Politics as Usual

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POLITICS

A D.C. INSIDER WARNS THAT THE FUTURE DOESN’T LOOK ROSY FOR THE 113TH CONGRESS, GIVEN THE PREVAILING ANTIPATHY TOWARD COMPROMISE AND COLLABORATION.

BY JESSICA TAYLOR
As Usual

Several months ago, some Furman alumni and I met for dinner in Washington, D.C. Gathered for barbecue and sweet tea, reminiscent of our Southern roots, many of us had arrived after work from jobs in politics, on Capitol Hill, or with former Democratic presidential candidates or GOP cabinet members.

We all held differing viewpoints, and the presidential election was just a month away. But little, if any, of our conversation turned on politics. And the varying political views represented at that long table had no bearing on our years-long friendships.

It was the same way when we were students at Furman. Whether we were involved in student government, the student newspaper, or opposing sides during campaigns or political science simulations, our political stripes — or lack thereof — never seemed to matter. We could agree or disagree with one another, respect our differences, and still be friends.

In Congress, just a few blocks down First Street from my office at the Rothenberg Political Report, where I am a senior analyst and reporter, good luck getting members of opposing parties — and even some within the same party — to break bread together or exchange a cordial word. During the second presidential debate, it even looked as if President Barack Obama and GOP nominee Mitt Romney wanted to take a swing at each other.

When I came to D.C. from Greenville in 2007, fresh out of Furman, I soon realized that bipartisan accord was practiced better in ivory towers than on Capitol Hill.

No Waves in 2012

Two thousand twelve marked the third full national election cycle I've covered. While by many measures I'm still a neophyte, in talking with colleagues who have been keen observers for some time, the level of vitriol in 2012 was nastier than ever. We've seen each party move further toward its own extremes, especially in the past two years, and the differences grew more stark during the most recent election cycle. This vitriol isn't anything new, but it has had an impact on the past few very different and dynamic elections.

The year 2010 brought a third consecutive "wave" election cycle in national politics. While the elections of 2006 and 2008 produced huge, sweeping victories for Democrats, largely in response to dissatisfaction with the outgoing Bush administration, the midterm elections in President Obama's first term proved very different. After Democrats, who had controlled both chambers of Congress, joined with the White House to push through sweeping healthcare legislation and government bailouts, they suffered record losses. Republicans gained 63 seats in the House.

But the bright-eyed rookies received a rude awakening when they arrived on Capitol Hill. Although such ideas as cutting billions of dollars from the budget and slashing federal programs made for good campaign fodder, they discovered that, in reality, it was much harder to affect Congress as one of 435 members. In Washington, everything moves at a snail's pace (traffic included), and for many freshman legislators, their ideas about cutting government weren't moving fast enough.

Washington has found itself at the edge of the cliff several times these past two years. Seemingly simple votes, such as funding the government, have turned into ideological battles, with small-government conservatives wanting to push through reforms while the other side makes them scapegoats. Groups such as the anti-tax Club for Growth or Americans for Tax Reform promise primary challenges and loss of support if members don't vote the way they're expected to. Raising the debt ceiling used to be a routine vote. Now it's an all-out war.

As 2012 wound down, the possibility of going over the fiscal cliff came down to the wire yet again. Neither side wanted to give an inch, partly for fear of retribution within their own ranks. Republicans were in disarray. Speaker John Boehner couldn't hold his caucus together to pass his own legislation, which was designed to avoid the looming economic calamity by raising taxes on the wealthiest Americans — even though the proposal would have been dead on arrival in the Senate, or with Obama. At the 11th hour, a deal was narrowly struck.

Quick question: Can you name one meaningful piece of national legislation passed in 2012? In the end, the 112th Congress passed the fewest number of bills since the Great Depression — about 80 years ago.

