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Politics in 2014

Michael Sean Winters | Jan. 2, 2014 Distinctly Catholic

Predictions in politics are risky things. Who would have predicted one year ago that Obama would have had such a bad year? Or that Sen. Ted Cruz would displace Sen. Marco Rubio as the Tea Party darling? Or that Bill de Blasio would be elected mayor of New York? Two predictions, however, seem unavoidable because they represent deep currents in our political and cultural life. In 2014, politics will continue to be highly personalized and the nation?s political divides will become even wider.

The personalization of politics is a hoary business. We treat politicians like movie stars and, for reasons I have never understood, let movie stars speak out in public, and even address congressional hearings, on matters of substance. It wasn?t always thus. There was a time when party conventions fought over the party?s platform and the chosen candidates felt bound to defend that platform. The ideas led the candidates, not the other way round. No longer. I am not certain I could pick a single idea that I associate with the prospect of a Hillary Clinton presidency, but no one seems to mind. (Nor could I point to a single achievement during her tenure as Secretary of State, but that is a story for another day.)

This personalization of politics sometimes reflects real power conflicts. Speaker John Boehner is the only member of Congress whose office is specifically mentioned in the Constitution and he stands first in the line of succession to the presidency after the Vice President. And, historically, Speakers of the House have never gone on to the White House. So, he embodies congressional prerogatives, congressional authority, and, just so, looks to the long-term interests of the institution he leads as well as to his short-term political opportunities. Conversely, Sen. Ted Cruz?s power rests in his showmanship and the power that showmanship gives him because it resonates with a significant part of the GOP base. So, in the coming year, as Republicans decide whether they want to govern or to obstruct, that struggle will continually be cast as a personal struggle between Boehner and Cruz, even though, at its core, it is a struggle about ideas and power.

On the Democratic side, it is true that there is more immediate ideological cohesion within the party, but scratch the surface, and there are some key differences. It was more than a little interesting to see former President Bill Clinton, founder of the Democratic Leadership Council, swear in unabashed economic populist de Blasio as mayor of New York. Clinton is a pol first and he remembers his wife?s trouble with the leftie base in 2008. I do not believe Clinton has come to think his policies, many of which furthered income inequality in this country, were wrong-headed. This was a case of re-positioning. (N.B. I penned that observation before reading Dan Balz?s piece on the subject in this morning?s paper!)

In the year-end review shows on MSNBC, the mouthpiece of the left, some commentators cited de Blasio as a rising star and others cited Texas State Sen. Wendy Davis. None of us know much about Ms. Davis?s economic ideas. I am 100 percent certain de Blasio is pro-choice. But, in New York, even Republicans are pro-choice. What distinguished him was the economic populism, the concern for income inequality, the worry that NYC

had become a ?tale of two cities.? That is a different concern than that voiced by Ms. Davis in her filibuster against a restrictive abortion law, which is what brought her to the nation?s attention. Alas, while the Republican civil war may be more obvious, the Democrats are a party of intense ideological incoherence too and it will be curious to see how these sensibilities play out.

The other trend that will undoubtedly continue is the increasing polarization of the nation?s politics. The polarization, like the personalization, is in part a function of the breakdown of party authority. One of the unintended effects of direct primaries, one of the key reforms introduced in the first progressive era at the beginning of the twentieth century and spread nationwide after the McGovern-Fraser Commission revamped the Democratic Party?s nominating rules after the debacle of the 1968 convention in Chicago, candidates have increasingly become less beholden to any long-term party leaders and more in debt to the grass roots organizing potential of special interest groups.

The polarization has led to gridlock in Washington. But, it is now spreading to the states in ways that are both disturbing and not. The states have long resisted the tendency to become one party enclaves. In 1979, when the Rev. Jerry Falwell formed the Moral Majority, Jacob Javits was the Republican Senator from New York. The current Democratic governors of both Connecticut and Massachusetts are the first Democrats to hold the governor?s office in two decades in those states. How easily we forget that Ralph Yarborough was elected to the Senate from the great state of Texas and William Fulbright represented Arkansas in the upper chamber. Those days have passed, although governor?s races are still more open to cross-party wins than races for Congress.

What is new is that in an increasing number of states, there is one party control of all the levers of legislative and executive power and that power is being used in very divergent ways. Dan Balz, whose eye is very keen, had a great article about the different governance strategies [1] emerging in all-red and all-blue states. In the red states, they did not opt in for Medicare, they have passed restrictive abortion measures, they are trying to curtail access to the franchise. In blue states, they are enacting stiffer gun control measures, raising the minimum wage, and raising taxes to pay for education and green energy infrastructure.

The downside is obvious: Bipartisan spirit, and the traditions of legislative courtesy that kept it alive, are hard to get back once lost. But, it is also hard to complain about a political development that is deeply, small-d, democratic. The political leadership in the various states is reflecting the views of a majority of their citizenry.

There is something distinctly promising about this otherwise baneful development. To the degree that state governments are willing to take the lead, we may be on the cusp of a healthy dose of federalism, in which the states function as laboratories in governance. At the very least, the fact of total control of some state governments by Republicans will call one of the most pernicious bluffs of the nation GOP: When they say they oppose federal welfare programs because such measures are best left to the states, it is now easy to look and examine what Republican-controlled state governments have done to improve the lot of the poor. In theory, it is easy to call for greater federalism, less D.C. bureaucracy, etc., but in practice, will the people who live in states that did not extend Medicaid be better off? Will employers rush to states with weak infrastructure and failing schools or will a higher minimum wage keep them away from the blue states?

Both parties insist that their approach to governance is preferable. Americans usually prefer divided government in which the two parties must compromise. But, if this trend toward polarization continues at the state level, we will likely see, over time, an answer to the question of which model of governance works best. In the end, some values are incommensurable: If you think the only proper end of government is to protect individual freedoms, no amount of evidence will lead you to want the kinds of measures Democratic governors are enacting. And, if your lodestar is the common good, no amount of frustration with bureaucracy will lead you to pine for life in the red states. But, evidence matters and for all of our ideological differences, there remains a strong strain of pragmatism in the heart of American political culture. If, in five or ten years, it is obvious that some states are

doing better than others, people will want to reflect on that fact and adjust their political perceptions accordingly.

So, I suspect 2014 will be frustrating in the short-term. Maybe we will see immigration reform pass, maybe not. Maybe the cuts to SNAP will be limited. Maybe the Affordable Care Act rollout will become less rocky. But, two things are for sure: We will talk about people more than ideas, and we will continue to see starkly difference forms of governance in the states. The first fact is simply problematic but the second brings a bit of hope with it, as well as a ton of frustration in the short-term. But, it will all be fun to watch.

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[1] http://www.washingtonpost.com/politics/red-blue-states-move-in-opposite-directions-in-a-new-era-of-single-party-control/2013/12/28/9583d922-673a-11e3-ae56-22de072140a2_story.html