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Ignoring the Right Cost GOP the Senate

By PAUL M. WEYRICH

Some analysts have said there are no clear patterns in the elections that saw the Republicans lose control of the U.S. Senate. I disagree. I believe one pattern is perfectly clear: The Republicans who won in the closely contested elections had an active association with conservative activists—the losing Republicans did not.

Both the 1980 and 1986 elections saw control of the Senate determined by a series of races that were decided by less than three percentage points. In 1980, the GOP won 11 of the 14 closest Senate elections; this year, the Democrats won nine of the 11 closest races. In all but one of the states where incumbents were defeated this year, there was a very small shift in the electorate from 1980. Those margins are exactly the sort of percentages produced in the past by issue-oriented conservative groups. I believe conservative activists can produce a switch of up to 5% of the vote for a Republican candidate, partly by motivating people who wouldn't otherwise see a difference between the candidates to go to the polls. But a candidate already has to be in the 45% to 46% range for us to do any good.

However, for the movement to be involved, two things have to happen: First, the positions of the candidates have to be compatible with the movement groups and second, the campaigns have to reach out, in one form or another, to conservative activists.

Winners and Losers

Let's look at some winners of closely contested Senate races:

- In Idaho, an initiative to overturn the state's recent Right to Work law produced the kind of very high turnout (77%) that is now necessary for conservative candidates to win. The GOP had feared a low-turnout election because the party's vote in Idaho drops off more than in most other states in the off-year.

- While Republican Sen. Steve Symms has done less than some others to identify with movement issues, his support of Right to Work was critical. The widely held belief that Right to Work was going to elect a Democratic senator proved false. Right to Work—which was retained with 54% of the vote—helped Sen. Symms win a 51% victory. He agrees that he would not otherwise have been reelected.

- In Wisconsin, Sen. Bob Kasten maintained a good working relationship with the conservative movement—working closely with defense groups in denying aid to Marxists in Africa, and working with pro-

life groups and those opposing United Nations policies. Moreover, he helped to train hundreds of conservative candidates. When it was clear that Sen. Kasten was in trouble (he had received negative media coverage due to a number of personal problems), nearly all of those groups came to his aid and were welcomed.

- In Oklahoma, Sen. Don Nickles reactivated the groups that had helped to elect him in 1980. Many thought it couldn't be done again, but Sen. Nickles had no problem. As the Rev. Oral Roberts put it: "I'm a Democrat, but Nickles represents more of what Oklahoma is about than does [his opponent] who is a liberal." Sen. Nickles skillfully involved the religious right. Mr.

ment Jeremiah Denton was elected in 1980. I received dozens of anguished calls from movement conservatives in Alabama complaining that they had no access to the senator—they felt cut off. Sen. Denton did become involved with some conservative issues, but often did things that angered and confused the movement. When conservatives protested this year about the senator's support for creating a new bureaucracy to deal with the problem of youth suicide, a Denton aide told one of them: "We don't need your support. We're more than 20 points ahead."

Indeed, accessibility proved to be the key issue there. So many of the groups that worked for Sen. Denton in 1980 simply

ing and turning out pro-family voters for Mr. Santini. Many of these people are Democrats. The Hansen plan, although praised by retiring Sen. Paul Laxalt (R., Nev.), was never implemented.

After Rep. Ed Zschau won the California Republican Senate primary, I met with him and suggested that he follow the example of Sen. Pete Wilson (R., Calif.). Sen. Wilson had met with conservative groups during his 1982 race against Jerry Brown, and afterward they saw that they had enough at stake in getting Mr. Wilson elected to become active. Pete Wilson and Ed Zschau had won the same kind of minority primary victory over more conservative candidates, but Mr. Zschau's reaction after his meeting with the conservatives was: "If you're talking about deals, I don't make deals." I told him we were talking about his election. Very few activists participated in his campaign.

The lesson is clear cut. Those who identified with conservative issues and welcomed activists into the campaign tended to win, but those who went out of their way to keep conservatives from being involved usually lost.

Old Party Loyalties

During the next two years conservatives must make certain that their issues occupy the attention of Congress. The Democrats controlled the Senate between 1978 and 1980, but conservative issues dominated that chamber's agenda. The GOP controlled the Senate during the past two years, but it was the liberals who put their agenda front and center.

If conservative candidates don't heed the lessons of 1986, more of them will be defeated in 1988. Yes, conservatives are not the entire electorate. But many conservatives are not Republicans, and cannot be depended upon to abandon old party loyalties. The Republican establishment, including the president, doesn't understand that these voters are motivated by issues and not by personalities—even one as compelling as Ronald Reagan's.

If the Republicans are savvy, they will learn how to work with coalition groups the way the Democrats and the unions do. Such work can provide extraordinary dividends because issue-oriented conservative Democrats are often the margin of victory in tight races. Courting them is just plain smart politics.

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Conservatives must make sure their issues are put before Congress. Democrats ran the Senate from 1978 to 1980, but conservative issues dominated the agenda there.

Roberts, who is a Protestant charismatic, described Sen. Nickles, a Roman Catholic, as very devout.

- Finally, former Gov. Kit Bond of Missouri first satisfied the pro-life movement, then won the support of the choice-in-education movement, and then sought the support of pro-defense groups after it was learned that Jane Fonda had contributed to his opponent. Some 30 different conservative groups—ranging from some traditional economic groups to the pro-family network—ultimately were active in support of his campaign.

Contrast this record with those GOP candidates who lost:

- In Washington state, we never had a single meeting with GOP Sen. Slade Gorton in the six years he was in office. Movement conservatives had virtually no part in his campaign. In fact, one prominent conservative leader called me two weeks before the election to ask me if he should accede to a White House request that he stop attacking Sen. Gorton for supporting a liberal judicial nominee.

- In North Dakota, Sen. Mark Andrews met with us once—only after Paul Laxalt sent him a handwritten note asking him to do so. That was in 1981. He has made no contact since, and movement conservatives in North Dakota were treated by the senator with arrogance and contempt. The senator went out of his way to antagonize conservatives: He was the only Republican Senate candidate who explicitly refused to take a pledge that he would not vote to raise the new lower marginal tax rates.

- Turning to the South, from the mo-

were not active this year because they felt left out. There were no sharp ideological differences in the campaign. Democrat Richard Shelby's theme was: I'll vote like Sen. Denton, but I won't embarrass you. None of the movement's offers for help were ever taken advantage of. Reed Larson of the National Right to Work Committee offered to set the record straight about Mr. Shelby's support for unions in this Right to Work state. The Denton campaign told Mr. Larson to stay out of Alabama.

- In Georgia the situation was even worse. Republican Sen. Mack Mattingly, while he generally voted with conservatives, employed people who went out of their way to see to it that conservatives were discouraged from becoming involved in the campaign. I cannot recall one single instance when Sen. Mattingly called conservatives together to work with him, even on basic issues such as the line-item veto.

- In North Carolina, after Rep. Jim Broyhill was appointed to the Senate in July to succeed the late John East, conservatives met with him and proposed he encourage movement conservatives to become involved in the campaign. Nothing was done. In fact, the Broyhill campaign made a special point of locking out the supporters of Sen. Jesse Helms so as to prove that they could win without him. It turns out they couldn't.

Of the non-incumbent GOP candidates, Jim Santini of Nevada was the most disappointing. Janine Hansen, a leader of pro-family groups there, presented an excellent and well-thought-out plan for identify-