But on November 6, little, if any, frustration was evident at the voting booth. Voters re-elected the same president and a Democratic Senate, and left Republicans in control of the House. For all the hand-wringing and grumbling and bickering — not to mention the billions of dollars spent by each side — everything stayed pretty much the same.
POLITICALLY THERE’S LITTLE INCENTIVE TO SEEK ANYTHING BUT GRIDLOCK — WHICH MAY BE THE WORST OUTCOME FOR THE COUNTRY, YET IS PROBABLY THE BEST OUTCOME FOR INDIVIDUAL POLITICIANS AND THEIR RE-ELECTION CAMPAIGNS.

So, does a seemingly status quo election mean that voters accept the status quo?

In the end, the absence of a wave election meant that for the first time in six years, voter sentiment wasn’t with one side or the other. For Democrats, the effort to take control of Congress in 2012 was much harder than for Republicans in 2010, as redistricting had shored up districts for many vulnerable members and produced fewer competitive seats.

PRESIDENTIAL DYNAMICS

With the presidential election, everyone believed the result would come down to the economy. Given the nation’s lengthy battle with high unemployment and a staggering job market, Obama looked for a while as if he would be a one-term president. But as much as voters want to vote against something or someone, they want to vote for something as well. During primary season the GOP went through so many iterations and frontrunners that when Mitt Romney finally emerged as the nominee, he was more damaged than battle-tested. The once moderate former governor of Massachusetts had been pulled to the extreme right of his party, which hurt his chances to woo voters in the middle who may have grown disenchanted with Obama. As a result, he could never find a niche — a problem that played out across the GOP spectrum.

The Obama campaign, flush with sophisticated voter lists and a massive turnout operation, proved far superior to anything the Republicans had built. And Obama succeeded in another key area: by defining Romney as an out-of-touch millionaire who couldn’t relate to the hardships the country faced. Voters didn’t remember the stories about Romney’s service in the Mormon Church, or how he helped struggling families, or his business successes. Instead they remembered his bank accounts in the Cayman Islands and the layoffs he’d overseen when turning around companies at Bain Capital.

According to national exit poll data on Election Day, Romney edged Obama 49 to 48 percent on the topic of which candidate would better handle the economy. But when people were asked who was more in touch with people like them, Obama won, 53 to 43 percent.

Perhaps the most defining moment of the election wasn’t in Romney’s failure to define himself or in Obama’s bumbling performance in the first debate, but at the Democratic National Convention. While these heavily staged party gatherings typically succeed at wooing no one, when former president Bill Clinton took the stage in Charlotte, N.C., a different narrative emerged.

I watched from the press gallery as the thousands of delegates cheered the former president. And in all his “humbleness,” Clinton stated that even he, who oversaw the booming economy of the 1990s, couldn’t have turned around the economic mess Obama inherited in just four years. Obama got a convention bounce he never completely lost, even after the lackluster first debate, and Romney never caught up. And in the exit polls, when voters were asked who was to blame for the current economic conditions, 53 percent said former president George W. Bush, while just 38 percent said Obama.

Republicans also failed to recognize a changing electorate — one that was more similar to 2008 than it was to their successful midterm year of 2010. Four years ago, young voters turned out in record numbers, and a drop-off this year was expected. But among 18- to 29-year-olds, there was a slight uptick to 19 percent of the electorate. Hispanic and even Asian-American voters continued to grow as a key demographic group, and both went overwhelmingly for President Obama.

GOP polling failed to foresee these new dynamics as part of the likely turnout model —
and contributed to the Republicans’ shock when Romney lost so decisively. The GOP will have much soul-searching to do over the next few years, not just on how to reach out and communicate to key voting blocs, but on issues of emerging importance.

**PLAY TO THE BASE**

It’s not by accident that a new generation of Republican leaders is already becoming very vocal about such topics as immigration — and somewhat more temperate on spending issues. The GOP has a more diverse flock waiting in the wings, including Florida Sen. Marco Rubio, Louisiana Gov. Bobby Jindal and straight-talking New Jersey Gov. Chris Christie. And you can expect newly appointed South Carolina Sen. Tim Scott, now the only African American in the Senate and the first black Republican senator since 1979, to be a star for the GOP. While he comes from the same conservative orthodoxy as his predecessor, Jim DeMint, his outreach value to minority voters can’t be denied.

