

This Election Will Be About Clinton, Not Congress's (Few) Accomplishments

By James A. Barnes

Somehow, I doubt that on Election Night, CNN public opinion analyst William Schneider will turn to anchorman Bernard Shaw and say, "Bernie, our exit polls tell us that Republicans picked up seats in the Senate and the House because voters were impressed with the record of accomplishment of the 105th Congress." Or, "Bernie, the voters liked the GOP tax-cut plan."

And if Democrats unexpectedly pick up seats, you will not hear Schneider, Shaw, or the other anchors saying the public had really wanted the GOP Congress to go along with the anti-tobacco legislation backed by President Clinton or his spending plans for school infrastructure. Unless something unforeseen happens, the interpretation of the 1998 mid-term election is likely to be a verdict on President Clinton's ethics and legal problems stemming from his sexual relationship with former White House intern Monica Lewinsky.

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For starters, as they finalized their plans in October, the various media representatives on the board of Voter News Service, the national exit polling consortium, were debating which and how many scandal-related questions to include on their Election Day survey, not whether to ask them.

Even before the scandal broke last January, the stage was set for a fairly quiescent election. In the aftermath of the 1997 balanced budget agreement and a booming economy, both President Clinton's and Congress' job approval ratings were on the rise. Indeed, the most intense struggle on Capitol Hill that year came when the Administration withdrew its request for fast-track trade negotiating authority after the White House could not muster even one-third of its members in the House of Representatives to go along with the Republican majority supporting the legislation.

Still, for months after the scandal broke, Democrats not only thought they would defy historical precedents and gain congressional seats, they harbored hopes of netting 11 House victories and retaking the chamber. Into the spring and summer, while the President was able to cover up his relationship with Lewinsky, party operatives boasted that issues like education, HMO reform, and anti-tobacco legislation would give enough competitive Democratic candidates enough of a lift to capture the House. Even a few Republican strategists said they could see the faint outlines of possible Democratic success.

All Monica, All the Time

To be sure, many Democratic issues fizzled before the Lewinsky story heated up. Anti-tobacco and campaign finance reform legislation were duds on Capitol Hill and the electorate does not look like its going to pummel Republicans for derailing them. Ironically, the GOP majority in the Senate has been the lead blocker for Republicans and the Senate is where the party could make its most significant gains on Election

Night. And Democrats have misplayed their hand in some instances, overreaching on tobacco legislation and permitting opponents to skewer it as a big-government, big-taxes bill.

But what has frustrated Democratic candidates the most during this election cycle has been their near inability from early August through much of September to get their message out to voters in the wake of the President's ethical woes. Just hours after the House Republican majority voted for a Patients' Bill of Rights/HMO reform legislation—which Democrats had hoped to use against GOP candidates because they deemed it too weak—news of an immunity deal from independent council Kenneth W. Starr to Lewinsky started to leak to the press.

Ever since that time, the national news media has been fixated on every turn in the Lewinsky scandal, from the President's unbecomingly nationally televised apology to the release of the Starr report and, later, his videotaped grand jury testimony. Thus, Democratic candidates in congressional races were practically badgered by questions about the latest twist in the scandal story.

But such media attention was not just a phenomenon of elite journalists in Washington and the political talk shows. The day after the Starr report was released I visited Democratic Representative Louise Slaughter in upstate New York as she opened her campaign headquarters in suburban Rochester. Correspondents and crews sent to the event by local television stations all quizzed Slaughter on her thoughts about the Starr report and the scandal.

In this kind of environment, how can Democrats get the attention of reporters to highlight their differences with Republicans on HMO reform? While the issue is still a staple of many

Democratic candidates' campaign ads, party consultants acknowledge that it is very difficult for their clients to gain much traction on the HMO issue, especially when House Republicans actually managed to pass a bill that they could claim addressed some of the more glaring abuses in the industry.

