

February 22, 2005

"Run Away" Election Strategy - Success or Failure?

A Quick and Dirty Analysis of the Inez Tenenbaum Strategy to Avoid the National Democratic Party

In this past year's US Senate race, Inez Tenenbaum's campaign strategy had her running to the center-right of the political spectrum and far away from the national Democratic Party and its leader, John Kerry. Having won two statewide contests Tenenbaum knew that victory in the senate race would depend on (1) mobilizing the base democratic vote and (2) attracting a sufficient number of marginal republican and independent voters to get to 50% plus 1. Tenenbaum's previous campaigns had successfully executed this strategy. However, figuring out a way to attract white independent voters to a democratic senatorial campaign in a state expected to vote overwhelming for Bush certainly would be tougher to engineer. To try and stem the tide of republican voting behavior Tenenbaum's forces embarked on the sensible strategy of running away from the national Democratic label, positioning their candidate instead as a South Carolina independent. The effectiveness of this strategy is worthy of analysis because the results may help focus the debate on whether or not a Democratic resurgence in the South can be engineered apart from the fortunes (or lack thereof) of the national party. So how did the "run away" strategy work with the state's various voting groups?

Certainly, Tenenbaum needed very little help from the party label to organize her campaign. As a two time successful statewide candidate she had the name identification, positive job performance ratings and experience to develop a campaign around her own vision and accomplishments. After the nominating conventions it was also clear that Bush would carry the state and Kerry would do little campaigning in the south. Consequently, trying to figure out how the national ticket would energize local democrats required very little analysis. If Tenenbaum was to prevail, her campaign needed a strategy that would allow her to be considered apart from the train wreck that the national ticket would become in South Carolina. The November results show how South Carolina voters split their decisions between the national ticket and Tenenbaum's efforts. In South Carolina, Kerry lost to Bush by almost 280,000 votes. Kerry carried 15 counties statewide but only one urban county – Richland. Tenenbaum lost to DeMint by about 150,000 votes - carrying 23 counties including Richland and Charleston. She ran slightly stronger in Democratic areas than Kerry and significantly better in swing counties. Tenenbaum also ran ahead of Kerry in the Republican strong hold counties of Lexington, Greenville, Pickens, etc. On the surface Tenenbaum's split of the vote suggests that her "run away" strategy had some impact on improving her prospects over the national ticket. However, when Election Day was over Tenenbaum's loss was still significant. So did the independent strategy really make any difference?*

Since South Carolina's voters do not register by party, a reasonable way to surmise party loyalty is to look at voter performance by race. In South Carolina African Americans tend to vote overwhelmingly Democratic while

whites tend to vote Republican. This election cycle was no exception. Of the 47 super African American majority precincts (precincts with a 96%+ average African American registration), Tenenbaum and Kerry carried all by a sizable margin. Tenenbaum won 95.3% of the AA vote while Kerry won 94.2% of the vote in these precincts. Among the state's most loyal democratic voters Tenenbaum maintained a slight edge over the national ticket. Consequently, the "run away" strategy did not suppress her Democratic support. Looking at the vote distribution in swing precincts also shows that Tenenbaum's strategy of accentuating her independence had some limited success. Among these split precincts Kerry won 50% of the vote while Tenenbaum garnered 54%. Again, Tenenbaum, was capable of picking up critical votes in areas she needed to win.

However, Tenenbaum's performance among white voters reveals the difficulty a Democrat known by any label has appealing to voters in strong Republican areas. Of the 222 super majority white precincts in the state (precincts with an average white registration of 98%+) Tenenbaum won only 2 and Kerry won 1. Among all white voters in these 222 precincts Tenenbaum fared slightly better than the national ticket. Kerry took 26% of all voters in these precincts while Tenenbaum won 30%. This 4% differential is critical because 30% represents the minimal threshold of white support a Democratic candidate needs in order to come close to winning statewide.

So if Tenenbaum held her base and reached the plateau of acceptability among white voters why didn't she do better? In a word – turnout. If turnout had been evenly distributed across all voting groups Tenenbaum's margin of support among white voters could have played a significant part in the outcome of the race. However, that was not the case in 2004. In many upstate counties Republican voters turned out almost 10 percentage points higher than voters in strong Democratic areas. Almost 50% of Tenenbaum's losing margin came from three counties – Greenville, Lexington, and Pickens. While Republican voting areas (particularly in the upstate) were surpassing their historic averages for presidential turnout Democratic voters were experiencing only average turnout. The Republicans' GOTV effort up and down the ticket did a good job of motivating their base. Consequently, a lopsided electorate showed up on Election Day swamping any chances the Tenenbaum campaign might have of reaping success from the "run away" strategy.

So does the Tenenbaum experience have any meaningful lessons for the prospects of future statewide Democratic candidates? That answer depends on if you believe the South Carolina Democrats' political glass is half empty or half full. Tenenbaum had some marginal success running as an independent but she still could not overcome the pull of the Republican banner at the top of the ticket. The half empty analysis sees this outcome as being indicative of how Republican the state has actually become. If a candidate as attractive, well funded and experienced as Inez can not get very far past the Democratic base in the state then - who can? This view acknowledges that in order for Democrats to have a viable future in SC a great deal of work must be done to re-positioning the Democratic image at the national level so that it connects better with the interests of Southern voters. The glass half full view of the Tenenbaum election acknowledges the same truth – to win in the south Democrats at all levels must connect better. However, the glass half full analysis sees the Tenenbaum outcome as providing an important pragmatic example of how to execute the strategy. By running down the middle Inez held the Democratic base, won two urban counties and attracted sufficient numbers of independent voters to keep her in the ball game. However, in order for Democrats to win the ballgame, as much – if not more – attention must be paid to expanding the Democratic base as it is to fundraising and campaigning.

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