In many instances, Democrats did better at pulling crossover voters to their side in more conservative states in the House and Senate elections than Republicans did in turning blue states red. Their success was aided by some less-than-stellar performances by GOP candidates.

In Missouri, Republicans nominated Todd Akin, their most conservative candidate, to run against Claire McCaskill, a highly vulnerable Democratic incumbent. But Akin’s comments on “legitimate rape” just a few weeks into the campaign, and his refusal to exit the race despite pressure from his own party, made McCaskill, once a sure goner, a virtual lock for re-election. In Indiana, six-term moderate GOP senator Richard Lugar was ousted in the primary at the hands of powerful conservative groups. But after missteps and ill-considered comments about rape, abortion and “God’s will,” Lugar’s conqueror, Richard Mourdock, lost to moderate Democrat Joe Donnelly.

It seems that any departure from party orthodoxy may endanger you to the other side or to voters in the middle, but good luck with your supposed allies. Just ask Greenville’s own former congressman, Republican Bob Inglis, how compromise and pragmatism worked for him in 2010.

Inglis’ overall voting score was extremely conservative, but after he voted against Bush’s troop surge and began to move more toward the center on such issues as energy and the environment, he fell victim to a more conservative challenger, Trey Gowdy. Inglis was booted at town halls around the Upstate for telling constituents to turn off conservative commentator Glenn Beck.

As Inglis learned, and as other incumbents and centrist GOP candidates have learned in recent years, “moderate” has become a dirty word to most of the party base. There’s little incentive to compromise, and if you do, you may be staring at electoral doom.

Conservatives aren’t the only ones who have to wrestle with these issues, but the problem has been less severe for Democrats. Progressive groups have sprung up to try to get more liberal members through primaries, although they have not worked as hard to challenge sitting incumbents. Progressives succeeded at pushing through their candidates in more urban and liberal states or districts, where they had less of a need to appeal to independents.

**HOPES VS. REALITY**

So with a status quo election and a frustrated and somewhat confused electorate, what does this mean for the next two, or four, or 10 years? The future, unfortunately, isn’t too rosy for moving anything forward in Congress if things continue along the same trajectory.

Politicians can’t find common ground and have often been forced by the extremes of their own parties to fall in line — or face electoral consequences. As for collegiality and cordiality across the political aisle? Politically there’s little incentive to seek anything but gridlock — which may be the worst outcome for the country, yet is probably the best outcome for individual politicians and their re-election campaigns.

In more than 100 interviews conducted in recent months by the Rothenberg Political Report, we asked many soon-to-be members of Congress about their hopes for compromise and for reach-
ing out to their political foes. Some, perhaps too wishfully, talked about ways they could forge relationships and seek out strong ideas, even if they came from the other party. But almost all of those who made such comments were from competitive districts and needed some crossover appeal to win.

With redistricting having produced fewer competitive seats, there’s less incentive to work together or to admit that in compromise and debate, one party rarely gets everything it wants. Rep. Tom Rice, from South Carolina’s new 7th District, was one who did sound pragmatic and realistic. When asked about negotiating in Congress, pointing out that as a tax attorney, he never got everything he wanted in a deal. Rice won a crowded primary in which many conservative groups stayed on the sidelines, but if he puts his outlook into practice, he and other like-minded members know they’ll come under scrutiny from their supposed allies.

Perhaps we could all take to heart the words that David Shi, former president of Furman, delivered at the 2008 Commencement, when the university’s invitation to President Bush to speak created a great deal of rancor on and off campus. Shi sounded this conciliatory note:

“Regardless of our diplomas and degrees, none of us has all the answers, no matter how loudly we speak or how certain we seem or how brashly we behave. The humility embedded in our imperfection should prompt us, at least occasionally, to reassess our dogmas, harness our arrogance, and slow our keystroke rush to judgment.