Although the videotape release of his testimony may have helped the President's—and by connection Democratic—political fortunes, it is doubtful that it turned the tide of media interest in the story. The impeachment process continues moving forward, practically devouring all other issues.

Many Democrats are resigned to the fact that the only way they can get their political case to the voters is through expensive television campaign advertising. And unlike the President—who has claimed adversity is good for the party at Democratic fund-raising events—many Democratic strategists are worried that, at least in part because of the scandal, their candidates will continue to be at a financial disadvantage compared to their GOP opponents.

The Democrats' Dilemma

Unlike the 1994 election when many Democrats had to run on the unpopular record of having backed the President's 1993 budget and his controversial health care plan, the political problem they face this November is not something they caused and not something they can easily address. If they criticize the President too harshly, they risk alienating their political base. If they appear indifferent to the scandal or too supportive of Clinton, Democratic candidates who have won in the past with the support of Republican and independent swing voters could lose that share of the electorate they need to survive. Moderate Democratic Senate incumbents like Nevada's Harry Reid or South Carolina's Fritz Hollings come to mind. Likewise, liberal Democratic incumbents like California's Barbara Boxer and Illinois's Carol Mosely-Braun, who both won with support from crossover Republican women voters in 1992, were already facing tough reelection races without having to deal with a presidential scandal.

This kind of potential electoral fallout among swing voters is one reason House Minority Leader Richard Gephardt has resisted the urging of liberals in his caucus to take stronger steps in coming to the aid of the President. Gephardt understands that a partisan defense of Clinton could complicate life from marginal Democratic candidates in swing districts and limit their maneuvering room.

For the most part, Democrats do not think their candidates are going to be held responsible for the President's problems. The political mood is "very different from 1994 when there was a wide, broad, deep hostility towards Democrats," said Democratic media consultant Anita Dunn, a partner in the firm of Squier, Knapp, Ochs, Dunn. "When you did film shoots in '94 and candidates went into public places,

people wouldn't come up to shake their hands. People are upset, but they don't look at individual candidates and say, 'I'm so upset with Bill Clinton and you are piece of it too.'"

While the Democrats' earlier expectations of making gains in the House and holding their own in the Senate were probably unrealistic, even modest losses on Election Night—say a net loss of four Senate and a dozen House seats—will be bitter pills for them to swallow. Many Democratic operatives admit that their hopes exceeded reality when they talked of retaking the House. But they also wanted to pick up a handful of seats or at least hold losses to a minimum to set the stage for a comeback during the 2000 presidential election when they anticipate the electoral environment will be more attractive for Democrats. Losses in 1998 that appear to put a recovery in 2000 out of reach will leave Democrats fuming. As one Democratic House leadership aide said acidly, "I have a feeling Clinton will remain standing and the party will be in tatters around him."

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Beware of the Backlash

Democrats have been put on the defensive by Clinton's mishandling of his affair, but Republicans must carefully handle the scandal lest they overplay their hand. The President, after all, still has a strong job approval rating—over 60% in many polls. While that rating may be a broad gauge of approval that includes a hefty dose of gratitude for the economy's performance, it is still an important barometer for measuring any president's political health.

According to surveys conducted by the Gallup Organization, Richard Nixon carried a job approval rating that averaged just over 28% for over a year before he resigned. Even if Clinton's rating is artificially high, it has a long way to go before it hits Watergate levels. "My big fear is that this Republican Congress will try to impeach a 60% president over an issue the public doesn't care about," said GOP pollster Fred Steeper, a principle at Market Strategies Inc. "I think they could technically have him on perjury and on obstruction of justice and they'd still be risking a horrific backlash."

The danger for Republicans running in 1998 is that the impeachment issue becomes partisan. Already, on many key aspects of Clinton's behavior and the investigation of indepen-

dent council Starr, a majority of Republicans takes a harsher view of Clinton than Democrats and independents.

