, even more tragic would be the cynicism that would be the result of ignoring this case for reasons of political expediency.

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