

The Sad Death of 'All Politics is Local'

Even before Justice Anthony Kennedy's blockbuster announcement that he would be retiring from the Supreme Court, it looked like the 2018 midterms would probably serve a nationalized referendum on Donald Trump. Against the backdrop of the migrant child-detention facilities controversy earlier this summer, and the contentious process to replace Kennedy with Brett Kavanaugh, the "Second Civil War" has gone from a social media meme to looking more and more like a grim forecast of the future.

But as much as the current fury has changed things, the more they have remained the same. For nearly a quarter-century, the midterm elections that used to center on bread-and-butter issues like schools, crime—"the economy, stupid"—have now been little more than proxy wars to impeach Clinton, thwart Bush, or attempt, no matter how vainly, to make Obama a one-term president. Now, they are all about dumping Trump.

Former Speaker of the House Thomas "Tip" O'Neill famously declared that "all politics is local." And for most of O'Neill's colorful life, that was true. When he entered Boston politics as a young man in the pre-war 1930s—when radio and "talking pictures" were still relatively new-fangled technology, and the influence of TV (let alone the Internet) was way off—most state and local elections were decided on old-fashioned retail politics and who could bring home the most bacon (or at least promised to).

But that era ended forever in 1994. That year, a brazen House Minority Whip named Newt Gingrich effectively nationalized all 435 locally-based congressional seats—as well as the one-third of the Senate and the vast majority of governor's mansions (including California, New York, and Texas) up for grabs that

year—for a massive political repudiation of Bill and Hillary Clinton. The result was perhaps the biggest “Republican Revolution” in modern history, as the GOP gained 54 seats in the House and eight in the Senate, and high profile Democrats at every level suffered stunning defeats—including New York Governor Mario Cuomo and Texas Governor Ann Richards.

Despite Reagan-like prosperity and relative peace, the GOP “Revolutionaries” (many of them with strong ties to the influential Religious Right) then launched an unsuccessful impeachment case against Clinton in 1998 over his affair with 22-year-old intern Monica Lewinsky. It was a bridge too far. African-American and Hispanic voters sounded a Silkwood alarm, with Toni Morrison racializing the attack on Clinton as though he were the “First Black President.” Women on the left stood by Hillary who stood by her man. As the Republicans pushed the most salacious details of the Lewinsky affair into the public forum, the media rushed to uncover the “impeachment managers’” own personal transgressions and the political discourse became rife with charges of overreach and hypocrisy—all of which helped Clinton’s case enormously.

Needless to say it was what was happening in Washington that helped the Democrats almost flip the House back in the 1998 midterms. California elected Democrat Gray Davis for governor, New York swapped out Republican Alfonse D’Amato for Democrat Chuck Schumer in the Senate, and even ultra-conservative North Carolina said sayonara to Senator Lauch Faircloth in favor of an impeccably coiffed Democratic lawyer named John Edwards. Instead of Clinton, it was Newt Gingrich who was forced to resign in disgrace by the beginning of 1999.

Then came the National Security/Bush Tax Cut Midterms of 2002. “We won the midterms. This is our due,” Dick Cheney was reported to have gloated, only to be followed by the Hurricane Katrina/Iraq War backlash against the GOP in 2006 and the equally fierce Obamacare/Tea Party backlash against the Democrats in 2010. The Get Ready for Hillary midterms of 2014

vacuumed out the DNC's treasure chest.

Not surprisingly, every special election and primary fight leading up to the November midterms today has been a referendum on Donald Trump. Over on the #Resistance scorecard, there was Democrat Ralph Northam's victory over Republican Ed Gillespie in November 2017, and though Democrat Jon Ossoff still lost to a Republican, his margin was surprisingly thin in the special election for the 6th district in redder-than-red Georgia.

Trump, meanwhile, had reason to brag about his "5-0" record of wins in last spring's special elections, including victories for CIA Director Mike Pompeo's successor Ron Estes, keeping budget czar Mick Mulvaney's seat in the GOP column with Ralph Norman, and most controversially, conservative Trump supporter Greg Gianforte's win (despite physically assaulting a reporter) in Montana's at-large congressional seat.

As any federalist will tell you, a great deal of why these elections have become "national" instead of "local" is because the federal government plays a bigger role today in every aspect of our lives, a trend that began in the Civil Rights era. From 1970s desegregation issues like busing and low-income and racial diversity housing mandates, to Reagan and Clinton-era culture wars over compulsory sex-ed, prohibitions on creationism, lawsuits over church and state, all the way up to Planned Parenthood decisions and health care, nationalized issues have galvanized interest groups and mobilized voters for the polls.

And don't think that savvy players like Newt Gingrich and Karl Rove didn't harness this from the top down in every election since 1994. They encouraged local conservatives to not only run for local offices but to use a uniform set of talking points based on the national hot-button issues of the day—a strategy soon adopted by Democrats. (Sarah Palin is perhaps the most recognizable but certainly not the only one of the

Gingrich-era pols who began their careers on on school boards and city councils.)