“Liberally educated people are those who have learned to practice tolerance and self-criticism and embody civility and humility. This doesn’t mean that we should not be confident or forthright in our convictions. It does mean that we should not contemptuously dismiss the convictions of others.”

Good luck, for now, getting those words to ring true anywhere near Washington. [F]
I almost didn’t make it, thanks to Hurricane Sandy.

That was how things began for me on Election Weekend — the most important days of the year, a time that we, as political analysts and junkies, had been anticipating since 2010. But despite the superstorm ravaging the East Coast and leaving much of New York City and the surrounding metro areas without power, I was able to catch one of the first Amtrak trains out of Washington, D.C., to the Big Apple to work as an Election Night consultant with CBS News.

It was my first prolonged foray into the behind-the-scenes workings of television news. I was joining a cadre of other political analysts, strategists from both sides of the aisle, and correspondents pulled from diverse beats to cover this once-every-four-years blowout.

I’d spent past election nights hammering away in print newsrooms, tracking Congressional races and feverishly writing and tweeting for the Web. To my readers, details and minutiae were important, as we were the strange junkies obsessing over every race in the country.

But now, my job was to assist in making sense of the 2012 battle for control of the House and Senate — a battle that would be somewhat overshadowed by the race for president.

It was a bit strange to run through rehearsals before Election Night, pretending in real time that each possible outcome — either President Barack Obama or President Mitt Romney — was happening. From our vantage point at the House and Senate desk, a few of our races would garner attention, but it was clear that determining who would reach 270 electoral votes first was the biggest story of the night.

When Election Night finally arrived, it almost seemed anticlimactic. As political analysts and journalists, we had worked for two years toward this day, just like every politician and staffer whose fates would be held in limbo until they knew the results.

At CBS, we started receiving embargoed exit poll data at 5 p.m. — an exclusive first glance at what the voters were thinking and saying. While the outcome looked close, the polls appeared to show that the country was leaning toward President Obama. Television likes to cover the fight for the House and the Senate, but it loves the presidential race.

Our House and Senate group was sequestered in the “60 Minutes” studio, far down the hall from the actual, historic CBS newsroom. But I had to sneak a peek — and wound up getting goose bumps. I had grown up watching the “CBS Evening News” with my family, and I remembered Dan Rather sitting in that very chair. Watching him was how I first developed my love of news. Now I was standing in the same halls Walter Cronkite and Edward R. Murrow had walked. And the news was about to begin.

Once the voting closed there was a flurry of excitement, but I was huddled with my laptop in a corner behind a green screen onto which, through the magic of television, we could project all the fancy graphics supporting the reports from our correspondent.

There weren’t many surprises early on with the Senate, and it quickly became a good night for Democrats. By winning seats in Massachusetts, Connecticut and Virginia, they were making it hard for Republicans to pick up the majority in the Senate chamber that they so coveted.

The presidential race, of course, dominated coverage. The exit polls and subsequent results weren’t moving in Romney’s direction, and some of the biggest surprises to me were that Virginia and Florida, which I expected to go the GOP’s way, weren’t.

Just after 11:30 p.m., CBS and most other networks had declared Obama the winner after putting Ohio in the incumbent’s column. It all happened in a flash, while our group was still focused on tracking how many seats each party would win or lose in the House or Senate. But not much from our desk mattered in the next hour, with concession and victory speeches to come.

The long, strange trip ended for me around 4 a.m., as I kept zeroing in on undecided House races, some of which would remain in recount purgatory for weeks to come. After about two hours of sleep and a frantic rush to catch the train back to D.C., we were ready to begin making sense of what it all meant.

And then, it was on to 2014. . . .

— Jessica Taylor