For instance, when a September 22-23 CBS News/*New York Times* poll asked people whether Clinton's relationship with Lewinsky had more to do with his private life or his job as president, 53% of the Republicans said it was a public matter having to do with his job, while 83% and 67% of self-described Democrats and independents, respectively, said it was a private matter. Likewise, when the CBS/*NYT* survey asked people their views on Starr's investigation, 49% of Republicans said it was impartial and 40% said it was partisan. Among independents, only 25% said it was impartial while 64% described the probe as partisan. Democrats were even more lopsided, 82% said Starr had conducted a partisan investigation.

These kinds of numbers may explain why House Speaker Newt Gingrich has taken care not to appear to be rushing forward with impeachment, even while individual Republican candidates and some members say the President should resign or otherwise be removed from office. Gingrich understands that even though most of the voters who will go to the polls on November 3 are offended by the scandal, they are cautious on the issue of presidential resignation or impeachment and do not want to act hastily. After all, look how long Nixon hung on.

Turnout Questions

Facing low voter turnout, whichever party gets its supporters to the polls on November 3 will also probably write the story of the mid-term elections. Heading into October, Republicans appeared to be have the upper hand in this contest.

The CBS/*NYT* survey showed that when registered voters were asked how they would cast a generic House ballot, 44% favored a Democratic candidate while 39% chose a Republican. But as a progressively tighter voting screen was applied, Republican fortunes consis-

tently rose: Likely voters—those who were paying at least some attention to the campaign, voted in 1996, and said they would definitely vote this year—favored the GOP candidate over the Democrat 44% to 43%; more likely voters—who also voted in 1994—preferred Republicans over Democrats 50% to 41%; and very likely voters—who said they were paying “a lot” of attention to the campaign—favored Republicans 53% to 41%.

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Indeed, Republicans need a focal point for their political energies since they have not established much of a record to run on during the last two years. Having banked on the generally positive mood of the country to reelect their incumbents and preserve their majorities in the Senate and House, Republicans showed little imagination and even less boldness in crafting an agenda to take to the voters this November.

With the budget surplus, the GOP-controlled Congress should have fashioned a compelling tax-cut proposal to excite partisans and woo hard-pressed middle class voters. But in the closing days of the 105th, conservative Republican leaders found themselves having to beg their own congressional leaders to pass some sort of tax-cut plan.

Republican White House hopeful Steve Forbes said that now is not the time “for the Senate to go wobbly. Now is the time to lead, not cut back-room Beltway deals to appease a weak and failed president.”

Democrats are heartened that President Clinton's job approval rating remains high and voters are not eager to kick him out of the Oval Office. But outside of raising campaign funds, which

he must do at a frantic pace to give Democratic candidates fuel to sustain their advertising efforts, Clinton may not be much of an asset in the closing weeks of election season. Typically, presidents can at least travel to states to rally partisans and obtain media coverage for their candidates. Certainly that should be a party's plan if its president had a 60-plus job approval rating.

A red flag to this strategy was raised in the latest Field Poll of California voters conducted September 27 to October 3 right after the President had made a two-day trip to the state and attended several well-publicized Democratic party fund-raising events. His job approval rating in California slipped to 57% according to the Field poll, and the percentage of those who said he would not be an effective leader if he remained in office jumped to 38%, up from 30% in an August Field survey. This in a state where Clinton has always enjoyed higher popularity than in much of the rest of the country.

“Clinton and his aides and lawyers have been able to stem the tide running against them,” pollster Mervin Field told the *San Francisco Chronicle*. “Now their ability to withstand the tide seems in question.”

A California Democratic political consultant, who requested anonymity, noted this downturn and that voters want Clinton “staying contrite, not in a political guise. He is venturing somewhat close to the line of being seen as too cocky.” He wondered if Clinton “can go any place” to rally the party faithful without alienating swing voters.

If that's the case, it could be a long Election Night for Democrats with an even more painful period of intra-party recriminations afterwards.



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