One only need read political histories like Thomas Frank's (most unsympathetic) *What's the Matter With Kansas?* to find one example after another across the country. Local school board, city council, county supervisor, and state legislature seats were increasingly decided by the candidates' positions on *Roe v. Wade*, gay rights, Hollywood immorality, gun control, and prayer in schools—issues that no local elected official or judge could actually change or meaningfully influence even if they wanted to.

Fast forward to 2008, when then-Senator Barack Obama campaigned on a promise for a national health care plan (with no individual mandate, which at the time he said would be like punishing people for being too poor to afford premiums), with some sort of public option, if not single payer. Many liberal congressmen and local state officials eagerly campaigned on Obama's heels, promising that if their voters ensured a blue wave in the 2008 elections, the long-deferred dream of universal healthcare would finally be theirs.

Until that is, a small group of endangered Blue Dog Democrats—Max Baucus, Ben Nelson, Blanche Lincoln, and Joe Lieberman (all gone now)—stood side-by-side with the toughest Tea Partiers and issued an arms-folded denial to the public option and the Medicare-at-55 buy-in. They insisted on a rock-ribbed individual mandate to shore up the private insurance industry for good measure. With no hope of getting past a Republican filibuster without those centrist Democratic senators, Obama caved. Then-Speaker of the House Nancy Pelosi strong-armed holdout House Dems to salvage a win for some form of universal healthcare—but it was vastly less than those overeager congressmen and local Democrats had promised.

As a result, voters took out their fury on Democrats—including powerless local representatives and governors, for the crime

of making promises they'd been in no position to make. Liberals largely stayed home from the polls in 2010, making way for a "Tea Party" landslide. The House has been run by Republicans ever since, and the Senate returned to Republican hands just four short years later.

Of course the nationalization of elections could not be complete without the ongoing marginalization of local news coverage and, especially after the 2008 financial meltdown, the loss of local newspapers themselves. Journalist Michael Kinsley once said that the Internet effectively made all "local" papers with any real footprint into national ones—people in Hawaii read stories from *The Miami Herald*, people in Boston watch the Arizona Senate races on their smartphones, and so on. But the local *content* has shrunk, because no one is hiring local reporters. And while newspapers have been gobbled up by corporate chains and conglomerates, local TV stations have been consolidated by networks and large station groups, and local emphasis and flavor suffers. Viewers and readers are driven to the Internet on which only the big players have survived the advertising wars, and Facebook and Twitter drive the social media narrative. Again, little room for quality community news or views.

While walking the suburban sidewalks of my southern California neighborhood in the run-up to the California primary this summer, I saw campaign signs for State Assembly and Senate seats that were promising Medicare for All, and heard candidates for local offices wishing they could vote for a Trump impeachment. Of course a state legislator has absolutely no legal jurisdiction to implement Medicare for All or to impeach a sitting president. Ditto for hardening federal environmental regulations or protecting one's right to own a firearm.

Today, Democrats and left-liberals alike are gassed up about fresh new Gen-X and Millennial candidates like Alexandria

Ocasio-Cortez and Julia Salazar amid an effort to win back Congress and shore up state and local offices (they lost over 1,000 seats at every level under Obama). As with the Gingrich/Rove-era Republicans, they know that a set of national talking points is in some cases more effective than local policy issues, especially in terms of creating media buzz and galvanizing the base.

So with the bombshell legal issues of Michael Cohen and Paul Manafort, along with the Supreme Court vacancy and the dangling hope and fear of a Trump impeachment should Congress change hands, there is every reason to believe that November's midterms will be All Trump, All The Time. Michael Tomasky recently predicted in *The New Republic* a strong possibility of the greatest midterm backlash since the groundbreaking "Watergate Babies" election of November 1974.

Yet whether the MAGAs or the new Democratic Socialists claim victory this November, the root of this problem remains unsolved. The vast majority of the other great Western and postwar Asian democracies have parliamentary governments—in other words, a strong centralized system which makes allowances for regional and local input, by way of forcing coalitions between numerous parties and groups.

America, owing to its Founders' vision, started out with a local and regional first-past-the-post system that makes (what the Founders thought would be) only occasional allowance (war powers, foreign trade and treaties, and eventually judicial review) for strong federal action. Unfortunately, as it stands today, we currently have the worst of both worlds. It would be wonderful to see an off-year election where local concerns and voices were truly "centered" in the discussion, a midterm that truly put 500 or 600 local spotlights on the individual and unique needs and cultures of individual communities and people, and *truly* reflected our diversity. Not a hyped-up online and cable smackdown referendum on the current occupant of 1600 Pennsylvania Avenue. Enough of the virtue-signaling,

prattling, and pandering about things of which, at the end of the day, local candidates have no control.

Well, as Milton Berle might have framed it in one of his jokes, *I'd love to see it*. But considering the glidepath of the last three decades, don't hold your breath.

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